

Exhibition
LE TARBOUCHE.
WHEN AN ACCESSORY BECOMES A SYMBOL

Works by Mouna Rebeiz

20 May - 8 November 2026

Museum of Palazzo Mocenigo
Study Center for the History of Textiles, Costume and Perfume

Text by Roberta Semeraro

Lebanese-Canadian artist Mouna Rebeiz, after studying psychology at the Sorbonne, trained as a painter with Alix de la Source, a leading expert in 18th-century painting at the Louvre in Paris. Thanks to her rich creative streak, she quickly rose to prominence on the international stage. She has developed a sophisticated artistic language, rooted in the great tradition of the Renaissance and Baroque masters but full of startling originality and eclecticism. Rebeiz' work primarily celebrates a femininity that arises from a contemporary sensibility joined with the Classical ideal of beauty as represented by the Three Graces, becoming a reflection on the female human condition in the modern world.

Focusing on this theme, between 2013 and 2014 Mouna Rebeiz created a cycle of paintings centered on the tarbouche, a traditional hat usually made of felt and decorated with a black tassel. These works were first shown in 2015 at the Saatchi Gallery in London. As part of the exhibition, the artist invited celebrated stylists and fashion designers from around the world to present their own creations inspired by the iconic headwear.

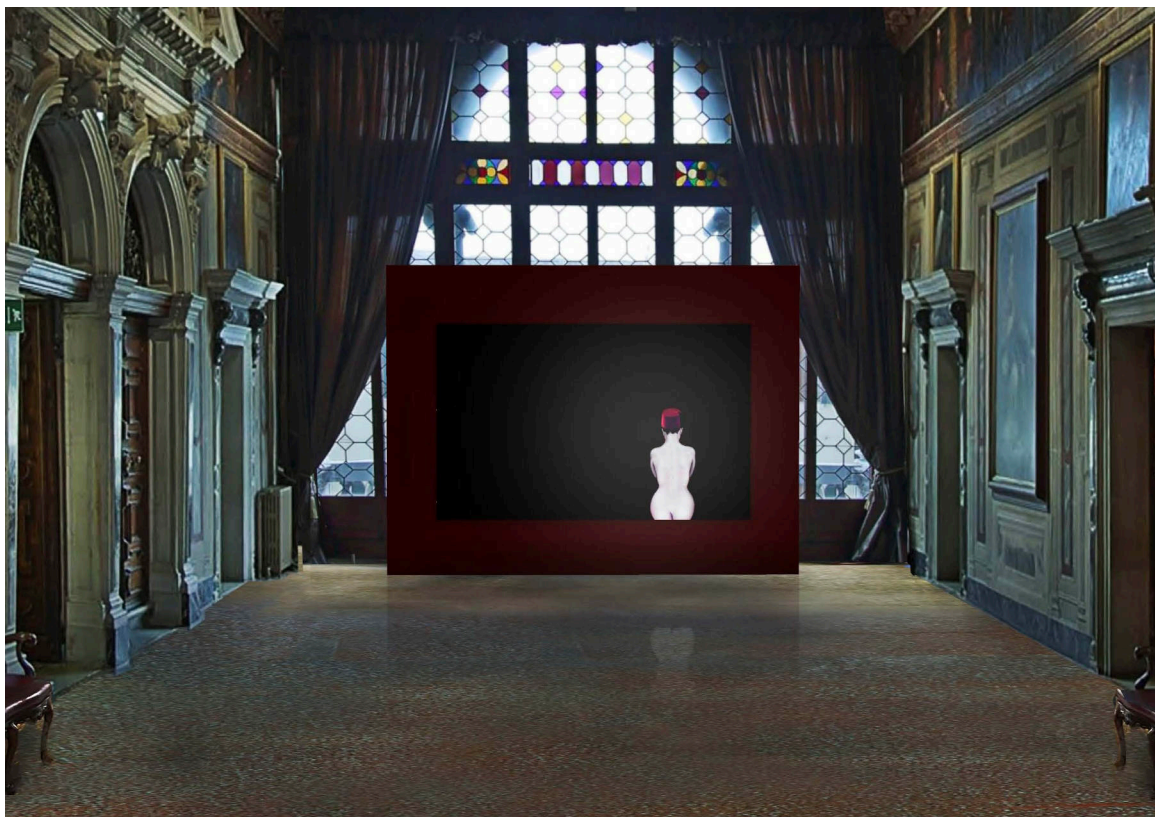
The tarbouche is still worn today by men in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans. The etymology of the name seems to point to an origin in ancient Persia. But in Mouna Rebeiz' paintings, it is women who wear the tarbouche. As she explains:

"At a time in which society is still dealing with matters of gender, interrogating male and female gender roles, the transformation of the family and new forms of feminism, it has never been more critical to reflect on the essence itself of "being a woman," in the words of philosopher and psychoanalyst Elsa Godart."

Thus the tarbouche is transformed from accessory into symbol, restoring identity and dignity to the monumental female figures that, in their pale nudity, might at first glance look alike. The works on display in the splendid 18th-century setting of the Mocenigo Palace Study Center for the History of Textiles, Costumes and Perfume trace the history of the tarbouche along the roads that brought it to Venice from the East. Details attesting to this cultural cross-fertilization appear in the "Triumph of St. George" and "St. George Baptizing the Gentiles", two monumental canvases painted by Vittore Carpaccio for the Scuola Dalmata: two women in the scenes are depicted wearing hats that strongly recall the tarbouche.

In this cycle of works inspired by the tarbouche, Mouna Rebeiz presents a holistic vision of womanhood, exploring numerous themes that give the paintings their titles. Taken together, they form a detailed manifesto on what *"being and feeling like a woman"* means to her.







Curator

Roberta Semeraro | robertasemeraro.it

Artist

Mouna Rebeiz | mounarebeiz.com

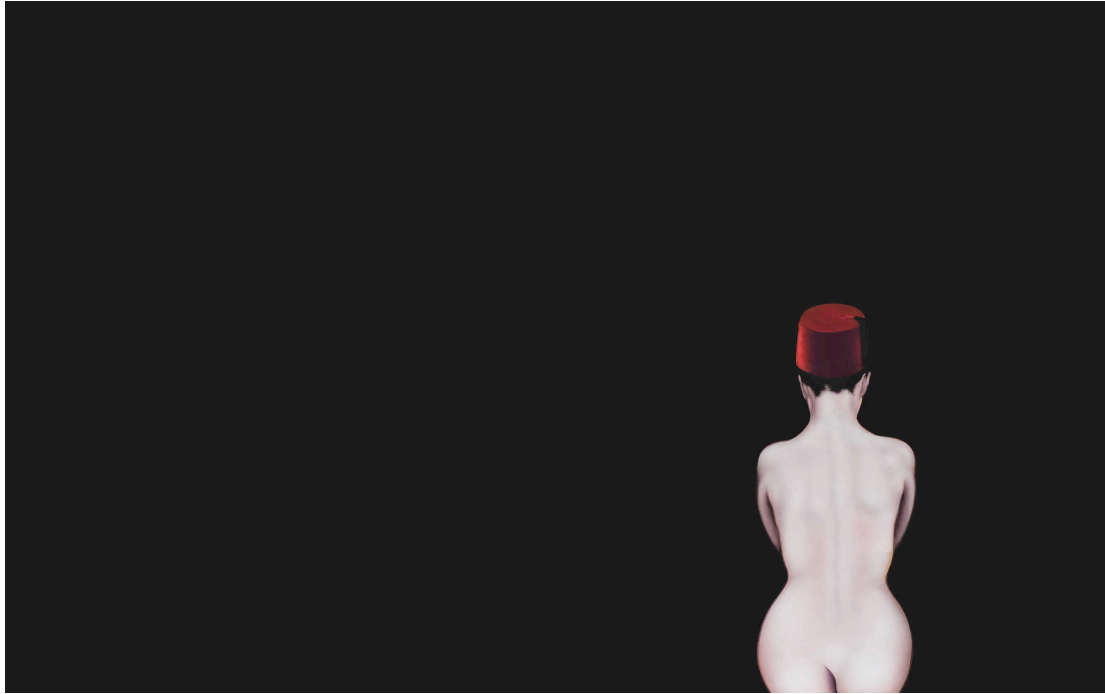
PORTEGO



Extasis

2014, oil on canvas

Extasis, inspired by Bernini's famous sculpture of St. Teresa of Avila, depicts the French writer and philosopher Elsa Godart in a reclining pose, her gaze turned towards the heavens. Her right hand rests lightly on her swollen belly, indicating her pregnancy, while her left arm is stretched out behind her head. Her pearly, almost-pure-white body appears to float at the center of the canvas, holding within itself the universal meaning of motherhood: the woman is placed at such a height of spiritual elevation as to be almost unreachable.



Le tarbouche

2014, oil on canvas

The painting *Le tarbouche* depicts the painful existential solitude within which women are often trapped. The black background expands ever larger, becoming an almost cosmic void. Juxtaposed against it, the nude female figure seen from behind becomes smaller and more alone. The woman seems lost in thought, gazing into the immense darkness looming before her. And yet the sinuous lines of her body reveal their own poetic beauty. The tarbouche on her head is a message of hope, showing that through a process of women's empowerment, she can rescue herself from the solitude she has been confined to.

Showcase

Corno Dogale

Tarbouche by Elie Saab 2026



HALL 18



Le Péch  Original

2014, oil on canvas

Le P    Original offers a profound reflection on the role religion has played in determining women's situation of negation and frustration. The three female figures here seem to be turning their backs on history in order to reclaim the truth.

Starting from the Bible - written, not coincidentally, by men - in which Eve, tempted by the serpent, takes the first bite of the forbidden apple and then immediately offers it to Adam. Placing the blame for original sin on the woman, men condemned her to a destiny of suffering. Over the centuries, one of the darkest periods of the Church's persecutorial attitude towards the female sex was the Inquisition: ecclesiastical tribunals burned thousands of women to death for the insane, irrational accusation that they were possessed by the devil.



Basic Instinct

2013, oil on canvas

The nudes of *Le Pêché Original* return in *Basic Instinct*, including the artist's self-portrait. The three female figures, wearing their hats, are seated in dialogue. Socializing is a typically female behavior, which we could almost define as women's innate instinct.

HALL 6



The Soldier I, The Soldier II, The Black Swan

2026, oil on canvas

In 1896, the Ottoman sultan Mahmud adopted the tarbouche as the official headwear of his armed forces. It was also used as a military cap in the twentieth century, during the First and Second World Wars. In this triptych, Mouna Rebeiz transforms the red of the tarbouche worn by the female nudes in the two paintings of *The Soldier* into a sensual, velvety drape highlighting the provocative backside of the woman in the third painting, *The Black Swan*. For the artist, the black swan symbolizes a burst of the unexpected and a breaking of barriers, suggesting a power sharper than any weapon, belonging to a female identity freed from prejudice and seen in its unity and fullness. The model whose portrait appears in nearly all of Rebeiz' works is Rana, the artist's niece and muse.

HALL 7



Profumo di donna

2014, oil on canvas

Scent of a Woman includes the only male figure depicted in this cycle of paintings. Inspired by the Italian film of the same name directed by Dino Risi, the artist here introduces the concept of the complementary nature of men and women. The figure shown here is the character played by Vittorio Gassman, who won the prize for best actor at Cannes in 1974. Here, Mouna Rebeiz places a tarbouche on his head and a rose in his hand. The rose is another recurring symbol in her painting, representing the very *essence* of femininity. Man and woman can be considered the two complementary halves of a single body, and thus the red of the cap is echoed in that of the rose. This painting also harkens back to the historical vocation of the Mocenigo Palace as a Study Center for the History of Perfume, which in turn has its roots in the "Mocenigo rose." The reddish-orange background, against which the black profile of the figure stands out, recalls the ancient Greek technique of clay vase decoration.



Quartette

2014, oil on canvas

Mouna Rebeiz comes from a family of poets and musicians. In her paintings, it is often music that dictates their rhythm and structure. In *Quartette*, the tarbouche recurs four times, as if marking the movements of a musical composition. A group of female nudes including the artist's self-portrait, huddled in the fetal position, intertwine to form a central knot on the canvas. Their dreamlike, drowsy state can be intuited from the half-closed eyes of the figure in the foreground. In this emblematic painting, the artist shows the tarbouche as a memory emerging from her past. When she was a child, every morning, Mouna loved to watch the family gardener at work, looking out the window of her home in Beirut. He wore a tarbouche, which he took off during his work and put back on as soon as he finished. *Red is the dominant colour in Rebeiz's painting, permeated by a powerful sensuality.* In painting, as in fashion, red is associated with a strong and passionate type of female beauty (just think of the great Italian stylist's "Rosso Valentino"), but not only that: it also carries the subtext of women's pain as victims of violence.

HALL 8



Red wine
2013, oil on canvas

The canvas of *Red wine* is completely covered with an intense red color reminiscent of wine. Again we find a dreamlike image of a nude woman, shown from behind and adorned with the iconic tarbouche, huddled in the lower left of the canvas. In the upper opposite corner a second woman appears, a mirror image of the first, as if she has been flipped upside down by the gravitational force of the red liquid. The edges of their hats blend into the background, which is none other than an emanation of their own red color. Mouna Rebeiz's painting is tactile and velvety, evoking the texture of fabric, yet also possesses the density of a rich fluid like blood - or wine.

HALL 9



Bloody Mary

2014, oil on canvas

Religion returns as a theme in *Bloody Mary*, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The tarbouches worn by the three women are an intense black that extends across the whole canvas, forming a backdrop for their amber-hued bodies.

They are depicted from behind, in conversation. In front of them is a faceless woman wearing a veil made from a colorful Hermès scarf. This woman who represents the Virgin Mary is in fact the French writer and philosopher Elsa Godart, a friend and mentor of the artist. According to Islamic tradition, the face of the Virgin - like those of women in general - must remain secret. The title, with its ironic reference to the vodka-and-tomato-based cocktail of the same name, is in turn a nod to Queen Mary I of England, who was known as "Bloody Mary" for ordering the execution of hundreds of Protestants. The artist here provocatively points out the suffering caused by religion.



Whatever Lola wants
2026, oil on canvas

Whatever Lola wants is a spontaneous flight of the artist's fancy, a genuine "caprice" unlike any other work in the cycle. The dense, velvety Renaissance-esque background is replaced here by a white brushstroke that recalls the technique of action painting. The rapid gesture traces a sort of vortex on the canvas, which has overturned the colorful tarbouches beside the seated female figure. The message is clear: once she has overcome her imposed social and existential conditions, a woman can get what she wants.

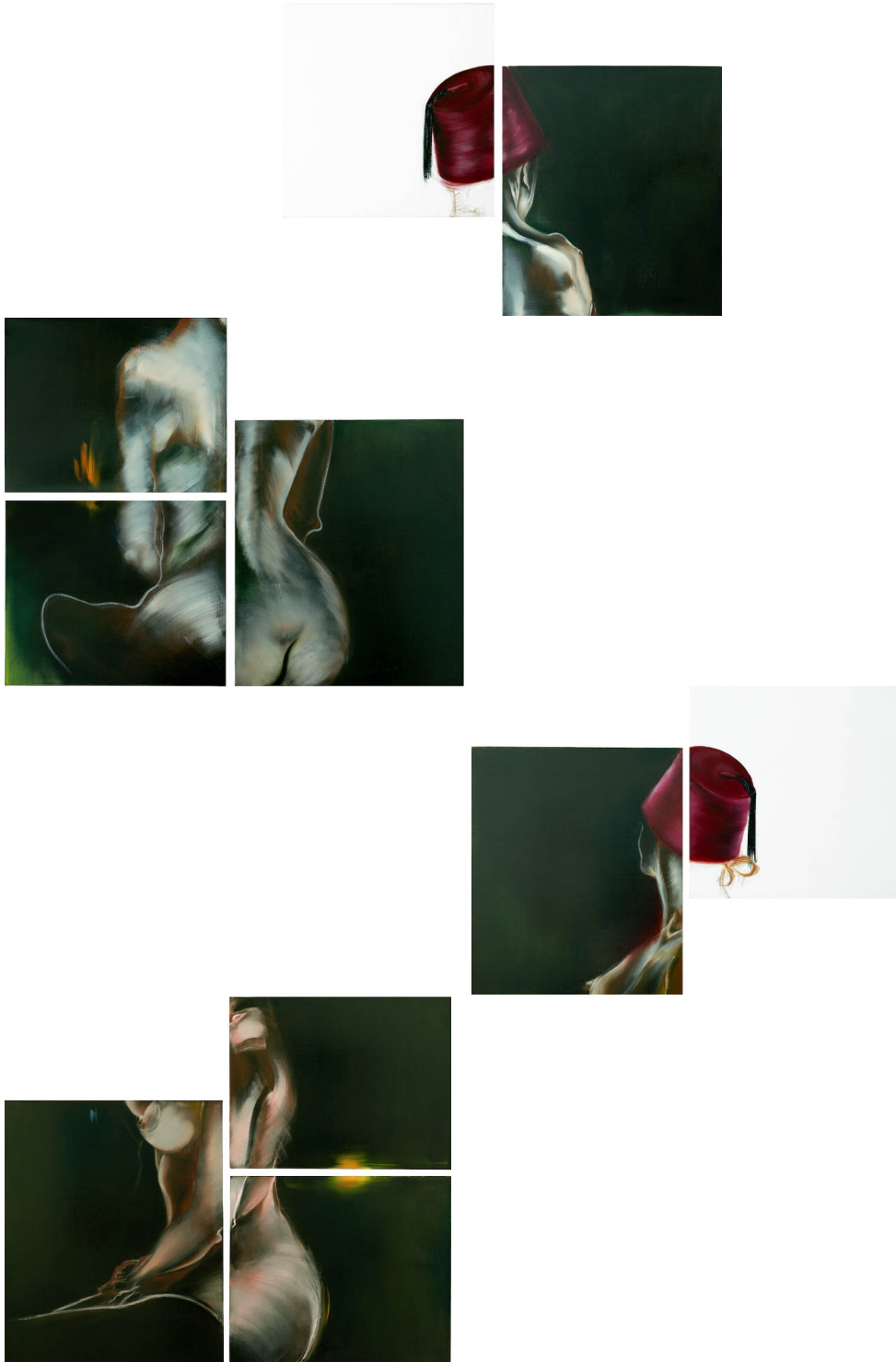
HALL 11 (*CABINET*)



Achille et moi

2014, oil on canvas

In *Achille et moi*, the traditional black tassel of the tarbouche emerges from the pistil of a rose adorning the hat. The pistil, the reproductive organ of a flower, almost always appears in Mouna Rebeiz' work with the shape of an eye. The work's title references the mythological Greek hero Achilles, and serves as an ironic wink from the artist towards him: she knows his "Achilles' heel," his weakest point, is a woman.



Divergent II, Divergent III
2026, oils on canvas

These nudes, composed of numerous smaller paintings, depict tarbouche-wearing female figures as if they were puzzles. This modular composition is a recurring feature of Rebeiz' work,

in which the meaning of a particular piece is often revealed by its form. The fragmentation of the female body, possibly evoking its commodification, is presented here as an artistic motif. The current movement of her work from figurative art towards abstraction is already apparent in the two *Divergents*, in which each singular element is complete and self-contained.



Le maitre et l'élève
2026, oil on canvas

This painting with the hat was created as a site-specific work by Alix de la Source and Mouna Rebeiz as an homage to Venice. In a Classical composition recalling the great Venetian tradition of vedutismo, including through the selection of a watercolor-like palette, we see the final stretch of the Grand Canal as it flows into the basin of San Marco. In the foreground is the Doge's cap, hanging on a balcony balustrade. In the background, to the left we recognize the Basilica della Salute, opposite the Campanile behind the Doge's Palace. The painting is also an homage to the Civic Museums of Venice: it reproduces the same field of view seen from a balcony in Vittore Carpaccio's *Due dame vénéziennes*, an iconic part of the collection of the Museo Correr.



Tarbouches by:

Ines de la Fressange for Roger Vivier, 2015

Zaha Hadid, 2015

Joanna Still for Sophie Fiennes, 2015

Nathalie Rykiel for Sonia Rykiel, 2015

Paola Caovilla, 2026

Sandra Choi for Jimmy Choo, 2015

Andrea Zanconato, 2015

Hoffsater (small eyes), 2015

Hoffsater (mask), 2015

Mario di Castro, 2015

Marni, 2026

Antonia Sautter, 2026

Souraya 2026

Solange Azagury Partridge 2015

Eva Jiricna with Clifford Chapman of Clifford Chapman Staircase 2015

Catherine Walker & Co 2015

Ector 2015

HALL 12



Un homme et une femme
2013, oil on canvas

A delicate-fingered hand's rough, grasping gesture and its long, filed fingernails seizing a hat: this image expresses a real act of conquest by the woman. The tarbouche, in this cycle of paintings by Mouna Rebeiz, represents power; in *Un homme et une femme* it becomes the very symbol of masculinity, here claimed by a woman.

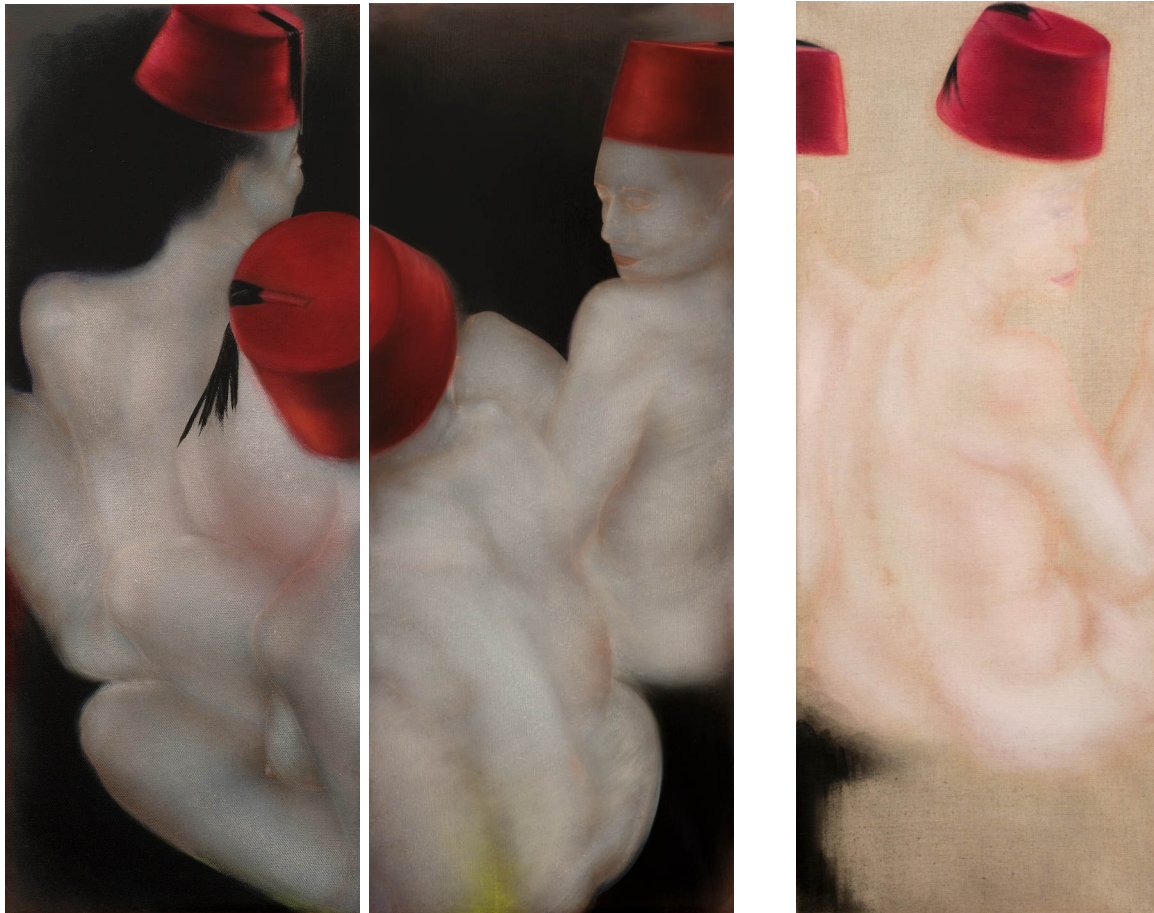
HALL 13



Exil II

2026, oil on canvas

The sense of loneliness women feel, especially when they are the victims of male violence, is depicted in *Exil III* by a nude female figure seen from behind, her head leaning forward. The artist confesses that she feels isolated from the rest of the world, as if she were still inside her mother's womb; this is probably why her figures are almost always shown in the fetal position against monochromatic backgrounds.



Unexpected Godot
2014, oil on canvas

The cynical and almost absurd image of waiting for something or someone who will never arrive, depicted by the Irish writer and playwright Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, is taken up by Mouna Rebeiz in *Unexpected Godot*. Here, though, she inverts the philosophical terms of the discussion.

In the Lebanese painter's interpretation, the absurdity is that the *unexpected* is what arrives. Her interest in theater, particularly absurdist theater, is apparent in her propensity to see women as dolls trapped in the net of social norms. As a child, the artist amused herself by cutting open her plastic dolls and filling them with cement, leaving them to harden in the sun on the balcony. The process of her painting isn't much different: it's no accident that her female figures often appear as faceless dolls, to whom she gives depth and identity by dressing them in hats.



La donna mobile
2026, oil on canvas

The painting entitled *La donna è mobile*, with its evocation of the famous opera Rigoletto by Giuseppe Verdi, was completed by the artist several days prior to the opening of this exhibition and can be considered the capstone of this cycle of works. After nearly ten years, the tarbouche no longer appears.

This group of three women, recalling Eduard Manet's figures in *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, are absorbed in their conversation and seemingly indifferent to the Doge's cap on the left side of the canvas, as if it were an unimportant presence.

Thanks to the thaumaturgic power of art, Mouna Rebeiz has reclaimed her female identity and no longer has any need for symbols of masculine power.

As Verdi's famous aria declares - women are changeable creatures. In this case, the "change" is precisely the realization of what *being and feeling like a woman* means to her. Always fascinated by archetypal symbols and explorations of the unconscious mind, the artist includes four zodiac signs with her signature to indicate the exact place and time that her reflections on this subject came to a close. Two of these signs relate to water - Venice - and Leo the lion is a clear reference to Saint Mark. The bull, Taurus, indicates the month of May, during which this exhibition opened.