

The world of Saddam Jumaily

By Amel Mekawi



Sacred tips, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 140x140cm. Courtesy of the artist and Art Sawa.

Saddam's paintings strokes the viewer at a first glance as a kind of art one can see in international museums; It doesn't have the usual dialogue that is distinctive to the Middle Eastern style that has been prevailing for the last two decades. Following is an interview done through his gallery in Dubai shedding the lights to Saddam's very beginning and focusing in his vision and methodology in approaching the artwork .

Amel B. Makkawi: Tell us more about your first exposure to art? Who influenced you and how?

Saddam Jumaily: It is certain that your childhood memory nurtured an important role and influences what you would become as a person. Consequently, the most important qualities of the artist are to have a high sensitivity to the world during his childhood and what is going on around him: Nature, event, and phenomena. Among those things to pay attention are the different talents or abilities, the human feeling that starts something magic and fascinating.

As a child, I remembered a lot of what was going around me; I was thinking, debating and absorbing. My first vivid memory of my introduction to art was an artwork of mixed oil and sand on Masonite in a barbershop showing a small room and lot of mud, I remember the painting as it was yesterday and still the image brings me back memory of happy-lost childhood. Another important thing that attracted me to art was a series of paintings that were displayed in my school; my father was the school guard in the village and he used to take me with him to check on the rooms and lock them. There, I was impressed by the drawings of birds on the chalkboard. Finally was the collection of works by a teacher using a technique of wood burning. I must add that I grew up in an art-oriented family having one of my brothers being a calligrapher and painter. I do not remember how it was my moment of faith but after I entered university to study arts during the years of cruel and violent siege, strangely I started making art and learned at the same time that a person can not be taught to become an artist.

I was suffering and drawing days and nights using bags, cans, cement, any pigments and dyes found. I remember believing that the siege will end one day and I would live my art as deliverance from severe life and as self-defense from the violence of the world.

AM: Tell us about your educational background, as well as your personal background (Where were you born, grew up, lived etc.)

SJ: I grew up in a quiet village isolated in Basra in Southern Iraq, a village with limited works opportunities. The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war affected me deeply, we were living next to the oil refinery and giant weapons storages. The Basra International Airport was a target for Iranian aircraft. I completed my preparation in the scientific section in the city of Basra in the College of Agricultural Engineering but I wanted only to study arts. I was able to successfully complete my education and excel in this field. Later on I have been appointed as teacher at the College of Arts. During these years, Basra was a bridge for the war were all the military convoys were going through hence I become a witness of long years of death, fear and panic.

AM: What is the inspiration behind your work? What are the messages you convey through your art?

SJ: There are important ideas in my work I want to express. The method is the result of ideas. The method is a result of the awareness of the artist. Wars, love and life are all ideas expressed in art but what motivates me first, is the attempt of an honest and sincere expression of my life and myself. These expressions entered into my daily life like water in the veins of the tree.

AM: Tell us about what you are presenting in your recent body of works.

SJ: I refer to an important issue; we, as human beings, cannot understand each other and dialogue easily. There are primary perceptions that we set about the other, making difficult to understand "the other". Even when culture is claimed to be about the dialogue, the reality is opposite, we face a culture of isolation what makes the world dangerous, because of all the fear and doubts. We build walls that no ladder can reach. The dialogue is empty, hollow, and dumb which leads to scary and disturbing feelings. I will not drag the idea by its collar in order to place it in a frame, I leave the garden door open for any idea to come hungry and chew the grass lovingly. Then it becomes a shining life in a frame, it gets rest and sleeps under a tree. I will not over-power painting with my thinking; the idea is there in its



Description, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 140x140cm. Courtesy of the artist and Art Sawa.

general form like a dropped stone on a footbath. There is a deep idea like a young star; it is the idea of painting itself. Painting is an idea, a creature that we cannot ride like a horse; it is more sacred more present in us, wider in imagination and in dream it will land like a butterfly. I will leave the window open for its sake to come in, bringing several creatures. It might come in the form of an alien creature - no matter! Bottom line it has to come

without a rope, without strings, virgin, wild, absolute, pure and honest. Painting says what we cannot hear.

AM: What are our diaries? How can we transcribe them?

SJ: There is always something deeper, something essential in our life that drops its shadow in the rooms of our soul, we stare at it, and it stares at us. It cannot hear what we are saying rather it whispers words that



Conned, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 140x140cm. Courtesy of the artist and Art Sawa.

we cannot hear. It pants and perspires; it is close and touches our life, something strange, obsessive, peaceful, lovely, it has an excessive presence, lively, intense like a dream of water in the life of a fish. We miss what it means, it doesn't feel our fears, going down the steps of our days, going up the stairs of our souls, slowly, we smell its strange odor, it smells our presence. It makes us consider our existence and destiny, the fact that there

is an alien creature inside each of us, a creature that doesn't necessarily have two legs, a nose or a tongue but is present and dominates our life.

We would like to thank Art Sawa for providing us with the relevant material of this interview.

Refusal to Lie on the Analyst's Couch

By *Bavand Behpoor*



Untitled, 2011, ink on paper, 100x100cm. Courtesy of artist.

“A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch,” write Deleuze and Guattari in the opening pages of *Anti-Oedipus* before bringing in an example from a novella, Lenz. The figures of Ali Nassir’s paintings seem to take up the advice and follow this “better model.” In the purely subjective world of these paintings—which would pass for abstract

painting were it not for the obscure presence of certain camouflaged figures—the figures resist psychoanalytical analysis. They simply refuse to lie down on the couch, as their problem is not psychological: “A breath of fresh air, a relationship with the outside world. Lenz’s stroll, for example, as reconstructed by Büchner. This walk outdoors is different from the moments when Lenz

finds himself closeted with his pastor, who forces him to situate himself socially, in relationship to the God of established religion, in relationship to his father, to his mother.” Although in times they bear indicators of social status or age, the painted figures move out of their social context, but not completely, as in a stroll in nature. The very few lines which portray them from time to time show the contours of a boot or a coat indicating that the city is nearby. They are more of personalities than “bodies”. They have not returned to the arms of Mother Nature; they are taken out of a machine (“producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines”) for a moment to be examined in isolation. Nassir provides them with a space—their own space—where they can interact with the surroundings and construct their world. Like a scientific camera, his paintings capture signals from the figures and their inner self and visualize them, without necessarily making them comprehensible: they serve as MRI images of brain displayed to a non-specialist.

This is not just the theme of one or two series of Nassir’s paintings. It is more than four decades now that Ali Nassir is recording his protagonists on a daily basis. The figures are studied on an ontological level, yet represent nothing generic. They are very particular indeed: they mainly represent the artist, his wife or their son. The figures and objects portrayed in these paintings are anything but symbols standing for something else—which was, and still is, a general characteristic of the works of many Iranian artists. They also avoid narration, again uncommon in Iranian visual arts, where literature has clearly exerted its influence. The figures in these paintings stand for themselves. They do not represent man and woman in general, or mother and father in general, or anything general: they have freed themselves from social bonds: “While taking a stroll outdoors, on the other hand, he is in the mountains, amid falling snowflakes, with other gods or without any god at all, without a family, without a father or a mother, with nature.” The figures represent, but refrain from explaining. The painter meticulously avoids formation of any semantics in his work. Anything that might refer to a concept is ruthlessly removed. The figures are transferred to a world where things have no names: “Lenz has projected himself back to a time before the

man-nature dichotomy, before all the co-ordinates based on this fundamental dichotomy have been laid down.” In such a world, figures and objects do not even own their colours or contour lines. They are rather invaded by them, and thus merge into the context: “He thought that it must be a feeling of endless bliss to be in contact with the profound life of every form, to have a soul for rocks, metals, water, and plants, to take into himself, as in a dream, every element of nature, like flowers that breathe with the waxing and waning of the moon.” Compared to Lenz, however, these figures seem to convey exactly the opposite feeling; to them, a contact with their environment is no bliss or relief. It is an ongoing challenge. There is nothing pastoral about what Ali Nassir portrays, nothing mystical. Like the protagonists of Beckett, the figures are rather tormented in this machine. The clear-cut boundaries between subject and object or inside and outside becomes porous: “There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species of life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.” Yet, Nassir’s figures fight for preserving their individuality. They are in a constant challenge with their surroundings and as such, are portrayed very dynamically: in thousands of images Ali Nassir has studied their “becoming” in one single style: every day, he probes into a world which is not completely known to him in order to translate it into colors. To his figures, color provides an escape from the cruel convictions of language. Language has never done them justice. Contrary to expressionist paintings, his paintings are mute and the figures reflect in silence and anxiety on their situation. This imbues the works with a mythical quality, as if the viewers were confronted with an ancient language which cannot be decoded. This forces the viewer to rely on what might be a very basic and universal language among men: this is the domain of mythology—in the case of Nassir, a contemporary and urban mythology.

In his recent works, the figures have come to terms with this agony and have realized the Beckettian Endgame situation to which they are subjected. They have actually come a long way. In the early phase of Nassir work (1983-6), the artist was obsessed with



Nocturnal II, 1985, Oil on canvas, 190x160cm. Courtesy of artist.

the dichotomy of the Sovereign and the Victim, catastrophe was recorded at the moment of occurrence, the figures enjoyed clear boundaries, and eroticism and violence had a clear presence. After a short period of fascination with abstraction (1988) he soon returned to figurative painting, this time focusing on the theme of death, portraying decaying figures gathering around coffins. His recent figures, however, are soothed by a Beckettian fatalism. They cannot go on, yet, they have to, and so, they will. As an Iranian artist, Ali Nassir is unique in his generation in that most characteristics of Iranian modern art is absent from his work. His bitter materialist approach to portrayal of man differentiates his work from that of most Iranian artists, with the exception of another figurative painter and sculptor, Bahman Mohasses (1931-2010). However, in the

structure of his paintings he is admittedly inspired by Iranian miniature painting in both its luminous and daring coloring as well as the flat arrangement of elements which defies perspective and allows viewer's eyes to constantly between different parts and not rest on a specific point. The different planes in his works (providing depth without the help of perspective) are also a reminiscent of miniature painting. As a German artist, Ali Nassir might be categorized very differently. Although he started studying painting in Berlin in 1978 during the high time of German neo-expressionism and has worked and lived there ever since, his works have gone down their own path, too obsessed with the personal world they portray than to react to major global or local political or artistic events. Compared to the works of the neo-expressionists (aka Neue Wilde



Untitled, 2013, acrylic on paper, 100x70cm. Courtesy of artist.

movement), Nassir's paintings prefer a less aggressive but more melancholic and philosophical approach and are not bent on intimidating the viewer with their visual might. Such a quality is shared by many other Iranian modern artists of the same generation established outside Iran whose works enjoy a milder tone in comparison to their western counterparts. The works of Ali Nassir are prouder than to focus on impressing their viewers. They are painted without thinking of the viewer and do not hide this. In their technique and the way in which colors are applied, they come in times close to Kandinsky's Blue Rider period, yet distance themselves from him in their opposition to any sort of "Spirituality in Art". The works of Ali Nassir show an introversion which is expressed through taking his figures to the open air, through putting them on stage

to show their relationship to one another, like a mute theatre. The mise en scène, the setting, the figures are all diverted towards portraying (instead of narrating) the world of his protagonist. As if looking through a keyhole, the viewer is invited to peep through the inner world of these solitary figures, who would have kept it to themselves were it not for Nassir's mediation.

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