

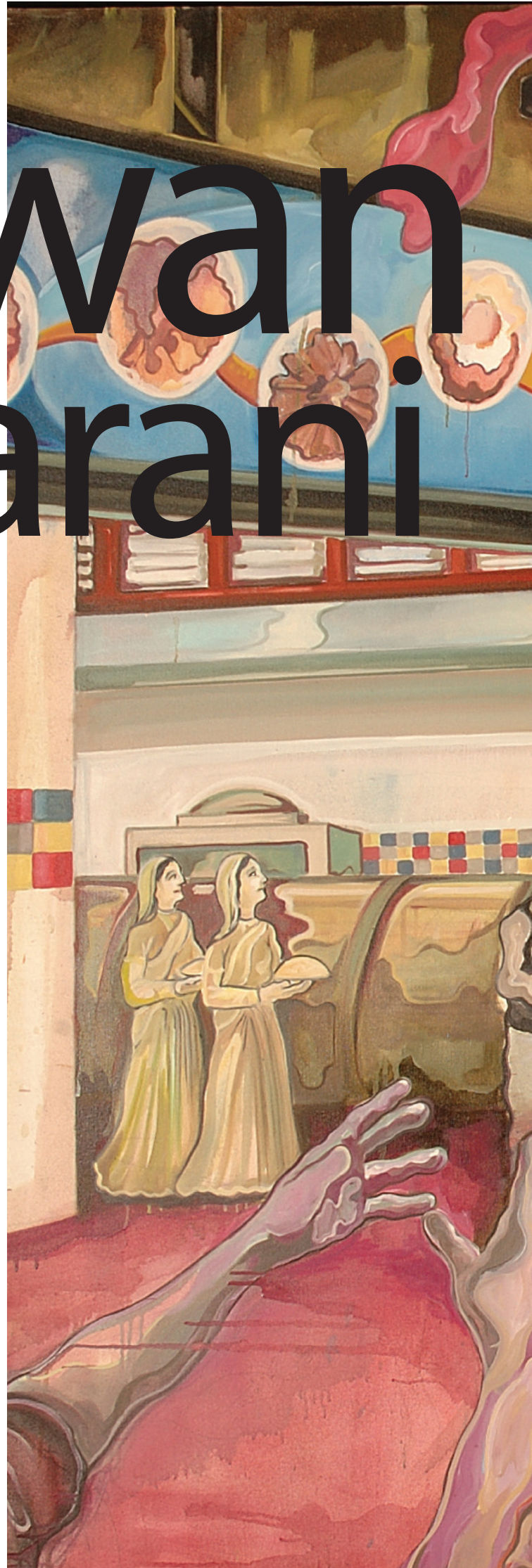
profile

marwan sahmarani

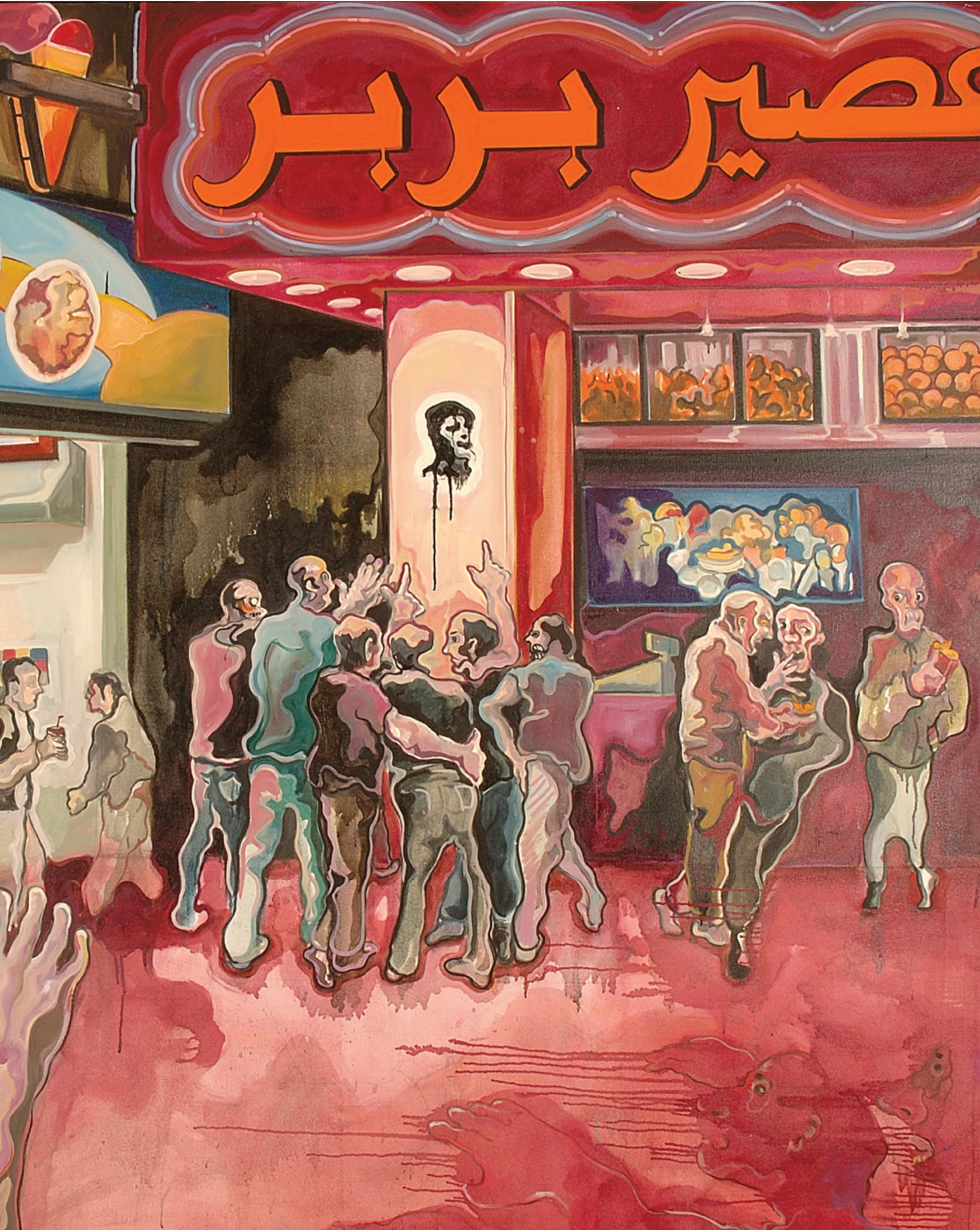
the indisputable
truth

Marwan Sahmarani denies there is a political message in his work. The message, he says, is the medium of painting itself; in trying to understand its significance at a time when artistic endeavour seems to have stretched far beyond the use of a simple paintbrush and oils.

TEXT BY NADA AL-AWAR
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANSOUR DIB



کھسیر بربر





UMHARAWI .65

Previous pages
'Assir Barbar!'. 2005. Oil on
canvas. 180 x 200 cm.

Facing page
Part of the 'Showdown'
series. 2005. Oilstick on
paper. 65 x 50 cm.

In 1995, soon after gaining a diploma from the Penninghen School of Art in Paris, the 35-year-old Lebanese artist moved to Montreal and entered a seven-year hiatus during which he abandoned painting - and perhaps a significant part of himself - and began to earn a living from a series of jobs in advertising, design and animation. "I felt that the medium [painting] had gone stale, that everything it had to say had already been said," explains Marwan Sahmarani. "I had been studying the work of conceptual artists at the time and felt they were expressing a great deal more than I ever could."

Yet it was precisely this interruption in his creative pursuits that eventually led him to start afresh and to ask the questions that would prove most relevant to him, particularly as a Lebanese in voluntary exile and as an Arab artist whose education had been entirely Western in content and focus. "I was trying very hard to understand the medium of painting, to see it in terms of its long history as well as to understand what it meant to me. Through the war in Lebanon and the constant displacement I went through, my identity had also been lost, so I had to retrieve it and try to find out if I really had something to say and if I could say it through painting."

He began by illustrating a book of poetry written by a friend. Next, he worked on a series of life drawings. The beautifully executed nudes were created without an objective in mind, beyond that of improving his technique and finding a subject that he was interested in working on. Once he began painting in oils, however, Sahmarani found himself turning to images from the Middle East - stories and photographs in the media of

political and social unrest, of incidents of violence and despair that were unrelenting and deeply disturbing.

He painted recurring images of buildings damaged by bullets and rocket fire, of women weeping in the aftermath of yet another incidence of brutality, of suicide bombers and the mystery that surrounds them, of people and places locked in a cycle of self-inflicted and external violence that has come to define their existence, both in their own eyes as well as in the perceptions of the rest of the world.

In his triptych of a stone thrower, one wonders whether he is a Palestinian aiming at Israeli troops or a Lebanese at Fatima Gate post-May 2000. Sahmarani says he is not trying to make a political statement but is, instead, attempting to uncover the role of painting vis-à-vis the ever-present turmoil in the region. His paintings, he argues, attempt to take this and similar photographed events out of their regional contexts and place them on a neutral surface that automatically empties them of their content. In this way, he argues, their true identity can be revealed. "Painting is a more distant medium than photography and does not convey the same message. My paintings are a diagnosis of a reality that eludes me. I seek to isolate what is essential, to extort the truth, to find the essence of the moment, of the violence in action and the reality of the situation, as well as to describe the extreme tension that has been prevailing in this region for decades. By applying textures of plain layers, I try to neutralise all subjectivity and to eliminate painting itself, thus creating a void in which the image crystallises many moments in one single perception."

profile



Making only occasional visits to Lebanon, Sahmarani continued to be deeply affected by what was going on in the region and in early 2004 began working on a series of quasi-caricatures of Lebanon's politicians. Entitled 'Family Portraits', the works, once viewed after the tumultuous events that followed the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, are almost prophetic and have gained significance beyond that of being merely ironic portrayals of the country's political leaders. Sahmarani now believes that he might have had an inkling something disastrous was about to happen when he was working on the portraits.

Yet when he embarks on a painting, Sahmarani says he may not be entirely aware of what it is going to be about; even if he does have some idea of the structure it might take. "Painting is like another person that I am working with," he says. "It has a soul of its own and the paintbrush does its own work. Painting is what leads me and not the other way around. It is an expression of my background and of the context in which I grew up and formulated my ideas."

Much of Sahmarani's more recent work is visually complex and seems to go hand-in-hand with a more complex, less clear-cut vision of the world. He depicts figures in strife, whether



sexual, political or social. These images suggest a studied brutality that is disquieting and even sorrowful. He contends that although many people have told him his paintings are filled with sadness, they do not fill him grief. Instead, he argues that his work is the result of a fascination with the violence of mankind, which he believes can be a force for both good and bad. The history of violence, Sahmarani says, is prevalent in the history of art. It is also there in the miasma that is Middle Eastern politics.

Last March, Sahmarani held his first exhibition in Lebanon in downtown Beirut's Planet Discovery. Organised by Fadi

'The Stone Thrower'
(Triptych). 2003.
Oil on canvas.
120 x 90 cm each.





“Painting is what leads me and not the other way around. It is an expression of my background and of the context in which I grew up and formulated my ideas.”

Mogabgab, the gallerist who has promoted Sahmarani’s work for some time now, the show featured some 250 works spanning 15 years. Sahmarani says he was surprised by the positive public reaction to the exhibit, especially in a country where he had thought cultural tastes would be conservative (sales of his paintings and drawings were brisk, during and following the exhibition, and the country’s art critics seemed as impressed by the artist’s technical prowess as they were by the often explosive content of his paintings). “When I was in Montreal, part of me couldn’t believe that it was possible to show this kind of work in Lebanon,” he explains. “Now I know that this exhibition was meant to take place here and at this point in my career.”

While in Beirut prior to the exhibition, Sahmarani produced hundreds of drawings on paper whose subject matter seems a far cry from his earlier work. Studies of traditional water pitchers (ibriq), of the windows and doorways of old houses and the inner courtyard pools distinctive to Arab architecture, of the women lounging around these enclosed areas, away from public sight, and of figures in movement, were among many other seemingly mundane subjects he chooses to focus on. “These drawings are just about me drawing, giving the painting its essence, far from all political or social engagement,” says Sahmarani. “They could not have been done the same way if I had been out of Lebanon. They would have had too many connotations.”

Despite the significance ‘place’ holds in Sahmarani’s psyche and in his work, and despite his profound attachment to the Middle East, he is still uncertain about why he should feel the need

to remain physically distant from home. In Montreal, he spends most of his time ruminating on what is happening in his homeland and then working hard to express it through painting. “Perhaps it’s the fact that in Canada nothing sticks to me so I can do exactly what I feel,” he says.

In other places in which he has lived, including Paris and New York, a sense of aesthetics is so prevalent, he says, that it is almost impossible to find a separate ‘place’ for oneself within it. Perhaps the same is true of Beirut, where a clear appreciation of beauty might be overwhelmed by an acute awareness of the vicissitudes of fate.

Back in Montreal, he is preparing to focus once again on oil painting and perhaps employ new media, working with sculpture and pottery and creating pieces that resemble the drawings he did in Beirut and also include all the contextual questions that surround them.

The experience of being in Beirut, of holding the exhibition and embarking on a new series of drawings, was a very positive one for Sahmarani and is likely, he believes, to shape the direction his work will take in the future. “It helped me get rid of a lot of things and return to the essential elements that belong to painting. It took me 12 years to acquire all sorts of intellectual and cultural baggage and now it will perhaps take the same time to empty myself of it and return to the essence of things and of myself.” □

Marwan Sahmarani is represented by the Fadi Mogabgab Gallery for Contemporary Art in Beirut. For information, contact +961 (0)3 734520. The artist will be exhibiting his latest works at The Third Line in Dubai from 22 March to 11 April. For details, visit www.thethirdline.com

Previous pages
From the ‘Showdown’ series.
2005. Oilstick on paper.
65 x 50 cm.

Facing page
Part of the ‘El Zyarate’ series.
2004. Oil and oilstick on
paper. 65 x 50 cm.



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