

## RECLAIMING ARAB “SKIN”: KAOUTHER BEN HANIA’S MODERNIST MASTERPIECE

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In the language of contemporary art, the Tate Modern defines an “intervention” as art “designed specifically to interact with an existing structure or situation, be it another artwork, the audience, an institution or in the public domain.” The film that’s been running through my mind since last spring is the very definition of such an intervention: an Oscar-nominated feature that subverts both the high-mindedness of the art world and the do-gooder hypocrisies of Western liberalism.

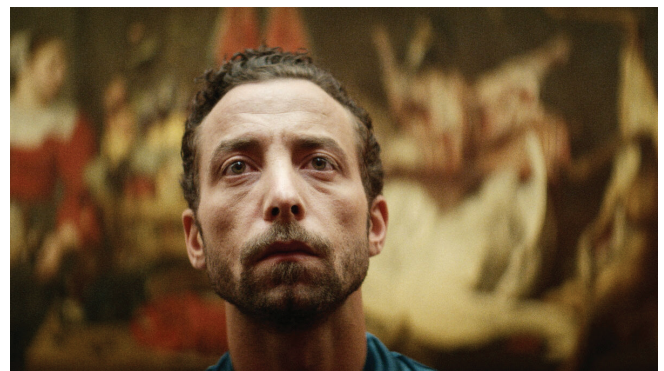
Kaouther Ben Hania’s film *مرمط عاب يذلا لجرلا* (*The Man Who Sold His Skin*, 2020) was one of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science’s five nominees for the Oscar for Best International Feature, as Tunisia’s first official nominee. But it lost, of course, to a Danish film about a middle-aged man’s struggle to get his groove back. Regardless of how systemically out of touch these award shows may be, *Skin* remains one of the most provocative, daring, and original films I’ve seen in years. Most importantly, it is a long-overdue satirization of that earnest and recurring narrative about the helpless migrant refugee and noble white saviors.

Since the start of the Arab revolutions, the bodies of refugees fleeing unsuccessfully toward Europe—capsized, drowned, policed, imprisoned, eulogized, politicized—have become etched in the public consciousness. In screening after screening at film festivals, ever since, well-intentioned filmmakers have sought to raise the political and moral consciousness of the public through harrowing cinematic tales of exiles, escapes, and arrivals. On more intellectual and abstracted stages, contemporary artists have wrestled with such interventions as well, often to dubious ends. The Venice Biennale in 2019, for

example, included an actual reclaimed drowned migrant ship, displayed in front of a café to confront its European art enthusiasts and yacht-borne dealmakers.<sup>1</sup>

Tunisian filmmaker Kaouther Ben Hania had the misfortune of having her own conceptual piece about a Syrian refugee’s arrival in Europe make its debut in the overloaded slog of lockdown streaming. *The Man Who Sold His Skin* deserves a much larger canvas and will hopefully in future find a more receptive audience for its genre-defying approach than those Western critics from whom it has received a lukewarm critical response. Writing in *IndieWire*, for example, critic David Ehrlich described it as a movie that “slumps towards satire through an awkward series of sketch-like scenes that belabor their self-evident ironies.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this kind of ambivalence is unsurprising, given that this Arab refugee story line turns the camera precisely—and bitingly—in the opposite direction: that is, onto the earnest politics of the cultured class.

The protagonist of Ben Hania’s film is Sam Ali (Yahya Mahayni), a Syrian refugee who is on the run from the Assad regime. In Lebanon, scrounging for food at Beirut art openings between shift work separating chicks at a poultry factory, he plots a possible journey to Europe. One day he’s caught by security and taken to meet Jeffrey Godefroi



Sam Ali (Yahya Mahayni) makes a Faustian bargain in *The Man Who Sold His Skin*.

Courtesy of Samuel Goldwyn Films.

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(Koen De Bouw), the renowned artist whose work he's been observing. The artist agrees to grant him his wish to travel to Europe and reunite with the woman he once loved—and lost, to the Syrian exodus. The price for his visa, however, is that he make a Faustian bargain: to travel, Sam Ali must agree to become the artist's latest installation and grant him ownership of nothing less than his own skin.

The theater of *The Man Who Sold His Skin* is today's rarified art world itself, where bizarre installations and interventions are the norm, embodied here by an ice-cold Monica Bellucci as a cynical gallerist. As Jeffrey's agent, she negotiates Sam Ali's exhibition and eventual auction to a Swiss buyer. The artwork Jeffrey sets out to create on Sam Ali's skin is a photorealist tattoo of a Schengen (European Union) visa inked across his entire back. In the film's not-so-satirical spin on the contemporary art market, Jeffrey is the world's highest-selling conceptual artist. In grandiose TV interviews, the artist explains how he is setting out to liberate Sam by defying the absurdity of migration policies and racist borders:

We live in a very dark era where if you are Syrian, Afghan, Palestinian, and so on, you are persona non grata. The walls rise. I just made Sam a commodity, a canvas, so now he can travel around the world. Because in the times we're living in, the circulation of commodities is much freer than the circulation of human beings. Thus by transforming him into some kind of merchandise, he now will be able, according to the codes of our time, to recover his humanity and his freedom. That's a paradox, isn't it?

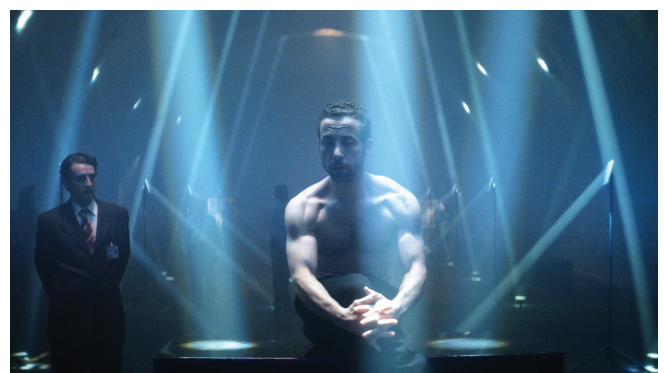
The film's conceit of a human artwork in a contemporary civilized museum may sound unbelievable, but Kaouther Ben Hania based her screenplay on an actual art installation she saw at the Louvre in 2012: *Tim*, by Belgian artist Wim Delvoye. (Delvoye even makes a cameo appearance in *The Man Who Sold His Skin*.) The inequities staged and exaggerated in the film's sale of a human body as art are fundamentally rooted in the power imbalance between East and West that a rare international North African filmmaker like Ben Hania is uniquely positioned to puncture. A story like this and a gaze like hers are long overdue on global screens.

Before cinemas reopened in late spring in much of the world, I had a chance to attend a rare public screening of *Skin* as part of an Arab contemporary-art exhibition in the port city of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. Chosen for its focus on the Arab gaze, the film was the opening

night's live event in an otherwise virtual conference edition of the Sharjah Biennial. The public screening was held in the Sharjah Art Foundation's open-air courtyard cinema, nestled amid apartment blocks where migrant laborers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India lived, mere blocks from the harbor of the Persian Gulf. There, the film's projection itself became an intervention at the crossroads of labor migrations and exploitations, an exercise in globalization and its discontents.

The film's urgent themes are compelling enough, but what truly elevates *The Man Who Sold His Skin* are Ben Hania's sleek, dreamlike evocations—musical interludes in which Sam Ali dances across the gallery to Amine Bouhafaf's pulsating score. Yahya Mahayni's taut, shirtless body is filmed under shafts of light as his vibrant movements disrupt the dead stares of the baroque paintings hanging on the walls. Before disrobing, he wears a jewel-toned blue robe that billows across the unlit gallery floors in his daily walk to the platform where he's being exhibited. For Sam Ali, the cost of becoming a museum object is a price he was willing to pay for the freedom to reunite with the woman he loves. As the arrangement reveals its full darkness, though, over the course of the story line, Sam Ali begins to recognize the gilded prison he's accepted. His awakening and the act of reclaiming his lost agency shape an exhilarating rebellion that concludes the film.

*The Man Who Sold His Skin* shares its dark tone—and grand settings—with the *The Square* (2017), by Swedish filmmaker Ruben Östlund, a satire of the contemporary art world set within a Stockholm museum. The shocking finale of that film is a black-tie dinner for museum donors and board members that goes terribly awry as a performance artist leaps into character as an ape, growling ferociously from table to table, terrorizing diners on all fours, and unmasking the absurdist theater of contemporary art.



**Sam Ali (Yahya Mahayni) on display in a Belgian art gallery.**

Courtesy of Samuel Goldwyn Films.

*The Man Who Sold His Skin* builds to its own explosive set piece in a salon where Sam Ali's tattooed body is being auctioned to new owners. As a price in the millions is named, the shirtless Ali stands up from his chair and pulls out a wired object, pausing to threaten the audience with the suggestion of an explosive device. It is a bleak joke, of course, that captures Ali's growing frustration with his condition. But as his character leaps off the stage and walks among his possible buyers, facing them eye to eye as an equal, they run in fear for their lives from the uncaged, radicalized Arab. The music builds as the film speed slows down to reveal Sam Ali alone in the abandoned auction room, laughing hysterically.

Since seeing the film for the first time with an Arab audience in Sharjah, I've returned to *The Man Who Sold His Skin* several times in lockdown viewing as it streams on Hulu. But my appreciation is not simply due to the fact that the film's identity markers—as the first Tunisian Oscar nominee, made by a North African, Muslim woman—make its global release newsworthy. No, what consistently unsettles and inspires me about Ben Hania's film is how it turns the psychological experience of marginalization into a work of palpable and visceral storytelling. The film's art-world setting is a visual feast, the glamorous cast and the

plot twists are riveting, and yet, within the Instagram-ready funhouse of modern museology, its themes encapsulate the centuries of violence—both physical and psychological—that cultural colonialism has inflicted on brown bodies.

The late Palestinian thinker Edward Said's foundational text *Orientalism* unmasked the systemic history of exploitation and extraction that undercuts both high and low culture in the West.<sup>3</sup> Colonialism was facilitated by the arts, in Said's formation, with Western knowledge built on the backs of dehumanized Arab and Muslim societies. Academic writing on the colonized and postcolonial world would never be the same after Said, as an entire generation has grown up with an acute awareness of the representational imbalance at play. Kaouther Ben Hania's film turns those Saidian questions of power into a stylish and vibrant work of transnational cinema.

In his afterword to *Orientalism*, Said wrote:

[A]lthough the animosities and inequities still exist from which my interest in Orientalism as a cultural and political phenomenon began, there is now at least a general acceptance that these represent not an eternal order but a historical experience whose end, or at least partial abatement, may be at hand.<sup>4</sup>



Sam Ali (Yahya Mahayni) awaits his auction in a grand Belgian art salon.

Courtesy of Samuel Goldwyn Films.

Sam Ali's decision to fight back to regain his skin, which he comes to over the course of the film, becomes a testament to that reclamation process. In a world still defined by the indignities of inequality and racist visa restrictions, Kaouther Ben Hania asks what it means to be free. In a film relieved of the earnest limitations of "issues" cinema, her answers to that question are delivered in arresting new forms. The loss at the final Oscar voting and the Western ambivalence to the film I've witnessed following its release in the United States are hardly signs of Ben Hania's defeat. Rather, it is Sam Ali who gets the last laugh: at the time of writing, *The Man Who Sold His Skin* is once again screening for open-air audiences in the United Arab Emirates.

## Notes

1. "Venice Biennale: Is Exhibiting Tragic Migrant Ship Distasteful?" BBC, May 15, 2019, [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48252938](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48252938).
2. David Ehrlich, "'The Man Who Sold His Skin' Review: Tunisia's First Oscar Nominee Is an Art Satire about a Million-Dollar Tattoo," *IndieWire*, April 8, 2021, [www.indiewire.com/2021/04/the-man-who-sold-his-skin-review-1234628611/](http://www.indiewire.com/2021/04/the-man-who-sold-his-skin-review-1234628611/).
3. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
4. Said, 352.