

ARTFORUM

Marwan Kassab-Bachi

BEIRUT EXHIBITION CENTER

Minet Al Hosn

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The Syrian poet Adonis composed seventy-five prose poems in his honor. The great Saudi novelist Abdelrahman Munif wrote the artist's most important monograph in Arabic. His major bodies of work include still lifes of marionettes and paintings of stretched and distorted faces. As the founder of an important summer art academy at the Jordanian foundation Darat al Funun in 1999, he tutored a generation of young talent, from the composer and sound artist Nadim Mishlawi to the painters Ayman Baalbaki and Tagreed Darghouth. His exhibition history is a veritable tour of art spaces once active in challenging adverse conditions: Baghdad's Museum of Modern Art (1980), Galerie d'Art 50 x 70 in Beirut (1994), and Galerie Atassi in Damascus (1995). For years, though, the early work of the Syrian-born, Berlin-based painter Marwan Kassab-Bachi, known as Marwan, has remained a mystery, rarely seen in anything but illustrated books, and all the more intriguing because his early work dates from the time of his friendship with Georg Baselitz.

Curated by Catherine David and coordinated by Mohamad-Saïd Baalbaki, an alumnus of the summer academy, Beirut Exhibition Center's "Marwan: Early Works 1962–1972" solves this mystery and more. Who knew there were so many early works? The show includes more than forty strange, fascinating, exquisitely colored paintings alongside watercolors, sketches, and drawings. The chance to take in so much all at once makes it possible to discern the patterns that run through Marwan's oeuvre. Over and over, we see portraits of men with extra limbs protruding from their thighs, shoulders, and mouths. We see men with split faces with objects the size of boulders on their heads, most successfully in a pair of works from 1965 titled *Bader Chaker al Sayyab* and *Munif Al Razzaz*. We see couples where the women are tiny and being pinched and the men look fearful, precursors to Marwan's later, more expressionist faces. Hailed as a modernist, Marwan appears sinister and playful here, a cross between Baselitz and Balthus.



Marwan Kassab-Bachi, *Munif Al Razzaz*, 1965, watercolor on paper, 24 x 18".

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

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