

Marwan Kassab Bachi

contemporary arab artists

Marwan Kassab Bachi - SYRIA

Born in Damascus, Syria -1934- Lives and works in Berlin.

"Marwan paints images of human beings, very subjective images, never individual portraits. The person portrayed is always exemplary, unique and anonymous all at once. Such images... reveal a crisis of identity, [but] they also expose its contrary: an identity with consciousness and feelings, an identity with the world. Marwan's paintings question life and ego, touch upon the secret, and circle about it, reflecting it. Emerging in his paintings as a vision – as a "face"- the secret, disappearing, proclaims itself, vanishes. There to be seen, it again withdraws."

-John Merkert



The Friend | 2002 | oil on canvas | 230 x 160 cm

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Full text by Jorn Merkert

Marwan paints images of human beings, very subjective images, never individual portraits. The person portrayed is always exemplary, unique and anonymous all at once. Such images are Marwan's diary, brief notations of his personal moods. They are portrayals of personalities resulting from an extremely physical artistic process and they reflect the painter's conflict with the world. While reveal a crisis of identity, they also expose its contrary: an identity with consciousness and feelings, an identity with the world. Marwan's paintings question life and ego, touch upon the secret, and circle about it reflecting it. Emerging in his paintings as a vision - as a "face" - the secret, disappearing, proclaims itself, vanishes. There to be seen, it again withdraws.

Marwan is a kind of hedonist. Reality is experienced and assimilated in a wholly sensuous way, in self exposure. By losing himself to the world he suffers his own vulnerability. At the same time, a great deal of joy is present via apparent trivialities - tiny emotional experiences open to feelings of profound happiness.

Since Marwan is a painter whose work develops step by step, his work from the past years can be viewed thematically as well as creatively. In the early "figures and couples" (1966-1970), Marwan represents the spiritual dramas of individuals with a remote coolness combined with a lyric feeling in such a way that the viewer feels a tranquil melancholy. The nervous strain and tension these figures reflect our inner lives- their external isolation along with their often emphasized pointing hands monumentalizes spiritual loneliness. These figures are full of urgent yearning for another human being, and at the limits of such yearning they seem to desire to be the other persons, to be transfigured. While their yearning while their yearning often controls itself into signs of sexual, it remains fixed in an aggressive sign language instead of in abandonment or commitment. Gesturing under sever pressure, cramped in their aggression these figures are tortured and obsessed by their longing to overcome their torment.

In the "veil paintings" (1970-1973), the motif of the shawl is used to shape a more thorough and exact handling of color and space. Moreover, the shawl gives a more specific definition to the former obsessive though vague psychological content, It conceals, thus reveals, offers insight. Like a kind of bandaging it protects and hides, evoking a sense of resistance and inaccessibility. But combined with the pride one feels associated with such veiling, there is also modesty and shame; the shawl not only conceals - it exposes. Mysteriously, it tenders promises. Through delicate, clayey treatment of the surface, light and shadow are shown by the flickering shading of the paint. In this way, the transfixed, concentrated stress and tension become visible.

These early canvases are done in classical oil painting which favors a tone-to-tone style over a strong, colorful one. Instead of fresh, loud complementary colors, a limited palette of four or five colors is used. Blending in various ways, painted over in subdued glazing, the figures always remain on the surface itself. Illusionistic perspectives are never used, not even when suggested by the subject matter. The surface is composed with exact, linear outlines which, in spite of contrasting color areas, become transition because of the described blending. In this way, the various parts keep within the overall concept on an entirely abstract level - independent of the theme .

The color values alone develop undulating , wrinkled areas by the juxtaposition of their independent, three dimensional qualities. The color belongs exclusively to the surface of the painting, taking place only there. The sought after distortion, stress and contraction of the figures is not supported by any means independent of the painting - which would make the work mannerist - but conforms entirely to the creative medium. The mode of expression is identical to the artistic procedure.

In coming to terms with the surface, the attitude of the line drawing remains decisive for the layout of the painting. The surface areas also elucidate the experience of the figures: sometimes these areas are strangely full of suspense - for the amorphous, thickly woven backgrounds are actually, imaginatively seen, not backgrounds but surroundings. This explains why the isolation of the figures can be experienced so keenly, almost painfully as loneliness. For emptiness which surrounds theme is a dense, oppressive one. It is not merely artificial space, but coexistence within the painting, limiting and restricting the figures. One accepts the fragmentation of these human beings because it is identical with the artistic means and therefore directs one's interpretation, releasing it from speculation. Emptiness is the oppressor, cutting down these figures, crippling them, reducing them to egos, locking them in a tension which they seem to tolerate under the pressure of their own silence, only through severe straining, through exaggerated, frozen signs and gestures, is this lack of communication even denied. When it is, when it starts to give, we are confronted with fundamental questions about human beings. The "facial landscapes", from the beginning of the 70s, show faces which are broadly unfolded onto the surface and frequently cut into by the sides of the painting - that is , again, they are fragmented. The curvature of the head describes a gentle arch like the horizon of a wide landscape. By connecting different visual angles to various parts, the face is distortedly stretched over the surface. The view from below and the steep foreshortening correspond without interruption to the frontal view and the curved forward sides views. Several perspectives, therefore, coincide; movement and time and integrated in the stasis of the painting and simply by looking at the object in this way , a backward and forward movement occurs. This movement belongs exclusively to the painting's own pulsating, abstract temenos. A foreshortened forehead leads, on one hand, into the far depths of the paintings, but at the same time remains part of the face shown in frontal position, parallel and penetratingly close to the viewer. It is this penetrating oblique closeness which gives an illusion of immense size to these canvases. The face spills beyond the frame, expanding off its own vision, enveloping us. We can immerse ourselves in it, for having become small, we can stroll in its hills, ravines, plains and abysses. The "brow" appears darkened by clouds, the "cheeks" as though lit up by the sun. Even the gaze, which is peacefully, openly, questioningly directed to us, invites us to step inside. The plasticity of these faces resides in color cracks, color traces, color folds winding themselves together. Dense and loose areas, constructed with brief strokes and winding lines, alternates as elevations over the clayey color zones and are bushily cut up. In the pulsating, hovering interplay of color values, the various parts of the face are shifted towards each other with a circular motion. Again, it is not just the often fractured perspectives, but the color and its presentation which breaks up the face, transforming it into those qualities evoked by the word "landscape". Such in turn corresponds to the warm, earthy atmosphere of gold, red, brown yellow and pink tones, with little blue and little white. Now , as in the past, the painting - not naturalistic- illusionistic perspective- determines the theme. Curving lines, quick brushstrokes, in fact almost blows of pure color, are now placed more freely, more confidently and more energetically as elevations. The lines can no longer be interpreted as the graphic portrayal of a

theme, but as the presentation of light. Color is employed, independent of representation, as an autonomous means of expression. Thus any representational reproach is destroyed at the outset, or at least rendered more than ever secondary. More and more a vision of color and light overcome the toned-down, clayey effects in Marwan's paintings. The graphic framework is still there and, as in earlier works, the linear works, the linear-constructed compositions are still largely woven together by graduated color. But something new is happening: a breakthrough into pure color, a greater vivacity, and a more complex range of personal characteristics.

In the subsequent paintings from 1973, the problem of clearing the painting towards clear color is consistently confronted. In these canvases, we no longer come across gradation of space, but, rather, an interlocking of areas in which plasticity takes place as color event. As a result, a brighter coloration overwhelms the tone-to-tone process. Alongside the glazed method, in which colors are transparently mixed with each other, a spontaneous, flickering "handwriting" becomes more and more dominant, covering the canvas, guided not by the object but by light in a sensitivity animated net of dots, swirls and lines.

1973 was a year of electric development for Marwan, a breakthrough which had probably been seething for a long time. In 1973 his work blossomed, the flower of a free and independent painting culture, into which he introduced his accumulated knowledge of abstract expressionism and tachisme.

The watercolor "head" from 1973 is a precious incunabula for this breakthrough. Clayey, very delicate colors which run into each other are still applied thinly to the paper, but they are no longer toned down. They are mainly pure colors, presented in varying intensities, which occasionally run and fuse but which are primarily dabs, licks, splashes and curlicues fleetingly jotted down, autonomously presented, above all expressive within themselves. They no longer depict the face as object, but execute it as a recital of color and light. Areas of paper which have been left white elevate the light and, as negative shapes developed between brushstrokes, are expressive as the colors themselves. The face, in this way lit up and shone through, becomes a transparent, fleeting image, flowing in the transition of colors which no longer occur through blending but through the intercourse of the surface fragments. Severe, controlled shapes are broken up into colors which fuse in their dabs and lines only to immediately disperse. The clump, entangle, knot up, then stagger apart. The same time the radiance is pregnant with darkness and concealment; the light, joyful and feverish over its miraculous birth, half-hides and half-reveals the chaos within. Tremendous concentration and confidence are behind this fleeting appearance of a face which seems to be disappearing in the very act of becoming visible.

The qualities described in the watercolor are rendered on canvas in tempera-painting; its mixture of oils, water and egg, which quickly dries, allows a dynamic, handwritten application of paint. In many of the large "head" paintings, done in 1973 and after, there occurs ecstatic battles of color - twining masses of ribbons, strokes and dots, done in intoxicated, twitching brushwork. Interwoven colors determine the three-dimensional shuttle like motion in the loom of the painting. Nothing more is to be seen of perspective, not even by way of allusion. The painting becomes a color - space fabric of pure movement, which seems to leave the single blows of color in place only for a moment, as if the light were constantly changing, producing an effect of shimmering transparency. As viewers, we are experiencing the result of an extremely physical painting process, in which Marwan occasionally paints with the balls of his thumbs and his fingers in an ecstasy comparable in its intensity to an orgasm. The act of painting is experienced full by exploding, exiting zest like a dance into which one flings oneself with hallucinated abandon: a flight of all the senses in which Marwan existentially includes himself. In these paintings, happiness coexists with terror and in the heat of momentary unification life teems with death. Realistic form is completely destroyed; form of pure event of color and light while a ripe sensuality clings to the "face" become a grid, optimistic with dread, anxious with tenderness, suffering its knowledge of redemption.

The mostly very similar faces, which seem to be the same when looked at separately, are always different if one looks closer, because they are inner faces depicting mental conditions always in flux. Marwan almost always paints himself, although physically there is little facial resemblance - yet they are self-portraits from the view point of inner truth because they are psychic profiles of himself. Furthermore, they are precisely subjective because they are unique, exemplary and universal in their anonymity. Images of the specific, they enter our lives.

It is especially in these paintings that Marwan comes closest to the "écriture automatique" developed by the surrealists for recording the unknown of the inner life. In these ecstatic paintings, Marwan finds again and again images of the human being with his secret: that of life.

In looking at such images we do not simply gain insight into the inner life of an individual. We enter with all pure senses, indulging in a landscape of inner lives in which we recognize ourselves. In the paintings done since 1974, color and movement have been liberated in a way which two years before seemed inconceivable. We must view this development as Marwan's continuing unpacking of the human image. In post 1974 heads, he has moved closer and closer to the face. If the heads were cut off by the canvas edges before, now the paintings often show the face as a segment: the eyes and mouth frequently touch the edge of the canvas. The over proportions of the soul portrayed literally burst the painting's frame. Such greater closeness to the object is accompanied by an even more extensive disintegration in the handling of color. Nothing is abandoned of the apparently confusing spontaneity in the use of color with regard to the contents: rather it is carried on even further. And yet it is especially these paintings which radiate an enormous meditative peacefulness, yoking in vision the "vita activa" with the "vita contemplativa". If one engages them in persistent, patient dialogue, it becomes evident that the face only slowly emerged out of the abstract mass of coloring apparent contrast to the fast method of painting. And since it only does emerge for a moment, the act is experienced as a flashing realization invaded by the fact that the face is already receding gently into the whirlpool of color. If one comes across a painting which one has seen previously, a face may appear with a completely different expression. Where before a perhaps gentle, melancholy look reached us, we now are confronted with a seriously critical, sometimes mocking gaze in the very same painting. Then again we might also come across a knowing and at the same time unquestioning cheerfulness which we perhaps do not even bear within us, but which may be a precious memory. This multitude of faces only reaches a physical solidity from a considerable distance, as if we could only get hold of them if we were nearer. But when we do move closer to them, these faces almost disappear, manifesting themselves only in the fragments our memory retains of them from the previous distance. Such shifting planes of distance and perspective cause us to introject these faces; we step into them as they step out of us and what we learn about ourselves through them seems to remain with them.

Marwan is obsessed by faces because for him they are a means of expressing the dramatic depth of life. I do not know any artist anywhere who to such an extent has adopted the head, the monumentalized head, as practically his only theme, in which the world can be laid bare and last question put into painting. It is understandable, given our age, that Marwan does not indicate any ideals. He reveals conditions and experiences. It is important to keep in mind that in his paintings human beings are never presented whole - they are always fragmentarily corresponding to the symbolic of concealment or of emptiness. But this fragmentation is also the formal analogy to the mentioned visionary qualities: the slightly opened veil, for example, contain textures of unveiling, revelation, exposure, search for truth and discovery. In recent paintings, where darkness partially conceals the face, a light not only illuminates them, but contains in itself the image of enlightenment.

The fact that last questions are posed last answers are not attempted, confirms the honesty of Marwan's art. Engaged, humanistic, believing in life and in the human being, Marwan's paintings are also aware of our weaknesses, helplessness, instability and our hopes. Through such participation in and identification with human suffering, Marwan's abstract sieges of color do not remain detached, aesthetic, consumptional ecstasies, but reflect through a commitment that is essentially artistic, dramas of the single individual's inner life.