



MARWAN SAHMARANI

KASHYA HILDEBRAND

ART DUBAI 2015

**COVER IMAGE**

*The Bomb (detail), 2014 | oil on canvas | 300 x 225 cm*

Marwan Sahmarani's new works may appear to have strong ties with art historical movements but their catalyst can be found in a seemingly unlikely place for an artist from Beirut: nature. The first time he was alone in a forest in Spain, he was terrified by the solitude, the quiet, and the stillness. Surmounting this fear has led to a change in his artistic practice. "It helped me to liberate myself from trying to focus on an idea," Sahmarani has said. "Instead, I had to look and see." He began to work *en plein air*, concentrating on transcribing what he saw in the moment, and then returned to Beirut to see this blossom in his studio. This transition in practice, which Sahmarani finds more personal and intense, has prompted a focus on the act of painting itself, leading to what he described as a "fleshy" use of thick layers of paint to depict an interplay of gesture, movement, texture, and colour evoking the collective unconsciousness.

What has persisted in Sahmarani's practice is an expressive exploration of violence – of feeling, bodily motion, nature and its human counterpart. The conflict between inner and outer is central, but the real crux of his inquiry is deceptively simple: how two people

can arrive at a point where they attempt to destroy each other. This appetite for destruction spans human history, and it is our failure to transcend this annihilating force that continues to haunt Sahmarani. These new works attempt to interrogate this failure, while also endeavouring to explore the raw emotions at the heart of violence.

The dramatic emotional use of colour is in full effect in *The Funeral*, where thick black brushstrokes, along with a strong blurred yellow swipe, contrast with the motion of swirling, reaching hands carrying a casket. Thus, stillness is held in tension with frenzied activity. Grief-stricken faces and upheld impassioned hands signal a unifying act of mourning. The dominant black strokes seem to obfuscate any chance of metaphoric access to the sky or heaven and create a physical barrier that presses down, suggesting the impossibility of transcendence. Yet the mourners' dynamism and splashes of colour struggle against this menacing darkness. The violence of emotions, threatening to overwhelm and dissolve all, is held ominously on the edge of chaos. While transnational experiences in Spain and Lebanon have impacted Sahmarani, all of these new works,

including the landscapes, were painted in Beirut. In *Algarroba*, as well as a series of small Spanish landscapes, Sahmarani captures a memory of Mediterranean nature awash with life, dissolving into symphonies of colour. What emerges from the landscape work in this context is the connection between violence and expressivity: how the brutality of nature reveals a primal energy of the elements, especially when compared to its man-made counterpart.

*The Bomb* is a record of one such man-made encounter. Rather than identifying any one specific act of violence, it showcases the agony and ferocity of an explosion, erupting in a series of thick, masterful brushstrokes to produce a viscerally potent experience. The heart of the canvas depicts the burning epicentre of a car bomb at the moment of detonation. Warped, expressively abstracted figures and car wheels, axles, and debris fly in every direction, as thin, rigid lines of orange clash with the thick downward motion of the swaths of blue and the fiery blotted red core that spurts in various directions: it seems as though the whole city is exploding. Sahmarani weaves hope into this seemingly bleak vision in the way the work evokes the Big

Bang, the archetypal explosion in which the universe was born, hinting at the possibility of rebirth in the aftermath of such a deadly boom.

Sahmarani's work has tended to focus on Middle Eastern conflict, but *The Bomb* deliberately avoids this specificity to suggest that the sheer chaos of conflict-ing ideologies leads to this moment, raising the question of social action whatever our subject position and location. In a similar vein, the inspiration for *Beggars in the Rain* was Syrian refugees, and yet this work also speaks to general dislocations of people in every city of the world. In this encounter between the specific and the general, Sahmarani raises the question of ethical responsibility in the implicit hail from the distressed (whether a whole people or an individual). His intervention, then, in the conflict between two that always ends in the annihilation of one is the communication between flesh and flesh, between subject and viewer. This communication, grounded not in words but in emotional gestures, does not offer a resolution to the complexities of socio-political strife. It does, however, promise a beginning.

— Jolaine Frizzell





*The Funeral, 2015 | oil on canvas | 150 x 170 cm*



*The Trenches, 2014 | oil on canvas | 200 x 200 cm*



*The Bomb, 2014 | oil on canvas | 300 x 225 cm*





*The Derbake Player I, 2015 | oil on canvas | 125 x 100 cm*





*The Derbake Player 2, 2015 | oil on canvas | 125 x 100 cm*



*Study for an Explosion 1, 2014 | ink on paper | 100 x 70 cm*



*Study for an Explosion 2, 2014 | ink on paper | 100 x 70 cm*



*Beggars in the Rain, 2015 | oil on canvas | 170 x 150 cm*





*States of the Mind 1, 2015 | oil on canvas | 50 x 50 cm*



*States of the Mind 2, 2015 | oil on canvas | 50 x 50 cm*



*States of the Mind 3, 2015 | oil on canvas | 50 x 50 cm*



*States of the Mind 4, 2015 | oil on canvas | 50 x 50 cm*



*Algarroba, 2014 | oil on canvas | 200 x 175 cm*





*Spanish Landscape I, 2014* | oil on canvas | 40 x 50 cm



*Spanish Landscape 2, 2014 | oil on canvas | 40 x 50 cm*



*Spanish Landscape 3, 2014 | oil on canvas | 40 x 50 cm*



*Spanish Landscape 4, 2014 | oil on canvas | 40 x 50 cm*



## BIOGRAPHY

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

## EDUCATION

1989 – 1994      Atelier Met de Penninghen Paris, France

## PRIZES/AWARDS

2010      Abraaj Capital Art Prize



## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014      *Black Moon*, Kashya Hildebrand, London, UK
- 2011      *Marie, Marie the devil in me has taken you for a ride*,  
Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Dubai, UAE  
*The Wolf Is Crying Like a Child*, Galerie Kashya  
Hildebrand, Zurich, Switzerland
- 2010      *The Feast of the Damned*, Museum of Art and  
Design, New York, USA  
*The Dictators: Studies for a Monument*, Selma Feriani  
Gallery, London, UK  
*The Feast of the Damned*, Abraaj Capital Art Prize,  
Art Dubai, Dubai, UAE
- 2009      *The Dictators: Studies for a Monument*,  
Boutique I 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*, Alternative, Montreal, Canada
- 1997      *Le prophète*, Mogabgab Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Contemporary Lebanon: Art Beyond Violence*,  
Singapore Art Fair (Lebanese Pavilion), Singapore
- 2012 *Domination, Hegemony and The Panopticon*,  
Traffic, Dubai, UAE
- 2011 *The Changing Room: Arab Reflections on Praxis and  
Times*, Spazio Qubi, Turin, Italy  
*Between A Rock And A Hard Place*, 3rd Thessaloniki  
Biennale, Greece  
*Heroes and Villains*, Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, UAE  
*Rebirth*, Beirut Exhibit Center, Beirut, Lebanon
- 2010 *Told/ Untold / Retold*, 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, DC, 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  
ArteEast, New York, USA
- 1994 *Le prophète*, Espace E.S.A.G, Paris, France

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