

Galerie Lelong & Co.

Paris – New York

Artforum

Février 2022



PRINT FEBRUARY 2022



Christine Safa, *Le lac de deux visages* (The Lake of Two Faces), 2021, oil on canvas, 76 3/4 x 67 3/8".

Christine Safa

PRAZ-DELAVALLADE | PARIS

On fourteen linen canvases, some stretched as wide as a picture window, others small enough to slip into the palm of your hand, Christine Safa had painted landscape and figurative imagery. Dreamlike in their disorienting oscillations of scale and approach, Safa's compositions are ones in which a mountain can become a forehead, the crook of a shoulder a valley, a shadow the sea. Her works are titled with lines from her poems or from things she's read, the proximity of word and image echoing the intimacy she creates between geography and the human figure.

In Safa's poetry and canvases, the catalyst for the alchemical transformations is affection. "I look at the sun drowning in the sea, as if I were watching the person I love sleeping," she writes in the poem announcing the recent exhibition "*L'habitude du ciel*" (The Habit of the Sky). Safa plays with a coupling of elements and forms. Her large-scale *Le lac de deux visages* (The Lake of Two Faces; all works cited, 2021), for example, positions two faces, rendered in deep ochre, as monumental apparitions. A wash of crystal blue illuminates the lower part of the canvas, and a sweep of dusky gold radiates across the top. The brushstrokes are wide, gentle—as if sky and water were meeting in the caress of a human couple.

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Imbued with the tones of the sea, stone, and light of the Mediterranean basin, Safa's palette is rich but muted. She mixes her own paints with linseed oil and marble powder, employing a simple traditional method that, the artist explains, allows her to "really know" the colors she is using. A recent graduate of Paris's École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Safa has established her studio in the French capital, while her work makes constant reference to Lebanon, where her family originated. Etel Adnan included Safa's work in "Horizons," the show she curated at Paris's Lévy Gorvy in early 2021, not long before her death. Concerned with both landforms and longing, these two artists share a rare affinity across generations.



Safa sometimes begins her canvas with an engraved drawing, most often made with the wooden tip of her paintbrush. Before applying paint, she'll make an impressed sketch of a horizon line or the details of a face. Pigment pools in these subtle topographies, as a tear might in the wrinkles of a cheek, leaving them barely visible. The small canvas *Cherchant sans cesse du regard les rayons du soleil* (Constantly Looking for the Rays of the Sun), with its rhythmic diagonal bands rendered in shades of the sun, was marked with a hollowed drawing of a face. Yellow pigment fills delicate indentions the artist made to indicate arched eyebrows and almond-shaped eyes.

Last fall, Willem de Kooning's *Woman in a Landscape III*, 1968, went on view in Paris at the Musée de l'Orangerie. The painting is an example of the Abstract Expressionist's embrace of figuration (of the nude female body, more precisely) and shows him reveling in the Long Island landscape around him. Safa's concern, though, is less with the body than with a face, or here, at most, a head, a neck, and shoulders realized as a portrait of a particular place. Physicists and philosophers often echo the sentiment that we are all made of minerals, the stuff of stars and mountains. As Adnan did, Safa engages poetry and painting as a means not only to capture this fragile human landscape, but to give it a face.

— Lillian Davies