

Studio visit *Mounira Al Solh*



In the atelier with multidisciplinary artist **Al Solh**

At age 30, multidisciplinary visual artist Mounira Al Solh (born in Beirut) has already exhibited at the 2007 Venice Biennale and won last year's Uriot Prize, awarded each year by the Rijksakademie to one of its residents.

Now she's completing her second year as an artist-in-residence at the famous Amsterdam art institute. And, together with 24 other emerging artists from the Netherlands and abroad, she's got a studio in what used to be cavalry barracks built in the 19th century on the Sarphatistraat.

The room is spacious yet badly lit. It's situated in the former manège on the ground floor and contains little more than standard-issue sofas and a multipurpose table. Al Solh doesn't seem to have been able to settle here.

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Except for a few stills from one of her videos carelessly pinned to the walls, these are bare. Among the few items that lie on the floor are Julia Kristeva's book 'Strangers to Ourselves' and a damaged old catalogue of 19th-century French caricaturist Honoré Daumier, open at an image of 'The Immigrants', a painting of a flock of faceless people wandering through the dark.

'This is what I am here in the Netherlands: an immigrant,' Al Solh says, looking down at it. 'But,' she goes on, 'it is also the way I feel at home, in Lebanon, where war is an endemic problem, and where I have the feeling

that I can't grow as an artist. When I was studying painting at the academy in Beirut, the only access you had to the history of Western art was by leafing through tarnished old catalogues.'

Recurring in Al Solh's multimedia projects, which include videos, installations and paintings, are the self-reflexive questions of what it means to be an artist and how art mingles with life. In her video installation *As If I Don't Fit There* (2005) she tells the story of four fictional artists and their artistic failures, while also addressing matters related to Lebanese politics and immigration.

'In this work,' she explains, 'I cast myself as Manet's *Fifer* and as one of Rineke Dijkstra's teenagers in a swimsuit from the Dutch photographer's famous *Beach Portraits* series.'

Al Solh's final project at the Rijksakademie, to be presented during the 'Open Atelier' (the Rijksakademie's annual show) at the end of November, includes a painting by Mohammad Haidar (1971-2008), a fictional painter from Lebanon, who Al Solh claims to have met when studying at the academy. *Hommage à Mohammad Haidar* is the first piece of what should become a full-scale multimedia installation with objects, written testimonies and other documentation testifying to Mohammad's existence.

Seated behind her laptop, she shows some edits of *The Sea is a Stereo*, the two-channel video installation she has been working on for two years now. It features interviews with men on the seashore in Lebanon. 'The sea is a great metaphor for a utopian view of the world: boundless.' Within a few months Al Solh's visa will expire and she will be boundless herself.

Catherine Somzé