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MARWAN SAHMARANI

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST:
Marwan Sahmarani's visual mastery

By Jareh Das

Marwan Sahmarani is a painter but his combination of performance, painting and drawing make him a great storyteller. Sahmarani is able to demonstrate the condition of being a painter while depicting varying subjects, which range from classical mythology, literature, politics and sociology. Through his art, he also comments on the condition of being in exile and on the war in his country of origin, Lebanon. He also often explores the unavoidable effects and challenges presented by migrating to the West.

Sahmarani's multimedia installation, *The Feast of the Damned* (2010), saw paintings and drawings activate the gallery space as floors and ceilings were covered entirely with scenes depicting what can be described as a transient state between the realms of real and unreal.

Sahmarani's installation created an environment that can be described in literary terms as being 'In the Belly of the Beast.' As author Jack Abbot describes in his book by the same name, 'After a dream of heaven, a nightmare intervenes' - an ethos undoubtedly present in this remarkable piece by the artist. The installation was presented in 2010 at Art Dubai and Marwan Sahmarani was awarded the acclaimed Abraaj Capital Art prize that year.

One of his earlier works "The Dictators" - *Studies For a Monument* (2007), features a series of paintings depicting the elongated and distorted images of dictators standing on what look like tiny pedestals. In this critique on socio-political affairs, Sahmarani strips the subjects of their assurance, exposing their vulnerability to the viewer.

Sahmarani describes the drawings, originally conceived as sketches for sculptures, as 'a parody on dictatorship and a study of sculptures not only like those we see in

countries throughout the Middle East where the dictators raised these monuments as a symbol of glory and power, but also throughout the ages, from the Grecian times to today.'

His *Urban Landscape* (2008), series captures a modern city's vibrancy through an explosion of colour, skyscrapers and abstract nature, perhaps representing its continual evolution. For his inaugural solo exhibition in the Gulf at Dubai's Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Sahmarani takes a marked departure from previous social and political themes and instead focuses on the effects that fatherhood has on the intrinsic nature of being an artist. The show titled 'Marie Marie, the devil in me has taken you for a ride' shows this internal conflict in its subject matter and execution on canvas. The surface is in his usual expressive painterly style, but the multi layering of oils makes the appearance vivid even though the figures are abstract. *Untitled 4* (2011), presents the artist's unique and colourful interpretation of Madonna and Child.

Sahmarani's paintings draw inspiration from Classicism, with an emphasis on mythology and religious iconography. One could imagine his paintings in the Sistine Chapel if it were reinterpreted for a contemporary audience. Sahmarani can be described as a painter's painter as he understands the nature of the medium so well. He uses oils, inks, watercolours and pastels simultaneously to create the perfect composition. He does not opt for one over the other, but masters the use of a variety of mediums.

Sahmarani has an inept understanding for the medium that best expresses his artistic idea as if the medium dictates the subject and vice versa. Both are inextricably linked and demonstrate the challenges of being a jack of all trades - and in this case, master of all trades.



From top to bottom, left to right: From the series *Urban Landscape* | From the series *Marie Marie, the devil in me has taken you for a ride* | Work on paper from *The Feast of the Damned*, courtesy of The Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2010.



Installation shot of The Feast of the Damned, courtesy of The Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2010.



The Dictators - Studies For a Monument.



BIOGRAPHY

Born in Lebanon in 1970, Sahmarani currently lives and works in Beirut. He left Lebanon in 1989 and moved to Paris to study at l'École Supérieure d'Art Graphique. Sahmarani is best known for his primary use of oil, ink and watercolour and for his representations of the socio-political issues most relevant to the Middle East. He has had solo and group exhibitions in cities such as Beirut, London, Montreal, Ireland, Dubai and Mexico. His featured group shows include Told/ Untold/ Retold at Mathaf, Doha (2010), All about Beirut at Kunsthalle whiteBOX, Munich (2010) and the The Feast of the Damned at the Museum of Art and Design, New York (2010). In 2010 Sahmarani was the recipient of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize and his work The Feast of the Damned was showcased at Art Dubai that year. Recently, he was selected to participate in the 3rd Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, titled 'Old Intersections-Make it New.'

All images by Marwan Sahmarani, courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi Gallery.