

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

the body in art

In this section we explore the artistic potential of the human body and its physical properties, from the power of our hands to create and sculpt to the movement of our limbs in performance art. We also look at the social, political and symbolic aspects of the human form and its physicality, as expressed by artists in their quest to explain and understand what it means to be human.





HODA TAWAKOL

Hoda Tawakol's voluminous textile sculptures and shrewdly crafted installations use the body to explore some of the thorniest issues of our time.

Words by Ayla Jean Yackley

Hoda Tawakol. *When the Dates Turn Red* #16. 2022.
Fabric, wadding, thread,
styrofoam. 220 x 130 x 20 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist

The textile artist Hoda Tawakol interrogates some of the most politically charged issues of the day, and she is having fun doing it. With energy, humour and a hint of the profane, she confronts cultural divides, environmental depredation and female agency in her vibrant fabric collages, mixed-media sculptures and buoyant installations.

The human body lies at the heart of Tawakol's work, its transformation throughout one lifetime and mutable ideas of beauty across time and borders. Her own fluidity between cultures, careers and societal roles allows her to navigate the breach to draw links imperceptible to most.

Born into an Egyptian family in London in 1968, Tawakol spent the early years of a peripatetic childhood in Frankfurt with her grandparents and nanny before joining her mother in Paris at the age of five. By the time she was 14, she and her older brother were living largely on their own. The maternal figures and the vacuum they left behind occupy the artist's imagination.

"I was a skinny child, brought up by three opulent women. They had voluptuously shaped bodies with large breasts and thighs. Because I had several mothers in my childhood, I missed out the one mother. And that's why my vision of a woman is fragmented," she says. "This paradox of overload and absence comes into my work."

Her shapeshifting *Mummy* sculptures (2019–22) are bulbous spheres packed into mesh netting or restrained by ropes, neither human nor simply inanimate. They conjure efforts to pacify the flesh through ritual mummification, as well as Tawakol's longing for a clearly defined protector.

Likewise, the *Nude* series (2011–19) hovers between the figurative and abstract, verging on grotesque representations of womanhood. Lacking faces and limbs, they are all breasts and torso with a shock of hair. The Rubenesque statues deceptively exude tenderness, but they are coated in resin, hard as stone. A thin wedge between nurturing and suffocation runs through *Lure* (2013–20), fabric installations left dangling out of reach that could bury a small child if snapped loose.

These corpulent figures emit power and love, like latter-day Venus figurines. What was once idolised for fertility is no longer the iconic

female from a Eurocentric point of view, "although this is changing with body positivity," says Liberty Adrien, co-curator at the Portikus art institution in Frankfurt. "We see in Hoda's work that all bodies are beautiful and ... an expectation of different shapes, volumes and transformations through time."

Adrien curated Tawakol's *Corps (in)visibles* at the French Institute's Les Vitrines art space in Berlin early last year. The wall of the streetfront gallery was papered with totemic eyes, painted by Tawakol, while her bodies and other fabric works were hung or squeezed into the narrow showcase. Over the last decade the artist, who also works with ink and watercolours, has staged another 10 solo exhibitions across Germany, as well as in Dubai and Lebanon.

Tawakol's hand-dyed and sewn textiles, tactile and sensual, reference the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s, when women artists reappropriated media once derided as domestic work, like embroidery, to express their political ideas. "Hoda walks a very interesting line," says Adrien. "She uses strong colours and textures to bridge this historical practice of textiles with a very contemporary discourse on gender and colonialism."

Body politics is as urgent today as it was when the term was coined half a century ago. Whether it's in the United States, following a male-dominated court ruling to permit the criminalisation of abortion, or in France's perennial sparring over the hijab, the policing of women's bodies exposes the degree of control society insists on asserting on half its population. "I have seen changes and improvements that have strengthened the position of women, and yet those transformations are clearly not strong enough," Tawakol affirms. "Women should be free to decide what happens with their body."

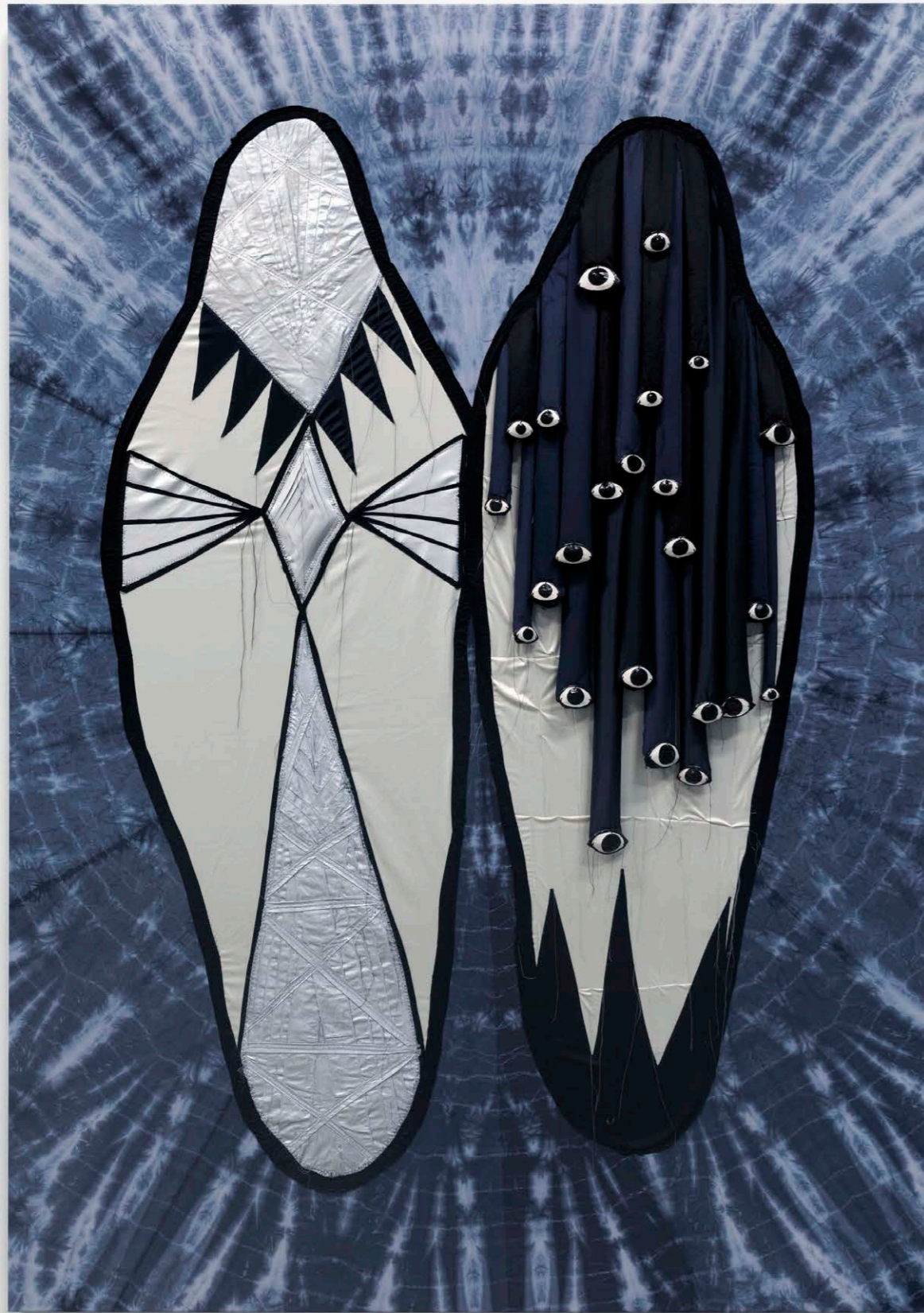
Among Tawakol's intellectual influences are Nawal El Saadawi, the feminist writer who campaigned against female genital mutilation in Egypt, and the politician Simone Veil, who stewarded the legalisation of abortion in France. An Egyptian rooted in Europe, Tawakol decodes differing sets of mores with sensitivity. In *Sarcophagus* (2019–20), she questions how a woman assumes different forms, depending on geography. The twin figures are unpredictably dissimilar; one is void, and the other radiates a rainbow. In another piece from the series, Tawakol has sewn the split coffin onto a tie-





Hoda Tawakol. Installation view of *Delicious Monster* at Ruttkowski;68 in Düsseldorf, 2022.
Right: *Delicious Monster* #15. 2022. Fabric, wadding, thread. 130 x 110 x 7 cm.
Left: From the *Nudes* series.
Image courtesy of the artist

Hoda Tawakol. *Sarcophagus #2*. 2020. Fabric, styrofoam, acrylic, ceramic, thread. 270 x 190 x 20 cm.
Image courtesy of Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde



Hoda Tawakol in her studio in Hamburg. Image courtesy of the artist

dyed panel, dressing one in a low-cut frock and veiling the other but giving it copious ceramic eyes to stare back. "The female body is always a surface of projection. Hiding the body in the Middle East is a control of female sexuality. Unveiling the body and portraying it as a commodity in Western societies also arise from patriarchal structures. I am looking at and confronting both," she explains.

Tawakol mines her Egyptian heritage for her materials, using rice – a staple of Egyptian cuisine – to stuff the *Mummy* and *Nude* sculptures, and resin, utilised in pharaonic embalming, to stiffen the synthetic strands of the *Hair* series (2010–14). The *Hair* masks also reveal Tawakol's subversive wit. The woman disappears, and all that is seen is what is meant to be obscured. In *Falcon*, she has created hoods in cheery colours that evoke a jester's hat. But this is the attire of subjugation. Just as a falconer hoods his raptor to subdue its hunting instincts, the work posits that blinding men is just as rational as veiling the object of their gaze.

The artist's dense *Jungle* and enigmatic *Palm Tree* tapestries (2015–22) slyly probe the constant association of women with the natural environment that seeks to confirm each one's inferiority. A blackened tree trunk with blood-red roots that flow out onto the floor is *Delicious Monster*. Pulsating with ominous vitality, it depicts the threat to their authority that men perceive in female autonomy.

"These plants represent different aspects of the feminine: on the one hand, the attractive ones like abundance and sensuality, and, on the other, those that are more uncanny and possible threats. Patriarchal structures try to control these aspects in order to control their own fear," explains Tawakol.

She is beginning to investigate ecofeminist theory, which reexamines the human relationship with the natural world as the model of domination implodes with climate change. "Her work has a singularity in linking questions about feminism with nature," offers the gallerist Isabelle van den Eynde, whose eponymous gallery in Dubai represents Tawakol. "It is very inspiring, not only in terms of the philosophy, but the medium in which she expresses it."

Van den Eynde credits Tawakol's late entry into the art world for her "very dynamic, very dedicated and very free" practice. Although she was making art as a child, Tawakol suppressed those aspirations to pursue a corporate career to support her mother financially. It was only after she had her own children that her artistic urges won out. "It all began to shake like a pressure cooker: when you open it, it's like an explosion," she explains. At age 38, she entered art school in Hamburg. The nickname her much greener classmates gave Tawakol would prove apt to her work. "They used to call me Mommy," she recalls. 🇸🇦