



Psychoanalysis and Painting: The Case of Abbès Saladi

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Among the Moroccan painters, Abbès Saladi is a special artist. He is the only one to have developed a very original imagination without succumbing to the fascination of sign which has engulfed a good part of the Moroccan painting for several decades.

In August 1992, I had just left Lyon to settle as a psychoanalyst in Casablanca. Soon after my arrival, I visited Abbès Saladi in his modest home in the Daoudyat district of Marrakech. It was two months before his death. I had told him of my intention to write a study of his work focusing on the relationship between psychoanalysis and painting. We made an appointment for the month of October to begin the interviews. Death worked faster than both of us. Abbès Saladi painted between two stays in a psychiatric hospital, a work from the depths of being. He embodied for me the best articulation between painting and psychoanalysis.

His work illuminates the genesis of the creative process as it is understood in

psychoanalysis. Among my notes, written on the day after our first meeting, I read again: “painting is the way to fight against madness and death, to affirm a hope of immortality, if only, as the poet Paul Valery says, “than that of a ‘laureated immortality.’” The shadow of death fell on his childhood and made him creative; his inner conflict has to do with depressive anguish. This shadow exerts on him a creative impulse, especially when he struggles with his anxieties. His depressive experience is dominated by the anguish of having lost the beloved object, of having lost it by his own fault, of having destroyed it at the same time that he loved it. The ensuing interior is that of “chaos,” which constitutes the symbolic figuration of death.

For Saladi, to paint is to revive the object loved, destroyed, and lost; to restore it as a symbolic object assured a certain permanence in its inner world. He paints to console himself for loss, mourning, and grief in order to be able to cope.

In general, the distinctive opposition that is in “works of chaos,” centers on the experience of death and “works of the robot,” to account for the experience of machination. The painting of Saladi, as long as it responds to an internal crisis, oscillates between these two poles: between death and evil, between the destruction of the self and the destruction of the object, between fragmentary perception and depression, between “chaos” and “robot.”

For Saladi, to paint is to transgress the taboos, to free oneself from threats, but also to play with fire. It is a descent into oneself which is also a descent into the underworld. The price of such descent is moments of anguish and depression. His painting is a revenge on childhood, on the family, on society, and even on the human condition.

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