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Lebanese artist Rana Hamadeh wins Prix de Rome Visual Arts 2017

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Visual and performance artist Rana Hamadeh is unanimously selected as the recipient of the Prix de Rome Visual Arts 2017.

A jury of six, chaired by Director of the Mondriaan Fund, Birgit Donker, awards the artist for a new instalment of her ongoing opera project *The Ten Murders of Josephine*.



Rana Hamadeh (left) receives Prix de Rome from the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science, Ingrid Van Engelshoven. Photo: Bas Czerwinski. Image courtesy Prix de Rome.

Established in 1808 by Louis Napoleon, the **Prix de Rome** is The Netherlands' most established and generous art award, which celebrates and supports artists under 40. The selected artist receives a EUR40,000 cash prize and a work station at the American Academy in Rome. Alongside the winner Rana Hamadeh, announced in late December 2017, the 2017 shortlisted candidates include Melanie Bonajo, Saskia Noor van Imhoff and Katarina Zdjelar. The jury selecting the winner included Birgit Donker, Mondriaan Fund director; Ferra Barenblit, MACBA Director; Mariette Dölle, Museum Kranenburgh Director; artist Folkert de Jong; artist Petra Noordkamp; and Francesco Stocchi, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen curator. The works of the four artists are on view until 25 February at **Kunsthall** in Rotterdam.

Rana Hamadeh: *The Ten Murders of Josephine*

The Ten Murders of Josephine is a large-scale opera project structured through several multifaceted iterations: a study group, theatrical performance, exhibition, publication and a film. Conceived as the three-dimensional realisation of Hamadeh's symphonic score, the installation must be approached as a living being, transforming through sonic stages and striking in its power of encapsulation. The forty-minute loop is periodically interrupted by Hamadeh's museum staff-turned-actors, disrupting the fluidity of the libretto and challenging its interpretation. The movement of objects between rooms and the ongoing production of 'stage' props invited the **Witte de With** to be part of the project's materiality.



Rana Hamadeh, 'The Ten Murders of Josephine [The Tongue Twister]', Movement from the Opera, "The Ten Murders of Josephine", Act III. 8 – Channel Sound installation with Disklavier & Telephone. Installation view. Photo: Daniel Nicolas. Image courtesy Prix de Rome.

Of the rapid movement and shifting display, Mirjam Beerman, coordinator for the **Prix de Rome** writes that "[Hamadeh's] interpretation of the past and the intelligence with which she deconstructs and rearranges it is topical and important." She elaborates in the **jury report** (PDF download):

Whereas [Hamadeh] previously operated as a scientist, historian or activist who reported on her research in lectures and performances, in her new opera project she adamantly chooses the position of visual artist. And by targeting her audience in this – even poetic – way, she creates a poignant presentation in which the visitor is overwhelmed by sound, technology and text in a theatrical setting that is in keeping with the subject she addresses.



Rana Hamadeh, 'The Ten Murders of Josephine [The Tongue Twister]', Movement from the Opera, "The Ten Murders of Josephine", Act III. 8 – Channel Sound installation with Disklavier & Telephone. Installation view. Photo: Daniel Nicolas. Image courtesy Prix de Rome.

This deconstruction and rearrangement – and further, the dissection – of the project's perpetual narrative is a common thread in the artist's work, and one which she hopes will allow her to give history a new voice. The crux of *The Ten Murders of Josephine*, and perhaps Hamadeh's entire oeuvre, is an urgent one: to make one's self aware of missing or obscured testimonies and how history is read in lieu of them.

The Field of Testimony

Inherited from Hamadeh's earlier manifold project, *Alien Encounters*, and her interest in theoretical fictioning, *The Ten Murders of Josephine* explores the integral conditions of validity within legal discourse and how they mirror the relations between authority and theatre. Is contemporary testimony valid, let alone possible, considering the voices that have been erased by colonial, patriarchal and racial violence? Can performance operate outside the vehement systems of erasure that have constructed our (legal) language? In conversation with the curator **Carolina Rito**, the artist states:

To be able to testify in court and have one's testimony rendered valid, one needs to subscribe to the language of the law; to constitute oneself as a respondent to the law's originary call, so that it passes through its narrow bandwidth.

In response to these questions, Hamadeh's work can be understood as a monument of absence; of all that is unspoken or unspeakable or oppressed by patterns of eradication. Her work submitted for the Prix de Rome points towards an archive of erasure; a narrative that has never been, and never can be, attended to. The immersive project asks viewers to constitute themselves as testimonial subjects and to re-define the theoretical terminology surrounding the legal subject, operating through infrastructures of militarism, justice or resistance.



Rana Hamadeh, 'The Ten Murders of Josephine [The Tongue Twister]', Movement from the Opera, "The Ten Murders of Josephine", Act III. 8 – Channel Sound installation with Disklavier & Telephone. Installation view. Photo: Daniel Nicolas. Image courtesy Prix de Rome.

Institutions of Resistance

What Hamadeh asks from her audiences, through her past and present work, is to rethink institutions of resistance, to treat fixed or defined histories as only partially-constructed fictions that are illusory and weak without the voices that could make them whole. Here, the opera-installation is regarded as a discursive tool, an apparatus that allows the artist to approach the hierarchy of historical voices through what she calls the 'axes' of reasoning, association and antagonism. The artist posits that processes of translation, re-definition and re-ordering articulate a shifting hierarchy of voices; however, the shift, and the hierarchy itself, are convoluted, clouded and translated beyond comprehension, thus requiring a fictionalisation amongst theoretical counterparts. This is a performative act.

The Ten Ministers of Josephine, A Graphic Score

1. The Ten Ministers of Josephine
 2. The Ten Ministers of Josephine
 3. The Ten Ministers of Josephine
 4. The Ten Ministers of Josephine
 5. The Ten Ministers of Josephine
 6. The Ten Ministers of Josephine
 7. The Ten Ministers of Josephine
 8. The Ten Ministers of Josephine
 9. The Ten Ministers of Josephine
 10. The Ten Ministers of Josephine

The graphic score is a complex visual representation of a musical score, featuring various symbols, patterns, and text. It is organized into a grid-like structure with multiple columns and rows. The symbols include musical notes, clefs, and other musical notation elements. The text is arranged in a structured manner, likely providing instructions or descriptions for the visual elements. The overall design is intricate and visually rich, combining musical notation with graphic design principles.



Rana Hamadeh, 'The Ten Murders of Josephine [The Tongue Twister]', Movement from the Opera, "The Ten Murders of Josephine", Act III. 8 – Channel Sound installation with Disklavier & Telephone. Installation view. Photo: Daniel Nicolas. Image courtesy Prix de Rome.

An epic in both form and scale, the project selected for the Prix de Rome comes at an essential moment in Hamadeh's practice, entwining several strands of speculative research in her career's largest project to date. Loosely based on the songstress in Kafka's short story, "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk", the project is "not so much a performance of songs as much as it is an assembly of people". It is not so much a test of the performative dimension of exhibition-making as much as a complex organism of incomplete translations, fragmented sound and an amnesiac mix of present, past and future.

Megan Miller

2017

Rana Hamadeh's 'The Ten Murders of Josephine' and work by the other Prix de Rome nominees is on view from 2 December 2017 to 25 February 2018 at Kunsthall, Westzeedijk 341, Rotterdam.