

STRANGE FRUIT

An exhibition of works by
Tagreed Darghouth

Artist Catalog, 'STRANGE FRUIT by Tagreed Darghouth '

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18th March – 1st May 2019

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Strange Fruit

Tim Cornwell

In Strange Fruits, her first solo exhibition in Dubai, the Lebanese artist Tagreed Dargouth pushes to the edge of abstraction. There is a superb soft quality to several of the pieces here, in the artist's encounter with the olive tree. Dabs of pale colour, a pinky-orange evening light over sandy soil, the lightly touched limb of a tree; then the quick twist of a brush to form a rich black olive. Some of these works have the cherished flimsiness, of studies or sketches.

The weapons of repression, the shadow of interminable conflict, have often characterised Dargouth's work. Her paintings have been easy to pick out in the noisy setting of an art fair. Lethal drones, surveillance cameras, war planes, colossal tanks, the brutalising machines of early 21st Century, but painted and presented in the manner of the French impressionists, with a thick impasto, and drops and splatters of acrylic, as if these creatures of war were advancing through muddy rain. She chooses a fluid, mature, style, that could be borrowed from Monet or Van Gogh, in haunting portrayals of objects that are intensely modern.

For this Dubai show, however, it is olive trees and stumps that stand as silent, wistful witnesses: the victims of violence and state oppression. The focus of this series is the Palestinian olive tree. It is estimated that as many as 800,000 olive trees in occupied Palestine have been uprooted since 1967, with continuing claims of ruined crops and frightened farmers. The olive trees are seen as a metaphor for the violent separation of the Palestinians from their traditional lands and way of life.

One of Dargouth's paintings here pitches for the outlines of the trunk, with quick brush strokes in an almost Oriental style. Another tree suggests a different season: darker, greener, wetter, branches that are bushier and thoroughly alive. There are trees in rain, flying flecks of paint. Olives that are fresh and black but with colour dripping down from them.

Using a palette of grey-blues and greens for the trees that surprisingly echoes the tone of her paintings of aircraft and drones. Dargouth's work here marks a painter who is still experimenting, developing, finessing the aesthetic value of her work. Sometimes the tree stands immovable, heavy-limbed, darkly shaded; affirming its place, defiant as a tank.

Tagreed Dargouth's work rests firmly in the modern Arab legacy. In the summer of 2000 and 2001, she was a student of Marwan Kassab Bachi, the Syrian-German master, when he taught at Ayloul's Summer Academy in Jordan. She admired Marwan's colours, his daubed brushwork, saw the influence of German expressionism. One day, she remembers, he leaned in and whispered in his student's ear: "I want you to be a sabhaa," - a lioness, the word used as a metaphor in Arabic for someone strong, sharp, and in control. "I loved that he saw something," she said, remembering those days. Painting, says Dargouth, is "a media where everybody has tried everything". It takes energy, time, focus for a painter to invent a language of their own; perhaps it needs a sabhaa to do it.

Dargouth is now well established as one of Lebanon's most prominent artists. Her work featured in Ourouba, the Eye of Lebanon, a selection of Lebanese paintings in private collections curated by Rose Issa for the Beirut Art Fair in 2017. There are a dozen examples of her work in the collection of Lebanon's Dalloul Art Foundation. Collectors admire the fierce intelligence at work behind the artist's hand; they speak of the energy, the positivity, of watching the development of a master painter's career, a rising star.

The olive tree may symbolise Palestine in this work - though Dargouth is not Palestinian herself. But the olive tree has a much wider artistic and religious symbolism. In the Quran the trees of heaven are the olive, fig and pomegranate; at Easter Christians go to church with an olive tree branch as a sign of

peace. Bcheale in Lebanon is claimed in folklore as the home of the world's oldest olive trees; in Greece the oldest confirmed olive tree dates back at least 1600 years.

Vincent van Gogh painted a series of olive trees from May 1889. He wrote to his brother Theo, of his struggle to capture them. "They are old silver, sometimes with more blue in them, sometimes greenish, bronzed, fading white above a soil which is yellow, pink, violet tinted orange...very difficult."

As a student at the the Lebanese University of Fine Arts, Dargouth'a first intention was to study interior design, thinking of a job and a salary. Somehow she wrote down 'fine art'. She was particularly inspired by teachers who remained working artists; Muhammad El Rawas was a key influence. He took his students seriously; "he wanted us to push our limits, to understand what we were doing", she said.

From the very beginning with her work, Dargouth made strong choices. She used a traditional medium of paint, expertly, even clinically manipulated to take on subjects that make statements. One might take her as an oil painter, but she works in multi-layered acrylic, relying on the rapid drying to build up the canvases thickly.

Her first structured solo show, "Falling Parts" came in 2006, a response to the July war in Lebanon. Her work turned on dislocated dolls; spelling out how easily people, as well as dolls, could lose their hands or heads, who with no protection could be scattered like pieces of a toy. In 2008, Dargouth truly made her mark with "Mirror, Mirror", a series which boldly confronted a peace-time obsession in Lebanon: cosmetic surgery. Her portraits of men and women with tell-tale nose bandages and bruised faces earned her a place in the Barjeel Art Foundation's collection, described as both artist and "a socio-cultural historian".



**Flayed Ox, a study after
Rembrandt Van Rijn**

30x21 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018

In 2011, several works from her “Canticle of Death” exhibition - like most others, at Beirut’s Agial Art Gallery - would go to Lebanon’s Mokbel Art Collection. By that time, Dargouth’s roving eye had taken her on to the atomic bomb, and the absurd and contradictory nicknames these weapons were given - Fat Man, Little Boy. She painted the human skulls that were left as the detritus of destruction; the weapon, and the target.

They also feature in the Dubai show; but it is her last that will explore the olive tree, she declares.

Strange Fruits is in part a second act of the 2018 show, Analogy to Human Life, at the Saleh Barakat Gallery in Beirut. It is political art, but it is not hateful or spiteful; it’s a cry for the crushing of the olive trees and the people that live among them.

The darker, more uncompromising side of Dargouth’s practise takes its place in the Dubai show. A blurred security camera that could be a machine gun; the grim shape of a black mechanical shovel; a pair of skulls; an abstract, brightly coloured hanging carcass inspired by Rembrandt’s Flayed Ox.

But mostly we have olive trees. Dargouth cites the work of Van Gogh, and the poet Mahmoud Darwish, on the significance of the olive tree. Another influence is the Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian philosopher, who writes about the concept of “al-sumoud” – steadfastness or resistance - among the Palestinians. At home in Lebanon she loves the colour schemes of Lebanon’s Paul Guiragossian, but the Europeans Georg Baselitz, and Willem de Kooning are stronger inspirations.

In the #metoo era, Dargouth has little patience for public vogue in the art world for women artist’s work. “I always say I am neither a woman nor a man when it comes to being an artist,” she said. “That pro-woman thing, I don’t mind but I think artworks should not be identified according to gender. When things become gender, this should be default, not intentionally, we should support men and women. Our community has got plenty of issues, it’s women, men, kids, everybody, that’s why I don’t like to be part of something that’s trendy.”

But she is in no doubt that artists play a role in reflecting on the world around them. Political art - such as Pablo Picasso’s Guernica - speaks loudest not with denunciation, or ugly

parody, but with its power to draw our attention to things, to use visual idiom to focus thought. “We have a major responsibility,” she said. “With all that I’m doing is using my visual language to speak about what is going on. That’s part of my concern all the time.” She compares herself to Jose Saramago, the Portuguese writer, who said he was not a creator, but “just someone who simply lifts a rock and exposes what’s beneath it”.

Santiago's Hemingway

Tagreed Darghouth

It's not about your brush strokes, or time spent in your studio.

It's not about the poetry lay intimidation a blank, ruined, or quick-to-finish canvas gives you.

It's not about your vain tactics against the relentless attacks of anxiety and distress.

It's not about the encouragements you murmur to yourself when the too loud orchestra plays the "seems you can't" tune.

It's not about your secret everyday hope to "catch the Big Fish" at your studio, and that each fruitless workday could be a rehearsal towards that catch.

It's not about the feeling that time spent away from your studio is your "recovery phase".

It's not about you grinning at the idea that your paintings also get sick of you and need time off.

It's not about you coming to the realization that founding a family and making art are mutually exclusive.

It is not about exposure, exhibitions, art fairs, or auctions.

It's not about praise or criticism.

It's not about male artists, female artists, you repeating that you're just an artist, or believing that we all are.

It's not about politics, religion, East and West.

It's not about your conclusion that the studio will always be your ultimate shelter.

It's all about that glimpse.

When all the noise goes unexpectedly silent.

When you step outside your own way.

When your own mental orchestra plays the music, for a change.

When your canvas finally sings along your tune.

You are, in this faint glimpse, Santiago's Hemingway, Camus's happy Sisyphus, The Rolling Stones performing "I Can't Get No Satisfaction".

You are, in this faint glimpse, what you've always wanted to be.



Photo courtesy of Giles Duley





Strange Fruits

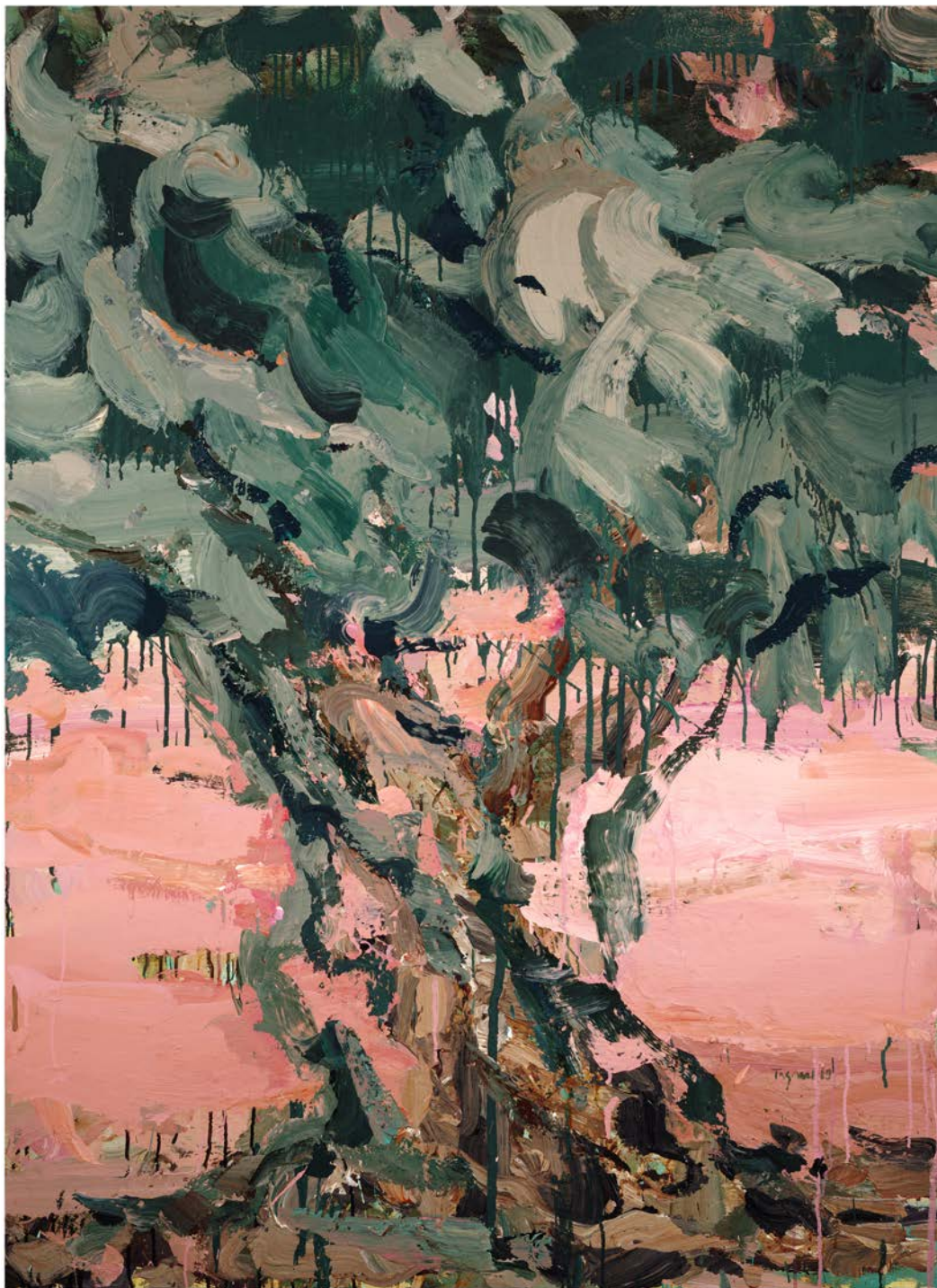
4 (30x21) cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018-2019



**From the "Cut Off
Trunks" series**
6 (30x21) cm
Acrylic on canvas
2018-2019



From "The Tree Within" series

160x117 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018-2019

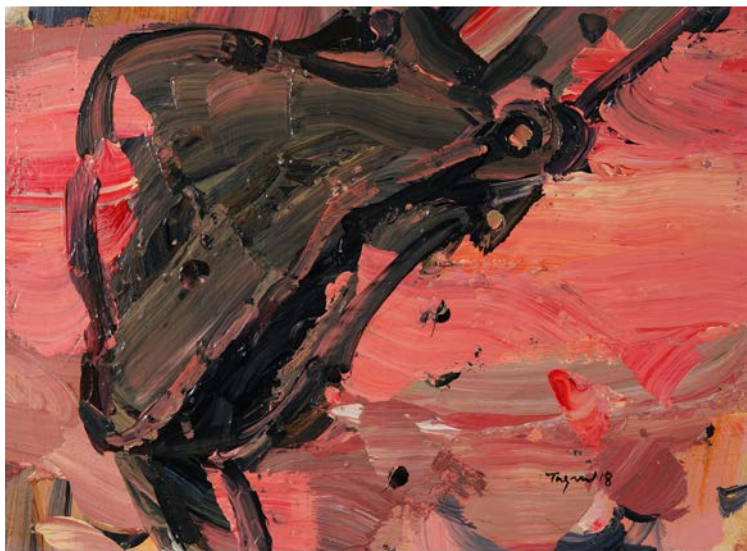


The Ruined Landscape

115x200 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018



From "The Caterpillars" series

3 (28.5x38) cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018

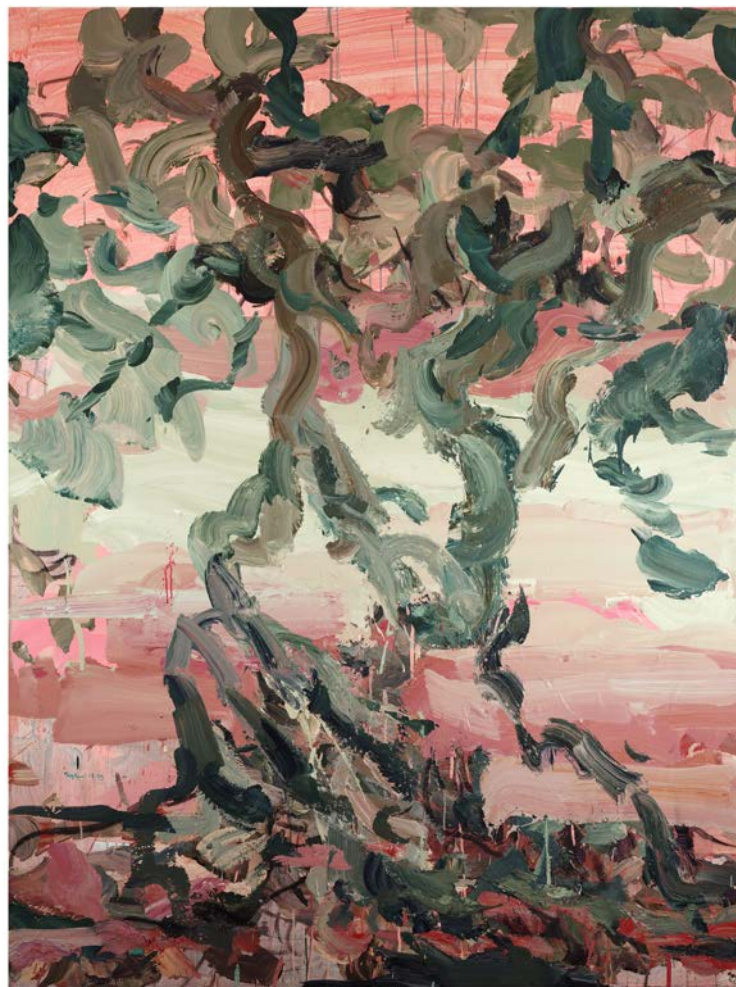


The Meat Mincer

100x150 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2019

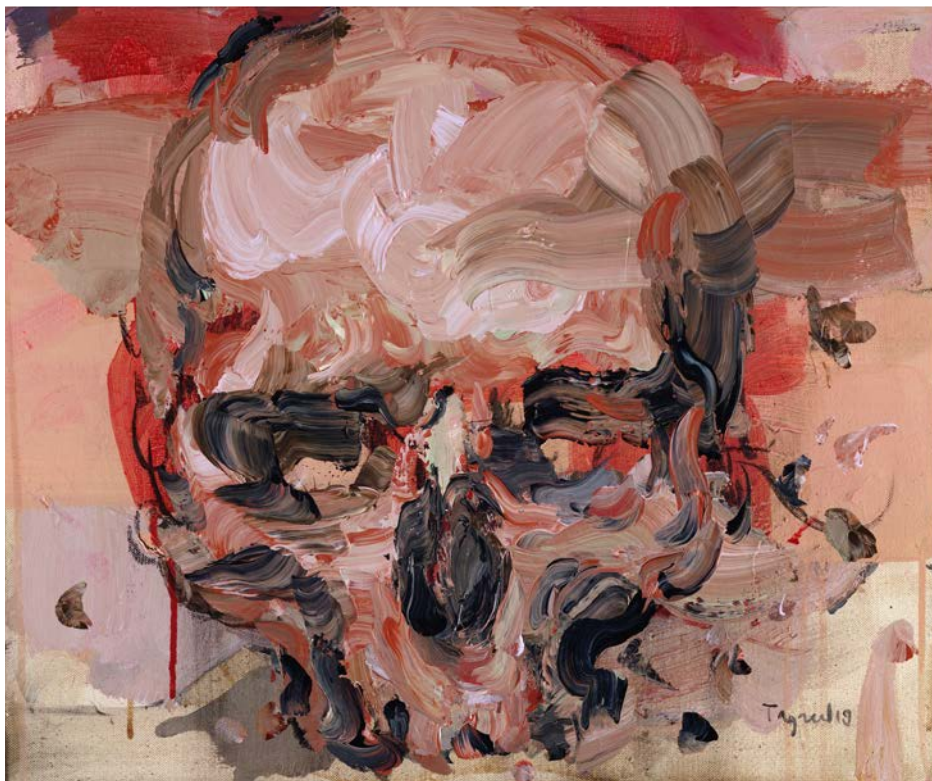


From “The Tree Within” series

2 (200x150) cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018-2019



From the "Skulls" series

50x60 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2019



Strange Fruits

30x21 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018-2019



Strange Fruit

115x200 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018-2019



From “The Tree Within” series

3 (60x50) cm

Mixed media on canvas

2019

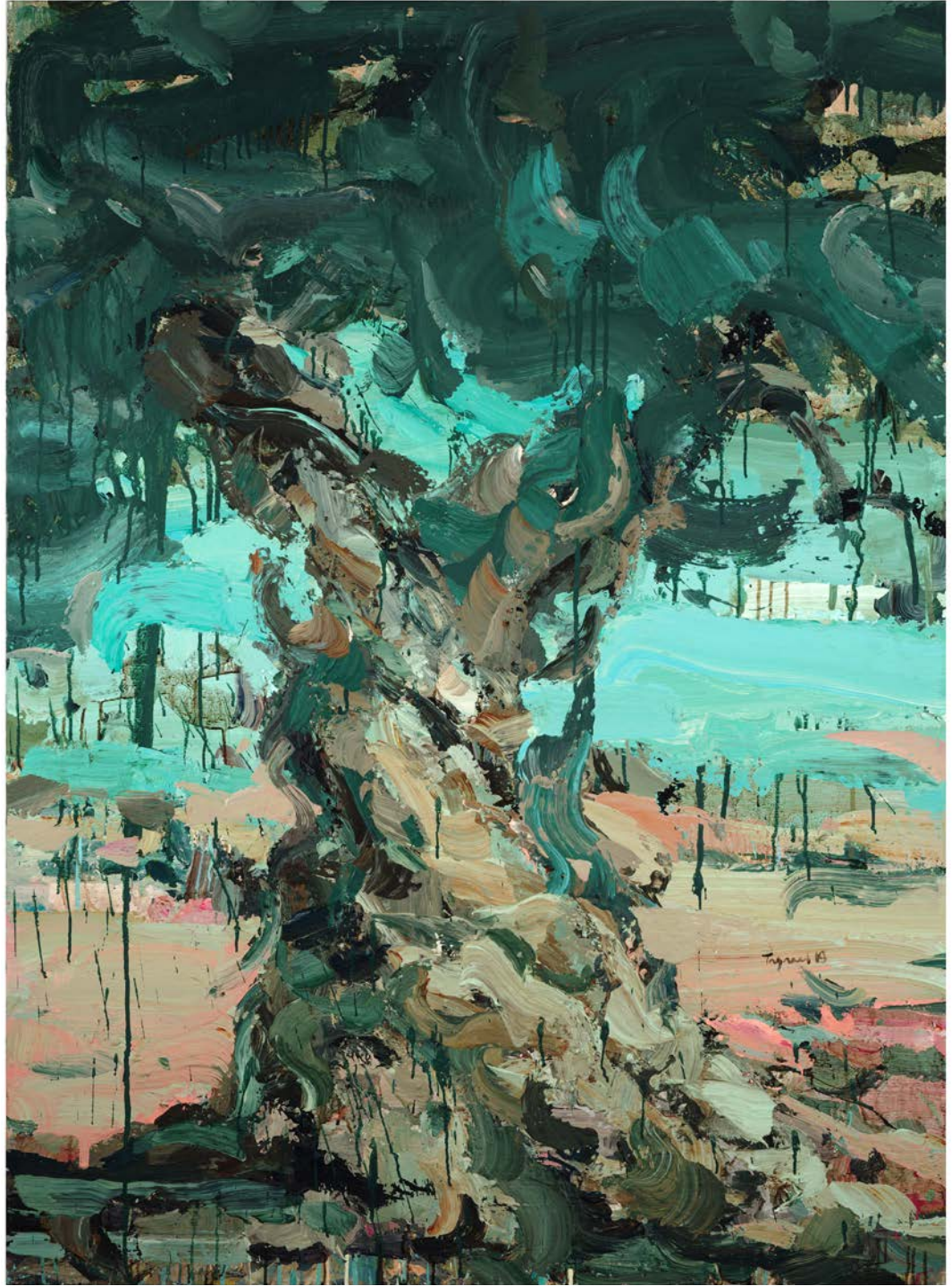


From "The Tree Within" series

160x117 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018-2019

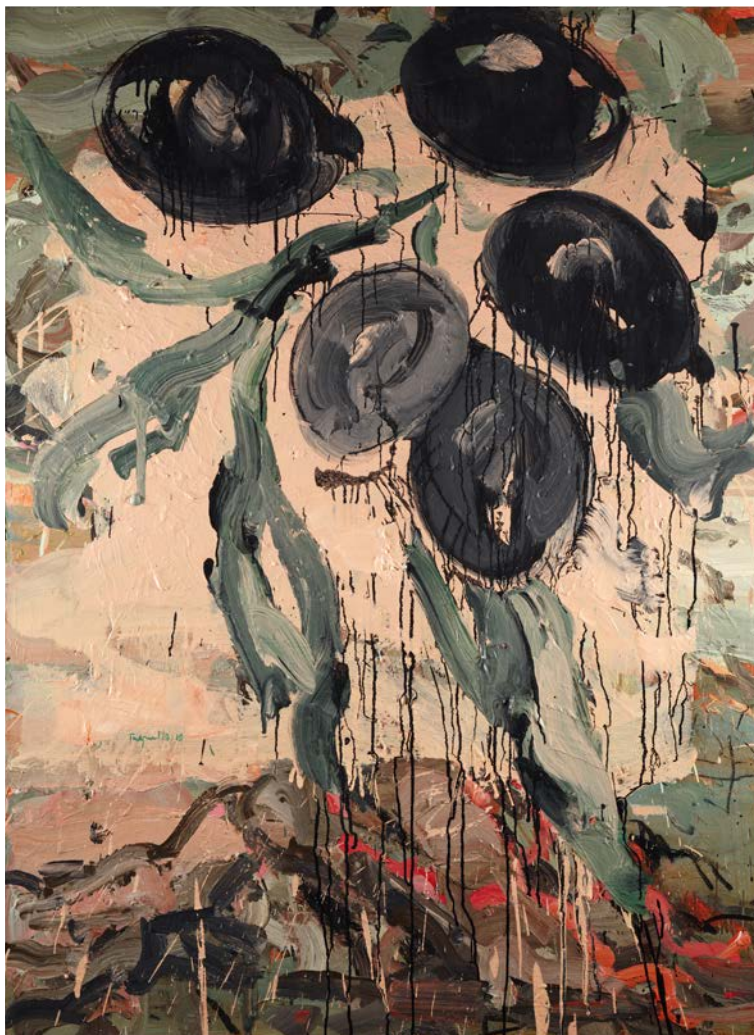


From “The Tree Within” series

160x117 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018-2019



Strange Fruits

160x117 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018-2019



**Flayed Ox, a study after
Rembrandt Van Rijn**

160x117 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018-2019

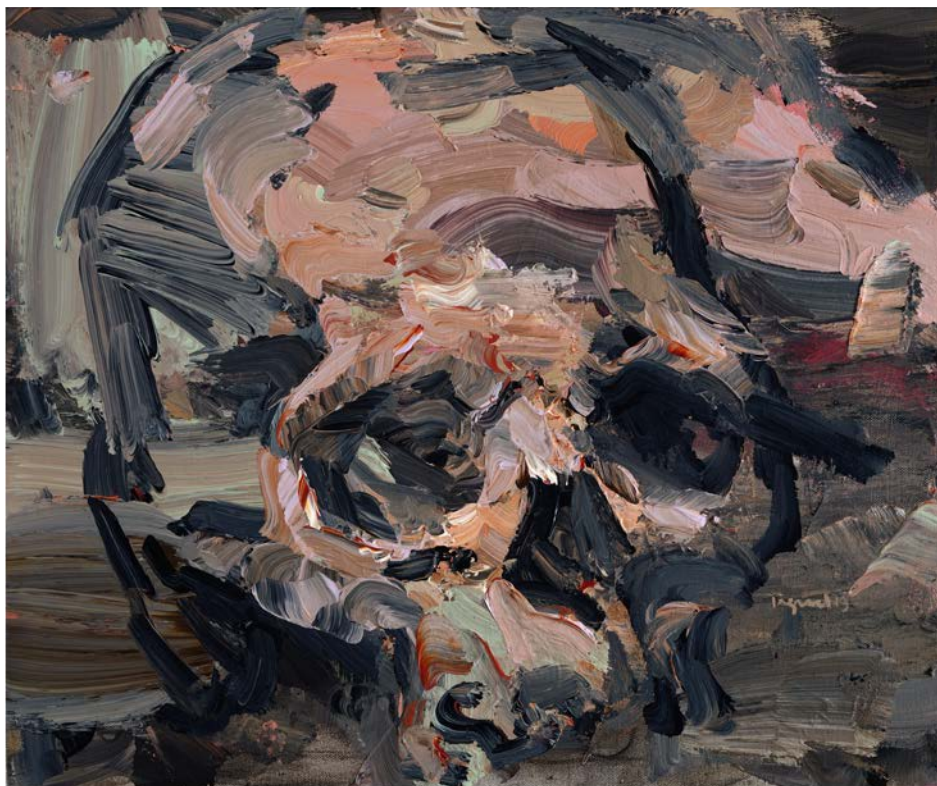


Strange Fruits

30x21 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018-2019



From the "Skulls" series

50x60 cm

Acrylic on canvas

2019



From the "Cut Off Trunks" series

3 (30x21) cm

Acrylic on canvas

2018-2019



Tagreed Darghouth

Born in Saida, Lebanon in 1979, Tagreed Darghouth obtained a degree in Fine Arts at the Lebanese University in Beirut, as well as a diploma in art education. She participated in the Ayloul Summer Academy, led by the Syrian-German artist Marwan Kassab Bashi, at Darat Al Funoun in Amman in 2000 and 2001. She then went on to study Space Art at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

Tagreed's social and political themes draw attention to forms of structural violence and misconceptions of the Other. In 2004, Darghouth had her first solo exhibition, *Still Features*, at Zico House in Beirut, which was then followed by *Falling Parts* at the Goethe institute in Beirut in 2006. She has since had several solo exhibitions in Agial Art Gallery, including, *Mirror, Mirror!* in 2008, *Fair & Lovely* in 2010, *Canticle of Death* in 2011, *Rehearsals* in 2013, and *Vision Machines, Shall You See Me Better Now?* In 2015. Most recently, in 2018, Saleh Barakat Gallery held Darghouth's exhibition *Analogy to Human Life*.

She has participated in numerous group exhibitions around the world, in Al-Sharjah, Amman, Beirut, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Doha, Dubai, Jordan, Istanbul, London, Miami, Berlin, New York, Paris, and Singapore, among other cities, which includes the 10th Anniversary of the Kasa Art Gallery exhibition in Istanbul in 2010, *Connecting Heavens* at Green Art Gallery in Dubai in 2010, Subtitled: *With Narratives from Lebanon* at the Royal College of Art in London in 2011, and *Thin Skin: Six Artists from Beirut* at Taymour Grahne Gallery in New York in 2014. Darghouth has received several prizes, including the 2nd Prize at the Ayloul Summer Academy exhibition in Darat al Funoun in Amman in 2000, the 1st prize at the cm3 exhibition in Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris in 2003, and the Boghossian prize for a young Lebanese artist in the category of painting in 2012. She currently works and lives in Beirut, Lebanon.

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