

KUNSTHAUS BASELLAND

SOUNDING THE INTERIOR

6.2.—

3.5.2026

Tamara Al-Samerraei and Mireille Blanc

Tamara Al-Samerraei (b. 1977, based in Beirut) and Mireille Blanc (b. 1985, based in Paris) take domestic interiors and everyday scenes as points of departure for their multilayered paintings. From these sources, each artist traces the interior in her own way—as a site for free thought, but also as a space in which fragile and fleeting memories take shape. Painting, often on a large scale, is the medium both artists choose to fix their motifs on canvas or other supports while simultaneously opening them to differing degrees of abstraction. How can we think, act, and project outward from within? This exhibition follows that question. It is curated by Ines Goldbach in collaboration with the artists.

Sounding the Interior

Ines Goldbach

Interiority—the term can evoke a wide range of associations. For some, it is tied to the seasons: to darker days that draw one into the domestic sphere, by candlelight or beneath warm wool blankets, or to moments when attention turns inward rather than outward. At times, the word also carries an almost Biedermeier echo, recalling a nineteenth-century bourgeois sensibility often understood as backward-looking and unpolitical, marked by a retreat into private life and domestic comfort.

But might interiority, and the practice of making oneself at home in space, also be understood as an opportunity to create possibilities within familiar surroundings—over shorter or longer periods of time—that allow for free, focused thought: for looking back and looking ahead, in order to move more fully outward, and thus toward what is new and unknown? In this sense, interiority becomes a kind of breathing space, a moment of gathering

and strengthening in response to what confronts us each day, whether socially, politically, or privately.

As distinct as Tamara Al-Samerraei and Mireille Blanc are as artists, their investigations in paint become particularly illuminating when seen side by side—also for the two painters themselves. They are searches for traces that recall what has passed and lend duration to what is fleeting. For both artists, photography holds onto the transience of a moment before carrying it into painting, where it can be held, questioned, and returned its intrinsic reality, sensuality, and tactility.

For **Tamara Al-Samerraei**, who lives and works in central Beirut, this conceptual oscillation between inside and outside, between the fleeting and the enduring, protection and danger is central to her practice. She also turns this movement back onto her own work, shaping themes and subject matter she continues to develop. Al-Samerraei photographs her existing, earlier paintings in order to carry them forward as fragments and details into new works. The places she explores through painting are often bound up with personal memories, fleeting homes—including those that no longer exist—, and past intimacies: a rumpled bed, a view into the garden, former studio walls from places that have been irretrievably lost, still bearing traces of earlier painting processes and of works already taken down—moments of uninhibited thinking and working. How does one paint and work in the interior when, in the exterior, great dangers, violence, and war are emerging for many people all around?

In this painterly looking back and at the same time looking ahead, the artist does not remain a mere observer of the past. On the contrary, she carries it forward, reflecting on herself in the present from a kind of external vantage point. The photographs she takes of her immediate surroundings—most often exterior or interior spaces—as well as found photographic material, are central to this reflection on the present. As Al-Samerraei herself notes, they serve as a medium through which she can return both to painting and to those spaces she has left, or been forced to leave. “They can be understood as testimonies of work and testimonies of life.”

I find myself wondering what it is like to work in the midst of Beirut over many years, even decades, moving between shifting locations, through uncertain and violent times, interrupted by travel or residencies abroad that not everyone can

undertake and that are often accompanied by immense difficulties— and yet to keep returning with all that happens there day by day: the images that have reached us in Europe in recent years of war, loss, explosions, economic and energy crises, and the precarious conditions faced by many who live there, but also of tenderness and beauty. What happens when the outside repeatedly breaks through the four walls of a studio or a home? “My studio is in Beirut, in the heart of the city,” Al-Samerraei explains. For twenty years, she worked in the same studio, located in an old, traditional Lebanese house with a garden. The house belonged to another artist, for whom she worked as an assistant for ten years. “That is how I began working there, and I continued because of our close friendship. My studio was in the outbuilding in the garden.” At a certain point, however, construction work next door became increasingly aggressive and caused the studio to collapse, just as Al-Samerraei was preparing for a solo exhibition. With the help of friends, she rebuilt the space, moved out temporarily, and then returned. “Then the electricity crisis in Lebanon began. We had to rely on generators. I was surrounded by several of them, and their diesel fumes entered the garden and my studio. So I moved to a higher floor of the house, facing a less affected side. This was meant to be temporary, but the crisis continued. The fumes became worse, and all sides of the building were affected, so I eventually had to leave entirely. In July, I set up my studio at home, desperately trying to settle in and work.” How does one live with such uncertainty, with the transience of spaces so central to artistic thinking and working as the studio, a place that allows life, work, thought, and being, as well as protection to come together? Does she often recall those places that were so central to her practice, and that she was forced to let go of? “The works *Studios Titon 1* and *2*, on view in the exhibition,” Al-Samerraei explains, “were made in a studio in Paris that I was able to rent for a short time from an artist friend and that means a great deal to me. Perhaps precisely because it reminds me of my garden studio in Beirut and of the sense of community there.”

When we first arrange to meet over Zoom, Al-Samerraei is once again on the move, spending a short period at a residency in Cyprus. What does she carry with her from these journeys and temporary homes, fragile and uncertain as it is,—in memory of what is left behind, and of what may no longer be encountered in the same way upon returning? “I only enjoy residencies when I feel a sense of belonging, even if it is temporary, as though I were trying to put down roots each time, even while knowing that this feeling will not last. I used to need a studio of my own in order to

weave together life, complexity, and stories, but over time everything became provisional. That is probably why I began to document these spaces and their walls. The theme of loss accompanies me everywhere.”

Al-Samerraei’s drawings and paintings can be read as images of memory, of fleeting studios and former sites of longing—moments that appear only briefly, before fading again. Yet we know from our own experience how elusive concrete recollection can be, especially when lived situations were never recorded, or only fleetingly captured, in photographs. Did everything truly happen as we remember it? What emotions surface within these memories? Which darker shadows, or brighter moments, come into view? And what, through painting again, through returning to and reworking these moments, can be recovered that once seemed lost?

Alongside these painterly reflections, the artist’s work also turns toward memories of the outside world, which she considers in relation to the current political situation and broader social upheavals. As she puts it, these are “places of burden, memory, and loss that, within the pull of the canvas, through painterly layering and questioning, find new grounding and even hope.” Her most recent works often depict abandoned, hutlike structures that she encountered in Cyprus, France, Kuwait, and Lebanon. These modest shelters evoke dreamlike ideas of a perfect house that the artist developed as a child in Kuwait. “I remember an apartment in a 1970s building clad in concrete and striking orange ceramic tiles, as well as a child’s drawing of an ideal house with a pitched roof, windows, a wooden door, and a picket fence.” What remains of this ideal in a country shaped by political and social uncertainty?

“Maybe,” says Al-Samerraei, “it is a vision of home, a kind of séance with memory: a fragile space of collapsed roofs and missing doors. Painting gives this transience its presence and duration back—also a hopeful thought.”

I travel on and meet **Mireille Blanc** in Paris. When I first encounter her paintings, I am deeply moved by their physical presence, their motifs, and the pronounced corporeality of the painting itself. Her work does not settle into conventional two-dimensionality, nor does it remain bound to the photographs she initially takes of images, situations, and details that catch her attention. But which motifs draw her in and speak with such closeness and intimacy? Most often, the artist explains, subjects assert themselves almost on their own. “Reality breaks in, and the image

that becomes the point of departure for the painting forms before my eyes. It is precisely the enigmatic aspect of things that interests me: their strangeness, the sudden ambiguity of the familiar, when things seem to lose their meaning and become something else, almost invisible.”

Blanc’s paintings develop in a multi-step process of approach and withdrawal: she photographs a situation or individual objects that draw her attention, then translates them into paintings of particular density. The material of painting itself is decisive in this process. Working with heavy oil pigment, the painterly procedure remains visible, conveying a legible haptic dimension that deeply interests the artist and that she deliberately sets against flatness and smoothness. “It is a pleasure to work with such dense material,” she notes, “material that forces a slowing-down of the eye.”

It is striking that some of the paintings Blanc works on and handles in her studio on the outskirts of Paris are very large, seemingly exceeding the artist’s own bodily scale. Others, by contrast, are very small in format and, in a sense, return to the scale of the photographs on which they are based. How does she determine the size of the motifs she captures with the camera, when here, too, what begins as small can become very large—and vice versa? “The question of format really is important,” Blanc explains. “I like moving between very large and very small formats. The relationship to the body—to my own, but also to that of the viewer—is different each time. In large paintings, the body stands opposite the painting; there is the idea of being absorbed, as proportions are unsettled through enlargement and fragmentation of the image and, so to speak, an overflowing of the frame. Small paintings, by contrast, demand a closer approach, a willingness to engage with detail and fragment, in an almost near-sighted intimacy.” It is precisely this tension between the two, this back and forth, that interests her, particularly because it disrupts habitual ways of seeing and introduces a productive kind of uncertainty on the part of the viewer. “For me,” Blanc continues, “this is one of the challenges of painting today: that not everything reveals itself immediately, that an image needs time to open itself to the gaze and to take on both temporal and emotional depth.”

What subjects does Mireille Blanc pursue through this layered process, moving from lived reality into photography, then into painting, and back into a physically experienced moment? Those that seem at once familiar and intimate: a birthday cake left behind once the party is over, its glamour gone; a worn T-shirt, creased and bearing the words

“Emerging artist,” as if its promise had simply dissolved; or a clementine peel, recalling old still lifes, left after the fruit has been eaten and carrying a faint aftertaste of loss. Is it this sense of the afterward, in its melancholy, that Mireille aims to capture with her painting?

“That is exactly what I am aiming for,” Mireille Blanc says: “to add sensitivity, to overcome banality, and to sharpen our attention to the things around us. That which impresses itself on me: a chance encounter, partly guided by intuition. There has to be a necessity to paint an image.”

I wonder whether a similar impulse is also at work in Blanc’s practice: the desire to remember through photography and to hold fleeting moments in painting, much as Al-Samerraei turns to what is irretrievably past, and as both artists came to know and value one another’s work during the preparation of the exhibition. “Yes,” Blanc explains, “there is this connection to the past, because the moment has already passed. I take photographs and then rework them. After that comes a phase of clarifying the initial image, during which I retouch my photographs, blur them, and almost exhaust them, adding another layer. As with any still life, it’s about the finitude of things—about what moves toward an end, but also about what endures. For me, this goes beyond nostalgia, because it has to do with what time does to matter. My paintings really are like remnants and recollections. And that surely has to do with a kind of fear: the fear of disappearance.”

Ultimately, it is interior spaces that interest me most and that serve as the starting point for many of her works. Here, everyday experience gathers around familiar objects that, depending on how they are framed, can begin to appear strange or enigmatic. I am reminded of a text by the philosopher and lecturer Matthias C. Müller on the tension between inside and outside in space, and on how the self takes shape within that tension. Could it be that we need an awareness of the inside, of the interior as a familiar place, in order to understand ourselves and the past, and to reflect on the outside as something new and unknown?

“I am very interested in this idea of movement between inside and outside. I see this boundary as permeable, and I believe there is just as much that is strange and unknown within what we consider familiar or interior as there is outside. I am drawn to moments of tension, of shifting meaning, when the everyday is transcended. This aligns with what is often described as the uncanny or so-called ‘unsettling foreignness’: the moment when domestic space, the self, or familiar objects

suddenly appear 'other.' It is this tension, this moment of turning, that I try to paint.”

Surrounded by the paintings, drawings, and wall works of Tamara Al-Samerraei and Mireille Blanc, their conversations continue to resonate. For both artists, the inward gaze is anything but backward-looking. Instead, it is a precise form of attention: a way of seeing—of protecting, understanding, and ordering thought, of reflecting on how things were and what they might yet become—sometimes touched by melancholy, but never without hope and assurance—on both an intimate and a wider scale. In their studios, they refine this attentive way of seeing in order to —despite so much—move forward and to share that perspective with us.

Tamara Al-Samerraei (*1977)

Born in Kuwait, Tamara Al-Samerraei is a painter based in Beirut. She received a BA in Fine Arts from the Lebanese American University in Beirut in 2002 and completed the inaugural year of the Home Workspace Program at Ashkal Alwan (2011-2012), Beirut. Her solo exhibitions include *Promise You Made*, Marfa' Projects (Beirut, 2023), *Outland*, Le Centre Inter-mondes (La Rochelle, 2022), *What Floats in Space*, Marfa' Projects (Beirut, 2019), *Let Me Stay a Little Longer*, Marfa' Projects (Beirut, 2015-2016), *Make Room for Me*, Gypsum Gallery (Cairo, 2014). She has participated in several group exhibitions including *Intimate Garden Scene* (Beirut), *Ashkal Alwan Homeworks 9*, Sursock Museum (Beirut, 2024), *Heavenly Beings: Neither Human Nor Animal*, Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, + MSUM (Ljubljana, 2018), *Home Beirut: Sounding the Neighbours*, MAXXI museum (Rome, 2017), Tamawuj-Sharjah Biennial13 (Sharjah, 2017).

Mireille Blanc (*1985)

Mireille Blanc lives and works near Paris. She studied at the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris (2009), and at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London (2007). Her work has recently been shown in solo exhibitions at Anne-Sarah Bénichou Gallery (Paris, 2023), The Pill Gallery (Istanbul, 2019), FRAC Auvergne (Clermont-Ferrand, 2018), and in group exhibitions at La Verrière – Fondation d'entreprise Hermès, (Brussels, 2023), Musée des Sables d'Olonnes (2023), MO.CO La Panacée (Montpellier, 2023), Beaux-Arts de Paris (2023), etc. She is 'Cheffe d'Atelier' at Beaux-Arts de Paris.

As part of the exhibition, regular multilingual guided tours, workshops, holiday programs, and much more take place. In cooperation with the association Anrufkultur, Kunsthau Baselland offers an inclusive program. You can always find up-to-date information about all events in the agenda:



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Tuesday to Friday
11 am – 6 pm
Thursday
11 am – 8 pm
Saturday to Sunday
11 am – 5 pm
Mondays closed

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