

Marwan Sahmarani
The Wolf Is Crying Like A Child

GALERIE KASHYA HILDEBRAND

“Where there is revolution there is creation. And therefore some dictatorial regimes are actually crying like children. The form is being molded from chaos like a piece of art. Everything can go one-way or the other.”

Marwan Sahmarani

Jolaine Frizzell

Marwan Sahmarani sources timeless themes from the history of art and uses them as lenses to explore and develop stories inspired by his personal experience of war, exile, and travel. Unlike his previous works, which tended to dialogue with art history and the past, his new works are inspired by current events in the Middle East, and they arise consciously and unconsciously from his perspective as a Lebanese artist. He is not, however, merely using his art to comment directly on the recent revolutions; instead, he is interested in the revolutionary fire that these events have ignited in ordinary citizens specifically and across the Middle East generally. In this way, he is invoking the spirit of the surrealists working at the beginning of the 20th century who were calling for a revolution in the arts and in the minds of the people of their time. This spirit of revolution captivates Sahmarani in a unique way: it resonates with the energy he felt during Lebanon's 2005 revolution – but it also reminds him how that energy has faded.

As reflections on revolution, the works in his exhibition, *The Wolf Is Crying Like A Child*, explores a range of sensations and vibrations: from the new energy of potential change to the hopelessness he feels for his home country. The colours of Sahmarani's work are influenced by the light of Lebanon: they are bathed in a radiant light that is particular to the region. In addition, there is spontaneity and vitality in his works arising from his engagement with the act of painting, from his use of perspective to illustrative figuration and gestural abstraction. He uses oil, ink, varnishes and watercolour as his primary mediums of expression, creating a unique language that is as poetic and ephemeral as it is sumptuous. What Sahmarani seems to have accomplished in this series is the creation of works with the very bare minimum of information in order to tell a story, to create a mood and to energize a moment.

Sahmarani's vertical story-telling foregrounds the role of the viewer in the creation of meaning in his works. His use of Japanese paper references a progressive narrative structure, where the action takes place over time, moving from top to bottom or from bottom to top. This technique challenges viewers to begin a decoding process and provides them with a path to follow in order to make sense of the iconography. In this way, it is useful to look closely at a few works in order to consider the productive effects of any initial disorientation.

In We All Have Dreams of Living, Sahmarani references the death of Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian man who set himself on fire as an act of resistance – an act that started Tunisia's revolution. Sahmarani's work, however, does not recount the specific details of the event; instead, he focuses on the idea of martyrdom. When one reads the work from bottom to top, the flames of the fire appear to spread up from the figure of a man in prayer and around a Roman temple. Beyond the temple, the flames transform into clouds, roots, and, finally, a tree in paradise – as if the figure's prayer is an act that scorches the state and reaches all the way to heaven. The orange-coloured area contrasts sharply with the gray figure and temple, both of which have red blood or veins passing through them. The gray and red seem to signify the earthly realm of blood and bodies, and the temple design invokes a history of martyrdom, which can be traced back to Roman times and beyond. In this

way, the work connects a current event and a current martyr to the history of martyrdom in general. Instead of examining martyrdom in a specific religious context, Sahmarani reflects on the core idea behind the martyr's act: self-sacrifice as the ultimate mode of resistance to injustice.

I Climb to the Top of the Hill resembles the board game *Snakes and Ladders*. Using the visual cue from the work's title, one can imagine someone climbing to the top of this world, passing through the life challenges presented along the way. In the bottom right, there is a ladder leading up from a typical Lebanese city to the root system of a barren forest, where animals peak out from and hang off of the roots. At the top, a fantastical figure stands on one human foot and one animal hoof and wears a tightly woven corset out of which springs a number of human, animal and other worldly heads. Beside this figure on the left, there are dots connected together in what appears to be a constellation of stars with human heads.

The theme of this work is how to follow the path of life and how to live a good and rich life. However, in aspiring for a better life, one is confronted with decisions that impact the future. Not everyone chooses the moral options along the way, and in the end, the temptations of sin and corruption can become too much. In Sahmarani's work, the figure standing tallest is a phantasmagorical creation mutated beyond its humanity by the temptations it has fallen prey to along the road of life. In this light, the constellation could represent other figures (or "stars") whose ambitions and lack of moral conviction have also morphed them into beasts. Like the title, and the game *Snakes and Ladders*, getting to the top may be the goal, but what is truly important is the journey and overcoming the diversions that challenge our humanity along the way. Sahmarani's monotone use of colour heightens the dramatic undertones of the work. The naturalism of the brown cityscape turns into a rich royal purple, while the top figure is splattered or showered with gold. It is a warning about the journey as much as it is a condemnation of the disingenuous figures who often claw their way into public office and other positions of wealth and power.

Blackbird may be Sahmarani's most pessimistic work of the series. He began the work with the idea of dividing it into a *yin* and *yang* interconnected harmony of opposites; however, as he got more involved, the work became black and black, with no contrasting forces or room for optimism. While many of Sahmarani's narratives move from bottom to top, the narrative of this work seems to be directed from the top down – as if ascent has given way to descent. At the top, three women – representing past, present, and future – are witnesses to the events unfolding with strong, defiant gazes. Importantly, it is only the youthful figure of the present who directly confronts the viewer's gaze. A spine-like series of bones connects the figures together and creates a visual narrative: the spine travels down the painting from the group of women to a man who is praying, to a pair of men who are fighting, and to an upside-down blackbird and wolf. What seems to be significant, then, is not only the individual figures and acts but also the interrelations between them. For example, in the center of the work, one man is holding back the arm of another man. The restrained man's face is contorted into a grimace: his mouth is open, his eyes are rolled back, and his legs are splayed out behind him; in contrast, the man performing the violence wears a patient, determined, calm look despite the pain he is inflicting. A long black and white geometric ruler, a trace of the *yin* and *yang*, bisects the two men. This gesture to the *yin* and *yang* reveals a dark irony: the opposite figures can only exist in relation to each other, yet a sense of displacement is apparent between the victor with his action and the victim with his suffering. Is this the cycle of *yin* and *yang* Sahmarani forecasts for the future – an endless cycle of violence where the only difference is whether one is victim or victor? The dark irony of interdependence is that one must always play one of these roles. Sahmarani's outlook for the post-revolutionary Middle-Eastern world, then, is not entirely optimistic: the only real change may simply be who is victor and who victim.

Through his painting process and the narrative content of this series, Sahmarani has positioned himself as a contemporary artistic interpreter of the unfolding events in the Middle East. By looking beyond the immediate revolutionary change, he asks us to consider the historical context that insightfully frames the contemporary moment. He explores the complexity of actions, a complexity that can be lost in the oversimplified demonization or glorification that can happen during revolutionary change. For Sahmarani, the victims of violence on both sides of the struggle are more than martyrs or enemies and the perpetrators are more than heroes or murderers – they are human beings engaged in a particular context. In looking closely at his works, we are reminded of the humanity of the individuals who create the events, and this intimacy facilitates an opportunity to consider the stories and motivations that lie unspoken behind the news spectacle. On the one hand, Sahmarani reminds us that we are all connected albeit in complicated ways; we are all dealing with the challenges imposed upon us. On the other hand, like the revolutionary spirit that inspires Sahmarani, we all have the power to provoke change, to productively reorient our way in the world and to define a new future.



Blackbird (Detail)

Blackbird
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm

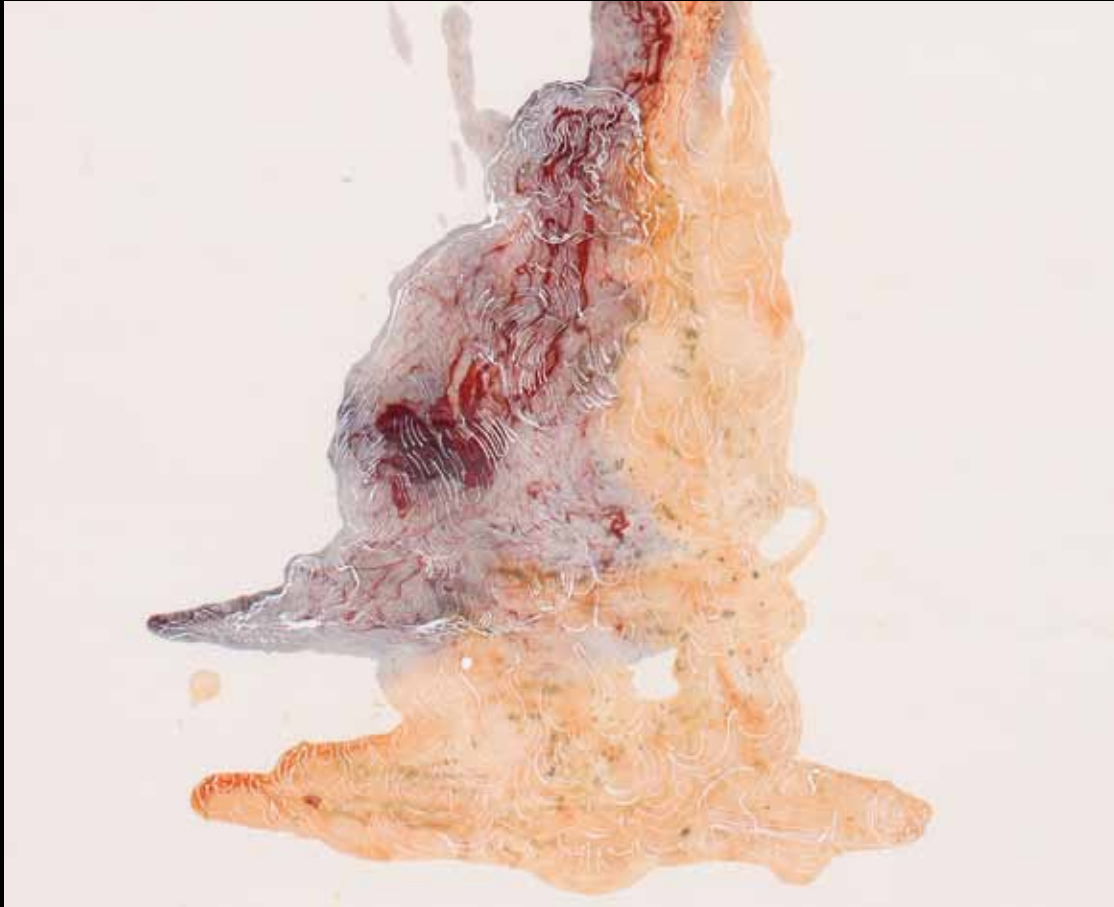


I Am Not Going Down
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



The City Has A Curfew
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm





We All Have Dreams Of Living (Detail)

We All Have Dreams Of Living
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



2014/10/24

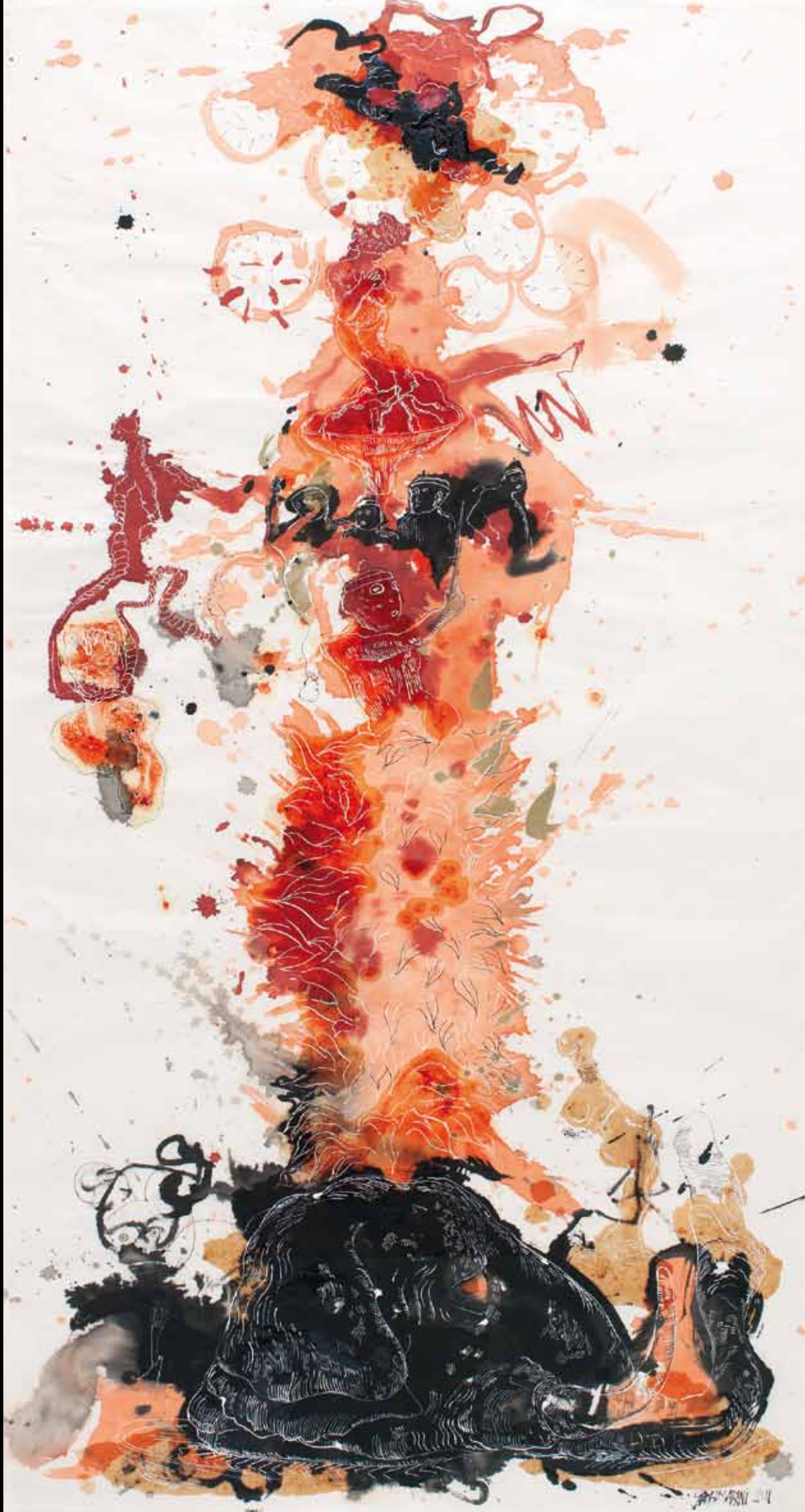


Blue As Your Blood (Detail)

Blue As Your Blood
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



The Broken Neck
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm





There Is Always A Mystery (Detail)

There Is Always A Mystery
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



Disorientation
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



...And Still Alive
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



YAMASHITA 2011

Terrible Love
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



I Climb To The Top OfThe Hill
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



SHIMAZAKI 2011



How Many Times He Did That! (Detail)

How Many Times He Did That!
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



W. K. W. 2011

Mixing Jealousy And Fear
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



100. 2014

All-Star!
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



The Wolf Is Crying Like A Child
2011
mixed media on paper
145 x 75 cm



于水画



Study For A Sculpture I
2010
ink on paper
75 x 50 cm



Study For A Sculpture 2
2010
ink on paper
75 x 50 cm



Study For A Sculpture 3
2010
ink on paper
75 x 50 cm



Study For A Sculpture 5
2010
ink on paper
75 x 50 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 *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 OfThe Damned, Museum of Art & Design, New York, N.Y., USA

The Feast OfThe Damned, Art Dubai, UAE, Abraaj Capital Art Prize

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

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 Villain, Lawrie Shabibi Gallery Dubai, UAE

Rebirth, Beirut Exhibition Centre, 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, 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

IMPRESSUM

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