

# V.O Curations

**Nour el Saleh**  
Where the Grass is Synthetic  
25 March - 1 May 2021  
*Press Release*



The Actor's Dollhouse, 2020, oil on canvas, 170 x 200 cm.  
© Nour el Saleh, courtesy V.O Curations, London

In her second solo exhibition at V.O Curations, London-based Lebanese artist Nour el Saleh presents a group of six new paintings alongside, for the first time, a miniature three-dimensional sculpted painting. Titled *Where the Grass is Synthetic*, this new body of work sits somewhere between real and dream worlds, employing the theatre as allegory, and as a character in and of herself.

Ugliness is subjective. Like beauty, ugliness is a polysemic concept. Where aesthetic beauty is informed by balance and proportion, by visual harmony, ugliness is informed by imperfection. By chaos.

Upon first glance into el Saleh's incongruous world the viewer is engulfed immediately by her cast of strange and grisly characters. With pallid flesh and gruesome, gaping mouths, the figures are nightmarish. Portrayed with overgrown features and puckers of shrivelled skin, the players in el

Saleh's paintings call to mind Da Vinci's physiognomical studies of the grotesquely ugly. They are altogether not entirely human. Just as one feels the urge to pull away, however, the viewer is caught off guard by a number of recognisable and even comforting sights: wallpaper depicting fluffy clouds against a blue sky in *The Play that Never Was*, or a figure's garments adorned in golden sunflowers in *The Actor's Dollhouse*. These tones and textures stand against the macabre, belonging instead to the sacred realm of childhood memory.

Whether familiar or unfamiliar, el Saleh's canvases are undeniably rich environments. Replete with layered symbolism these are worlds in which traditional *commedia dell'arte* stock characters have been pulled apart and reassembled as a means of exploring identity and in-betweenness. The figure of the jester or joker appears in different forms across the exhibition both as self-portraiture and as an archetypal figure embodying ugliness as a means to address that which is most despised or feared in society.

El Saleh's interest in the theatre began early and intensely, and since, has become a conceptual framework and a methodology for the construction of a new visual language. The focus, instead of being on leading roles, falls on supporting characters. These figures who are traditionally snubbed and confined to the dusty wings of the stage are pushed to the forefront, emerging centre stage under the care of el Saleh's paintbrush, and rendered in brilliant colour.

Rather than to shy away from storytelling, the artist's work confronts head on the notion of narrative within contemporary painting. Co-opting the dramatic visual signifiers of Western European religious painting, el Saleh has developed her own visual lexicon with which to articulate that which is culturally Arabic. In *Portrait of Pious* the central figure gazes upwards with a cross-like object on their head and an expression of otherworldly ecstasy. The tempestuous sky is rendered in deep umber calling to mind Heironomous Bosch's apocalyptic Dutch Renaissance paintings. In the exhibition's titular painting two faerie-like figures can be read as Lebanese aunties, at once welcoming - beckoning with their insistent hands - but all the while playing the role of the gossip.

El Saleh's work is generous. She provides infinite entry points into her chaotic imagined worlds, playing with aesthetic ugliness as a way to confront alterity, and ultimately, change. If ugliness is in the eye of the beholder what can we learn from sitting with the grotesque? And existing outside of the purview of beauty, is this state of irregularity and chaos perhaps the most generative place for us to be?

**Nour el Saleh** (b. 1997 Beirut, Lebanon) grew up in Abu Dhabi and lives and works in London, United Kingdom. She received a Bachelor in Fine Arts from the UCL Slade School of Fine Art in 2019, and is currently completing a Postgraduate degree at the Royal Drawing School. Recent solo exhibitions include *The Play That Goes on Forever* with Lowell Ryan Projects at Zona Maco, Mexico City (2020) and *Exquisite Farces* at V.O Curations, London (2019). Forthcoming group exhibitions include *Host, Chapter II: Skin* at Edel Assanti, London (2021) and *The Era of Reclamation* at The House of Saint Barnabas, London (2021).

**Exhibition:** *Where the Grass is Synthetic* by Nour el Saleh

**Public Programme:** TBC

**Location:** V.O Curations - 1st Floor, 56 Conduit Street, London W1S 2YZ

**Opening Times:** 25 March - 1 May 2021 online and by appointment commencing 12 April.

## **V.O Curations**

Located in central London, V.O Curations is an arts organisation dedicated to supporting emerging and underrepresented artists, curators and researchers through an innovative and critically-engaged programme. Founded in 2018 by Zina Vieille and Nnamdi Obiekwe, V.O Curations believes that to curate is to approach all aspects of our programme - residencies, exhibitions, events, publications, and studio spaces - with care.

V.O Curations promotes diverse voices and narratives across all of our activities and projects. Our programme aims to facilitate artistic exchange, socially-focused discourse, knowledge production and experimentation. We are focused on cultivating a sense of community, promoting collaboration and encouraging active learning rather than passive viewing.

Launching in January 2021 and spanning three floors at 56 Conduit Street, our new location in Mayfair is the site for V.O Residencies, a new gallery, an experimental project space and artist studios. This new location in central London reinforces our commitment to connecting emerging and underrepresented artists to wide-ranging and distinctive networks and resources.

V.O Curations  
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