

Tamara El Samerraei: Agial Art Gallery.

Tamara El Samerraei's first solo exhibition in Beirut featured just twelve paintings, all dated 2008. While this could have made for a rather thin debut, "Something White," as the show was called, introduced a confident, self-contained series of new works and signaled the start of more a focused phase in the artist's career. Born and raised in Kuwait, Samerraei studied art in Lebanon and has been based in Beirut for more than a decade. She has shown flashes of brilliance in the past--notably the moody installation *Red Balloons*, 2001, which was shown briefly in the now-defunct Beirut art space Espace SD as part of an initiative highlighting experimental, noncommercial works; or the sculptural installation *Music Box*, 2005, featuring a porcelain doll spinning awkwardly on a rotating wooden base, which was presented in a derelict house for an international artists' workshop in the mountain town of Aley. But Samerraei is far from prolific, and until now, without gallery representation, she has mainly made her work known by periodically throwing open her doors and declaring an open studio.

In "Something White," the artist put the spotlight on painting. All twelve of the works on view featured young women--possibly the same woman, though clearly not the artist herself--arranged in playfully sinister, pseudosexual scenarios. Always, the features are finely drawn: black eyes, brooding brows, red lips. The flesh, too, is consistently rendered in watery shades of gray. The figures' summery clothes drape and billow and seem on the verge of falling off completely. In *A Love Story*, Samerraei's protagonist appears to crouch down and cuddle a bull that is splayed on its back. One of the subject's hands creeps along the animal's stomach, while the other grips what at first looks like a delicate flower but turns out to be a dart. Light weapons, such as a slingshot, water pistol, and the recurrent dart, appear in almost all of the artist's paintings, as do animals such as a monkey, horses, and what might be a dog. In works such as *Fist*, which features a young woman astride a horse, Samerraei circumscribes her ambiguous narrative in a frame drawn on the painting itself, as if to contain the symbolic melodrama that might be unfolding.

Lebanese painters have largely been overlooked, compared to their compatriots working in video and photography. At a time when international curatorial interest in the Middle East remains high, "Something White" daringly thwarts expectations of what an Arab woman's art should look like. There are no signs of "The East" in her work: no veils, no fabrics, no calligraphy, no embroidery. One strains to read regional specifics into her oeuvre. Her women are similarly undecidable, simmering at the end of adolescence: They are on the verge of adulthood but not quite there yet. Samerraei's compositions wind sexual tensions around threats of violence in an imaginative world that is fully the artist's own. Her paintings have less in common with the works of Ghada Amer or Shirin Neshat than they do with those of Marlene Dumas or Elizabeth Peyton, though Samerraei is arguably more mischievous than the former, and perhaps thankfully more serious than the latter.

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