

A Wondrous Visit from Chafa Ghaddar

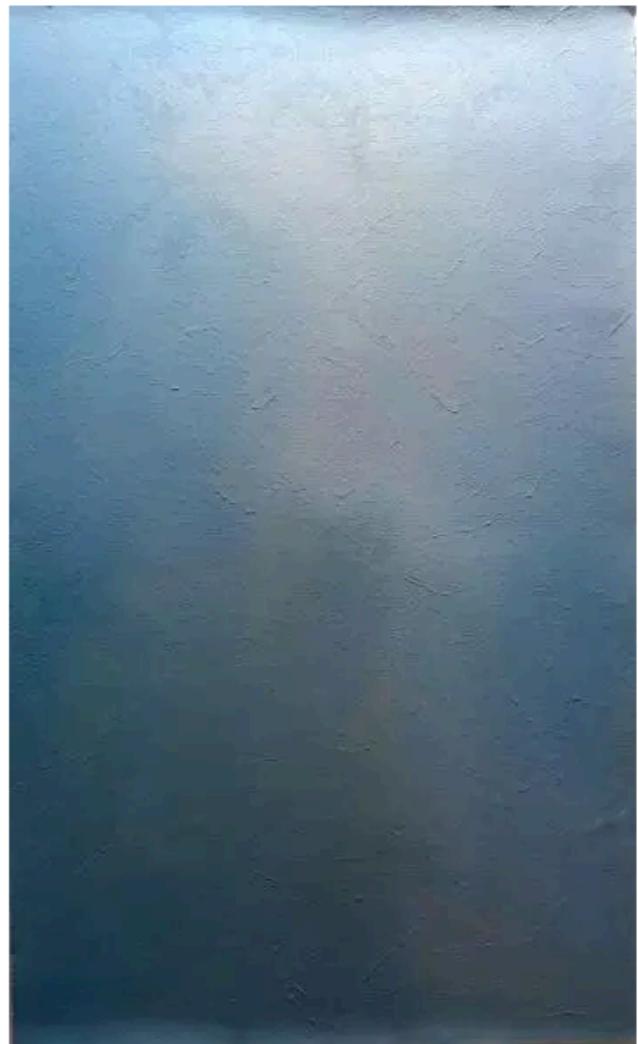
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I first encountered Chafa Ghaddar's works five years ago, when she exhibited a fresco in a group exhibition at the now-defunct Beirut Exhibition Center, and was taken with her project to tackle the venerable technique — one seldom seen in the context of contemporary art — and to update it with a sensitive reflection on the layering of time and materials.

Ghaddar's current show at Galerie Tanit, billed *The Visit*, bears a deceptively generic name. It promises not to be a mere gallery visit, but a gravitas-laden stay with Ghaddar's works. Or perhaps it underscores the facts that artworks, like us, are but temporary and elusive guests of an exhibition space. Unlike *a visit*, *The Visit* evokes the alien and the spiritual. In any case, it is a visit to and from an unclassifiable and singular place, conceptually and materially running outside mainstream contemporary art trends.

She embraces ancient techniques, like fresco, and kinds of wall treatments usually associated with the decorative arts. Materials like paper, traditionally considered less noble than canvas, for instance, are given weight, when, for instance, she hangs them low enough to unfold on the gallery floor. Even lace, and kitsch upholstery or wallpaper patterns that would not have been out of place in antiquated living rooms, are repurposed and worked with glue and different types and techniques of painting to fashion multilayered textures.

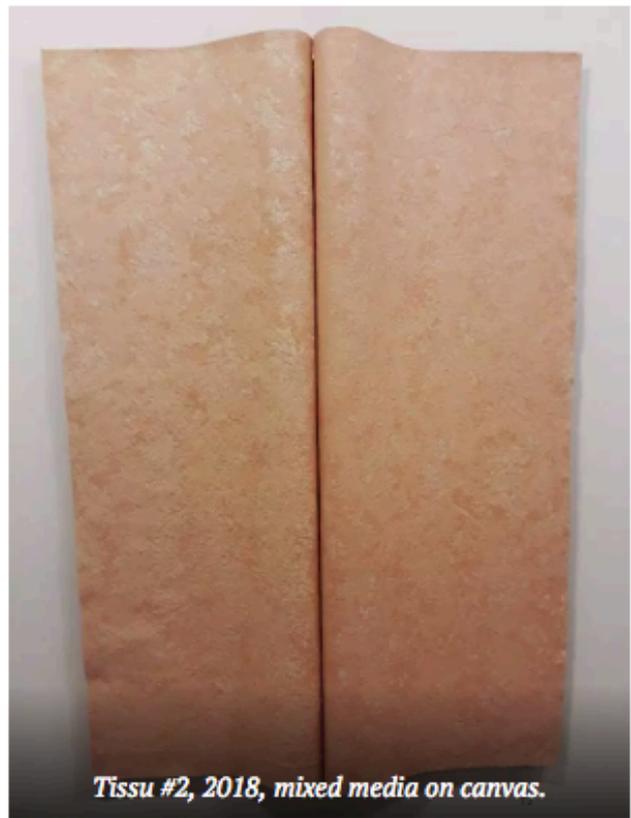
Ghaddar makes no grand social or political statements; she does not purport to do things that sound like re- or un-[insert verb], to question, consider, or gesture towards, something or another – although she does, to an extent. Perhaps because, as it is often the case, the grander the claims, the flimsier their answers. With Ghaddar, the aims and the results of her project are both to be found in the works themselves, and do not pretend to be anything but tentative. There is something neither entirely polished nor finished about her works, which are, both in technique and in their constituents, at once, old and new, destroyed and rebuilt. Their who, what, were, and how, are enigmatic; in the absence of exhibition labels, remain intentionally unexplained, forcing one to engage with the image rather than speculate.



This one again! Elsewhere, 2018, mixed media on cardboard.



Cheminement, 2018, mixed media.



Tissu #2, 2018, mixed media on canvas.

From the monumental to the letter-paper-sized, her works indeed demand close involvement from the viewer, going back and forth between up-close and a few feet away, to take in their reliefs, their delicate motifs, the details of their lines and patterns, their subtle gradations of colors, the layering of materials. Not only calling upon one's sense of vision, her works are tactile — and I've seen many a visitor feel them. This implicit invitation to touch (although a perverse one: the rule against touching artworks still holds) might stem from Ghaddar's own physical implication in the making of her works: looking at them, one senses the undeniable role of the artist's hand, and, in fact, of her entire body, in her creative process, painting, gluing, and scraping away, dealing with murals several-meters long or impossibly heavy slabs of stone.

Despite the predominance of abstraction throughout the show, the human body's presence remains hard to escape, and violence can erupt from within intricate textures. A series of works are marked by red vertical slits, ones reminiscent of wounds or of the female anatomy, cutting into flesh-colored backgrounds; others show shapes formed by a multitude of little holes, as many tiny stabs. A fresco shows a half-erased male torso and arm, or, what remains of his body. But this aggressiveness is fleeting, and only suggested. For a change of mood, there is the atmosphere-setting patterned mural in shades of red, or the blue lace-based panel that seems lit from within; or find the infinitely deep blue pool and dive in.



Details from Ghaddar's mixed media on canvas, 2018.

Chafa Ghaddar's The Visit is on show until January 12, 2019 at Galerie Tanit, Mar Mikhael, Beirut <http://www.galerietanit.com>