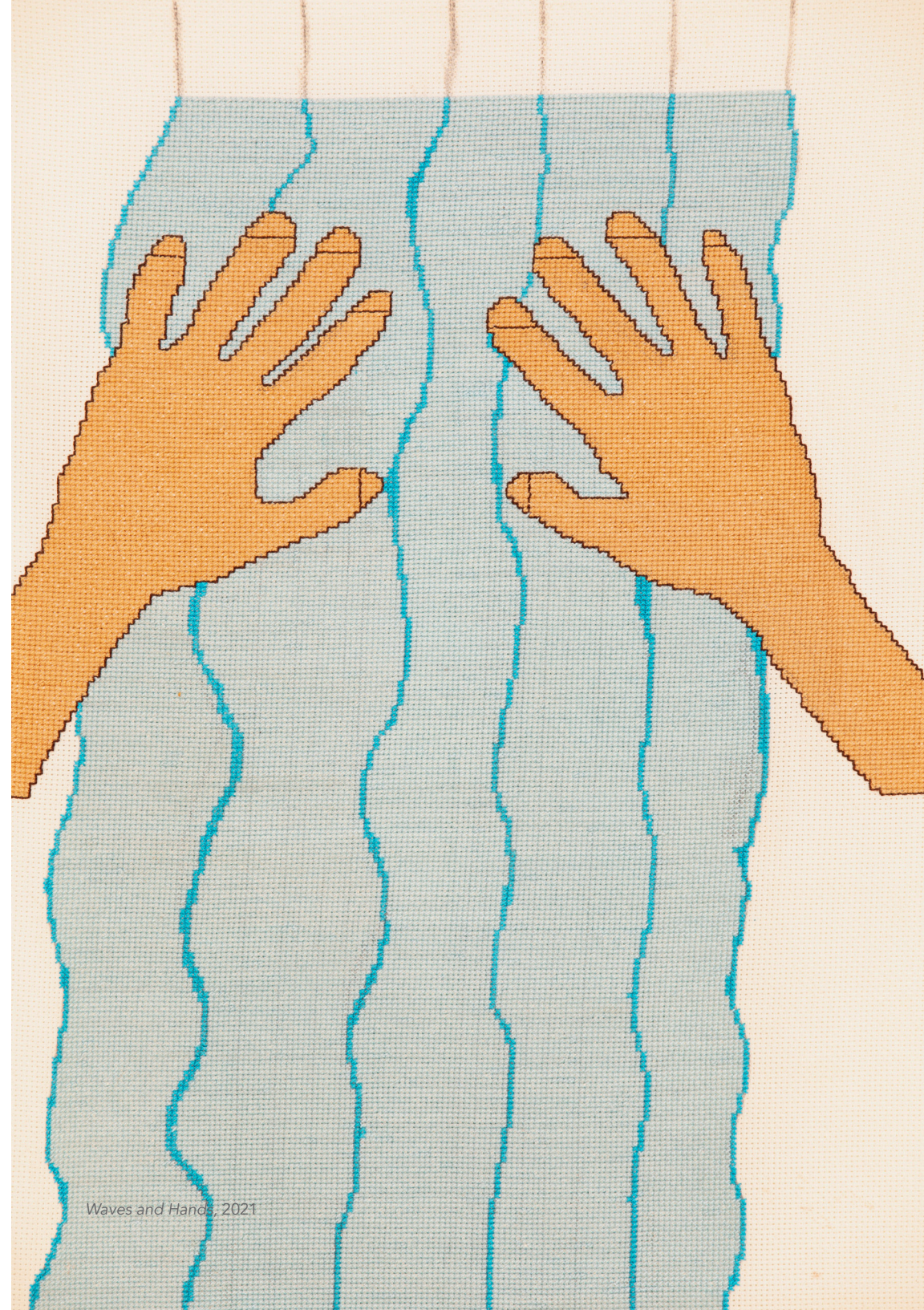


CAMPLE—LINE

**JUMANA EMIL ABBOUD  
THE UNBEARABLE  
HALFNESS OF BEING  
07.10 - 17.12.23**



Waves and Hands, 2021



Ein Abu al-Adham

*Eline van der Vlist is the chief executive of SPACE, London's oldest studios provider, supporting artists and building creative communities since it was established by artists in 1968. Previously, she was the Artistic Director of Darat al Funun-The Khalid Shoman Foundation in Amman for nine years, where she first crossed paths with Jumana for her exhibition The pomegranate and the sleeping ghoul (2016/17).*

Jumana Emil Abboud: *The Unbearable Halfness of Being*  
– Eline van der Vlist

*Once Upon a Time ... كان يا ما كان*

And so the story begins. Or, perhaps, so the stories come together. Passed on from one generation to the next, fairytales and folkloric tales become the vessels of our collective memories and traditions. A loose collection of narrative threads that each in their own way are trying to persuade us, give us moral guidance, and make sense of our lived experience of the world around us. But what if the 'us' in the story become displaced, their identity ruptured, their history denied?

When reflecting on Jumana's work, there is an obvious irony in the fact that a visual story teller who draws upon myths and tales that have survived for centuries and have bound generations of Palestinians together through a shared and interconnected collection of narratives and memories, is confronted with a decades-long campaign of myths and misinformation effectively denying their very existence and history.

That forced rupture forms the backdrop of her continuing exploration of the – to borrow a term – 'haunted springs and water demons'<sup>1</sup> that inhabit the landscape of Palestine. But although always ominously looming in the background, both metaphorically and in reality, this is not the starting point of the story. Or, rather, the story is much bigger than that.

The colours bleed into each other, conjuring sweet evocations of childhood dreams (and sometimes nightmares). The fantastical figures – birds, women, hands (many, many hands) – morph in and out of focus like a distant vision, the water of the enchanted springs reflected in the fluidity of the colours. It should perhaps be noted that the Arabic word for 'spring' is the same word as that for 'eye' (*ain/عين*): the water is seeing, we see the water, or are we just looking rather than seeing?

Jumana's research spans over more than two decades, and, mirroring the ebb and flow of all good stories, during this time she has dipped in and out of various tales, tracked down and returned to the landscapes they represent, activating them through her drawings, paintings, objects and films, while touching on questions of loss, identity, longing and belonging.

*Once upon a time there was a man who was married to two women. One of them was his first cousin and the other was a stranger, and neither of them could get pregnant.*

*[...]*

*'Go to such and such mountain,' the sheikh advised, 'and there you'll find a ghoul. Say to him, "I want two pomegranates to feed my wives so they can get pregnant," and see what he says to you.'*<sup>2</sup>

It reflects on the fallacy of mankind that after managing to obtain the two enchanted pomegranates, the man eats half of one on the way back home. And so Half-a-Halfling is born. We never get to know what the non-human half of the child represents, but it is clear from the start that he is the cuckoo in the nest. Even his own mother favours his twin brothers, who were born from the whole fertile pomegranate given to the other wife. It is only later, when Half-a-Halfling (he is never given a name in the story) cunningly and heroically manages to help his siblings escape from the clutches of a *ghouleh*, or female evil spirit, that he is finally praised by his father.

There is a lot to unpack in this tale, which forms the focal point of this exhibition and is alluded to in its title. Mostly narrated by women, allegorical tales such as this one would have given them a chance to subtly shape the patriarchal world around them, and covertly critique existing social norms and structures in a tone both light and playful. The weakness of the father, the sibling rivalry, the ableism, the competition between the two wives – any child listening to the story would be gently guided into seeing these familial and societal practices for what they are. Quite probably even more so when looking at it with contemporary eyes.



*Facing tiger I, 2020*

But that is just one angle in how to read, or rather, listen to, the story. It does not end there. Neither did it end there for our hero Half-a-Halfling. Having proved himself more courageous than his brothers, as well as magnanimously coming to their rescue despite their disdain for him, it is not yet enough. Following the rhythm of all good storytelling, there is a third and final quest.

*'And what would you say,' the boy asked, 'if I were to bring the ghoulah herself right here?'*

*'We'd confess you're cleverer than both your brothers if you could do that,' replied the parents.*

It goes almost without saying that he ingeniously succeeds in getting rid of the *ghoulah* once and for all, thereby saving not just his family but the entire community from her evil. His heroic transformation is complete. In this respect Half-a-Halfling's journey is a classic one, tapping into our deep-rooted aspirations to succeed against all odds and creating feelings of empathy and hope.

Now listen to the story again.

What does it tell us in a context where the land it relates to is destroyed, occupied or renamed? Can these stories give a voice to and hold Palestinian culture together in a land of silenced tales and a diaspora of silenced people? Are the obvious metaphors to be found in this tale of the underdog who succeeds against all odds too naive? Or should we entertain them, place them in a larger context, one of hope and a quest for justice, for recognition, for belonging? Can moral guidance be found in ordinary folklore when official history is dictated by the colonisers and spread through high-tech propaganda campaigns?

In all their seeming simplicity, Jumana's poetic responses navigating the myriad of complexities are remarkably multi-layered. There is no pretence that she holds all the answers. Sometimes she doesn't know the right words either. But through her fragmented approach she succeeds in drawing out the larger questions looming in the background, while taking us along on her quest. Like all good narrators, she improvises on the way, adopting a fluid approach while deftly moving between fact and fiction, past and present.



In addition to the more ephemeral paintings and drawings, the exhibition also includes a collection of more solid objects. You can tell they are lovingly made, mostly by hand, and in material and form they relate to both the produce of the land (pomegranates, olive wood, turmeric) and the allegorical stories that both shape and transform them. Perhaps precisely through these more tangible visualisations, Jumana manages to draw our attention squarely back to the human stories they tell.

The story doesn't end here. This exhibition is one poetic version of it – with love and hope.

*'The bird has flown, and a good evening to all!'*

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1. Dr. Tawfiq Canaan, 'Haunted Springs and Water Demons in Palestine', *Journal of the Palestinian Oriental Society* Vol. I, pp.153-170 (Jerusalem 1922). This study is one of Jumana's primary references.

2. This and following extracts from 'Half-a-Halfling' are as published in Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana, *Speak, Bird, Speak Again: Palestinian Arab Folktales*, University of Berkeley Press (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1989).





*The bird of this story ii, 2022*







Our other half (diptych), 2022



## List of works

1. **Ein**, 2022  
neon signs  
each 60 x 41.4 cm
2. **The bird of this story ii**, 2022  
oak-gall ink, natural wax crayon  
made from earth near 'ein qiniya  
spring (Palestine), pastel and pencil  
on paper, 39 x 20 cm
3. **Small broken**, 2020  
ink and shellac on paper  
26 x 36.5 cm
4. **Two 'Eyun (eyes)**, 2022  
ink and vegetable ink on paper  
48 x 36cm
5. **Trust in God**, 2022  
ink on paper  
44.8 x 35 cm
6. **Facing Tiger I**, 2020  
gouache pigment, pastel, acrylic,  
pencil, ink, charcoal on paper  
57 x 76 cm
7. **Four dwellers by the well**, 2020  
gouache pigment, pastel, acrylic,  
graphite, aquarelle, pencil on paper  
76 x 57 cm
8. **Have faith blind faith / or,  
Untitled grey memories**, 2022  
gouache pigment, pastel, acrylic,  
graphite, aquarelle, pencil on paper  
29.7 x 21 cm
9. **Spring**, 2022  
ink, earth wax and pencil on paper  
64 x 50 cm
10. **Small, possessed (water)**, 2020  
pencil and crayon on paper  
26 x 36 cm
11. **Void (split in half)**, 2020  
ink, aquarelle, acrylic, pastel  
and pencil on paper  
76 x 56 cm
12. **A stream between us**, 2021  
vegetable and pomegranate ink  
on paper  
32 x 24 cm
13. **Embrace (Wrapped arm)**, 2022  
pomegranate ink on paper  
45.2 x 36 cm
14. **Bdour and Qdour II (brother  
and sister by the spring)**, 2020  
aquarelle pencil, shellac on paper  
57 x 76 cm
15. **Ripple 1**, 2022  
vegetable ink, earth wax, pastel  
on paper  
122 x 80 cm
16. **Hands I**, 2020  
ink, pastel and pencil on paper  
35.5 x 26.5 cm
17. **Hands II**, 2020  
pastel and pencil on paper  
35.5 x 26.5 cm
18. **Waves and hands**, 2021  
embroidery, in collaboration  
with Suha 'Atta 'Alqam  
74 x 47 cm



Greek strawberry maple, Sakiya, 'Ein Qiniya

19. **An enchanted tree (Large  
qaiqab, Greek strawberry  
maple)**, 2021  
embroidery, in collaboration with  
Suha 'Atta 'Alqam 105 x 75 cm
20. **Our other half (diptych)**, 2022  
vegetable ink, pastel, natural wax  
crayon made from earth near 'ein  
qiniya spring  
105 x 75 and 105 x 75 cm
21. **Crochet horse as guardian**  
by Clemence Abboud  
20 x 26 cm
22. **Guardians of the gallery**, 2016  
olivewood figurines:  
bride, ghoulah, two messenger birds,  
lion-boy and a dancing girl under the  
great tree
23. **Pasts and Futures in Palm of  
Hand: the Water-divined Votive**  
2022, wax amulets, in collaboration  
with Issa Freij and the Water Diviners  
Palestine group

*Dimensions are given H x W*



An enchanted tree (Large qaiqab, Greek strawberry maple), 2021

**Jumana Emil Abboud** (born 1971, Shefa'amer) lives and works in Jerusalem and London and is currently pursuing a PhD at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, entitled *I begin with eye: on spirited waters and folk tale reunions*.

Over the last two decades, Abboud's work has been presented in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art (2023), Biennale of Sydney (2022), documenta 15 (2022), *Common Grounds: Story / Heritage*, Casco Art Institute, Utrecht (2020); The Jerusalem Show (2018); Sharjah Biennale (2017); BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead (2016); Venice Biennial (2015, 2009); and Istanbul Biennale (2009), among many others. She has participated in art residencies, including Sakiya – Art/Science/Agriculture, Ein Qiniya; Delfina Foundation, London; Arts Initiative Tokyo; and Gästeatelier Krone, Aarau. She currently has work included in *This too, Is a Map*, The 12th Seoul Mediacity Biennale, 21 Sept–19 Nov 2023, Seoul Museum of Art, South Korea.



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