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# KILLING THE ANGEL

Interview by  
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SANAM KHATIBI, *Everything I Don't Remember*, Rizzoli New York, 2025

# 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

Lauren Elkin, whom I admire tremendously. I think she’s an extraordinary writer — her text is so creative. And finally there’s Annabelle Ténèze, director of the Louvre-Lens museum, who wrote a beautiful piece too.

ER I am particularly interested in Lauren Elkin — she’s based in Paris too, right?

SK Yes, she lives between Paris and New York.

ER 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.

SK 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 Al 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 Exactly.

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 — I 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 Nicolas Schimp



Photo Els Roelandt



