

A photograph of three dancers in black leotards and pink headscarves performing in a grassy field. They are holding long, flowing pink ribbons that create dynamic, swirling patterns in the air. The background features a line of green trees and a body of water under a bright sky.

# **2FIK**

## **HIS AND OTHER STORIES**

**April 6 to June 4, 2017**  
**Koffler Gallery**  
**Curator: Mona Filip**





# 2FIK: HIS AND OTHER STORIES

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In 2Fik's photography works, both subject and artist find themselves in front of the camera. No one is looking through the viewfinder, until the image is assembled, printed and displayed, and the viewer approaches the scene.

As the images produced are not self-portraits, the photographer regards himself as other. This places both the artist and the viewers in unusual positions. When looking at a photograph, viewers usually identify with the photographer, assuming the position of remote observer. In this case, the artist performs as others-performing-for-him, all the while posing for an eventual audience. The displacement of this exterior point of view in front of the camera supplants expectations, compelling viewers to push the identification further and to see themselves as potential protagonists in the performance of otherness.

Amalgamating the roles of artistic director, photographer and model and therefore collapsing the "I" into the "other," 2Fik stages otherness into elaborate tableaux that reveal the complexity of identity constructions. Creating images that examine the daily life and interactions of a bubbly mix of fictional characters, the artist toys with viewers' expectations, destabilizing assumed points of reference. Often re-enacting familiar compositions derived from famous European and North American paintings, he playfully orchestrates scenes that comment thoughtfully on current society.

2Fik's artistic practice began with displacement. Born in Paris to a Moroccan Muslim family, he moved to Montréal in 2003, finding himself in an environment that inspired him to examine identity and its socio-political ramifications. This led him to develop a group of recurring, full-fledged characters stemming from his own life experiences and inner tensions. *Abdel* was born in a middle-class neighbourhood of Casablanca and later moved to Montréal where he now works as a low-paid property manager. The love of his good wife, *Fatima*, helps his self-esteem, though they married under family pressure and he was never attracted to her. Turning to religion for a sense of belonging, his practice of Islam became strict yet deeply hypocritical. He allows *Fatima* to work for *Alice* so they can make ends meet.

*Alice* is the general manager of a fashion trends agency and a good friend to *Fatima*, but she really wants to "westernize" her in her own image. Daughter of a Maronite Lebanese and a French amateur painter, *Alice* grew up in Paris. She loves being in control of her life and most men find her irresistible. *Fatima* faithfully followed her husband to Montréal, abandoning a professional career in science, yet she believes they can be perfectly happy together. Gradually overcoming her shyness, she explores new ways of expressing herself, oscillating between North American and North African ideas of femininity.

*Kathryn* interns with *Alice* and secretly covets her job. She is an overconfident, spoiled young woman from Montréal's West Island, juggling many lovers, including *Abdel*. Her best friend, *Firas*, fled his native country and applied for refugee status in Canada, fearing persecution based on his sexual orientation. *Abdel*, *Fatima*, *Alice*, *Kathryn* and *Firas* are only a few of the fictional individuals imagined and embodied by 2Fik in his beguiling photographs. Playing on stereotypes and deftly dismantling them, these characters compel viewers to question their own sense of self and to reflect on acquired notions of gender, sexuality, belief, universality and difference.



At the Koffler Gallery, 2Fik's exhibition *His and Other Stories* brings together for the first time a substantial body of work from three photography series produced over the last decade. *2Fik Or Not 2Fik* (2005–2009) marks 2Fik's first exploration of his characters' daily lives, establishing their intricate relationships and developing biographical storylines. With a sensibility more akin to Nan Goldin's empathetic gaze than to Cindy Sherman's cinematic self-staging, 2Fik constructs a microcosm of interconnected individuals that harbour deep passions and soul-searching questions. Set up either as candid snapshots, formal portraits or imagined views into private fantasies and internal crises, these scenes employ equal doses of humour and gravity to gradually unfold *Fatima's* opening to different models of femininity, *Abdel's* descent into disingenuous piety, *Kathryn's* refinement of the art of seduction, *Alice's* know-it-all attitude, or *Marco's* closeted-by-day / anti-homophobic-vigilante-by-night lifestyle.

*2Fik's Museum* (2010–2012) uses the same technique of constructed photography to reimagine the compositions of well-known paintings with his lively characters, bringing a contemporary perspective. Motivated by a desire to desacralize art and to shatter perceived accessibility barriers, this series disrupts the grand narratives of Western culture with rebellious irreverence, making room for the marginalized and excluded. In 2013, these reinterpretations evolved in a new direction with site-specific, performance-based works that restage history paintings and reflect on national identity. Working in public spaces and inviting local audiences to observe, 2Fik exposes his entire production process, from set-up and compositional blocking to make-up and photo-shoot. The public witnesses his skilful transformations from one persona to the next with astonishing speed and dexterity as he shoots each character in position within only a few hours. At the end of just one day, the raw material is ready for extensive hours of digital assemblage that will eventually produce the final image.

*His and Other Stories* combines these three series into a fictional chronology tracing the characters' narratives and their conceptual development. Upon entering the exhibition, *2Fik court la Chasse-galerie* (2016) dives right into the characters' arrival story. In a reinterpretation





of Henri Julien's *La Chasse-galerie* (1906), the work pictures them all landing in Montréal in a flying canoe, welcomed by the Québécois natives – *Manon*, *Benjamin*, *Francine* and *Kathryn*. 2Fik “himself” is also in the boat, in a black, all-effacing morphsuit, while *Ludmilla-Mary* hovers up in mid-air like an enticing devil or the tide-rousing moon, dressed all in white and sporting her signature thick beard and leather hijab. The fable depicted in the original is well known in and beyond Québec, and 2Fik's new allegorical take is poignant in its clarity. Instead of eight lumberjacks who sell their souls to the devil to get home on New Year's Eve, eight immigrants make unspoken sacrifices to find a new home in Canada.

The experiences of immigration, inter-cultural exchange and culture clash are central to 2Fik's narratives. Each of his newcomer characters represents a different way of relating to ideas of home and belonging. *Abdel* moves to Canada in search of socio-economic status. *Fatima* has to adapt in a society where her university diploma is not recognized. *Alice* looks to expand the reach of her business and Marco follows her lead, driven by his own ambition. *Firas* seeks refuge fleeing religious persecution. *Dominique* relishes a roaming life unattached to any particular place.

Two other works – *Les Ménines* (2011) and *The Marriage of Abdel and Fatima* (2014) – complete a small antechamber in the gallery that introduces the characters and sets-up the saga of *Abdel* and *Fatima*. Both the wedding scene and the parallel piece foretell the subjects' inner struggles and eventual divergence from each other. Their ill-fated relationship is primarily the focus of one of two rooms opening up from this central space, while the other offers a conceptual yet fanciful exploration of all the characters' psyches.

Each character's complexity is deepened by their choices to embrace, struggle with or distance themselves from their culturally prescribed roles. Their attitudes toward faith, family, gender and sexuality are equally nuanced. *Le Sultan Abdel* (2012), *Abdel's* portrait as Gentile Bellini's *Sultan Mehmet II* (1480), sums up his duplicity in an iconic image where his rigid masculinity and religious posturing unmask his more profound drive: money. The same conflicting desires are alluded to in *Abdel et son frère* (2012) where *Abdel* and his brother *Sofiane* find themselves in a potentially compromising position, trying to earn cash with a homemade skin flick. In *Arabesque* (2006), *Fatima* indulges in a joyful fantasy of freedom as she begins a new life in Montréal, playfully swirling a pink ribbon while wearing nothing but a bikini and a niqab. Her outfit perfectly translates her vision of freedom in which personal expression and traditional modesty are not mutually exclusive. Though the images can seem paradoxical from different cultural perspectives, they reflect the idiosyncratic ways in which any individual negotiates contradictory beliefs and their psychic hold.

*Le cri* (2013), 2Fik's remake of Edvard Munch's 1893 painting *The Scream*, foregrounds the deep doubts and despair of the artist facing an identity crisis amid his self-multiplication in the service of representing others. 2Fik's depiction of himself as a featureless, zentai-clad black figure originates in *Les Ménines*, his reinterpretation of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) in which the Spanish painter included his self-portrait among the young Infanta's courtly entourage. Confronted with the dilemma of picturing himself as the artist within an image where he equally embodies every character, 2Fik resorted to the idea of a human blank canvas, enlivened only by becoming others. His interactions with his fictional creations place him on equal footing with them as an author more or less in control.

As these imaginary personal dramas echo universal ones, 2Fik's reinterpretations of iconic paintings exude biting commentary on vital current issues. *Ludmilla-Mary's* pose in *La Grande Intendante* (2012), is a take on Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) and a nod to Guerrilla Girls' 1989 poster,<sup>1</sup> critically equating today's exploitation of women as domestic workers to their enslavement as sexual objects referenced in the original. The discrimination and misogyny that still exert control over women's bodies in





contemporary societies are plainly exposed in *The Marriage of Abdel and Fatima*. Based on Daniel Maclise's *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife* (1854) and created in Dublin where the original hangs in the National Gallery, the composition highlights *Fatima's* reluctant compliance with an arranged marriage and *Kathryn's* graphic self-inflicted miscarriage, a powerful statement in a context where abortions are still illegal.

Positioned as the exhibition's centrepieces, 2Fik's most recent, large-scale allegorical images critically reinvent four history paintings as subversive statements on nationhood. Just as his incursions into famous icons of Western art history reflect a desire to confront cultural privilege and to bring forth the long suppressed stories of others, 2Fik's take on history paintings aims to complicate their nationalistic narratives and to reclaim both past and present for the disenfranchised. If *2Fik court la Chasse-galerie* and *The Marriage of Abdel and Fatima* introduce the exhibition's plotlines, *Preporod Ludmille-Mary* (2013) and *The Death of Dishonest Abdel* (2017) frame its climactic conclusions. One celebrates the whimsical apotheosis of 2Fik's most eccentric, taboo-defying character, while the other confronts the tragic fall of his most deceitful and narrow-minded protagonist.

*The Death of Dishonest Abdel*, 2Fik's new work produced by the Koffler Gallery, responds to Benjamin West's 1770 painting, *The Death of General Wolfe*, tackling an emblematic example of Canadian history represented through a colonial lens. The original dramatically depicts the fall of General James Wolfe during the 1759 Battle of Québec, honouring him as a hero and a symbol of British dominance in late eighteenth century North America. 2Fik's version presents the darkest moment his characters have yet experienced, the death of one of their own – *Abdel*. Laying down bleeding in front of the cash exit of Toronto's iconic discount store, *Honest Ed's*, *Abdel* has just been stabbed by a stealthy 2Fik seen fleeing the scene in the background. Relatives and friends are gathering around the body, displaying an array of unleashed emotions at the sight. Several layers of reference and meaning combine into a complex image that comments on both present and past events.

Within the framework of 2Fik's ongoing epic, his characters face an existential crisis. *Abdel's* death unsettles the relationship dynamics and default positions assumed by the others around his controlling personality. Most significantly, *Fatima* finds herself single





and independent for the first time in her life, though potential suitors (*Omar* and *Félix*) already stake out their ground. Her hand gently pulling her hijab, she seems to be calmly absorbing her new reality, her sadness shifting inward to vindicated self-awareness.

The key positions of *Abdel* and *Fatima* parallel essential ones in West's painting – those of the dying General Wolfe at the centre and the pensive Indigenous witness to the composition's left side. History framed by colonial perspective glorifies the British settler while relegating the disputed land's rightful inhabitant to a marginal, submissive position.





Overlaying the drama of the cheating, controlling husband and the now liberated wife to the historical scene, 2Fik shrewdly subverts patriarchal hierarchies, restoring a strategic point of view to *Fatima*, and therefore implicitly to the Indigenous warrior.

Subverting the dominant, whitewashing perspective, 2Fik's vibrant characters of mixed genders, ethnicities and faiths infuse new meaning into an iconic image. Props and signs infiltrating the image further emphasize the decolonizing, anti-patriarchy resistance. Shot in late February 2017, the photograph resonates with the swelling echoes of protest



and defiance that challenged both the American presidential inauguration and Canada's sesquicentennial. A birthday balloon spells *Resist* instead of *Celebrate*, several hand-painted signs announce self-determination, and a pussyhat<sup>2</sup> lies at *Manon's* feet. The fierce Québécois single mother is the feminist par excellence. A revealing triangle is formed between *Fatima's* sightline, the pink hat, and *Manon's* perceptive look returning the gaze back to her widowed friend with an assertion of solidarity.

Staging the photograph at Honest Ed's, 2Fik takes the battle cry from the Plains of Abraham to the site of big real estate development. Over almost 70 years, the outlandish discount store represented a haven for Toronto's newcomers, low-income families and students, providing affordable household merchandise, marketing strategies that doubled as popular entertainment, and legendary free Thanksgiving turkeys. Closed and slated for demolition in 2017, the cherished landmark received a fond farewell from the community it helped build. *The Death of Dishonest Abdel* was created over two days at Honest Ed's during this public event, and so 2Fik's photographic work becomes a new historic record, documenting a place of extraordinary impact and significant memory in Toronto's civic life. Honouring both present and historic loss, mourning across time and cultural dimensions, *The Death of Dishonest Abdel* carves a new viewpoint in the Canadian narrative.

Each of 2Fik's works involves an element of performance in its creation, though only his historic compositions intentionally implicate an audience. Making visible his process to the public, 2Fik's performance-based works demystify the creative act. At the same time, revealing his metamorphoses from one character into another, switching between genders and personalities within the time constraints of a photo-shoot that presses him to change in a matter of minutes, underscores the fluidity of shifting identities inherent in each person. Viewers are compelled to recognize the intricate layers and twists that define them, as well as others, as multifaceted individuals. By turning the camera on himself, 2Fik enables us to see each other.

## Mona Filip

<sup>1</sup> Established in 1984, the Guerrilla Girls is a group of anonymous American female artists working to expose sexual and racial discrimination in the art world and cultural institutions. The poster is part of the series entitled *Guerrilla Girls Talk Back* and features a nude woman wearing a gorilla mask and adopting the same reclining pose, accompanied by the headline: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?"

<sup>2</sup> The pussyhat is a symbol of support and solidarity for women's rights and political resistance. The Pussyhat Project was co-founded by screenwriter Krista Suh and architect Jayna Zweiman, and was launched on November 23, 2016 in anticipation of the Women's March on Washington.

**2Fik** is multimedia artist based in Montréal who combines the roles of artistic director, photographer and model. His photography and performance works have been presented widely in Canada and the United States. 2Fik's first series, *2Fik Or Not 2Fik*, was exhibited in Montréal, Toronto, Regina and New York. *2Fik's Museum* premiered at The Invisible Dog in New York. In 2013–2014, 2Fik attended residencies at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, Croatia, and at the Fringe Festival in Dublin, Ireland, creating new site-specific works. In 2016 he participated in the Festival TransAmérique in Montréal, producing *2Fik court la Chasse-Galerie*, and he was part of the group exhibition *Yonder* at the Koffler Gallery.

**Mona Filip** is the Director/Curator of the Koffler Gallery. From 2009 to 2013, she developed the Gallery's Off-Site exhibition program – a series of site-specific projects presented across the city. In 2013, Filip launched the new venue at Artscape Youngplace, with a curatorial program that fosters new artistic production and invites a comparative discussion of identity, memory and place.



# koffler gallery

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All works: 2Fik. | Cover: *Arabesque*, 2006 (detail), digital print, 14" x 24". | Inside cover: *Le Sultan Abdel*, 2012, digital print, 50" x 33" (based on Gentile Bellini, *The Sultan Mehmet II*, 1480). | Page 2: *2Fik court la Chasse-galerie*, 2016, digital print, 41" x 70" (based on Henri Julien, *La Chasse-Galerie*, 1906). | Page 4: *La Grande Intendantie*, 2012, digital print, 32" x 50" (based on Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814). | Pages 5-6: *The Death Of Dishonest Abdel*, 2017, digital print, 44" x 70" (based on Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770).

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