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Jamil MOLAEB

XYLOGRAPHIES
WOODCUTS

1980-2014



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JAMIL MOLAEB A.P. 1934

اصول

جیل ملائی

A life worth living

Well rooted in the soil of his native village Baysour, a small peasant hamlet not far from Aley, Jamil Molaeb demonstrated from the beginning a breadth and depth of vision rare in vernacular painters. His obvious ambition, from so a particularistic fulcrum, was to universally embrace, with a gaze at once empathetic and critical, all areas of nature and culture: emptiness and fullness (which he brilliantly plays against each other in his relief woodcuts since 1980), cosmos and stone, day and night, sea and mountain, rural life and urban life, private life and public life, war and peace, wisdom and folly, tradition and modernity, veil and nudity, myth and reality, History and the latest news. And, of course, men, women, children, animals, and plants.

The list could go on, but the approach is clear: it is to combine opposites and complements in a continuum of images where time becomes space and space time, the distant close and the close distant. Such effects are achieved through juxtaposition and superposition of signs, figures and images: their simultaneity and succession on the same two-dimensional surface (paper sheet, canvas, or, in this case, a carved wood board) simulate both the concordance and offset of various actions in compositions with multiple human and animal characters. Their very heterogeneity eventually leads to a sense of harmony and unity.

Two adjacent images may mean two different times in the course of the same day. Molaeb does not deliver snapshots, but, in apparent promiscuity, a narrative on many levels that must be reconstituted. It may even be a kind of cinematic narrative, such as those columns of superimposed vignettes where a close-up car enters the first frame only to drive obliquely away until getting completely out of the last frame. Woodcuts with vignette columns (three to nine) may thus be compared to celluloid film strips with their parades of repetitive images.

The division of the woodcut in columns or rows also allows Molaeb to combine series of images that seem conjured up through free associations or, without associations at all, by sovereign decision: cars, snakes, donkeys, faces, profiles, revolvers, salamanders, roosters, sheep, writings, birds, nudes, children, mothers and children, tanks, and so on. Although those effigies are in themselves perfectly meaningful in the overall context of the work, they sometimes seem enigmatically disparate, as if Molaeb, instead of making his thought explicit, were condensing it in rebus.

Molaeb's woodcuts are from an indigenous ethnographer of sorts. Far from adopting the dry unfeeling «distant gaze» of a foreign ethnographer, he watches his familiar world with obvious affection and active sympathy, a world threatened by war, rampant globalization, mechanization,

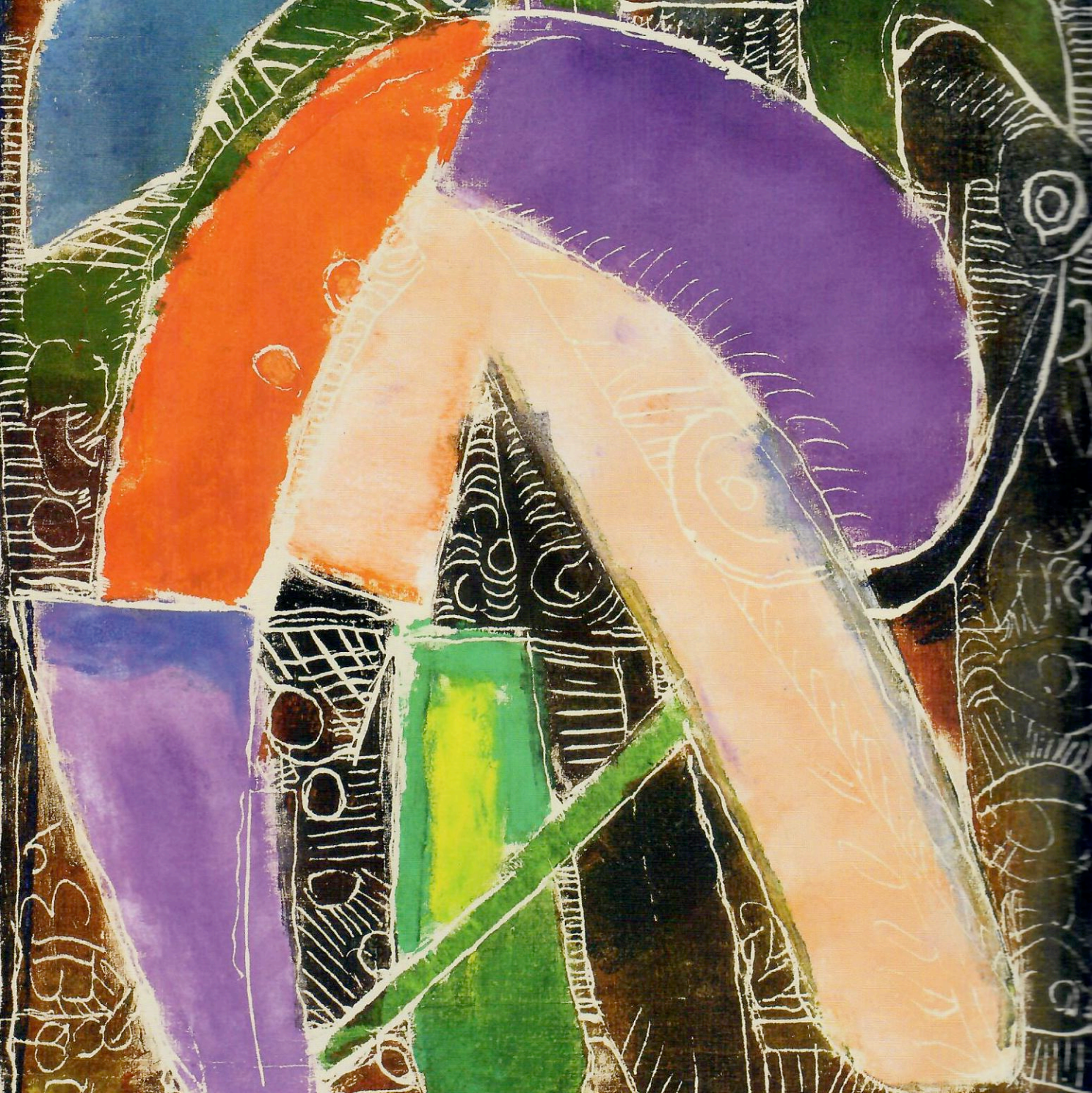
information technologies, real estate, and financial speculation, in order to perpetuate its memory through a graphic approach imbued with hieraticism and sometimes solemnity which ennobles and idealizes even the minor aspects of peasant life, despite the seeming disorder of a kind of patchwork of scenes seen and remembered. A life where men, women and children are constantly accompanied, helped, or watched by pets and wild animals whose behavior often allegorically evokes the Lebanese internecine war and its aftermath which were in full swing when most of the prints were being engraved and edited in only two or three copies by the artist himself between 1980 and 1984.

The so-called Mountain war required this son of the Druze fatherland to seek refuge with his family in the Bekaa Valley. Unwilling to stay idle, he undertook the creation of most of his woodcuts on makeshift wood matrices, pine logs, door leaves, and other reclaimed wood. He had to prepare and engrave those using improvised tools, chisels, knives, screwdrivers, and anything fit for cutting, gouging, and hollowing out. Without a printing press at hand, even a tinkered one, he took on himself to coat, not with ink but with black oil-painting, limited portions of the surface of those large format woodcuts (50 x 70 cm, sometimes more), then to lay a sufficiently thick sheet of paper and press it down with all his might, using a roller of only five centimeters in length. A bigger one would have required a pressing force exceeding his physical abilities. Pulling a proof requires several grueling sessions since it is necessary, besides that, to ensure continuity of printing and uniformity of impregnation, which is not easy at this turtle pace. Hence the drawing of few copies, artist's proofs somehow. Polychrome woodcuts dated 1991, 1993, and 2013 are resumptions of the woodcuts of the 80s, with rare exceptions. They are drawn by the same method, each oil color being spread over a small portion of the relief woodcut, sometimes several times to ensure the desired saturation, a work even harder and more delicate than with black and white. Those proofs, like the engravings themselves, are thus a highly unusual production, out of character in the world of woodcut techniques and procedures, where appropriate wood boards and professional presses are used.

When the engraving is performed on a large size wood board, such as a door leaf, Molaeb divides the plane into several registers with similar or dissimilar themes, so as to be able to print one or more woodcut per register. A polychrome door leaf is spectacular, but it is impossible to draw a single proof from it: even presses cannot do it. In short, drawing a proof is almost an athletic achievement, and this factor must be taken into account when assessing it.

With those large areas, the engraving is necessarily done along the way of the wood grain. Small dimensions are engraved against the grain, perpendicular to it, which is much easier and allows for finer effects.

The woodcut, by the nature of its medium, its instruments, and the hollowing out procedure along the wood grain, is ideally suited to the rustic character of Molaeb's world. It requires powerful jerky gestures, abrupt cuts, and concise angular synthetic outlines of an almost awkward



simplicity: the more summary, so much the more potent. Only thus the desired hieratic effect is achieved.

In any case, this style was closer to his heart than the free flowing drawing style that he also masters quite well: as early as 1976, he published a book of drawings on the "Two-year war" (1975-1976) using the same primitivist approach to the line, probably due to the fierceness of the battles, kidnappings, liquidations, massacres, and destructions.

Woodcutting is for Molaeb a kind of emotional release, externalized rage, and physical and creative energy expenditure. He often works through improvisation, much like in dreams one image leads to another in an apparent arbitrary disorder pertaining to the mechanisms of displacement and condensation. The underlying coherence emerges only later, during the interpretation process.

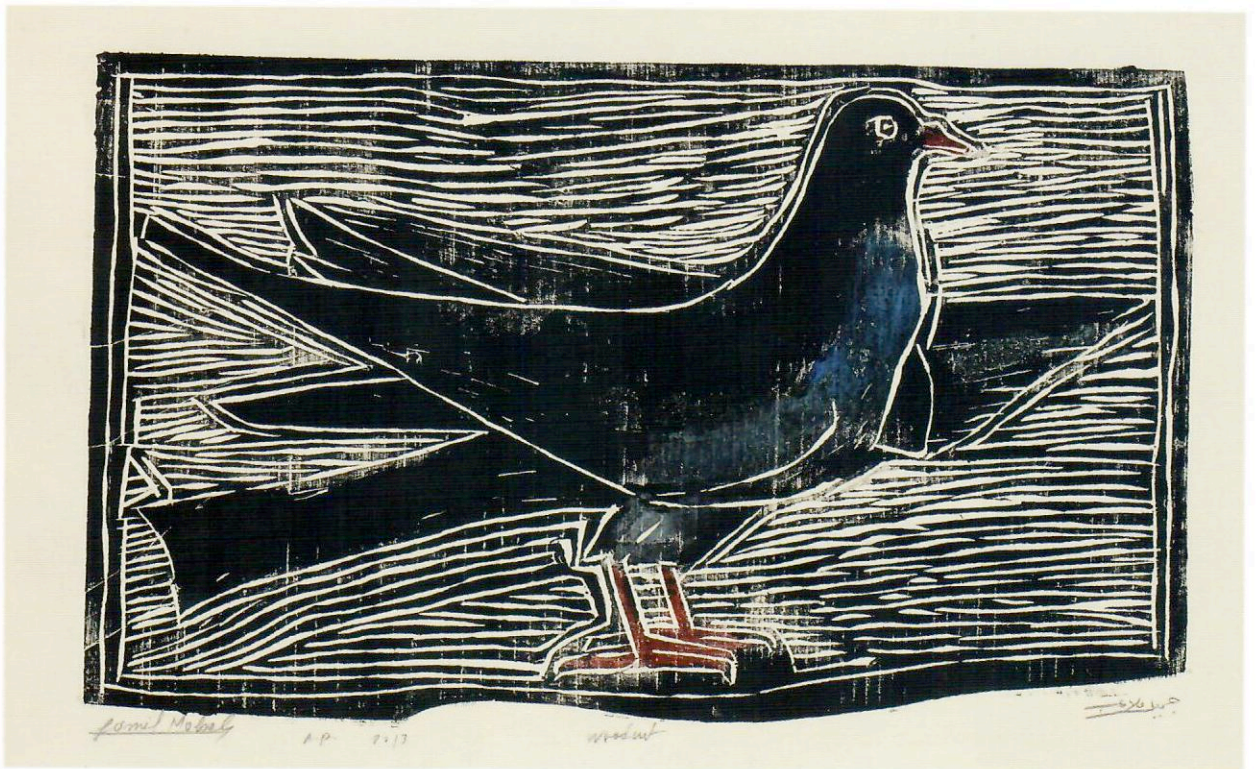
Each proof is thus something like the projection of mental images, of very precise observations of peasant home and country life, images which, to Molaeb, define his root identity and true nature: he is a Druze countryman deeply attached to his family home, his native village, with its fields, landscapes, men, women, children, plants, animals, specially birds, including raptors, and practices such as scarecrows in cultivated fields frequented by cheeky fowl, the taking of birds with bird-lime (an apt metaphor of the Lebanese mired in war), and stacks of stones marking a boundary or commemorating an event, which may have inspired the stacking of vignettes in the woodcuts with three to nine columns.

This inquisitive gaze, both at ground level and at sky altitude, does not prevent Molaeb from identifying with overall Druze history, as the print "*Sultan El Atrash*" makes plain, with its eleven irregular compartments composing a collage of sorts around the hero's portrait in close up, and reaching out to a pan shot via intermediate views full of human characters, horses, birds, and numerous motifs that make up a non-linear epic narrative, complex as are most of the artist's compositions.

After the first 1981 woodcuts populated with naked women, partially draped or not, in the privacy of home, the following, from 1982 onwards, appear immediately, knowingly or not, to point to the Lebanese situation where the strongest imposes his law, turning life into a perpetual plundering: the panic-stricken birds glued to the tree where they will be plucked like ripe fruit, the eagle squeezing a little bird in its beak, the fox stealing a chicken, the brambles bouquet, bushes of prickly-pears, windmills, the fighting cocks surrounded by a constellation of wide open eyes staring in the dark, the night fight of two men strangely evoking the struggle of Jacob with the angel, with symbolic animals around them, ox, donkey, owl, dog, and raptors lying in wait on the backdrop of a town under the moon and stars. As if Molaeb abhorred any vacuum, there is hardly a square inch devoid of any pattern, as in most of the woodcuts although it is the void, at the heart of the engraving, that produces the whites and therefore the very readability of the prints.



Woodcut , 2013. 36 x 61 cm



Departure, 2013. 36 x 61 cm

Other prints are more explicit, as the man who walks painstakingly, weighed down by a multitude of words (and woes) that describe the 1976 situation and are still top of the news in 2014. And, more visually impacting, the prints with queues of cars at roadblocks, destroyed vehicles, tanks, and helicopters, helpless refugees lost without means in the big city, and more.

To refresh his eyes, Molaeb never forgets to observe nature, from the sun to the beetles, from the moon to the flowers of the fields. His favorite peaceful scenes are village ones, inside and outside houses, as if, facing the possibility of losing this heritage, he were eager to revive the minutest memories of things seen and heard, in order to save what can still be saved. This is clearly, in all its aspects, an endeavor to preserve rural memory in a specific Druze context, but going beyond it to reach out to universal values through its humanism and benevolence, in an approach that makes it an elegiac tribute to a lifestyle where men and animals maintain, in a natural setting that is actively involved in their exchanges, mutual relations of trust and distrust, hostility and friendship, antagonism and complementarity in the wheel of universal existence, of life and death.

The relationship of man with nature and other creatures is being lost faster and faster, despite desperate campaigns waged by advocates of the environment and its ecosystems to ensure, if it ever can be done in a proactive and artificial way, a natural balance that was spontaneously generated in the countryside and villages of Lebanon (and the rest of the world), and celebrated by rural writers, geographers, and landscape painters. Molaeb is the bard of a kind of paradise lost, and he enacts it, far from academic precepts, in a style and methods of two-dimensional composition evoking the oldest sources of Ancient Near Eastern art. Like the peasant presenting (or purchasing?) a bunch of flowers to a child holding another one on a Bekaa roadside, Molaeb proffers a range of works imbued by the nostalgia and hope of a quiet convivial life, a life worth living, despite the bellicose mood of the times. Sheer utopia, idealization of a presumed condition that never existed? Maybe.

In the meantime, he lavishes an age-old teaching from the wisdom of nations: refrain from seeing, hearing and speaking. Had he followed it, he would never have designed, engraved, carved, nor painted. Precepts are meant to be infringed. Freedom and creativity are at this price.

Joseph Tarrab

