

## **Aref El Rayess**

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The year 1968 witnessed what many critics described as one of the most important, yet controversial exhibitions of the year. Titled "Blood and Freedom," this was a significant solo presentation of around 15 paintings by Aref El Rayess. It took place from April 9 to 14 at the Salle de L'Orient. Three paintings from that exhibition are now part of the Saradar Collection. Similar to the other works that were on view, they represent a culmination of a decade-long process of reflection on the role of art and political engagement. The shift in El Rayess' approach vis-à-vis art and activism occurred back in 196i while still in Florence upon the bombing of Bizerte in Tunisia by the French Army, commonly known as the Bizerte Crisis. "Untitled (Homage to Martin Luther King)," a haunting depiction of the plight of African Americans, could not have been more poignantly current given that it was unveiled a mere five days after the assassination of King. "Untitled (The 5<sup>th</sup> of June or The Changing of Horses)," is a blatant critique of the hypocrisy of political leaders. It provides a scathing commentary on the defeat of the Arab Forces to the Israeli Army in the Six-Day War of 1967. "Untitled (The Night of Shame or The Day of the Students)" presented an unforgiving condemnation of the police attacks against the student demonstrations of the Lebanese University.

The paintings, along with the entire exhibition led to a rigorous conversation around the extent to which artists should "commit" to a specific political position, questioning the line between "politically-engaged art" and outright "political propaganda." While opinions varied, many critics agreed that El Rayess managed to elevate the topic from its local specificity to touch on the universal human experience. Some, however, felt that the formal quality of the works was reduced due to their overt political message. El Rayess himself admitted to this, but only in the case of his painting about the Lebanese University students. "I painted this over one night. I intentionally did not want it to be a work of art. As long as the human being and human thought are not valued in this country where its students are attacked, we will no longer make art!"

El Rayess would continue his exploration of art and its political agency over the next three years, and return in 1970 with another politically charged exhibition that would take place at Dar El Fan from October 29 until November 21. From the twenty-six paintings that were on display, "Untitled" a work of oil on Masonite from 1970 is now part of the Saradar Collection. Referred to by one of the critics as "Death and Resurrection" the painting was considered, along with the body of work that El Rayess presented, "a huge leap whether in the choice of topic, the distribution of color, or in the mastery of composition." Nazih Khater, another prominent critic of the time, concurred. In describing the difference between El Rayess' 1968 exhibition at the Salle de L'Orient and his 1970 show at Dar El Fan he wrote: "The first was a revolution and not art. In this second one, art came back to occupy the main obsession of the painter. [...] This time around, he is acting, first, as an artist." It seems that El Rayess managed to please, not that this was his intention, both the formalists as well as the activists. In an interesting note, one that remains as relevant today as does the question of art and formal vs. semantic concerns, is art's true ability to effect political change when it is almost always presented in what the critic referred to as "Bourgeois Clubs" driven by consumerism and geared for the "Revolutionaries of the Salons."