

The Universe is Expanding  
Yesmine Ben Khelil

Selma Feriani Gallery hosts *The Universe is Expanding*, a solo exhibition by Tunisian artist Yesmine Ben Khelil. The show brings together new works that have emerged from the artist's research on the possibilities for representation and the resurgence of image. It consists of drawings, videos and mixed media works in which found material operates as the common denominator.

The title of the exhibition references Ben Khelil's eponymous video-work based on a scene from Woody Allen's 1977 movie *Annie Hall*. The film's protagonist, Alvy Singer, sits in a doctor's office next to his mother who is troubled by her son's anxieties. "He's depressed. It's something he read." She says. "The universe is expanding. The universe is everything, and if it's expanding, someday it will break apart and that will be the end of everything." Alvy replies.

The sequence serves as the opening scene of Ben Khelil's video. It is followed by a constellation of several scenes taken from varied sources on the internet: Tunisian 80's news bulletins, a French historical documentary on Tunisia, American reality T.V. footage, Leila Ben Ali's video leaked online and a viral video of a cat's birthday party. Different types of images are juxtaposed on one single black screen. They are superimposed with a milky way as an allegory of Alvy's existential concerns that resonate with the current state of disquiet and visual streaming.

Spanning different temporalities and provenances, each of these images stands as a poor image waiting to be activated. As Hito Steyerl puts it in her seminal essay\*, "the poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image". She concludes with the relationship to reality: "It is no longer about the real thing—the ordinary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality."

Image as a haunting ghost appearing and reappearing in search of materiality; image-making as a way to conjure the conundrum of existence. The artist emphasises the idea in different threads.

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*History of Haunting* is a series of pencil and watercolour drawings inspired from late 70's ghost movies, spirit photography and religious imagery. One small-scale drawing shows a haunted house and two large-scale drawings portray teenage girls in a state of fear or ecstasy.

Their faces are covered with hair depicted with spiral curls conveying an uncanny atmosphere to the image.

Equally evocative is a series of mixed media works based on vintage stereographs sourced from Beit el Bennani archives. In one group of works, the artist cuts out one fragment from the right image and replaces it with another from the left image, and vice versa. Every time, a small gap is left between the fragment and the original image, adding depth and shadow to the work.

In a second series entitled *J'attendais en Vain*, Ben Khelil intervenes on vintage nudes superimposed with contemporary ones. The viewer can identify these latter only by looking through holes cut through the moulds that unfold across the print surface like a ghostly presence devouring the subjects.

Engaging with a havoc of images entangled with both contemporary and historical subjects, Yesmine Ben Khelil deploys different appropriation and editing strategies that exceed image semiotics and create new visual experiences imbued with dream and imagination.

\* Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image" in *e-Flux Journal* 10(11), 2009.