

Agial Art Gallery presents “Rituals of Isolation” by Oussama Baalbaki from May. 5- May. 21

Posted on [May 3, 2011](#)

The birth of self-portraits as such coincides with the emergence of a new awareness among Renaissance painters both of their individuality and the dignity of their trade. No longer viewed as craftsmen in the service of the Church, they claim the right to sign their works with their name. From signature to self-portrait, there is one more step to take in the individuation process. Apart from the complex economical, political, and cultural context which allowed this crucial development to take place, self-portraits would not have been made possible without the invention, at the same period, of clear mirrors, even if the first ones were small convex devices. The self-portrait is the “mirror stage” of painting, to use a psychoanalytic phrase. It took three centuries to get big flat mirrors allowing full-length depictions of the painter at work. The self-portrait is thus contingent upon a technical set-up. Each progress in the exteriorization of the painter’s image would henceforth open new artistic possibilities, new ways of self-staging..

Among the hundreds of self-portraits in the story of painting, scanty are those that do not seem to train their eyes upon the viewers standing at approximately the same spot as the painter when he was staring at his virtual doppelgänger in the mirror. The viewers gaze at the portrait which, in turn, seems sometimes bent on confronting them with an unsettling insistence. Some painters, such as Johannes Gump (17th century) or Norman Rockwell (20th century), divulge the mirror-painter-easel-canvas set-up, resulting in a triple portrait: the presumed “real” painter (or rather his depiction) turns his back to us, allowing a partial view of his “real” face looking both at his virtual face in the mirror and his painted face on the canvas, with the unavoidable discrepancy and staggering between them, as if signifying that “reality” or identity would always escape us and painting was but a reflection of a reflection of a reflection. Maybe this is why painters such as Rembrandt (17th century), and Omar Onsi (20th century) so unrelentingly pursued their self- inquiry through a series of self-portraits from youth to old age.

A few painters, shunning the focus on the gaze, which is the mainstay of self-portraits, depicted themselves either in the process of painting, but with their face deflected towards the canvas (Artemisia Gentileschi, 17th century), or engaged in activities other than painting :Artemisia Gentileschi again, and Lavinia Fontana (16th century) playing the harpsichord, Jan Steen (17th century) scratching his lute disguised as a jolly clown, Gustave Courbet (19th century) greeting one of his collectors in the countryside, Tamara de Lempica (20th century) at the wheel of her car... They seem bent on projecting themselves onto the outside world instead of making do with the virtual world of the mirror or even the actual world of the studio.

Their works foreshadowed the advent of photography, which opened up new perspectives, allowing painters to duplicate themselves as Others in countless specimens engaged in many pursuits. When, in addition, they resort to living models as surrogates in order to study at leisure attitudes and gestures, they get a large range of situations conveying ideas, emotions and feelings, beyond the purview of the purely psychological portrait.

Herein lies Oussama Baalbaki’s originality. In some forty large size self-portraits showing him in various activities, the first thing that impresses the viewer is that the staging of the painter-actor manipulating domestic or familiar objects within the banal setting of his studio relies on a leading principle contravening the tradition

of self-portraits. Instead of looking, so to speak, outside the canvas toward us, the model deflects his gaze or dissimulates his eyes so as to shun any straightforward contact with the viewer's eyes. The plain, bare narcissistic or critical face is out. What counts here is the freeze frame of an attitude or gesture no longer conveying a state of being through the mirror portrait, but rather a cut in the timeline of a sequence of actions in progress in life's movie, a suspended fleeting moment, as if caught unawares.

A deft draughtsman, Oussama Baalbaki, working with photos and living models, skillfully sketches his motives directly upon the canvas with charcoal sticks. Hence his preference for black and white acrylic painting, although he demonstrates his virtuoso mastery of color in a few pieces. The value tonalities and light effects over a usually neutral grey background (the studio walls) respond to his mood, and perfectly suit the quiet melancholy of the depicted scenes, corroborating the suspension effect.

As a result, most of the paintings show enigmatic, mysterious, unexplained acts in contrast with the banality of the context, enhancing yet more their ambiguity. They incite the viewer to go beyond simple contemplation towards analysis, interpretation, and tentative comprehension, be it merely intuitive or emotional, of the scenes.

In traditional self-portraits, the mystery of being is essentially concentrated in the gaze. In Oussama Baalbaki's works, it lies in the strange behavior of the artist. He invites viewers to embark upon an open ended inquiry in search of the missing evidence underlying his figures' uncanny antics. The peculiar strength of his works derives from this staggering effect, this interpretative gap which continually defeats attempts to close it up through clear-cut meanings.

In these pieces, there is a subdued qualitative leap beyond the pale of the quotidian, without ever adventuring into fantastic or surrealist territory. This reserved leap is the quality of Oussama Baalbaki's creative imagination. Through a simple gesture, an inflection of the head, an object related to in an incongruous way, he manages to cross to the other side of an invisible mirror into a world exclusively his own. His complex self-portraits are and are not self-portraits, are less and more than self-portraits all at once. They solicit viewers to enter this personal world and probe the arcana of a complex artistic approach, all at once metaphoric and symbolic, facetious and serious, masculine and feminine, free and rigorous, poetic and critical.

Oussama Baalbaki is not obsessed with his ego: rather, he uses it as a pretext to try and fathom the mystery of our presence on this planet, echoing the perplexed questions so many pondered upon before and after Gauguin: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Not content with stage managing attitudes and movements, Oussama Baalbaki submits them to geometric patterns which reverberate from canvas to canvas, orchestrating contrapositions of right and acute angles, re-entrant and salient angles, mainly in the articulations of the arms (often crossing over from right to left and left to right), and fingers, in resonance with the downward pointing collar of the T-shirt he perpetually wears, and the angles of tables, chairs, and other objects.

The antithesis is recapitulated in the main theme of a canvas depicting a broken, suffering chair, a casualty of violence, strife and war. Lacerated by bullets, shrapnel, or knives, its back exhibits a rectangular rent from

which hangs down a triangular piece of upholstering material. On the verge of geometrical abstraction, the vacant chair is the seat of the pervasive presence of the artist and his secret heart-breaks. This insistence on geometric patterns is also the outcome of the underlying construction of the canvas in conformity with mathematical rules and grids dating back to the origins of painting.

In his stage managed portraits, Oussama Baalbaki mainly sits on a chair, or lies in bed, and sometimes stands up in his studio. But he is perpetually elsewhere. His eyes are always averted, closed, half-closed, partially or totally invisible, so that his gaze never meets the gaze of the viewer: head bent down looking at the ground or a familiar object rendered incongruous by the context; head literally sinking into a book, so that reading becomes impossible; head turning towards a measuring gauge in a kind of muted perplexity; eyes dreamingly raised upwards, looking at the ceiling; head half-hidden by a flower vase, with only one eye staring at the viewer; head with closed eyes emerging from under a bed cover; napping head bending sideways, one eye hidden by an auspiciously tender female hand with a disconnected radio set in his hands; reader's head with eyes absorbed in a book held in one hand while the other one tries to grab red fish in their round bowl; face almost entirely covered by his plentiful curly black hair; day-dreaming eyes looking into the void while he lays in bed holding a bunch of painting brushes; head turned towards the wall, his emblematic hair as only sign of identification; head in profile with a huge acoustic horn, as if literally turning a deaf ear to the world; head looking at an invisible mirror with a hair dryer pointed to the temple like a gun; counter-image of him standing in front of the mirror, his reflection showing him with the hair dryer in the same position, looking sideways at the instrument; head emerging from a bed spread with sleepy eyes, his hand transformed into the hand of a wooden anatomical model...

Evasion and avoidance do not confine themselves to the sense of sight. They control the strategies of three other senses: hearing, smell, and touch. The only exception is the sense of taste. The radio set is disconnected, the red fish are elusively ungraspable, the acoustic device signals deafness, so much so that the character howling through an acoustic cornet into the ear of the subject enigmatically looking down at a light bulb lying on an egg carton does not seem to be even noticed. The importance given to the hair at the expense of the face illustrates the determination to use it as a veil between the self and the environment, to turn inside or away. Even books become meaningless opaque screens.

The traditional self-portrait is a request of recognition addressed by the painter to society at large, a proclamation of his irreplaceable idiosyncrasy. Oussama Baalbaki's self portrayals are, contrariwise, a demand of seclusion, a denial to recognize society and its intrinsic barbarity, a repudiation of heteronomy and a proclamation of the artist's moral and creative autonomy. Through their ambiguity, their humor, their irony, their derision, Oussama Baalbaki's self-portraits edict a code of ethics of painting practice.

If there is so much silence, softness, kindness, peace interiority, and elusiveness in Baalbaki's paintings, it is because he began by portraying dozens of vehicles torn by machine-gun fire, shelling and bomb blasts, not only as testimonials, but as monstrous memorial portraits, or rather self-portraits of Lebanese society. No wonder, then, that he prefers to retire within, and shut himself off. If he retreats in dreaming, reading, play, or even idleness, if there is so much absence of presence, and presence of absence in his works, it is because he has seen too much, heard too much, smelled too much and tasted too much the bitter lemons of cruelty, injustice and violence. By refusing to look at us, he invites us to desist from stiff ready-made antagonistic views and answers, and embrace the inexhaustible fluidity of a critical, uncertain, enquiring, and non-violent mind.

Joseph Tarrab

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