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## **Foreword \_ Marwan: Topographies of the Soul**

*By Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi*

Earlier this year I decided to travel to Berlin with my friend Giuseppe Moscatello primarily to meet with the Syrian-born artist Marwan and visit his studio. In an apartment in the Berlin borough of Tiergarten, I found myself enthralled by his work—upon entering his studio I felt as if I had walked into a cave of treasures. ‘This series I produced soon after I had arrived in Germany in the 1960s when I worked in a tannery,’ Marwan recounted to me pointing with his right hand that held a cigarette at the brown areas of colour in the paintings. ‘I used to work all day and paint all night,’ he added. Marwan told me of how desperate life was during that time, how many of his works were sold for a fraction of their value and how people took advantage of his trust, some never paying or returning the works that he had sold or loaned to them. I left Giuseppe to speak with the master artist and sat myself on the ground in front of two works: *Selbstbildnis* [Self-portrait] from 1964, which would soon adorn the cover of his book for the recent exhibition at the Museu de Art Contemporânea—Fundaç o de Serralves in Portugal, and a 1965 portrait of Munif al-Razzaz, the Secretary General of the Syrian Ba'ath Party, covering his right ear with his hand. Both works were from his ‘tannery era’ and were so captivating that I completely lost track of time, only realizing the length of my absence when I heard Marwan ask Giuseppe where I was. ‘I kept these for decades, I refused to let go of them,’ Marwan told me as I rose up from my secluded spot on the floor of the studio.

The first time I saw an abstract ‘face’ work by Marwan was at Frieze London in 2009, an oil on canvas painting measuring 195 by 130 cm, produced in 2006. At the time I had never come into contact with Marwan’s oeuvre, however, the colours and execution of the painting were so striking that it quickly became one of my favourite works. That large abstract face painting is now part of the collection of Barjeel Art Foundation and is included in the *Topographies of the Soul* exhibition. After Frieze, I was keen to see as many Marwan works as I possibly could. I travelled to Amman to see the 1970 painting *Al Wakef* at Darat al Funun, where he taught for many summers, and saw a New Figuration work from the 1970s at the Berlinische Galerie, which holds over two-hundred artworks by Marwan. This Berlin visit was made possible thanks to my friend and partner at Meem Gallery, Charles Pocock, who organized the viewing through another Berlin-based Arab artist, the Palestinian Kamal Boullata.

I started to read and enquire about Marwan’s work and found that his German friend J rn Merket had written extensively about his paintings. The more I read

about Marwan the more I came to respect and admire his work. Few living artists can lay a claim to being amongst the very best of their generation, not just regionally but internationally—in 1994 he became the first Arab member of the distinguished Akademie der Künste of Germany.

*Topographies of the Soul* is the very first solo exhibition by Marwan in the Arabian Gulf region. Marwan's work has been shown extensively in the Levant, his last major show in the region was held in Beirut in 2013. While Marwan has never before exhibited his work in a solo capacity in the GCC, his work is not entirely disassociated from the Gulf region. Having formed a close friendship with Abdulrahman Munif (1933–2004), a Saudi writer most famous for his controversial *Cities of Salt* quintet, first published in 1984, Marwan maintains a very personal link to the region. The series recounts in five parts the evolution of life and the advent of modernity in the Arabian Peninsula towns following the discovery of oil and was seen by many as a critique of the tribal structure of these societies. When I asked Marwan about his friendship with Munif, he simply responded: 'He was my friend .... We would stay up talking for hours.'

Marwan first encountered Munif in the 1950s in Damascus but only became close friends with him many years later. Their friendship resulted, in 1997, in a rare collaborative book on Marwan, written by Munif, titled *Journey of Art and Life*. Following Munif's death, new editions of many of his books were reprinted with illustrations by Marwan including *Cities of Salt*, *When We Left the Bridge*, *East of the Mediterranean*, *Mother of Vows*, *Memories for the Future*, and *The Journey of Light*. Another recently published book, *Literature of Friendship*, includes previously unpublished letters exchanged over years between Munif and Marwan as a testament to their friendship and continuous interaction despite geographic distances.

Marwan has lived in Berlin since 1957 and witnessed a divided Germany recover from the challenging post World War II era, reuniting East and West twenty-five years ago and transforming the country into one of the most successful nations in the world. Germany, his adopted home, offers a tale of hope for the artist's country of birth, demonstrating that a nation that has been ravaged by war can once again be rebuilt and catapulted to the forefront of the world. Although Marwan spent most of his life in Europe, his relationship with the Arab world endures through his paintings and the friendships he has developed with other intellectuals from the region.

The purpose of *Topographies of the Soul* is to present and honour, in a very modest way, this towering figure of art and intellect.