

Dahlia Elsayed

Real Feel



September 5 – October 7, 2023

Morgan Lehman is pleased to announce, “Real Feel,” an exhibition of new paintings by Dahlia Elsayed. This marks the artist’s first solo show with the gallery.

At the heart of Elsayed’s practice is the examination of personal geography in the midst of displacement. Her work pairs notions of diasporan narrative with an insistence on belonging, creating a cohesive sense of place through formal elements arranged within pared-down geometric compositions. The artist describes what she does as, “creating myth pictures for placelessness.” Elsayed’s own history of familial displacement over multiple generations has shaped her perspective on subjects ranging from storytelling to memory, and imbues her work with a distinct urgency.

In making the paintings on display, the artist was drawn to the idea of a “welcoming void”. In each composition, Elsayed arranges colored forms to emphasize a sense of entry and openness. The images imply pictorial depth despite their ostensible formal flatness, and in this way invite the viewer into and through the space. In terms of reference, the paintings suggest architectures of moving planes, as well as fictional, almost utopic landscapes. There is even a sense of the virtual, where materiality falls away into pure colored light. It’s also no coincidence that some works feel flag-like, pointing us further toward a conception of place and country.

One experiences each work as a visual poem: Elsayed’s straightforward, graphic language is both strong-voiced and obliging to our gaze. Playful juxtapositions of shape and color surprise us in their attempts to defy the paintings’ internal compositional logics. Space functions as a pause or breath. Unfolding in time, the works invite slow, considered looking. There is a meditative quality at work in each piece that spills over into the experience of viewing. This process relates back to the artist’s own daily meditation and spiritual practice, which highlights personal reflection, solitude, repetition, and ritual. Elsayed’s conceptual sources also include the mystical aspects of Islamic art, symbolic geometry, vernacular Nubian ornamentation, personal visual experiences of Islamic Cairo and ancient Egyptian art, and post-modern architecture. This complex mix of considerations and inspirations blend together to form a singular abstract language that is equal parts political and poetic, but fully potent.

Dahlia Elsayed is an artist and writer who makes text- and image-based work that synthesizes an internal and external experience of place, connecting the ephemeral to the concrete. Her work has been exhibited at galleries and institutions throughout the United States and internationally, including the 12th Cairo Biennale, Robert Miller Gallery, BravinLee Programs, The Arab American National Museum, The New Jersey State Museum and Aljira Center for Contemporary Art. Her work is in the public collections of the Newark Museum, The Zimmerli Museum, Johnson & Johnson Corporation, The US Department of State, among others. Dahlia has received awards from The Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Edward Albee Foundation, Visual Studies Workshop, The MacDowell Colony, Women’s Studio Workshop, Headlands Center for the Arts, and The NJ State Council on the Arts. Public corporate commissions include Hermès, Meta, United Airlines, and the Penn station project for Art at Amtrak. Elsayed received her MFA from Columbia University, and lives and works in New Jersey. She is Professor of Humanities at CUNY LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, NY.