

ROSE ISSA PROJECTS

EX VOTOS: Rites of Life/ Rites of Infernos

Curated by Rose Issa

TANK PROJECT SPACE, 91-93 Great Portland Street, London, W1W 7NX

OPENING: Friday 10 October 2025, 6–9pm

EXHIBITION RUNS: 13–18 October 2025, Monday–Friday 12-6pm, Saturdays 12-.5pm

Traditionally, an ex-voto is a votive offering, given in fulfilment of a vow in gratitude to a saint or divinities. An 'ex-voto' — Latin for, roughly, 'from the vow made' — may be a painting, often naïve or resembling folk art, but not always. It could comprise plaster limbs, symbolic crutches, canes and boats, signs of healing prayers answered, in gratitude for cures. This votive ritual dates back to ancient pagan beliefs within Rome, Mesopotamia and Egypt, so the practice has spanned centuries and cultures.

In the contemporary South-West Asia and North Africa (SWANA), artists escaping wars, colonisations, occupations, dictatorships, oppression and economical bankruptcies, express powerfully the miracle of surviving and the ritual of life. Rebellion, liberation, resilience and massive talent are needed to overcome such calamities in artworks reflecting the destruction, humiliations, deceptions and injustices that the region has had to suffer in the past seven decades — starting with the creation of states based on religion, and later control over the ownership of oil and its prices.

Within the past seven decades, the Arab world and Iran have lost many of their inspiring leaders, from Mossadegh to Gamal Abdel Nasser or the assassinated King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. Its people saw civil war in Lebanon, regime change in Iran, the rise and fall of Saddam Hussein or Muammar Gaddafi. The expansion of Zionist occupation over Palestine continues without any condemnation. From 2011 onwards, the multiple uprisings were stifled by paid agents and mercenaries; and the oil of the region is in the hands of unidentified owners, sold in exchange for arms.

So how do artists from Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq or Yemen, countries exposed to annihilation of their history, respond to their situation? This small exhibition is a teaser for a forthcoming publication. It is about the miracle of life and art, and the force of talent in the service of surviving — aesthetically, artistically, conceptually and socio-politically — the real politics of the region. Who can express this better than artists, whose work will, for generations to come, reflect the rituals of life, history and memory?

Maliheh Afnan (Palestine), Farhad Ahrarnia (Iran), Nasser Al Aswadi (Yemen), Ayman Baalbaki (Lebanon), Said Baalbaki (Lebanon), Tagreed Darghouth (Lebanon), Abdul Rahman Katanani (Palestine), Khayzaran (Yemen), Issam Kourbaj (Syria), Ramzi Mallat (Lebanon), Malak Mattar (Palestine), Mehdi Navabi (Iran), Nayla Romanos Iliya (Lebanon), Raeda Saadeh (Palestine), Walid Siti (Iraq).

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