



faces in the
landscape

marwan kassab-bachi

With his works held in an array of public and private collections worldwide, Syrian artist Marwan Kassab-Bachi holds a commanding position on the stage of Contemporary Middle Eastern art. Through his monumental canvases he explores the inexorable solitude of life, touching on aspects as varied as joy, longing, sensuality, sadness and death in a cosmos of his very own creation.



TEXT BY JAMES PARRY
IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Previous pages: *The Veil*. 1973. Oil on canvas. 130 x 195 cm.
Facing page: *Jarba Village*. 1947/48. Oil on wood. 13 x 18 cm.

Calmy tucked away in a leafy residential section of Berlin's district of Pankow, one of the most celebrated artists of the Middle East, Marwan Kassab-Bachi, more usually known as Marwan, creates his masterpieces. Formerly on the Communist side of the German capital's infamous wall, Pankow may seem an unlikely location for an artist of such renown. Yet it was here in the 1950s that the then East German government established a purpose-built artists' quarter, to which Marxist artists and writers exiled from their home countries were invited to come and work at government expense. Set in attractive landscaped grounds and gardens, the spacious villas are complete with splendidly lit studios and, following the collapse of the Communist regime and the reunification of Germany in 1990, they became highly sought after by artists looking to get out of the 'hot-house' atmosphere of West Berlin.

Marwan's journey to Germany began over a half a century ago. He left Syria in 1957, by boat from Beirut to the Italian city of Genoa, his intention being to go to France, at that time "the Ka'bah of art and literature," as he puts it. With seminal figures such as Sartre, Camus and the many artists that were active in Paris at that time, the French capital was an irresistible draw for artists from all over the world. However, as so often in life, politics intervened, and the outbreak of the Suez crisis prompted the severing of French links with Syria. For a Syrian passport-holder like Marwan, France ceased to be an option, so instead he headed to what was then West Germany. Germany – and more specifically Berlin – has been his home ever since.

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A Man with Deep Roots

Marwan is, however, unequivocally Syrian. Acutely aware of his 'Syrian-ness', he is imbued with a sense of identity that transcends the physical and assumes a deeply emotional and spiritual hue. His starting point is the country's landscape, for which he retains a deep yearning: "It's me, my identity. I cannot imagine life without this sense of being rooted in the soil." The son of a wealthy corn merchant, Marwan grew up in the old city of Damascus. His family owned land outside the city, and at weekends there were regular family expeditions to the local villages. As a small boy, he became transfixed

by the rural landscape there: "It shaped my feelings, and indeed my future. I loved the sense of movement through the landscape, and landscape has since become a metaphor for my identity, my family and the place where I was born." He has little time for modern-day Damascus, lamenting the passing of the city he once knew: "Today it's all mobiles

and computers, and the outskirts have changed totally. I hardly recognise them now."

Although his family were highly educated and mixed in artistic circles, the young Marwan had no formal training in art. Indeed, he chose to study Arabic literature at university, although he has no doubts about how his destiny lay within the arts: "If I had not been a painter, I would have become a poet or an author." Indeed, he retains these literary links to this day, and is good friends with many of the Middle East's most celebrated literati, including Abdul Rahman Munif and the iconic poet, Adonis. However, it was to the artist's



profile

canvas that Marwan was drawn, partly as a result of a chance encounter in the house of a school friend. The friend's father was a keen amateur artist, and Marwan was once shown into his studio, where a freshly painted copy of a famous Monet work was resting on an easel. He recalls how "...it was not so much the Monet that impressed me but the smell that I encountered there. That wonderful mix of turpentine and oil paint, so sensual and erotic." To this day, Marwan's favourite medium is oil: "Acrylic may be faster and cleaner, but there is nothing like the alchemy of oil."

Marwan still owns several of his early works, painted whilst he was growing up in Syria and before his departure for Europe. Among the most striking – not least in terms of the skill and level of accomplishment it demonstrates in one so young – is a small oil painting of the village of Jarba, painted when he was only 13 or 14. Clearly influenced by the French Impressionists, it shows a precocious talent and marks the first step in Marwan's journey through the landscape of life. His travels have taken him in various directions, but from those early landscapes and contemporary portraits of his sister to his monumental recent works, he has never lost sight of his obsession with the agony of the human condition and particularly with the enduring pain of everyday aspects of life such as loneliness and longing. His most celebrated human images, of huge heads and faces, are decidedly uncompromising and even unnerving: "My art is quite confrontational. People don't always like it, as they often want something more 'sweet'", he observes, with a wry smile.

Landscapes of Heads and Humanity

For Marwan, the head is a landscape. A world, rather. Or even a universe. It can represent all these things, and as such is an expression of the human soul, appearing simultaneously compassionate and melancholic. Decidedly human and humane, but frequently ambiguous in a sexual sense, v

Marwan's heads – and there are hundreds of them – have become synonymous with his name and style. They are, however, first and foremost an expression of self and of the emotions he has felt, and feels.

After Marwan's first few years in Germany, the political situation in Syria changed, and his family lands and wealth were confiscated by the authorities there. Cut off from his native home in a physical and emotional sense, he was forced to fall back on his own resources. For several years he worked full-time as a cutter in the fur trade, during which time he was only able to paint during the night and at weekends.

The enforced estrangement from his homeland prompted an acute sense of homesickness that permeated his very being, something that still resonates today: "I have homesickness everywhere.

A sense of longing for elsewhere is deep within my soul. For this reason I can say that I've kept my sense of 'home' [Syria] rather more than some of those who still live there."

The fact that such feelings are often hidden away, out of view, is equally significant for Marwan. He remembers how once, from his studio, he saw a woman who had a small pet bird, which she would hold in her hand and talk to lovingly. It was her only friend. "She shared her loneliness with this creature," he recalls, viewing this little episode as a poignant example of "how secret things happen in life that you can't imagine."

This interrelated complex of feelings stares out from Marwan's heads. "I started using my own features as a symbol, as a mirror. My face as a window on my world, I suppose," he reflects. Yet Marwan's portraits are not portraits in the conventional sense. Rather, they are signs,

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Previous pages:
Left: *Head*. 1998. Oil on canvas. 146 x 97 cm.
Right: *Head*. 1999. Oil on canvas. 162 x 130 cm. Private collection, Belgium.
Facing page: *Figuration*. 1966. Oil on canvas. 162 x 130 cm.



"My art is quite confrontational. People don't always like it, as they often want something more 'sweet'."



“I put [the marionette] on the table in my studio and almost immediately it became part of my presence. So I made a still life of it.”

pointers towards a way of accessing and – perhaps – understanding the wider cosmos. They also reflect Marwan’s view of the inestimable value of the Orient and of Islamic culture specifically, the mixture of the hidden and the obvious, elements of mystery and sensuality, and his conviction that both the West and East can draw great strength from each other. As an artist who values honest dialogue, Marwan finds much of concern to him with regard to what is happening in the world today, especially in the Middle East. Such a critical attitude is extended equally to himself and his work. He confesses readily to being overly self-demanding, but firmly believes that the quest for real art and artistic achievement hinges on such stringent self-analysis. “We know this from Van Gogh, Giacometti and Monet, for example. They were all like that.”

Faces on the World

Uniquely Marwanesque, the ‘face landscapes’ serve as a metaphor for his physical connection to his routes, and some of his later works become very embedded in their landscapes, featuring multiple faces. Even during a period of the 1980s, when he produced a series of still-lives, these were heavily landscape-oriented, set in a “melancholic, dreamy sky in the afternoon,” as he recalls. The faces, meanwhile, were invested with a whole host of qualities, ranging from the sensual and erotic to feelings of marginalisation and shyness. These are recurring themes for Marwan and are strikingly apparent in his more recent series of monumental works featuring, perhaps somewhat incongruously, a marionette doll. These huge canvases are big for a reason – “the presence is very important” – and were inspired by a virtually life-size doll

Facing page:
Marionette.
2006. Oil on
canvas.
97 x 146 cm.

he bought from one of his students (he was a senior professor at one of Berlin’s universities). The marionette assumed an early and profound significance: “I put it on the table in my studio

and almost immediately it became part of my presence. So I made a still life of it.”

One of the most striking aspects of the marionette or doll paintings is the organic quality of the central figure; in each work it seems to grow out of the canvas, reaching out and assuming control in both a physical and emotional sense. It is clear that the artist feels a great affinity with his creation: “It’s like a tree, with roots ... I feel like a tree myself, growing from the earth, up to the sky, eaten by the weather and insects. The roots, and me, we are connected with the soil.”

As a creator of art, Marwan is a tough taskmaster and not one to take prisoners, metaphorical or otherwise. He is an obsessive over-painter, re-doing sections (or, indeed, all) of his

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canvases up to 30 or more times before finally sitting back and allowing completion, however grudgingly. He is rarely, if ever, satisfied with a work: “I feel like a killer, always destroying and trying to reach the unattainable. I leave hundreds of victims en route. In any case, you need 50 years to decide whether or not a work is good or not. You

need distance from it.” This may well be so, but the multi-layered approach gives an intense fullness to his works that is immediately breathtaking. The depth of the paint reflects the profundity of the feelings the works express, yet despite the investment of time, energy and emotion, Marwan is surprisingly prosaic about both the process and the result: “You don’t get anything for nothing. You have to work at it, in order to have something. All I want is my art, my coffee and my cigarettes.”

Marwan is represented by Galerie Sfeir-Semler, BCA Gallery and Galerie Michael Hasenclever. For more information, visit www.marwan-art.com