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SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

TRANSCENDING REALITY

Marwan Sahmarani talks travel, tradition and
his approach to painting tragedy

by India Stoughton

Lebanese artist Marwan Sahmarani was born in Lebanon in 1970 and fled to Paris in the 1980s to escape the Civil War. He studied art at the Ecole Supérieure d'Art Graphique Penninghen before moving to Montreal, where he worked in advertising for some years, later quitting to focus full time on his art. In 2010, he won the Abraaj Group Art Prize for his multimedia work *The Feast of the Damned*. He spoke to Selections about his approach and inspirations.

Marwan Sahmarani,
The Man Who Kill III, 2015,
200 x 175 cm, oil on canvas

You've lived in France, Canada and Spain, as well as regularly spending time in Lebanon. How has living in so many different places and cultures affected your work?

I think moving geographically is a way of seeing differently from what I am used to seeing in a specific location, and therefore having different experiences when it comes to my practice – discovering another language of forms, gesture, colours, sensation.

In fact, it is similar when I arrive in a new country and I try to pick up the native language to express myself to other people. I find this process very challenging. There is a switch in the brain process – it's the same when painting in a different space. The experiences just overlap. Every territorial journey nourishes my art, in terms of experiencing the medium.

How do you approach materials as an artist?

In general, my sole medium on canvas is oil paint. Nevertheless, I do work on paper or on canvas. I use a different medium for each support, like ink, aquarelle, pastels, etcetera. I am very traditional in terms of my medium and the way I use it. I feel more secure when I work with tradition.

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Marwan Sahmarani,
Crime and Punishment, 2013,
250 x 400 cm, oil on canvas

Many of your works tackle cycles of violence in Lebanon and the region, but always from a stylised point of view. How do you use colour and form to convey the idea of violence without directly painting scenes of death or conflict?

I think it is impossible to recreate the realities of this situation in a picture. The horror of a war and everything that comes with it, like mass murder or brutality, cannot ever be transformed in the same intensity with a painting... As much as the painting is expressionist or trying to express some violent scenes, the end result will still remain aesthetic. What remains maybe is the political gesture of what the artist thought he saw.

It is essential for an artist to have his interpretation of reality. He will search for his personal way of showing what he feels he is seeing. Forms and colours are just like music notes to create a melody that convey an emotion that the spectators will feel, or hear. But horror as it stands cannot be painted.

My goal as an artist is not simply to act like a journalist or a war photographer. I think there is more to painting than simplistic evocations of violence or a description of a specific event. From my point of view, painting should transcend reality.

Your paintings hover between abstraction and figuration, with discernible shapes appearing out of the seeming chaos the longer one studies your canvasses. When you begin a painting do you have a specific image in mind, or do you begin to paint and then see where the process takes you?

If I already have an image in my mind, why bother executing it? The pleasure is to keep the process out of control. I can have an impulse or something that triggers me. It could be a feeling, or something I read or saw. It could be a word or a certain shade or colour. But I usually let it go as quickly as it came. Only its shadow remains. And what's nice about a shadow is that it can be reinterpreted as I wish. I don't understand how some artists can paint from a picture. All the mystery vanishes. ■