ALMINE RECH

Farah Atassi
The Lost Hours

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Farah Atassi is known for revisiting some of the major themes of modern and contemporary painting in her pulsating compositions. These range from still life to the mechanical ballet and, more recently, the relationship between the model and the artist. Yet no model has ever posed for Atassi. Instead, she plays with the archetype of a model. Created in Atassi's mind out of an art historical vocabulary, the figures in her spellbinding works are all made up. Same for the artists' studios and the other settings they inhabit. None of these spaces or objects belong to Atassi's everyday life. Appropriating a vocabulary of geometric, pared-down modernist forms and references, her paintings are unshackled from any representational logic.

On closer inspection, it becomes evident that few models are actually at work. With their eyes shut or cast down, the figures are steeped in reading, sleeping on a divan or resting, curled up in an armchair. Acrobats have put down their hoops—their relaxed bodies are sagging. The languorous, soft spills create an impression of ease that differs from the way models are traditionally portrayed. Atassi explains that she paints models "*in abstracto*, outside the desire of the painter".[1] This is a time of their own. Figures are caught in the suspended, "lost hours" that give the exhibition its title and signal a departure. As she now invites the viewer to share these intimate moments, Farah Atassi's works convey a sense of tranquillity and harmony. The upright poses in *Woman with Green Headscarf* (2022) and *Seated Woman and Daisies* (2024) form exceptions to these laid-back attitudes. Yet, even in these cases, the figures are both sensual and serenely confident.

Seen from the back, the half-naked woman with headscarf, a reference to Ingres' odalisques, turns her gaze to the viewer in an ironic twist. She is set in a theatrical environment, characterized by large, curving curtains and drop-like patterns that echo her body's curves. In Atassi's compositions, sinuous lines flow across geometric patterns, while simplified shapes and signs ricochet across the surface. In this case, various props (lemons, oranges, a candlestick, blank and upturned canvases) compete with the contemporary odalisque who is caught in an ambiguous space, halfway between illusion and decoration. Space is constructed in a more classical way but remains ambiguous. Depth and volume are built up not through light and shade but the overlay of objects and surfaces in order to create an illusion of space. As for the human figure, Atassi began including models in her work about ten years ago and apprehends them in a Cubist way. She first turned to Picasso and other Cubist artists for their efficacy and the formally innovative way in which they build up their figures. "This efficiency bears the violence of a shortcut, the biting edge of a line," explains the artist, who is primarily driven by formal investigation.[2]

Her riveting compositions are replete with quotations—even clouds seem to emanate from a repertoire of artworks—generating a feeling of visual familiarity and a sense of play, which is reinforced by the use of bold, unmodulated colours, combined in this new series with sassy baby blue, lilac, and soft pink. Henri Matisse's recurrent oranges make an incongruous appearance by the sea in *Lone Bather and Clouds 2* (2024). *The Green Door* quotes Pablo Picasso's *Femme assise près d'une fenêtre (Marie-Thérèse)* (1932). A black and white composition in the background of Atassi's majestic *Summer Night* (2024) is taken from Matisse's *Grand intérieur rouge* (1948). The montages of Tom Wesselmann also come to mind. Yet Atassi carries this inheritance lightly and choreographs her fictional spaces with humour and determination in her obsessive construction of space.

As she continues to subvert artistic conventions, Atassi now touches on the essence of painting; both in its allegorical dimension and relation to representation and in its social reality. With these new works also enters a sense of narration, which Farah Atassi has long held back from, and which takes the artist's studio as its pivot. Creating an impression of parallel spaces to that of the studio, curtains and windows announce enchanting landscapes made of lush, abundant vegetation in *The Rest* (2024) and *Summer Night* (2024), while skyscapes brimming with clouds become a focus in works such as *Woman reading by the Window* (2024). Elsewhere, doors and their large keyholes suggest further oneiric spaces that belong to the inner life of the model. In *Sleeping Acrobat* (2023) the cross-ruled window to the left deliberately echoes the stretchers of the resting, turned-around canvases to the right. Even the frame hanging on the wall is empty and reveals the striped background of the studio. The work is entirely centred on the interiority of the acrobat and the space she occupies.

Farah Atassi's technique too contributes to this meditation on painting. Made of oil and glycerol paints, the texture of the canvases is deliberately left rugged and imperfect. Suggestive of changes that may have happened during the production process, when seen from up close, the uneven thickness of the paint invites the viewer to wander along works. This physical quality further underlines their orchestrated artifice. Painting is a window onto reality, is the common saying since the Renaissance. Painting is a window onto painting, says the work of Farah Atassi.

— Devika Singh

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[1] Cécile Debray and Florience Derieux, 'Une conversation avec Farah Atassi', in Florence Derieux (ed.), *Farah Atassi*, Musée national Picasso-Paris and Manuella Editions, Paris, 2022, p. 8.

[2] Ibid., p. 9.