

SEMAAN KHAWAM

BIRDMAN

أجيا
للفنون التشكيلية



AGIAL
art gallery

[...] Like a bird on the wire,
Like a drunk in a midnight choir
I have tried in my way to be free.
- Birdman, Leonard Cohen

The birdman is a paradoxical figure. The birdman is a composite creature, made up of two unnecessarily, and not immediately, contradictory things: a bird and a man. Birds are recognized by their capacity for flight, mobility, and often perhaps mistakenly, freedom. Under current material conditions, man is characterized by increasing immobility and immiseration. The birdman embodies a resistance between the state of things as they are, and the way they could be if the human were not alienated from its own kind. In nearly all of Semaan Khawam's work, the birdman is his one leitmotif, and varyingly, this motif takes the form of merely a bird or merely a man.

Khawam is a self-taught artist. Having refused that his work be circumscribed and defined by the authority of the fine arts, he came to teach himself his craft. He works across various media – painting, sculpture, poetry, prose, and even design and graffiti – but produces discrete forms. As an unpopular adolescent in school, Khawam found refuge in music that seemed to promise freedom from social constraints, from the institutions of family and religion. To this day, his primary object of critique is the family, as the unit on which all social relations are based.

One cannot tell a story without drawing on the particularity of this experience, but this story in turn is not to be read as a biographical narrative, but rather, as allegorical in relation to the artist's work. The personal import in Khawam's work is grounded in his fraught relationship with his father with whom he frequently hunted birds. He now makes figures out of these birds in order to both preserve the violence of the act in an image, while also purging himself of it.

However, the 'man' in Khawam's work is not really a man, but a symbol: Icarus. In Greek mythology, Icarus is the son of Daedalus (himself a craftsman, no less). Trapped in exile with his father, Icarus produces wings out of wax and feathers and takes flight from Crete. His father warns him not to fly too close to the sun, but Icarus fails to heed his father's warning and melts and drowns in the sea. The allegorical import of Khawam's work is its fatalistic core, manifested in the tension between a desire for escape and the inevitability of reproducing social structures, unconsciously internalized.

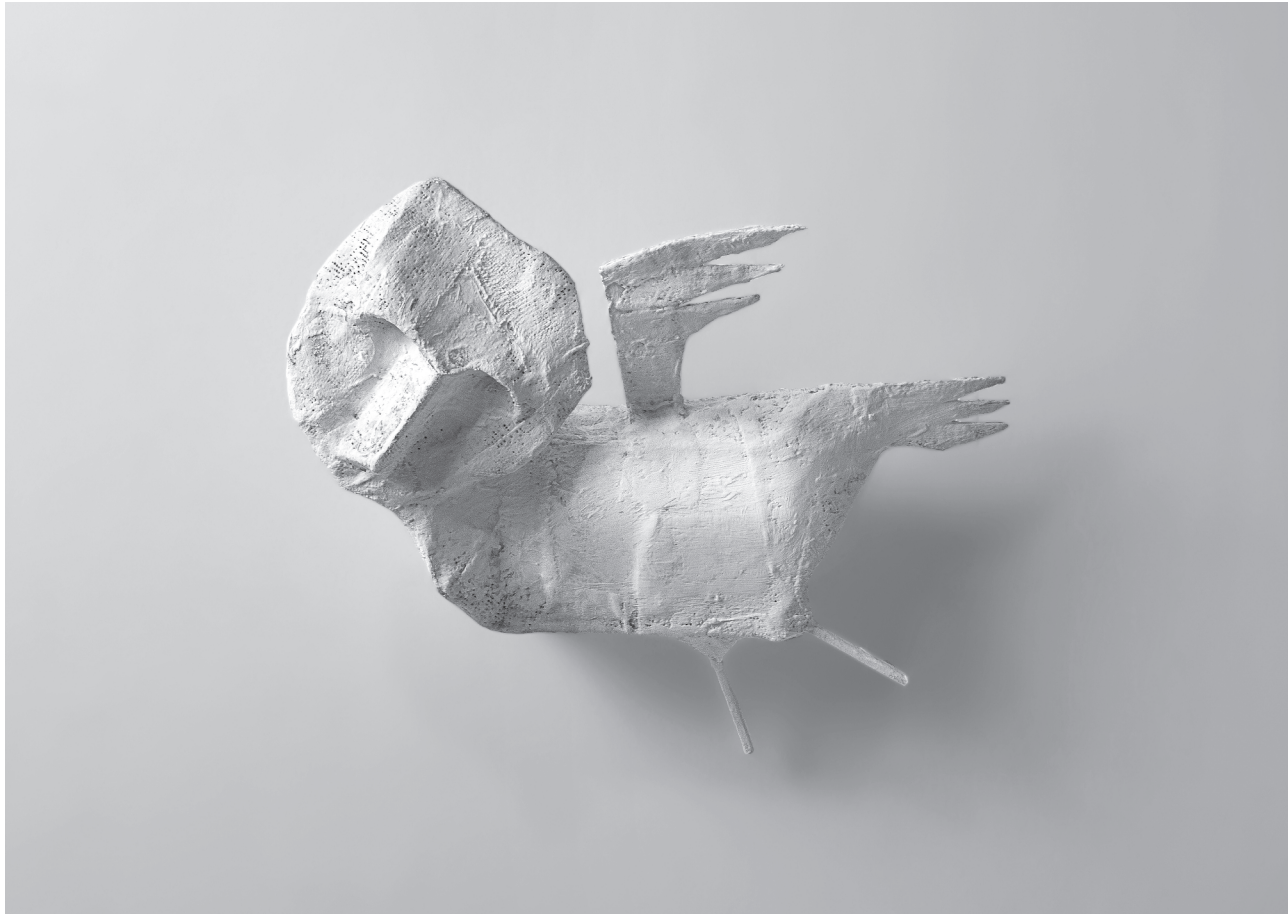
Through its own internal paradoxes, Khawam's birdman is prescriptive. It makes claims on the social world and strives toward universality, but it also emerges out of a concrete and individual lived reality. The birdman is homesick, but it has no home.

Natasha Gasparian
Beirut, 2018

Gypsum (p.o.p bandage) cardboard and unrecycled materials
2018



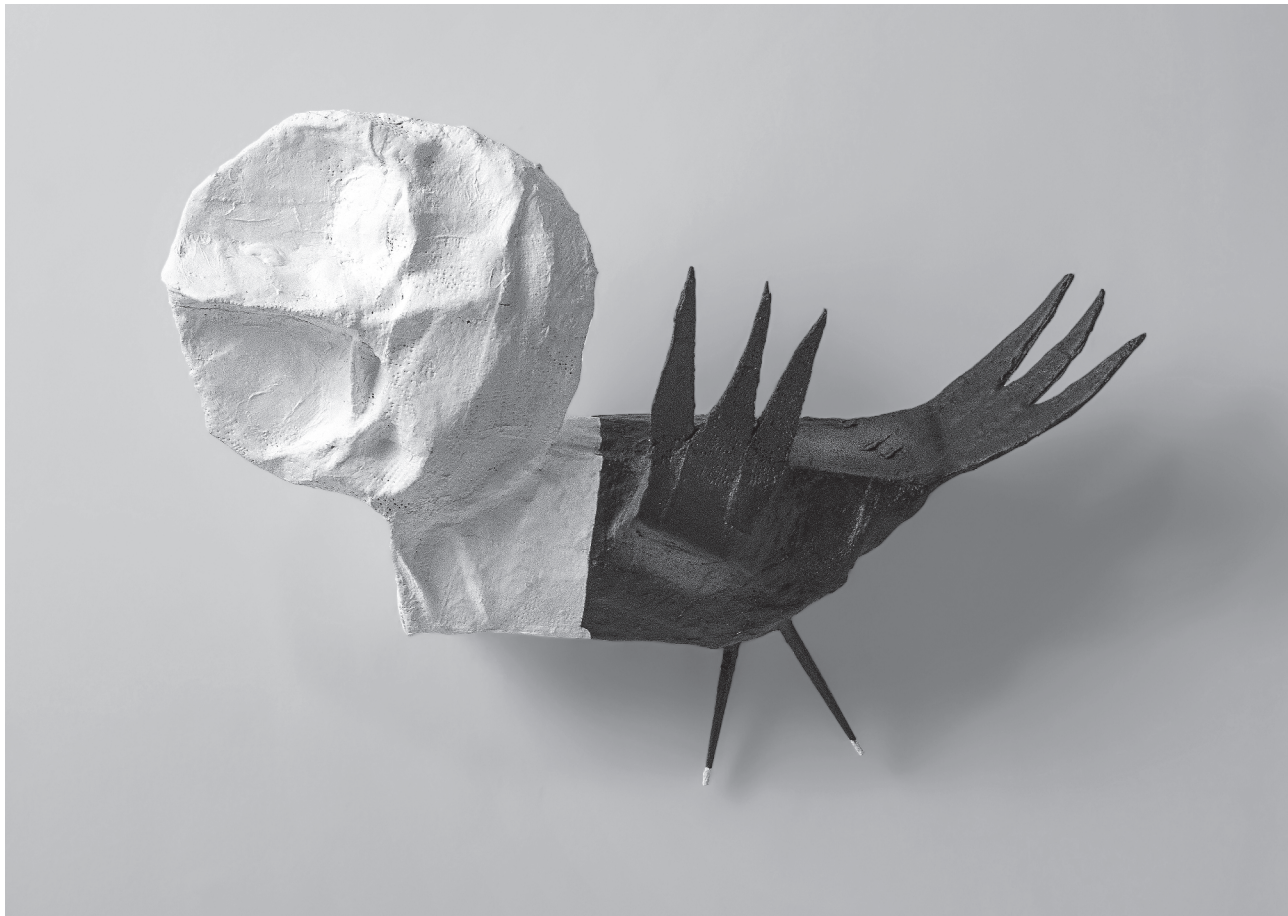
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45x32x13 cm



56x55x26 cm



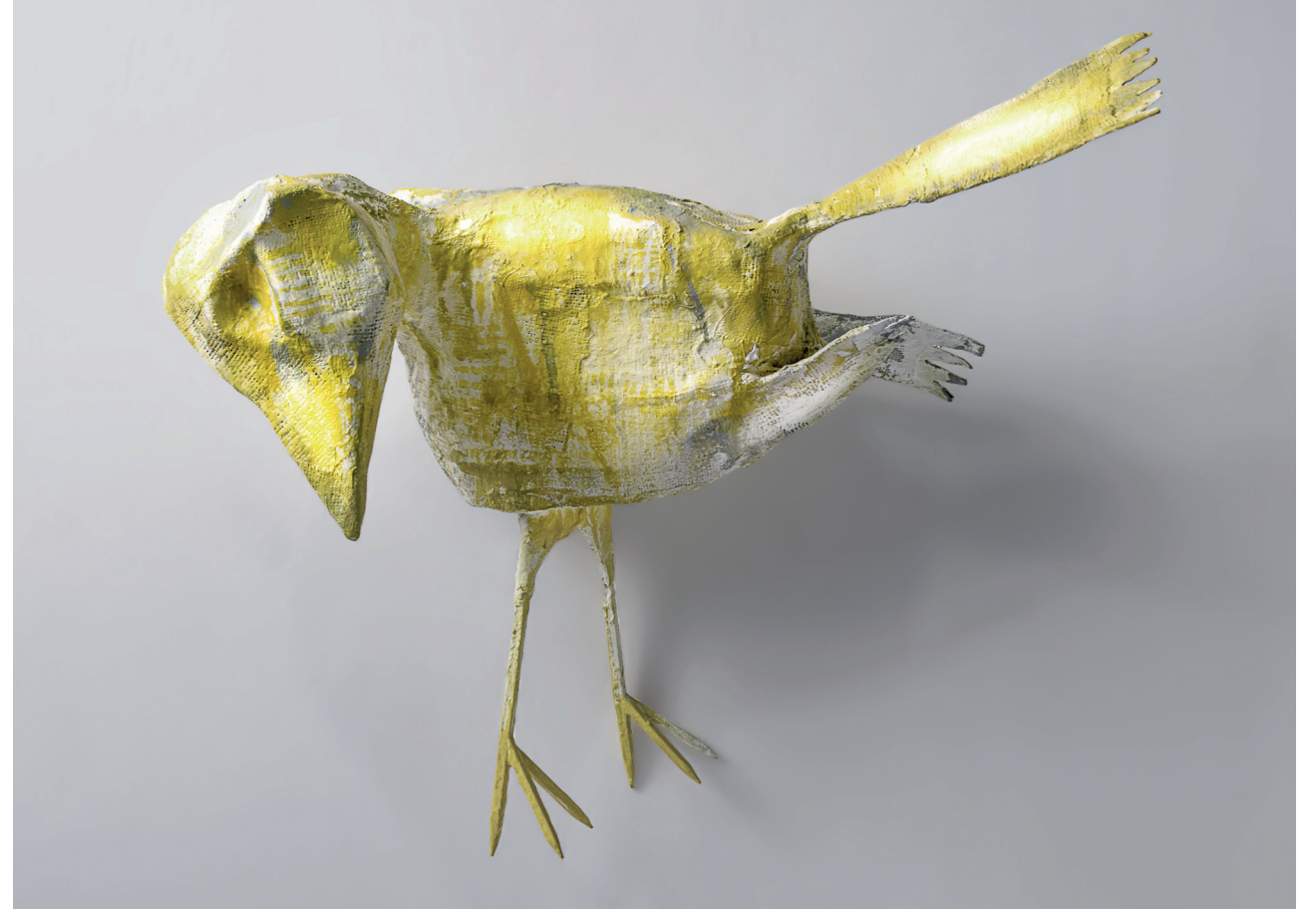
47x37x10 cm



57x44x22 cm



52x32x14 cm



52x42x22 cm



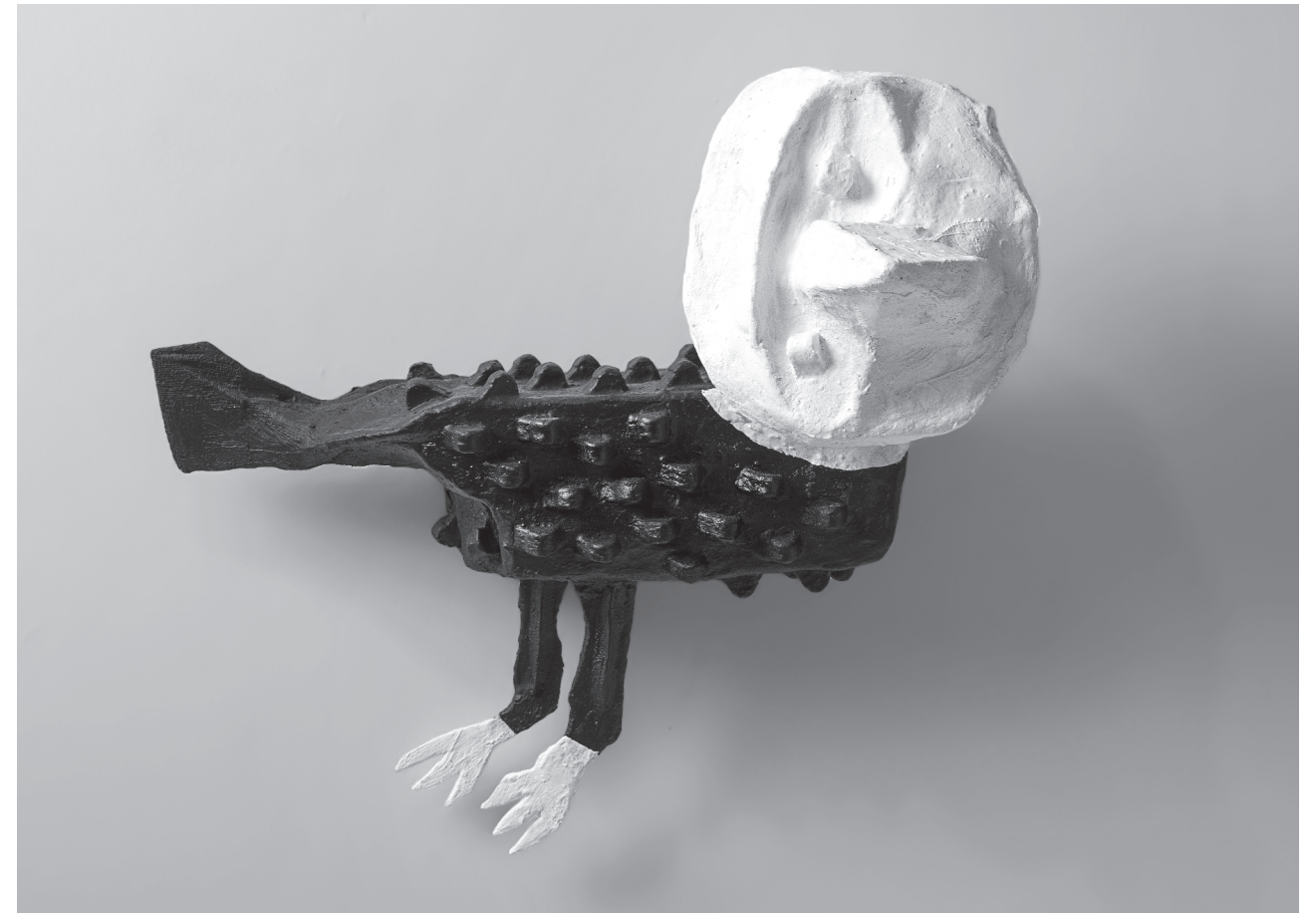
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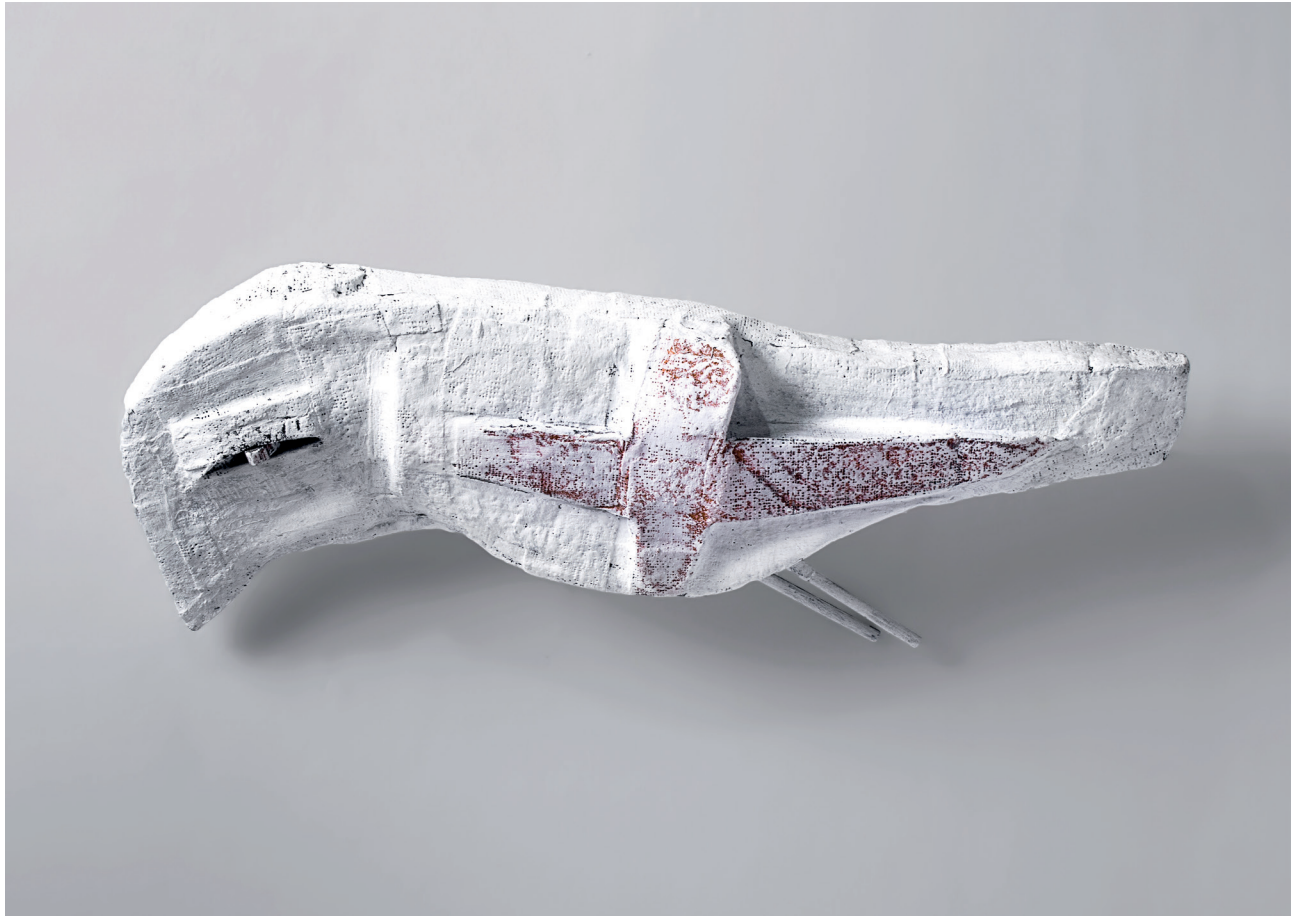
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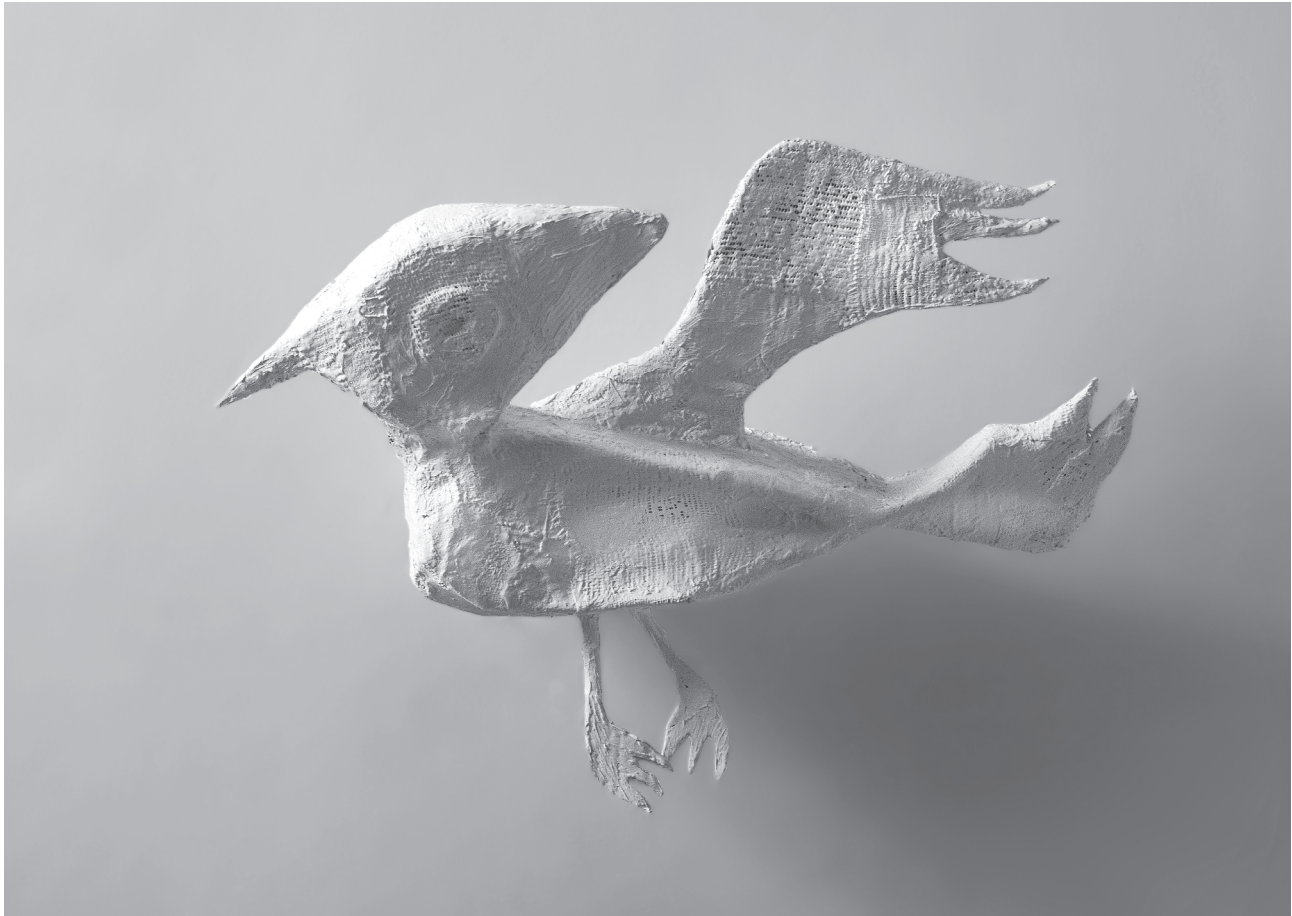
57x43x15 cm



50x47x30 cm



63x17x10 cm



22x22x22 cm



60x40x30 cm



42x34x33 cm



40x40x22 cm



56x45x20 cm



82x76x13 cm



90x34x23 cm



70x28x15 cm



88x88x88 cm



42x39x12 cm



53x52x17 cm



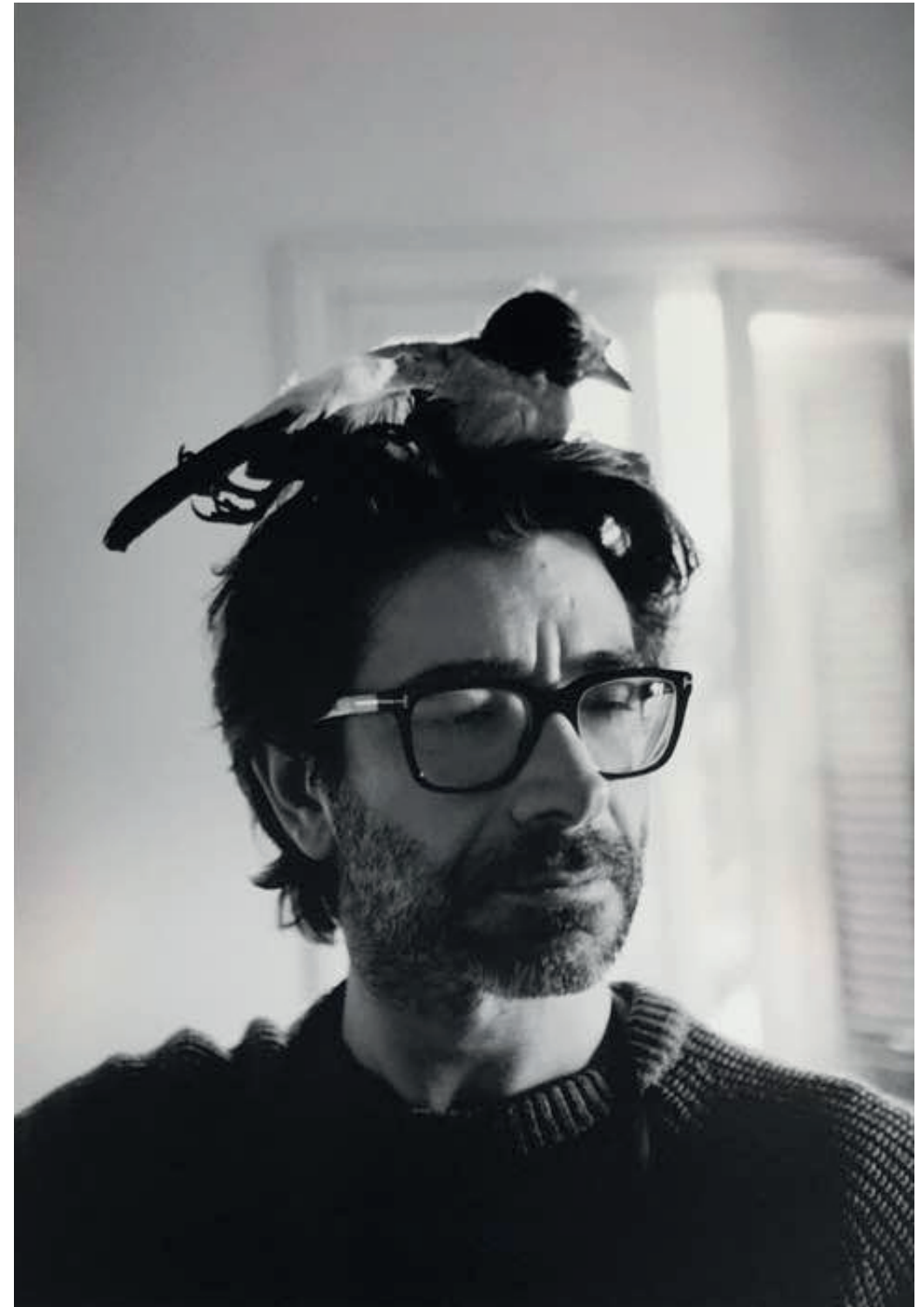
77x47x30 cm



61x40x17 cm

About the Artist

Semaan Khawam (b. Syria, 1974) is a self-taught artist who has worked in painting, sculpture, design, graffiti, acting, and poetry. In 1988, he fled Syria for political reasons and settled in Beirut where he now lives and works. His artwork is informed by the daily reality of the city he lives in. Khawam uses his work to draw attention to political contradictions, social injustice, the lack of cultural appreciation and other uncomfortable realities. Early in 2012, he spray-painted an armed soldier on a wall in Gemmayzeh to remind people of the Lebanese Civil War, something that he feels has been forgotten. His arrest for this act drew international attention to the limits on free speech and artistic expression. For his latest series of sculptures, which initially grew out of an individual response to the “garbage crisis” in Lebanon in 2015, he began to make use of found materials, including recycled paper, cigarette boxes, and plastic bottles. Khawam has exhibited in both art and design galleries in Beirut, including Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Joana Seikaly Art Gallery, and Nada Debs Gallery. He has had several solo exhibitions, and has participated in group exhibitions in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Geneva, and London, among other cities. In 2010, he participated in a major exhibition entitled Convergence: New Art from Lebanon at the Katzen Art Center in the American University, Washington DC.



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