



Tarek Butayhi, *Draw Me*,
acrylic on canvas, 100 × 80 cm

Delicate shades of pink, mauve and purple adorned the walls of Art on 56th in March during Syrian artist Tarek Butayhi's solo show *Women in Canvas 2015* – but these were colours with a satirical twist. The artist revisited the portrayal of women in art, the theme of his 2013 exhibition at the gallery, updating and expanding on his earlier work with a new sense of irony.

The sexualised objects in his earlier work, described by prominent Syrian artist Youssef Abdelke as women “formed from the fantasies of men,” are here replaced with even more fanciful and exaggerated notions of the feminine, as emphasised through Butayhi's colour palette. This time around, his work primarily seeks to reflect on the role of women as muses and sources of inspirations to generations of male artists, rather than capturing their sexual allure.

In *Whatsapp*, he captures a woman in a white T-shirt and green trousers lying on a bed, her arms raised, as though holding a mobile phone. Her delicate features, surrounded by a shock of brown hair, appear focused on an invisible object where her hands should be, but, preoccupied with painting her full lips, eyes and body, Butayhi has neglected to paint her hands and the phone they hold. Other paintings capture women with clouds of pink or purple hair, rendering long tresses — often seen as a symbol of femininity — even more overtly emblematic of womanhood.

Butayhi captures his subjects at everyday moments: writing at a desk, eating, sleeping, curled up in bed. Many of them are paired with cats, which they stroke and pet, taking on a nurturing role often associated with womanhood. Captured in a rough impressionistic style, Butayhi's women are not idols or studies in perfection. In their postures, he communicates a sense of emotion, rendering his subjects human — with all the imperfections that entails — rather than simple objects defined by the male gaze. ♦

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Reflections on femininity

Tarek Butayhi revisits the meaning of womanhood

by India Stoughton