

Finkel Jori, 'Brief Encounters, Enduring Portraits of the Displaced; Mounira Al Solh'. www.nytimes.com, 7 February 2018.

Brief Encounters, Enduring Portraits of the Displaced



Mounira Al Solh at the Art Institute of Chicago. The Art Institute's show, "I strongly believe in our right to be frivolous," is the first exhibition of her work in the United States. Whitten Sabbatini for The New York Times

CHICAGO — When the civil war in Syria escalated in 2012, the violence forced many residents to flee to neighboring Lebanon. Mounira Al Solh, an artist, remembers seeing a wave of immigrants enter her native Beirut, only to encounter racist behavior there.

“I was seeing hundreds of new faces in my neighborhood,” said Ms. Al Solh, now 39, who has a Syrian mother and Lebanese father. “I was curious. I wanted to meet those people, welcome them and help them feel at home.”

So she began inviting some of the newcomers to her studio or a cafe to hear their stories and draw their portraits. Six years later, she has not stopped. Her portraits of refugees, mainly Syrians but also Afghans, Bengalis, Somalis and Ethiopians, currently number more than 450. Now, the Art Institute of Chicago is showing about 250 drawings from the series, along with some related embroideries, in the first exhibition of Ms. Al Solh’s work in the United States.

The series and show are called “I strongly believe in our right to be frivolous” after a statement by [Mahmoud Darwish](#), the Palestinian poet known for writing about the emotional roller coaster of exile. Ms. Al Solh’s portraits too find, in the current refugee crisis, moments of personal resilience or hopefulness amid the trauma.

Beyond Beirut, Ms. Al Solh has also made portraits in the Amsterdam area, where she lives part-time, as well as in Athens and Kassel, Germany, where she showed a selection from the series in last year's Documenta. At Documenta the portraits were exhibited along with [her re-creation of a Beirut bakery that her father ran to provide jobs for people with special needs. It was bombed in 1989.](#)

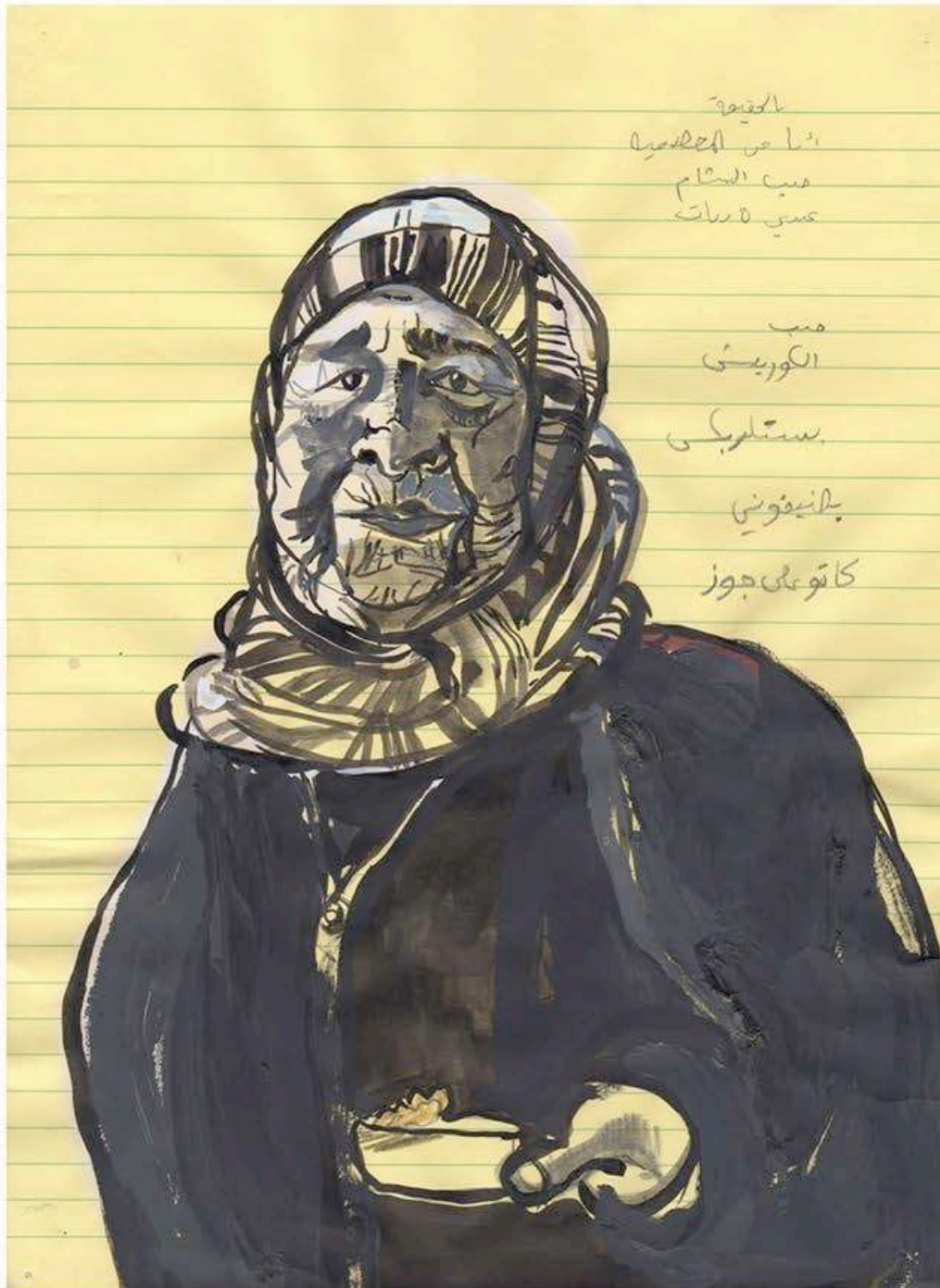
Ms. Al Solh often completes a portrait during a single sitting, and tries to capture sitters' individuality along with snippets of stories they share, in Arabic text. Her sketchbook is a yellow legal pad, "reminding us of the painstaking bureaucratic processes through which immigrants must go in order to obtain citizenship," said Hendrik Folkerts, an organizer of Documenta who also curated the Art Institute's show. He recently helped her locate Syrian immigrants in Chicago to draw.

At times Ms. Al Solh has found herself sharing her own wartime accounts with her sitters, including her experiences growing up during the Lebanese war in the 1980s, when she fled to Damascus for periods to stay with relatives.

"It sounds ironic now but Syria was our refuge," she said. "So making this work has also been a way for me to understand my own childhood, a way to process the trauma we all went through."

In these edited excerpts from an interview, Ms. Al Solh recalls the encounters behind her portraits of three displaced Syrians.

Um Mayssah, Beirut, 2014



Mounira Al Solh, portrait of Um Mayssah, Beirut, 2014, with her walnut cake from Starbucks. Sfeir-Semler Gallery

Um Mayssah means “the mother of Mayssah,” so this is her nickname, not her real name. This naming is a traditional way of showing respect in Arab countries for elderly people. She told me she’s the mother of five daughters.

I met her through neighbors the year I moved to a new studio in the Raouché neighborhood of Beirut, on the sea. It’s an exciting and very mixed neighborhood, with Lebanese, Syrians, Iraqis and Palestinians — an expensive neighborhood originally but also worn out because of war, and the wind and sea too. There’s one Starbucks there, and if you go early it’s not too busy, so I could draw. That’s why she’s carrying this walnut cake. Believe it or not, it’s from Starbucks.

What I really loved about her was her face, with all of her wrinkles, suggesting such a tough life — tougher, I imagine, because she had no sons, a problem in the Arab world. I like to carry a box of supplies and in this case I chose black and white ink, black gouache and brown watercolor to try to capture these wrinkles.

We didn’t talk too much — I’m not a journalist, not a secret agent, I don’t need to know everything about everyone. Sometimes it’s more about the story, but here I just wanted to do a good drawing.

Waad, Beirut, 2015



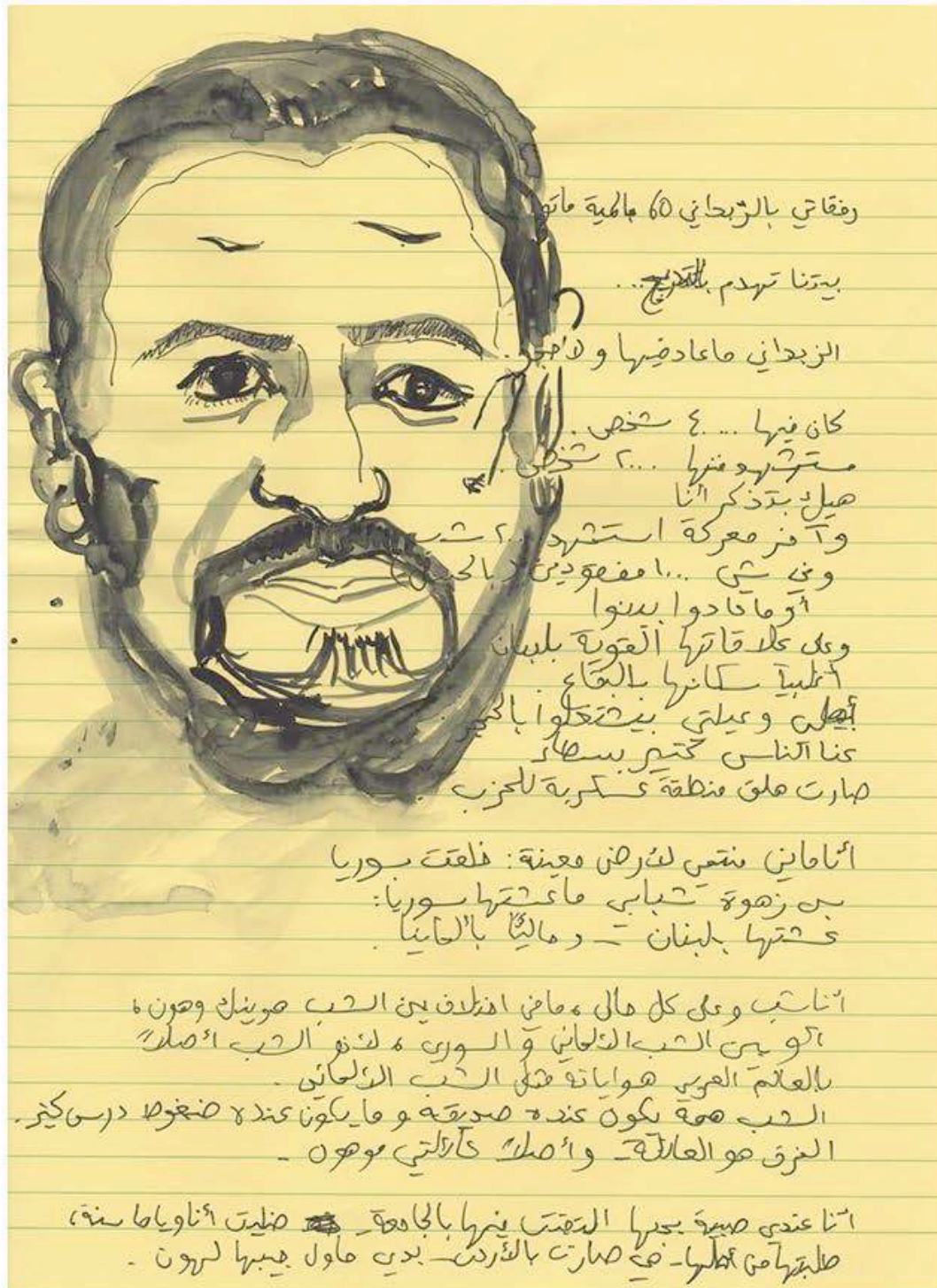
Waad, Beirut, 2015, by Mounira Al Solh. Sfeir-Semler Gallery

I met Waad through good friends and finally I asked her if I could draw her. She reminded me of myself in some ways. She's probably 10 years younger than I am, and she's an example of all these young women in the Arabic world who are pursuing their own studies, not just waiting to get married. When I first met her she had finished her studies in Damascus, where she lived far from her family. She loved the theater and was working in film, dubbing Turkish voices into Arabic with a Syrian accent.

In the text she talks about how she's more of a Damascus person, though she's really from Sweida [a city close to the Jordan border]. It's like someone saying they're from New York, even when they didn't grow up near there.

The orange splotches I added to suggest wind. And you can see a hint of that in her clothes too. I'm not a big believer in the idea or ideal of the finished drawing. The series is really performative — it's about the moment of sitting down with someone, facing each other, sharing something. The moment of making the drawing is really what matters to me.

Ali, Kassel, 2016



Ali, Kassel, 2016, by Mounira Al Solh. Sfeir-Semler Gallery

When I was in Kassel, Germany, preparing for Documenta, I was introduced to Tamim, a Syrian restaurant owner. His restaurant, which has maybe 10 tables, became my studio. He would give us coffee or tea and we could sit for an hour or more.

That's where I met Ali, who is from Al Zabadani, a Syrian town close to the Lebanese border where there was a big battle. He told me that 60 percent of his friends in Zabadani died, and his home was destroyed. He said there's not a single stone left standing in Zabadani.

I used black ink for this but I put some green watercolor on the brush. I was trying to evoke the color of ash, the feeling of when a city is burned out. We sat for a few hours, a very long meeting. He was confident and open and ready to share.

This is something I found more with the men I met in Europe than the women — the men more urgently needed to speak. While the women I met had children or husbands to take care of and were too busy to talk, these men were mostly on their own, away from family in Syria or Jordan. They carried the stigma associated with being a refugee in Europe but of course they're not supposed to cry or say they're in trouble when they call home, so this became a great platform for them. I had men telling me: It's been five years since I've seen my children; I've missed out on their lives.

And some men had lost the people they love, which was very heavy. Sometimes I had to refrain from making portraits. I wasn't able to — it was too intense for me.

Ali also talked about how he doesn't feel like a typical Syrian. He asked me, What's the difference between a young German man and a Syrian? He said, We all want a cool life, we all want a girlfriend.

Mounira Al Solh: I strongly believe in our right to be frivolous
Through April 29 at the Art Institute of Chicago; 312-443-3600, artic.edu.