

### ***Venus Palestina*—Fatima Abu Roomi**

Hues of royal red, the warmth and glow of splendid heavy fabric, run like crimson threads through Fatima Abu Rumi's new paintings. Ornamental floral motifs intertwined with strands of gold take on sundry configurations that the body has pressed into them. In the absence of a body, they stand as a silent monument that the painter, with delicate and concentrated movements of her thin brushes, has seemingly woven into them. Dark tassels on a yellow and orange chain, alternately evoking jewels and garlands, embellish the fringes of the cloth. The painting concurrently offers precise details and rejects illusory depth. The nature of the representation nods to the Islamic miniature tradition but enlarges it, amplifies it, and diverts it toward additional paintings in the cycle that reverberate with Byzantine icons—they, too, connected with the volatile and rich cultural history of the place. Finally, the title of the exhibition, "Venus Palestine," turns the tables and refutes the understandings initially formed by the gaze, which marvels at the high qualities of the works. How do multiple and ostensibly clashing elements give Fatima Abu Rumi's artistic world its form?

It is description that emulates reality, mimesis as perceived in the ancient world, that the artist instrumentalizes to convey messages and ideas; it does not necessarily serve as a technical goal *per se*. Abu Roomi deliberately allows two elements, one mimetic and the other cultural-symbolic, to mingle. The metaphor of Venus-Aphrodite—the classical world's goddess of fertility and beauty—is almost totally baseless in the staged scenes in which Abu Roomi places her father. In her various appearances in European painting from the Renaissance onward, many artists have invoked the goddess to portray nude females laying on white silk sheets and red velvet coverings, as a symbol of celestial love whereas her attire symbolizes love in the here-and-now.

Abu Roomi's paintings have nothing to do with feminine nudity. They communicate their symbolic messages via the coverings of the body, the bed, and the wall. The artist's father

sits on a chair, straining to keep himself erect, or lies with his back to the observer. A man in a white jalabiya sprawls on a bed that is clad in a gorgeous solemn bedspread; he turns his back in a physical gesture of disinclination to cooperate with the image. Although fatigued, weak, and ill, he retains enough strength to become an icon of resistance. Here there is no mirror that captures his beauty as in Diego Velázquez' famous painting; there is no back room where servants fuss over him as in Titian of Venice's work. Fatima Abu Roomi's father sleeps, feet exposed, neither martyred nor tortured. His artificial, theatrical magnificence amplifies his loneliness. The painter's own father and those of his generation who resemble him have been drained of strength by the struggle of life—the personal and the national, not the idols of beauty and eros.

The myth is presented in mordant inversion and swapping of gender roles. The daughter, the painter, the woman—it is she who establishes the rules of the ritual, plants hints and hides them, slices and isolates gestures and body parts, builds connections and then invalidates them. She offers no help to those who would decode them at once. Her paintings are a lovely lamentation and a new beginning. A thin veil of splendid sadness traverses from the canvases to the video work that concludes the cycle—a hypnotic sadness, as befits *Venus Palestina*.

Yael Guilat, 2017