

Marwan

Damascus (Syria), 1934 – Berlin (Germany), 2016

After his studies in Arabic literature in Damascus, Marwan Kassab Bachi sailed to Paris from Beirut in 1957, led by a profound desire to experience Parisian life. However, the recent events surrounding the Suez Crisis compromised his chance of entering France. With his plans thwarted by politics, he decided to settle and set up his studio in Berlin. A few years after his relocation, the Syrian government confiscated his affluent family's assets, and Marwan had to fully rely on himself to live. Working a full time job at fur factory, he painted at night and on the weekends, and continued his art education at the Academy of Fine Arts, attending courses with the painter Hann Trier. Interested in the pictorial studies of his contemporary German expressionists, he established a close working and intellectual relationship with Georg Baselitz and Eugen Schönebeck. His early work from the 1960s was based on the representation of the human figure. However, the individual person was not the focus. He often either painted himself, friends, or strangers. The subject was humanity with all its doubts, fears, and desires. This subject remained a focal point of Marwan's work. From his earlier figurative work until his most recent pieces, Marwan constantly sought to reach his own truth through painting.

On display are his self-portraits from different periods in the artist's practice, tracing the evolution of his work. His work from the 60s shows lonesome figures against a contrasting background, painted directly on canvas, without any prior sketches. In the 70s, his work concentrated on the face and head, fragmenting and distorting them. The eyes of the fractured visages stare at the viewer, prompting them to question their own condition. Commenting on the manner his work unfolds and reconsiders the reality of an individual – he states in 2010 that “[his] subject matter is duality: life and death, absence and presence, love and hate”¹

The canvases, albeit large, are taken over by a tight close up of enigmatic yet expressive features; further obscured by layer after layer of paint. One painting often needed a few years to be considered finished by the artist. In a transcendental act, he would try to catch his soul on the canvas. He increasingly focused on it-until it became his only subject. His devotion to the face and his repeated layering of color and brush strokes, created a mystifying three-dimensionality, with the image appearing and withdrawing. The work unveils raw emotion and the vulnerability of the spirit. His landscapes of the human soul witness the nostalgia of a painter in exile and evoke the political and cultural history of the Arab world. Marwan's work is an ode to freedom, a hymn for the soul.

“He is both at once, that is ‘a Syrian painter in Berlin’, and none at the same time, that is, a painter whose practice feeds from the worlds he has interiorized, not unlike a poet or novelist who writes, masterfully, in a language not his mother tongue, living in a country not his motherland...”²

¹ Marwan in conversation with Hans-Ulrich Obrist from a video recording, artist studio visit, Berlin, 2010.

² Marwan in conversation with Rasha Salti. Salti, Rasha. Incarnation and Interior Geographies : Marwan's Art of Portraiture, In : MARWAN. Primeiras Obras/Early Works 1962-1972. Fundação de Serralves, Porto, 2014