

**Sacha Abou Khalil:
Writings
Agial Art Gallery
Until February 3**

The best writers can draw vivid images in the minds of readers, bringing characters and worlds to life. But they still say that a picture is worth 1,000 words. In Writings, Serbia-born Lebanese artist Sacha Abou Khalil played with the relationship between literature and art, creating eerie, hyperrealist portraits of characters who at first glance might be anyone, but whose true identity lies in the title of each painting.

Basing each character on a friend or family member who agrees to model for him, Abou Khalil brings the novels of authors including Franz Kafka, Jack Kerouac and Vladimir Nabokov to life. In *The Road*, he evokes Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer-Prize winning novel about a father and son journeying through a post-apocalyptic wasteland in a simple image of a boy swathed in a red hoodie, running a toy car along the edge of a table. With eyes fixed on the toy, as though shutting out the rest of the world, the image evokes something of the bleakness of McCarthy's narrative, in which food and warmth are scarce and cannibals roam the dead grey world in search of prey.

On the right - Lolita (Vladimir Nabokov, 1955) - Oil on canvas - 90 x 80 cm - 2017



On the right - Nadja (André Breton, 1928) - Oil on canvas - 142 x 150 cm - 2017

The Trial II captures a young man in a rumpled shirt, clutching a long stick in both hands and staring straight up at the viewer with clear blue eyes, as though demanding answers. Equally arresting and disturbing is his portrait of *Lolita*, in which a young girl dressed in jeans and trainers, her blond hair falling around her shoulders, leans back against a red sofa, on which a man in jeans and hoodie lounges, his face hidden. By placing real people into iconic roles, Abou Khalil gives these tales an immediacy and impact that brings them into a new era and locality, ultimately emphasising the universality of their themes, hinging on concepts such as youth, innocence, death and freedom.

**Khalil Rabah:
New Sites for
the Museum
Departments or
Four Places to
Visit Heaven
Sfeir-Semler
Gallery
Until April 7**

Palestinian artist Khalil Rabah began working on his ongoing project *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* in 1995. More than 20 years on, the latest iteration of this complex enquiry into history, and the ways in which it is socially constructed through material steeped in identity and

culture, is a fascinating blend of fact and fiction. Presenting four different departments in this imagined museum – the Botanical Department, the Earth and Solar System Department, the Geology and Palaeontology Department and the Anthropology Department – the artist mixes and matches geographically recognisable sites with hypothetical ones, placing himself at the centre of the work.

Among the highlights is *Hide Geographies*, a 2017 series of four maps of Palestine, showing its changing, shrinking shape before and after 1948, 1967 and subsequent Israeli incursions. Made of delicate patchwork in rich shades of embroidered fabric, these maps are poignant reflections on the theft of Palestine's historic territory, at once lamenting its loss and emphasising the precious nature of the remaining land and its cultural heritage, including the art of embroidery.

Another moving series, *Sometimes When We Touch*,

which dates from 1997, consists of a series of agricultural tools – a spade, a pickaxe, a hoe – made from the twigs and leaves of olive trees. Like the rest of the work on show, these pieces succeed in telling a double story, one of colonial dominion over indigenous people, and one of human dominion over nature. Without a permanent physical home, Rabah's museum is ephemeral and nomadic, existing in a new form in each new iteration. Its Beirut existence is superb and not to be missed.



Left - Khalil Rabah
Untitled, All is well,
2017
Mixed media
Variable dimensions
Courtesy of the artist
and Sfeir-Semler Gallery
Beirut/Hamburg
Right - Khalil Rabah
United States of
Palestine Times, 2008
Two newspaper pages
55.8 x 36.4 cm each
Courtesy of the artist
and Sfeir-Semler Gallery
Beirut/Hamburg