

WALKING WITH MARWAN SAHMARANI'S

By: *Jolaine Frizzell*

Vitality and spontaneity arise from Marwan Sahmarani's engagement with the act of painting, from his expressive use of color and his use gestural abstraction to his use of perspective to illustrate figuration. His preferred subject matter reflects his lived experience including the day-to-day politics of Lebanon, the landscapes of Spain, and events of our contemporary moment. Exploring violence is particularly significant for Sahmarani: he attempts to situate the violence he has grown up with as well as the violence now seen daily on television news and in popular culture within the context of traditional representations of violence in art history. Through this exploration, he searches for a root, an impulse, or even a motivation for this action. Yet he also gives a voice to those who have been born and raised in an environment of perpetual warfare, speaking to the destructive psychic and physical tolls.

Sahmarani was awarded the Abraaj Capital Prize for his monumental installation *Feast of the Damned* (2010), a work that integrated large-scale painting, drawing, ceramics, and film. It was a powerfully immersive experience with a cascade of tumbling humanity showcasing the pain and suffering of violent conflict inspired by European masterpieces and contemporary political events in the Middle East. The work draws on Ruben's *Fall of the Damned* (1620), which depicts the descent to Hell at the final judgment with the voluptuous fleshy bodies of sinners whirling in a tornado of motion as they meet their end. Sahmarani's practice has continually sought to make these connections, to link the past with the present and to demonstrate how the specifics within his environment touch on universal themes, while also showing how notions of evil, violence, and political agendas have distinct traditions. In his series *The Wolf is Crying like a Child* (2011), he addressed the Arab Spring. Here, he explored a range of sensations and vibrations: from the new energy that emerges with the potential for change to the hopelessness he feels for his home country, having had its own revolutions with no real change. Interested in how the revolutionary fire was ignited within ordinary citizens, he reminds us we are all dealing with the challenges imposed upon us; however, like the revolutionary spirit that inspires him, we all have the power to engender change. For instance, in *We All Have Dreams of Living*, he references the death

of Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian man who set himself on fire as an act of resistance - an act that started Tunisia's revolution. Yet his work does not recount the particular details of the event; instead, he focuses on the idea of martyrdom more generally. By using vertical storytelling in this series, he foregrounds the role of the viewer in the creation of meaning by allowing them to navigate up and down to shape a narrative. His use of long vertical sheets of Japanese paper references a progressive narrative structure. When one reads the work from the bottom to top, flames of the fire that engulfs the figure of a man in prayer climb upward: the flames transform into clouds, and then roots, and finally a tree in paradise - as if the man's prayer is an act that reaches up and sends him to heaven itself. In this way, the work connects a current event and martyr to reflect on the core idea behind acts of martyrdom: self-sacrifice as the ultimate mode of resistance to injustice.

Since then, oil painting on canvas has become a newfound medium for him, who declares that he started "painting" only four years ago. This modesty speaks to the fact that it is only in recent years he feels he has been fully committed to exploring its potential on canvas, though he had worked with oil previously. His newer works may still appear to have strong ties with art historical movements, but their catalyst can be found in a seemingly unlikely place for an artist from Beirut: nature. The first time he was alone in a forest in Spain, he was terrified by the solitude, by the quiet, by the stillness. Surmounting this fear has led to a change in his artistic practice. Sahmarani has said "It helped me to liberate myself from trying to focus on an idea. Instead, I had to look and see." He began to work en plein air, always referencing elements from a real and specific space and concentrating on transcribing what he saw in the moment, and then returned to see this blossom in his studio either in Spain or in Beirut.

What has persisted in Sahmarani's practice is this expressive exploration of violence - of feeling, bodily motion, nature, and human beings. The conflict between inner and outer is central, but the real crux of his inquiry is deceptively simple: how two people can arrive at a point where they attempt to destroy each other. This appetite for destruction spans human history, and it is our failure to transcend this



Beggars in the Rain, 2015, oil on canvas, 170x150cm. Courtesy of the artist.

annihilating force that continues to haunt him. In more recent works, he attempts to interrogate this failure, while also endeavouring to explore the raw emotions at the heart of violence.

In *Algarobba* (2014) he captures a memory of the Spanish landscape awash with life and dissolving into symphonies of color. What emerges from the landscape work in this context is the connection between violence and expressivity: how the brutality of nature shows a primal energy of the elements, the works are records of a violent encounter, especially when compared to its man-made counterpart. Looser brush strokes capture the exuberance, vitality and force of nature and produce expressive abstract landscapes with thick lines of paint and bold colors. This transition in practice, which he finds more personal and more intense, has kindled a focus on the act of painting itself, leading to what he described as a "fleshy" use of thick layers of paint to depict an interplay of gesture, movement, texture, and color evoking the collective unconsciousness.

In an attempt to access emotions as raw and dynamic as the acts of violence that had preoccupied him, he relishes impassioned mark-making. In *Nudes on the Beach* (2015), he references the Western art historical traditional composition of the artist and his model depicted in many paintings. However, in his adaptation, he introduces a striking twist. Rather than the structure of the artist depicted studying the nude form of the model in the artist's studio, here both the model and artist are nude in a landscape. Diffused daylight creates various abstracted forms. Moreover, figuration of the model is abstracted almost to the point that the model merges with the sand of the beach. The action of the artist sketching also seems to inhibit clear figural definition where the sketchpad and arms would be. It is as though the activity of sketching is so full of motion and dynamism that it is impossible to define the form. Definition, however, is seen in the artist's face where deliberate care has been given to the profile and gaze of the artist looking at his model: thus, a strong emotional intensity between the gaze of the artist and that of his model is created. However, the intensity of the former's gaze is not reciprocated by the latter. And, despite a loose figurative style, the model's body language suggests boredom, while her less intense gaze suggests annoyance and impatience with the request to model for him. In this work, he presents us with an exploration of the violence of emotions. Traditional power dynamics between artist and model would place the artist in a position of power, but, in this case, the artist does not seem to assert this power: instead, his naked vulnerability - typically reserved for model alone - and his focused, fixed gaze suggest an emotional toll as a result of the model's unresponsive gaze. Here, the interpersonal relations between these two archetypal figures of Western art instigate their own ferocity and terrible force.

The Bomb (2014) is a record of man-made violence on a large-scale, using a vigorous gestural style of movement. Rather than identifying any one specific act of violence, it showcases the agony and horror of an explosion, erupting in a series of thick, masterful brushstrokes to produce a viscerally potent experience. There is a sense of dynamic incompleteness - forms are still in the process of moving and settling, coming into definition. The heart of the canvas depicts the burning epicentre of a car bomb at the moment of detonation. Warped, expressively abstracted figures and car wheels, axles, and debris fly in every direction, as thin, rigid lines of orange clash with the thick downward motion of the swaths of blue and the fiery blotted red core that spurts in various directions: it seems as though the whole city is exploding. Sahmarani weaves hope into this seemingly bleak vision in the way the work evokes the Big Bang, the archetypal explosion in which the universe was born, hinting at the possibility of rebirth in the aftermath of such a deadly boom. *The Bomb* deliberately avoids specificity with respect to location, suggesting the sheer chaos of conflicting ideologies leading to this moment and raising the question of social action whatever our subject position and location. In a similar vein, the inspiration for *Beggars in the Rain* (2015) was Syrian refugees, a topic that has come even more to the popular consciousness since this work was created. And yet this work also speaks to general dislocations of people in every city of the world. In this encounter between the specific and the general, Sahmarani raises the question of ethical responsibility in the implicit hail from the distressed (whether a whole people or an individual). His intervention, then, in the conflict between two that always ends in the annihilation of one is the communication between flesh and flesh, between subject and viewer. This communication, grounded not in words but in emotional gestures, does not offer a resolution to the complexities of socio-political strife. It does, however, promise a beginning.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Jolaine Frizzell holds an undergraduate BA in Art History at the University of Calgary in Alberta led to a degree in Photography, followed by a return to art history for her postgraduate studies at the University of Western Ontario. After internships at various arts organizations working on their fund-raising programs, Frizzell relocated to Zurich, where she writes in numerous publications.



Nudes on the Beach, 2015, oil on canvas, 300x250cm. Courtesy of the artist.



The feast of the damned, 2009-2010, installation view, 10x5.4m. Courtesy of the artist.