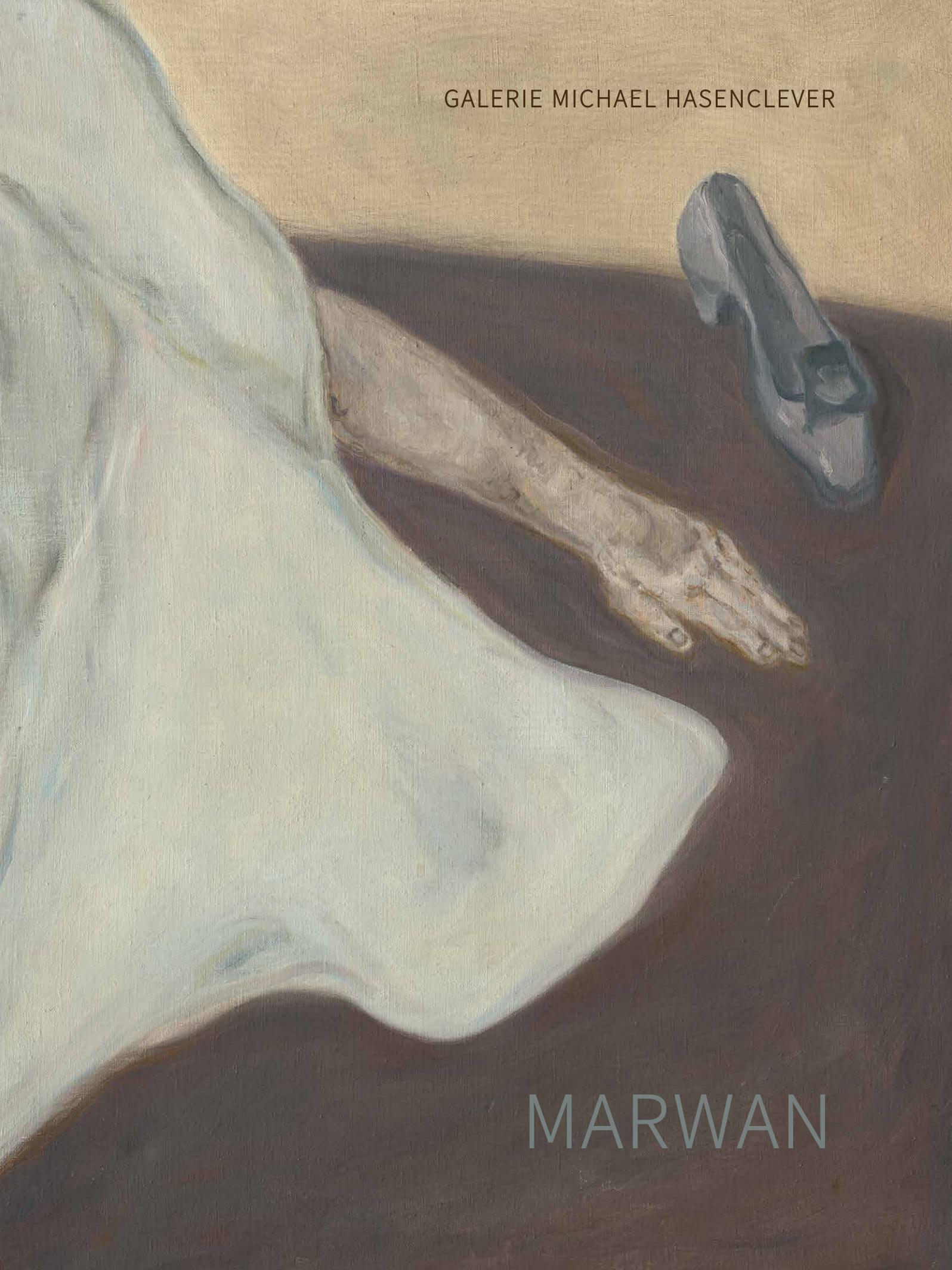


GALERIE MICHAEL HASENCLEVER



MARWAN



MARWAN

1934 - 2016

Early works

2023

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After living for over half a century in self-imposed exile away from his country of birth and culture of origin, how do we read a painting by Marwan to assess the language by which it expresses the correspondence the artist maintained between his home culture and the culture of his residence? Such a question is central to Marwan's work not only because he continued to live in Germany with the full awareness of what continued to take place in the Arab world, but more importantly because the history of Arab painting is relatively recent in comparison to the centuries-old history of studio painting in Europe, the mother continent that gave birth to this form of self-expression and from where it was exported to the rest of the world.

Marwan Qassab-Bashi, better known simply as Marwan, was born in Damascus in 1934. At twenty-three, he went to Berlin to pursue his art studies. Within a few decades after his graduation, his work was sought by major art collectors and museums throughout Germany. Having been considered an original contributor to the making of the Berlin art scene, the Berlinische Galerie acquired a substantial collection of his art. To date, Marwan remains one of the most prolific Arab painters living abroad.

At a time when celebrated painters in the Arab world-of his generation or younger still-were as prolific as Marwan, their output has often been the product of repeating themselves and improvising on earlier breakthroughs that distinguished their art. Marwan, on the other hand, belongs to a rare breed of artists. In his infinite isolation during which he was mostly cut off from his home and friends, he worked on his painting with unyielding tenacity, patience, and determination, which never ceased to deepen his experience and refine his vision. Every one of his paintings is a world on its own and goes through several transformations before it is considered finished. Some of his paintings take months, others take years to complete. In the meantime, he explores the same theme simultaneously on different canvases, at times employing different media before he returns to the painting he started with. In the process, every work, be it a drawing, etching, watercolor, or oil painting, was intrepidly leading to another and each would open up new horizons from which he could continue his exploration.

I shall limit my reading to a selection of key etchings and paintings Marwan created between 1966 and 2004. Through this reading, I wish to show how each work led to the other and in what way each related to the native world the artist left behind. In the process, I shall trace the gradual transition he accomplished from a figurative to a more abstract language.

The selected works of this study attempt to tackle two major themes in his work. One is of the standing figure, the other of faces and heads. Together with the etching series, which was realized over the same period and which elucidated those two themes, one can gain a bird's-eye view of key evolvments in his art.

By limiting his focus on those two themes in his work, the Damascene loner managed over the decades to build a metaphoric vocabulary all his own. From his visual contemplation of facial expressions and bodily gestures signified by mute signs, the artist, who following his arrival in Berlin rarely had anybody to speak Arabic to, insinuated through the gestural signs of his figures their affiliation with verbal expressions in his mother tongue. Having been hermetically secluded since 1957, when he arrived in the German metropolis at the height of the Cold War, he has been approaching his two favorite subjects from a deeply introspective angle.

At a time when most other Arab painters expatiated on the human figure and the face as subjects in their art, the great number of their products reflected a generic nature. Rare are those painters who expressed an interest in painting the recognizable features of a specific individual. In contrast, Marwan, who painted a portrait of his sister before leaving Syria, never ceased painting portraits of friends and colleagues who occasionally sat for him or those he painted from memory whom he left back home and whose portraitures displayed symbolic references to their political trials and ordeals. In facial expression and bodily gestures, Marwan found his gateway to a personal language in which he could foster his originality. Most importantly, it was the scores of

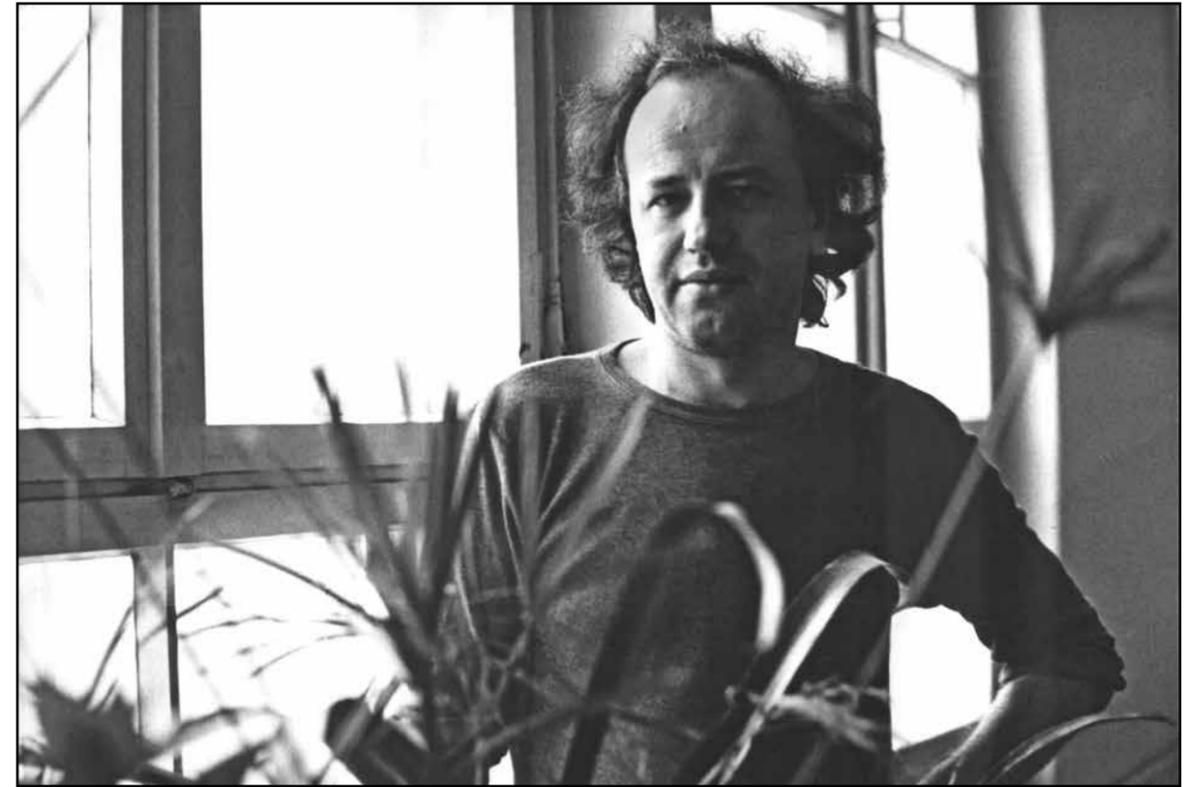


Foto: N. Delacroix

self-portrait paintings realized over a number of years that lead him to rediscover and hence reinterpret the face of the other. In the meantime, just as the autobiography has been a rare genre of writing in Arabic culture, the subject of self-portraits has seldom been of serious interest to any of his contemporaries in the Arab world. In fact, it is phenomenal how the self-portrait has been a rare subject throughout the history of modern Arab art, when the entire history of painting in Europe may all be recounted through the art of portrait painting.

Away from the Arab world, Marwan doggedly pursued what is revealed and what is concealed through the body's gestures and through the transient expression of a face. What facial expression has been for the traditional portraitist, bodily gestures have been for Marwan. For him, there has always been a latent relationship between the two subjects as there is one between the word and the voice. In the process, bodily gestures in his art never fail to act as the visual manifestation of verbal expression. In every period in his development over the decades, as he continued to traverse terrains between his mimetic language of bodily gestures and the metamorphoses of the face, he was unraveling further layers of the self and of the other.

„Standing Man“

The 1970 oil on canvas painting that Marwan titled *Standing Man* was completed at a turning point in his career that coincided with a crucial period of political turmoil in the Arab homeland following the 1967 Israeli blitzkrieg in which Egypt's Sinai, Syria's Golan Heights and the remaining part of historic Palestine fell under Israeli military occupation. The painting represents the frontal image of a standing youth depicted from the top of his head to the middle of his thighs against a rosy gray background. What strikes the viewer at first sight



is the nondescript clothing of the young man, which makes him appear loaded with ambivalence. The white longcloth covering his head and the sides of his face as it gently falls on his shoulders resembles the hatta, the headdress traditionally worn in this manner, without its black head cord, by the older generation of rural men in mosques and Arab churches during prayer and religious ceremonies. In contrast, the youth wears his hair long and is dressed in modern casual clothes with a sandy, long-sleeved pullover loosely tucked in his dark gray jeans, reflecting a contemporary look commonly worn by young men and women everywhere in today's world. The figure's disposition, bodily gestures, and mute signs reaffirm the ambivalence.

Viewed from a lower angle, the young man stands tall with both arms clenched to his body, stiffly held down much like a sudden and emphatic gesture during a conversation. While his stance with close-set legs appears to be firmly rooted in the ground, the movement of his gesture slightly tilted to the right side gives the impression that his body is tipping sideways. What confirms this impression is the way Marwan positioned his figure relatively off center to underscore the young man's gesture. With both palms curled and lightly lifted off his lap toward the viewer, each of the man's thumbs touch the index and middle fingers of each hand, a sign usually used in the Mediterranean region when one is asking another to be patient.

As the veiled youth looks down, straight at the viewer, who is assumed to be positioned at a slightly lower angle as in a seated position, one cannot help but wonder: who could this tall, ambivalent-looking young man be and why is he asking his onlookers for patience? The answer to these questions may be found in other works created around the same period during which Marwan was immersed in questions of the revealed and the concealed in the face and body.

Out of his series of etchings, we find a number that also depict veiled young men frontally, viewed in different positions. One of them portrays a youth with a baggy open shirt whose entire face and head are cloaked in a veil against a black background. Another portrays the frail body of a young man with a loose sweater against a gray background. A rectangular sheet covering his face and neck appears to float flatly over his face.

In both these prints, the frontal position of the figure appears ambiguous, as both the overhanging veil and the flat sheet could not in reality be sustained in the way they appear if the figures were actually in a standing position as all other indications of the image imply. Such visual ambiguity builds up as the background in each print simultaneously assumes the shades of a nocturnal sky and that of asphalt, which indicate that the figure in each print could either be seen standing erect against the sky or lying horizontally on the ground; one connoting being alive and the other of being dead.

Interestingly, in German the title Marwan gave to the first print is *Der Verdeckte*, meaning „the veiled“ and the other he titled *Der Junge*, meaning „the youth“. In Arabic, however, he chose to give the same title to both prints using alternative descriptions in each. The given title is *al-Mulaththam aw Fida'i*, which translates to „The Veiled or the Redeemer“. The alternation in titling these two prints, as well as a number of other prints in the series, entails that „the young“, „the veiled“, and „the redeemer“ describe the same subject commonly referred to in English as „freedom fighter.“ Likewise, what alluded to an ambivalent position of the two veiled figures, each of whom may be simultaneously viewed standing and lying down, translates in visual terms the meaning of the Arabic word *fida'i*, which epitomizes the imminence of death in a living being. Thus, Marwan's use of the different titles seeks to represent the kind of apotheosis associated with the Arabic word *fida'i*. How he expressed in his art what the redeemer's readiness for self-sacrifice meant for him was best described in writing by Jean Genet who was living among the Palestinians on *fida'iyeen* bases in Jordan at the same time Marwan was painting his ambivalent figures in Berlin. Genet remembered two young *fida'iyeen* filled with mirth and exultation as „they were beating out more and more skillful and difficult rhythms on two new coffins which their long thin fingers transformed into drums.“ The coffins were obviously destined for them or for comrades of theirs. Genet was later to liken the merriment of their improvised drumming on the coffins to the ebbing of the joyful passage in the „Kyrie“ of Mozart's *Requiem*.

The years during which Marwan worked on his painting *Standing Man*, and on his series of etchings that represented alternating titles of the veiled and the young, marked a critical period in the political history of the Arab homeland. The 1967 defeat of the Arab armies within six days fomented rage and rampant despair among people throughout the Arab world. The state armies' humiliating defeat sparked the radicalization of the Arab youth as a new generation of Palestinian leaders-most of whom arose from the refugee camps and started taking matters into their own hands. Inspired by the liberation wars in Algeria, Vietnam, and Latin America, they called for a people's revolution and an armed struggle to establish a secular, democratic non-sectarian state in Palestine. Young Arab volunteers flocked from every corner to join the training camps of the *fida'i-yeen*.

Wrapped in the black-and-white checkered headdress to conceal their identities, the veiled and the young *fida'iyeen* were all ready to die anonymously in the battle for Palestine. Genet noted, „they would put the predicament of all before their own individual wishes. They would set out for victory or death, even though each still remained a man alone with his own sensibilities and desires.“

In a similar sense, Marwan's figures in his prints and paintings embodied in their standing position the verbal connotation of „maintaining one's position“ and expressing „a halt for defense or resistance.“ Thus, the 1970 oil painting *Standing Man* in all its ambiguities represents the incarnation of a young man's courage. A watercolor he painted the same year shows the figure of a youth standing in an identical position except that the semblance of the *fida'i* is made more explicit. The head is fully cloaked in the checkered headdress with only a slit of an opening for the eyes, an image that during the period had become the identifying mark of the anonymity of the *fida'i*. Titled like the two prints, *al-Mulaththam aw Fida'i*, the young man in the watercolor makes the same sign for patience as his thumbs are touching the index and middle fingers in each of his curled hands.

In contrast to the watercolor that seems to have been a preliminary study, the standing figure of the young man in the oil painting has his face exposed as a sign of trust and openness before his imagined interlocutors to whom he gestures the sign for patience. With unmistakable directness, he looks on gently at them and at us, his onlookers. Amid the national predicaments of the period during which the *fida'i* represented the sole hope for social change and national liberation, he had been besieged by burning questions, incessant demands, and expectations that were blasted at him by his admirers and close observers. With both his hands, the standing youth signals the need for patience as if to say: a social and political revolution could not be achieved overnight neither can it be realized without sacrifice.

With death literally hanging over the figure of the *Standing Man*, the silvery white sheet of longcloth covering his head alludes to the transcendent state of his selfless spirit. Like a halo, the traditional headdress crowns his head. His mundane clothes, which clash with that elevated state, only reflect the external appearance of his contemporary and youthful being. In bridging over the transitory and the transcendent, Marwan brings together the two distant worlds in which he was living in Berlin. The veiled youth heading for „victory or death“ indicates with a sign of his hands the need for patience. Through the wordless language of painting, the artist invites his viewers to cultivate the kind of patience needed to enter into the world of his *Standing Man*.

Kamal Boullata

Reading the Body in Marwan's Paintings

in *There Where You Are Not. Selected writings of Kamal Boullata.*

Edited by Finbarr Barry Flood, Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2019, p. 117-123

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The English text is taken from Marwan (2015) by Meem Editions.

The essay originally appeared in Arabic in the literary journal *Al-Akhar*, no. 6 (Autumn 2011).





1 **Untitled (Self-portrait)**
Oil on canvas, 1964
Signed and dated on the reverse
81 x 100 cm

2 **Untitled (Sideways)**
Oil on canvas, 1968
Signed and dated lower right
146 x 114 cm

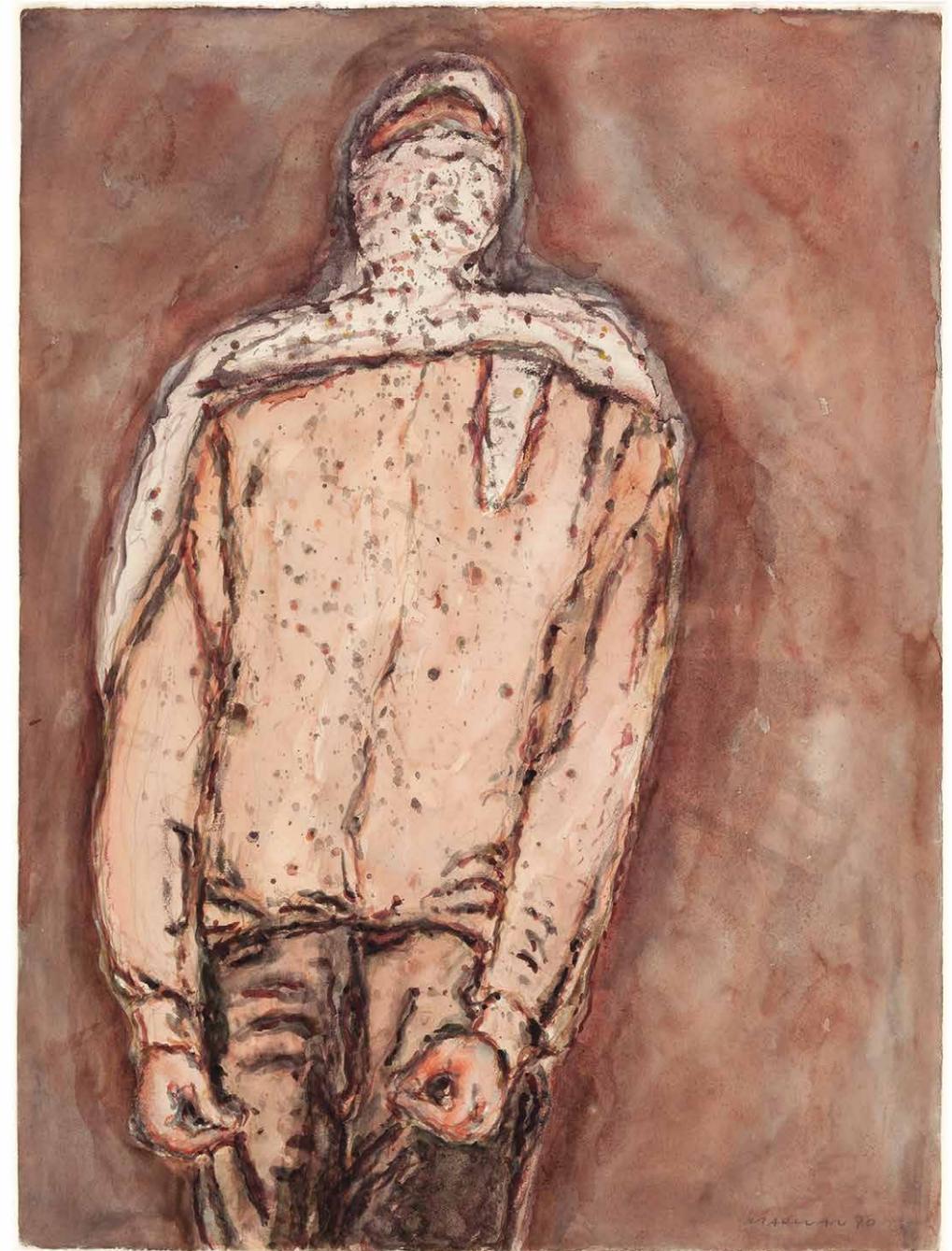


3 Untitled (Badr Shakir al Sayyab)
Oil on canvas, 1965
Signed and dated lower middle
130 x 97 cm



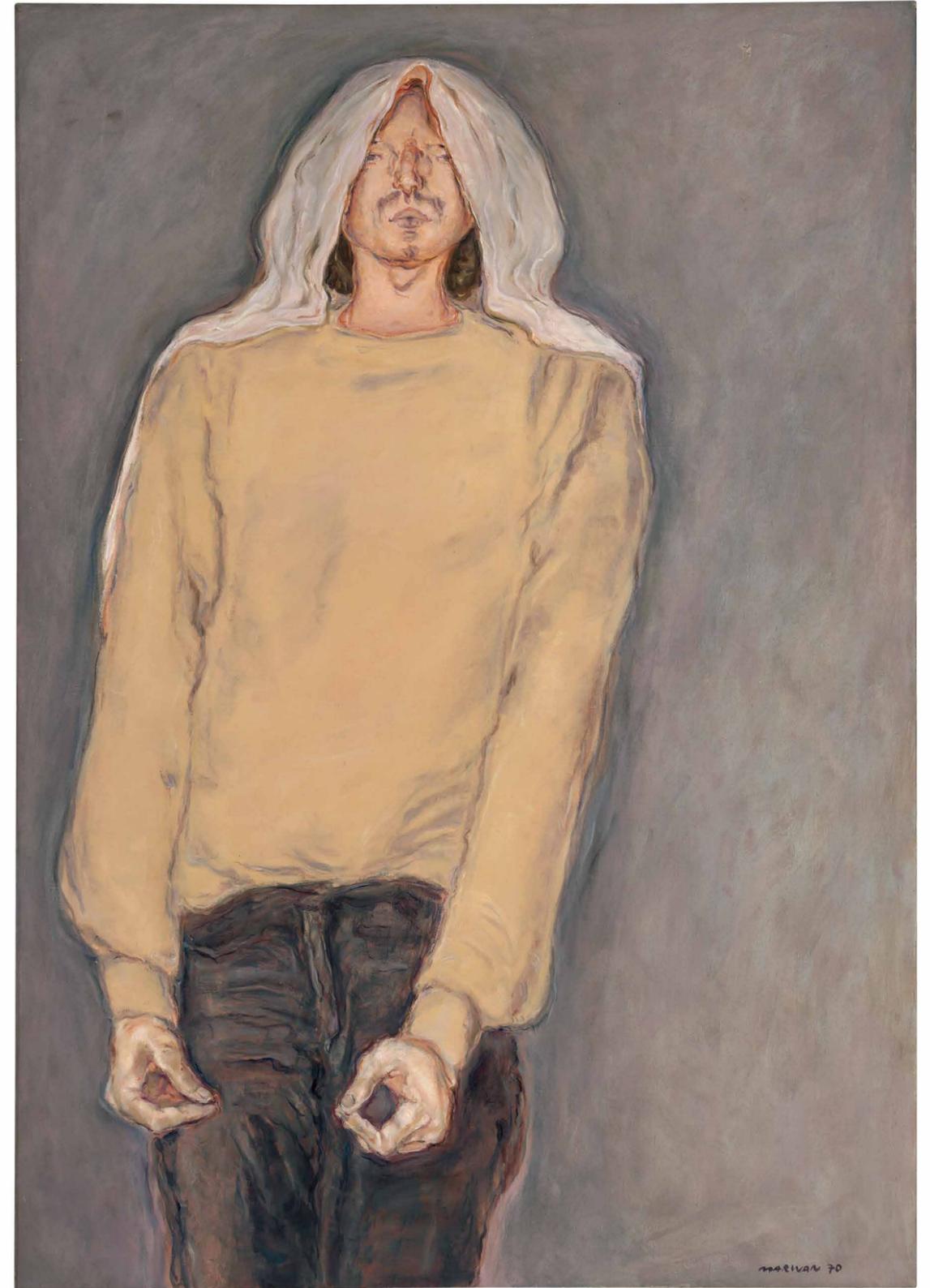
4 **Untitled (Munif al Razzaz)**
Watercolor on paper, 1965
Signed and dated lower right
58,3 x 46,2 cm

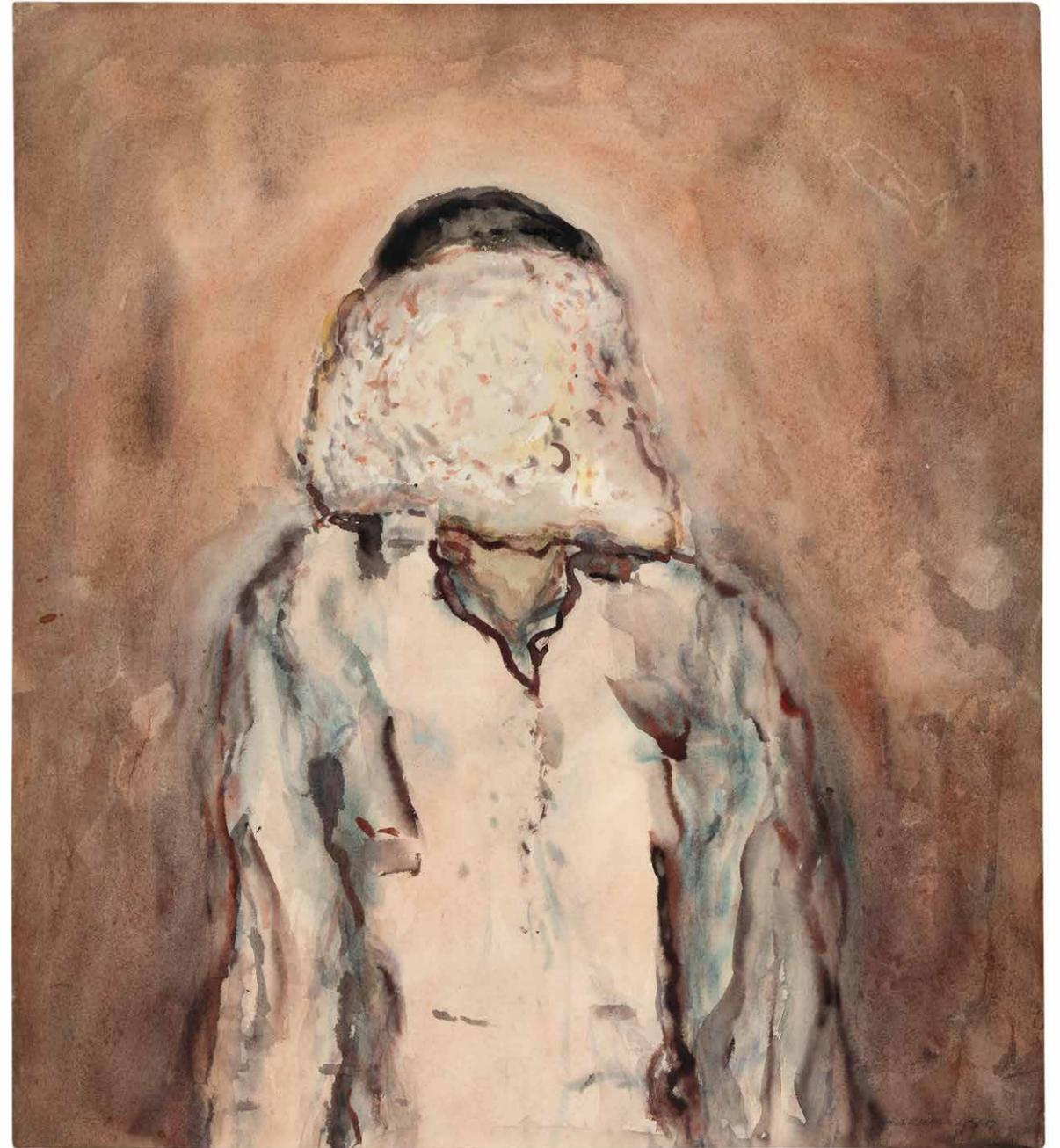




5 **Untitled (Covered)**
Watercolor and pencil on hand-made paper, 1970
Signed and dated lower right
64 x 48 cm

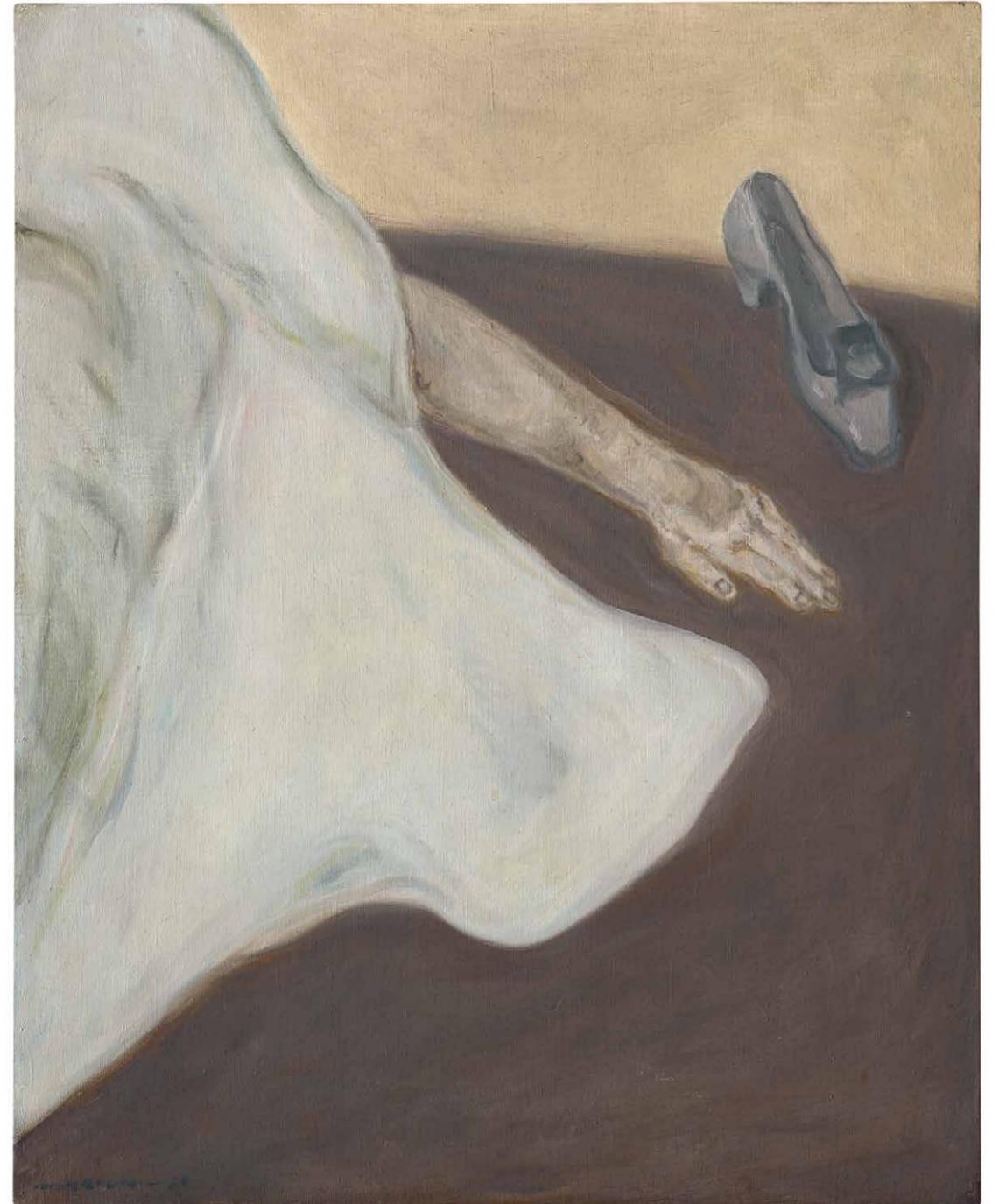
6 **Untitled (Veil)**
Oil on canvas, 1968
Signed and dated lower right
146 x 114 cm

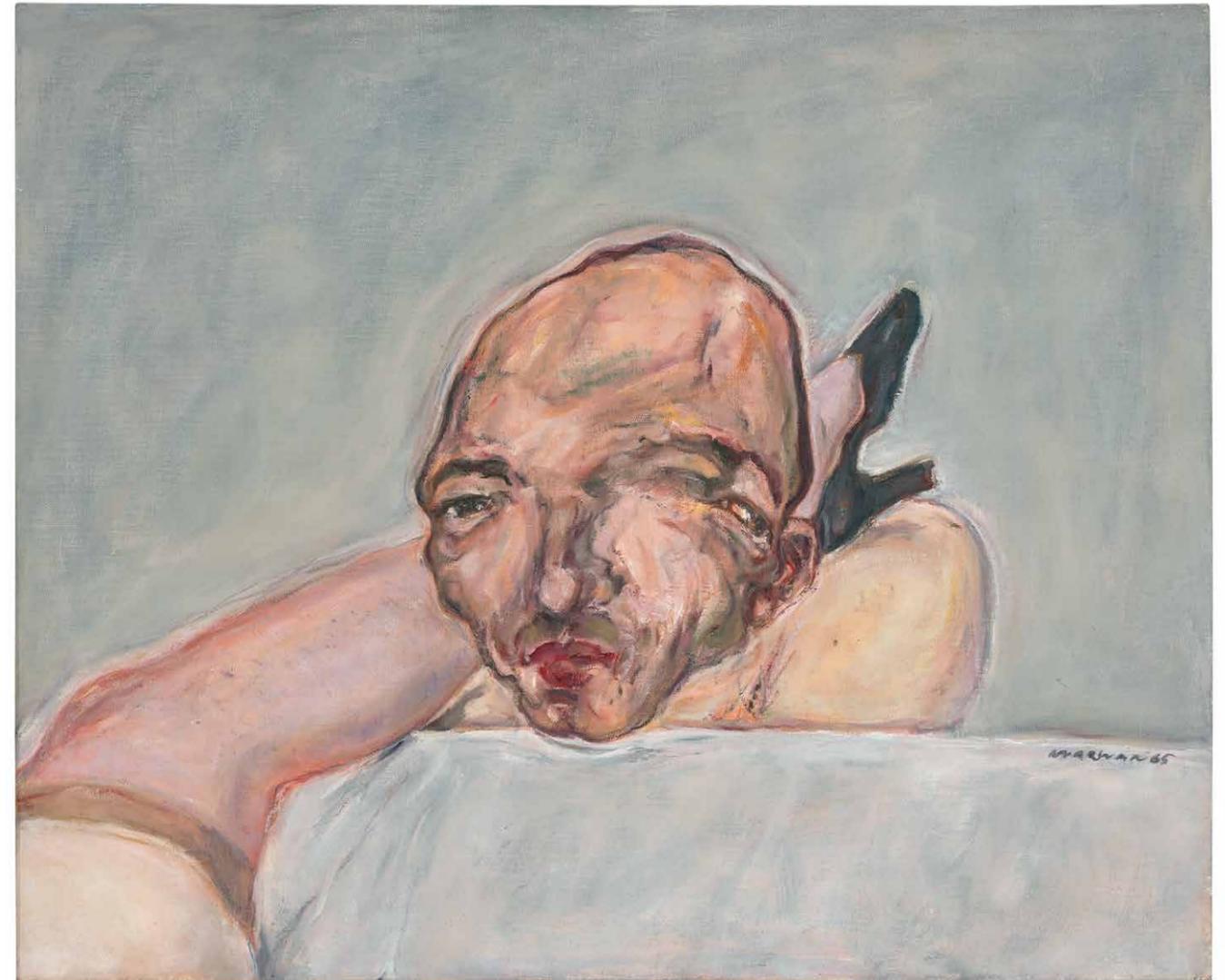




7 **Untitled (Covered)**
Watercolor on paper, 1970
Signed and dated lower right
59,8 x 55 cm

8 **Untitled**
Oil on canvas, 1969
Signed and dated lower left
73 x 59 cm





9 **Untitled**
Oil on canvas, 1965
Signed and dated on the right
81 x 100 cm

10 **Untitled (Couple)**
Watercolor on paper, 1968
Signed and dated lower left
61,5 x 46,5 cm



11 **Untitled**
Watercolor on paper, 1968
Signed and dated on the left
61,3 x 46 cm



12 Untitled (The jacket)
Oil on canvas, 1972
Signed and dated lower right
195 x 130 cm





13 Untitled (The jacket)
Pencil and watercolor on paper, 1971
Signed and dated lower right
72 x 51 cm



14 **Untitled (Self-portrait)**
Oil on canvas, 1972
Signed and dated lower left
130 x 162 cm

BIOGRAPHY

1934 Born in Damascus
1955-57 Studies of Arabic literature at the Damascus University
1957 First price for sculpture in Damascus
1957-63 Masterclass for painting by Hann Trier at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Berlin
1966 Karl Hofer-Award, Berlin
1973 Scholarship of the Cité des Arts, Paris
1977-79 Guest professor for painting at the Hochschule der Künste, Berlin
1980-2002 Full professor for painting at the Hochschule der Künste, Berlin
since 1994 Member of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin-Brandenburg
1999 Founder of the Summer Academy of the Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, Darat al Funun in Amman, Jordan
2002 Fred Thieler Price for painting, Berlin
2005 Awarded the Merit Order of the Federal Republic of Germany, Berlin
2005 Prix Forum Culturel Libanais, Paris
2016 Died in Berlin on October 22

PERSONAL EXHIBITIONS (selected)

1967 Berlin, Galerie Springer, (also 1987, 89, 91, 93 and 2004)
1970 Damascus, Arabic Cultural Center
1971 Berlin, Galerie Lietzow (also 1972,74, 75, 76, 78, 80, 83 and 85)
1975 Munich, Galerie Buchholz
1976 New York Gruenebaum Gallery
Berlin, Orangerie Schloss Charlottenburg, Retrospective
1978 Rottweil, Forum Kunst
1980 Bagdad, Museum of Modern Art
1981 Kassel, Schloss Bellevue, Documenta-Archiv
1982 Frankfurt/Main, Galerie Timm Gierig (also 1986)
1983 Lübeck, Overbeck-Gesellschaft, Retrospective
1984 Darmstadt, Kunsthalle, Retrospective
Cannes, Galerie Joachim Becker, (also 1985, 87, 90)
1985 Munich, Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer
1987 Munich, Galerie Michael Hasenclever (also 1990, 99, 2001, 08, 14, 17, 20)

1991 Munich, Haus der Kunst
Paris, La Teinturerie Galerie (also 1993 and 97)
1992 Paris, Galerie Joachim Becker (also 1993)
1993 Paris, Bibliothèque National de Paris
Paris, Institut du Monde Arabe
1994 Damascus, Galerie Atassi (also 1995, 96)
1995 Amman, Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, Darat al Funun (also 1996, 98)
1996 Kairo, Al Hanager Hall
1998 Birzeit, University
Ramallah, Khalid Sakakini Cultural Centre (also 2001)
Beirut, Galerie épreuve d'artiste
1999 Jena, Stadtmuseum Göhre
2000 Berlin, Brechthaus Weissensee
2001 Wittlich, Georg-Meistermann-Museum, Städtische Galerie für Moderne Kunst
2002 Berlin, Galerie Dr. Irene Lehr
Berlin, Lapidarium
Emden, Kunsthalle
2004 Detmold, Lippische Gesellschaft für Kunst
2005 Damascus, Damascus-Berlin-Damascus
Beirut, Solidere
Altenburg, Lindenau-Museum
2006 Lübeck, Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte
Berlin, Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst Photographie und Architektur
2007 Rheinsberg, Kurt Tucholsky Literaturmuseum
2008 Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst
2009 Berlin, Haus am Waldsee
2012 Istanbul, Galeri Artist (also 2013)
2013 Beirut Exhibition Center
2014 Berlin, Villa Grisebach
Porto, Museu de arte contemporânea de Serralves
2015 Paris, Nadine Fattouh / Galerie Jacques Leegenhoek
London, Mosaic Rooms
Sharjah, Barjeel Art Foundation, Maraya Art Center
New York, Armory Show bei der Meem Gallery, Dubai
Dubai, Art Dubai, Meem Gallery
2016 Berlin, Galerie Albrecht
2017 Venice, Biennale
2018 Berlin, Galerie Michael Haas

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (selected)

- 1971 Frankfurt/Main, Farbwerke
Ludwigshafen, Kunstverein
Munich, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung: Liebespaare in der deutschen Graphik des 20. Jahrhunderts
- 1975 Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett: Druckgraphik der Gegenwart 1960-1975
- 1978 Neu Delhi, 4. Triennale India: Seven German Realists
- 1982 Venice, Biennale
- 1985 Paris, Musée-Galerie de la Seita: Autoportraits contemporains, 80 oeuvres sur papier
- 1986 Berlin, Sammlung der Berlinischen Galerie im Martin-Gropius-Bau: Berlinische Galerie. Kunst in Berlin von 1870 bis heute
Berlin, Staatliche Kunsthalle: Bildhauer und Maler am Steinplatz
Berlin, Orangerie im Schloss Charlottenburg: Das andere Land
- 1988 Paris, Institut du Monde Arabe: Quatre peintres arabes
- 1990 Berlin, Sammlung der Berlinischen Galerie im Martin-Gropius-Bau: Kunstszene Berlin (West)
86-89 Venice, Biennale
- 1991 Dublin, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art: Berlin. The Berlinische Galerie Art Collection visits Dublin
- 1996 Berlin, Sammlung der Berlinischen Galerie im Martin-Gropius-Bau: 100 Zeichnungen
- 1998-2001 European Tour (Bonn, Grenoble, Valencia, Porto, Budapest, Prague) der Sammlung der Berlinischen Galerie: 100 Jahre Kunst im Aufbruch
- 2009 Istanbul, Biennial
- 2011 Wolfsburg, Städtische Galerie: 760 914 cm2 Druck
- 2013 Berlin, Berlinische Galerie: Kunst in Berlin. 1945 bis heute
- 2014 New York, New Museum: Here and Elsewhere
- 2017 New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery: Modern Art from the Middle East
Paris, l'institut du monde Arabe: Barjeel Collection

WORKS IN PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

ENGLAND

Tate Modern, London

FRANCE

Beaubourg, musée d'art moderne, Paris

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Institut du Monde Arab, Paris

Musée-Galerie de la Seita, Paris

GERMANY

Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin

Berlinische Galerie, Berlin

Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Photographie und Architektur, Berlin

Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin

Berliner Bank, Berlin

Berlin Hyp, Berlin

Kunstsammlungen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Bonn

Kunsthalle, Bremen

Graphische Sammlung der Veste, Coburg

Galerie Neue Meister, Dresden

Städel Museum, Frankfurt/Main

Deutsche Bundesbank, Frankfurt/Main

Städtisches Museum, Göttingen

Kunsthalle, Hamburg

Sprengel Museum, Hannover

Städtische Museen Jena

Romantikerhaus, Jena

Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte der

Hansestadt Lübeck

Städtische Kunsthalle, Mannheim

Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich

Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich

Ludwig Galerie, Schloss Oberhausen

Landesmuseum, Oldenburg

Sammlung Ostdeutsche Landesbausparkasse LBS, Potsdam

Städtische Galerie, Wolfsburg

JORDAN

Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, Darat al

Funun, Amman

Arab Bank, Amman

Khaled and Soha Shoman Collection, Amman

LEBANON

Solidere, Beirut

PALESTINE

University, Birzeit

Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, Ramallah

PORTUGAL

Museu de arte contemporânea de Serralves, Porto

QATAR

Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha

SYRIA

National Museum, Damascus

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

Guggenheim, Abu Dhabi

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

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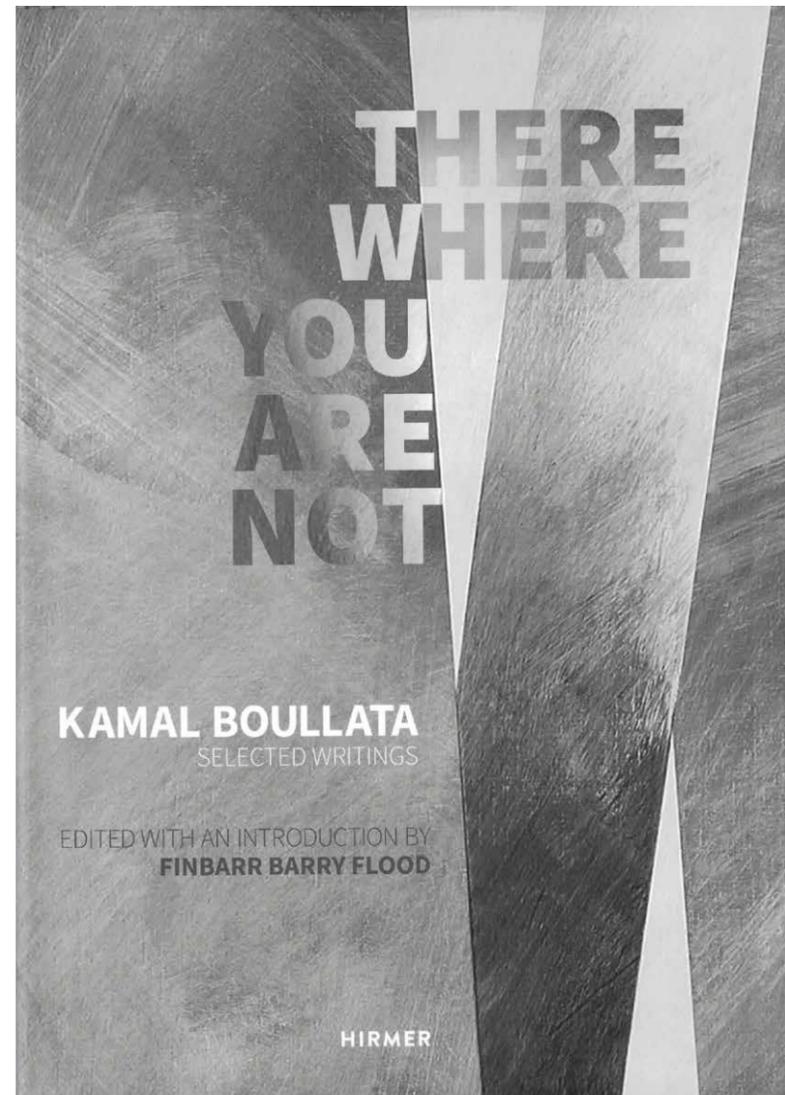
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