

May Murad

Réalité virtuelle (Virtual Reality)

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Corridor – Cité internationale des arts

The work of May Murad tries to reconcile both physical and virtual presence. Her self-portraits do not pass by means of a mirror, but rather through a screenshot. Not a thoughtful face-to-face position with her own reflected image, but an intense desire of expression and communication via the only channel available for the artist; her computer. Born in Gaza, in the world's biggest jail, May Murad had been subjected to double imprisonment, geographical and cultural, under the iron rule of religious and patriarchal regime who continually restrains women and lock them up. Like a bird, looking at the world from behind the bars of its cage, she is opening electronic apertures. Their semantic and visual codes have become the familiar and intimate setting of her pursuit of soulmates and the discovery of a whole world beyond walls. Behind the closed curtains of her room in Gaza, she succeeded to free herself from clothing yokes and personify the young woman she had always aspired to be, for her own sake and for others. She was able to carry out an exchange of emails containing virtual landscapes and plants with a Scottish artist, Rachel Ashton, who sent sights of leafy and grassy forests and initiated May into botanical drawings.

When by miracle May Murad could obtain an exit permit, coupled with a ban on re-entry for the duration of one year, she took the difficult decision of exile and thus, disembarked in the outside world she deeply dreamt of. Yet, the reality continued to slip out of her hands. Upon arrival in France, she realized that her country does not exist, her nationality is indetermined. Another language, another culture and another longing sent her back hanging onto her screen, to weep with family but without consoling hugs and comforting scents. The loneliness of exile and then of confinement treaded on the heels of the one she experienced in her home prison.

Fortunately enough, there is painting, brush strokes, jolly or angry, delighted or enraged, the gentle touch, unhurried or accelerated, the vivid vibration of colours, the model's tenderness, the misleading inaccurate depth of shades and shadows, the gleams and sparkles of light. While in Gaza, the artist barley emerged from grey shadowy hue who yielded only to a few harsh hints, her more recent work is shrouded in warm, blue-shaded environment, the intimate space created by the luminous screen. Although painting comforts after the resentment of electronic communication, it remains committed to it, it does not alter its virtual perception, but rather magnifies it by giving it the vital spark, the force who persists in its intention to communicate.

Lying down among delightful and homely cushions, taken by reading, lost in her inner world, or even while slumbering, the painter-model is addressing, on an inward-looking approach, the one who looks, opening her intimacy to the observer's. At that point, openings, one after another, start to emerge, translucent or veiled, warding off every illusion of obscurity or worldliness. A scheme of bits, figures, pictograms and numbers, drop-down menus with series of blinding limited options, watchwords or error messages, and encrypted instructions in the form of existential precepts, all these

components are building together the frame whereby passes the intimate communication. May Murad is collecting those significant and illusive elements, taking them in, only to be able to come up with a harmonious intelligible message; from them, she draws out lexical poetic visions where signs become legends, where words meet physical and emotional reality to be more revealing and 'to feel less alone'.

The art of May Murad has gained a new relevance during this pandemic period mainly dominated by virtual date-based communication. In questioning the very notion of presence, physical and virtual, her work is summoning the possibility of disappearance, the virtual perspective as an anteroom, a forerunner of dematerialization, of disfigurement leading to dissolution. Hence was the case of Jamil, the Palestinian prisoner disfigured by torture to the point that even his wife was not able to recognise him during the trial in front of the Court of Jerusalem. Jamil, trying to draw his wife's attention, started to cry out "I am Jamil, ya Rawan I exist, I exist".

Pauline de Laboulaye
Author and curator