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Marwan: Topographies of the Soul

By Charlotte Bank

Marwan Kassab Bachi is a wanderer at heart, a free spirit whose art has left critics full of wonder and amazement, but often also puzzled as to how to place his oeuvre within the post-war artistic world in Germany. His singularity has been explained with a supposedly inherent Arab sensuality, with the loneliness and longing of the Bedouins, with the particular textures and colours of his native Damascus, all elements profoundly foreign to the art scene of the divided city of Berlin.

And surely, Damascus remains an important factor in the artist's life. It was where he was born in 1934 and he remains a Damascene at heart. Even after fifty-seven years of leading a successful artistic life in Berlin, Marwan still describes himself as such. But he has also always been a Berlin artist, an active member of the art scene in his chosen city, *Wahlheimat* as a German expression describes it, 'homeland by choice'. To approach Marwan's painting, both factors are equally important. The two places remain interlinked and cannot be separated. As it has often been said about him: 'Marwan has found his Damascus in Berlin.'¹

Thereby, the beginnings in the foreign city must have been difficult, as always when changing location. In the class of Professor Hann Trier, Marwan encountered the contemporary painting of German Informel, American Abstract Expressionism, and French Tachisme. Gestural painting was the international language of art of the 1950s and 1960s. For Marwan this new approach meant a radical break with his former work that was more influenced by French Impressionism, but it also led him to explore the quality of colour and its inherent possibilities of giving form. Not many works from this early period have survived, but a number of disturbing images resembling heaps of torn flesh or monsters remain. Situated somewhere between the abstract and the figurative, they already point towards his later 'face landscapes'.

Marwan's painting never found rest in pure abstraction; from the beginning it seemed insufficient for his needs. He was one of the few painters in Germany at the time who felt this way, at a time where figuration was often viewed as outmoded and passé. In 1961 and 1962 Eugen Schönebeck and Georg Baselitz published their *Pandemonium Manifesto* in which they called for a new, expressive and personal style of painting, far from the prevailing 'harmony soup', as stated in an essay in 2012.² But this particular German variety of post-WWII *Weltschmerz*, fuelled by the frustration the young generation felt when faced with their parents' silence about the Nazi regime, the war and its crimes, was far from Marwan's reality;

¹ Marwan Kassab Bachi, personal communication.

² Baselitz, Georg, 'Als Georg Baselitz seine Weltkarriere startete [When Georg Baselitz started his international career],' *Die Welt*, 4 February 2012. Accessed 20 October 2014, <http://www.welt.de/kultur/article13841235/Als-Georg-Baselitz-seine-Weltkarriere-startete.html>.

something else drove him towards figuration. And while the works of the German painters were clearly intent on shocking the audience, Marwan's paintings – although no less provocative in their treatment of desire and sexuality – appear less aggressive and display a particular poetic mode, an almost lyrical quality that is very characteristic for his work. Marwan's art is more concerned with the human condition of those years, his own personal experiences in the foreign surroundings and the political upheavals in the Arab world.

Marwan remains a deeply humanistic artist. His paintings reveal the full spectrum of human emotions and phenomena, 'all that we can experience in our inconsistencies', to cite the German art historian and friend of the painter, Jörn Merkert.³ This centrality of human existence with its joys and sorrows appears in perhaps the most innocent way in the portraits of Palestinian youngsters, such as *Three Palestinian Boys* (1970). At a time when art produced in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle usually recurred to easily recognizable motifs such as the *Fedayeen* (freedom fighter) or women in embroidered dresses, Marwan chose to paint youngsters, those Palestinian youths who became iconic figures during the First Intifada as a symbol of resistance. In Marwan's pictures the young boys appear to us in all their vulnerability, three kids with their shirts open at the neck and rolled up sleeves, kids as one would find them to the thousands on the streets of any city or refugee camp. But Marwan gives them a greater significance; he paints them from a low angle and lets them appear larger than life. These young people have to carry a super-human burden, a burden that would break most of us. This is what sets them apart, what inspires respect. The fate of the Palestinian people has always remained close to Marwan's heart. Apart from his paintings of young Palestinians, he has often expressed a profound sympathy with the struggle for a Palestinian homeland. Not limiting his commitment to paintings or declarations, he dedicated a collection of paintings to a future Palestinian National Museum in 1997, in the hope that a Palestinian state would come into existence where art and culture had its recognized role.

Contrary to the calm and composed nature of the Palestinian boys, most of Marwan's early works testify to a search for completeness, often in the erotic or sexual sense. Hidden limbs that protrude behind frontal figures, legs encircling heads or distorted limbs that hinder a breaking free of bonds all speak a language of desire, loneliness and yearning. The figures' faces often bear the traits of the artist himself, but these paintings go beyond the autobiographical. They speak of existential concerns of all humanity. Isolated in a kind of non-space, these figures seem entrapped in their own fragmented existence, struggling to break free and gain a full life. The figure of the enigmatic *Der Gemahl* (The Husband, 1966) shows three distorted limbs, two of which hold the upper part of his body, his chest and chin while the third holds a stick, a classic phallic symbol. The impossibility of the gestures, the tense positions of the arms speak of a tortured emotional state, a longing for togetherness and fulfilment.

The head of the figure is disproportionately large, the face rich in details, full of rhythmic lines, alternating valleys and hills, like the face-landscapes that Marwan started painting a few years later. Since then, since the early 1970s, faces and heads have been the major theme in his work. A noted change occurred with the year 1973, however, the year he spent in Paris on a scholarship. Here, his life-long dream of studying French painting close at hand finally came true, and he immersed himself in the works of Cezanne, Monet, Bonnard. It was during this sojourn in Paris that colour found its way back into Marwan's painting. Here, he started using the strong colours that remained so present in his memory: 'silky orange, violet and emerald green', the colours of twilight in his native Damascus.

³ Jörn Merkert in *Marwan. An die Kinder Palästinas* [To the Children of Palestine], Munich & Ramallah: Goethe-Institut, 1998.

Marwan's faces started to change, to gain a new depth, their surface becoming more and more fragmented, with patches of colour accentuating furrows and lines. Viewers can immerse themselves in the image, wander among its depths and heights and contemplate the marvels of existence. We are faced with a vast landscape, a topography of the soul. Moving towards the motif of the head, the leading theme of his later oeuvre, Marwan explored the textural qualities of colours, breaking up the surface and letting it appear in a profusion of colourful patches, painting and repainting, often covering the image with several layers of paint, letting a new face appear with each step. Marwan's *Heads* come in a variety of media: oil, watercolour, drawing, and prints. What they have in common is the fragility and strength of human existence, the signs of life lived to its full. They represent snapshots of particular emotional states, captured at one moment within an ever-changing existence, which recall Francis Bacon's paintings of the human body. But where Bacon's bodies seem to be caught in a state of emotional torture, Marwan's *Heads* appear sovereign and strong, showing a deep understanding and acceptance of the upheavals of life. As Adonis wrote in a poem dedicated to Marwan: 'When we perceive the face, we can say: we comprehend everything.'⁴

⁴ Adonis, 'Le visage – vu par le pinceau de Marwan' (1993), translated into German in Jörn Merkert, *Marwan. Ein syrischer Maler in Berlin*, Berlin: Werke in der Sammlung der Berlinischen Galerie, 2001.