

Mohammad Al Mahdi: The Hunter of the Forgotten

By Farouk Yusuf



Untitled, 2007, Oil on canvas, 120x90cm - Courtesy of Albareh Art Gallery

We would not be correct if we believed that there lies a trap of some sort in the paintings of Mohammad Al Mahdi; for he is the one who paints, not a fictitious child. When we say that the Bahraini painter rather responds to the desires of the child that dwells in his past as he paints—that would not be enough for interpreting everything that we see. This visual plain, to which we react sensually, cannot be created by other than an adept artist. True, this painter has unleashed his imagination to freely express delirium, but at the same time he does not make a single technical mistake. I would think that craftsmanship is what made an artist of that child. We are not standing before the paintings of a child who has grown suddenly, but rather an artist who insists on

clinging to his childhood. Let us look into this experience objectively. Innocence would not be meant for itself; for there are ideas that target adults (in terms of age group, of course). Ideas that philosophize its capability of challenge and elusiveness, the bold approach to that which is eligible to form an object for illustrating, and that which cannot be seen except through the screen of imagination. This approach suggests a great deal of intelligence and skill. Al Mahdi easily shortens the distance between the two worlds. We would expect the painter to tell us about the child that he is about to be, not that whom he used to be; for his hand, which extends from different directions, does not belong to, nor point to, a specific time. His paintings are a test

of our ability to endure a playfulness that is a mixture of living emotions and scenes extracted from a living reality. And thus, these scenes would not be completely invented. The visual memory of the painter is chock-full with what can be painted. Life as we have never lived except through humor. The wishes that each child explains are presented in a savoring manner. Through that, the painter finds great joy in following this child's vestige.

"To learn from him" He would not say, "To teach him."

Forgotten Tales

Scattered places that do not belong to a particular time can place narratives in the painter's hands. Endless lingual ruins. From these ruins emerge visual plains that do not juxtapose, but rather pile on one another, appearing below, above or through it all the same. This creates a vertical line of events that captivates and urges us to rummage it for our forgotten footsteps, the remainings of what we had lived, dreamed and imagined that our senses could come across it on every moment.

The painter then composes narratives. Would his description be enough to call him a story-teller? This description fails him as a painter since it does not represent him as the person he is. Painting here is not a means of expression or communication. Al Mahdi does not want his narrative to be completed through its narrated events. There is that thing which cannot be done away with: the act of painting that lies in order to broaden the circle of truth. We would always have to search for the appropriate formula that draws us closer to the hidden meaning, the filament which ties figures together. Painting, however, does not condone us for turning it into meanings. We would have to enjoy narratives void of meanings, at least upon real-live viewing, and then painting would drive us to the essence of its pleasuring side as a repository of pictures.

Independent Creatures

Al Mahdi spreads his creatures over the canvas, as if meaning to preserve their independence from one another. But does he do that for technical ends, in order to prevent the canvas remaining empty perhaps? I would think that this painter paints under direct influence of the persistent delirium of his creatures, and as he paints,



Untitled, 200x, Oil on canvas, 150x100cm - Courtesy of Albareh Art Gallery

he undergoes a state of continuing visual conflict with the transformations of these restless creatures. So, as the canvas of one of his paintings fills up, he moves slightly to working on another one. There is a notable fluidity that makes his paintings more of a sequence, its series of links emerging one after another with spontaneity in search of rectification. This breathless transition from one painting to another, however, does not necessarily indicate a pursuit of aesthetic perfection of some sort; Al Mahdi's paintings overlook the principle of equilibrium in visual plain. Moreover, the painter often tends to break such equilibrium, if unguardedly, so that the painting appears as if it were on the verge of falling. Al Mahdi's aesthetic sensitivity identifies with a world showcasing its imperfection glamorously.

Secret Garden

Mohammad Al Mahdi, b. 1975, belongs to a generation of Bahraini artists whose imagination could no longer



Untitled2, 2009, Oil on canvas, 150x100cm-Courtesy of Albareh Art Gallery .

be satisfied with prescribed forms of artistic modernism, not only because the concept of beauty has become more of a lie, as compared to the instances of ugliness that our age witnesses—war, poverty, illiteracy, abuse—but also because the individual, for the first time, has realized the importance of the details of his personal life. The technique alone could no longer capture the manifestations of a personal experience of living that had become the focus of language. Style was the first obstacle of artistic modernism that had been stepped over towards the beyond. Arab painters began to regard style, for the first time in their history, as a mask that needs to be removed. The importance of a painter such as Al Mahdi lies in the fact that he writes his diaries through painting. Those who look into his paintings should discover him to be a realistic creature, even if such discovery takes place in an imaginary context. Certainly, his insistence on painting with the hand

of the child whom he is becoming is no more than an attempt to hold high all that which is intimate in the human experience he alone has gone through, at least in the state in which it materializes on the visual plain. It is a normal life acquiring some kind of ferocity through art. There is no modernist experimenting of any sort. Everything that we see and live is a subversion of the concept of art; for narratives here do not promise any potential contract of social or historical nature. There are no symbolic signs which make us capable of interpreting what we are witnessing. The painter produces his signs from canvasses, as a magician produces doves and rabbits from his hat. The painter offers us feasts, chariots, rainbows, hearts, dolls, houses, clothes, a family, flowers, a notebook, bicycles and cats, yet the narrative remains his alone. The painter takes us on a visual journey through a secret garden, yet all of the figures that we see in the secret garden cannot be formal perceptions that bring us together with the painter. The personal life of the painter will remain distant from collective comprehension. The painter writes his diaries, not because he cares for being recorded in history, for that is a grand delusion to him; but rather because he does not have to be anything but himself at that particular moment in time.

Postmodernist Painter

Mohammad Al Mahdi places us at the heart of the existential choice of the individual that opens before us worn out pages from the book of the postmodern era, making it easier for us to comprehend the applicable aspect of the spiritual experience of the painter in which the visual plain combines different eras of the art of painting. Such combination cannot stand outside the imagination of an independent intuition—an intuition that does not look at what lies still in the mirror, but rather captures each and every thing that is ephemeral, negligible and marginal. It is a fiesta that Mohammad Al Mahdi sets for a spectrum of painters: Chagall, Hockney, De Beauvais, Klee and other painters we could not identify. With this, the mythical side fulfills the prerequisite for its own sovereignty. Is not painting a sort of venture into a myth?

For Mohammad Al Mahdi the daily is what it indicates, i.e. the happenings of his personal life taking the shape



untitled, 2011, Mixed Media on canvas, 100x100cm - Courtesy of Albareh Art Gallery.

of imaginary figures, often fragmented. Would painting be a medium then? This question is what we should ponder. The art of Mohammad Al Mahdi faces us with a different rhythm of inter-relation for it bestows a vibrant nature upon its personal details. This vibrancy is what liberates the details from their still form, inspiring them with ideas and rituals, and creating a shelter for incidental and perplexed emotions—emotions born at the moment of painting. It even occurs to me that these details could not have existed in their rebellious forms had it not been for painting. Does this not entail that the painter imagines upon painting what he had

undergone in previous times? Nevertheless, what the viewer ends up with has no relation with mythologizing the past. We are safe from history. These paintings do not concern themselves with joining their precedents; they live their moment as if they were seeing their manifestations in opposing mirrors. Upon tents in the garden, the sun shines, now and then, its movement controlled by the geometry of imagination. Did the painter invent a childhood of some sort in order to have his free walk in it? Here, I think, lies the reason for everything this painter does.



Untitled, 2009, Mixed Media on canvas, 160x120cm - Courtesy of Albareh Art Gallery.

Open Memory

In 2009, Mohammad Al Mahdi suggested the concept of Open Memory (private gallery, Dar Al Bareh Gallery, Bahrain). This concept counts on freedom as the basis from which all compromises emerge, and after which painting becomes pure. Through this basis the individual faces his past in intensity, not weakened by yearning or prone to frustration. The past here, abandoning its density, becomes nothing more than a flexible material for painting. And since one's childhood is their past, the first priority for painting would be to liberate this childhood from its time-frame. Childhood would not be a closed, dark closet, but it would rather grow wider through its verbosity with every moment of painting, and every glance of a viewer at those canvasses that seeks identification with a memory open to all expectations. Whereas the composition of visual plain, according to Al Mahdi, has no great concern for equilibrium between its components, it cannot hide from an expert eye that there always exists something that pulls these



untitled, 2009, Mixed Media on canvas, 160x120cm - Courtesy of Albareh Art Gallery.

components back to the core. This thing represents the knot in which all formal relations meet, regardless of their conflicts. In this core, the painter's goal of universal harmony is realized as expected and planned. Truth materializes through delusion, and reality transcends its banality in order to identify with its essence. This core appears as if it were newly formed—a visual phenomenon representing a reflection of the emotional shock caused by the coexistence of all those contradicting elements. We could, however, read the matter in a different way. Why do we not imagine that this core is the point from which all this swarm of non-potential relations comes forth? It is a core that represents the naval of the earth and nurser of miracles and which ascribes the entire narrative to some metaphysical force. Here the core of the painting becomes a vessel for the entire human experience in its past and present, as well as its future. The technique of core-based viewing here serves the concept and opens scientific potentials for its theoretical context. Did I say “universal harmony”?

Abstract Prey

The creatures of Mohammad Al Mahdi are as traps, set to capture specific preys. After having been fascinated by looking at them and savoring them aesthetically, one discovers that their purpose has not been in themselves. “We have been somewhere else,” one says and goes on amused in dismantling his bewilderment. The open memory of the painter helps him to overcome the problem of the still object. There is no object that takes the same form in two paintings, and the one object would not be mirroring itself. The painter appears to be interested in the gleam of the object, not in its form. Objects pass by as we remain unable to properly capture their final forms, even when they land in the core, they do not show more than a miniscule concern with their form. I might account all this disorder of form to an abstracting obsession represented by a mental concept that embraces universal harmony—which is the final goal of art—where a picture abandons its material elements in order to be united with imagination.

Mohammad Al Mahdi imagines his creatures. He, however, compels us in a later stage, the post-painting, to imagine these creatures as if they were undergoing rebirth. Consequentially, we would be obliged to restructure the narrative, not as we heard it or saw its details the first time, but as we have been feeling it before it ends. Such paintings dare to instigate us to stand against our visual beliefs. Distortion of senses suddenly followed with a drumming—a technique that Al Mahdi uses in all of his works in order not to miscalculate the distance between an object and its shadow, between a sentence and its effect and between an idea and its meaning. Having done that, I imagine him looking at us, smiling with melancholy, “I have had you in my traps, and I forgot myself.” And since, as I mentioned earlier, the painter writes down his diaries through painting, he expects his meetings with his creatures to be more intimate than what actually takes place on his canvasses. Eventually, after reluctance, he will have to believe that he, too, has become a stranger. His creatures are cut loose and standing apart with the secrets that they hold.



Untitled, 2009, Oil on canvas, 180x120cm - Courtesy of Albareh Art Gallery.