

FILM

SELF SUFFICIENT

November 21, 2012 • Kaelen Wilson-Goldie on Simone Fattal's *Autoportrait*Simone Fattal, *Autoportrait*, 1971/2012, video, 46 minutes.

HERE'S HOW THE STORY GOES: In 1971, [Simone Fattal](#) went to see an exhibition of self-portraits by artists working in every media except video. She noted the absence, and wondered why. Born and raised in Damascus, Fattal studied in London, Beirut, and Paris. Two years earlier, she had moved back to Lebanon from France, and, after abandoning a project to change the world by overhauling the education system in the Arab countries of the Middle East, she had decided to become a painter. But the idea of self-portraiture perplexed her. A painting didn't seem like it would be enough. So she set up a video camera and a microphone, invited a few friends and family over, began talking, and continued for a good seven hours.

"I wanted to do my self-portrait," she says onscreen in her deep, raspy, unforgettable voice. "Although I'm a painter, I called upon two friends to make a film because I thought the language of cinema was much richer, and allowed for a longer-lasting vision." Halfway through, she changes the rules. She doesn't want an autobiography but something more angled, fragmentary, and disruptive; something truer to the medium; something closer to the way memory, confession, and seduction work at once. She shot hours of soliloquy and lively conversation but then set all of it aside.

Around the same time, Fattal began to share a studio with another painter named [Etel Adnan](#), whose works were as bold as hers were textural and delicate. When the two of them left Lebanon together for California, ten years later and five years into the civil war, Fattal packed up her side of the studio and never painted again. In 1982, she founded the Post-Apollo Press, and devoted all of her energy to publishing avant-garde poetry and fiction until she turned her attention to sculptures and ceramics in 1989.

Then she returned to the video footage, and earlier this year, she made *Autoportrait* (1971/2012), one of the glittering jewels in the film program "Mapping Subjectivity: Experimentation in Arab Cinema from the 1960s to Now, Part III," screening through November 25 at the Museum of Modern Art. In addition to a studio in their formative years and a full life since then, Fattal and Adnan also share an editor, [Eugénie Paultre](#), who helped reconfigure Adnan's early experiments with Super 8 into the ninety-minute film *Motion* (2012), which premiered this summer at Documenta 13. But where *Motion* is excruciating in a cinema setting (and suffers the great weight of an overwrought soundtrack by the Iraqi oudist [Munir Bashir](#)), *Autoportrait* is nimble and quick (and, at forty-five minutes, judicious).

The jumps, cuts, and pauses in Paultre's editing set a good shifting ground for Fattal's performance. In a crisp white shirt knotted at her navel, she sits at a table scattered with coffee and cigarettes. She retells memories, dreams, fragments of conversations, and, through these bursts of storytelling, she doubts religion, asserts and then questions her own strength, laments the burdens of her loyalty, suffers the pain of a woman who left her, and ignores the advice to never show a man that she's in love. "Without love, everything comes apart, my mind stops working, I lose my beauty," she says. "Nothing works."

Fattal's portrait of an artist as a young woman is familiar to the literary form. But the force of her character really does require the durational qualities of film. The strange slackness of early video also allows for crucial moments of silence, when *Autoportrait* quiets down and glances in on a world that once reined in Beirut and Damascus but is now utterly and completely gone. Fattal's longer-lasting vision was perfect in ways she must have imagined, and painful for reasons no one then could have foreseen.

—[Kaelen Wilson-Goldie](#)