

PRESS RELEASE

Nada Elkalaawy

The Butterfly's Burden

23 September – November, 2026

Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai

Lawrie Shabibi is pleased to announce *The Butterfly's Burden*, a solo exhibition by Egyptian artist Nada Elkalaawy, opening on 23 September 2026. Borrowed from the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, the exhibition's title speaks to the tension between sensitivity, beauty, and emotional weight. Across a body of paintings developed through layered processes of accumulation and erasure, Elkalaawy explores memory, loss, regeneration, and the passage of time. Ephemeral forms including flowers, butterflies, domestic vessels, family photographs, and ghostly figures hold traces of shared human experience, drifting between past and present, presence and absence.

Elkalaawy's practice is grounded in the relationship between memory, representation, and materiality. Drawing from a personal photographic archive accumulated over many years, comprising family albums, still lifes, auction catalogues, and found imagery, she constructs compositions that blur the boundaries between the lived, the remembered, and the imagined. Through processes of collage, reworking, and painterly methods, these fragments are displaced from their original contexts and absorbed into new configurations. The resulting paintings do not function as direct representations of specific memories or narratives, but as spaces in which personal and collective histories, and multiple temporalities, can coexist.

Drawing plays a fundamental role in Elkalaawy's process, providing a direct means through which ideas are developed and translated into image. Almost every work begins with a sketch, with charcoal and graphite serving as preparatory and exploratory mediums before the image develops through painting. Charcoal allows for rapid shifts in tone and gesture. Painting ultimately becomes a space for mystery and transformation, allowing the artist to deconstruct and reconstruct fragments of time as she searches for new relationships between images.

Veiling and pentimento are central to the artist's process. Layers of translucent paint obscure and disrupt forms, creating shifting depths in which images emerge, recede, and dissolve across the picture plane. The withholding of information slows the act of looking, establishing a tension between visibility and concealment. Earlier painted gestures and imagery remain embedded beneath the surface, particularly through the reworking of older canvases and unfinished works. These traces function as metaphors for memory itself: unstable and fragmentary, continually shifting rather than fixed.

This process has resulted in the emergence of ghostly figures that populate the backgrounds of several of her paintings, hovering at the edge of visibility. Almost imperceptible, they remain nonetheless present, suggesting memories that resist forgetfulness. Alongside these figures, recurring motifs including flowers, domestic objects, and textiles carry emotional and symbolic weight. Flowers become markers of tenderness, beauty, regeneration, and mourning, while silverware, tureens, candelabras, porcelain figurines, urns, and fragments of interiors function as repositories of memory and human presence. These objects are not presented as static still life elements, but as charged forms that evoke ritual, preservation, longing, and care.

The figures that emerge from within these constructed spaces are at times suspended between clarity and dissolution, as though recalled rather than directly observed. Shadows, reflections, and glares further complicate the image, disrupting the stability of the depicted forms and introducing ambiguity between what is seen and what remains concealed. By disconnecting objects and figures from their original milieus, Elkalaawy creates a space for fabrication and reinterpretation, allowing familiar images to acquire new associations and meanings.

The repetition of imagery across different compositions further investigates the relationship between memory and representation. The same subjects may appear across varied contexts, scales, and configurations, transforming their meaning through new placements. Elkalaawy's engagement with illusion, whether through the techniques of realism or the manipulation of imagery, challenges the possibility of a definitive reading. Painting becomes a site where histories accumulate, disappear, and resurface, and where the distinction between fact and fiction remains deliberately unclear.

The works in *The Butterfly's Burden* emerged from Elkalaawy's own experience of recent loss and grief, while also giving form to manifestations of hope. They are shaped by a series of dualities: foreground and background, familiarity and surreality, happiness and sadness, hope and despair, life and death. The narratives remain intentionally ambiguous and untethered from a specific place or moment, allowing fragments of personal experience to move towards broader reflections on human connection.

The butterfly provides a central metaphor for this tension. Associated with freedom, transformation, and the fleetingness of life, it is also presented as carrying a burden: that of grief, longing, remembrance, and the responsibility of carrying forward what must not be lost. Like the butterfly, whose transformation renders it almost unrecognisable from what it once was, Elkalaawy's paintings

find renewal through processes of relinquishment. Earlier images are concealed, altered, and absorbed into new compositions, yet continue to persist beneath the surface.

Through this continual movement between preservation and loss, Elkalaawy approaches her paintings as a form of world-building. Her paintings create spaces where absence and presence, fragility and strength, and past and present remain in dialogue. While rooted in personal sources, the works seek to evoke experiences that extend beyond the individual, including togetherness and loneliness, love and grief, vulnerability and resilience, and the search for one's place within the world. *The Butterfly's Burden* brings these tensions together, proposing painting as a space where memory can be materialised, carried, and renewed.

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Lawrie Shabibi is a contemporary art gallery housed in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. The gallery supports the long-term development of the careers of young international contemporary artists with a focus on those from the Middle East and North Africa. The gallery also organises art historical exhibitions working with an older generation of artists from the region. Liaising with curators, institutions, museums and collectors the gallery has successfully introduced international artists to the region whilst at the same time presenting Middle Eastern artists to the international contemporary art community. By holding a regular programme of exhibitions, screenings and talks, publishing catalogues and participating in international art fairs, Lawrie Shabibi has been a forerunner in the development of the contemporary art scene in Dubai.

For more information on Lawrie Shabibi please visit: www.lawrieshabibi.com

PRESS INQUIRIES

For press inquiries please contact:

Zarha Zammi

zarha@lawrieshabibi.com

T. +971 4 346 9906