

Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas

Chantal Khoury: *I Tie Them Loosely* — September 16–October 28, 2023
Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles



FIGURE 1 Chantal Khoury. *Six Lambs of God*, 2023. Oil on canvas, 213.36 cm × 182.88 cm, 84 × 72 in. Image courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery

Chantal Khoury's solo exhibition, *I Tie Them Loosely*, was the artist's first international exhibition following a decade of nationally acclaimed practice in Canada. In this series of paintings, Khoury is consistent in her introspective approach, delving into reinterpretations of visual symbolism repeated across the history of painting, from the cross-cultural perspective of a second-generation Canadian of Lebanese descent. Infusing symbolic figuration with abstract elements, Khoury reframes the withdrawal of familiar objects of cultural inheritance by recognizing their historical significance in the present, out of place. Utilizing glazing, *sfumato*, *alla prima*, and *chiaroscuro* in her work, Khoury blends the traditional techniques employed within the canonical pictures of Renaissance and early modern painting, complicating them with her reinterpretations. However, unbound by traditional methods of application, Khoury favours improvisational processes in her use of dilution over built-up paint layers, which results in luminous gestural marks. Her painterly inquiries build upon pictorial traditions that unite mythography with iconography, traditions drawn from her family's Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox heritage.¹

1 Chantal Koury, in discussion with the author, January 14, 2024.

2 All the artworks addressed in this review were exhibited at *I Tie Them Loosely* exhibition.

In this vein, the multi-figural oil on canvas composition in *Six Lambs of God* (2023) (fig. 1) renders these shared symbolisms, visually referencing religious prohibition of the *Agnus Dei* (the Lamb of God) by Rome, following the ecclesiastical discord which resulted in the broken communion.² In Khoury's painting, the appearing figures are loosely encircled under the divine observance—the deity turning its many heads towards the onlooker—prompting awe and wonder, as well as visual detachment and dispersal. The fading halos in vertical progression correspond to a circle breaking apart on the ground.

Reflecting on cultural isolation passed down through the experience of her family's immigration from Lebanon, Khoury's longing for inherited community is expressed in visual references to rituals such as *dabke*—a Levantine folk dance collectively performed in circles, signifying joyous unity in resistance despite struggle. In *Dancing Rose Water* (2023) (fig. 2), a choir of dancers glowing radiantly is painted in airy lines, dancing, swirling out of darkness. The visual circularity within *Dancing Rose Water* symbolizes regeneration in the cyclical pattern of life; this thematic appears also in *Fauna in Copper* (2023) (fig. 3), with its animated horned creatures breaching out of an ornamental bowl.

The spirited animals depicted in various works within the exhibition are repeatedly let loose from their confines of the antique vessels, bursting into the clearing of Khoury's canvas. Trotting winged horses in *Two Dark Horses*, the winded horse in *One White Horse*, as well as the rearing serpents in *Carafe* and the roosting peacocks in *Feathers Fall*, are all the witnesses to the resilience of the artist's ancestral past, nesting in the immigrant home. The titles *Zayt wa Milh (Oil and Salt)*, *Holy Carafe*, *Tita's Water Jug*, and *Tipping Bowl* allude to sacramental blessing, healing, offerings, and generosity; these qualities are treasured by the artist for their association with the domestic habits that sustain diasporic life. In Khoury's paintings, mundane and domestic objects are adorned with ethereal glowing, symbolically extending their value beyond their functions, and embracing their nurturing powers through blending the holy with the domestic.



FIGURE 2 Chantal Khoury. *Dancing Rose Water*, 2023. Oil on canvas, 167.64 cm x 152.4 cm, 66 x 60 in. Image courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.

The figures that emerge in *Mary Mary* (fig. 4) conjure the gradual exposure of a concealed image resurfacing in memory. The duplication of Mary signifies the artist's overlaying memories, fractured and projected with latency. The artist remembers from her early years an image of Our Lady of Lebanon, with outstretched arms overlooking Beirut, standing small as a statue of Mary extending her grace and watching over the grandparents' home.³ The memory clearly translates into the painting, while also highlighting the relevance of the built environments in Khoury's work.

Similarly, following the shoreline of Beirut along the Mediterranean coast of the southern Levant, a statue of Aphrodite rakes the coastal ruins of ancient Caesarea Maritima, emerging through the storm headless and armless after centuries. In *She Rises from the Sea, Again*, Aphrodite gracefully stands holding her locks, her face towards the storm, turning her back to the wreckage of the past, thus translating Khoury's experienced imagery into her paintings.⁴

Khoury's approach to the material loss of treasured objects is primarily intended to recognize their immaterial withdrawal—reflecting Lebanese artist and author Jalal Toufic's articulation that “the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster.”⁵ The resurrection of what has been historically withdrawn and withheld through recurring cycles of war, displacement, and destruction haunts the imagination of historical subjects in Khoury's paintings. Within the context of Lebanon, this is evident in the works of Toufic's cohort, many of whom are artists known to be of the *jil al-harb* (the “war generation”).⁶



FIGURE 3 Chantal Khoury. *Fauna in Copper*, 2023. Oil on canvas, 30.48 cm x 30.48 cm, 12 x 12 in. Image courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.

3 Khoury, in discussion with author.

4 The reemergence of Aphrodite from the storm in Khoury's *She Rises from the Sea, Again*, undeniably resonates with Walter Benjamin's vivid depiction of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920). Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, et al. (Schocken Books, 2012), 253–264.

5 Jalal Toufic, “The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster,” in Volume 1 of *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World*, ed. Clara Kim and Ryan Inouye (Forthcoming Books, 2009), 1–53.

6 The “war generation” refers to those born between post-independence and 1980 in Lebanon. Fouad Elkoury, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, Lamia Joreige, Rabih Mroué, Walid



FIGURE 4 Chantal Khoury. *Mary Mary*, 2023.
Oil on canvas, 25.4 cm x 20.32 cm, 10 x 8 in.
Image courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.

For Khoury, a second-generation migrant artist, the association with these Lebanese predecessors is closely tied to a haunting that transverses across her practice, through activating memories of unlived pasts.

Raad, Marwan Rechmaoui, Jayce Salloum, Paola Yacoub, and Akram Zaatari, are among the Lebanese contemporary artists who are associated with the “war generation” due to the thematic focus of their work on the country’s fifteen-year civil war (1975-90). See: Chad Elias, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

Notes on Contributor

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