

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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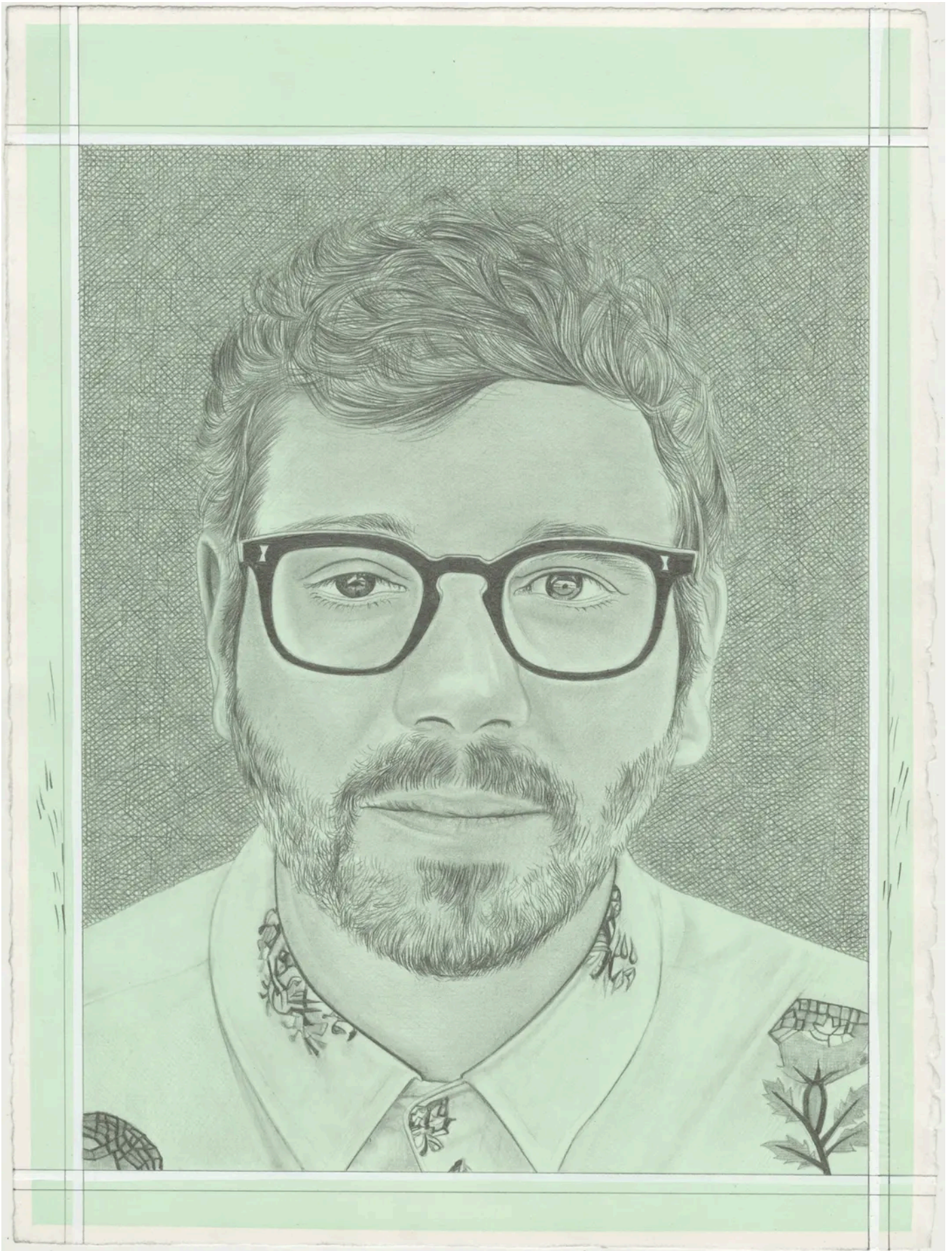
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# Pictures, Windows, Portals, Lives

An Assembly of Critical Feelings

By Omar Kholeif



Portrait of Omar Kholeif, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.



Luísa Correia Pereira, *Trois Cabanes Seules*, 1974. Mixed media on paper. Courtesy Gallery São Roque, Lisbon.

By 1991, Patti Smith had long retreated from the storied life of the Chelsea Hotel in New York to Macomb County, Michigan. That year, amidst what Smith describes as a “strange torpor,” she authored *Woolgathering*. Subsequently revised, it remains the artist’s decisive work. Prose poems unspool like threads that wrap around the reader as they gently stir and unsettle into their consciousness. In this pocket-sized book, Smith gave the


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marked the chaotic wonder of a child’s mind with the aesthetic poetics of dreaming. For the *woolgather* is a vessel able to afford a young Smith with a vocation, if only, “to rescue a fleeting thought.”

The cadence of Smith’s prose flows like a stream occasionally barricaded by the boulders of lament. It is a slim volume, but the inner world of

*Woolgathering*, like any great work of art, carries on forever. Words are slowed down to a rhythmic movement that crescendos to a chorus, punctuated by black and white photographs, which evoke the unbounded illusion of phosphorescent clouds, affording possibility, suture, recovery. Here, the soul wrenched in the grip of mystification gradually constructs semblance—out of body, from the imagination, into nature, into world.

It is peculiar how this volume arrived to me in the desert plains where I lived in a 2-bed prefab house with my father and younger siblings in Saudi Arabia in the nineties. Our patriarch sprung us from the surf and tide of the Pacific where a dithering dream had turned to embers before it had begun. The uncle who opened the gates to this kingdom of scorched earth and burnished sky offered slight reprieve via a chain of stores he owned that sold imported stationary, Arabic-language magazines, cassette tapes, and CDs. These shops also included a curated selection of English-language books. This uncle travelled often, and along with my aunt, volunteered the gift of imported possessions.

Critical inspiration for my “wish list” was gleaned from the bulky television set, where the music channel had inspired this “hunk of chunk”—an affectionate misnomer designated by the fraternity, seeking visual inspiration off the screen, transmuted me into a pallid post-grunge youth. Denim overalls and my father’s oversized white shirts served as a complement. The “No Fear” chain wallet served as a metaphor for a kid, who would on one occasion, upturn a desk when mandated to sit separately from the girls in compulsory religious education class.

In the end, records and books by Patti Smith and Lester Bangs arrived at the same time. I accepted what I was given, including the perfunctory beating when the contents of my requests were revealed to be “morally unorthodox, or *too* eccentric.”

I wasn’t the only person in my community cut from stained cloth. My seemingly miniscule generation was formed of a battalion protesting for content and meaning, unawares but all too aware that our elders were sheltering us from the specters of wars that continue to haunt to this day. I would later come to find, in an era of all too much content, of “too much world,” and all too little context that *the plot between the lines*—the margins, the gap—had eroded; the cosmos, the sky and ground, folding. I entered my

teenage years withering, starved for purpose. At this precipice, I have felt another biting sense of absence, a grief difficult to pinpoint or compound to one specific subject.

What then, what can, or *what should art do* in such a crisis of self, of confidence, or anxiety? In instances where we are of the belief that the free fall of Cameron Crowe's "Vanilla Sky" is all but a cyclical loop? Jean Fisher—an artist whose work involved the critical writing of artists' works and artists' lives—consistently returned to the inherent constitution of human thought as a rebuttal to the pure myths of art. Here, the phenome is disassembled through philosophy; the Indigenous is re-codified in tactile, sensuous form. The splintering of light shunts the imagination from debilitating dream cycles into, in my reading of her life work, art as an eventual space for the creation of specific forms of empathy.

Delving into the uncanny, and specifically, the vivid telling of the trickster, the coyote—the shapeshifting entity that decodes, destabilizes, alters, rejoins and stabilizes society's imbalances through the deployment of phantastic acts, cunning behavior and humorous speech acts—Fisher imagined the artist as an agent of virtuosic change. If Jean Fisher was an artist whose practice of critical thought constituted her "art" then perhaps, I could constitute "an art" arched around the critical act of worldbuilding. I would use (as Angelina Jolie professes while performing Maria Callas) "my body for dreaming"—as a portal for a voice as expansive as that of a coloratura soprano, to enter spectators through picture planes, via windows, through portals, connecting life. Here, friendships, support structures, aching bodies, not ruins, tenderly attend to one another across ladders arched across the expanse of time as in the pictorial fields of the Portuguese artist Luísa Correia Pereira— one of the most excruciatingly overlooked and underserved figure of late modernism.

In 2021, as society cleaved its way to a sense of supposed "normalcy"—at the ends of the immediate trauma wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic, a generous friend and mentor, William John Thomas Mitchell invited me to contribute to this very publication when he was guest critic. I responded with a slice of my childhood: "[Narcissus, in Brown, Black and White.](#)" It was a pictographic slice of iconoclasm from a childhood where to eat a tape worm was as beguiling an act as the visit to the Costco-like superstore. Here, one acquired

Twizzlers-like candy in bulk, barfed in lumps and bumps. I ended my piece in 2021, by asking a question that seemed to sit flailing in a wind where storms continue to gather: Have we bypassed history, is it time to sink into our feeling, to enter an age of emotion?

The voices assembled here, all artistic or literary in one way or another, have created a frame, a window, a tunnel, or a portal to tell stories that open into an emotional politics via the act of looking. Their work is a form of woolgathering, a vocation of and for the polyglot voice. It has served as a form of rescue, a salvage from wreckage. In their communal voice is a composite portrait of moments. In their singularity, as in their plural.

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Dr **Omar Kholeif** is the avatar of Doctor O—Pop Physician and the heteronym of several non-Portuguese poets. Born in Cairo, Egypt, they were raised in Glasgow, Scotland, Los Angeles, CA, and elsewhere. An author of over two dozen critical volumes on art, a curator of more than seventy exhibitions, and a cultural historian, they are the founding principal of artPost21, a not-for-profit publishing and broadcast platform for artists and their dreamwork. A visiting professor in the school of arts and creative industries at Teesside University, UK since 2018, they have served Sharjah Art Foundation (Govt. of Sharjah), UAE, where they are director of collections and senior curator. Their recent books include, *Nil Yalter: Circular Tension* (2024), *Magda Stawarska* (2024), and *Internet\_Art: From the Birth of the Web to the Rise of NFTs* (2023), forthcoming in 2025 is their long-awaited critical biography on Huguette Caland published as part of imagine/otherwise.

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