

MARWAN SAHMARANI: ALLEGORIES IN/OF PAINTING

Politics for me is a step toward understanding painting. Everything for me is a step toward understanding painting.

-*Marwan Sahmarani*¹

Initiated during Israel's July 2006 invasion of Lebanon, the centerpiece of Marwan Sahmarani's latest body of work is a suite of monumental oil paintings titled *Houroub* (Battles) (2006). Cinematographic in scope, these dense and frenzied depictions of epic battle successfully blend together a myriad of disparate historic references and artistic traditions. While the perspective, composition and expressionism draw from famous representations of battles from the Western canon, the fluid lines and flat, patterned areas evince the influence of Islamic and Persian art. The large works are accompanied by related series of smaller works on paper, most notably the *50 Martyrs* (2006-07), a collection of heads that run the gamut from illustrative figuration to gestural abstraction. Rather than serving as preparatory studies in the traditional sense, these process-oriented sketches allow Sahmarani to develop and refine a repertoire of marks, strokes, gestures and figures that fill out his larger compositions. Drawing is the essence of his creative process, providing a point of entry into painting; form, iconography and composition are rarely pre-planned but emerge through process and repetition.

According to the artist, the subject matter of these works is inspired by the repeated violent conflagrations between Arabs and Persians that punctuated the medieval history of the Middle East.² Sahmarani's turn to the past marks a significant departure from his

¹ Wilson-Goldie, Kaelen. "A Prodigal Son Returns to Paint," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), March 13, 2006.

² From Marwan Sahmarani's artist's statement describing the series.

earlier work, which, regardless of style, remained firmly rooted in the politics of the contemporary moment: in *The Stone Thrower* (2003), Sahmarani employed a cool, neutral palette and a photorealist painting technique to reflect on the complex relationship between painting and photography, using the slower medium of painting to isolate and monumentalize a photographic image of protest from the constant stream of media images; while *The Family Portrait* series (2004-05), exhibited last year in Beirut, lampooned the many players in Lebanon's volatile political landscape through severely distorted caricatures. Though referencing historical events, Sahmarani's latest works are not simply history paintings, mere apolitical retreats into the deep recesses of the past. His work extends an alternative tradition of representations of armed conflict, epitomized in the oeuvre of eighteenth-century Spanish painter Francesco Goya, that do not commemorate specific military victories but strive to capture the inhumanity and tragedy of any and every conflict. Sahmarani strategically deploys historical reference as allegory for the vicious cycles of war, violence, invasion and conflict that have plagued and defined the Middle East as a region, both throughout history and in the present. The retrospective view simultaneously situates the roots of the current conflict in the historical past and allows the artist to address this conflict without recreating the clichéd images that dominate media coverage of the region.

While the political resonances are key, these latest works propose alternate allegorical readings. *Can You Teach Me How to Paint?* (2006) infers, both visually and through its suggestive title, a link between acts of violence and painting, a connection supported by Sahmarani's agitated lines and sanguinary splatters of paint. In the foreground, a fallen

warrior recoils back towards the viewer as he is speared by his adversary; in the lower left corner, rendered in a faint yellow outline, is a hand holding a paintbrush. Both beholding and creating the scene, the artist is cast as helpless bystander, vigilant witness and, most provocatively, sadistic director of the violence represented. Does the paintbrush, threateningly pointed towards the fallen figure, drip paint or blood? Such ambiguous visual cues, linking the tools of conflict and painting, appear in other works as well: a shield triumphantly held aloft in *Houroub of November 20-December 28* (2006), one of the few colorful details on a dark, brooding canvas, is reminiscent of an artist's pigment-loaded palette.

This suggestive link is captured in the photographs of an exploratory performance conducted by the artist that served as a cathartic epilogue to this particular series. Flanked on either side by his finished works, disguised in the costume of a medieval warrior, the artist inserts his physical self into the military world imagined and brought to life in his paintings. Engaged in a hysterical, but humorous, showdown with his painterly tools as he struggles to give material form to his artistic vision, the performance, hovering between sincerity and parody, acts out the difficult and often violent practice of painting itself.

Arguably then, Sahmarani's history paintings can be read on the level of both content and medium, as allegories of contemporary conflict and painterly process, as attempts to resolve the traditional opposition between politics and aesthetics. The passion, energy

and violence captured in these battle scenes are not only emblematic of destructive acts, both historical and contemporary, but also necessary for acts of artistic creation.

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