

## RITE OF PASSAGE – WALID SITI

By: Mona Krieglner

*... and I must travel on a road that I do not know! Until the time that I go and return.<sup>(1)</sup> ...*

A passage is a route, a path. It is an act of moving forward, past something on the way from one space to another. Voyages unfold, perpetually flow, gradually shift from the point of departure en route to a final destination and with them life is transformed. The transformative nature of the act of passage is a significant idea for Walid Siti and resonates across his new series of works on paper, a visual dialogue with the Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the earliest texts in ancient literature. Through its labyrinthine and layered nature, Rite of Passage (2011-13) engages with the many transitory trails of Gilgamesh, who was both god and king, alluding to the journey of a life. The condition of travelling in the Unknown has neither identity nor nationality nor is it bound to one place or another because in every life there are unknowns, no matter the whereabouts or the nature of its adventures. The epic journey is translated from text into form guiding the viewer through the perplexity of unknown wanderings and adventures over mountains, valleys, through forests, and in waters, which neither represent linear nor literal journeys at any point but rather suggest a plurality in the trajectory of being/existence.

Siti's work traces paths of life through the movement of the brush, accentuated by a distilled palette from earthy to monochrome colors, weaving them into multiple layers that build spherical palimpsests and inviting the viewer to unravel them. Microcosms of lines, meshes and structures on paper meander not only through the complexity of the world of images, admitting only fragments of what lies behind, reflecting the perplexity of human transformations. Each unique exploration narrates a little universe of travels transforming the viewer's perception. The subtle changes in the color blends of the brush stroke invite the viewer to trace its paths of the brush stroke, albeit only partially. This attention to detail reveals complex elements in the work, so the work -or the perception of it- is transformed and with this process the viewer who is then embarks on a visual journey. The implied inner layers of the work point to semi-revealed sign systems the viewer can potentially decode in identifying flashes of meaning. This reluctance of the work to surrender specific signification with its hints of something not entirely graspable, engages the viewer in a decoding process with no clear end. "All human endeavours are by nature transient<sup>(2)</sup>": a journey is also one of rediscovery, of rethinking and retracing steps.

Siti's omitting compositions echo the unfathomable which crosses over itself multiple times, constituted by lines, often in repetitive and overlapping circles, waves and flows, always interlinked and in search of an entity. Lines that whirl around some sort of centre that never reveals itself emit tension from this elusive origin. While some contrasting scenes merge into one another, others are knotted together swirling into an interdependence

of light and dark, real and imagined, exterior and interior. With their inherent array of ups-and-downs, of joy and sorrow, of birth and death these opposites reflect different peculiarities of the journey of a life. While traversing the forest, Gilgamesh loses his loyal friend and companion Enkidu which leaves him in search of immortality but results in the tragic realisation that life is framed by definiteness.

The incomprehensible, like the nature of immortality, leads to more questions: Is life an epic itself? A quest for self-discovery and of certainty, a quest to make determined what is ungraspable?

I began to fear death, and so roam the wilderness... How can I stay silent, how can I be still?<sup>(3)</sup>

Not only does Gilgamesh roam the wilderness of life that never remains in stasis unearthing new discoveries like the excavated clay tablets of the epic itself. In the end, the memory of Gilgamesh set in stone outlasts him. In contrast to the boundaries of life in time and space, Siti's wanderings of the reoccurring ovate organic forms offer the viewer clues towards a circularity and wholeness which has neither beginning nor end and suggesting a different endlessness. Both the orbital shapes and the infinite lines refuse the static nature of their construction: with the brisk strokes that form around them and the splashes of exuberant color one is given the impression of sound emanating from the centre along with movement and force.

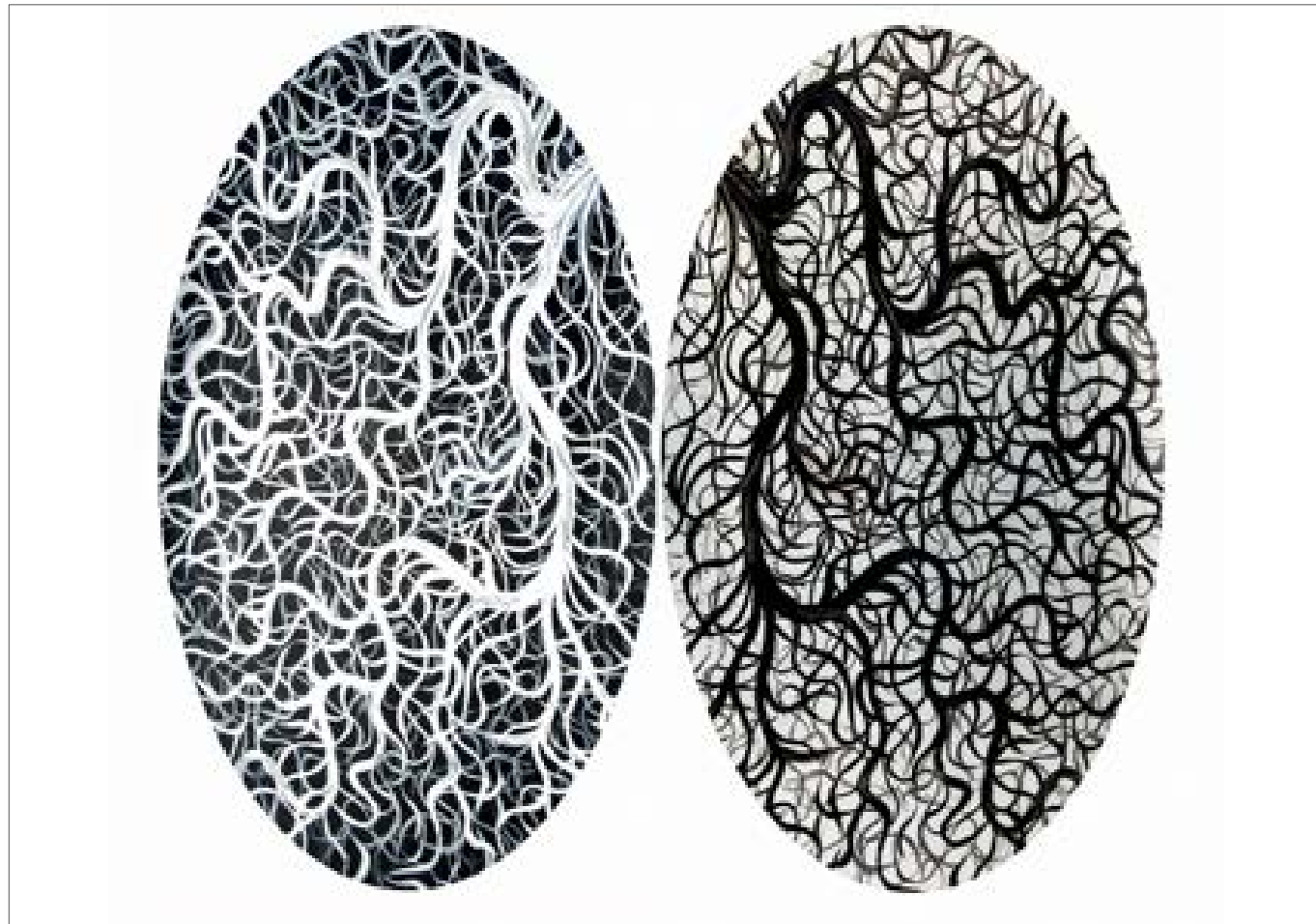
Just as Rite of Passage is multi-faceted so are the readings it offers. The fragmented and partial views of the inner layers, circular patterns and vigorous brushstrokes of Siti's work reflect the fragmented epic, a documentation of "the totality of knowledge of all"<sup>(4)</sup>. Yet, the original tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh are incomplete, parts lost and lines missing and with this absence of knowledge different interpretations came into being. Walid Siti's visual language begins where epic words fade away, creating openings for new perspectives. The nature of the fractured epic is in itself a reflection of the multiple and surprising travels of a life, suggesting that the reasons for our worldly expeditions are not to escape death but rather to relish existence. The ambiguousness of abstract form in this body of work relate back to the artist's overall theme: the sense of belonging to culture is connective to both nature and the collective social structures and hierarchies in which the individual is entangled. The ritual of finding rhythm in the passage of life seeks comfort by disentanglement, a necessity in times of uncertainty and disquietude.

The heavens cried out and the earth replied. And I was standing between them<sup>(5)</sup>.



1. The Cycle of Gilgamesh IV, 2011, acrylic & crayon on paper, 77x112cm. Courtesy of XVA gallery and the artist.

2. Dream Lines I, 2011, acrylic & crayon on paper, 56x76 cm. Courtesy of XVA gallery and the artist.



1. Dual Formation. 2013. C-Print. Edition of 5. 140x140cm. Courtesy of XVA gallery and the artist.
2. The Cycle of Gilgamesh I. 2011. acrylic & crayon on paper. 112x77cm. Courtesy of XVA gallery and the artist.
3. Life Radius. Wall based installation, straw, thread & nails. 300x250cm. Courtesy of XVA gallery and the artist.

#### End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kovacs, G. M. (1989) The Epic of Gilgamesh, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Tablet III, p. 25.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 83
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, Tablet X, p. 88
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid, Tablet I, p. 3
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, Tablet VII, p. 64