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## Artwork Spotlight

Hiba Al Ansari & Nour Asalia

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*In line with this issue's theme, our Spotlight section examines the works of two female artists: Hiba Al Ansari and Nour Asalia. The two artworks we have chosen are both faces, both created in 2016, both revealing as much as they obscure and hiding as much as they try to uncover.*

At first glance, the black masks in this untitled series by Hiba Al Ansari may seem comical, even absurd. Look at them longer, however, and one begins to feel unsettled. There is something haunting in the ways those dead eyes stare out at you, like a discarded ghost, an inverse Ku Klux mask. No surprise then, to realise these mixed media works are comprised of black ISIS masks smuggled out of Raqqa, in northeast Syria. They sit like black holes against a calm, blue sky-like background. The material onto which they are mounted is in fact a satin bedspread, and each mask is adorned with sequins and beads

– alluding to the desperate fate of the many women used as sex slaves by the terrorist organization.

Meanwhile, in Nour Asalia's *Memory* series, we are presented with what appears to be a face floating in liquid. The clay sculpture, embedded within clear resin, resembles the bog mummies found after centuries embedded in peat – perfectly preserved, as if asleep. “In my sculptures, closed eyes refer to the moment between life and death,” Asalia explains. “I define this moment as one of peace: it is the final stage of life, and the first stage of death.” Indeed, the serenity and light within the sculpture amplify the sense of calm evoked by its closed eyes – we do not know if the face is asleep and dreaming, or closed to us forever in death. “I come from a country where sculpture is often created for a purely figurative purpose,” says Asalia. “I want to represent the face in sculpture in a contemporary manner.” And yet, the face, at once fragile and exposed, remains utterly closed to us, its memories locked inside it, like insects in amber. For Asalia, whose father was a taxidermist, this is half the point. “My work concerns the memory of a material, and not of a particular subject,” she explains. “My father mummified bodies; I mummify moments.”

Together, these two visages present something of an inverse relationship to each other: Al Ansari's black mask at first seems completely forbidding, yet raises questions about the plight of women and ISIS the longer one looks at it; conversely, Asalia's open, vulnerable face draws one in, yet, ultimately, remains locked away, lost to us within its cage of resin.

Together, they force us to confront difficult questions, face to face with the myriad complex issues surrounding Syria today.

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