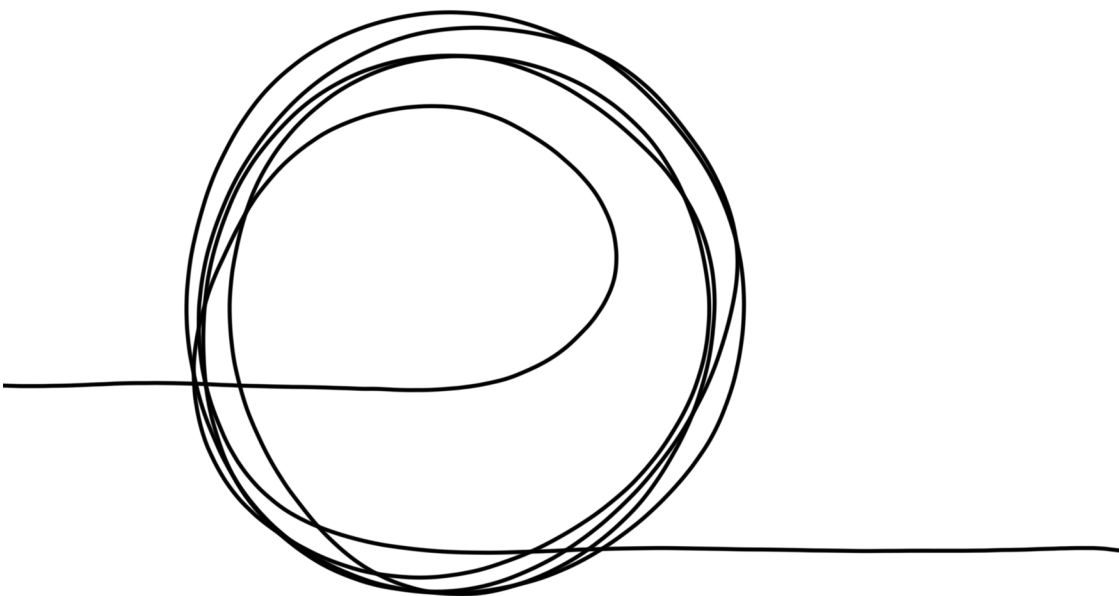


MOVING MATTERS CULTURAL PLATFORM presents

# STAGES OF LIFE



**RAAFAT BALLAN**  
**JOEP VAN LIEFLAND**  
**SHAZA OMRAN**  
**KEVIN OSEPA**  
**SAWANGWONGSE YAWNGHWE**

**26 OCTOBER - 24 NOVEMBER 2019**  
**GALERIE SANAA . JANS DAM 2 . UTRECHT**  
Open Wednesday to Saturday 12.00 - 18.00



# STAGES OF LIFE

The depiction of 'Stages of Life' is a familiar subject in art history, like it has been and still is in theology, medicine or psychology. It commonly specifies three up to twelve phases of life, from birth to death and sometimes even beyond. Traditionally the stages are mapped out in a chronological order of things, cyclic or linear. From today's perspective however, we might be less impressed by the striking simplicity of this order. The irresistible image of designated ages passing by one after each other omits a much more impactful life experience: that of migration from one place to another. The chrono-logic of a lifespan is often, and profoundly, intersected by a spatial logic. This spatial intersection concerns migration for economical, political or educational reasons, which can be either voluntary or forced – the border between which is hardly definable.

The exhibition Stages of Life seeks to concretize this intersection of the chronological and the spatial, in various and sometimes oblique ways. The intersection is not, or not always, simply readable from the works on show but also concerns the artists' personae. The genesis of this exhibition is embedded in the slippery fundamentals of what defines art in a context of global exchange, colonial stratifications, diasporic culture, adaptation, and opportunism. Or to quote one of the artists in the exhibition, Sawangwongse Yawngghwe: "It might complicate the framework if your narrative is one of the statist viewpoint."



# BIRTH

The lyrical paintings by **Shaza Omran** are based on the faces and media representations of children and sucklings, her fellow humans, who got killed in wartime. She eternalizes them in art-historically informed, idealized stylizations. Omran developed her characteristic style during her bachelor and master studies in Damascus, Syria. But it was only after her arrival in the Netherlands that she gradually managed to carve for herself a distanced artistic perspective to the traumatic situations on the ground: "Is it a dream or a cast away reality? I see faces when I look at my white canvas. I draw their lines; children, dead or alive?

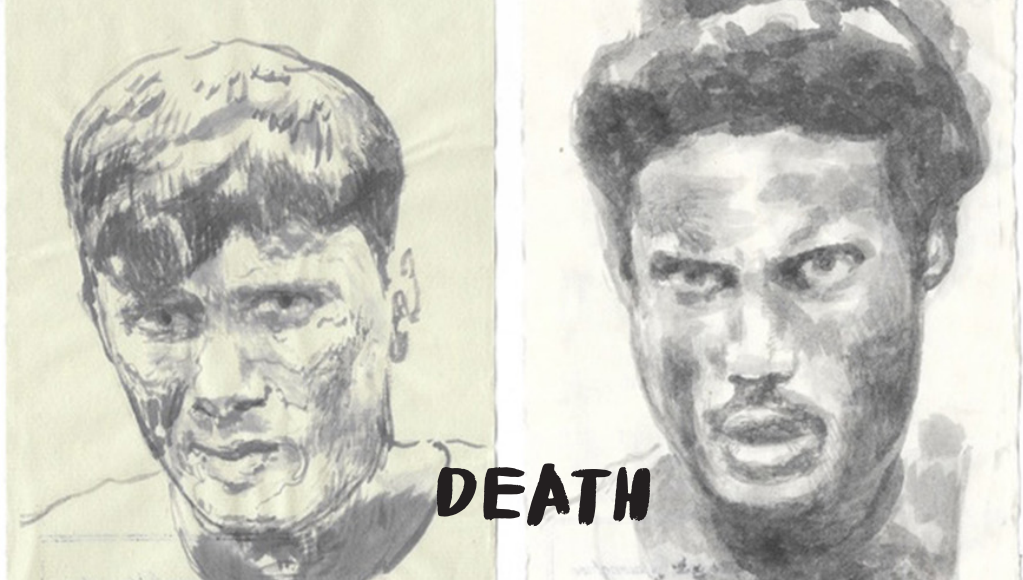
Their eyes closed, like dreaming, dying, dancing or flying. Is it just one, and I draw the movement, or are there many, holding each other in an embrace of love, or anxiety, seeking for a shelter? Drifting away from.... or floating to.... anew... Was it what I've really seen, or just feared of? An appearance of lost lives, traveling souls, life itself, my own life, the old or the new? Life is a constant move. I go with it. I follow the lines."

**Raafat Ballan's** paintings are essentially transcending tensed domestic situations and victims of violence in Syria into stilled compositions with isolated figures. More specifically, the body of works presented in this exhibition is a painterly reflection of a suicide bombing attack in the city of As-Suwayda (Sweida), Syria, coinciding with a series of raids on seven villages east of the city in the night of 25 July 2018. Killing almost 200 people, the bloodshed event is now better known as the ISIS massacre in Sweida. The city of Sweida is also the home of a branch of the Damascus University College of Art, where Ballan studied painting. Founded in 1960 the College of Art went through several phases. From the typical post-colonial experimentalism in painting and sculpture in the beginning, it became under the influence of (former) Soviet social realism in the times of the Assad regimes. Because of the turmoil

in Syria, many among its (former) student population moved out of the country or have taken refuge – often into Europe. Ballan's work is in many respects a balancing between acquired academic skills and a response to the coalescence of events spurred by the strife in his homeland and hometown. Whereas his work stylistically pays debts to canonical modern masters, such as Francis Bacon, Ballan's attitude feels more akin to Syrian colleagues in the diaspora, such as the late Marwan Kassab-Bachi (1934-2016), better known as Marwan, who spent most of his life in Berlin. Ballan is also active as organizer of exhibitions together with a small group of artists who gather under the name 'Just Shout'.

**LIFE**





**Sawangwongse Yawngghwe**, a descendent from a prominent royal-turned-guerrilla family leading the struggle for the rights of the Shan people in Eastern Myanmar, is committed to exposing the hidden and repressed histories of violence and oppression in his country. He critiques dominant Bamar-centric artistic and historical narratives by presenting a personal, counter-historiography, often in solidarity with other oppressed or excluded communities in Myanmar. Yawngghwe, who nowadays lives in the Netherlands, ostensibly uses painting as the vehicle of his critique: "Painting at this moment, I claim, is the most radical action one can embark upon. I see painting as the new language imposed on me as a result of my exile. When I grew up in the jungles along the Shan-Thai border and in Thailand, Western painting practices were unknown to me. I was not exposed to it until my family escaped to Canada when I was at

the age of 12. To me, painting is 'a thing that emerges out of its own loss,' to borrow Zizek's words." For **Exterminate all the Brutes (Inn Din massacre)** he portrayed Rohingya men who were photographed while sitting in line just before they got executed at what is known as the Inn Din massacre, 2 September 2017 (see Wikipedia). By painting their individual portraits, they retain their human dignity, as in old family photographs. The portraits are combined with a long silk cloth, referring to the longyi and scarf typically worn by the Burmese elite, including its current leadership. Yawngghwe decorated it with rectangular forms echoing the digital data of a punch card (or Google's image search page layout). The modern history of technological progress, it suggests, coincides with the long history of atrocities and an unprecedented industrial military complex that define Myanmar.



The monumental collages of Joep Van Liefland allude to the will, and various strategies of humankind, to overcome Death. They form a visual reflexion of the theoretical research that van Liefland conducts at the intersection of art, technology and theology. Images taken from books, advertising or the Internet are layered with silkscreen prints of his own of the static of dead TV screens, creating a kind of mental maps or subconscious coordinates.

There are references to zombie movies and antique ruins, cryonic

laboratories – where people are frozen through and await resurrection in the future – as well as Christian symbolism, spaceships, meatballs, gradients on fake nails and the geometry of data networks. It is a fractured cosmological realm infused with fantasies about transcendence and the power of mankind, but also a profane realm of haul videos, corporate design and discount advertising: of everyday life. The work of Aby Warburg (1866-1929) comes into mind in this context, as well as the kaleidoscopic diagrams of the late Paul Laffoley (1935-2015). Also, the Russian philosopher and cosmist Nikolai Fyodorov (1829-1903) plays an important role, 'a futurist from the past'. The crux of Fyodorov's utopian vision is that technological progress would ultimately allow humans to overcome mortality and, in fairness to the already dead, revive the whole human race and spread across the universe. This idea of rise, fall, resurrection and continuity is an essential aspect of van Liefland's work. The obsolete technology and storage medias that he continuously assembles and explores, along with his archive of images, become a hinge between the past and the future, between our analogue and digital realities. (Text by Anne Ethelberg)



## AFTER DEATH

# REBIRTH



In his video film **Con los Santos no se Juega** (You don't play with the Saints) Kevin Osepa delves into seeming inscrutable spiritual rituals in Curacao. In colonial (Christian) times these rituals were forbidden and went underground, but they have survived. In the video Osepa interprets and performs them in various ways, with a prominent role for bluing powder, or blous as it is called in Curacao, otherwise used as an additive to laundry detergent. "I revisit my childhood memories to investigate how Afro-Caribbean spirituality has formed my life. I was born in an environment where, despite them being taboo, rituals and magical thinking played an important role. The spiritual practices of **Brua** and **Las 21 Divisiones**, some of which my relatives were secretly engaged in, aroused my curiosity. These syncretic religions were born from a fusion of Catholic, African, and Indian influences. Duality often plays a vital role, as saints and spir-

its have powers that can be summoned for good or evil. To keep these forces in balance, there is a range of commandments and rituals for cleansing and protection. In the film, I combine real stories with poetry and poetic imagery to give an insight into Afro-Caribbean spiritual culture, and to paint a picture of this collective experience."

Osepa came to the Netherlands to study art in the city of Utrecht, "not to become a Dutch/European artist, but to become a better artist." According to him the Dutch lifestyle and landscape lack space for magical thinking. His work then can be seen as a means of recreating an idea of home. That is also why the language used in **Con los Santos** is in Papiamentu, which is typical of Curacao. Yet he is also critical of his home country. He keeps visiting the island, currently to work on a project on homosexuality, which due to the colonially imported Catholic moralism is still a firm taboo subject there.

# CREDITS

Stages of Life is conceived by Moving Matters Cultural Platform.  
This platform initiates projects and exhibitions on the cutting edge  
of visual art and migration.

**[movingmattersplatform.nl](http://movingmattersplatform.nl)**

Stages of Life is curated by Jelle Bouwhuis. Text by Jelle Bouwhuis  
unless stated otherwise.

With thanks to Alice Sun (intern), Benine du Toit (design), Berthe  
Schoonman (production), Rabi Koria and Marjolein Sponselee (ad-  
vice); Sophie Steengracht (volunteer).

The work of Shaza Omran has been made possible in part through  
financial support of After The War-Inclusief



Stages of Life has been made possible with financial support of:  
KF Hein Fonds, Elise Mathilde Fonds, Carel Nengerman Fonds and  
Utrecht Municipality.

≡kfheinfonds

And through the support of Galerie SANAA, Welkom in Utrecht and  
De Voorkamer.

