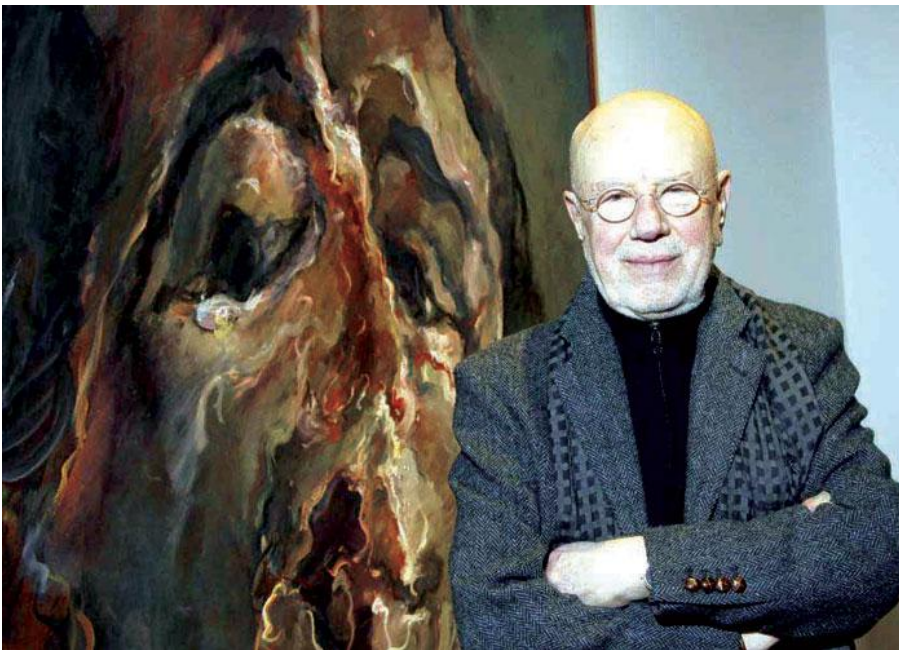




The Arab Weekly ^(/) Marwan Kassab-Bachi, an artist who challenged the landscape of portraiture

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Syrian artist Marwan Kassab-Bachi. (Alserkal Avenue's twitter page)

Beirut - In its traditional sense, a portrait can be expected to capture the likeness of a person but some artists have sought to portray something more symbolic, breaking beyond conventions in

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search of capturing a certain essence.

Transcending mere physical representation, this intangible quality can penetrate the surface to reveal aspects of the sitter's inner psyche, which can challenge a viewer's notions of identity.

Syrian painter Marwan Kassab- Bachi tapped into such elusive territory. Through his loosely figurative paintings, he expressed a dramatic depth in the individuals he painted.

Kassab-Bachi, who died October 23rd in Berlin at the age of 82, was esteemed as one of the Arab world's most prolific artists. His works seemed to bridge cultures, embodying both Arab and Western- European stylistic influences.

Kassab-Bachi was born in Damascus on January 31st, 1934. After studying Arabic literature at the University of Damascus, he planned to head to Paris, a creative refuge for young Syrian and Lebanese artists at the time, but in 1957 his path led him to Berlin.

The unstable sociopolitical situation in early 1960s Berlin was a pivotal time for the creative development of the then young and impressionable artist, who absorbed all that the vibrant city had to offer. He befriended post-war

German neo-expressionists, who influenced each other, channelling the zeitgeist of the neo-expressionist German approach in their works.

Kassab-Bachi's early works were characterised by surreal figurative representations of people, with some works including figures from his life and childhood in Syria.

The human face eventually became an obsession for Kassab-Bachi and, by the mid-1970s, it dominated his works. Inspired by the poetry and writings from Arab Sufis, Kassab-Bachi layered coats of paint over and over again on canvas, evoking flesh with a sort of piercing three-dimensionality.

Eschewing the conventions of formal figuration, Kassab-Bachi gravitated towards abstraction. Brutal brushstrokes and gloomy colours collide to imbue his works with an introspective at times of uneasy feel. In some of Kassab-Bachi's portraits, the face is transformed into a distorted landscape, enriched with a cacophony of colour.

Veteran gallerist, art critic and friend of the artist, Saleh Barakat, described their relationship as one of "reverence not equality".

“For me he was a master... Marwan is the guy who never made any concessions. He was always very true to his painting... It’s not only about portraiture; he was [also] influential in how to impose on artists the discipline of rigorousness and application and taking painting very seriously, to the utmost extreme,” Barakat said.

He described Kassab-Bachi’s uncompromising nature when it came to his art with painstaking attention to detail.

“I saw him at work in his atelier in Berlin. He’s a very demanding artist from himself. Sometimes he could finish a painting in five minutes but sometimes it could take years until he was convinced,” Barakat said. “He was a master technician, very rigorous about the technique. He could have [achieved] more success had he been willing to make any concession about what he wants to do in his painting.”

Underlining Kassab-Bachi’s strong link to his roots, Barakat added: “He was somebody who was very much part of the Berlin school of German expressionism and he was very grateful for everything he had in Germany but, at the same time, I think Damascus was in the middle of his heart and the middle of his [mind]. He never left Damascus somehow.”

Kassab-Bachi's paintings have been collected by international museums and institutions, including the National Gallery in Berlin, the Tate Modern, the Centre Pompidou, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, the Abd al-Hamid Shoman Foundation in Jordan, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Barjeel Art Foundation Collection, the Sharjah Art Collection and many more.

In a tribute to the artist, Andree Sfeir-Semler, a Lebanese-German art historian and founder of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, which had a long-standing association with Kassab-Bachi wrote: "A single canvas would carry many faces on top of each other and one painting would often need several years of work before it was considered finished by the artist."

Indeed, every feature of his subjects' faces appears to be intensely examined. Imbuing his canvases with an unabashed emotional honesty, Kassab-Bachi managed to forge memorable impressions of the people he painted.




Written By

[Jimmy Dabbagh \(/jimmy-dabbagh\)](#)

Jimmy Dabbagh is a journalist based in Beirut and contributes cultural articles to The Arab Weekly.

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