

A close-up, artistic photograph of a person's face, partially obscured by water splashing over it. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, creating a sense of movement and texture. The person's eyes are closed, and their hair is wet and matted with water.

# Adelita Husni-Bey

A Wave in the Well

21 October 2016 – 30 January 2017

With thanks to NAHNOO, Jessica Chemali, Amal Husni-Bey, and Faiza Husni-Bey

**Exhibition graphics:** Mind the gap

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“The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together or, rather, when, through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being. This space is a feature and effect of action, and it only works, according to Arendt, when relations of equality are maintained.”

Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street” (2011)

Drawing on the techniques and histories of critical pedagogy, Adelita Husni-Bey works collaboratively with people to unpick, critique, and make visible the interplay of forces shaping their lives.

For *A Wave in the Well*, Husni-Bey collaborated with the youth-led organization NAHNOO to lead a workshop looking at affect and urban space in Beirut. Policy and politics often speak in broad terms, such as the need for more green spaces or the benefits in preserving cultural heritage; but how do these factors and encounters actually make us *feel* in our daily lived lives? How does it feel to have access to a green space, to be intimidated in the street, or to live next to a checkpoint? We might presume to know, yet focusing in on these affects enables us to better understand the *why*, and subsequently the *how* to change.

The photographs presented in this exhibition are a somatic, deeply personal reading of the city. By distilling abstract forces down to an individual level, we can understand and visualize how these sometimes contradictory forces act on our bodies.

*After the Finish Line*, produced while on a one-year residency at the Kadist Foundation in San Francisco, is a portrait of the culture of competition, embodied through North American high school sports culture. Developed in collaboration with a group of injured teenage athletes, the film delves into the psychological pressures and social stigmas of failure and success, and questions where these pressures stem from.

Filmed in Cairo soon after the Egyptian revolution of 2011, the video *Ard* looks at the often tense and uneven encounter between redevelopment plans and local residents, in this case in the informal neighborhoods of Gezirat al-Qursaya and Ramlet Boulaq. The video follows conversations with local residents around a new “public benefit law,” drawing attention to the uneven intersection of daily life and legislature.

**Nora Razian**

Head of Programs and Exhibitions, Surssock Museum

## A Wave in the Well

In August 2016, Adelita Husni-Bey co-ran a workshop for seven participants in collaboration with staff at the Sursock Museum and Jessica Chemali from youth-led organization NAHNOO. The workshop centered on the ways in which affect shapes a citizen's mobility – and therefore sense of agency – around the city of Beirut. What spaces elicit strong feelings in us? Why? How are these feelings connected to larger social dynamics and events? How are feelings and mobility connected to our capacity for protest? How is our capacity to walk across certain spaces affected by our relationship to class, gender, ethnicity, creed, political allegiance, personal narratives, and ability?

Below are excerpts from the feedback session held at the Sursock Museum on 2 September 2016 between those involved in the workshop and Husni-Bey.

**Adelita:** So, what did we do? Maybe the harder question is, why? Why did we do it?

**Mariam:** We were actually trying to see how certain places in the city can evoke certain emotions and we were always relating it to what is personal at one point, but we were also relating it to social events that may have led to these factors. We were linking it to class, gender... so we are thinking of reasons that are beyond the personal, more collective. Eventually, we wanted to link how maybe the city defines or forms our understanding of agency and citizenship somehow.

**Adelita:** How did the workshop feel for you? You were saying that feeling is something hard to talk about publicly?

**Ali:** It's sad. It's hard to express, because at some point you know the feelings are there, but you can't say them, you don't know how to form them. But later you figure out that you don't want anyone to know them, even if it is about place. You have different spots in Beirut and its suburbs, you have the checkpoints, you have the closed and barricaded places. It's all just closed, closed, closed. You don't have

open public spaces, they're also closed. So, that's it, you learn how to keep everything inside. It's the affect of the city. Maybe if we lived in a more open city, then we would find it easier to express our thoughts and feelings. But we have lived in this atmosphere for a long time, where we don't have the time optimal conditions to express our opinions or feelings. So through the workshop, I started thinking of new ways to explore my city, new ways to look at a city and speak about it publicly.

**Marcelle:** We are not used to "feeling" a place, even the environment. The first exercise was very hard. When we were looking at the street together. It was awkward, fun, and very difficult.

**Adelita:** Is there anything that was missing from our stories from the places we went to? I know a lot of it is personal, and you can't really say what is missing from a person's narrative that you don't know. But were there experiences that the city went through that we didn't really address? Like, I was talking to a Lebanese friend of mine a couple nights ago and he was telling me that he was researching for



a book, and thinking about why the Civil War is not discussed a lot. He was talking about the fact that he was going around interviewing people, especially from the first phases, or what is mythologized as the first incident, when the Palestinian bus was attacked in the Christian neighborhood. He found the guy who owns the bus, and the bus is still there, and he has been trying to sell it for twenty years, and no one wants to buy the bus. I was thinking it was a nice metaphor for somehow not wanting to unearth these material reminders of what trauma can be or is. It is obviously very different depending on... I don't know... I was thinking about it, because I end up thinking about civil war a lot recently, coming from Libya and witnessing it in some way. My family is quite privileged, so I speak from that perspective where my losses are infinitely small compared to other people's, yet they are present. I lost my childhood home, most of anything material from my childhood is gone. It's completely different conflicts and stories, but it is still a civil war, and there is that element of chaos, uncertainty, and sheer trauma that is implanted in my mind, and I tend to hide it, too.

**Dana:** I also think about the Civil War, maybe us as the new generation that didn't live it. We tend to romanticize it, and we tend to talk about it a lot. But the older generation, the people who did live it, they don't want to glamorize it, you know? Or keep something that reminds them of it. If you are an outsider or not from the country, just the fact that you didn't live the war, you may tend to try to romanticize it.

**Mariam:** I don't know how healthy that is, it's like you are denying what happened. You didn't actually face it, you just ended up having to deal with the aftermath.

**Dana:** But *they* lived it.

**Mariam:** Yeah, I know, but we are living the consequences, because we didn't choose to face what happened somehow, somehow. I know it is hard to please everyone who was part of it, and the problem is that most of them are actually ruining the country right now. I don't think it's psychologically healthy to not address the issue.

**Adelita:** It feels like there are all of these suspended histories. So maybe instead of a metanarrative where someone needs to win, there is a complexity to that history. It is really important to be able to tell it and what language you have to use to tell it, as complex as it is.

**Ali:** I agree with this, but I look now and each group has its own martyrs, each group has its own history, each group has its own Lebanon. So what do I do?

**Adelita:** Maybe more than a collective history, maybe it's an understanding that there will somehow never be one history. The state is founded on this idea that there is one history, and that history is this "thing," and that is how the state has power in some ways. But in having different narratives, you get confused spaces, but I also feel like they can be very generative if they were dealt with instead of being buried...but I am perceiving this as a complete foreigner.

Re-routing back to the workshop, I was thinking about gentrification. We went to a few spaces. Marcelle's site was a space that she perceived as "dirty," she wanted it to be "cleaner" and used. At Lina's site, in Gemmayze, we looked at spaces that were not neglected at all and were actually being gentrified. They were really looked after maybe because they are in wealthier spaces and there are different types of investments behind them. I think a lot of the work we did, rotated around



**Adelita Husni-Bey**  
*After the Finish Line (film still), 2015*  
Video, color, sound, 12'39", English with Arabic subtitles  
Courtesy of the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea

that – which spaces are being taken care of and which aren't? And what are the reasons behind these measures of perceived "care"? It felt like a lot of it had to do with class, the sometimes conflicting ways different classes understand "care" and "use." I was wondering what you feel about gentrification, because it seems to be happening rapidly in some spaces?

**Mariam:** I think gentrification is also related to the war, and in Downtown for example, we have Soldiere. They washed away what was there, and started building these huge complexes.

**Ali:** They snatched out a big part of the history of Beirut.

**Mariam:** You can go to Downtown, it's very empty and uninhabited and they want an image that doesn't really reflect the people and the circumstances that we are actually living in.

**Ali:** In any country, you have a downtown, a city center. Maybe it isn't made for locals, more for tourists and stuff like that. Soldiere's vision is not a vision of 5 or 6 years, it's a vision of 10, 20, 30 years. It's not for us.

**Nora:** What is interesting here is you are discussing how a private company is changing the city, and actually you are not discussing the municipality or any sort of policy. That's what I found was interesting in this discussion. How did Solidere have this much impact and where is the other vision for Beirut? How does it work together?

**Ali:** That's a postwar effect, because it gave rise and power to the politicians and stuff, it didn't give power to the state or municipalities.

**Dana:** It's not a result of the war, it's a result of someone buying all this land and privatizing it and then building just for profit.

**Adelita:** But the state is involved in regulating that, could be involved in regulating that, no? I feel like every time there is an overlap between a private company and private profit and the state, you lose that bond between the state and the citizen. Because the company will begin to cater to the bond in unison or regardless of the municipality. Like at the [Sursock] Museum here, the idea that there are always guards at the door and gates.



**Ali:** When I was walking by the guard, I was looking at him waiting for him to say something to me. I'm walking, looking at him like, "Tell me something, Tell me!" I never thought I would be able to go into Sursock.

**Mariam:** Back to this feeling, and when we were talking about Solidere, in Downtown you can't take pictures in certain places, because whenever you want to take a picture a security guard will stop you and say, "Stop, show me." My friends have been harassed and had all their pictures searched through to delete them.

**Dana:** It's paradoxical, but you almost feel unsafe when you walk because of the security. You feel like you are being watched, and you are not free to do whatever you want, even though it's a public space.

**Adelita:** Did anyone go near where we left some of the plexi? Is it still there or is it gone?

**Dana:** It was gone the first night. I am so disappointed!

**Ali:** I went 4 hours later to Ramlet el Bayda and I found it was still there. Right now in Hamra, I saw the one in Picadilly.

**Adelita:** As a process, you leave something somewhere and somebody else can take it. They can either have a fulfilling relationship with it where they see it as some strange thing that they encounter or use it as something really functional, like a table.

**Mariam:** Or they feel really offended by it and put it in the trash!

**Ali:** They can use the one in Ramlet el Bayda as a surfboard, I hope.

[Laughter]

**Adelita:** They might just end up in a landfill. Some person in a landfill might be like, "What the heck is this?"

**Adelita:** Going back to the notion of citizenship, the reason I thought about using a transparent surface and draw this very anonymous figure, is because essentially you can become a ghost. If you're in a space where citizenship or agency isn't a prominent question in people's minds in some ways, you literally become ghosts rather than actual humans in space. And so the stakes you have in the city as a whole become less important somehow. To me, it was a reduction in agency or notions of what citizenship means, as ghostly representations of a person.

**Sasha:** I like the idea of it being ephemeral, but I personally didn't want my plexi to disappear. I wanted it to stay for a period of time where there is a chance for a number of people to recognize its presence, and recognize that an intervention occurred and that this is place that calls for intervention. Not necessarily, to spend time reading what I wrote, but to recognize the site, and that there is activity there.



## After the Finish Line

The following are extracts from *In the Cloud*, a publication produced in conjunction with the film *After the Finish Line* (2015). In this publication, Adelita Husni-Bey transcribed sessions recorded with a San Francisco-based cognitive behavioral psychologist (CBP) specialized in optimizing performance. Contrary to popular assumptions, working as an artist is an extremely precarious and many times low paid labor. This also relegates the profession mostly to more privileged individuals who have other means of sustenance to fall back on. In these extracts, Husni-Bey discusses the making of *After the Finish Line*, as well as the pressures of labor on the psyche through her experience of a panic attack caused by work-related stress.

**AHB:** Um, I'd never had one before and I didn't know what it was. I mean, it was never diagnosed but I couldn't breathe for the life of me and I stumbled around the hotel room. I tried to get to the window to breathe and then I tried to swallow some water and I couldn't swallow the water. The main thing was that I couldn't breathe and that my body was completely out of control, like I was feeling it was not responding at all. And to think that anxiety or work brought me to that state. Or at least I associated the fact that I felt overworked and stressed to that state. It was really interesting for me because a lot of the artwork I do is around how it's super stressful and difficult to be living under capitalism. And now making that work was having an effect on me at that point. So I eventually lied down and calmed down and I remember thinking that I could have died. But I was calm, I didn't know what to do about it, I was really impotent and powerless and I thought I would have panicked more but I just felt calm and then my heart slowed down and I could breathe. Then the months after that I kept being scared that it could happen again. Since then I've just tried to be more sparing with what I do, but the anxiety is still present if I have tasks at hand.

**CBP:** 'Cause the anxiety is just too overwhelming?

**AHB:** Yeah, I feel like I always put myself in a situation where there's too much to do and too little time, and so I beat myself up about it.

**CBP:** And what is your exhibition<sup>1</sup> on?

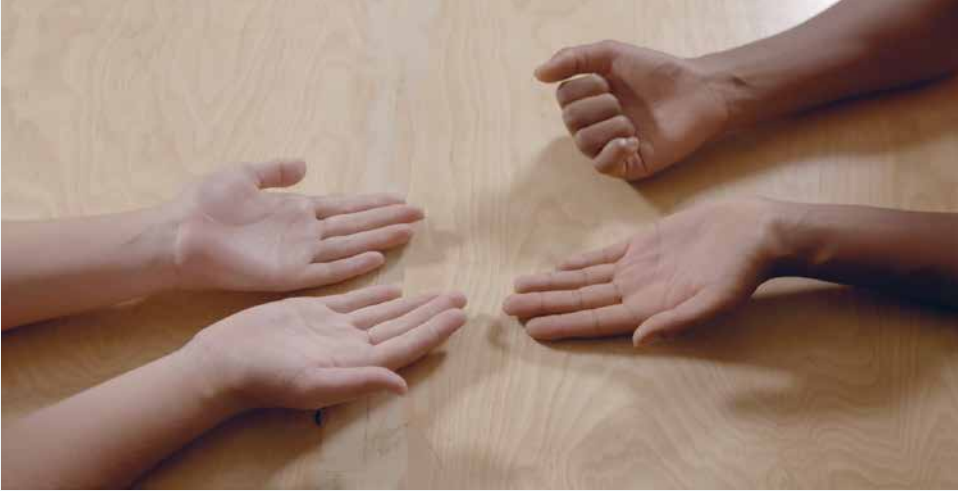
**AHB:** What is it on? My exhibition is partially on competition.

**CBP:** Oh!

**AHB:** And on, like, I worked with teenagers. A lot of the work I do is educational, or based in pedagogy, so I look at like, very left wing educational models. And I try to work through ideas with younger people. So in this case I've tried to work, because I was so affected by it, with the idea of competition. I worked with a group of young athletes who had sustained injuries during competition. We spent a couple of weeks together doing a few sessions to try to tease out what their feelings were and how their injuries could be de-individualized. So taken away from feelings of guilt and shame related to failure and seeing how to both overcome those feelings but also how

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<sup>1</sup> *Movement Break*, held at the Kadist Foundation in San Francisco from December 2015 to February 2016.



**Adelita Husni-Bey**  
*After the Finish Line* (film still), 2015  
Video, color, sound, 12'39", English with Arabic subtitles  
Courtesy of the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea

to attach them to what led them to desire success in the first place. And that's, systemically, the core of the issue. And I'm also trying to go through my issues as I'm going through the process with them, making our condition common... but I feel like I lost feeling, like I'm looking for feeling somewhere, like maybe it's under a rock.

**CBP:** Well, go back.

**AHB:** Start over?

**CBP:** Go back, when you started the film, what kind of meaning did you want it to have?

**AHB:** Um, I wanted it to be about competition and about how these young athletes relate to competition. And in the end I want the athletes, after the workshop that we went through to be able to say, okay, so we've gone through this process together, and we've talked about what competition is and expressed our own narratives around it. And then I wanted to get to this point where they would be able to somehow make decisions, or reach conclusions about how their desire to compete was produced politically. Like we're in

a neoliberal milieu and although it might feel like the desire is internal it's actually imposed in the way we are structured as subjects made into people. Some of them talked about how they feel ashamed or guilty, or they are going through a process of recovery. And the idea was try to break that mold so that we could think about collective recovery although I don't always necessarily know what that looks like.

**CBP:** Or how injuries are opportunities for growth.

**AHB:** Yeah, a lot of them pointed that out. But we have this narrative so deeply rooted inside us. About how we fail, and then how we need to be stronger, and fiercer, and better, and more efficient, and more masculine etc. and it feels individualizing. I suppose that's where the root of competition lies, in being alone against another or even as a unit but against the opponent or other both in the process of recovery or becoming. It's a very isolating experience. I guess part of it is understanding ourselves as separate units, then further divided by spheres of privilege, like class and gender, etc. Although of course epistemologically

these differences help us make meaning, and thus make politics.

**CBP:** And where did you film this?

**AHB:** In Cupertino, in a decommissioned part of a mall, so the film is not purely like a documentary but connects the athletes to this symbolic space, as a signifier of market economies, maybe slightly defunct forms of market economies. But these processes take so much time, it's hard to gauge from the start how long they will take, and this builds my anxiety.

**CBP:** Mmmhmm, I don't think it's not that you don't work, it's just that your efficiency is hard and your process is not one you can organize ahead of time. So that being pushed up against the deadline really causes you to work intently to push yourself to figure out where you want to go. You know everyone has a different style in terms of how they work and the beauty of exhibitions is that there's a very clear deadline. And how many exhibitions have you had?

**AHB:** Wow. Hmm, in the past?

**CBP:** Mmmhmm.

**AHB:** I guess I've been more or less active since 2007. I would say around thirteen exhibitions a year. New projects of this magnitude, those are probably three to four a year, and they take out a lot emotionally and mentally. They push me in directions I'm thinking about and I'm happy about the pace so that I can keep thinking and cycling through, but it's still painful because of the amount of energy that goes into them. But then I get into an anxiety crisis and then I can't function, it just, repeats itself.

**CBP:** Well, it's been going on for a long time.

**AHB:** Yeah.

**CBP:** And fairly intensely, and it's the kind of thing, that since you've established yourself that way, it's gonna take some time to shift your paradigm in terms of your level of response. Because one of the things to sort out is what is it about the anxiety that helps you and hurts you.

**AHB:** Mmm, but isn't that just part of feeling? Maybe we just don't have a language for this fluidity in affects.



**Adelita Husni-Bey**  
After the Finish Line (film still), 2015  
Video, color, sound, 12'39", English with Arabic subtitles  
Courtesy of the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea

<sup>→ dicta to the</sup>  
no function must be allowed to petrify and become fixed, and it will not remain irrevocably attached to any one person. Hierarchical order and ~~promotion~~ do not exist, so that the commander of yesterday can become a subordinate tomorrow. No-one rises above the others, or if he does rise, it is only to fall back a moment later, like the waves of the sea forever returning to the salutary level of equality.



(Bakunin, in Joll 1979: 91-92)

Given a common need, a collection of people will, by trial and error, by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of the situation - this order being more durable and more closely related to their needs than any kind of externally imposed authority could provide.

~~\*~~ (Ward 1996: 32)



'fully fledged' participatory democracy could only, so the social-anarchist view seems to imply, exist at the level of the workshop, the community, or the school. It is at these levels, in fact, as the foregoing discussion suggests, that we should focus our analysis of desirable educational qualities. And indeed, the anarchist insistence that the schools they founded be run as communities (see Chapter 6), in which solidarity and mutual respect prevailed, supports the view that fraternal attitudes were both 'taught', in such educational settings, by means of the prevailing climate, and helped to sustain and foster the kinds of experimental communities that were being created as an alternative to the state.



pupils.

It could also mean that men will shield themselves less behind certificates acquired in school and thus gain in courage to "talk back" and thereby control and instruct the institutions in which they participate. To ensure the latter we must learn to estimate the social value of work and leisure by the educational give-and-take for which they offer opportunity. Effective participation in the politics of a street, a work place, the library, a news program, or a hospital is therefore the best measuring stick to evaluate their level as educational institutions.





was not merely one in which men treated each other as friends, but one which excluded exploitation and rivalry; which did not organize human relations through the mechanism of a market – or perhaps of superior authorities. Just as slavery is the opposite of liberty, and inequality of equality, so the competitive system of capitalism was the opposite of fraternity. (Ibid.)

**This solution cannot be achieved in idealistic terms. In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action. Nor does the discovery by the oppressed that they exist in dialectical relationship to the oppressor, as his antithesis—that without them the oppressor could not exist<sup>4</sup>—in itself constitute liberation. The oppressed can overcome the contradiction in which they are caught only when this perception enlists them in the struggle to free themselves.**

**Neither learning nor justice is promoted by schooling because educators insist on packaging instruction with certification.**

*Excerpts from the following texts*

Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd; New edition (July 1, 2000)

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin Education, Penguin Group (CA); 2nd edition (January 1, 1996)

Judith Suissa, *Anarchism and Education, a Philosophical Perspective*, Routledge International Studies in the Philosophy of Education (Numbered) (Book 16), PM Press; 2nd edition (September 15, 2010)

## Ard: Public Benefit Law

Between 2013 and 2014, Adelita Husni-Bey worked with activists Nazly Hussein and Salma El Tarzi as well as urbanist Omnia Khalil on the workshop and film *Ard* (2014). *Ard* (Land) brought together residents from Gezirat al-Qursaya and Ramlet Boulaq, whose livelihood was being threatened by an urban renewal plan of epic proportions, Cairo 2050. Providing the groups with a maquette depicting their neighborhoods in the future – once the development had taken place – Husni-Bey and the residents of these neighborhoods discussed the legislation that Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was intending to use to push the plan forward. Below are extracts of this legislation, referred to as the Public Benefit Law:

*Article I:* The expropriation of properties for public benefit.

*Article II:* Public benefit as defined as:

- First; the construction of roads, streets, or their broadening; modification, paving, or the construction of entirely new districts.
- Second; sanitary drainage and water projects.
- Third; irrigation and drainage projects.
- Fourth; electricity and power facilities.
- Fifth; construction of bridges and their surface paths, slip roads, lower passages and related modifications.
- Sixth; transportation projects.
- Seventh; urban and rural infrastructural improvement.
- Eighth; all activities that are considered to be of public benefit as per any other law.

Other public benefit activities may be added as per Cabinet of Ministries decree(s).

Properties outside the original plan may be expropriated if the responsible entity decides it is necessary, or because their current state, aesthetically, does not comply with the requested improvement.

The definition of public benefit is pursuant to Presidential decree.



**Adelita Husni-Bey**  
*Ard* (film stills), 2014  
Video, color, audio, 23'20", Arabic with English subtitles  
Courtesy of the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea

## Adelita Husni-Bey

b. 1985, Milan, Italy  
Lives and works in New York, USA

Adelita Husni-Bey stages workshops, seminars, publications, radio broadcasts, archives, and exhibitions focused on using collectivist and non-competitive pedagogical models within the framework of urban studies. In her ten years practicing as both an artist and a pedagogue, Husni-Bey has worked with activists, jurists, schoolchildren, spoken word poets, students, and teachers on unpacking the complexity of collectivity. To make good what can never be made good: what we owe each other.

Recent exhibitions include *Movement Break*, Kadist Foundation, San Francisco, 2016; *Undiscovered Worlds*, the New York High Line, New York, 2015; *Really Useful Knowledge*, Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid, 2014; *Utopia for Sale?* MAXXI Museum, Rome, 2014; and *Playing Truant*, Gasworks, London, 2012.

### Works on display

#### Twin Gallery 1

*After the Finish Line*, 2015

Video, color, sound, 12'39", English with Arabic subtitles  
Courtesy of the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea

#### Twin Gallery 2

*A Wave in the Well*, 2016

Photographs resulting from the artist-led workshop "Emotive Wells," held in August 2016 in collaboration with NAHNOO, different locations, Beirut.

7 inkjet prints on wallpaper  
Courtesy of the participant authors

Produced by the Sursock Museum

Workshop framework: Adelita Husni-Bey


Photography: Christopher Baaklini

Participant authors: Mariam El-Amin, Dana Harake, Lina Hassoun, Hala Itani, Marcelle Khatib, Adel Nehme, and Ali Sharara

*Ard*, 2014

Video, color, sound, 23'20", Arabic with English subtitles  
Courtesy of the artist and Laveronica arte contemporanea



A close-up, artistic photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her eyes and upper cheek. She has dramatic, dark eye makeup, including thick eyeliner and long, dark eyelashes. Her eyes are looking slightly to the right. The lighting is soft and directional, highlighting the contours of her face and the texture of her skin. The background is dark and out of focus.

*A Wave in the Well* is part of an ongoing series of exhibitions in the Twin Galleries, showcasing recent work by early-career artists.

**Sursock Museum**  
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Ashrafieh, Beirut, Lebanon  
[www.sursock.museum](http://www.sursock.museum)