

Alte Soothsayer

L'indovino

Mouna Rebeiz

PRESS
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23 APRIL-
27 NOVEMBER
2022

St George's Anglican Church
Campo San Vio, 30123 Venice VE

59th Venice Biennale – Republic of San Marino





11

La Force

The Soothsayer

L'indovino

Mouna Rebeiz
Curator: Ami Barak



PRESS RELEASE

MARCH 2022

**Chiesa Anglicana
di St George -**
St George's Anglican Church

Campo San Vio, 30123 Venice VE
59th Venice Biennale – Republic of San Marino

From April 23 to November 27, 2022, for the 59th Venice Biennale and under the patronage of the Republic of San Marino, the Lebanese-Canadian artist Mouna Rebeiz is presenting “The Soothsayer,” a body of new works that invites the viewer to a symbolic and metaphoric journey in the St. George Anglican Church in Venice, Italy.

The title of the exhibition, “The Soothsayer,” refers to the character of Shakespeare’s tragedy who warned the emperor Julius Caesar of his premeditated assassination in the Senate, but who was ignored and called a “dreamer.” Mouna Rebeiz uses the idea of premonition as being one of the artist’s missions.

The artist takes an interest in the unlikely meeting point between artificial intelligence and the mystic. Three works dialogue with each other and guide the visitor along the path of his own discovery and that of humanity: a majestic set of the revisited 22 Major Arcana of the Tarot of Marseille, a puzzle of colored pieces and an abstract totemic sculpture.

Arranged in an arc along the central nave, the reinterpreted 22 Major Arcana of the Tarot of Marseille, painted on polished aluminum plates using a singular pictorial technique, symbolize the psyche’s original core and of self-awareness.

The puzzle wall of colored pieces, upright behind the holy water font, symbolizes the boundary between the real and the great beyond, in which ancestors, spirits, wisemen and new divinities cohabit. The puzzle pieces that compose the wall are associated with a production system of a prophecy through the sense of touch. It is projected in the church’s space in a textual form.

A totem composed of transparent puzzle pieces made from recycled Plexiglas is in the entrance of the nave. It is also an offshoot of the gods, ancestors and wisemen who reign in another dimension and who choose to communicate with us. We can read on the totem, in gothic characters, the first quatrain of Charles Baudelaire’s Correspondences.

In the very center of the St. George Anglican Church of Venice, the meditative vocation of the three elements of the performative work takes on its full dimension.

ABOUT MOUNA REBEIZ

A Lebanese-Canadian contemporary artist, Mouna Rebeiz lives and works in London. Her remarkable style was shaped in contact with master works stretching from the Renaissance to the present day. She makes use of these varied influences and a singular pictorial mastery to capture the meaning and existential queries of the human being. A psychologist by training, her work constitutes a vast reflection on the human psyche.

ABOUT THE VENICE BIENNALE

The Venice Biennale is one of the oldest and most prestigious artistic events in Europe and the world. Since 1893, it has given pride of place every year to contemporary art, dance, music, cinema and architecture in Venice’s most emblematic sites.

Press contact - Robin Davis: +1 203 622 1334 - robindavis@townsendgroupmedia.com

THE SOOTHSAYER, Mouna Rebeiz
St. George Anglican Church - Campo San Vio, 30123 Venezia VE, Italie

Opening Exhibition

Wednesday,
April 20th 2022
6pm – 9pm





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INTRO- DUCTION

Ami Barak, Curator

Mouna Rebeiz is an artist of remarkable talent and unclassifiable personality. Of Lebanese-Canadian origin, she lives among painters, musicians, and poets. Her classical training in the beaux-arts leads her to draw inspiration from the repertoire of Old Master painting, though she just as often creates sculptures and installations. Through dedicated effort she has developed her own pictorial grammar and a characteristic and distinctive style. Over the years, she has been adventurous in the realms of abstraction. Yet the female body is a recurring theme in many of her works.

Mouna Rebeiz's project for Venice is called *The Soothsayer*. The title refers to a minor character in Shakespeare's tragedy, *Julius Caesar*. Despite speaking only nine lines, his role is pivotal, since it is he who warns the emperor to avoid going to the Senate on the 15th of March, as he will certainly die. In the play, Cesar ignores the soothsayer's warning, calling him a "dreamer".

Throughout her career, Rebeiz has been fascinated by the mystery of life and the hidden meanings of existence. Recently this quest has taken the form of examining the unlikely meeting point between artificial intelligence and mystic. What will tomorrow be made of? Are these technologies changing our ways of thinking? As an artist, she must grasp this mutation in her own way, becoming in a sense a whistleblower. Her installation stages the lines of force of a "cognitive ecology" likely to reconcile man with technology.

It is in Venice's Anglican church, Saint George's, near the Accademia, that Rebeiz presents three works whose interaction takes the form of a complex performative ensemble, to be understood as conversation taking place as much on the symbolic as the metaphorical level. In the central nave of the church, the spectator sees the twenty-two cards of the Major Arcana of the Tarot of Marseille reinterpreted in Rebeiz's particular technique, using oil paint, at times highlighted with BIC ink or with gold leaf, on mirror-polished aluminum plates. On their backs appear a pink harlequin diamond pattern. The oversized cards are arranged in semi-circles on both sides of the nave, symbolises the original core of the psyche.

Certain cards derive their characters and motifs from the iconic paintings of such masters as Michel-Angelo, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Peter Paul Rubens, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Giovanni Bellini, Jacopo da Pontormo, Antoine Watteau, William Blake, Gustave Moreau, or Honoré Daumier. Traditionally, the Major Arcana of the Tarot of Marseille concerns self-knowledge. Each card in the Major Arcana can be read diversely, as they were conceived to embrace both positive and negative interpretations and the symbolic content of each card contains several meanings that constitute a coherent whole. Hence, each viewer must determine which meaning is the most appropriate for his or her situation. Several relevant meanings can sometimes be retained.

Alte Soothsayer

L'indovino

The other work in this display takes the form of a wall composed of thirty-four interlocking puzzle pieces. Each piece has a different shape and color and some are associated with a system of producing a prophecy by touch. It is broadcast in text form and projected on the wall of the church. The puzzle symbolizes the border between the real and the beyond, where ancestors cohabitate with spirits, sages, or new divinities.

The third work, located at the entrance of the church, is a totem composed of transparent puzzle pieces, each 6 cm thick, made from recycled Plexiglas. The totem is also an emanation of the gods, ancestors, sages, who reign in another dimension and who choose to communicate with us through this medium.

Painted in Gothic characters resembling the titles of the Tarot mysteries, where the pieces of the totem connect, are verses from the first quatrain of Correspondences by the poet Charles Baudelaire:

*"In Nature's temple, living columns rise,
Which oftentimes give tongue to words subdued,
And Man traverses this symbolic wood,
Which looks at him with half familiar eyes."*



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Guy Boyer, Editorial Director, Connaissance des Arts, Paris



The New Mirrors of the Soul

“Apart from the pride that any artist would have felt in representing a country, I feel as if I am a bearer of Beauty here, in the spiritual sense of the term”, explains Mouna Rebeiz when asked about appearing at the 2022 Venice Biennale in the San Marino Pavilion. “Beauty transcends the despair in which the world finds itself at the moment. The stars aligned and the project came to life.” In this year that marks the 700th anniversary of Dante’s death, a line from his Divine Comedy comes to mind: “Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars.”

This incredible alignment of the planets has enabled the Lebanese Canadian artist to complete her project initially designed for the Lebanese Pavilion. She can thus present it in its entirety, and in line with her original idea, group together totems, a wall of puzzles, and her twenty-two cards from the game of tarot. The whole work was conceived as a vast installation revolving around mystery, spirituality, and revelation.

(...)

The tarot according to Mouna Rebeiz

The universal story related in the twenty-two Major Arcana cards of the tarot deck recalls the existence of humanity, the passage from innocence to enlightenment. *“I don’t know why I approached the tarot. I’ve never had a tarot card reading, but I’m fascinated by the richness of the images on the cards. There’s everything in the tarot: numerology, astrology, astronomy, alchemy, kabbalism, paganism, and Christianity”, confides Mouna Rebeiz.*

“Before this work entitled The Soothsayer, I wanted to speak about the emptiness in our existence, a De Chirico-type metaphysical void with its lifeless stations, a disquieting, quasi-sublime void, which I felt during the Covid pandemic as I walked along the deserted streets of Beirut. When we are isolated and no longer have much faith in anything, we begin to question ourselves deep down inside; it’s an essential process of introspection. So I chose to work on the theme of The Three Graces, because of what bound them together, and their solitude. Then I turned towards the tarot, and from there towards divination, as Marie Curie did when her husband died. When one loses all hope, one seeks to hold onto a truth. And since we are in the age of artificial intelligence, I decided to connect it with the art of divination. The Soothsayer will replace the fortune-teller of yesteryear. It’s an improbable coming together of the spiritual and AI. This project draws inspiration from André Malraux when he wrote, or could have written, that the 21st century would be spiritual, or it would not be.”



To confirm the pertinence of the images she created, Rebeiz worked with Pierre-Henry Matard, a tarot specialist. To understand how an artist may engage in this traditional form of illustration, while injecting a large amount of suggestiveness, she visited the collections of the Musée Français de la Carte à Jouer (The French Playing Card Museum) in Issy-les-Moulineaux, outside Paris, and saw the Surrealist Tarot of Marseille and other decks designed by Dalí, Tim Burton, and Walt Disney. Like the great Catalan master, who based his collages on works by Watteau, Ingres, and Vigée-Lebrun, she delved into the repertory of the Old Masters, yet sought to make it contemporary.

"I added lots of colour, a little magic, playfulness (as in Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens, play is a part of human nature), humour, and comic strip art", she explains. "I really needed to revisit the Old Masters to anchor myself in time, so to speak. To return to my classical training. And yet, even if I rework masterpieces in art history, I need levity, to reimmerge myself in childhood, in cartoons. It's a new language, a hybrid language." And she is right, since there is both highbrow and lowbrow culture in her offerings: scholarly culture, going back to Cesare Ripa's book of emblems Iconologia (1593), and popular culture with Asterix's cauldron or Mr. Monopoly.

In these twenty-two cards, Rebeiz also continues to explore her own work on self-portraits (she features in The Magician and The Moon), the human figure (in Justice, the silhouette wearing a cap reappears, recalling the fez in her previous series), and classical painting (where she dips into the repertory of Michelangelo, Rubens, Gustave Moreau, and William Blake).

When the tarot reflects

On display in St. George's, the small Anglican church in the heart of Venice's sacred artistic triangle between the Guggenheim Museum, the Accademia, and the Punta della Dogana, the twenty-two cards painted on a human scale on polished aluminium, which has a mirror effect, form part of an immersive experience. As one enters the narthex, a forest of seven transparent totems help create the atmosphere.

When someone touches the puzzle, a system of facial recognition is activated and triggers an algorithm which lights up one of the twenty-two tarot cards placed in the semi-darkness of the nave of the church.

On the backs of the twenty-two cards is a cold, stiff, pink tech diamond pattern, reminiscent of the backs of tarot cards. When a visitor stands in front of the selected cards, his or her image will appear amidst the painted motifs. "It's the first time that tarot cards have been put on mirrors", says Rebeiz. "And yet tarot is the mirror of the soul." Each card is framed with fluid Art Nouveau lines, while their titles are written in angular Gothic script.



Seiya T, 2022
Puzzle pieces made
from recycled plexi
240 x 50 x 6 cm

Above the illuminated cards, a prophecy which will later be found on paper or sent by email is projected on the walls of the church. “A link between sacred and profane”, was Rebeiz’s idea. “The works will remain in place during services in this very religious atmosphere.” An actual tarot deck on paper might stem from Rebeiz’s delicate paintings on polished aluminium.

In twenty-two cards, from The Fool to The World, Mouna Rebeiz proposes an original reading of the tarot cards. She transforms them into new mirrors of the soul, brings together universes that everything seems to drive apart (Bellini and Cranach the Elder meet Uderzo and Tim Burton), and makes a highly personal Jungian synchronicity possible.

The Soothsayer is another step in her artistic research, where beauty grazes itself on the asperities of ugliness, where trash perverts elegance, where classical culture triumphs over facile pornography, vulgarity, and outrageous narcissism. Here she pursues her exploration of the human being and psyche, as commenced in “Le Tarbouche”, her very feminist series shown at the Saatchi Gallery, London, in 2015. Once again, she bridges the wide gap between cultures as she did in 2017 with “The Way of the Opera, from Wagner to Vangelis” at the Galerie Pierre-Alain Challier in Paris. She broadened her scope on an even larger scale in January 2022 with the sculpture she presented at the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC).

With The Soothsayer, Mouna Rebeiz has succeeded at leaving her easel behind and dared to gamble on the immersive installation. Sensitive, cognitive, and experimental.

The Soothsayer
Exhibition view, 3D
simulation





PRESS KIT

Elsa Godart, *Philosopher, Psychoanalyst, Research Director.*

“The World in the Image of Man”

A world ready to drop, exhausted, a world worn and weary, and yet resuscitated! A world caught between multiple outbreaks (from terrorism to the pandemic crisis), between variable temporalities (from that of life to that of technology), its feet chained in an illusory past while it gazes firmly forward, to its future. A world that never stops looking in the mirror for a fluid identity, always in flux, indefinite, forever in search of authors.

The world embodies the vicissitudes of our contemporary society in the midst of morphing identities, caught in a technological whirlwind and the mirages of the virtual, questioning what it is to be human at a time when machines seem to be taking command. What does it mean to be human when you are talking to robots endowed with AI? What is beauty, what is truth, what is good, when one spends half of each day in front of a screen, reinventing oneself in fictitious images?

Yet it is pointless to be technophobic, knowing well that the flow of techno-scientific discoveries can never “run backwards”. So we cannot choose to reject or denounce the technique fundamental to the melting pot of life, but rather turn towards a new definition of humans metamorphosed or transformed by their digital regime. It is a quest for identity that is at stake. And the future will depend on the result of this quest, because no future is conceivable without knowledge of the past.

We must then return to the ancient Delphic oracle Gnothi Seauton (Know Thy-self) and turn to the World: know thyself, World; and turn to ourselves: know thyself, man of the 21st century. It is on the answer to this question that any future depends.

There are twenty-two trump cards in the Tarot deck (playing cards used in Italy since the mid-15th century). The deck is totally re-invented but shows, even reflects, its roots in the tradition, as the figures are incised on polished aluminum mirrors. Hence, the viewer is invited to a double experience: questioning both the future and his/her identity. When entering the work (which is set up like a theater with magic at work), the spectator is invited to touch puzzle pieces assembled in a large wall. These different pieces compose a music and, by the effect of an algorithm, they refer to a choice of arcana: That's it! The tarot is drawn. The spectator is now in the center of a semi-circle composed of these mirror cards, surrounded as it were by the self, a center from which comes a new birth (as a new identity). It is at this moment that the card is revealed to the player and the other spectators observing this scene. A prediction is revealed, the result of the pulled card, scrolling on a lit banner, like a message in a fortune cookie.

The setup serves as a metaphor for our contemporary society in which man is all-powerful, to use the words of Protagoras, the measure of all things, and in which all mystery or mysticism is annihilated by the power of technology. But is identity reducible to an algorithm? Is the future predictable by a machine? Have we exhausted all the mysteries that embrace life and humanity? Has the World said its last word?

The Wall, 2022
Interactive puzzle wall
made from
recycled plexi
260cm x 248cm x 21cm





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BIO- GRAPHY

Mouna Rebeiz

Even as a small child, Mouna Rebeiz's creativity and special fervour for the plastic arts were manifested. Born into a family of artists — musicians, painters and poets — her paintings resonate with the music and verse that infused her childhood.

Fascinated by the complexities of the human psyche, Mouna studied Psychology at the Sorbonne and at Saint Joseph University. Once she completed her Master's degree in Psychology, she started a family of her own, dividing her time between Europe and the North American continent. In 1995, she was accepted at the Atelier Cépiade in Paris, where she met Alix de la Source. A specialist of 17th and 18th century painting, and lecturer at the Louvre, Alix introduced her to the techniques of the Great Masters and helped her evolve her personal style.

From her courses in patinas in Paris, to those on the Renaissance, from the expertise of Abraham Pincas, painter and head of the Painting and Techniques Atelier at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris to that of the great Lebanese painter, Mohamed el Rawas, her professor at the Institute of Fine Arts in Beirut, Mouna continually refined her technique, to better capture the pulse of life in her paintings.

Selected solo shows:

- 2022** | **Colour Power**, Leila Heller Gallery, *Dubai, United Arab Emirates*
- 2019** | **The Lebanese Embassy** with the British Lebanese Association, *London, England*
| **The Chelsea Arts Club**, *London, England*
- 2018** | **The Trash-ic**, Saatchi Gallery, *London, England*
- 2017** | **La voie de l'opéra**, Galerie Pierre Alain Challier, *Paris, France*
- 2015** | **Le Tarbouche**, Saatchi Gallery, *London, England*
- 2013** | **The Betty Boop Collection "A-Part-Être"**, Galerie Hubert Konrad, *Paris, France*
- 2012** | **The Betty Boop Collection "L'Être et le paraître"**, Galerie Pierre Alain Challier, *Paris*
- 2008** | **Hymne à la vie**, Galerie Daniel Besseiche, *Paris, France*

Selected group shows:

- 2022** | **A Harmony of Different Voices**, DIFC Sculpture Park, *Dubai, United Arab Emirates*
- 2020** | **Togeth'Her (Madame Figaro)**, La Monnaie de Paris, *France*
| **Oeil de Bic**, Fondation Bic, *Paris, France*
- 2013** | **Le Rouge et le Noir**, Art 13, Meshkati Fine Art, *London, England*
- 2012** | **She views herself**, Fondation Paul Ricard, *Paris, France*
| **She views herself**, Banque ODDO, *Paris, France*
- 2007** | **Art Capital**, Grand Palais, *Paris, France*
- 2006** | **Salon des Indépendants**, Grand Palais, *Paris France*





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BIO- GRAPHY

Ami Barak

Ami Barak is an independent curator and advisor based in Paris. He initiated numerous projects and exhibitions in France and abroad, among them:

- 2021 | **1 + 2 + 3 + 4 | An anniversary**, a compass for the future, Jecza Gallery, *Timisoara, Romania*
- 2021 | **who protects us from the slug slide that passes over the knife blade without caring**, Sector 1 Gallery, *Bucharest, Romania*
- 2021 | **Jacqueline de Jong** – Potato Blues Art by Goralska, *Luxembourg*
- 2021 | **Nira Pereg** – Twilight Zones, Braverman Gallery, *Tel Aviv, Israel*
- 2021 | **Julian Mereuta** - The Invention of Me, Sector 1 Gallery, *Bucharest, Romania*
- 2021 | **Ana Adam** - Life vest under your seat, Mnac, *Bucharest, Romania*
- 2020 | **Pusha Petrov Unspoken and other images**, Jecza Gallery, *Timisoara, Romania*
- 2020 | **Pusha Petrov Descoase** - (Un)stitch, Borderline Art Space, *Iasi, Romania*
- 2020 | **Ana Adam Drawing is a witchcraft or the other way round** – Jecza Gallery, *Timisoara, Romania*
- 2020 | **Quo vadis homini** -, Danube Dialogues Festival, *Novi Sad, Serbia*
- 2019 | **Ana Adam - Peste Fire – Hangs by a thread**, Borderline Art Space, *Iasi, Romania*
- 2019 | **Causal Loop** Curated_by Charim Gallery, *Vienna Austria*
- 2019 | **subREAL – a premonitory vision of glocal**, Prismes Paris Photo
- 2019 | **subREAL – Serving Art Again**, Jecza Gallery, *Timisoara, Romania*
- 2019 | **Dominique Blain** – Displacements, Canadian Cultural Center Paris, *CCC-OD Tours 2020, Château de Chambord 2021*
- 2019 | **Ex-East, past and recent stories of the Romanian avant-gardes**, Espace Niemeyer, *Paris*
- 2019 | **La Brique, the Brick, Cărmida**, Kunsthalle Mulhouse, *France*
- 2018 | **Role-playing – Rewriting Mythologies** – Daegu Photo Biennale, *South Korea*
- 2017 | **Life- A User's manual** – Art Encounters Biennale of contemporary art, *Timisoara, Romania*
- 2017 | **What does the image stand for?** – Momenta Biennale of contemporary image, *Montréal, Canada*
- 2016 - 2017 | **Julião Sarmiento The Real thing** – Fondation Gulbenkian Paris
- | **Peter Kogler Next ING** Art Center, *Brussels*
- 2016 - 2017 – 2018 - 2019 – 2021 | **Le Salon de Montrouge** 61st, 62nd 63rd 64th & 65th editions – *Paris Montrouge*
- 2015 | **Taryn Simon, Rear views**, star forming nebula and foreign propaganda bureau – Jeu de Paume, *Paris*
- 2014 | **Stuttering** – Melik Ohanian, Crac, Sète, *France*
- 2013 | **Off to a flying start** – Scotiabank Nuit Blanche, *Toronto, Canada*



Former president of IKT (International Contemporary Art Curators Association).
<https://amibarak.com/en>

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St George's Anglican Church
Campo San Vio, 30123 Venice VE

59th Venice Biennale – Republic of San Marino

The Soothsayer

MOUNA REBEIZ

OPENING:
Wednesday, April 20
6pm – 9pm



The Townsend Group

robindavis@townsendgroupmedia.com
+1 203 622 1334

Mouna Rebeiz is represented by:
LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Alte Sottosopra

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