



## Reading the Body in Marwan's Painting

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After living for over half a century in self-imposed exile away from his country of birth and culture of origin, how do we read a painting by Marwan to assess the language by which it expresses the correspondence the artist maintained between his home culture and the culture of his residence? Such a question is central to Marwan's work not only because he continued to live in Germany with the full awareness of what continued to take place in the Arab world, but more importantly because the history of Arab painting is relatively recent in comparison to the centuries-old history of studio painting in Europe, the mother continent that gave birth to this form of self-expression and from where it was exported to the rest of the world.

Marwan Kassab-Bachi, better known simply as Marwan, was born in Damascus in 1934. At twenty-three, he went to Berlin to pursue his art studies. Within a few decades after his graduation, his work was sought by major art collectors and museums throughout Germany. Having been considered an original contributor to the making of the Berlin art scene, the Berlinische Galerie acquired a substantial collection of his art. To date, Marwan remains one of the most prolific Arab painters living abroad.

At a time when celebrated painters in the Arab world – of his generation or younger still – were as prolific as Marwan, their output has often been the product of repeating themselves and improvising on earlier breakthroughs that distinguished their art. Marwan, on the other hand, belongs to a rare breed of artists. In his infinite isolation during which he was mostly cut off from his home and friends, he worked on his painting with unyielding tenacity, patience and determination that never ceased to deepen his experience and refine his vision. Every one of his paintings is a world on its own. It goes through several transformations before it is considered finished. Some of his paintings take months, others take years to complete. In the meantime, he explores the same theme simultaneously on different canvases; at times, employing different media before he returns to the painting he started with. In the process, every work, be it a drawing, etching, watercolour or oil painting, was intrepidly leading to another and each would open up new horizons from where he could continue his exploration.

I shall limit my reading to a selection of key etchings and paintings he created between 1966 and 2004. Through this reading, I wish to show how each work led to the other and in what way each related to the native world the artist left behind. In the process, I shall trace the gradual transition he accomplished from a figurative to a more abstract language.

The selected works of this study attempt to tackle two major themes in his work. One is of the standing figure, the other of faces and heads. Together with the etching series, which was realized over the same period and which elucidated those two themes, one can gain a bird's eye view of key involvements in his art. By limiting his focus on those two themes in his work, the Damascene loner managed over the decades to build a metaphoric vocabulary all his own. From his visual contemplation of facial expressions and bodily gestures signified by mute signs, the artist who following his arrival in Berlin rarely had anybody to speak Arabic to, insinuated through the gestural signs of his figures their affiliation with verbal expressions in his mother tongue. Having been hermetically secluded since 1957 when he arrived in the German metropolis at the height of the Cold War, he has been approaching his two favourite subjects from a deeply introspective angle.

At a time when most other Arab painters expatiated on the human figure and the face as subjects in their art, the great number of their products reflected a generic nature. Rare are those painters who expressed an interest in painting the recognizable features of a specific individual. In contrast, Marwan who painted a portrait of his sister before leaving Syria, never ceased painting portraits of friends and colleagues who occasionally sat for him or those he painted from memory whom he left back home and whose portraits displayed symbolic references to their political trials and ordeals. In facial expression and bodily gestures, Marwan found his gateway to a personal language in which he could foster his originality. Most importantly, it was the scores of self-portrait paintings realized over a number of years that lead him to rediscover and hence reinterpret the face of the other. In the meantime, just as the autobiography has been a rare genre of writing in Arabic culture, the subject of self-portraits has seldom been of serious interest to any of his contemporaries in the Arab world. In fact, it is phenomenal how the self-portrait has been a rare subject throughout the history of modern Arab art, when the entire history of painting in Europe may all be recounted through the art of portrait painting.

Away from the Arab world, Marwan doggedly pursued what is revealed and what is concealed through the body's gestures and through the transient expression of a face. What facial expression has been for the traditional portraitist, bodily gestures have been for Marwan. For him, there has always been a latent relationship between the two subjects as there is one between the word and the voice. In the process, bodily gestures in his art never fail to act as the visual manifestation of verbal expression.

In every period in his development over the decades, as he continued to traverse terrains between his mimetic language of bodily gestures



**Marwan - figuration**  
1970 oil on canvas 162 x 114 cm

# MARWAN

## projects

- Galerie Hasendever 2017
- Biennale Venezia 2017
- Marwan Galerie Albrecht Berlin 2016
- Marwan Hamburg 2016
- Mosaic Rooms 2015
- Art Dubai 2015 and Armory Show
- Topographies of the soul - Barjeel, Sharjah
- early works 1962-1972 exhibition Beirut
- the damascus years
- early sixties
- sixties
- Heads
- Adonis - Für Marwan
- Joachim Sartorius - Speech in Honour of Marwan
- Robert Kudielka - Marwan and the Marionette
- Jörn Merkert - A Stranger in the World
- Kamal Boullata on Marwan
- Tristan Trémeau - Une peinture entêtante
- Jörn Merkert - Marwan's unknown early work
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and the metamorphoses of the face, he was unravelling further layers of the self and of the other.

#### 'Standing Man'

The 1970 oil on canvas painting that Marwan titled *Standing Man* was completed at a turning point in his career that coincided with a crucial period of political turmoil in the Arab homeland following the 1967 Israeli blitzkrieg in which Egypt's Sinai, Syria's Golan Heights and the remaining part of historic Palestine fell under Israeli military occupation. The painting represents the frontal image of a standing youth depicted from the top of his head to the middle of his thighs against a rosy grey background. What strikes the viewer at first sight is the nondescript clothing of the young man, which makes him appear loaded with ambivalence. The white longcloth covering his head and the sides of his face as it gently falls on his shoulders resembles the hatta, the headdress traditionally worn in this manner, without its black head cord, by the older generation of rural men in mosques and Arab churches during prayer and religious ceremonies. In contrast, the youth wears his hair long and is dressed in modern casual clothes with a sandy long-sleeved pullover loosely tucked in his dark grey jeans, reflecting a contemporary look commonly worn by young men and women everywhere in today's world. The figure's disposition, bodily gestures and mute signs reaffirm the ambivalence.

Viewed from a lower angle, the young man stands tall with both arms clenched to his body, stiffly held down much like a sudden and emphatic gesture during a conversation. While his stance with close-set legs appears to be firmly rooted in the ground, the movement of his gesture slightly tilted to the right side gives the impression that his body is tipping sideways.

What confirms this impression is the way Marwan positioned his figure relatively off centre to underscore the young man's gesture. With both palms curled and lightly lifted off his lap towards the viewer, each of the man's thumbs touch the index and middle fingers of each hand, a sign usually used in the Mediterranean region when one is asking another to be patient.

As the veiled youth looks down, straight at the viewer who is assumed to be positioned at a slightly lower angle as in a seated position, one cannot help but wonder: who could this tall ambivalent-looking young man be and why is he asking his onlookers for patience? The answer to these questions may be found in other works created around the same period during which Marwan was immersed with questions of the revealed and the concealed in the face and body. Out of his series of etchings, we find a number which also depict veiled young men frontally viewed in different positions. One of them portrays a youth with a baggy open shirt whose entire face and head are cloaked in a veil against a black background. Another portrays the frail body of a young man with a loose sweater against a grey background. A rectangular sheet covering his face and neck appears to float flatly over his face.

In both these prints, the frontal position of the figure appears ambiguous, as both the overhanging veil and the flat sheet could not in reality be sustained in the way they appear if the figures were actually in a standing position as all other indications of the image imply. Such visual ambiguity builds up as the background in each print simultaneously assumes the shades of a nocturnal sky and that of asphalt which indicate that the figure in each print could either be seen standing erect against the sky or lying horizontally on the ground; one connoting being alive and the other of being dead.

Interestingly, in German the title Marwan gave to the first print is *Der Verdeckte*, meaning 'the veiled' and the other he titled *Der Junge*, meaning 'the youth'.<sup>1</sup> In Arabic, however, he chose to give the same title to both prints using alternative descriptions in each. The given title is *al-Mulath-tham aw Fida'i* which translates to 'The Veiled or the Redeemer'.<sup>2</sup> The alternation in titling these two prints, as well as a number of other prints in the series, entails that 'the young', 'the veiled', and 'the redeemer' describe the same subject commonly referred to in English as 'freedom fighter'. Likewise, what alluded to an ambivalent position of the two veiled figures, each of whom may be simultaneously viewed standing and lying down, translates in visual terms the meaning of the Arabic word *fida'i*, which epitomizes the imminence of death in a living being. Thus, Marwan's use of the different titles seeks to represent the kind of apotheosis associated with the Arabic word *fida'i*.<sup>3</sup> How he expressed in his art what the redeemer's readiness for self-sacrifice meant for him was best described in writing by Jean Genet who was living among the Palestinians on *fida'i*yeen bases in Jordan at the same time Marwan was painting his ambivalent figures in Berlin. Genet remembered two young *fida'i*yeen filled with mirth and exultation as 'they were beating out more and more skilful and difficult rhythms on two new coffins which their long thin fingers transformed into drums.' The coffins were obviously destined for them or for comrades of theirs. Genet was later to liken the merriment of their improvised drumming on the coffins to the ebbing of the joyful passage in the 'Kyrie' of Mozart's Requiem.<sup>4</sup>

The years during which Marwan worked on his painting, *Standing Man*, and on his series of etchings that represented alternating titles of the veiled and the young, marked a critical period in the political history of the Arab homeland. The 1967 defeat of the Arab armies within six days, fomented rage and rampant despair among people throughout the Arab world. The state armies' humiliating defeat sparked the radicalization of the Arab youth as a new generation of Palestinian leaders—most of whom arose from the refugee camps and started taking

matters into their own hands. Inspired by the liberation wars in Algeria, Vietnam and Latin America, they called for a people's revolution and an armed struggle to establish a secular, democratic non-sectarian state in Palestine. Young Arab volunteers flocked from every corner to join the training camps of the fida'i-yeen. Wrapped in the black-and-white chequered headdress to conceal their identities, the veiled and the young fida'i-yeen were all ready to die anonymously in the battle for Palestine. Genet noted, 'they would put the predicament of all before their own individual wishes. They would set out for victory or death, even though each still remained a man alone with his own sensibilities and desires'.<sup>5</sup>

In a similar sense, Marwan's figures in his prints and paintings embodied in their standing position the verbal connotation of 'maintaining one's position' and expressing 'a halt for defense or resistance'. Thus, the 1970 oil painting *Standing Man* in all its ambiguities represents the incarnation of a young man's courage. A watercolour he painted the same year shows the figure of a youth standing in an identical position except that the semblance of the fida'i is made more explicit. The head is fully cloaked in the chequered headdress with only a slit of an opening for the eyes, an image that during the period had become the identifying mark of the anonymity of the fida'i.<sup>6</sup> Titled like the two prints, *al-mulath-tham aw fida'i*, the young man in the watercolour makes the same sign for patience as his thumbs are touching the index and middle fingers in each of his curled hands. In contrast to the watercolour that seems to have been a preliminary study, the standing figure of the young man in the oil painting has his face exposed as a sign of trust and openness before his imagined interlocutors to whom he gestures the sign for patience. With unmistakable directness, he looks on gently at them and at us, his onlookers. Amidst the national predicaments of the period during which the fida'i represented the sole hope for social change and national liberation, he had been besieged by burning questions, incessant demands and expectations that were blasted at him by his admirers and close observers. With both his hands, the standing youth signals the need for patience as it were to say: a social and political revolution could not be achieved overnight neither can it be realized without sacrifice.

With death literally hanging over the figure of the *Standing Man*, the silvery white sheet of longcloth covering his head alludes to the transcendent state of his selfless spirit. Like a halo, the traditional headdress crowns his head. His mundane clothes, which clash with that elevated state, only reflect the external appearance of his contemporary and youthful being. In bridging over the transitory and the transcendent, Marwan brings together the two distant worlds in which he was living in Berlin. The veiled youth heading for 'victory or death' indicates with a sign of his hands the need for patience. Through the wordless language of painting, the artist invites his viewers to cultivate the kind of patience needed to enter into the world of his *Standing Man*.

#### Self-Portraiture

Ever since the Renaissance when Cosimo de Medici allegedly said that 'every painter paints himself' each time one sits before an artist for a portrait, many are the Western art and cultural critics, as well as portrait painters, who reiterated the expression and commented on its significance. In modern Arab art, however, Marwan stands almost alone in his quest of portrait painting. Throughout his career, one may trace how his work revealed an intimate identification with all the portraits, or selves, of others that he painted. In fact, it was soon after completing his *Standing Man* that the process of identification with others he painted was pushed further by a whole new cycle of paintings and prints whose subject explored different signals summoning his own features as he looked at himself in the mirror. His self-portraits, however, if we can call them that, appeared to reflect the features of a being who is other than himself as much as his portraits of others had appeared to reflect his own traits. Though the viewer can see that the cycle of these works he spent a full decade painting are developed from the artist's looking at himself looking in the mirror, hardly anywhere does one find a title indicating that they are of him. When given a title, most of them are simply described as *Face*, *Head* or *The Veiled*.

Marwan's manner of keeping himself in the shadows when it comes to his self-portraits and avoiding any reference to himself, a manner which echoes the kind of ambivalence that encompassed his earlier work, is reminiscent of the literary genre in which the first autobiography in modern Arabic literature was written. By avoiding the first-person narrative form and employing that of the third-person to recount his own experiences as he grew up, Taha Husayn, the leading Egyptian intellectual of the twentieth century revealed his life story as he effectually concealed himself. His narrative style, which established a distinctive voice in modern Arabic literature, appeared to set the standard for self-revelation in fields beyond modern Arabic prose.<sup>7</sup>

Since the earliest self-portraits Marwan painted, following his painting of the young standing figure up until the last one, traces of that 1970 painting continued to be detected in his subsequent work. From the lower angle of vision that he maintained, wherein the standing figure was viewed from a seated position, he proceeded to increase the angle's obliqueness. By placing his mirror on a low-lying support and possibly as far down as the ground and at the same time magnifying his focus of the central features of the face, its foreshortening distortions created

the unfamiliar illusion of looking up at the painter's face from where he had been standing above his mirror.

Marwan's identification with the veiled young man in his works during the 1970s reflected his continued preoccupation with the subject of what is concealed of the body and what is revealed through signs and gestures, which is further revealed particularly in his earliest self-portraits. In some, the painter has his face frontally appear through a thin opening of a veil placed on the head in the very same manner it was placed upon the head of his Standing Man, except that this time the veil was neither chequered nor plain white but transparent. In others, his face is not covered from the head down but from the bust up whereby his foreshortened head with his flowing hair is viewed as it were from the foot of a bed as his chin and upper bust appear covered under bed sheets as if it were a metaphoric allusion to his exile and the freezing winters of Berlin.

In all his self-portraits, what reinforces the visual distortions of his foreshortened face, making it appear as if it were reflected in a liquid mirror, is the unfamiliar horizontal orientation he maintains in portraying his countenance. At times – with his close-up of the spread-out face usually confined to the central features between the forehead and the chin – his horizontal self-portraits exceed two metres wide. The artist's face, which, with the transparent headdress, once echoed that of the young man who laid down his life for his people, thus assumes the characteristics of a landscape. The tint of bronzed skin recalls earth's autumnal shades and its golden glow amplifies the ochre tones of wheat fields under sunset skies.

The artist's features resembling those of a full moon lightly marks what looks like undulant land as they spread out horizontally across the canvas. Jo?rn Merkert, director of the Berlinische Galerie, summed it all up when he described Marwan's horizontal self-portraits as 'landscapes of the soul'.<sup>8</sup> One may add that they are the pictorial equivalent to the central leitmotif in Mahmud Darwish's poetry wherein images of the homeland's landscape are interchanged with those of the poet's limbs as the landscape's familiar details are metaphorically represented as the extension of the poet's body.<sup>9</sup>

#### The Other's Portrait

After having focused ever so closely on his own looks as he was looking through the mirror at himself, Marwan moved on to concentrate more intently on the faces and heads of anonymous selves while occasionally painting the portrait of a friend or colleague whom he asked to sit for him. Just as much as he could see his own face spreading out horizontally and alluding to a rolling landscape, his anonymous faces, which mostly assume a vertical orientation and which continue to be confined to the face's central features, often reach monumental proportions, some of which exceed three metres high. What is most striking in this development, however, are not the faces' extravagant dimensions, which are simply the external manifestation of an organic component of the artist's creative intention, but the realization that the transition between his self-portraits and the painting of the anonymous selves witnessed a subtle transmutation from a free mode of figuration to a rigorous form of abstraction. In the process, the metaphoric vocabulary he had cultivated over the decades was replaced by a more atomistic articulation of his aesthetic language. By abandoning his earlier metaphoric allusions that were transmitted by means of bodily signs and gestures, the transformation his work underwent actually swerved from a pronounced concentration on content, wherein form had simply been a vehicle to express meaning associated with speech, to a language in which form and content were to become inseparably united in his pictorial construction. His painting was thus turned from the more naturalistic stance that for long was associated with verbal implications to one that strived towards a purely plastic mode of expression. Naturally, it was through the very manner of painting his faces and heads of anonymous selves that this transformation was most graphically articulated.

Throughout the 1960s, during which Marwan's paintings usually depicted a solitary male figure standing frontally amidst a desolate space making signs and gestures, and until the early landscape faces he painted of himself during the early 1970s, his paintings had been composed of relatively thin layers of paint that were evenly spread with a soft brush on canvas. His forms were delicately delineated with a sharp-pointed brush that was often employed with the marking effect of a drawing pencil to accentuate a body's definition or grasp a detail such as a finger's mimetic sign. With clear-cut contour lines of his forms against his plain and vacant backgrounds, the surface of his paintings remained smooth and velvety as his palette continued to be dominated by earth colours which were often counterpoised with accents of black and white, sepia and mustard yellow, lilac, roseate and olive brown shades.

The painting method he employed over the years along with the earth colours he confined himself to, were congruent with his intention to give body to the dismal and forbidding world of aliens, exiles and outcasts that he must have felt part of during his first two decades of isolated life in Cold War Berlin. At the time, all his paintings were created either during the night or on weekends because he spent his entire days working as an assistant to a furrier to earn his living. Loaded with signs and symbols associated with verbal expression, each one of his figures stood alone or occasionally with a partner in a deserted and shallow space and each painting seemed to echo the muffled outcry in a recurring nightmare.

In his artistic development from a metaphoric interpretation of his world to a more abstracted and painterly configuration, the transformational changes his language underwent called upon the viewer to explore new ways of looking. The painter's earlier need to endow his figures with bodily gestures was sublimated and transposed into the artist's own gestural method of applying paint onto his canvas. Therewith, he abandoned his oblique angle from which most of his standing figures and self-portraits were viewed as it were from the low stationary position of a seated viewer. In turn, his atomistic manner of painting heads, each of which assumed a static and frontal position, compelled the spectator to move around the artwork to consider different angles from which to view his enigmatic heads. Having reduced the portrait to its most essential close-up components, whereby the features often blended with the background, it was the network of overlapping layers of paint that Marwan wove out of successive stabs, dashes and fluent twirls of his brush that became the very content of his work. Thus, throughout his paintings, the pulse of his visual field throbbed with a gestural mode of expression that left its distinguished markings and textural traces on the canvas. Employing broad brushes and avoiding any linear definition, features of the close-up face were blurred and fragmented as it reflected a perpetually fluttering impression and a diffused sense of volume cloaking the painted self with a mystery that recalls the kind of ambivalence and ambiguity that characterize the painting of his earlier selves. This new method of painting his abstracted faces produced the appearance of a multiplicity of faces in the one and the same face.

As for the spectator before Marwan's new method of gestural expression, the mysterious impression of a flutter rippling throughout the fragmented facial features of each of his faces invites one to come close to take in the painting. From a close range, the painter's colour fragments dissolve into an abstract crust of pigment making one acutely aware of the slightest dab of paint that contributes to the making of a Marwan head. The moment one moves back from the work, however, the initial flutter sensed is translated into a number of overlapping faces that seem to simultaneously emerge from beneath the layers of brushstrokes wherein the features appear to shift places all along with creating the unsettling illusion of seeing different facial expressions in a single head.

By composing a face out of painting and repainting its features as it unfolds with multiple expressions, it seems that Marwan, with his usual intensity, was seeking to go to the very core of what in Italian has been called since the Renaissance, *ritratto* (from the verb *ritrarre* literally meaning to retract). Thus, every time he sat to consider the repainting of one of his portraits, he was as it were constantly "retracting" earlier appearances of a face he saw or imagined. Sometimes the process took him several weeks, at other times it took him months and a number of his heads took as many as five years for him to consider them concluded. By disavowing earlier appearances of a face, or by keeping only traces of them and veiling each new apparition with fresh facial expression, Marwan managed to crystallize the emotion of flippant moments when a face wavers at the same time as his markings evoked the viewer to contemplate the enigmatic metamorphosis of a face as it continues to change over the years. Through the contemplation of a destiny in the painted image of a face, one sees how each of Marwan's paintings is as different from the other as individual selves are from each other.

#### Heads in Pairs

The *Friend* is how Marwan chose to title each work in a cycle of paintings that he embarked on during the early 1980s and that he resumed during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Each of them depict a pair of heads frontally set side by side but turned in the opposite direction of each other. Simultaneously, during the same period he worked on paintings representing frontal pairs of heads that are placed on top of each other, titling each *Reflection*. Both groups of paintings within this cycle of works complete each other. Constructed with dabs and short brush strokes, each of the two faces radiates with the warm tones of ember with dashes of golden streaks whereas the face next to it or below it lurks in some brown and black shadows of fresh-turned earth. By having the composition in one group arranged horizontally and the other vertically, Marwan seems to have sought retracing the directions of a cross which has been the chief symbol he alluded to in two paintings dedicated to the Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab whose metaphor of the cross and crucifixion reflected a tormented life torn between political directions. The watercolour painting on paper and the oil on canvas were both painted in 1965, a year after the poet's death.

At first sight, the viewer standing before any of the paintings with two heads may wonder, could this pair of frontal faces painted in this oppositional setting represent the face of the self and that of the other? Or, does each of these paintings reflect what Jung defined as the *anima* (soul) versus the *persona* (mask)? By reading the titles *The Friend* and *Reflections*, however, the viewer of this cycle is persuaded to believe that the pair of faces in each painting represents those of Life and Death as embodied in the commonly popular saying, "Death is Life's companion".

Thus, by placing the fragmented faces of Life and Death side by side in a quasi symmetrical composition, or placing the two faces on top of each other as if one is the reflection of the other, recalls how the earliest portraits painted or sculpted throughout the region, from Fayyum in

Egypt to Ebla in Syria to Ur in Iraq, have all been believed to represent the eternal bond between life and death. More specifically, contemplating Marwan's pair of faces portraying the 'friendship' between life and death and the meeting between the horizontal and the vertical compositions bring to mind the two prints etched over two decades earlier in which the figure of the veiled youth could be simultaneously seen as being alive and dead.

Just as the two prints and watercolour carrying the same title serve as a key to interpret Marwan's 1970 *Standing Man*, the series of prints created over three decades from 1967 to 1998 supply a fitting background that allows us to reflect upon the artist's journey and perceive more distinctly his relentless pursuit to arrest the multiplicity of appearances in a single face.

Adding up to ninety-nine, a number that coincides with the number believed to be that of the Divine Names of God in Islamic culture, Marwan's prints are limited to that number.

While the one-hundredth and greatest of all the glorification names remains hidden, Marwan's one-hundredth print is left blank except for a verse by the twelfth-century Arab Sufi, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, which sums up the artist's lifetime quest. It says, 'the face is but one; only by counting the mirrors it multiplies.'

Over half a century did go by but Marwan's rootedness in his oral and cultural tradition never prevented him from contributing to modernity in art. Has his contribution been that of an insider to the evolution of modern Arab art, or that of an outsider to the making of modernity in German art? Such a question goes to the heart of the historic debate crystallized by the cultural encounter between East and West. Jürgen Merkert put it this way: Marwan, 'like no other has mastered the language of European art even in the face of its glorious tradition of painting and yet has steadfastly related the wonders of the world from which he comes.'<sup>10</sup>

*This essay originally appeared in Arabic in the literary journal al-Akhar, no. 6 (Autumn 2011). It is being published for the first time in English.*

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Published by Meem Gallery in 2015 for the  
Armory Show Catalogue*