

LARA ZANKOUL



ayyam  gallery

THE UNSEEN

LARA ZANKOUL

Ayyam Gallery Beirut
10 February - 30 March 2014



The dreamlike compositions of Lebanese photographer Lara Zankoul are contemporary fairy tales that explore the charm and mystery of the human psyche. Whimsical and playful, they represent an attempt to invent new worlds, to push against the boundaries of our reality and escape the monotony of everyday life. The characters inhabiting Zankoul's work are anonymous and timeless, universal symbols existing within a fantastical and surreal landscape.

Born in Lebanon in 1987, Lara Zankoul lives and works in Beirut. She has participated in group exhibitions within the Middle East and France. Part of the Shabab Ayyam incubator programme, she was an award recipient at the 2011 Shabab Ayyam Photography Competition and in 2013, she held her first solo exhibition at Ayyam Gallery Beirut.

Seen/Unseen: A Look into the Fantastical World of Lara Zankoul

By Zarmina Rafi

Animals that take on human propensities, the inclusion of the fantastical, and characters moving above and below the surface of a body of water make up some of the tableaux in photographer Lara Zankoul's new exhibition, *The Unseen*. Zankoul herself terms her work 'fairytale-like' and there can be no doubt that the alternate world aspect of conventional fairytales can be found in the elaborate set constructions that she has engineered for this series. Just as the succession of motifs are found in fairytales, the repeated colour tones and billowy dresses worn by Zankoul's female characters serve as unifying elements throughout the photographic series. A feminine persona comes through in the choice of colours Zankoul uses, a range that begins with pinks and blues and moves on to red, black and cobalt. The colour scheme, according to the photographer, has always been a 'personal preference' and in this choice, Zankoul's work gives the sensation of airiness and of being filled with light. Thematically too, Zankoul brings viewers into the light as she raises issues of desire, societal relevance, social occlusion, jealousy and other concerns pertinent to the human psyche to the surface.

In the photographs of *The Unseen*, Zankoul uses a brilliant water tank effect in which the photograph is divided into the surface above water and the space below the water level. The state of truth that the photographer is interested in exposing is found just under the water's surface. In this clever set up, not only does Zankoul achieve artistic singularity, but she differentiates herself from others who may resort to techniques of digital manipulation.

Zankoul utilises the water tank to comment upon the nature of duplicity. This method is reminiscent of the divide between reality

and false appearance in Irish writer Oscar Wilde's 1890 novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the author employs a painting to reflect upon duplicitous human nature. Dorian Gray, the beautiful and youthful protagonist of the novel, sells his soul to the devil in exchange for infinite youth, after which he embarks upon a series of debauched events. Gray's evil actions never come to bear upon his own visage, yet they come to affect a portrait of his that had been painted during the course of the novel. Towards the close of the novel, the portrait is rendered withered and disgusting, having absorbed the darkness of Gray's soul. In this gothic tale, the nature of reality is evident not on Gray's face but on the face of the portrait. Similarly, *The Unseen* requires that audiences pay close attention to both halves of Zankoul's expertly created photographs so that the true nature of reality is made visible.

Several pieces in this exhibition depict inner struggle or desire that characters in Zankoul's cast aspire to. A handsome young man in a tuxedo vest and bow tie stands before us, as our eye moves to the bottom half of the photograph we see that below the torso he is dressed in a delicate skirt, similar to that which Zankoul's female protagonists often wear. This hints at the man's hidden desire to take on a feminine identity. Another delightful piece referencing unrealised desire is *A Boat's Imagination*, in which agency and the power of imagination are ascribed to an inanimate object. A plastic boat sitting on an indoor countertop dreams of sailing outside. A further nautical reference is made in the piece entitled *Life* that works with the metaphor of sailing. In this life we are passengers, sometimes steering ourselves, sometimes being steered by others, we experience the ebbs and flows in life and come to periods of clarity and those of chaos. The figures in *Life* are presented in various states of tumultuousness, some upright and others bound up in leaping waves.

In *The Nobody*, a woman struggles under the surface of the water, she is one of those who have completely succumbed to the waves of life. In a light green room, the tilted placement of the ceiling chandelier suggests that something is askew. Directly underneath, a woman struggles as if gasping for air, her dress bathed in yellow light. This piece comments upon those who strive to have their voice heard, wish desperately yet feeling like they are 'no one'. *The Flower* is a piece whose top half depicts sadness. Upon closer inspection though, what appears to be sorrowful is not without redemption. The woman with her head bent and bare back holds a flower in one hand. While the woman's nails may be painted black, the colourful flower she clasps points to a secret joy blossoming within her.

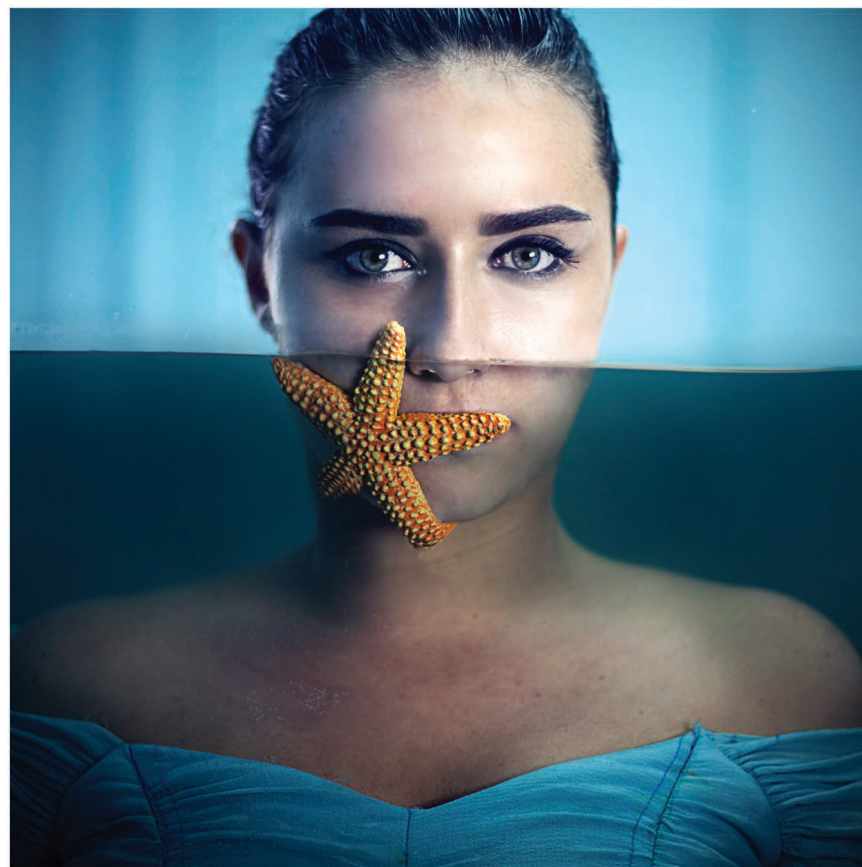
Covering a plethora of emotions, *Hurtful* depicts two girls in identical red dresses, their arms intertwined, smiling at each other in a true picture of a joyous friendship. Yet, in the bottom half of the photograph, we see the picture-perfect friendship go awry as one girl takes cutting scissors to her friend's dress in attempt of sabotage. This photograph is an example of the wounds that women can inflict upon each other out of envy.

Most fantastical in the exhibition is the *The Zoo*, a prime example of a surrealist inspired work. A seated couple enjoys tea. On second glance, they are not a regular couple, but one with the heads of animals. The female with a rabbit head is perfectly poised, her red painted nails grasping a teacup. As viewers, we are forced to ponder habit and domesticity in the animal world contrasted to that of the human world. What if animals could live very ordered lives? Such a question highlights Zankoul's sense of humor and play and Wonderland-like created worlds.

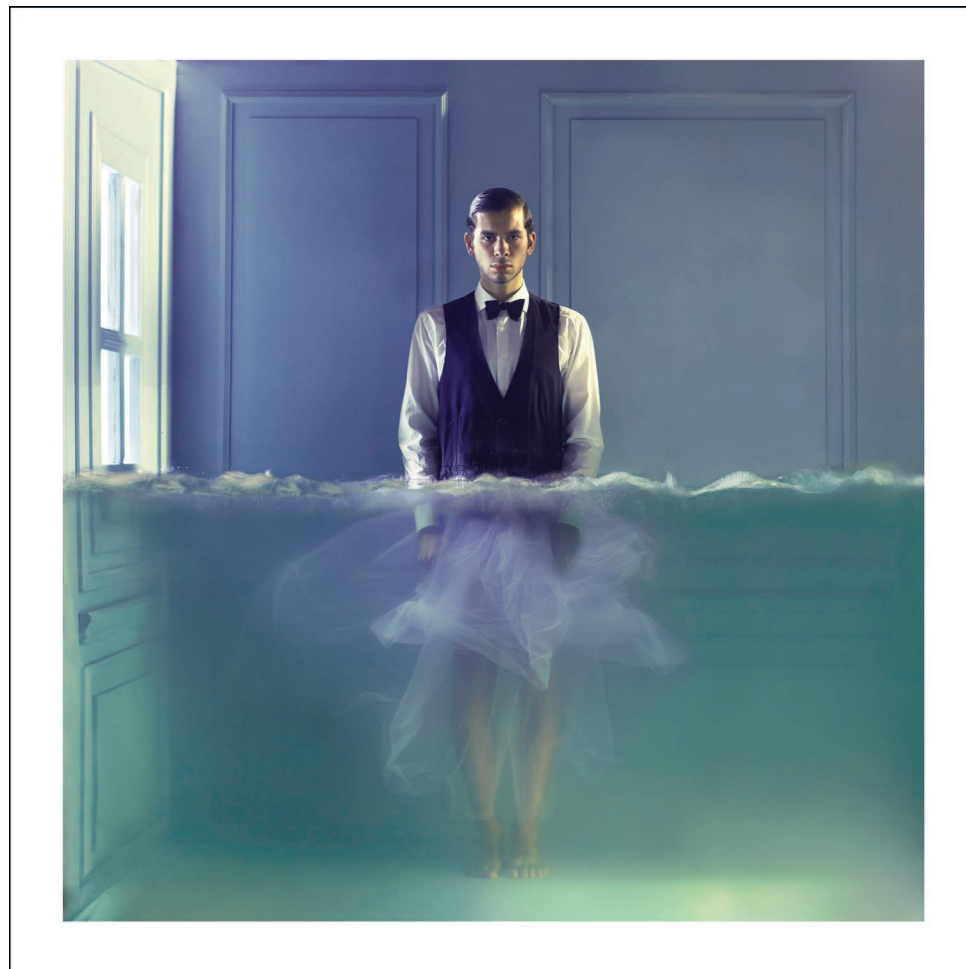
The photographic compositions in *The Unseen* are visually striking and show Zankoul to be a careful observer of life. She creates aesthetically pleasing photographs while also offering relevant commentary on the varied spectrum of human emotions and their embodiment in the world.



A Boat's Imagination
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
90 x 90 cm
Edition of 5



Censorship
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
90 x 90 cm
Edition of 5



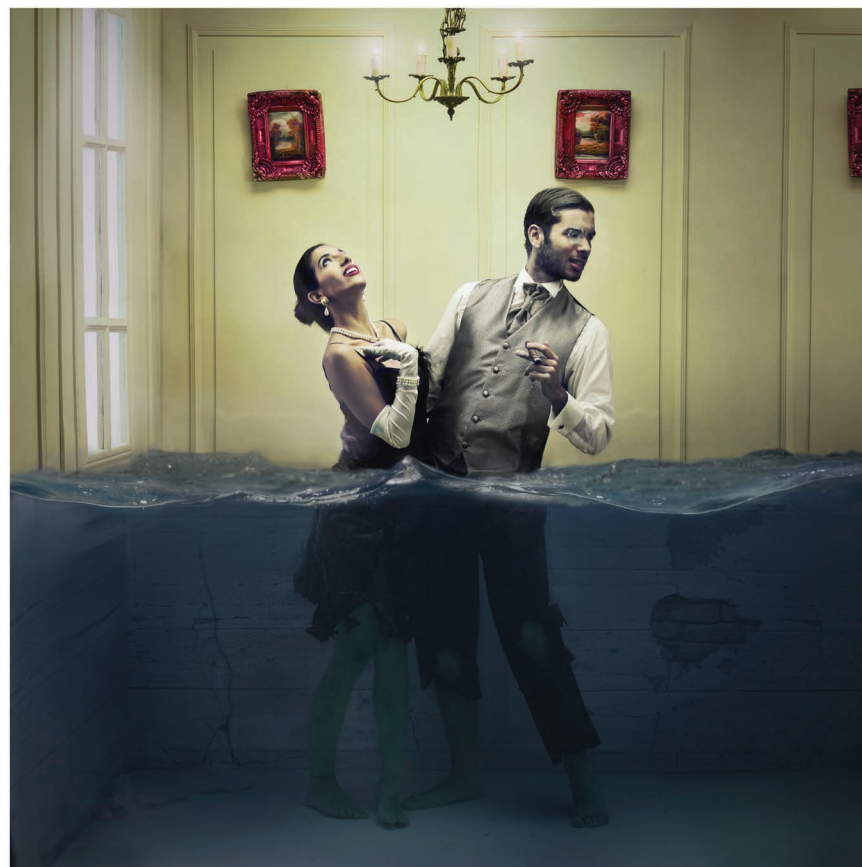
Feminine Side
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
90 x 90 cm
Edition of 5



Hiding Lies
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
90 x 90 cm
Edition of 5



Hurtful
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
90 x 90 cm
Edition of 5



Nouveaux Riches
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
90 x 90 cm
Edition of 5



Life
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
90 x 250 cm
Edition of 5



Paranoia
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
90 x 90 cm
Edition of 5



The Nobody
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
90 x 90 cm
Edition of 5



The Zoo
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
90 x 90 cm
Edition of 5



The Flower
2013
Archival print on cotton paper
90 x 90 cm
Edition of 5

Ayyam Gallery

Founded by collectors and cousins Khaled and Hisham Samawi in Damascus in 2006, Ayyam Gallery sought to nurture Syria's burgeoning and dynamic contemporary art scene through landmark non-profit initiatives such as the Shabab Ayyam Project, an incubator for emerging artists. Expansion into Beirut and Dubai enabled Ayyam Gallery to broaden its scope from the promotion of work by Syrian artists to those from the wider Middle East region. In doing so, Ayyam Gallery has established itself as one of the foremost exponents of Middle Eastern contemporary art to the international community.

Today, Ayyam Gallery is recognized as a leading cultural voice in the region, representing a roster of Arab and Iranian artists with an international profile and museum presence. A number of non-commercial exhibitions, as well as the launch of Ayyam Publishing, Ayyam Editions, and The Young Collectors Auction, have further succeeded in showcasing the work of Middle Eastern artists with the aim of educating a wider audience about the art of this significant region. Ayyam Gallery Damascus currently functions as a studio and creative haven for artists who remain in the war-torn city. In early 2013, Ayyam Gallery launched new spaces in London and Jeddah.

