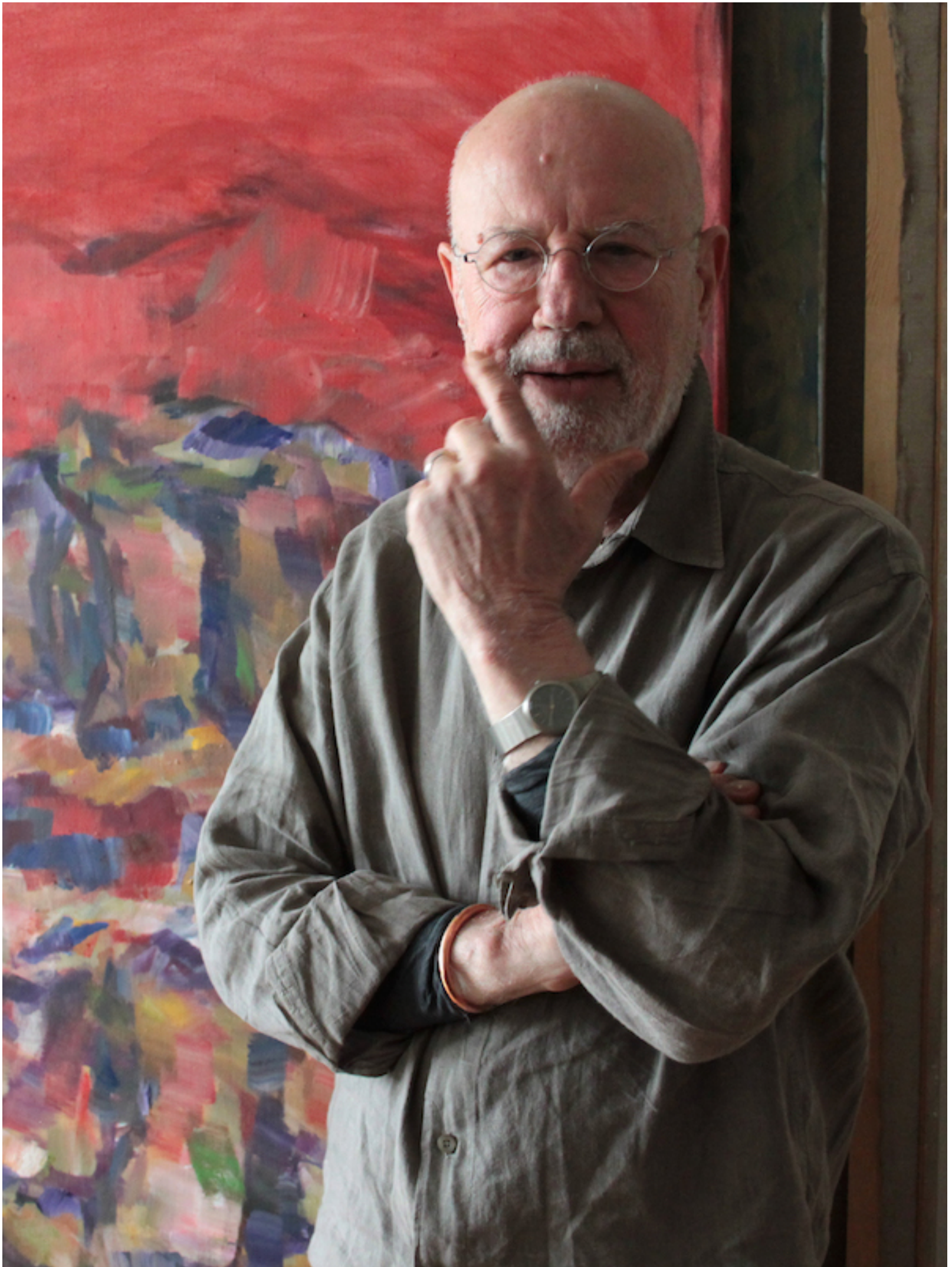


Marwan Kassab-Bachi (1934–2016)

[Omar Kholeif](#)



Marwan, 2012. Photo: Dietmar Bührer.

THE PAIN OF LOSS seems to pervade every corner of my life at the moment. Everything feels more precarious than ever before. I sat and watched the US election results from a hotel room in Berlin after having spent the day shivering in a bitter-cold forest fifteen miles outside of the city, where Marwan had just been buried.

[Marwan Kassab-Bachi](#), known simply as Marwan, was an artist whose imagination captured the minds and hearts of many. But he also moved beyond the limits of art, the limits of painting or canvas, indeed the limits of our imaginations.

I will begin by explaining how I met Marwan. It was in London at a hotel on the eve of an exhibition. I was charmed. Charmed by his desire to continue chain-smoking throughout our conversation despite the weather conditions and despite his seemingly frail health. He was a true rock star in my mind.

Days later at the Whitechapel Gallery we were to meet where I had installed a suite of his 1960s paintings, which extended from political figures to self-portraits. His works captured the imagination of over three hundred thousand visitors.

From then on, I followed Marwan as much as I could. I went to his studio in Berlin, where I sat in awe of a man who had consistently decided on a subject—the body, the face, its deconstruction, its reanimation. The human face as it appeared in Marwan’s work was one of violence and of beauty: a face that could look into and unfold the intangible qualities of what might live and breathe behind the formal confines of a traditional face. He once said to me, “I paint souls.” Marwan’s faces became landscapes, worlds that we could enter and let ourselves be free to dream within.

Next I followed him to Hamburg to an exhibition. Following Marwan was like following a godfather I had only just met. He would regale me with stories of Damascus, of Arabic folklore, of his tense relationship to the New

Figuration movement in Germany. He spoke of feeling accepted and then rejected in the Western world, but he was never bitter. Indeed, his meditative resolve made him ever more endearing.

Following Marwan became my key to unlocking my own pain, which was rooted in the absence of a father figure I could relate to. I imagined and fantasized what my life would have been like had I grown up with Marwan. His beautiful wife, Angelika, a former student of Marwan's, would sit with him and act as translator whenever he struggled to articulate an idea or lapsed into German.

I realize now that we spend our lives following certain people. Sometimes we follow too late, sometimes too soon. I do not know if I started following Marwan at the right moment, but I will continue to do so from this day forward.

Marwan was a figure that was kindred to many. At his funeral, I saw hundreds gathered from every walk of life. Yet what has always been clear to me was his hold on the Arab community. I had grown up in this population, and as a young boy I found myself struggling to find inspirational idols, figures that could contend with masters we had studied in our international schools, and so I fully understand his powerful appeal; he was, after all, a painter of our time, tackling the human subject like no one else. The pages of art history were for so long devoid of Arabs—people with names like my own, people who tackled or represented our world.

Marwan became an idolatry figure for me.

Death means nothing at all to an artist like Marwan. Indeed, he will continue to pulse not only through memory but also in the work that I will fight to exhibit—to illustrate his legacy to the world—a world that has still much to discover.

Marwan lives on in art as in life.

Indeed, he was, if anything, a historian of art. His faces, in particular, are an examination of the entire history of portraiture: from discombobulated

heads to abstract bodies, from caricature to surrealist wonder. These faces embody and are in dialogue with a genealogy of composition that stretches from the Egyptian pharaohs to the Greco-Romans to the tight close-ups of the digital era. For Marwan, the face is the most expressive of all landscapes; it is a universe whose emotion requires continual unfolding.

Having begun his work in earnest the late 1950s and early 1960s, Marwan soon began painting figures in a post-Surrealist style. His evocative bodies displayed likenesses of friends, poets, politicians, and the artist himself. The moods of his subjects, often a mix of somber and desirous on inspection, pierce through the fourth wall of the canvas, presenting us with an uncanny vision of the interior composition of a conflicted being.



Marwan, *Three Palestinian Boys*, 1970, oil on canvas, 51 x 64".

Born in Syria and having spent the majority of his adult life in Germany, Marwan remained a proud Arab to the end of his life—someone who

believed in and followed political struggle and voiced his opinion about human-rights issues not only in his native Syria but in Iraq and Palestine as well—a subject that he continually returned to in his painting, such as in his epic canvas *Three Palestinian Boys*, 1970.

In the end, though, the impact of Marwan's work extends beyond any single identity, whether Syrian, Arab, or German. He was someone who asked us, indeed begged us, to think about representation, to think of art, to think of our bodies and our relationship to the canvas in new ways. He was, quite simply, a master artist.

Marwan's art will continue to act as a portal into a familiar yet uneasy territory—a topography of the human condition's pleasures as well as its traumas.

Marwan, to quote [Dylan Thomas](#), will not go gentle into that good night; he will continue to live and breathe in this world. He will “rage, rage against the dying of the light.” He will never go gentle into the night, or from this world. But rather his artistic spirit will continue to ignite generations of us, from darkness and into light.