

Emerging as Light

Nagham Hodaifa's Dignifying Plea Amidst a Burning World



MU'ANNATHĀT

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This short piece was originally published in l'Orient-le-Jour on the 09th of June 2026. I add it here to share it with open access. I wish to thank Michał Sobański and D. Joyce-Ahearne for their insightful remarks. My warmest thanks go to Nagham Hodaifa for opening her atelier and her heart to me for the most incandescent and tender discussion.

All views are mine and do not necessarily reflect those of the artist.



Après le déluge, juin-sept. 2025.
26 Pigments et huile sur toile, 114 x 162 cm. (courtesy of the artist)

Syrian Painter ***Nagham Hodaifa*** wishes to convert the humiliated and violated spectator into a dignified witness. In her upcoming exhibition, “***Incandescence***”, she makes a delicate plea for us to step into the rampant fire of this erupting volcano that is our world. She beseeches us to emerge thereafter as light, if possible.

If an artistic *série* of this sort could have a clearly delineated impulse, it would be—in the voice of the artist—the unremitting Israeli assault on the lifeworld that once was *Gaza* and the more recent, no less abominable, genocidal massacres carried out in the southern Syrian governorate of *Sweida* against the minority Druze community of her hometown. There, the distinctive moustaches—traditionally worn by some Druze religious elders (*ʿuqqāl*)—have been shaved by Islamists and Bedouin troops affiliated with the new encroaching government. Kneeling men were coerced to bark, and were filmed on camera, women hid in street waste bins to flee the erectile violence of bloodthirsty fighters intent on humiliating the ethnic community by maiming its female body.

In both volcanic eruptions, whether in the *Occupied Palestinian Territory* or the now autonomy-seeking territory of *Sweida*—dignity has been breached twice: firstly, when forms of life were irreparably pained or annihilated in collective punishment; and evil was ruthlessly articulated in dehumanising and banalising language—rendered in perversely pleasuring atrocious acts. And secondly, for us spectators, whose dignity is injured by the mere fact of beholding affliction from afar with scarce pathways of agency. As our senses become a liability of complacency or are plagued by a fatigue-induced apathy, *Hodaifa* gently guides the defeated, red-rimmed eye with enchanting colours of fire and mist, so as not to fear the incandescent eruptions. Her promise? Forthrightly venturing into the wounding flames might bear our remaining chance at glistening.

Yet, how do you firmly stand on the burning verge of a volcano's embers and you don't burn your feet?

The answer is delivered twofold: through the recurrent symbolic motifs of volcanoes (active, dormant, or extinct) and through the image of a young woman, pregnant, resolutely standing on a tapestry of charcoal and blaze. *"She is the only one who faces the looker with her eyes; she is the only one daring to see"*, Hodaifa tells me.

Hodaifa's aesthetic is experimental; it does not strive to add something ontologically new by positing volcanoes as subjects of a new materialist epistemology—although, in her work, the endearing Earth-openings seem to witness and listen. Instead, she is striving to understand and arrange current structures and systems that are, on the one hand, dominated by an overpowering ecological post-humanist concern and, on the other, by the survivalism of identitarian victims, as theorist *Jodi Dean* notices. Hodaifa bravely reinstitutes a nowadays suspect humanist address by recentering the agency of "publics" who—in the words of art critic *Mi You*—are *"those who make up most of society but who shy away from asserting their political existence, and whose positions are instead hollowed out by current political debates."* These publics are asked to avail themselves of the example of the daring woman, bearer of life, yet unabashedly standing on the relics of death.

Hodaifa's protagonist, as the painter generously explains to me, is a bemoaning victim of the *Sweida* massacres in which thousands were killed in a matter of days. In *"Après le Déluge"*, Hodaifa thoughtfully paints the woman's grieving scarf in ethereal black, a colour deemed more universal than the white veil, which is especially associated with Druze women. In this telling gesture, the woman's grief is not conjured in the register of wounded identitarian attachments. As philosopher *Wendy Brown* presciently warned us, such logics of pain anchored in incommensurability might prove alienating, secluded, and secluding. Instead, Hodaifa announces a vehement invitation to a translation of suffering which grants space for universalist identification.

One could take the liberty of extending such a gesture to the fathoming of the violence of the persecutors. By apprehending both the atrocities

of Israeli soldiers and Syrian Islamist fighters as equally monstrous and morally appalling, one is compelled neither to exceptionalize the perpetrator nor to hierarchise the victim. In a post-post-colonial radical leftist analysis, the telos of Zionist supremacy is no different from an Islamist/Arab one. After philosopher *Slavoj Žižek*, a critique of one bereft of the company of the other is, at best, fragile, at worst, murderous.

In one of *Hodaifa's* most touching paintings, an homage is paid to *Empedocles*— a pre-Socratic philosopher who is said to have been bewitched by the fire of *Etna* that he ultimately delivered himself to it. Inspired by *Gaston Bachelard's* eponymous text on the philosopher's complex, *Hodaifa* recounts, in her tender voice, that fire incarnates both the instinct of life as that of death. In this marking painting, through the myth of the philosopher, the Eastern Sicilian mountain is tied to the *Qleib* volcano in *Sweida*, which gave life to the region and later gifted it its name.¹ Similarly, the figure of the Greek philosopher *Empedocles* is called upon as akin to an unyielding woman from *Sweida*—a poetic rendition of emancipatory universalist horizons. These horizons, according to *Hodaifa*, cannot express themselves without a certain reclaiming of dignifying agency— despite the crushing breadth of pain.

In the same vein of *Donna Haraway's* supplication for us to “stay with trouble” and be invested in vessels of kin-making instead of those of progeny, when asked about her personal understanding of what standing in dignity nowadays might mean, *Hodaifa* looks at the fiercely grieving pregnant woman of her painting, pensively pauses, then unexpectedly tells me: “*Maybe it also means women who dedicate their life to their art and do not wish to bear children into a burning world.*” Here's a small ode to re-dignifying agency.

Exhibition “*Incandescence*” by Nagham Hodaifa

vernissage on Thursday, the 11th of June, 2026; 17:00-22:00

Exhibition on display

From the 11th of June to the 11th of July 2026

Galerie Nadine Fattouh

c/o Galerie Jacques Leegenhoek 35 rue de Lille – 75007 Paris

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- 1 It is said that *Sweida* (Arabic: “the Black one”) is named after the black Basalt of the *Qleib* lava, which the Nabataeans used to build the city in the pre-Hellenistic period.