

Ali Cherri

B.1976, in Beirut, Lebanon

Lives and works in / Vit et à travaille à Paris

Solo shows (selection) / Expositions personnelles (sélection)

2022 Solo exhibition, The Herbert Art

Gallery & Museum, Coventry, UK

2021 Solo exhibition, National Gallery,

London, UK

Return of the Beast, Imane Farès,

Paris, France

Somniculus, Uppsala Art Museum,

Sweden

2018 *Tales from the Riverbed*, Clark House,

Mumbai, India

2017 *Dénaturé*, Imane Farès, Paris, France*From Fragment to Whole*, Jönköping

County Museum, Jönköping, Sweden

Programme Satellite 10: *Somniculus*,

curated by Osei Bonsu, CAPC,

Bordeaux and Jeu de Paume, Paris

2016 *A Taxonomy of Fallacies: The Life*

of Dead Objects, Sursock Museum,

Beirut, Lebanon

Group shows & screenings (selection) / Expositions collectives et projections (sélection)2021 *In-Between Days*, screenings of*The Digger*, Solomon R. Guggenheim

Museum, New York, USA

Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2021,

curated by ShibiG Rao, Kochi, India

2020 *La vie des tables*, Centre d'art

contemporain d'Ivry – le Crédac,

Ivry-sur-Seine, France

Comme un parfum d'aventure,

curated by Mariou Leneuveille

et Matthieu Lelièvre, macLYON,

Lyon, France

*Trembling Landscapes: Between**Reality and Fiction*, curated by Nat

Muller, EYE Filmmuseum, Amsterdam,

The Netherlands

Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning, 13th

Gwangju Biennale, curated by Defne

Ayas & Natasha Ginwala, Gwangju,

South Korea

Immortality, 5th Ural Industrial

Biennial of Contemporary Art, curated

by Xiao Wieng, Ural Optical-Mechanical

Plant, Ekaterinburg, Russia



Imane Farès

Return Of the Beast

Institutional collections (selection) / Collections publiques et fondations (sélection)2021 *Phantom Limb*, curated by Nora

Razian, Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai,

UAE

An Opera for Animals, Para Site,

Hong Kong & Rockbund Art Museum,

Shanghai, China

2018 *Statues Also Die*, Fondazione

Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Italy

2017 *Anarchéologie*, curated by Marcella

Lista, Centre Georges Pompidou,

Paris, France

Awards and fellowships / Prix et bourses de recherche

2021 Artist in residence at the National

Gallery, London, UK

2020 Hubert Bals Fund Script &

Development "Bright Future"

– *The Dam*

Aide aux cinémas du monde du CNC

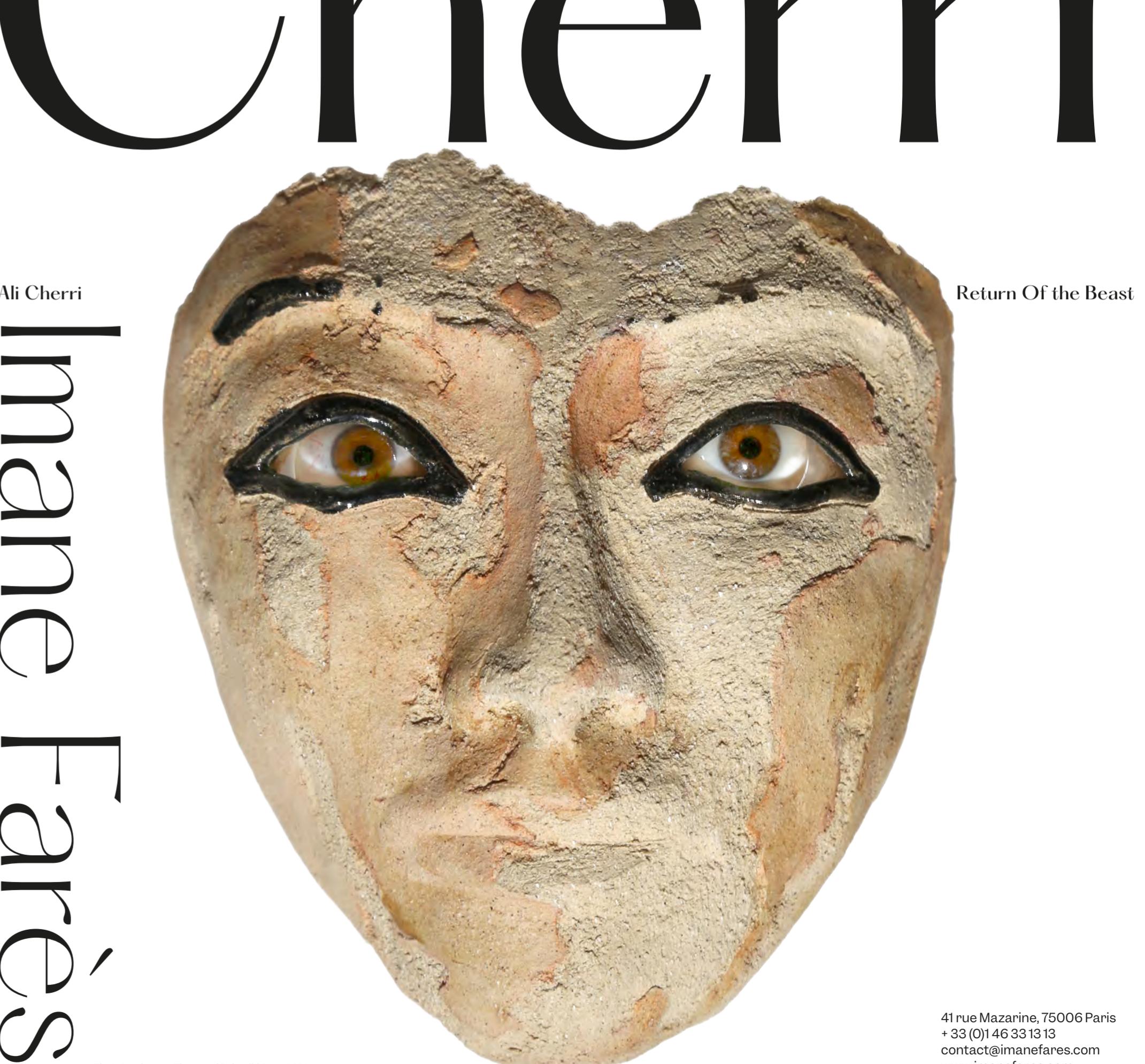
– *The Dam*

2018 Shortlisted – Abraaj Group Art Prize

2017 Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio

Center Residency Program

Imane Farès



Ali Cherri

Imane Farès
represents
lebanese artists:
• Sinzo Aanza
• Basma Alsharif
• Samy Balaji
• Ali Cherri
• Alia Farid
• Mohsin Harraki
• Emeka Ogboh
• Younès Rahmoun
• James Webb

du 22 avril au 23 juillet 2021

Return Of the Beast



Fig. 2, How To Make a Bird Sing, 2021

« (...) j'aperçus le malheureux - le miserable monstre que j'avais créé. Il soulevait le rideau de mon lit et ses yeux, si je puis les appeler ainsi, étaient fixés sur moi. »
Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, 1818

Dans les récits d'épouvante et les films qui les incarnent, les monstres suscitent un sentiment d'affroi, mais également un agréable frisson. La figure du monstre est à la fois séduisante et répulsive et la première rencontre avec elle est souvent envisagée comme un moment de sidération: le regard se fige, les jambes se dérobent et la voix s'éteint avant le temps du cri et de la fuite. Cet échange de regards est une entreprise risquée, qui peut laisser pétrifié, comme le rappelle le mythe de Méduse et Persée. L'une des origines étymologiques du mot monstre – le latin *monstrare* qui signifie montrer ou exhiber – confirme ces liens entre le regard et le monstrueux. C'est cet instant de sidération, cette stupéfaction qui se révèle être un piège scopique, que semble saisir la sculpture *Return Of the Beast* d'Ali Cherri: on ne peut pas regarder; mais on ne peut détourner le regard.

À la centre de la quatrième exposition personnelle d'Ali Cherri à la galerie Imane Farès, une créature en marbre unijambiste nous accueille. De ce corps partiellement amputé ne subsiste qu'un pied humain tronqué à l'extrémité du socle, tandis que la jambe gauche, ornée de motifs d'écaillles, semble avoir fusionné avec son support.

À ces restes mutilés est fixé un visage humanoïde blême. Cernés de traits vert-bleutées, ses yeux sont grands ouverts, comme stupéfaits par notre présence, dans une surprenante inversion des rôles. Intitulée *Return Of the Beast* (*Le retour de la Bête*), l'exposition d'Ali Cherri nous invite à reconsiderer la figure du monstre comme construction historique et à réévaluer notre regard sur lui. Comment regardons-nous les monstres? Comment nous envisageons-ils à leur tour? Comment advient le monstrueux? L'exposition investit le trope du monstrueux dans le prolongement des recherches de l'artiste sur l'hybridité, qui est au cœur de sa pratique depuis bientôt une décennie.

Dans diverses langues et imaginaires, le monstrueux se définit en opposition à l'humain. En arabe (la langue maternelle de l'artiste), *wahshah*, qui dérive de la racine à trois lettres *wahsh* (signifiant monstre), « renvoie à la distance [qui sépare le monstre, ndt] de la communauté humaine. Ce terme assimile l'absence de l'humain à une condition d'abandon et de bestialité ». Ce processus de bestialité implique de quitter la communauté à laquelle le paria appartenait. Suite à ce déracinement, l'abandonné revient – un retour qu'il ne peut opérer que sous une forme monstrueuse. Empruntant son titre au texte épynome de Tarik El-Ariss, l'exposition d'Ali Cherri tient compte de cette dichotomie héritée du passé, dans la suite logique de sa

réflexion sur un autre binarisme historique, celui opposant nature et culture. Ce questionnement s'exprime à travers l'habileté qu'a Ali Cherri de travailler l'assemblage, stratégie qu'il a perfectionnée en empruntant la pratique de la greffe aux domaines de la botanique et de la médecine. Cela lui permet de constituer une myriade d'hybrides, assemblages de différents fragments allant d'objets délaissés à des artefacts précieux, de griffes de corbeau naturalisées à d'autres débris moins identifiables.

Ce nouveau corpus d'œuvres, qui s'appuie sur ces hybridations, est néanmoins plus anthropomorphe. L'hybridité et la monstruosité ne sont plus situées ailleurs, dans une altérité lointaine, mais bien au sein du corps humain, comme en témoignent les moulages qui peuplent la galerie. Un visage en céramique fait saillie à partir du mur et regarde fixement devant lui, ses yeux fortement soulignés de noir. Il rappelle l'Œil du dieu Horus, symbole de l'Égypte ancienne qui servait à protéger ou à avertir. L'impression inquiétante qui s'en dégage nous renvoie à la seconde étymologie du mot monstre, le terme latin *monere* qui signifie prévenir ou mettre en garde³. En regardant plus attentivement, on s'aperçoit que ce regard vient de globes oculaires en verre. Ces prothèses, utilisées après une énucléation, nous placent face à un dilemme interprétatif. L'assemblage est-il un objet protecteur, ou bien l'annonciateur funeste d'un avenir aveugle?

Autrefois de simples objets déracinés de divers sites, ces créatures nous rendent désormais notre regard. Nous nous demandons alors si ce *retour de la bête* est un retour à l'humain, au corporel, ou simplement le retour de l'objet-comme-monstre – une entité qui interroge la possibilité de sa propre restitution à son contexte original. Toute analyse conventionnelle de ces fragments est en effet remise en cause. Comme les autres éléments qui composent les œuvres d'Ali Cherri, le visage et la paire de prothèses ont été achetés aux enchères, rendant leur valeur et leur origine incertaines. Cette authenticité compromise est exacerbée par l'assemblage, rappelant les mots de la philosophe Jane Bennett: « un assemblage doit sa capacité d'action à la vitalité des matérialités qui le constituent⁴. » *Staring at a Thousand Splendid Suns* (voir fig. 1) est en ce sens une articulation du factuel et du spirituel, de l'organique et du technologique, de l'ancien et du contemporain. Scintillant sur un mur éclairé par les rayons du soleil, ces yeux de substitution résument l'état d'entre-deux qui rend Ali Cherri « littéralement ensorcelé » par ces artefacts⁵. Il invite ici le visiteur à s'engager dans un rapport affectif avec ces visages et ces corps qui nous ressemblent. Couronné d'une imposante coiffe, *Life After Life*, un autre facies à

perfectionnée par borrowing aspects from the botanical and medical technique of grafting. This serves to create a myriad of hybrids, in which different fragments are patched together—from forlorn things to much sought-after artifacts, from naturalized raven claws to other unrecognizable remains.

“(...) I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me.”
Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, 1818

In horror stories and films alike, the sight of monsters provokes fear, but also creates a thrill. The figure of the monster is at once enticing and repulsive, and the first encounter with it is often depicted as a moment of stagger when your gaze freezes, your legs feel as if melting to the ground, and you are left speechless before you can scream or escape. This interlocking of the eyes is a risky enterprise that can leave you petrified, as the Greek myth of Medusa and Perseus warns. One of the etymological origins of the word monster, the Latin *monstrare*, which means to show or to display, confirms these intricate ties between looking and the monstrous. It is this moment of stagger, this utter stun that is a scopophilic trap, that is encapsulated in Ali Cherri's sculpture *Return Of the Beast*: you cannot look, but you cannot look away.

Standing at the center of Cherri's fourth solo exhibition at Imane Farès gallery, a one-legged creature carved in marble greets you. Its limbs have not been fully amputated: a fragmented human foot lingers on the right, while the left leg, adorned with scale-like patterns, seems to have sunk into the short plinth. Attached to these mutilated remains is a pale humanoid face. Rimmed with green-blue lines, its eyes are wide-open, as if staggered by you, in a surprising inversion of roles. Titled *Return Of the Beast*, Cherri's exhibition compels us to rethink what we've historically considered as the figure of the monster, by inviting us to reevaluate the gaze that defines this conception. How do we look at monsters? How do they look back? What brings about the monstrous? The exhibition engages with the trope of the monstrous in a continuation of Cherri's research on hybridity, which has been central to his practice for the better part of the last decade.

In various languages and imaginaries, the monstrous is defined in opposition to the human. In Arabic (Cherri's mother tongue), *wahshah*, which derives from the three-lettered root *wahsh* (meaning monster), “refers to the distance from the human community; it marks the absence of the human as a condition of forlornness and beastliness.⁶” This process of beastliness entails leaving the community to which the outcast once belonged. Following this uprooting, the forlorn comes back—a return which reshapes them as a monster. Borrowing its title from Tarik El-Ariss' eponymous text, Cherri's exhibition reckons with this inherited dichotomy, in a logical continuation of his reflection on another historical binary, that opposes nature and culture. This questioning is expressed through Cherri's knack for assemblage, which he has

perfected by borrowing aspects from the botanical and medical technique of grafting. This serves to create a myriad of hybrids, in which different fragments are patched together—from forlorn things to much sought-after artifacts, from naturalized raven claws to other unrecognizable remains.

His new body of works expands on these hybrids, but is more anthropomorphic. Hybridity and monstrosity are no longer located elsewhere, in a distant otherness, but *within* the human body, as evidenced by the moldings populating the gallery. A ceramic face protrudes from the wall and stares ahead, its eyes heavily underlined in black. It recalls the Eye of Horus, a symbol from Ancient Egypt that served to protect or to warn, and transpires an ominous feel that could be linked to another Latin etymology of the word monster, *monere*, meaning to prevent or caution⁷. A closer look reveals that two glass eyeballs are peering at you. These prostheses, used to heal the sight after an enucleation, leave us with an interpretive dilemma. Is the assemblage a protective ritual object, or is it the fatal announcer of a blinded future?

Formerly objects uprooted from various sites, these objects return our gaze. Ultimately, we are left wondering if this *Return of the Beast(s)* is a return of the human to the bodily, or simply a return of the object-as-monster, an entity that interrogates the possibility of its own restitution to its original context. Any conventional appraisal of these fragments is indeed challenged. Like most elements in Cherri's work, they were bought at auction, making their values and origins uncertain. This compromised authenticity is accentuated when they are joined together, bringing to mind philosopher Jane Bennett's words: “an assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the materialities that constitute it.”⁸ *Staring at a Thousand Splendid Suns* (see fig. 1) is in this sense a compound of the forensic and the spiritual, the organic and the technological, the ancient and the contemporary. Scintillating on the sunlit wall, these surrogate eyes encapsulate the in-betweenness that makes Cherri “literally bewitched” by these artifacts⁹. Here, he extends an invitation to the visitor to similarly engage in an affective rapport with these faces and bodies somewhat akin to ours. Wearing an imposing headdress, another humanlike face, the work titled *Life After Life*, stands in the gallery's niche. The confrontation with its downward-looking gaze—somewhat jaded, or rather humble—is an intimate encounter, revealing the nature of these composite creatures: they are soulful entities which can affect and be affected.

A certain agency animates these sculptures, most of which seem to have been frozen in the midst of a gesture. Endowed with terracotta legs, *Euphoria* appears to have

been petrified while in the process of walking. Its upper body bears no resemblance to a human figure: a black marble hand springs out of its torso, a miniature skull delicately resting on it. This skull is not just a dreary reminder of death; it is a part of the living that resolves the tension between life and death. Likewise, the naturalized birds, the wounded foxes, dying deer, and other roadkills in *Dead Inside* (see fig. 3 & 4) do not reek of the macabre: Cherri's delicate brushstrokes render these corpses endearing.

Similarly, the small sculptures that are ordered on the table cannot simply be considered as monsters. Like the roadkills placed side by side, some of these creatures share a platform, as if they formed a community of uprooted and displaced things together. They are not only monsters by their appearance, but also by their condition of uprooted objects. Or rather, they are outcasts who gather as survivors and witnesses of catastrophes. And while the de-hierarchization of objects has always pervaded Cherri's work in a renewed critique of “the museum as a mausoleum,”¹⁰ it is here expanded further: figures and birds converse in *How To Make a Bird Sing* (see fig. 2), inhabiting their own world, in a blissful ignorance of the human whose gaze has long defined them. And so, we are tempted to lend the words of Donna Haraway, speaking of her “kin,” to these fauns that are re-assembled by Cherri: “And like a decadent gardener who can't keep good distinctions between natures and cultures straight, the shape of my kin networks looks more like a trellis, an esplanade, than a tree. You can't tell up from down, and everything seems to go sideways.”¹¹

—Line Ajan, April 2021

Return Of the Beast



Fig. 3, La Mort dans l'âme / Dead Inside, 2021

1. El-Ariss Tarik, “Return of the Beast: From Pre-Islamic Ode to Contemporary Novel”, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, no. 47, 2016, p. 66
2. Cezar Aaron & Cherri Ali, “Une histoire de rencontre(s) / “A Question of Encounter” in: *Earth, Fire, Water: Ali Cherri*, Paris, Éditions Dilecta, 2021, p. 139

3. Bennett Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 34
4. Adorno Theodor W., *Valéry Proust Museum*, “Prisms”, London, Neville Spearman, 1967, p. 175
5. Haraway Donna, “Cyborgs to companion species: reconfiguring kinship in technoscience”, *The Haraway Reader*, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 298

—Line Ajan, avril 2021