

MANDY EL-SAYEGH
The Amateur

March 31–April 29, 2023
New York



Mandy El-Sayegh's studio, 2023. Photo by Abtin Eshraghi

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Lehmann Maupin presents an exhibition of new work by **Mandy El-Sayegh**. Featuring painting, sound, video, installation, and live elements, this visually and materially rich exhibition explores the curious experience of being an artist in the studio. Through a variety of media, El-Sayegh invites visitors into this interior world, seeking to activate material through chance encounters and opening up the gallery space to collaboration. A program of events will take place throughout the run of exhibition including a talk by the artist, and open access opportunities for dancers to use the gallery as a rehearsal space. The exhibition's title, *The Amateur*, points to the artist's interest in how a coded language and framing of professionalism supposedly confers legitimacy on creative acts of various kinds. With an emphasis on participation, El-Sayegh embraces amateurism, a moniker whose etymology, the Latin *amare*, suggests one who engages in something out of love.

The exhibition features new large-scale paintings, many of which are from a recent series by El-Sayegh that utilizes an abundance of blood-red pigment combined with found elements such as newspaper pages and her father's Arabic calligraphy. These "fragments," often seen within the artist's densely layered compositions, are particularly stark and apparent. Also seen in the paintings on view are figurative passages reproduced from anatomical reference books. These motifs, which appear frequently in El-Sayegh's work, are, for the artist, a symbolic re-introduction of the body into the abstract. Trapped within the paintings' schema, sometimes by the form of a grid (which evokes a net or a crosshair) these splintered bodies also refer to the idea of suppressed subjects, denied individuality, wholeness, and representation.

The idea of this suppression is also hinted at by the inclusion in some works of a reproduced watermark from a childhood passport belonging to the artist's brother, as a displaced Palestinian. The intention of the watermark is to prevent reproducibility, but El-Sayegh renders the mark repeatedly through silk-screening. The imperfect repetition created by this process alludes to the gradual writing out of a people from history. Also included are reproductions of currency – silk-screened dollars and counterfeit banknotes. Selected for their aesthetic appeal, as well as the inherent mechanisms of irreproducibility in authentic notes, these symbols candidly suggest the connection between art objects and commerce.

In the second gallery, a vast installation covering two large walls includes layers of finished paintings over works-in-progress: swathes of linen that are painted, screen-printed, and collaged, overlapping in a complex patchwork. These pieces feature characteristics for which the artist's work is well known: fragments of found imagery, frequent use of red tones, and the appearance of grids silk-screened across surfaces. The installation recreates the artist's studio, in which works are hung in layers on the walls – El-Sayegh works on multiple pieces at once, often living with works for extended periods and gradually adding what they need to be complete.

The effect in the gallery is of an immense collage, a technique which is central to El-Sayegh's practice. The process of attempting

to bind together disparate fragments into a whole functions materially as well as symbolically, connecting the philosophical, the psychological, and political worlds. The emphasis on collage techniques can be seen throughout the exhibition, in video and sound, paintings, and in acts of collaboration – which El-Sayegh also views as a form of living collage.

A new sound work, created by the artist with her frequent collaborator, composer Lily Oakes, permeates the galleries. The piece features samples including voice-notes sent by El-Sayegh to friends, and outtakes from an interview recorded in 2020 in which she haltingly introduces herself and her work. For El-Sayegh, this reflects her own ambivalent relationship with framing herself as an artist to the outside world.

As well as physically constructing a studio space, the exhibition seeks to unravel the experience of creativity and invite direct participation in this experience. El-Sayegh often paints during the night and at times experiences what she refers to as a "flow state," which she sees as universal – a state of euphoria one might experience while dancing in a club, for example – a common experience or "connective tissue" between human beings. For the show's opening, in a new performance work, *Akathisia*, El-Sayegh will activate the installation by going through the same motions she performs in her own studio – moving intuitively in front of paintings-in-progress. This activation is a gesture that challenges the mythology around the figure of the artist, revealing the ultimate simplicity of standing in front of a painting while at the same time alluding to the intimacy and possibility of the studio. The movements are accompanied by projections featuring quick cuts between shots of studio processes along with snippets of current news and forensic pathology sources. The movements in the performance (and its title) refer to *akathisia*, a nervous condition El-Sayegh experienced in 2020. Connected to dopamine imbalance, *akathisia* produces a feeling of restlessness or jitteriness, and an inability to stay still. This restless movement also mirrors the multitude of imagery within the works and their perpetual state of fluid, internal flux.

For El-Sayegh, movement has become a means by which the living body is brought back into her art, and she has worked with collaborative performance for several years, usually within her exhibitions, by interacting with installations, works on gallery floors, and projections. For this exhibition, the artist invites others to inhabit the space, and has issued an open call for dancers to use the gallery to rehearse or improvise throughout the run of the show. These interventions connect with the methodologies El-Sayegh employs throughout her practice – the "cut-up" method, pulling together material from different sources, as well as experimentations that invite chance occurrences.

Through inhabiting the gallery as a living space, El-Sayegh resists the static framework in which her works typically appear outside of her studio. Isolating herself by listening to music on headphones, while the audience hears her sound piece, she plays with the dichotomy between the separation of the artist in the studio and the collective experience of the work that can occur when art is brought into public spaces.

Mandy El-Sayegh's (b. 1985, Malaysia, lives and works in London, United Kingdom) highly process-driven practice is rooted in an exploration of material and language. Executed in a wide range of media, including densely layered paintings, sculpture, installation, diagrams, and sound and video, El-Sayegh's work investigates the formation and break-down of systems of order, be they bodily, linguistic, or political. She is particularly interested in exploring the Part-Whole relationship—how something significant yet unpremeditated emerges and comes into being through various smaller, micro-interactions or repetitions. She physically demonstrates this by collaging disparate fragments, text, and found imagery, and layering them with materials like latex, rubber, and clay that mimic organic matter. Through simple, repetitive patterns such as a hand-painted grid or geometric molds, formal and narrative synthesis occurs that is not consciously intended or anticipated.

Solo and two-person exhibitions of El-Sayegh's work have been organized at Lehmann Maupin, Seoul, South Korea (2022); UTA Artist Space, Los Angeles, CA (2022); Lehmann Maupin, Palm Beach, FL (2022); Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, France (2021); Lehmann Maupin, Seoul, South Korea (2021); Lehmann Maupin, New York, NY (2021); Surssock Museum, Beirut, Lebanon (2019); Bétonsalon, Paris, France (2019); Chisenhale Gallery, London, United Kingdom (2019); The Mistake Room, Guadalajara, Mexico (2018); and Carl Kostyál, London, United Kingdom (2017).

She has been featured in various group exhibitions including *Biennale Matter of Art*, Prague, Czechia (2022); *The Drawing Centre Show*, Le Consortium, Dijon, France (2022); *Time, and time again - Works from the Vermeire-Notebaert Collection*, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Sint-Martens-Latem, Belgium; *British Art Show 9*, Hayward Gallery Touring, Wolverhampton, United Kingdom (2022); *Body Topographies*, Lehmann Maupin, London, United Kingdom (2021); *Drawing Biennial*, Drawing Room, London, United Kingdom (2021); *When I Count, There Are Only You...*, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2021); *Words at an Exhibition - an exhibition in ten chapters and five poems*, Busan Biennale, Busan, South Korea (2020); *Our ashes make great fertilizer*, PUBLIC Gallery, London, United Kingdom (2020); *Searching the Sky for Rain*, SculptureCenter, Long Island City, NY (2019); *Ecologies of Darkness*, SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin, Germany (2019); *Deterioro y Poder*, Instituto de Vision, Bogota, Colombia (2018); *Lessons in Agronomy*, Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, China (2017); *Boundary Work*, Sharjah Biennial 13: Tamawuj, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2017); *For Pete's Sake*, Carl Kostyál, Stockholm, Sweden (2016); *Elizabeth House*, Elizabeth House, London, United Kingdom (2011); and *Responsive Eye*, London Gallery West, London, United Kingdom (2011).

El-Sayegh's work is in public and private collections, including Collection Nicoletta Fiorucci Russo, London, United Kingdom; Institute of Contemporary Art North Miami, Miami, FL; Kadist, Paris, France; Kamel Lazaar Foundation, London, United Kingdom; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Long Museum, Shanghai, China; Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates; Start Museum, Shanghai, China; and Tate, London, United Kingdom. In 2017 El-Sayegh was shortlisted for the Max Mara Art Prize for Women in collaboration with the Whitechapel Gallery, London and was invited to participate in the Chisenhale Gallery Commissions Programme 2017-19, supported by the LUMA Foundation.



Portrait of Mandy El Sayegh, 2023. Photo by Abtin Eshraghi

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Rachel Lehmann and David Maupin co-founded Lehmann Maupin in 1996 in New York. Since Inception, Lehmann Maupin has served as a leading contemporary art gallery with locations in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. For over 25 years, Lehmann Maupin has been instrumental in introducing international artists in new geographies and building long-lasting curatorial relationships. Known for championing diverse voices, the gallery's program proudly features artists whose work challenges notions of identity, and shapes international culture. Today, the gallery has locations in New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London, as well as a team in mainland China. In the past year with growing opportunities in new markets, the gallery has opened seasonal spaces in Aspen, Palm Beach, Taipei, and Beijing.



Lehmann Maupin in New York. Photo by Matthew Herrmann