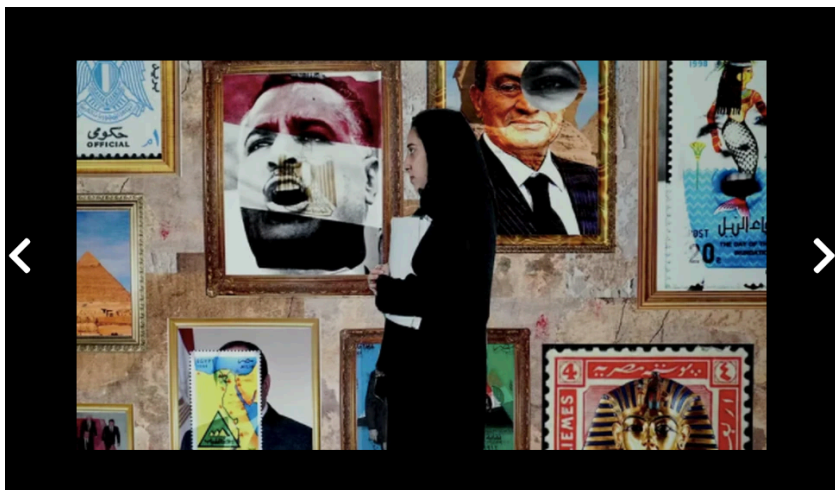


Eyes Wide Shut exhibition at Alserkal Avenue - in pictures

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Vamika Sinha
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Known primarily for its displays of digital and abstract art, the Firetti Contemporary gallery at [Dubai's Alserkal Avenue](#) is having its first all-female exhibition, titled Eyes Wide Shut. Curated by Celine Azem, Mara Firetti and [Oceane Saily](#), the show features 10 women artists of different generations and levels.

Hailing from the UAE, Iran, Armenia, Ukraine, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Kuwait, they include Qamar Abdulmalik, [Sawsan Al Bahar](#), Afra Al Suwaidi, Amani AlThuwani, Khawla Almarzooqi, Negin Fallah, Annie Kurkdjian, Alymamah Rashed, Maria Shapranova and Amina Yahia.

"The title 'Eyes Wide Shut' actually has nothing to do with the [Stanley Kubrick] film," curator Azem says, with a laugh.

"It's about the blind spots we have about various sociopolitical issues. Something happens in the world and we get sad for one day and then move on. This show is about prolonging that moment of reflection and confronting different realities through the perspectives of women."

Collage is a key feature. Shapranova's mixed-media collages use [Ukrainian](#) symbolism in pop art style to portray the resilience of Ukrainian women, particularly amid the country's ongoing occupation. Shapranova uses bold scarlet shades to evoke blood — literally and metaphorically — as well as colours of the Ukrainian flag as backdrops for cleverly cut images.



Maria Shapranova's mixed-media collages use Ukrainian symbolism in pop art style to portray the resilience of Ukrainian women. Photo: Firetti Contemporary

In one piece, Shapranova juxtaposes the Virgin Mary's image against a hot red background, cutting it in such a way as if she is crying blood.

In a neat curatorial move, multidisciplinary artist AlThuwaini's works are placed next to Shapranova's to continue the conversation the latter started. Having spent her early childhood in Kharkiv, Ukraine and then relocating to Kuwait, she melds childhood fairytales such as *The Nut Cracker* with Kuwaiti marriage traditions and rituals.



Having spent her early childhood in Kharkiv in Ukraine before relocating to Kuwait, multidisciplinary artist Amani AlThuwaini melds childhood fairytales with Kuwaiti marriage traditions and rituals. Photo: Firetti Contemporary

Collectively, her works mourn the catastrophic destruction of a place that holds her earliest memories, and how her own children may not be able to experience them. The artworks thus become a way of preserving that nostalgia and love in the face of immense loss.

Palestinian artist Abdulmalik, who lives in Saudi Arabia, also uses the fantastical to comment on politics. Through a stop-motion film and three collages, she depicts her alter-ego journeying via a lift to a world constructed from papier-mache: the Egyptian embassy in Riyadh, which handles identity papers for Palestinian refugees. Flush with images of passports, the artworks exaggerate the absurdity of an undocumented immigrant's quotidian challenges.

Elsewhere, two large female-centric oils on canvas, Yahia's *Ya Aghla Ism Fi El Wogood* and *Te'rafy?*, explore how women's autonomy is dictated by state power and authority.

Meanwhile, in Lebanese-Armenian artist Kurkdjian's untitled works, a woman is trapped in the tangles of her own strands of hair, her hands wound around these dark strings of memory and history.

In another work, a woman lays on a bed or block, disturbingly evoking a body in a morgue, tendrils of hair spilling eerily like blood. The gaze is top-down; the audience views her aerially, akin to a vulture, a position of voyeuristic



Lebanese-Armenian artist Annie Kurkdjian was inspired by her experiences of civil war in Beirut and her grandmother's memories of the Armenian genocide. Photo: Firetti Contemporary

Kurkdjian was inspired by her experiences of [civil war in Beirut](#) and her grandmother's traumatic memories of the [Armenian genocide](#). Her work similarly distorts the female body to visually perform academic research on psychosis.

The show's centrepiece is Kuwaiti artist Rashed's *My eye splits your love to hold us closer to our depths (I will meet you there)*, a floor-to-ceiling watercolour occupying the gallery's back wall.

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Rashed, too, has a distinct surrealist style, recently seen in full glory at her solo show at Tabari Artspace last May. This piece de resistance ties the exhibition together through its sheer magnitude and abstracted, poetic exploration of the female body.

Incorporating her botanical research on the palms of Kuwait, Rashed explores her subjectivity between the binaries of East and West by depicting the female body as an enormous palm tree. Paint cascades into the "trunk" of the body, dripping down into palm fronds as limbs, with an eye at the top and an eye at the bottom — the gaze, hers, the figures and ours, are both decentred and interrupted.

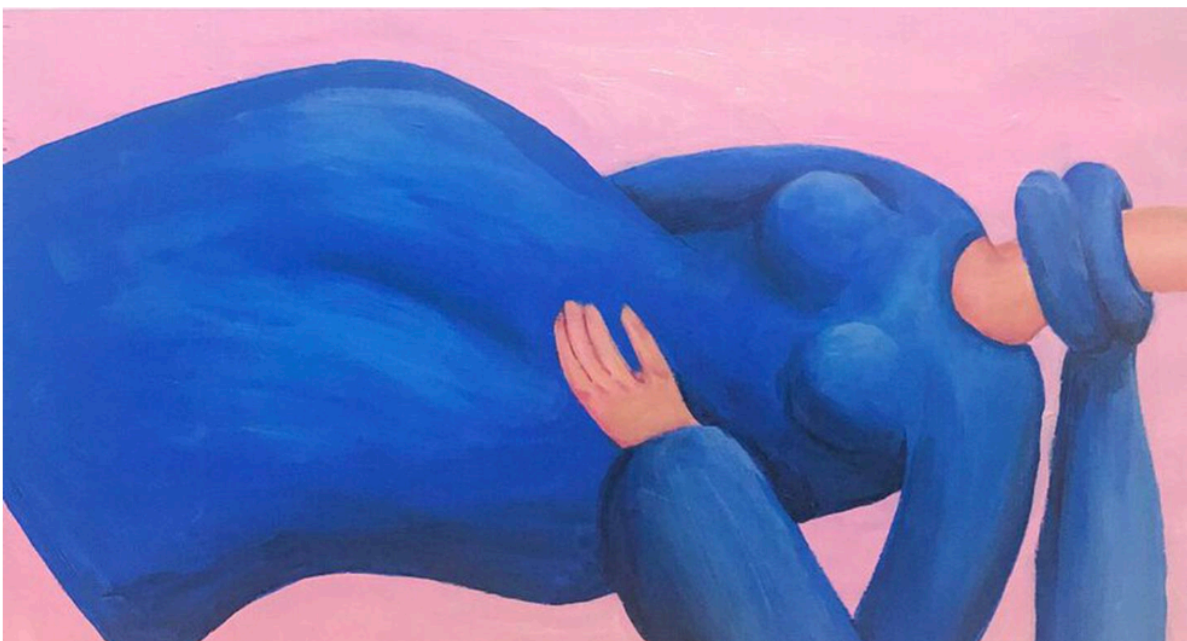
Curator Azem emphasised how happy Firetti Contemporary was to have an all-female show, an aim they had had since their inception.



The curators of Eyes Wide Shut, from left to right, Oceane Saily, Mara Firetti and Celine Azem. Photo: Firetti Contemporary

The works in Eyes Wide Shut largely come together thematically through female trauma. But we must continue interrogating what kinds of women's experiences we explore, and creating room for centring female healing and joy alongside their pain.

The key may lie in Emirati artist Almarzooqi's canvases. Using vivid greens and deep indigos against pinks and lavenders, she creates surreal meditations on the emotions, embodied by the intensity of the colours, that are caused by the constrictions placed on the female mind and body.



Emirati artist Khawla Almarzooqi's canvases are surreal meditations on the emotions that are caused by the constrictions placed on the female mind and body. Photo: Firetti Contemporary

In one painting, a woman's form is uncomfortably contorted, her neck in a stranglehold. Yet she also seems peaceful, one palm resting on her chest, as if floating through an ethereal rose-coloured sea. Al Mazrooqi challenges the viewer's biases by introducing tension and ambiguity: to what extent is the female body unfree, and who decides? How does she navigate her oppression and simultaneously try to heal?

What *Eyes Wide Shut* is really asking of us — curators, artists, critics and onlookers — is not only to prolong our gaze but expand it. Can we view the female body beyond the lens of her trauma and pain?

Eyes Wide Shut by Firetti Contemporary is on at Alserkal Avenue until August 12. More information is available at alserkal.online

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