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Saturnine Portraits Somewhere Between Damascus and Berlin

Janet Tyson | December 3, 2015



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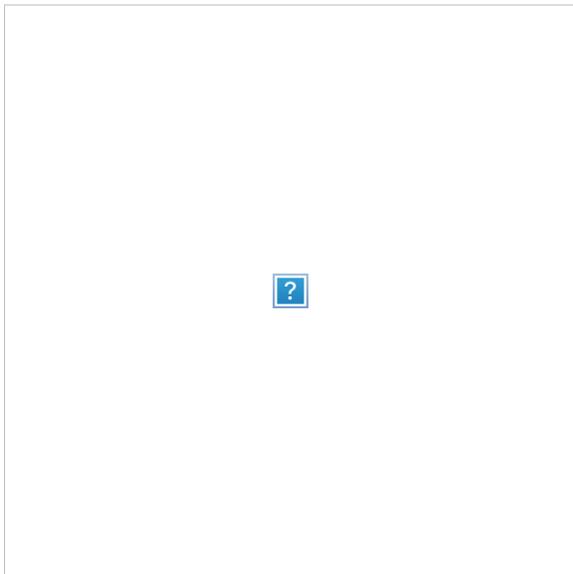
Marwan, “Untitled” (1976), etching and watercolor on paper, 70x100cm (all images courtesy The Mosaic Rooms unless otherwise noted)

LONDON — Pictures by the Damascus-born, Berlin-based artist Marwan Kassab-Bachi are neither Arab nor European, Syrian nor German, but occupy

the liminal space that diasporic people find themselves in. That liminal ambiguity or, perhaps more accurately, ambivalence is on full display in the artist's first one-person exhibition in the UK, presented by The Mosaic Rooms. *Not Towards Home, But The Horizon* presents some 50 years of figural works on paper and expressive oil paintings large and small by the 81-year-old artist.

The exhibition's title, itself, is particularly elusive. Marwan, as he commonly is known, was born in 1934. At that time, the city was like a paradise, he told a gallery audience shortly after the exhibition opened. But he nonetheless decided to leave in 1957, so that he could live in another paradise: Paris. Instead, he ended up in Berlin — about as far from paradise as one could be. A place of brutality

and isolation, he said it was akin, then, to what Aleppo is now. In 1973, he managed a spirit-reviving year in Paris, which allowed him to return to Berlin with a new approach to color. Encouraged by works by [Chaim Soutine](#) and other Western artists represented in the Louvre, Marwan began using color for more than filling in spaces between lines: he started using it to build forms that were simultaneously faces and torsos.



Marwan (right) in conversation with former Berlinische Galerie director, Jörn Merkert (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

A painting begun shortly after Marwan's return from Paris is the focus of attention in the exhibition's grand, main gallery. But the date on it (1977) bears witness to Marwan's habit of revisiting pictures and changing them — often repeatedly. Like many of his pictures, this work clearly depicts a man's face — the artist's. It's painted in scrawls and patches of tempera on canvas, and makes the large surface into a looming, frightfully unsettling presence. Measuring roughly 6 x 4.5 feet, it towered over my head. Additionally, the face is shown from an oblique, low angle, as though it belonged to a giant. The rendering of the jaw is unclear: it seems to go on interminably, beyond the bottom edge of the canvas. The eyes are immense and bug out,

such that there's no escaping their gaze. It is truly a saturnine visage.



Installation view of 'Marwan Not Towards Home But The Horizon' at The Mosaic Rooms (photo Andy Stagg)

In a more intimate gallery downstairs, a selection of earlier pictures similarly engage the viewer on an intensely personal level, but not as menacingly. There is a flat vitrine filled with small works on paper, a cluster of small, painted boxes, a selection of large, powerful watercolors, and a small group of oils that depict fatigued-looking male figures. The images are painted very

flatly, with color used descriptively and staying within figure-defining contours. The earliest pictures on view, they predate Marwan's Paris epiphany.



Installation view of Marwan's "99 Heads" etchings

Since the mid-1970s, Marwan has amplified the importance of the human face to a point where it's all there is, in almost all of his images — including a series of 99 etchings that fill the walls of a closet-sized gallery. That work is called "99 Heads" and evokes the Sufi reference to names for God. But this might

be the only occasion on which Marwan, a non-dogmatic Muslim, identifies himself with a larger group. These etchings present the head or face frontally, with no oblique, theatrical angles to give the portraits drama. Instead, he has scarred his etching plates with lines resembling lashes.



Marwan, "Untitled" (1991), watercolor, 245 x 185 cm (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

In his paintings, these lacerating, gestural lines alternate with short, choppy strokes of paint that build up until they resemble mutilated flesh. As the Syrian poet Adonis has written of Marwan's art: "It is as if Man in his entirety had become a face ... and that is the site recording the tragedy of the Arab world." But, despite such readings of his imagery, Marwan told gallery visitors that he doesn't see a connection between his work and the violence that has ensued in the wake of the 2001 invasion of Iraq. Nor does he compare his leaving Damascus — as one member in the audiences suggested — to the plight of the hundreds of thousands of Syrians and others seeking refuge in the West, particularly Germany.

There's another comparison to consider, which is whether his paintings resemble works by German artists of his generation. I can't help but say "yes." His images stem from a different history than that of his German peers, but I couldn't look at Marwan's paintings without thinking of the violently expressive works of [Georg Baselitz](#), [Markus Lupertz](#), and [Jorg Immendorff](#), among others.

I started this review by talking about Marwan's liminal status, which is reflected in the exhibition's title. *Not Towards Home, But The Horizon* indicates moving away from what is defined and known, and towards the unlimited unknown. I also noted that his only expressed identification might be as Muslim in spirit. But I don't entirely buy it. Lines

will connect with other lines, even when moving towards an open horizon. Instead of belonging to no category, Marwan's work falls into many categories — occupying many times and geographies. Such art is literally ambivalent or, to phrase it with more currency, intersectional. Rather than “none of the above” I would categorize the artist and his art as “all or much of the above.”



Installation view of ‘Marwan: Not Towards Home But The Horizon’ at The Mosaic Rooms (photo by Andy Stagg)

Not Towards Home, But The
Horizon *continues at The Mosaic*
Rooms (226 Cromwell Rd, Greater