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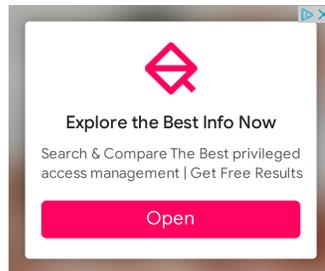
Once upon this time: contemporary stories for summertime at Leila Heller

31 May 2023 💬



Lin Jingjing's work titled More Than Ever.

Muhammad Yusuf, Features Writer



Leila Heller Gallery has opened its group show titled The Storyteller (April 26 - September), curated by Behrang Samadzadegan, to meet the heat. It is a collection of contemporary narratives featuring artists Wim Delvoye, Azza Al Qubaisi, Zeinab Alhashemi, Melis Buyruk, Parinaz Eleish Gharagozlou, Nathaniel Aric Galka, Robert Wilson, Lorenzo Quinn, Lin Jingjing, Ran Hwang, Naeemeh Kazemi, Arash Nazari, Marwan Sahmarani, Alaattin Efe, Farideh Lashai, Ghada Amer, Shirin Neshat, Marcos Grigorian, Ana D' Castro, Reza Aramesh and Samadzadegan.

At the heart of much contemporary art lies a powerful narrative or story, something that the artist seeks to communicate. Artists who work with narratives may use a variety of mediums, from painting and sculpture to video and installation art. The chosen medium is utilised to create a narrative that engages the viewer, inviting him to consider issues and ideas.

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One way in which artists use narrative is to tell stories about themselves or their personal experiences. Some use narrative to explore social and political issues, such as race, gender, identity and political crises; yet others use narrative to create fictional worlds or alternate realities.

In all of the instances, the artist acts as a storyteller. By working with narrative, contemporary artists are able to create works that are not only visually striking but also intellectually and emotionally stimulating.

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The artists at Leila Heller aim to convey the power of storytelling by focusing on contextual and situational realities. The uniqueness of each situation and its particular references are crucial elements in their approach to storytelling. By emphasising this, the artists hope to create a poetic and powerful narrative that increases our sensitivity to the realities of the world.

Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', which the curator quotes, reflects on the loss of the art of storytelling and the impact of industrialisation and modernity on traditional forms of communication. Benjamin, says the curator, argues that the act of storytelling is more than just a means of transmitting information; it is also a way of connecting individuals to their cultural and historical roots.



Parinaz Eleish raises the question What of the Broken Roof of My House in this work.

The exhibition title, inspired by the essay, suggests that the art of storytelling is still present today though in much danger of being lost. The emphasis is on the importance of retaining and preserving stories as a means of keeping alive our authentic cultural heritage. The title also alludes to the idea that the act of storytelling is a communal activity, one that requires both a storyteller and a listener. Through the act of listening, the listener becomes a part of the story and is able to retain it in his memory, in turn passing it on to others.

"For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is becoming unravelled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship," said Benjamin.

Storytelling is an integral part of Arabic popular culture and in all parts of the Arab world, storytelling has been a very popular and much-appreciated form of entertainment for the cognoscenti and the general public. The traditional storyteller has different names in different countries and has distinctive styles of presenting his stories. In Syria, he presents his stories in cafes where he sits on a high seat and tells his stories to his audiences. In Egypt, he tells stories to the accompaniment of traditional music. In Manal Ataya, the storyteller stands on a stage while telling his story, which is usually in poetic form.

In Morocco, storytellers stand in the middle of a circle of audiences and enact the stories as they narrate them. Some storytellers use old books to read sections of their stories; but the

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great majority tell their stories orally. Stories can be long or short, most of the time extending over many nights. They deal with the tales of famous popular heroes who played important historical roles in supporting kings or clans, resisting occupation, or helping the weak and poor against aggressors. All heroes of stories are strong, brave, loyal and true - and they all face betrayal and defamation. The story teller interrupts his story at a very critical point every night and leaves his audiences anxious about the rest of the story until the following night. In rural communities, stories provide a good opportunity for people to talk and speculate about how the narration would progress. Only the storyteller knows how the story will unfold - perhaps even he does not know, since a lot of them are made up at the time of telling! Narrative has played a key role in the development of Arab belles lettres no less than moral philosophy, with the production of celebrated texts such as A Thousand and One Nights, Kalila and Dimna and Kitab al-Bukhala'. Since its establishment over four decades ago in New York, Leila Heller Gallery has gained worldwide recognition as a pioneer in promoting a creative dialogue and exchange between Western artists and Middle Eastern, Central and South Asian artists. In 2015, it opened its first international location in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue.

Artist Exhibition

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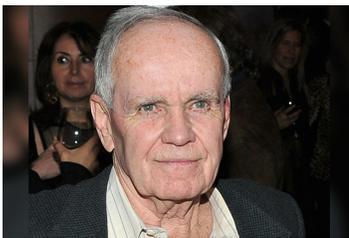
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