



KASHYA HILDEBRAND

Marwan Sahmarani  
Black Moon

## Marwan Sahmarani

Like so many others from his generation, Marwan Sahmarani left his native Lebanon in 1989 to study at the Ecole Supérieure d'Art Graphique Penninghen in Paris and returned in 1995, only to leave again shortly thereafter to base himself in Canada. After a decade in Montreal, the artist decided to return to his home. With this move came an important shift in Sahmarani's colour palette, along with an emphasis on the day-to-day politics of the country. Unlike the majority of his peers' work, usually extremely conceptual and reflective, Sahmarani lays his frustration bare on his canvas. Strong brushstrokes and vivid colours reflect the increasing political turmoil and tension felt throughout the country and the region surrounding it.

In Sahmarani's earlier works, figures and humans set on monochromatic backgrounds, reminiscent of the styles of Bacon and Schiele, dominated his canvases. From simple

compositions of defined lines and graphic figures, Sahmarani's paintings have transformed. A looser brush stroke dissolves into symphonies of colour not unlike those found in his new home by the Mediterranean. This transformation however, is anything but sudden, and is the result of several years of experimenting with different approaches and media. Going back and forth between conceptual work and exercises in style, in oil painting, Sahmarani seems to have found the medium that he is the most contented with. Over the years, defined figures and human shapes have dissipated to make way for freer forms and a bolder application of colour. Some of his paintings (which he refers to as "drawings") still incorporate the precise illustrative strokes often seen in his earlier sketches, but the background is denser in colour, adding depth and an extra dimension to what are already multi-layered works. In the pieces showing in Black Moon, the artist takes us through his creative journey, which resembles his career trajectory. His Skewed "drawings" serve as sketches for his larger, Untitled paintings. Sahmarani skillfully plays with different styles and materials, moving from watercolour drawings to works in oil with a marked contrast between the two: His watercolours generally resemble drawings, where the subject matter is more of a focal point and the human figure is almost always on centre stage, whereas his newer oil painting feels freer and deals with a wider view of the subject matter or its context.

In his Untitled oil paintings, reminiscent of an impressionistic version of Picasso's Guernica, one sees an amalgamation of bodies, authoritative figures that represent violence in war. Bodies intertwine and become unrecognizable, the human as an individual

fades away and makes way to a representation of the human condition. In the series Blue Soldier; however, Sahmarani moves back to watercolour in order to draw a series of close-ups of human faces. Despite this intentional lack of detail and a minimal amount of brush strokes, he manages to bring out extreme expressions on these tortured faces. Sadness, fear and desperation are so skillfully depicted that the viewer is made to feel compassionate towards these anonymous soldiers. Set on a white background and almost duotone, they are further amplified by the soberness of their colour palette.

The range of works in this exhibition reflects the diversity of Sahmarani's oeuvre. Light also plays a pivotal role in the artist's work and he handles it with subtlety and intricacy, adding drama to his already spectacular works. Indeed, Sahmarani has become a master of technique with his ability to manipulate oil paint. At first glance, these complex paintings almost depict vernal sceneries but, when closely observed, shapes start forming and the intricacy of the subject matter becomes evident. His work deals not only with current socio-political topics such as corruption and violence, but also the more intimate and social effects these issues have on us as humans. He draws on Ancient Roman, Greek and Mesopotamian iconography and figures to represent the current political state of the world – with a particular emphasis on the Middle East – and uses it to full effect, oscillating between history and modern day themes.

Interestingly, for Sahmarani, painting is something of a newfound medium, for he humbly claims that he only started painting two years ago. This may not be entirely accurate, but what Sahmarani means

is that it is only now that he is fully focused on method and medium rather than concept and subject. The smooth, flat surface on his canvases have given way to swathes of thick impasto, the texture of his paintings taking physical form as a tangible being, with abstract patterns and heavy brush strokes revealing the images within them with each step one takes further away from the painting.

While Sahmarani works in diverse media, including sculpture and performance, Black Moon presents a series of canvases that take the viewer on a journey through the artist's thought process, including smaller works that act almost as studies for the larger works on display. Sahmarani is one of the rare artists who paints because of an internal need. Painting to him is like therapy, a means to express his frustrations, passions, nostalgia, anger... and us, as viewers, cannot help but go through these motions with him.

*Blue Soldier series*



*Blue Soldier I*, 2013, ink on paper, 75 x 55 cm



*Blue Soldier 2*, 2013, ink on paper, 75 x 55 cm





*Blue Soldier 3*, 2013, ink on paper, 75 x 55 cm

*The Skewed series*



*The Skewed 01*, 2013, mixed media on paper, 140 x 200 cm





The Skewed 02, 2013, mixed media on paper, 140 x 200 cm





The Skewed 03, 2013, mixed media on paper, 140 x 200 cm



*The Skewed 04*, 2013, mixed media on paper, 140 x 200 cm





*The Skewed 02*, 2013, oil on canvas, 140 x 200 cm





*The Skewed 01*, 2013, oil on canvas, 140 x 200 cm

*The Gun Shoot series*



*The Gun Shoot I*, 2013, ink on paper, 70 x 80 cm





*The Gun Shoot 3* , 2013, ink on paper, 70 x 80 cm





*The Gun Shoot 2*, 2013, ink on paper, 70 x 80 cm

*Tarbena series*



*Tarbena I*, 2012, oil on canvas, 37 x 45 cm





*Tarbena 2*, 2012, oil on canvas, 37 x 45 cm



Torbena 3, 2012, oil on canvas, 37 x 45 cm



Torbena 4, 2012, oil on canvas, 25 x 45 cm







*Tarbena 5*, 2012, oil on canvas, 64 x 90 cm





*Tarbena 6*, 2012, oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm



*Tarbena 7*, 2012, oil on canvas, 64 x 90 cm





*Tarbenä 8*, 2012, oil on canvas, 64 x 90 cm





*Tarbena 9*, 2012, oil on canvas, 64 x 90 cm



*Tarbena 10*, 2012, oil on canvas, 64 x 90 cm



Untitled, 2013 oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm



MARWAN SAHMARANI

Born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1970  
Lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon

#### EDUCATION

1989 – 1994 Atelier Met de Penninghen Paris, France

#### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 Marie, Marie the devil in me has taken you for a ride, Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, UAE  
The Wolf Is Crying Like A Child, Galerie Kashya Hildebrand, Zurich, Switzerland
- 2010 The Dictators: Studies For A Monument, Selma Feriani Gallery, London, UK  
The Feast of The Damned, Museum of Art & Design, New York, N.Y., USA  
The Feast of the Damned, Art Dubai, UAE, Abraaj Capital Art Prize
- 2009 The Dictators: Studies for a Monument, Boutique | Gallery, Dubai, UAE
- 2007 Can You Teach Me How to Fight? The Third Line, Dubai, UAE
- 2006 Paintings And Drawings (1990-2005), Mogabgab Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon  
Masturbation, Ard Bia Gallery, Galway, Ireland
- 2005 Beirut el Koubra, Mogabgab Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon
- 2004 Mecca Cola, Clair Obscur, Montreal, Canada  
No-body, Mogabgab Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon
- 2003 Non-dit, Mogabgab Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon  
Non-dit, Alternative, Montreal, Canada
- 1997 Le prophète, Mogabgab Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon

#### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 Traces, Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, UAE
- 2012 Domination, Hegemony and The Panopticon, Traffic, Dubai, UAE
- 2011 The Changing Room: Arab Reflections On Praxis and Times, Spazio Qubi Gallery, Turin, Italy  
Between A Rock And A Hard Place, 3rd Thessaloniki Biennale, Greece  
Heroes And Villains, Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, UAE

Rebirth, Beirut Exhibition Centre, Beirut, Lebanon

- 2010 Told/Untold/Retold, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar  
All About Beirut, Kunsthalle whiteBOX, Munich, Germany  
Convergence: New Art from Lebanon, American University Museum at the Katzen Art Center,  
Washington, D.C., USA
- 2007 Espejismos: Contemporary Art from Middle East and North Africa, International Festival of Puebla,  
Puebla, Mexico
- 2004 Pensées et mesures, La Fabrique, Montreal, Canada
- 1994 Le prophète, Espace E.S.A.G, Paris, France

AWARDS: 2010 Abraaj Capital Art Prize, Dubai, UAE