

"Vision Machines, shall you see me better now?"

There are eyes in the sky.

Ticking eyes that never sleep, little lenses that see it all, a flickering little red light underneath them, constantly recording, constantly watching.

These birds of a new kind flock our skies and spread their wings against the clouds. Their nests lay on long poles and hold within them sets of other, smaller, watching eyes.

Cameras, drones, satellites, or whatever latest technology that's been added to the lot, they are everywhere, watching everyone, an integrated part of today's reality.

It's in these "vision machines" that Tagreed Darghouth has placed her interest, in a new series, that comes after and as an understandable continuation of her ardent critique of war weaponry and nuclear projects. Indeed, from her various series denouncing socio-cultural phenomena in her native Lebanon, to *Vision Machines, Will you see me better now?*, it is safe to say that Darghouth's artistic project is one that is both politically and socially engaged. For Darghouth, and in a reference to Picasso, artists are warriors, fighters, whose battlefield is the world and weapon, art.

The latest addition to her artillery is thus a variety of large renderings of these "vision machines" -an attribute borrowed from French thinker Paul Virilio's eponymous book, depicted with her strong brushstrokes and dripping paint. And while painting, as defined by Darghouth, may seem like a means, it is also and quite undeniably, an end of its own: as we see Darghouth's aesthetic, her use of expressive brushwork and mastering of the medium, the love of paint that lies beneath the questioning and problematic that moves her work, is made quite visible.

The series thus features surveillance cameras, drones, etc. all floating on the flat surface of the canvas, made its only residing objects. These vision machines, objects of surveillance, are also objects of war. They are objects of power. Through them seeing becomes knowing, controlling, and ultimately, seeing becomes winning, winning the wars of the future.

Hence the uneasiness one faces when looking at Darghouth's work. These are not mere still-lives, nature morte, these objects are watching, these objects are alive. This uneasiness is further accentuated by Darghouth's choice of size, as the objects lying on the huge canvases are no longer small, seemingly unthreatening objects, they have been made equals, they have been made worthy opponents whose size reflects their true danger. Walking in the exhibition space surrounded by these unblinking eyes is a daunting experience where one is constantly feeling watched, a simulation of what we go through, unaware, in our every day lives, with which comes the realization of our own daunting reality.

Darghouth thus choreographs an interesting, unexpected, and quite impossible encounter. She places us, the viewers, face to face with these machines, these eyes in the sky that have watched us for so long, but only to make us watch back.

As Darghouth, in a way, captures the capturers, we come to look at images of the image-makers themselves; coming out of their hiding-spots, the vision machines have finally been made visible, in an unexpected reversal of power dynamics. Now we have the power, now we see them, now we know.

There is however, another angle to this encounter, that of our eye meeting the electronic one, this almost-confrontation of the human and the machine.

Yet these technologies go beyond being mere image capturing mechanisms, they are instruments, intermediates between us, and others, unknown someones, at an unknown somewhere, sitting behind a screen, watching.

The machines become the face of faceless power, and to them Darghouth poses the question: shall you see me better now? As she paints them, and as we confront them one by one, staring back, looking into the lens, can they get a closer, better look, can they see the humanity hiding behind potential threats and "terrorists", can they see people hiding behind numbers?

Because these machines, as Darghouth explains, are a symptom, an example of a world as globalized, yet as divided and categorized as ever. They are watching everyone but for different reasons, protecting some, while protecting from others, they allow the Dominant "West" to remain dominant, and partake in the demonization of "the Middle-Easterner", "the Arab", the "Oriental" –all labels, all definitions, that have come to refer to and dehumanize an unknown other, an other that is often only seen through these machines, as a little dot appearing on a separating, almost protective screen, seen from a cautiously safe distance.

And it is this distance that Darghouth comes to break; shall they see us better now?

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