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SYRIA

## MARWAN KASSAB-BACHI (1934–2016)

BY BRADY NG



Berlin-based Syrian artist **MARWAN KASSAB-BACHI** died on October 23, 2016, at the age of 82. Photo by KZ, Berlin. Courtesy Europia, Paris.

On October 23, Marwan Kassab-Bachi, the Syria-born Berlin-based painter, passed away in the German capital at the age of 82. Better known as Marwan, the artist was esteemed for his loosely figurative paintings that were simultaneously Arabic and Western-European in style, reflecting the confusion of identity of those who found themselves among a cultural diaspora after World War II. He particularly drew inspiration from the expressionist works of Chaïm Soutine and European artists whose works were exhibited in the Louvre, which guided his own experiments of using color to build forms of human features and body parts.

Born in 1934 in Damascus, Marwan studied Arabic literature at Damascus University from 1955 to 1957, then left in 1957 to travel to Paris, but ended up studying painting under German artist Hann Trier at Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Berlin. After his artistic studies, Marwan remained in Berlin and worked as a freelance artist. To make ends meet, he also worked in a tannery between 1962 and 1970, but continued his practice of sketching and painting. During this time, some of his clients underpaid the ever-trustful artist for his paintings, if they paid him at all.

Counting Georg Baselitz and Eugen Schönebeck as his contemporaries, Marwan's style bridged continents and cultures. His paintings are saturnine, at times menacing. Baselitz and Schönebeck were likely references during his formative years as an artist, but the human face eventually became his obsession. German art historian Jorn Merkert, who was also a personal friend of Marwan's, once [said](#) that the artist considered the face to be "a means of expressing the dramatic depth of life." It was featured in practically every one of his creations since the mid-1970s, appearing in various formats, in both oil and watercolor. At this point in his career, he abandoned a formal figurative approach and gravitated toward lashing brushstrokes or etches—violent whips of color whose arrangement fell into place as a mutilated human face. Referring to Marwan's art, Syrian modernist poet Adonis once noted: "It is as if Man in his entirety had become a face . . . and that is the site recording the tragedy of the Arab World."

In 1977, Marwan arrived at Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, where he was visiting professor of painting for two years before becoming full professor in 1980. He remained there and taught until 2002. In 1994, Marwan became the first Arab member of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin.

The artist exhibited mainly in Germany, but also had shows in the Middle East and the United States. Sharjah's [Barjeel Art Foundation](#) hosted a retrospective of Marwan's works in late 2014, when the artist was already battling health problems at the time. His last exhibition was also his first solo show in the United Kingdom, called "[Not Towards Home, But The Horizon](#)," held at Mosaic Rooms, London, from October to December last year. The retrospective presented his figurative works, featuring paintings, etchings and works on paper from the 1960s onward.

Marwan's creations are part of numerous public and private collections, including German national museums in Berlin, the British Museum in London, Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, Khalil al-Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah, the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi, Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, among others.

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