

Galerie Claude Lemand

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SHAFIC ABBOUD, THE PROPHET .

Emmanuel Daydé - *SHAFIC ABBOUD, THE PROPHET.*

‘Where will we go when the lights go out and we gather all together?’, asked the feisty American-Lebanese poetess and painter Etel Adnan. ‘We will all go to Paradise’ seems to be the answer of her contemporary Shafic Abboud, whose paintings that are inebriated with light, woven with colours like carpets, enclosed like the Garden of Eden and rustling like Persian miniatures, appear as transfigured visions of an intangible reality. It seems that his entire oeuvre follows some of the Bonnardian aspects of the *joie de vivre*, as is proven through the title of one of his paintings, *Cette place pour le Bonheur* (‘That space for happiness’). Abboud remains a mystical believer of the moment, who is capable of sacrificing everything to this wild god. With his troubled nature, the Levantine artist desperately fights against time that consumes us and against depression that threatens him. He does this by making his canvases flutter and vibrate with a fire that burns, warms up and consumes itself, using all sorts of yellow, orange and red colour variations from the complex East.

There are some aspects of a meticulous alchemist in this magician of colours, as is proven throughout his books of paintings or his notebooks covered with sentences neatly framed, similar to some form of patchwork that is to be read as well as being looked at. There is also the notion of a musician lost in the harmony of spheres in this man crazy about Beethoven’s quartets. The latter supposedly possessed ‘the gift of perpetual migration’, according to his friend André Boucourechliev, the composer. For example, in his *Quatuor* (‘Quartet’) of 1977, Abboud’s painting is never still as there is always movement, sparkling, passion, iridescence. Finally, there is a mystical approach to the flesh in this wounded hedonist, who wants to ‘look at Nature straight in the eyes’ and who paints nudes like

landscapes and landscapes like nudes on the ceiling. Born in the Greek Orthodox village of Mhaidsé in 1926, at the heart of the Lebanese mountains, Abboud the sensualist painter remained a maker of icons all his life, these ‘splendors of light and beauty, glorious with liquid gold’, as the poet of the two riverbanks, Georges Schehadé, called them. Although he moved away from his childhood memories when he settled down in France, next to the enchanted garden of the Montsouris park, and that he ended up rejecting the confessional politics that sparked the fire in Lebanon, he never stopped sanctifying the secular between Beirut and Paris, painting here ‘where the heat is appeasing’ during the summer, and there, ‘where the temperature brings the brain to a boil’ during the winter.

As the paths of modernity were inscrutable, that of Post-War abstraction only served him as a way of cultivating his garden by irrigating the tradition of new lights. Just ten years before he passed away, he wanted to see again the Greek Orthodox monastery of Saidnaya one more time. Located on the Syrian foothills of the Anti-Lebanon, his mother used to take him on pilgrimages when he was a child to go see one of the three paintings depicting the Virgin Mary and attributed to Saint Luke. From his fascination with icons - and hence from Siennese painting, stemming from the latter - Abboud preserved the idea of not representing the world around us but rather transfiguring it. Even when he doesn’t use the deep and absolute matt of tempera, he employs light and pure colours, from which emerge his hypothetical figures in a static and frontal way, illuminating them from within (and not from behind, as in the black Midi works of his friend Marfaing). There is no better example that alludes to the theory of saints in Orthodox deism than his painting of his golden brown Ladies of the gallery of 1977 – without mentioning his series on Simone’s dress or the full-length portrait of a Saudi woman, titled Widad Dress. Even when all figural traces seem to have disappeared, the child of the mountain pursues his visions in ecstasies of colours: ‘The collision of two colours provokes light... Colour, I will never escape from it, it is a fatality, it is my nature’, he used to say; ‘my eyes must have been dazzled forever’.

Even if it was only a way into his later oeuvre, the moving poetic figuration of his paintings from 1947 to 1953 heralds a universe of dreams that are already compartmentalized, through soft grey colour tones, almost transparent. He uses a folkloric construction, similar to that of Zoran Music's small Dalmatian horses. His slender and dreamlike strokes are borrowed from Paul Klee, whilst the little secret stories that the *Fous* or *La boîte à images* tell each other refer to the happy childhood days, when young Shafic was like a bird, living off clean air and fresh water by absorbing the stories that his grandmother used to tell him. Yet there is no need to begin such an ordinary narration in the Paris of the 1950s that strives to forget the horrors of the war through the regeneration of abstract art. Although he fundamentally rejects its components, the Lebanese painter adheres to the lyrical Abstraction praised by critic Roger van Gindertael and applies an integral abstraction in the same way as Poliakoff, finding the inner realm he sought for in the Russian artist's combinations of silent shapes. However, he complicated these sensorial, and here again iconic puzzles, by building them with stacks of colours, just like in his dense cycle of the *Saisons* ('Seasons') dated 1959, depicting an imaginary muddy topography that foreshadows Eugène Leroy's rotten magmatic *Saisons*. Far from being a Middle-Eastern epigone, Abboud is a discoverer. If we attribute the invention of the 'black-light' to Pierre Soulages, then we need to attribute the invention of the 'colour-light' to Shafic Abboud, considering his skill in making his canvas colourless through the use of colours. As in the art of manuscript illuminations, he knows how to extend his monochrome neutral figures through coloured images. Yet the empty space of abstract art, that approaches strict geometry, was beginning to suffocate him. A painting such as *Enfantine* of 1964 tacitly echoes the luminous composition of Nicolas de Staël's *Méditerranée*.

At the same time as creating his abstract religious school, he illustrated fairy-tales for his daughter Christine as well as producing a magical lantern in the shape of a cinema-box, that shows movies that are as still as the Quay Brothers' short animation films. 'I do not oppose abstract painting against figurative painting', de Staël claimed to his accusers, 'A painting should be simultaneously abstract and figurative. Abstract for acting like a

wall, figurative as being a representation of space'. This space is what Abboud wants to conquer from that point onward, taking something caused by reality as the starting point to then be blurred in the great Baroque carpets gleaming with colours, or, on the contrary, in the whiteness of immaculate snow or the dullness of minimal night. Then, the entire world wears clothes worthy of the Thousand and One Nights, whether it be in the shimmering fabrics of the Saint Pierre market, his mother's blue-stained stretched out dead body, Merce Cunningham's Zen performance at the Fondation Maeght, the nostalgic memory of Paradise on Beirut's beach, the children's beds in the room, the fields surrounding his little house on the Loire river banks or the ultimate monochrome beaches, 'so soft that they can be touched with the eyes'.

In a time where there becomes here, when the Museum of Modern Art of Paris is getting ready to dedicate a large exhibition to Iranian artistic creation and the Pompidou Centre is featuring Arab informal abstraction in its show entitled *Modernités plurielles*, it is only natural to turn towards Modern Lebanese Art and its solitary pioneers, headed by Saliba Douaihy and Shafic Abboud. Being the only Arab artist who showcased his works at the First Biennial of Paris in 1959 - exhibiting side by side to Yves Klein, Martin Barré, André Marfaing and Joan Mitchell - Abboud succeeded in escaping from the Second School of Paris, by breathing into his luminous and formal conquests an oriental incandescence, that is as dazzling as it is unexpected.

Note on the prophet by Claude Lemand

* *The prophet* is a twofold allusion to Gibran Khalil Gibran's famous book entitled *The Prophet* (1923) and to the French art movement known as the *Nabis* (1888-1890).

1. Gibran (1883-1931) was a Lebanese writer who lived in New York. He wrote *The Prophet* in English, which consists of 26 poems written in prophetic prose. The book was quickly translated into Arabic as well as in twenty other languages. Gibran was one of the founders of the Nahda, the Arabic Renaissance modernist and anti-clerical movement. Gibran's

writings were highly influential on the youth of the Near East and on Shafic Abboud, born in 1926.

2. The *Nabis*, otherwise referred to as The Prophets, was a group of painters founded by Paul Sérusier, the creator of *Talisman*, a masterpiece inspired by Paul Gauguin in Brittany. The Nabis group liberates itself from the Impressionists' heritage by moving away from reality and extolling vibrant colours and light. They drift away from Christianity, find inspiration in various other theosophies and come closer to Symbolism by emphasizing the sacred role of art and painting, where light becomes a witness of spiritual life. The Nabis do not restrict themselves solely to painting as they also throw themselves in many other types of artistic production. The group was influenced by Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cézanne, and also by Orientalism and Japonism. Its main forerunners include Sérusier, Vuillard, Bonnard, Denis, Roussel, ... From them, Shafic Abboud will preserve Bonnard's colours (that he had always admired), Vuillard's interiors, Gauguin's sacred and pagan sensuality present in his 'women-landscapes', as well as being drawn by the Nabis' experiments with various applied arts.

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