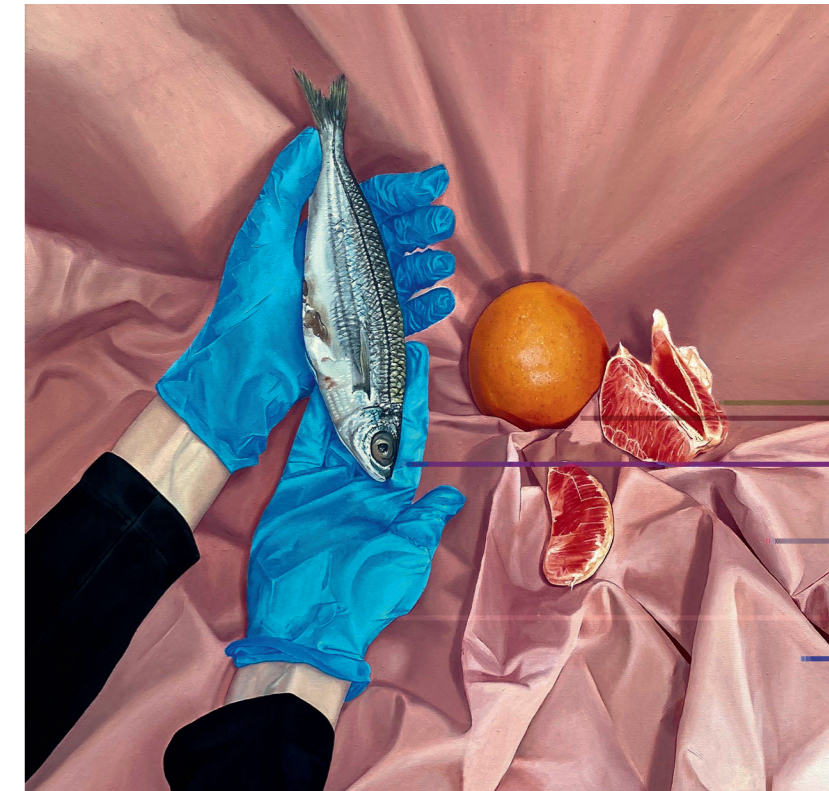


# THE FEMALE GAZE

Whether tackling gender norms or exploring folklore and identity, the fourth edition of Menart Fair asserted the strength of women artists



“W

omen have always been at the centre of my images,” says Lebanese photographer and filmmaker Yasmina Hilal, whose layered works distort the “ideal beauty” often represented in fashion photography. Using a collage technique, Hilal manipulates what we see – and how we see it. In some instances, she cuts her photographs up into strips, sticking them onto another image and building volume. In her work entitled *Jupon*, this technique is employed to mimic the shape of the skirt worn by a model. Using different types of paper and textures, she superimposes her images, sometimes using acetate – a material she loves for its likeness to film roll, and its “ghostly effect”.

Hilal also uses other methods, sometimes burning, bleaching, cutting or tearing the paper she’s working with. A self-portrait called *La Belle au Bois Dormant* depicts a sort of double-headed Hilal, lounging on her grandmother’s antique couch and wearing her mother’s blue velvet gown. “To collage is to distort, and with that comes the idea of distorting perfection,” she explains. “To me, not all beauty is symmetrical and not all imperfections are ugly. By distorting the ‘ideal’ feminine figure, I’m aiming to make the viewer question beauty standards. How can we defy them without losing the essence of beauty?”

Hilal is one of the powerful female voices showcased at the fourth edition of Menart Fair, which brought a trove of artists from 11 countries across the Middle East and North Africa to Paris in September. Inside the historic 20th-century Palais d’Iéna, the female gaze reigned in its varying perspectives. “I am happy and proud to see that some of the biggest online art platforms and galleries in the MENA region that shed light on female artists, such as Emergeast, Hunna and Mathqaf, are also led by inspiring female curators,” says Palestinian

artist Reem R., whose own still-life works are imbued with meaning that is often symbolic and cultural, and at other times personal.

The inanimate objects that adorn her paintings – think shiny burgers and Coca-Cola cans or fruits and white flowers – are usually set against a monochromatic, silky fabric. “I paint many elements with the intention of triggering memories or senses and provoking thought,” she says. “Each piece is a reflection of my inner world that others can somehow relate to.” *Lilies and the Last Meal*, for example, was painted during the Covid pandemic and captures the artist’s sentiment of being isolated from human interaction. Based between Qatar and the UAE, Reem R.’s heritage is often symbolised in her work, represented by citrus fruits such as oranges or lemons – an ode to her ancestral homeland. “Being Palestinian feeds my creativity,” she adds.

Along with Reem R., Egyptian artist Nour Elbasuni is represented by UAE-based gallery Hunna, which exhibits works by emerging women artists based in the Arabian Peninsula. Elbasuni’s paintings examine themes surrounding gender politics, cultural perceptions, representation and spirituality. Her most recent works – showcased during the fair – explore orientalist legacies in the Middle East, while posing alternative representations of gender roles. “In the context of close-knit communities like we have

Above, from left: *Sons of Endymion* by Nour Elbasuni; *Feels Citrusy* by Reem R. Opposite page: *Friday Afternoon* by Nour Elbasuni



Above, from left: *Last Night* by Reem R.; *Rosa Damascena* by Yasmina Hilal

in the Arab region, it is important to understand and reflect on the way gender has been historically politicised or used as a form of control for both men and women alike,” explains the artist. “Certain moulds, expectations and categories of behaviour have contributed to blinding our insight into our individual identities and spiritual and emotional growth.”

Elbasuni – who identifies as a feminist artist – continues the legacy of other Arab feminist creatives such as Egyptian artist and activist Inji Aflatoun. In her own search for freedom, Elbasuni reflects on the changes needed for growth and healing. Across works such as *Sons of Endymion*, *Koussa* and *Friday Afternoon*, she stages her male subjects in domestic settings: looking out the window with a cup of tea, sharing intimate conversations in the comfort of a bed, or stuffing vegetables for dinner. These unexpected scenes bathe the male figures in a softer, more emotional light, challenging the status quo of what it means to be masculine.

“I started with creating images that restore dignity and elevation to women, only to realise that men are a big contributor to the way women experience life as well,” Elbasuni explains. “If men do not heal their emotional selves, it will

be difficult for women to also reach their healed selves. Creating paintings that depict men in a contemplative state, in the context of communities where there’s mutual acceptance and sharing of wisdom and insight, offers a peek into a reality that I hope will manifest for society at large.”

While healing comes in many forms, for Moroccan-French artist Margaux Derhy, it comes through the process of creating with other women. Trained as a painter in the UK, Derhy began embroidering in 2017 during an artist’s residency in Cape Town, eventually leading her to merge the two disciplines in her work. “A few years later, I was fortunate to connect with a woman in my father’s village, Massa, in the south of Morocco, who offered her assistance,” the artist shares. “This prompted me to delve into hand embroidery. As my projects grew in scale, I realised the need for a dedicated studio to facilitate larger works and to harness the direct social impact my art could have.”

Derhy now collaborates with a community of women to craft her works. Each woman takes up a section of the pastoral scenes depicted on her linen canvases: one embroiders the roof of a house, while others work on garments. Other parts are completed using a sewing machine. “This partnership with female artisans enhances the narrative of my work, infusing it with stories, experiences, and the diverse cultural embroidery that binds us all together.” The collaborative dimension is integral to Derhy’s work. For several years, she has run a project in France known as *Le Cercle de l’Art*, which unites a community of 100 women artists, providing them with a reliable monthly income and access to educational programmes.

The theme of “reconnection” is also central to Derhy’s work, echoing her personal quest to



Below: *Jupon* by Yasmina Hilal, available at Zalfa Halabi Art Gallery, Beirut

reconnect with her Moroccan roots. “I delve into the significance of the female presence and the female ‘hand’ in art,” she explains. “This theme underscores the integral role of women, both as creators and as subjects, and their enduring impact on our shared history and artistic expression.”

Women artists in the MENA region have shown remarkable resilience, creativity and determination, often challenging societal norms and stereotypes while contributing to broader conversations around culture, gender, power, and representation. This year’s edition of *Menart Fair* asserts just that. “Female artists enrich the global art scene,” Derhy adds, “by offering fresh perspectives that contribute to the ongoing redefinition of the MENA region’s identity.” [menart-fair.com](https://menart-fair.com)

Below, from left: *Poésie Pastorale* and *La Couleur de L’Amour* by Margaux Derhy, in hand- and sewing machine-embroidery on linen canvas

