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Art
The Legacy of Leila Alaoui: The Late Artist-Activist Lives On through Powerful Images of Global Crises

Charlotte Jansen

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Courtesy of East Wing, Dubai.

On Friday, January 15th, 2016, Leila Alaoui was parked outside the Skip to Main Content in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou. She was in the country, which was not considered to pose any risk at the time) on an assignment for Amnesty International, to produce



Mahamadi Ouédraogo multiple times, at close range. On January 18th, she passed away from her injuries. She was 33.

“I met Leila in person just once, in November 2015, but we communicated via email quite a lot in this past year,” Peggy Sue Amison, Artistic Director of East Wing gallery in Dubai, tells me. “We were just beginning to discuss collaborating on a few events together. When I finally met her in November, I was struck by her incredibly vibrant and positive energy.” Alaoui is featured in the gallery’s current show, “If I Leave, Where Will I Go?” which is dedicated to her memory, and also includes work by photographers Tanya Habjouqa and Omar Imam. “I felt her loss deeply, even though our personal contact was mostly through the internet,” Amison adds. “She had this incredible charisma — and her positivity was wonderfully infectious.”

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Installation view of Leila Alaoui’s Crossings, on view for “If I Leave, Where Will I Go” at East Wing. Courtesy of the gallery.



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Alaoui gave so much—and had so much still to give as an artist and activist. But her photographs and films leave an ineradicable legacy. Alaoui devoted her lens to telling the unseen stories of the marginalized, the people displaced by global conflicts and unrest, living in peripheral communities. She worked on many projects, but migration was a topic she returned to again and again in her personal work. Alaoui was profoundly influenced by her own heritage: Born in Paris to a French mother and Moroccan father, she grew up in Marrakesh, but was acutely aware of the freedom she enjoyed because of her Arab-European dual identity. It was only natural that her work persistently questions what it means to “belong” to a place. Her interest was prescient. With a fine art aesthetic and a photojournalistic working method, she was looking for a means to capture a more nuanced picture that expresses the many layers of a life lived—approaching the psychological, fictional, and factual sides to every story of transition. Migration, whether forced by climate change, war, or economic inequality, does not discriminate. The camera, for Alaoui, was an immediate and urgent tool for documenting and communicating these journeys and the trauma they inflict. But her images also depict human resilience in the face of adversity.



From the series, *No Pasara*, 2008
East Wing

Before Alaoui’s death, East Wing had started to work on an exhibition responding to the current refugee crisis. “If I Leave, Where Will I Go” includes her three-screen, seven-minute video installation *Crossings*. The video is a reflection on the experiences of sub-Saharan migrants that Alaoui spent weeks researching as a participant observer in migrant communities in Morocco. It’s an immersive, cinematic piece, which recounts the harrowing experiences of individuals who embark on the dangerous journey to Europe, in search of a better future – a utopian narrative that too often turns out to be apocryphal.

“We wanted to create an exhibition that would promote dialogue in Dubai on these important and pressing issues as soon as possible,” Amison explained of the genesis of the show. “Of course, when we first started talking about mounting this exhibition, we didn’t expect that Leila Alaoui would be lost to us in January 2016. Her death hit both Elie Domit [director of East Wing] and I very hard and we wanted to commemorate her work in a way that could help us and

[Skip to Main Content](#) come to terms with this sudden, senseless loss of such a talented artist and our dear friend. We were honored that Leila’s family allowed us to include *Crossings* in the show, at such a



Crossings, 2013
East Wing

Today, the assumed truth of the photographic image is more ambivalent than ever. How can photography still contribute to social change? Leila consciously adopted the ambivalence of the camera, using it to expose a harder, more complex and confusing truth about the human condition—neither archetypal nor moralistic—to represent the fact and the feeling of individual social realities.

This vision is emphatically clear in her acclaimed body of work “The Moroccans.” Recently shown at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, the series of life-size portraits depicts diverse ethnic and tribal groups. To take the photographs, Alaoui traveled all over the country with a mobile studio. The images, with their penetrating gazes and a sense of respectful fascination, are direct responses to foreign and colonial representations of North African and Arab identity. “Rather than being objective, the series adopts the subjectivity of my own position as both an insider and native Moroccan, and simultaneously an outsider as the critically informed documentarian,” the artist wrote in her statement on the series, inspired by Robert Frank’s “The Americans.” She [Skip to Main Content](#) importance of providing a more nuanced picture than the Arab visual clichés that commonly circulate—especially in



are all extremely direct and sensitive in their narratives,” Amison asserts, and adds, “Her honesty will stand the test of time, I am sure of this.”



From the series, 'The Moroccans', Khamlia Brid... East Wing



From the Series, 'The Moroccans', 2011 East Wing



From the Series, "The Moroccans", 2011 East Wing

Perhaps this is the ultimate legacy of Alaoui’s art: The camera no longer needs to be a weapon used to divide and rule. Alaoui put subjectivity back into the frame. She is part of a new generation of photographers who mix documentary, photojournalism, and activism with a more subliminal sensibility. Alaoui went out into the world with a fearless conviction to take her photographs, and to give her subjects back their own voice and identity. She showed us that a photograph not only speaks a thousand words, but a thousand different languages.

■

Charlotte Jansen

“If I Leave, Where Will I Go?” is on view at East Wing, Dubai, Mar. 10–Apr. 7, 2016.

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Artsy Editorial

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Increased Interest

Yifan Jiang

Grandpa's desk, 2025

Alisan Fine Arts

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Ellie Kayu Ng

Haircut, 2025

LATITUDE Gallery New York

US\$2,500-US\$5,000

This Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month, we've selected 6 shows to see by AAPI artists. There are also other [initiatives to pay attention to](#), such as [Art for Change's](#) [Skip to Main Content](#) [light of prints by Asian American artists](#). From



“Painting As Method”

Alisan Fine Arts

Through June 21



Mimi Chen Ting
Suddenly September, ca. 1990
Alisan Fine Arts
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The trio of Asian American painters featured in [Alisan Fine Arts's](#) new show spans generations and engages with a range of art historical traditions, such as [Surrealism](#), hard-edge abstraction, and Chinese album painting. The eldest of the group, the late [Mimi Chen Ting](#), distilled the organic shapes of the landscape of New Mexico—where she lived part-time in the latter half of her life—into colorful, minimalist contours. The Chinese Canadian artist [Yifan Jiang's](#) more conceptual practice encompasses animation, sculpture, and performance, but it is her paintings of mystical, dreamlike landscapes that take the spotlight here. [Kelly Wang's](#) practice, meanwhile, is grounded in materiality; she uses Chinese ink painting and layers of minerals and ground metals to create diaphanous, monochrome abstractions. Despite their varied approaches, all three artists bring lyricism and fluidity to their work.

—Olivia Horn

[Ellie Kayu Ng, “Bloom!”](#)

[Latitude Gallery New York](#)

May 7–June 7



Ellie Kayu Ng
Fitting Room Visions, 2025
LATITUDE Gallery New York
US\$10,000–US\$15,000



Ellie Kayu Ng
My Fair Lady, 2025
LATITUDE Gallery New York
US\$5,000–US\$7,500

Inspired by a personal encounter with an infinity mirror in a dressing room, Ellie Kayu Ng's latest works render the city and herself with hyperreal precision. These scenes, on second look, dissolve into dreamlike spaces. *Fitting Room Visions* (2025), for instance, features a woman wearing a purple dress who is multiplied in mirrors. Hands on hips, she appears like a ballerina on stage—but hidden away in a curtained, behind-the-scenes spot. Elsewhere, city streets and nighttime interiors become settings to explore shifting identity through fashion-inflected imagery. A gauzy patterned scarf encircles a subject's face in *Nighthawk* (2024), and chic pointed red shoes strut the street in *My Fair Lady* (2025). On view now at Latitude Gallery New York, Ng's "Bloom!" features 11 new paintings

[Skip to Main Content](#) tity as something fluid, continually refracted through the act of performance.



— Maxwell Rabb

Yunfei Ren, “Latitude Unknown”

Jonathan Carver Moore

Through May 31



Yunfei Ren
Scorched Into Memory, 2025
Jonathan Carver Moore
Price on request



Yunfei Ren
Stars Return in Fragments, 2025
Jonathan Carver Moore
Price on request

In tender, blooming paintings, emerging Chinese artist Yunfei Ren
[Skip to Main Content](#) migration and its impact on people over time. The
artist presents billowing color field paintings,
reminiscent of tie-dye blotches. He adds fluid ink marks to his



backdrop for flame shapes that echo across the canvas. The work gestures, perhaps, to the warmth of a burning hearth or the danger of a raging wildfire.

“Latitude Unknown” is Ren’s first solo show with San Francisco tastemaking gallery Jonathan Carver Moore. He has previously exhibited at the de Young Museum and Stanford Art Gallery and received his MFA from Stanford University in 2024.

—Josie Thaddeus-Johns

Calvin Kim, “Departure Before Arrival”

Harper’s

Through June 14



Calvin Kim
Keeping, 2025
Harper's
Price on request

Calvin Kim's paintings gesture toward thresholds—horizons, sightlines, and moments before a climax. In "[Departure Before Arrival](#)" at Harper's, his luminous paintings pair a hazy style with surreal, symbolic imagery, rendered in soft gradients and glowing colors. In *Keeping* (2025), a yellow flower is held between two colossal thumbs under a scarlet, cloud-ridden sky—its delicate stem precariously held in place. In *The urgency of feeling (in the morning there is meaning)* (2025), a translucent paper airplane is caught mid-air, an ephemeral moment turned into an emotional metaphor by the painting's evocative title. Across his paintings, Kim [Skip to Main Content](#) of departure and the weight of arrival, often folded into one moment.



mounted by Situations in 2024.

—MR

Shuto Okayasu, “Okku/Beyond the Light”

PLATO Gallery

Through May 11



Shuto Okayasu

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PLATO Gallery

Price on request



aisles full of soft drinks (*New Dream Land*, 2025) and chess games in the park with rapt audiences (*Chess at Union Square*, 2025). And yet, there is a slightly warped edge to the artist's works, a sprinkle of magic that reveals the artist's optimism. Of his [works on view now at PLATO Gallery](#), this is most visible in *Love is Okku* (2025). The piece references the titular Japanese word "Okku": originally a Buddhist term, meaning hundreds of eons, it has now come to mean "tedium." In this painting, the artist portrays himself and his wife amid a bountiful landscape, surrounded by a laptop, speaker stack, and other modern day trappings. Love, he suggests, is both eternal and everyday.

Okayasu apprenticed with two of the best known Japanese contemporary artists: [Takashi Murakami](#) and [Tomokazu Matsuyama](#). His works have been exhibited in New York and internationally, including in a [group show](#) of Japanese artists at [Tang Contemporary Art](#)'s Hong Kong space in 2024.

—J T-J

Noormah Jamal, "[Meena / Veena](#)"

[Rajiv Menon Contemporary](#)

Through May 11



Noormah Jamal
Zarbaba, 2025
Rajiv Menon Contemporary
Sold



Noormah Jamal
WEEDS 31, 2025
Rajiv Menon Contemporary
Sold

In the show “[Meena / Veena](#),” Pakistani artist [Noormah Jamal](#) unpacks her childhood memories of Peshawar, the capital and largest city of Pakistani province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, known colloquially as the ‘city of flowers.’ Jamal filters these memories through a fantastical and wistful lens in small ceramics, paintings, and works on paper. “At the core of my work is a desire to create space for dialogue—between past and present, between individual experience and collective memory,” the artist said in a statement.

Fuzzy, warmly composed figurative paintings draw on Mughal miniature painting and Pashtun folklore. The result is deeply evocative scenes, such as [Zarbaba](#) (2025), which shows a woman atop a sun against a backdrop of mountains, with flowing acrylic and pencil marks creating a sense of swirling movement. In Jamal’s ceramics, meanwhile, amorphous heads emerge from weed stems in a playful twist on identity and its rootedness to nature. The show is presented by Los Angeles gallery [Rajiv Menon Contemporary](#), [Skip to Main Content](#) : doors in Hollywood in February, which has a “particular—though not exclusive—focus” on artists with origins in South Asia.



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