



Asad Faulwell. *Les Femmes D'Alger #68*. 2016. Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and Asad Faulwell

In the Heart of the Cosmos: a review

Laura Egerton | January 12, 2017

A single experience can inspire an artist's body of work for several years, if not an entire career. Such was the case when LA-based artist Asad Faulwell watched Gillo Pontecorvos's 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers* in his first semester of graduate school. For almost a decade his practice has focused exclusively on a series *Les Femmes D'Alger*, inspired by the film which sheds light on a specific history, that of women freedom fighters during the 1956-66 Algerian war of independence from French occupation.

"The film dealt with a lot of issues I was already interested in," he explains, "but also had this added complexity that it wasn't just dealing with colonialism, it was dealing with gender in a really interesting and maybe an unexpected way." The series runs to over 70 paintings, all sold and many in important collections. Earlier examples were part of his first solo at Lawrie Shabibi in 2014. *In the Heart of the Cosmos*, Faulwell's second solo exhibition in Dubai, which opened this week, includes seven recent paintings and marks the series' culmination.

"These were women asked to make a huge sacrifice for independence, who did so willingly, but were subsequently excluded from the conversation and not given the opportunity to shape the future of the country they helped to create." The artist, who is half-Iranian, elucidates: "The story is a specific narrative that repeats itself so often around the world and throughout time that its something that has a very universal quality to it".

Trained in abstract painting and initially uncomfortable with depicting figures, Faulwell was soon creating mesmeric, technicolour canvases dominated by portraits of real women, images taken from photo-reportage transformed into psychedelic icons. He asked himself: "am I effectively communicating what this story is about, I need to communicate something psychologically." The women's eyes were where the transformation was most extreme, adding emotive tears or closing them completely. Many women are mutilated or scarred. As the series evolved: "I started to think of them less of living women and instead as monuments to historical figures," Faulwell discloses. "I stopped trying to paint them as fleshly, living human beings but more as statues." These iconic female forms are a world away from the fleshy sexualised women of Delacroix and Picasso.

In his latest paintings Faulwell has come full circle back to his original preoccupation with abstraction and patterning. Female forms that were once protagonists are pushed to the periphery of the canvas. Despite this repositioning, the women are still there: repeated again and again, their images decreasing in size to create perspective in the composition, becoming an anonymous army. A major strength of his practice has been combining different materials resulting in a rich surface quality and intense composition. "I think a painting should be equally compelling from the door as when you are right next to it," he tells us. In one work he has created a deep blue expanse of sky, with constellations mapped out by pins. "I think of these as landscapes. In a year I make ten or twelve paintings. Such a slow speed of evolution allows for a super slow-motion improvisation."

It's important to appreciate how *Les Femmes d'Alger* questions many assumptions prevalent in the art world. Faulwell declares: "it is consciously, intentionally feminist work. In terms of the confusion that creates, I love that."

* Asad Faulwell *In the Heart of the Cosmos* runs until February 4 at Lawrie Shabibi, Unit 21, Alserkal Avenue.

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