

1976

War erupts in Lebanon with a frenzied violence.

Until then, Norikian had always painted wandering, dispossessed, humiliated, offended, estranged women and children, everlasting victims of an everlasting conflict, which coincides with the historical and indeed the metaphysical condition of mankind.

In the likeness of his images and in the logic of his paintings' major obsession, he too takes the road, on the path of exodus.

What he had never, in a way, ceased anticipating, foreseeing and one might say foreshowing, had finally happened. He had anticipated it because his gaze, turned towards the past, discerned in it a red thread of blood and death, exactions and crimes.

The Tragic being imbedded beforehand in his painting in the guise of a timeless archetype, any real tragedy can only be its contingent embodiment, its present illustration.

Paris allows him to pursue his work, at first on its last tracks. Then, with the persistence of war in Lebanon and his prolonged stay in the French capital, a new, more relaxed, one dares not say happier atmosphere sets in: his female teenagers, flotsam and jetsam of History, seem to find a roof, a shelter, and even an artist's studio where they can discover and reveal their forgotten womanliness, concealed if not cancelled by their past tribulations and trials.

Try as they may to emerge from the anonymity of the crowd or the group and gain access to the individuality of the face and the body, they still keep the old veil of worry and anguish that darkens their forehead and their eyes.

In their black gaze, often tuned inward, there looms an infinite sadness, an anxiety of being, a feeling of precariousness confirmed by their ever naked feet of homeless and without family, errant youth, feet hardened by dint of roaming from canvas to canvas on endless roads, under fiery and stormy skies.

Each picture represents a station on this way of the cross, a stage in this labyrinth Diaspora without issue.

The artist's studio where they are modeling is but an intermission between two catastrophes, an illusive interlude, a respite which they do not trust much, in any case not to the point of letting go and allowing their body to relax and bloom. Sitting taut and tense, in frontal architecturally structured poses, they face the onlooker as by challenge. With an uneasy and distrustful watchfulness, they cross their hands and their legs to lock up their body as if still fearing violence or rape. Or, bent down, they give in to despondency, a gloom, or a spleen, which renders their flesh cheerless and their nudity rather pitiful, their half-open shirt scarcely revealing a shy breast.

His canvases of refugees seemed to move, after 1976, in the direction of a realist representation of a panoramic space with wide celestial horizons, based on the drawing up

in echelon of the picture planes and the inclusion of architectural landmarks.

The compositions had either a central core (sitting or standing characters) or a diagonal, complete or incomplete, straight or crooked, structure (two slanting branches joined by a vertical one, etc...), or also a cruciform structure: a transversal shape (i.e. a crowd) crossing a longitudinal one (i.e. characters in the foreground topped by a building or a cloud in the background).

In those works, Norikian inclined towards an angular schematization of graphics and chromatic simplification through the interplay of hot and cold colors (reds, yellows, oranges, and blues, blacks, whites) displaying the contrast and interaction of dualities: darkness and light, intensities and tenuousness, opacities and transparencies.

Alternately worked with the brush and the spatula, on a well primed canvas, with superfluous traces of paint carefully scraped off in order to thin and flatten the organic matter while enriching its texture through a play of hues produced by delicate peeling with the spatula of white or colored stains or trails of paint off the uppermost coat, as well as by the numerous shades and gradations of tones and tints and the clever distribution of values, Norikian's paintings aimed at a kind of ample breathing, of calm stability, as if the drama had settled into habit.

Spatial realism was further emphasized, parallel to increased accuracy and distinctness in drawing and virtuosity in color handling, in the portraits of mature, middle-aged women, in the studio models, nude or otherwise, and in the depictions of candle-bearing women on their way to church, almost convinced beforehand of the pointlessness of the rite.

Even when they surround themselves with flowers and mandolins, they still belong, by their carriage, their peasant garb and a kind of pathetic awkwardness inseparable from their ill-being, to the people of the destitute, of those who, at each turning-point of History, let themselves be smashed, victims of the tyrannical, omnipotent Father, ever invisible but ever present in his very absence. A Father who governs in iniquity and abomination and imparts life and death, war and peace, fortune and misfortune to Norikian's mankind or rather womankind, since it is meaningfully reduced to its most vulnerable members, women and children, easy sport to the unrelenting passions of the Father and the men who embody him.

Norikian might well strive to repress the image, even the recollection of this unnatural Father, it resurfaces surreptitiously in the ruinous churches to which the miserable crowds turn their backs, as if no compassion was to be expected from this indifference. It bounces back again in a very unusual gesture, a rare one in Norikian's work, where there are neither actions nor gesticulations, but waiting and wandering without beginning nor end.

This gesture, a fist brandished against the sky, in one of the splendid canvases painted after the last earthquake in Armenia, expresses at once the bitterness, the revolt, the impotence and the dereliction of those who have no choice but malediction and blasphemy.

This gesture is echoed, in a second imposing canvas, by another strange innovation: an endless scream of terror and horror resounding suddenly in this world where, since the start, reigns sovereign the forced silence of speechlessness, of the inanity and impossibility of the spoken work, of dialogue and communication, as absent as the Father, the only master of Speech and Action in History and Nature.

In order to express themselves, his victims have only aphonic, grinding of teeth, biting of fingers and, when too much is too much this non-work, this wild anti-word of the primal scream reverberating into the void, an inarticulate shriek addressed to Nobody. It re-echoes from time immemorial and it will continue re-echoing as long as there will be, in History, massacres and wars and, in Nature, cataclysms and catastrophes.

The Armenian earthquake seems to have given a new impulse to Norikian's painting.

In the post earthquake canvases, breathing becomes jerky, stability gives way to convulsion, the earthly foundation disappears, handling tightens, lines remain angular, compositions transcends spatial realism towards a kind of central mobile chimney where the characters rise tier upon tier, without objective and rational spatial relationships, many scenes being compressed into the same ascending movement. The onlooker is obliged to follow it from the lower edge of the canvas where close-up characters are cut off at shoulder or chest level, as if they were practically located in the same spatial field as the onlooker, whereas previously the distinction of the pictorial and the real fields was clear-cut, a return to an old compositional practice of Norikian.

The eye continues ascending up to the top of the canvas, where, again, a character might be cut off at neck level. No body below, no head above. In any case, the movement of the composition, instead of spreading itself entirely within the canvas frame, oversteps it and seems to carry on outside, as by a double stretching suction, leaving the sides free for pure pictorial work.

At the same time, new, more dynamic postures and gestures make their appearance: the play of hands and fingers on faces, the kneeling woman, her head bent between her raised forearms with her fingers fanning out, in a prostration not of worship but of mourning and lamentation, or the group of characters surrounding a wounded boy just above the howling girl, her mouth a huge gap, her hands pressed on her cheeks, in a striking close-up.

Although drawn together by the drama, they remain each one in his or her previous loneliness and vulnerability. No contact seems possible, in this state of impotence and misfortune, except that between a mother and her child, the only positive aspect in this world of negativity.

In turn, interpenetrating colors get spirited and galvanized, brushstrokes get more nervous and disorderly because more emotive and throbbing with life: chromatic simplicity turns into complexity, work in depth displaying remarkable richness of expression, variety and freedom of handling.

The authentic renewal of the pictorial approach and the change of palette conjoin henceforth, in the fictitious space of the canvas, figuration and abstraction into a dynamic composition electrified by a drama which, like the war in Lebanon before, makes of Norikian's work a retrospective and a premonitory performance at once.

Hence the return, after a tentative descriptive diversion, to the rejection of facility and seduction: beyond their purely painterly qualities, but through them, Norikian's works set themselves up as an indictment of the sorry state of our soul and our conscience as much as an unimpeachable report on the state of our world and our times in which, more massively and more frequently than ever, whole populations are thrown on the way of exodus.

More than ever before, Norikian is a witness of his time committed to the ethical-artistic struggle for the reinstatement and the respect of the Face and the rights of the Other, of women, children, the weak, the unloved, the oppressed and the rejected.

No struggle is nobler and no cause is more urgent than the “Humanism of the Other Man”, as the French philosopher Levinas would say.

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