

# ARTFORUM



## View of “Elham Rokni: The Seven Abdulkarims,” 2018.

TEL AVIV

### Elham Rokni

THE CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART (CCA)

2a Tsadok Hacoheh St. (Corner of Kalisher) The Rachel & Israel Pollak Gallery

January 18–March 17, 2018

Iranian artist Elham Rokni confronts a subject that has been increasingly sidelined in the mainstream media of late, namely, the displacement of peoples due to war and conflict. After interviewing refugees from Eritrea and Sudan seeking asylum in Israel, the artist made mixed-media works on paper, a book, and a video recounting their folktales and oral histories, rendering stories as dreamlike images.

Refugees’ rucksacks stored in treetops open the video *The Seven Abdulkarims* (all works cited, 2018) before we are introduced to Khamis Elshaikh/Abdulkarim, a Sudanese actor. Rokni and he visit the Israeli ministry of the interior to attempt his visa renewal, which the Kafkaesque officer says hinges on the delivery of a tuft from a lion’s tale. Weaving together reality and fiction to form a kind of observational surrealism, the naive, colorful drawings of animals from the artist’s book *The Iblis, the Girl, the Sultan, and the Lion’s Tail* are tinged with gold, and some are even integrated as animations overlaying documentary footage in the aforementioned video. These place the work in a seemingly lighthearted aesthetic register; however, the video’s references to death by drowning (represented by footage of shoals of fish washed up onshore) and the ostracism experienced by refugees, combined with the inclusion of their own testimony, speak to the reality of their plight.

Contrary to the structure of folktales, which often convey wisdom or lessons learned, the video leads nowhere and ends without resolution—a clear analogy for how nations are dealing with a global crisis. The current mass movement of people presents a truth that is stranger than fiction, and, in a country such as Israel, is fraught with a far-reaching history of cultural conflict. The artist uses narrative as a mechanism to reveal how exile and hardship are cyclical. People are promised (and should expect) help and support but wind up stranded and isolated.

— Louisa Elderton