

‘A Hair Tie’: The dark, haunting work of Syrian artist Randa Maddah

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Naima Morelli

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33
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In many art colleges today, teachers are dismissive of work that is too personal. They disapprove of students inspired by the expressivity of a Munch or trying to follow in the footsteps of a Van Gogh or of any other artist able to convey their anguish by simply depicting their own bare room. Conversely, professors generally prefer the intellectualism of the conceptual, possibly with references to traditional iconography.

In doing so, they seem to ignore the fact that art colleges are a bit like psychology faculties; they tend to attract students with a tormented soul. In some parts of the world, this inner turmoil also corresponds to the wider socio-political condition. In other words, what could be defined as idle existentialism in Zurich becomes deeply-felt anguish in the occupied Syrian Golan.

Have you ever heard of Majdal Shams? The town is located at the edge of the ceasefire line between the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and Syria. Before the occupation started in June 1967, Majdal Shams was part of Syria. Residents were subsequently isolated from their country and separated violently from their relatives living or working in Syrian-controlled territory; for a long time they refused to pay taxes to Israel.

Many have close ties with their long-lost home country, which intensified during the nineties with the introduction of a crossing programme allowing people to go over the ceasefire line for religious pilgrimages or to attend university. Thirty-three years ago, artist Randa Maddah was born in Majdal Shams.

From the occupied Syrian Golan to international exhibitions and festivals, Maddah has found herself becoming a representative of art from modern Syria. She received her education at a number of different institutions, where she focused on learning a range of techniques, from

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sculpture to etching. She attended courses in painting and carving at Adham Ismail Centre, and then graduated from the Fine Arts College Department of Sculpture at Damascus University.

A poetic image that reveals the scars left by the painful history of Maddah's homeland is to be found in the artist's work "Light Horizon". This seven-minute video from 2012 shows a woman wandering in the ruins of a house. We follow her as she tidies up scrupulously amidst the debris. Her housework routine of washing the floor and preparing the table would be banal in times of peace, but appears surreal in times of war, expropriation and occupation. We see how her repetition of everyday tasks is an attempt to restore normality and familiarity against all odds.

The short film was shot in the village of Ain Fit in the occupied Syrian Golan, in one of the houses destroyed by the Israeli forces in 1967. This is one of the rare instances in which the artist addresses the issues faced by her people in a straightforward way. "Light Horizon" still allows for a sense of hope to be read between the lines. However, with her latest exhibition at Gallery One in Ramallah, Palestine, Randa Maddah's lens on the world darkens decisively.

In her work for the exhibition, the artist goes back to the tormented bodies, screaming faces and alienated figures that marked her early sculptural and pencil-on-paper production. In "A Hair Tie", she represents the aforementioned sense of displacement and confusion of those who live and work in the occupied Golan, but still feel that they are Syrian. To an international audience, the work gives a voice to the pain of Syrians today. For the Palestinian public who visited the exhibition, it could also provide a visual counterpoint to their own suffering under Israeli occupation.

The sculptural hair leitmotiv from which the exhibition takes its title can be subjected to a double reading. On one hand, the tangle of hair seems to be yet another representation of desperation; a hellish bundle impossible to sort out. In other works, however, we see hair in a positive light, connecting characters.

The exhibition also features a series of grotesque bodies hanging from the roof, suspended by thin wire. This haunting way of presenting the work is recurrent in the artist's shows. The fetus-like figures look like they have been strung up, perhaps ascending to the sky or descending to the earth. Just like the citizens of Majdal Shams, we can interpret the clay bodies as being suspended in an in-between state – belonging nowhere, forever waiting. Their formless shape means that they haven't yet found a stable identity.

Other works on display include a series of bronze figurines. One of the most impressive pieces is a screaming face that appears to be splitting in two. Other statuettes consist of mangled bodies



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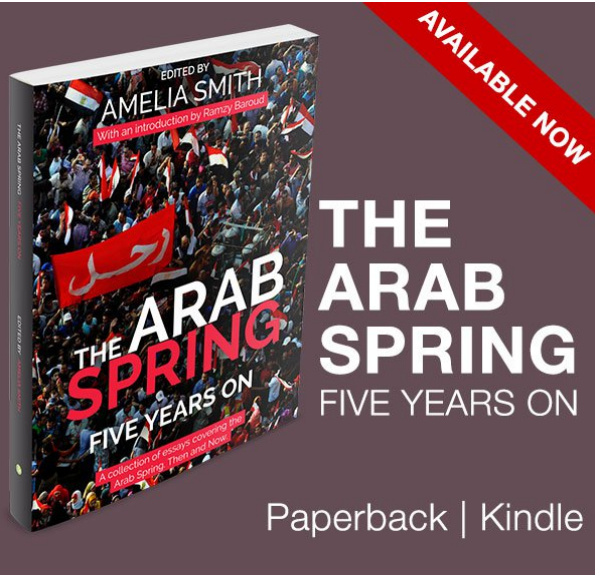
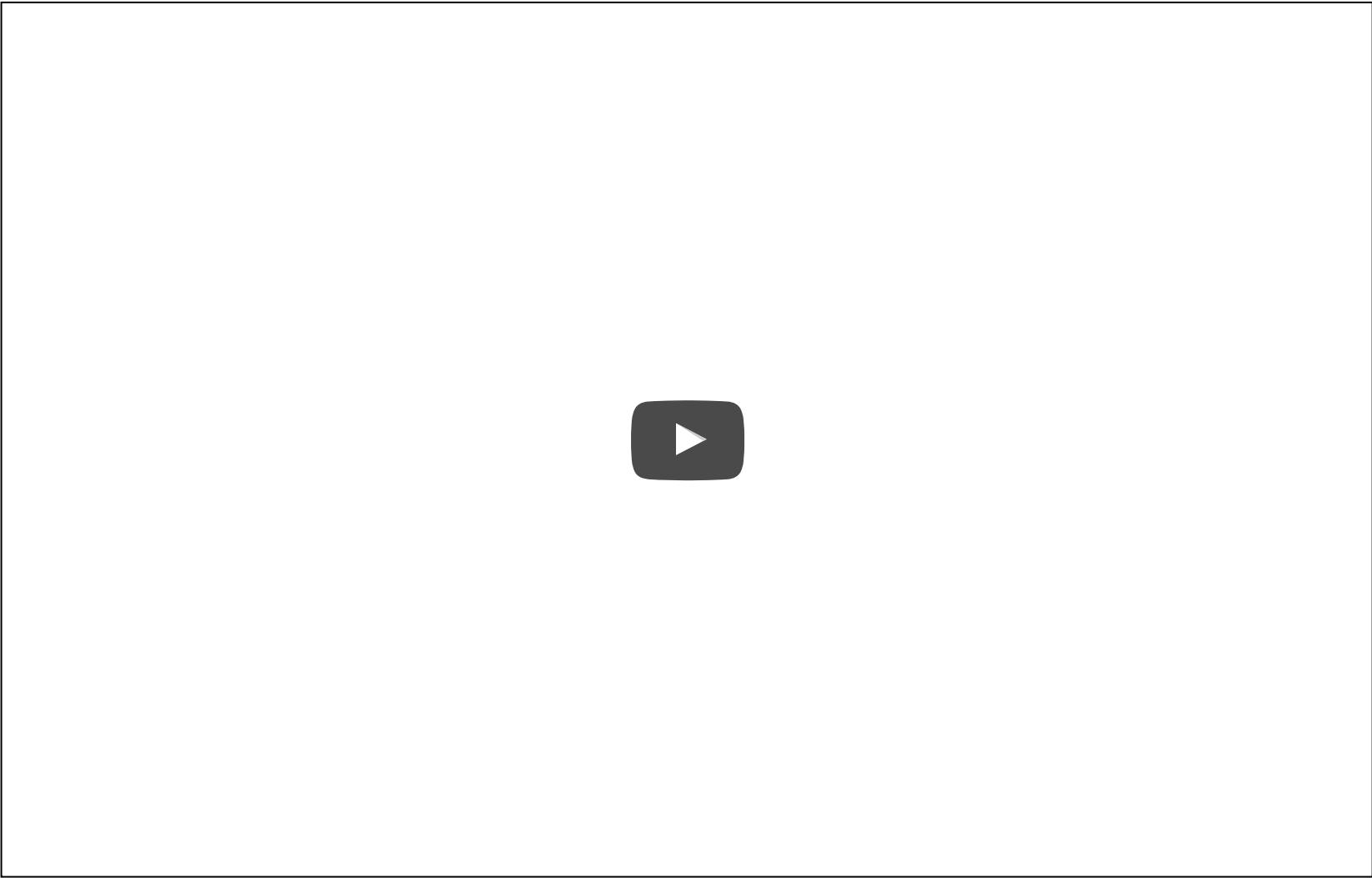
Chemical Attacks

wrapped in a blanket, a mother and a son trying to get some rest and a captive with a bandage over his eyes. Small, angular, heavy and compact, these pieces bring to mind that indistinct feeling of anguish we all have in the worse moments of our lives.

Thinking back to the problem we started with — that of artists becoming too conceptual — they often end up disconnected from their bodily and emotional sensitivity. In Randa Maddah’s work we find the exact opposite; her figures immediately create a connection with the most primal part of ourselves and hit us like a kick in the guts.

Ultimately, “A Hair Tie” is a scary exhibition; light and hope are nowhere to be seen. No wonder many viewers might want to look away, as you would recoil automatically from a deformed beggar grabbing you by the shoulder unawares. However, the test for our humanity is to be able to resist averting our gaze: to look the stranger in the eyes and offer him compassion.

Likewise, Randa Maddah’s work not only has the power to make those who suffer feel less alone. It also helps those on the greener side of the fence to cultivate courage and empathy, and perhaps even act from that place.



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