

The Artist's Library

KILLING THE ANGEL

Interview by Els Roelandt



Join us in exploring the treasure troves of artists' libraries. Celebrating books and their writers, editors, publishers, designers and readers, The Artist's Library is a column about what to read next.

SANAM KHATIBI

A long line of female authors has led me to rediscover the work of painter Sanam Khatibi. It began with a passage by Jenny Offill, who introduced the notion of the 'art monster' in a 2013 piece in The Paris Review. Offill writes: 'My plan was to never get married. I was going to be an art monster instead. Women almost never become art monsters because art monsters only concern themselves with art, never mundane things. Nabokov didn't even fold his umbrella. Véra licked his stamps for him.'

The art monster, in this context, is a figure wholly devoted to her art — one who only reaches that place by shedding (or killing off) the caring, loving angel she was raised to be. This idea is echoed in Virginia Woolf's essay 'Professions for Women', in which she recounts: 'I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better, I called her after a famous poem — the Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her.'

More recently, the Paris and New York-based writer Lauren Elkin dedicated an entire book to the concept of the art monster, using it as a lens through which to examine the oeuvres of artists such as Eva Hesse, Kara Walker and Vanessa Bell. Elkin also contributed an essay to Khatibi's newly published monograph, Everything I Don't Remember. Reason enough, I thought, to visit Sanam Khatibi and discuss her own 'art monsters', her library and her recent move to Paris.

- ER Thank you Sanam for welcoming me at your studio in Paris. The last time we met during the pandemic it was at your beautiful house and studio in Brussels. Since then, I have been in awe of your work. So this is an enormous pleasure. Let's start off with the books: You already published two monographs with Posture Editions, a Ghent-based publishing house, and this month you're releasing a new monograph with the prestigious Rizzoli bookmakers in New York: Everything I Don't Remember. What was the impetus behind the publication?
- SK My Paris gallery, Mendes Wood DM, suggested the idea they asked if I wanted to produce a book that would bring together various bodies of work. Not everything I've made is in it, of course, but I selected the pieces I felt belonged together. The idea was to create a catalogue that offers an overview across the different series of my practice. All three of my galleries (Mendes Wood in Paris, rodolphe janssen in Brussels and P.P.O.W in New York) collaborated to make it happen. We have these brilliant women writers contributing texts, which I'm extremely proud of. Katy Hessel, author of *The Story of Art Without Men*, who has been following my work from the very beginning. Then there is

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- ER I am particularly interested in Lauren Elkin she's based in Paris too, right?
- SK Yes, she lives between Paris and New York.
- R I was curious about her contribution to the catalogue because she's the author of Art Monsters (2024). Has that book or the concept behind it influenced you at all? Does it resonate with your work?
- SK Yes, absolutely. She's a powerful feminist voice, and she's writing about issues that are very present in my own work.
- ER I remember her referencing Virginia Woolf's essay 'Professions for Women' (first published in 1932), where Woolf speaks about 'killing the angel in the house'. That idea of needing to let go of the accommodating, self-effacing woman inside in order to make art resonated with me. I think about your work in that context especially the contrast between your smaller-scale paintings and the enormous, commanding female figures in others. It felt like a kind of burst of energy, a powerful assertion. In my mind, I draw a parallel between Elkin's art monster theory and your giant female nudes.
- Definitely. I do play with these notions quite consciously. There's always a back-and-forth between different series, and each one tends to lead into the following one. They're often connected thematically. For instance, the still-life series grew out of the offerings that the women were presenting to the gods in the large-scale paintings. That evolved into its own body of work, and it often reminds people of Flemish or Dutch still lifes. My work questions our relationship to power structures and our ambiguities in relation to violence, domination, sensuality and each other. And being a woman the work naturally engages with questions of femininity, what it means to be a woman, both socially and politically. The larger paintings often reflect this more directly, but the smaller works — the 'Murder' series, for instance, or the more recent Protection Charms - are also tied to broader themes. They reflect the state of the world: the chaos of politics, our excesses and the destruction of our environment.

I'm always very involved in the process of making books. For this one, I invited the graphic designer AI mare. Studio. working for Rizzoli to Paris. We locked ourselves up and worked on the project together. I wanted to divide the book into distinct chapters. The objects that surround me in my studio play a crucial role in my practice — we get glimpses of them on the front

and back covers and throughout the early pages. Then we move into the large paintings of the feral women, the still lifes, followed by the 'Murder' series, which is more visceral and layered with humour. Finally, there's the section on the Protection Charms.

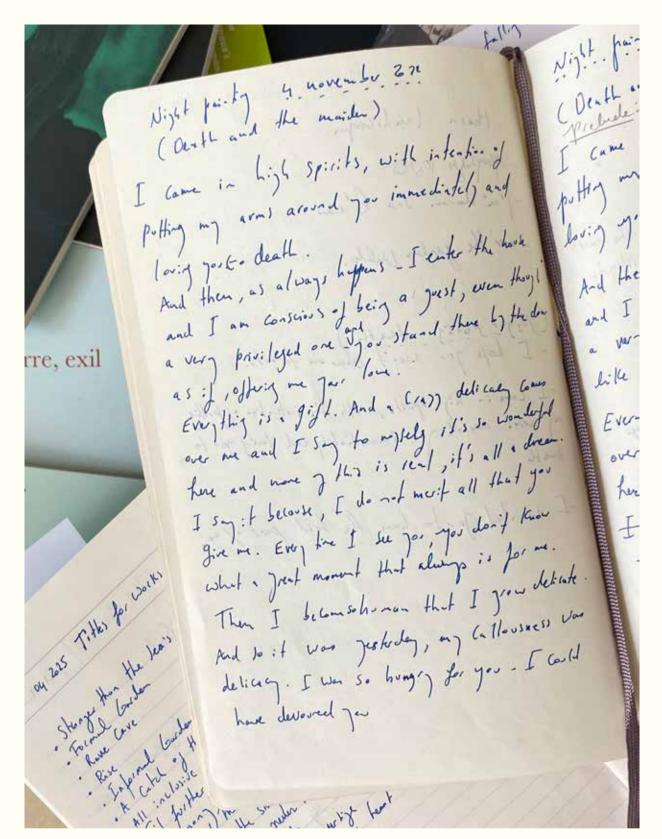
- ER The 'protection charms' those are the paintings framed in black featuring skeletons engaged in various actions?
- SK Exact
- ER You told me that at the beginning of the book you show a glimpse of your collection of small objects. I was surprised to find that Lauren Elkin focused on them. Was that something you asked her to write about?
- SK Not at all -1 believe it's essential to let writers bring their own interpretations to the work. All three of them wrote freely, as all writers must.
- ER They bring different perspectives. Katy Hessel, for instance, starts her interview with your earliest memory, which you say is a book on Hieronymus Bosch.

- SK My mother was an avid collector and lover of the arts and quite a personality. I grew up with music, travelling and her love of the arts. I discovered her book on Bosch when I was very young four or five, I think. I was both terrified and fascinated. It was my first experience of fear, and that emotional tension is something that continues to drive my work the dynamics of power structures, submission, domination, and how closely attraction and fear can be interrelated.
- ER There's also a religious element in Bosch's work.
- SK I wasn't raised religiously at all neither side of my family has any religious affiliation. But one day, when I showed the book to another child visiting our house, she said, 'This is hell.' I was stunned. I took it literally and became even more intrigued. I liked the idea that this could actually happen, that it was real, that there was this other place called hell, where torture and punishment and fire was abound—it fuelled my imagination. I suppose it was my first aesthetic and emotional 'crush', and it stuck with me. Certain childhood experiences leave deep imprints. That first sense of fear, in particular, was formative. It became a kind of primal lens through which I engaged with the world.



Photo Els Roelan

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Those themes — fear, awe, fascination — still resonate stronaly in your work.

Yes. And I think that's true for many women artists today, as well as for artists from historically marginalised communities. Katy Hessel's book also addresses this — the fact that women have been systematically excluded from art history. These conversations are happening now across many groups — whether it's women artists, Black artists, or other groups with intersecting identities. These are the pressing realities of our time.

- FR When I visited your studio in Brussels, back in 2020, you were working on a large-scale painting for an exhibition at the Groeningemuseum in Bruges. Was that the first time you worked on such a monumental scale?
- Yes, that marked the beginning of my 'giant'series.
- Recently, you made a giant sculpture for Nantes. How did that project come about?
- Unexpectedly, to be honest. I'd never made a sculpture of that grandeur before. I was inspired by the sculptures in the Monster Park in Bomarzo, Italy. I had this vision of a large female figure who was marking her territory and devouring a smaller woman. Then Marie Dupas from Le Voyage à Nantes play there, and mushrooms are unpredictable. So instead, I cre-

visited me in Belgium and invited me to create a monumental public sculpture for the city. I saw it as an opportunity to challenge myself in a way that would still be closely linked to my practice, both thematically and visually. I worked with volcanic stone, charred wood, and created a garden and a sculpture that could also function as a site of offering and collecting - something the public could interact with.

You hadn't experimented with sculpture before?

Not in that scale. But the team in Nantes was extraordinary — open, enthusiastic, and solution-oriented. Lalso had help from an artist friend in Brussels, a sculptor who aided me in conceptualising and scaling the piece. It was a long process — three years, with many eight-hour train journeys between Brussels, Paris and Nantes.

The sculpture is located in a park?

It's more like a wooded trail by the Sèvre River bordering a residential neighbourhood. People walk, and run, through it. The sculpture is next to the river, and I created a medicinal garden around her for protection. I initially wanted to surround her with poisonous mushrooms, but it wasn't viable - children

ated a symbolic medicinal garden. Each plant was chosen for its and the poetry of it all. Every phrase is like a poem. Then here traditional associations — something for the heart, for memory, for healing, for burns, for protection, to foget, to be able to sleep and so on.

ER Do you have much knowledge of herbs?

SK I've always been interested in them. During my research I discovered Juliette de Baïracli Levy (1912-2009) aka Juliette of the Herbs — an amazing holistic healer — who travelled and lived amongst different tribes to learn as much as she can on the benefits of plants from different regions and cultures. I studied herbal medicine a little in my youth and took a course online. I find the symbolic dimension of herbs especially beautiful — these plants carry meaning across cultures. From Native American and pre-Columbian practices to African traditions, I've always been fascinated by how humans, in the absence of formal society, turn to nature for healing, for mysticism, for meaning. It ties back to the idea of our primal instincts. Even in Western culture we still retain beliefs in the evil eye, in burning sage, although much was erased by Christianity. I believe in the power of magical thinking — acts that symbolically purge negativity. Even if it's just the act of lighting something and setting an intention, there's real energy in that.

- ER On that note, I see that you have a copy of *Perfume: The* Story of a Murderer by Patrick Süskind. When did you first read it?
- I think about fifteen years ago. It's a book I love and reread every few years And again, when we talk about the themes in my work, they're all connected. It's also about scent, about the senses — very primal elements. I'm incredibly responsive to sensory experiences. People close to me know that sound and smell can affect me deeply. I have a more heightened sense of smell than most people. People are always surprised by that. I think it's something I've inherited from my father. From what little I remember of him, I recall he was very sensitive to sound and smell. I was fascinated by Süskind's novel — the magic of it, the animalistic drive, the blood, the passion, the killings, the power dynamics. All these themes are constantly present in the work. in one form or another.
- ER It was a very influential book. I think I was in my twenties when it came out, in the late '80s. Which other books have left an impression on you?
- There's one just behind you on the table: Francis Bacon in Your Blood, A Memoir (2015) by Michael Peppiatt, I love it. While reading it you move through his life, his childhood, the violence, his elegance, his lovers and friendships, the bars, the drinking and the debauchery — all of it feeds into the paintings. But most of all, I love the way Bacon spoke about his work. That's what draws me in. He's had an enormous influence on me. like he has for many artists. Even though our practices differ, the foundations — the impulses — are very similar. I see myself in what he says. Since moving to Paris, I've also discovered Annie Ernaux. I encountered her through Une femme (1988, A Woman's Story in English), an essay about her mother's experience of living with Alzheimer's disease. I was struck by it. It resonated so deeply, especially around the parent-child relationship, which we all experience in some way. I wanted to read more. I bought most of her books. Her writing touches on the realities of our social interactions, something so familiar yet rarely addressed so directly. I've also started La honte (1987), about her relationship with her father, which is equally powerful. Her work strikes a chord, the way a great painting or artwork does. It goes straight to something fundamental - which resonated to us all. And she omits all the unnecessary details. It reads with such ease and simplicity, though it's not simple at all. I'm always drawn to writers who manage that - writing that seems simple but contains great complexity.
- ER Is that something you also find in Marguerite Duras' work? I see you have some of her books too.
- Absolutely. What I love about Duras is the pain that runs through her writing, and the way she describes things. Again, it appears like she writes with such obviousness, but it isn't. There's a connection between them, for me, Duras and Ernaux, Duras is brutally honest, which I find incredibly powerful. Her book L'Amant de la Chine du Nord (1991) lies in a corner on my desk where I paint. She's truly one of the great writers. That brutality, her strength, femininity, her controlled masculinity -

is Gertrude Abercrombie (1090-1977), whom I absolutely adore. And I'm also pointing to my favourite copy of Arthur Miller's play The Crucible (1953) which, I think, still is very relevant.

ER A beautiful edition indeed!

- It's my old copy. I studied it at school my notes are still in it, written in my schoolgirl handwriting. It's one of those books that's always stayed with me.
- How do you feel about the recent revival of interest in Surrealism?
- Has Surrealism ever truly disappeared? These things move in cycles. And I think most artists have been influenced by surrealism. For me it was when I discovered Dali, and particularly Giorgio de Chirico in high school. Georges Batailles' Story of the Eye, My Mother, Madame Edwarda and The Dead Man was very influential for me. I'd like to push my work further in that direction. Even though it's already present in my practice in an indirect way.

It seems that you have only a small library in this apartment? FR

I'm always moving. People tease me about it. I accumulate a lot, and each time I move, I give away many things — to people I love. Books take up a lot of space, so I gave most of my library to two close friends. I kept a very tight selection. The main collection is in the Brussels house, which is larger. I moved here intending to bring only the essentials - just a selection of objects and books that are important to the work and that I need to have close to me. And then there are the Paris bookshops and incredible public libraries... I am especially a great fan of the one at the Palais de Tokyo, which is very well curated and has a great selection of books. There's also this trend to produce a series of short books, which I rather enjoy, as you can read them over coffee in a café — they're quite fun. Also, I love audiobooks. I spend so much time in the studio, and the energy I put into painting means that, at the end of the day, even cooking a meal can feel like a challenge. So, reading time is limited. That's why I've turned to audio. Listening can be a form of meditation, really. It puts you in a different state, allows you to see other images. I like that when I paint.

I think I needed to surround myself with certain things when I arrived in this new city. Also, I haven't really fully left Brussels yet. I still have my studio and house there. I needed to have the essentials with me in my Paris studio. I'm also surrounded by a selection of artworks from friends and artists I admire and books by artists who've left a mark; like Carol Rama. Leon Gollub, Stephane Mandelbaum, Ensor, Pierre Klossowsski, Louise Bourgeois. It's so important to be well surrounded.

Reading list:

- Sanam Khatibi, Everything I Don't Remember, Rizzoli New York, 2025
- Sanam Khatibi, Cyanide, Posture Editions, 2021
- Lauren Elkin, Art Monsters. Unruly Bodies in Feminist Art,
- Jenny Offill, Dept. Of Speculation, 2014 (including the 2013 essay published in the Paris Review)
- Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women', published in The Death of the Moth and Other Essays, 1932
- Marguerite Duras, L'Amant de la Chine du Nord, 1991
- Georges Batailles, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man, My Mother and Story of the Eye, 1966
- Michael Peppiatt, Francis Bacon in Your Blood. A memoir,
- Annie Ernaux, La honte, 1987
- Annie Ernaux, Une femme, 1988

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