

## HODA TAWAKOL

### *Between Bodies*

21 November, 2020 - 16 January, 2021



*Mummy #7*, 2020, Fabric, rice and resin, 26 x 19 x 16 cm

Death has never been more alive. Rising tolls seep into our daily newsfeeds; images of the deceased pile up in worldwide media; and mortality rates are on (nearly) every global leader's lips.

For her second solo show at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Hoda Tawakol fathoms death less as an end than as a promise of renewal. In works ranging from large-scale textile pieces to more intimate sculptures, Tawakol freeze-frames an instance of transition, a moment teetering between presence and absence, physical and ethereal.

Liminality is her realm. Here, the body reigns, and the cocoon is the ideal metaphor for this in-between state. The works capture a brief suspension within a transformative cycle, notably the passage beyond death, witnessed by the ancient cocoon-like figures of mummies, sarcophagi, and pyramids.

Tawakol revives charged rituals. She revels in both the materiality they require, and the temporality they inhabit. Her very gestures are liminal, suspended between the ancient and the contemporary.

Wrapping, moulding, binding, freezing—such are the steps that 'embalm' her *Mummies* (2020), a series of nine plump totems. The artist crams nylons with rice, squeezing, twisting, and sculpting the swelling bulges, before enmeshing them in netting. The fleshy assemblages are then 'frozen' in resin, channelling ancient funerary techniques that used the viscous material to mummify for eternity, a gesture that undergirds the entire show's sense of 'fixing' a moment between states. Undulating blobs, mangled male genitalia, bulbous charnel abstractions—the works defy easy reading precisely because they conflate an uncanny myriad of corporal contortions and gender allusions.

Tawakol is a sculptor of textile; throughout her practice, fabrics are endowed with a force hoisting them above mere material swathes. They become entities, bristling with breasts or puckered by protuberances. In Tawakol's hands, fabric is like skin, a sensual membrane between intimacy and exposure. *Sarcophagus No. 1* (2019), for example, vibrates with vitality: the left side of the coffin-like enclosure is made of tufted 'bandage' fabric, peaking in rounded mounds like some perky mammary landscape, while the right 'lid' refracts a rainbow light in uneven silk shafts. The body is physically there—by its scale, its wadded materiality—and yet absent, abstracted. Similarly, the eyes dripping from *Sarcophagus No. 2* (2020) emblemize sight. As a presumed soul peers out through the fringes of tentacular eyes on the right (eerily echoing hair that would continue in post-death growth), a cacophony of bandage-wrapping techniques—strapping, binding, criss-crossing—animate the twin lid.

Revivifying, bright-hued dye bleeds through these fabric works like an insidious witness. A diversity of unpredictable hand-dyeing techniques—batik, spotting, painting, tie-dye—creates background vortexes, like portals propelling suspended souls to another state. Or, in the case of *Sarcophagus No. 2*, the tie-dye ripples stare out at us like an iris—a single über-eye intensifying the chorus of dangling ceramic-eye gazes. Irregularly dyed silk is the backdrop to *Sarcophagus No. 3* (2020), riddled with busty amulets and neatly punctuated by a transversal collar, a yellow, spine-like token, and a crotch-level patch pricked with wild, fin-like wads: the viewer finds a legibly mirrored morphology in the here-but-not-quite body evoked by the two-and-a-half-meter-tall work.



*Sarcophagus #2*, 2020, Fabric, dye, acrylic, ceramic, thread and styrofoam, 270 x 190 x 15 cm



*Immaculate #34*, 2020, Ink on paper, 106 x 78 cm

The pyramid, unsurprisingly, rises as a site of transition in Tawakol's cocoon-like, death-as-new-beginning universe. One of a series of fabric works, *Pyramid No. 1* (2020), composed of hand-sewn constellations of paint-dyed silk, is a flattened, aerial sweep of a pyramid cluster—a drone's-eye view hovering over a shift in perspective. Watercolour, often a medium of experimentation for *Pyramid* and *Sarcophagus studies*, oozes through a series of works on paper (2019-2020): the familiar shapes of *Mummies* and *Sarcophagi* throb with colour, as Tawakol's hallmark iconography—pendulous, fruit-laden date palms—endows the images with an amplified fertility. A second series of works on paper, *Immaculate* (2018-2020), relishes the unpredictability of dyeing: whether on paper pleated from a central point, or block-folded according to the Japanese *shibori* technique, the ink does what it wants, with the blind determination of a bodily fluid. *Immaculate No. 12* (2018), for example, is a scream of colour, yet it functions as a witness to some vivid, fluid act, bearing the traces of a bodily secretion. It throbs resolutely, like an image striving to be read in a shroud.

Throughout her practice, Tawakol has wrapped uncomfortable questions (particularly relating to the manipulation of women's bodies) in sharp-witted, spirited works. Like the liminal states she navigates in *Between Bodies*, her strategy is double—vivacious yet critical, vaguely salacious yet earnest. While her lens on the afterlife may offer glimmers of hope to some in our current moment of

biological uncertainty, Tawakol's works in *Between Bodies* perform a far more daunting task—they bring us nose-to-nose with our finitude, suggesting it may only be the beginning.

#### ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Hoda Tawakol's practice is built on the twin pillars of wit and criticality. Her colorful, engaging textile works—collages, sculptures, installations—ripple with vitality, while tackling compelling issues of gender and bodily control. At once captivating and disarming, the works spring from a range of media, yet focus largely on the female body, its distortions and transformations across a woman's lifecycle. The artist's hallmark fabric sculptures of date palm trees, while stemming from the plant realm, wittily probe bodily questions of gender fluidity. This is a universe of transformation: the body forever hovers between physical and ethereal, reality and abstraction, presence and absence.

Tawakol herself is culturally liminal. Egypt-born, raised in France and Germany by an interchanging trio of 'mothers,' she not only navigates an 'in-between' that percolates through her identity, she layers this suspension into her practice. Her works are spirited—boisterous, wall-filling textile collages, rambunctious fabric installations, and plump sculptures that revel in the uncanny. Yet wrapped within these vigorous creations lie deeper questions around biopower, control, and corporal manipulation.

Tawakol's practice vibrates with feminist energy. While her hand-dyed and intimately sewn textile pieces clearly signpost questions of women's labor, she also interrogates the wider yet more insidious forces (social, biological, cultural) impacting the female body. Sculptural gestures of abstraction and manipulation probe gender restrictions; superposed grids and lattices conjure sensations of confinement, concealment, repression; allusions to ancient rituals and embodied practices fathom death and procreation.

While her artistic strategy is focused—stay vivacious yet critical, vaguely salacious yet deeply earnest—her material mastery is vast. A diversity of unpredictable hand-dyeing techniques—batik, spotting, painting, tie-dye—vivify her textile work. Similarly, her watercolour and ink compositions on paper are the fruit of a teetering negotiation with chance, and a surprising relinquishing of control. Her sculptures, whether assertively figurative or cryptically morphed, enlist a variety of materials with which she consistently experiments.

Hoda Tawakol's work has been exhibited in numerous institutions and galleries in Germany, including Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, Weserburg Museum of Modern Art in Bremen, Religio Westfälisches Museum für religiöse Kultur in Telgte, Kunstverein in Hamburg, Kunsthaus in Hamburg and Produzentengalerie in Hamburg and in Berlin. Internationally, she has shown at Sfeir-Semler gallery in Germany and Lebanon, Beton Art Space in Denmark, and at 10th Velada Santa Lucía in Venezuela.

Her work appears in the following collections: The Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation (SHF), Abu Dhabi; The Progressive Art Collection, USA; Huma Kabakci Collection, Turkey, UK; Sammlung Haus N, Germany; Sohst-Brennenstuhl Collection, Germany, among others.