

# A'aru

2022 · Photography, drawing, digital collage

Twenty-two works built from snapshots of men posing on the beaches of Alexandria between the 1930s and the 1960s, painted into fifty years later.

A man stands on a rocky shore in Alexandria, one hand on his hip, chin lifted, posing for a camera he trusts. He doesn't know I've pulled his face out of shape, or that heads are falling to the ground past his right shoulder. In the corner of the same picture a small girl balances above a seated man, arms out, trying to hold his attention. He is looking somewhere else.

The girl is me. The man is my father. Posturing Bravado is one of twenty-two works here, and it holds the series in miniature: a confident male body, a landscape coming apart behind it, and a daughter at the edge of the frame.

A'aru is built from black and white snapshots taken on the beaches of Alexandria between the 1930s and the 1960s — men and boys at the shore, alone or in groups, performing for the lens. I no longer know where they came from. They accumulated over years, from several places, and I can't now say which hand passed me which photograph. That suits the work. These men never agreed to any of it. I took them at their most confident and did something to them, and I would rather say that plainly than pretend the series is only about me. I work into them digitally and by hand, then print on translucent Japanese paper, light enough that the images feel unfinished, which is closer to how memory behaves anyway.

The title comes from the Field of Reeds, the ancient Egyptian afterlife: a mirror of life on earth that rewards whoever survives the crossing with an idealised version of what they already had. In Nebamun's tomb chapel it is a garden of ripe trees and a pool thick with fish and birds.

I've turned it around. My A'aru isn't a paradise to come, it's one already ending. I spent my childhood summers in that Alexandria and it was handed to me as somewhere I had already arrived too late for, a place with a greater past than its present. The photographs are of that place at its most self-assured. The paint is what came after.

In Cosmic Mutations 1 a father and son look out to sea with their arms around each other, bodies sculpted by sun, in what reads as a rite of passage. They aren't mine. Behind them waves break on rock and a scorched post-war landscape is still smouldering. I can't tell whether they're contemplating a future or failing to notice what's being left to them, and I didn't want to resolve it. By Cosmic Mutations 2 the virility has gone: both faces collapsed into the same grimace, the wrecked landscape at their feet.

In *The Gatekeeper's Truth* a young man in a full 1920s bathing suit stands with a dark figure at his shoulder, part African mask, part Greek myth, present in a way he can't see. That's the pattern. The men hold their poses, and something arrives behind them.

I built these the way you build a sketchbook, letting the subconscious decide what surfaced — looser than *Upekkha* or *Wétiko*, where I controlled everything. Bacon's distortions, Basquiat's bull, Nash's ruined ground are all in here. I've never thought of any of it as mine to begin with.

The second half of the series is looser still, and less guarded. In *Narcissus Drowning* a man reclines against dark water while figures rise from the shore behind him. Dream logic lets everyone in at once: me as a child on horseback, nude men riding bareback through a neo-baroque landscape, the bull again. Across the surface, in my own Arabic, I gifted you my memory — which leads into the *Darwish* poems that appear elsewhere.

Grey charcoal lines run under the visible layer of several works, moving between the layers, trying to connect one image to another. They rarely get there. If I kept working on these they would keep changing, so I stopped and left them as questions.

What I'm asking is who inherits a place, and who stands to one side while it's handed over. The men on the beach are beautiful and confident and completely unaware. The landscape behind them is already burning. The child in the corner is trying to be seen. Fifty years later she's the one who picks up the photograph and paints on it.

## About this portfolio

This reading portfolio reproduces the current website image sequence. Plate references identify images for correspondence; they are not edition numbers. Captions use the available studio records. Dimensions and editions that are not recorded are not inferred. Image counts refer to displayed images, which may include details or alternate views. Series: <https://www.nerminehammam.com/work-aaru>



## Clearing Unity

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## Colliding Particles

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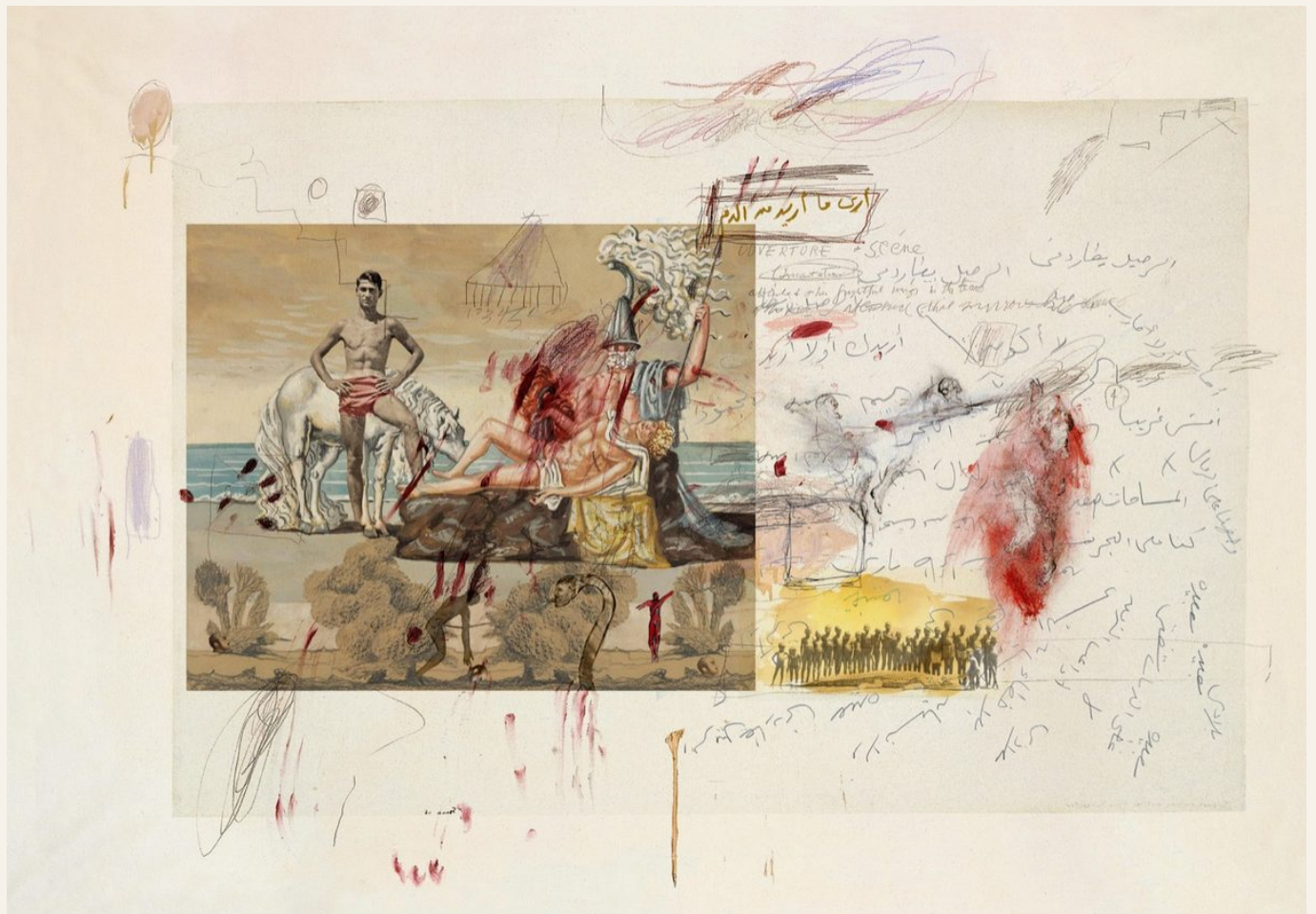


## Sons Of Fire And Light

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## Sunfishman

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## The Gate Keeper

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## Destroyer Of Manifest

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## Night Journey Under The Sea

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## Dematerialization Of Matter

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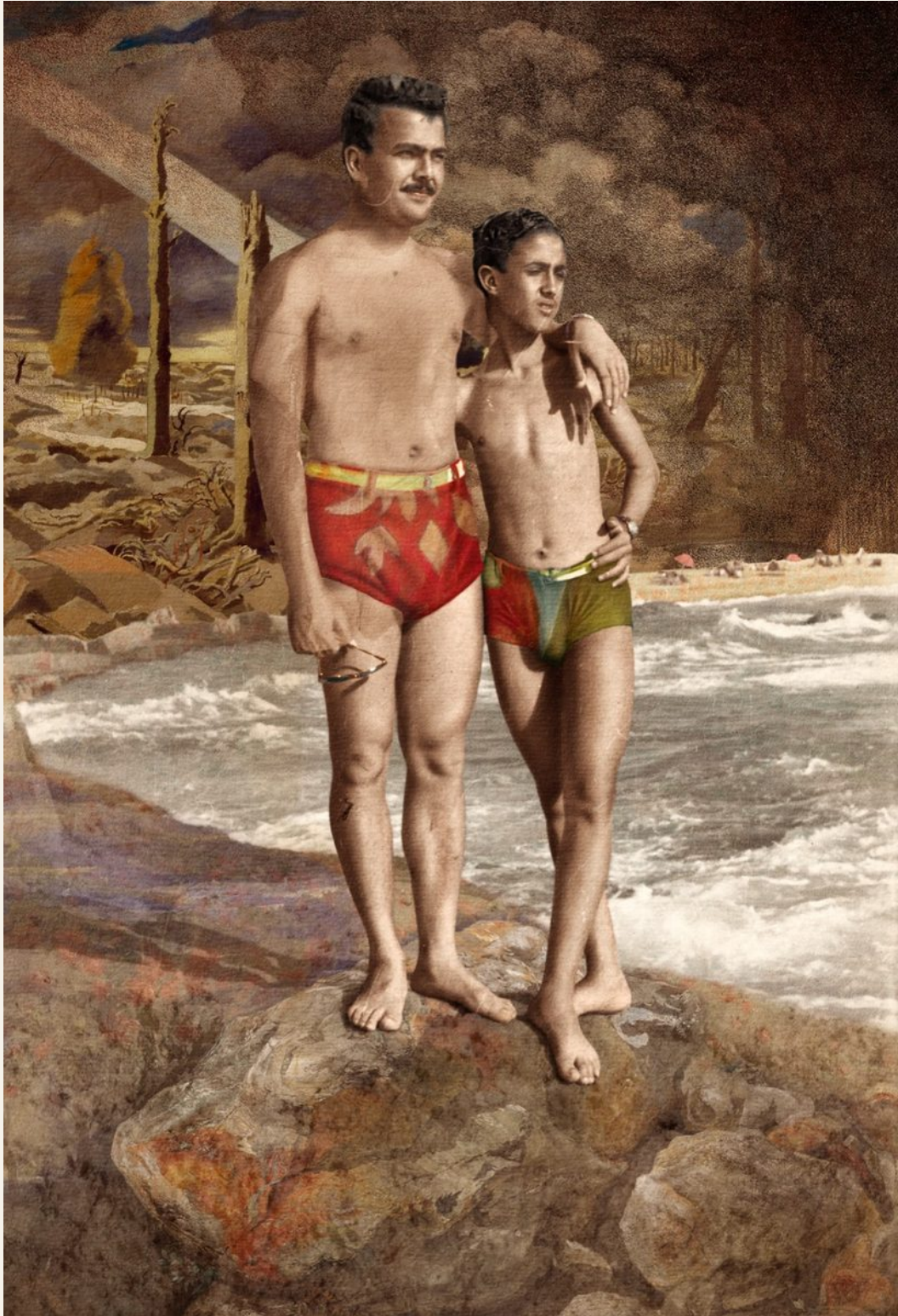


## Comic Mutations 01

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## Comic Mutations 03

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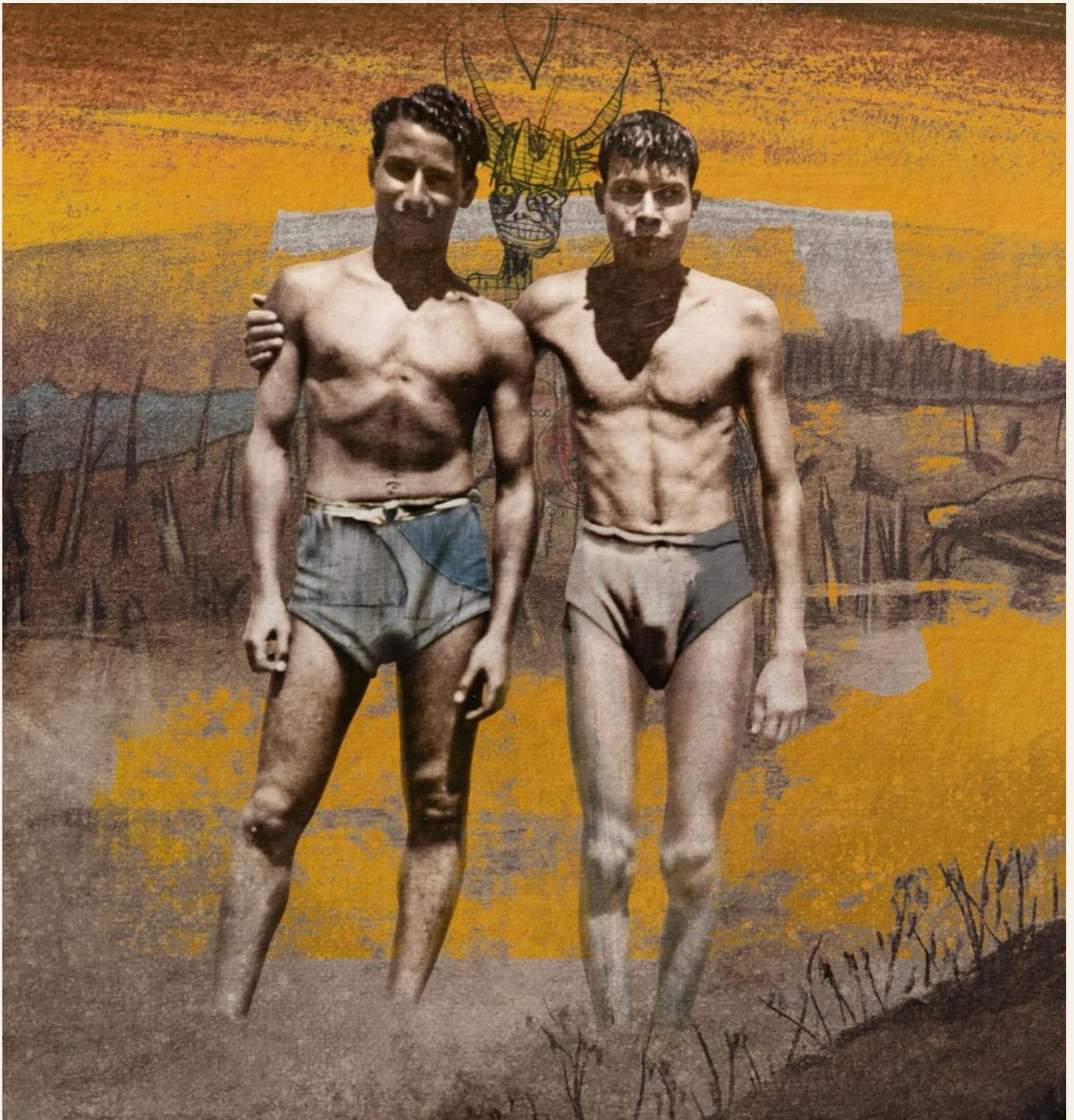


## Comic Mutations 2

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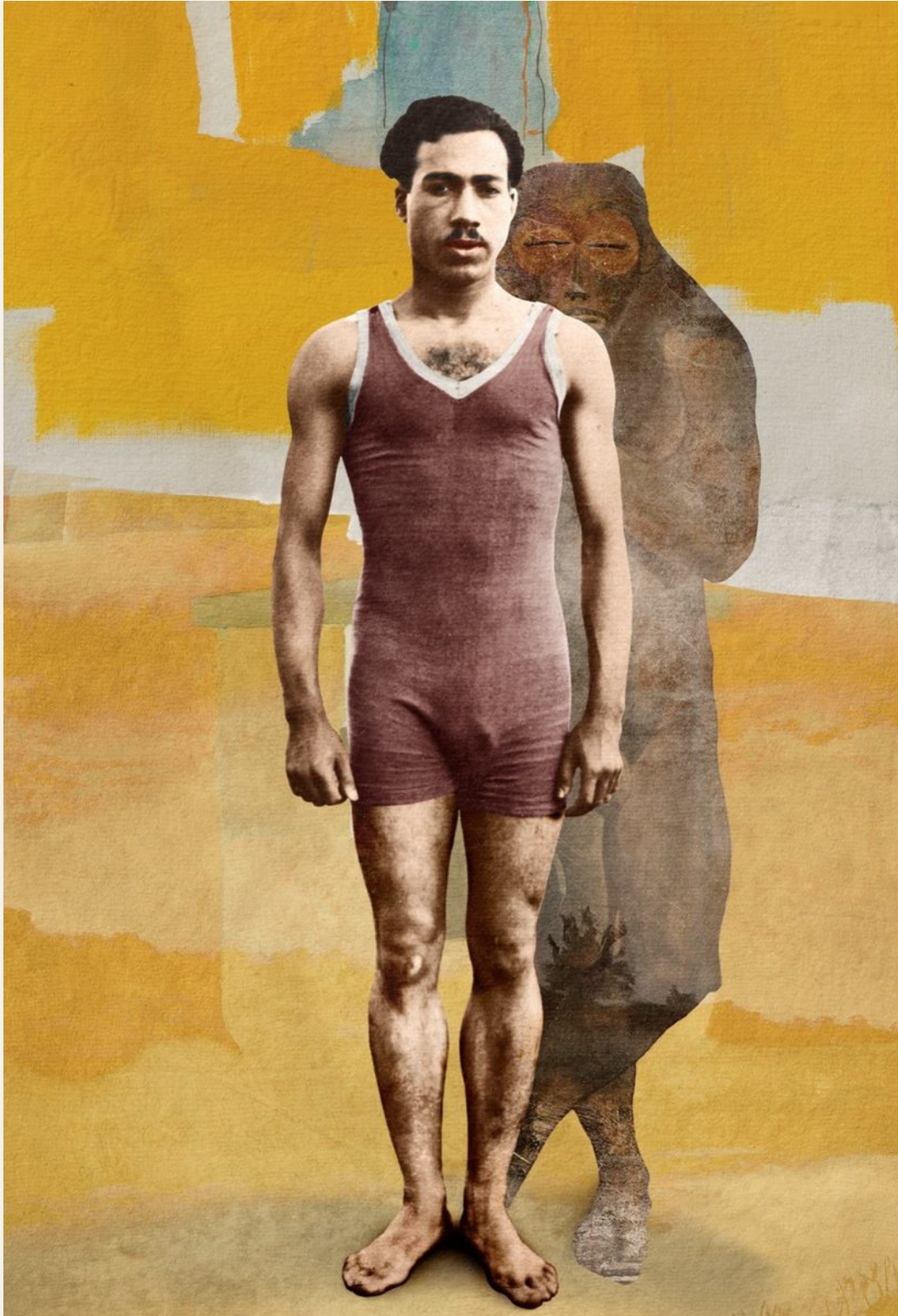


## Incubated And Reborn

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## our future selves

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## The Fires Of Transmutation

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## fireflies

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## posturing bravado

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## Tehom Heros

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## glactic bloom

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## Obscuring The Face Of The moon

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## Shadow O f The Fish-Head

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## The Logic Of Ambiguity

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## narcissus drowing

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## major tom

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