

# Marwan Sahmarani

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13 December – 16 february 2012

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Two years ago when Marwan Sahmarani was working on his ambitious Abraaj Capital Art Prize (ACAP) commission *The Feast of the Damned* he declared: “My paintings are a diagnosis of a reality that eludes me. I seek to isolate what is essential, to extract the truth, to find the essence of the moment, of the violence in action and the reality of a situation”.

With the recent birth of his first child, Sahmarani has had a literal ‘homecoming’ in his subject matter and found a way of expressing his own personal experiences and emotions directly onto canvas. Discovering an everyday reality that previously eluded him by focusing on his own family unit in his paintings, no longer caught in a fantasy world inspired by the writings of Dante and the book of Revelation, Sahmarani creates an entirely new aesthetic language. He does still remain firmly in dialogue with the masters of the Renaissance, but he also excitingly finds inspiration from more contemporary painters such as Francis Bacon and Jean-Michel Basquiat. He also mentions Monet and Giacometti. Such influences are present in particular facial features, but more enthrallingly through a new departure in his technique and selections of colours. Details made with ink and varnish on top of oil, common in his previous work, have been eliminated: in this series Sahmarani celebrates the act of applying paint thickly, often violently, to a canvas, directly from the tube. Dense blacks and reds have been replaced with pastels, and death and damnation with a celebration of new life.

The six large, unframed canvases in this exhibition all share a title: *Lonely I feel, lonely I trust*. This refers to the position Sahmarani finds himself as a painter. Increasingly lonely in the field of contemporary art, especially working in Beirut, where the act of painting is no longer fashionable. Most artists have rejected it in favour of new media – video, photography, performance. In his practice Sahmarani has

experimented with these, especially performance – but in essence he is a painter, and one that is not afraid to tackle universal themes: life, death, redemption.

Sahmarani was working on two parallel bodies of work in Beirut during the Spring of 2011 (coined ‘the Arab Spring’); the works we see in this exhibition and a series *The Wolf Crying Like a Child* displayed at Galerie Kaysha Hildebrand, Zurich in September. They couldn’t be more different. He talks of switching between paintings, some taking a week, others he would leave and return to, as the oil takes time to dry. You can picture him in his studio, with the intense Beirut sunlight streaming in, his work pattern completely disrupted by the new arrival in his family. Instead of working all through the night as he was prone to do as a bachelor, he found himself often working in the early mornings, working still everyday but not in a fixed routine.

He faced a dilemma during this time: “as a painter you work firstly from personal experience, and then from what influences you from outside”. Visitors can see that he explored the first in this exhibition, while the second series is inspired by the doom and gloom of the Levant and North Africa during this period, where revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and beyond where threatening people’s everyday lives. Lebanon however was not, for once, the focal point – artists there were in a strange position, seeing their counterparts in Egypt such as Mohamed Abla or Lara Baladi out on the streets, where the experience was overwhelmingly altering artists’ perception of art and its position in society. The Lebanese had felt these emotions for years, and repeatedly explored specific narratives from their civil war in their artistic practice. Sahmrani had, for sure. We see this in his works shown in Lawrie Shabibi’s first group show this summer, *Heroes and Villains*, as well as *The Dictators – Studies for a Monument* on display as part of the 3rd Thessaloniki Biennale, *A Rock and A Hard Place* in the section curated by Mahita El Bacha

Urieta, ACAP 2010 curator. To quote Sahmarani: “I feel that every painter is not only connected to everything in life, but also to everything surrounding him. Each is as important as the other, and they are connected”.

The dynamics of the precarious relationship between mother, father and newborn are most eloquently expressed in the six large paintings forming the heart of this exhibition. Sahmarani finds the act of painting, as opposed to drawing, by its very nature more time consuming and therefore more reflective and suited to exploring universal themes. In the first of the series hues of shocking pink, yellow and in one corner vivid green have been densely applied to the canvas. The central figure, who we take to be the mother although her features are unclear dominates. With one eye scratched away, and violence expressed in her movements, she is reminiscent of the primitive forms in Pablo Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* from 1907. Loyal and loving, Sahmarani was quick to mention over Skype how unflattering and untrue to life the depictions of his wife are in many of these works. The child looks old and wise, with deep set eyes and substantial hair on his head: similar to depictions of Christ in Nativity scenes – whereas the father or Joseph figure on the left has a foolish expression, referencing his earthy and non-sacred role in the religious narrative. In the second painting we have lost the yellow hues and celebrate movement of the paint on the surface, getting close to a pointillist or fauvist technique, or even perhaps Monet. The female is here, thankfully a beauty. With the child raised above her head and her body twisting in a contrapposto stance, she is clearly inspired by Michelangelo’s *Doni Madonna* from 1506, the earliest surviving panel painting by Michelangelo. This is the quintessential image of the Holy Family, with Joseph in the background. Sahmarani declares that everything began with the Nativity as depicted by Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, whose lost cartoon of Leda and the Swan and painting The Virgin and Child with

St Anne are exemplary of the Renaissance rediscovery of foreshortening and contrapposto. The Renaissance masters learnt this from Greek and Roman statues, most likely the *Laocoön* excavated in Rome, also in 1506, and the Venus de Milo. Sahmarani however claims to not have looked at any sculpture or reliefs as inspirations, only paintings.

It is by the third painting in the series that we see Jean-Michel Basquiat working on him, the surface is rougher, the markings more naïve. The fourth in the series is closer to previous work by Sahmarani, forms with long necks and thick outlines. In the fifth we have lost any sense of a pyramidal structure, the child holds his hand to his head in alarm, and it is hard to tell whether the Raphaellesque beauty is meant to be the artist or his wife. In the final painting balance is returned, but rather disturbingly the artist’s wife is a little too similar to the figure of the Anti-Christ with cow-like legs, holding a cup of wine in one of the large-scale drawings forming part of *The Feast of the Damned*. The cup is here replaced by a floating baby staring lovingly at its father, the painter, holding his palette. You can find the artist’s self-portrait most clearly in Study 4, where his palette and raised brush dominate the composition.

Sahmarani had actually begun the whole body of work with the smaller paintings, *Post Madonna and Child* which are more intimate in feel, depicting just mother and child. You can see a clear power shift in their relationship from the first to the fourth, where to start with a giant, yellowish child fills the composition, with the mother’s role gradually increasing. In the first two she merges into the background, as a wash of fauvist blocks of colour. By the third she is painted in the customary blue, reminiscent of *lapis lazuli* and referring directly to traditional depictions of the Virgin Mary – but instead of this colour purely being used for her garments; here all of her features and body are in various tones of blue. What is also quite striking about

this work is that she faces out from the canvas, while her child is in profile. In the final painting of these four, the woman takes over a larger proportion of the composition and despite having had time to apply some lipstick, clearly has control over her child, who meekly raises one hand and looks off to one side. Their relationship here is echoed in a larger painting *Spanish Princess* inspired by the Baroque artist Diego Velázquez in the cap the child wears. The child's form here, reaching towards the mother's chest is almost fetal.

*Lady Madonna* would be an ideal image for a Christmas card – being the most realistic and closest to Christian counterparts of the Madonna and Child. How appropriate this exhibition falls over Christmas. Sahmarani keeps it fresh in the titles reference to a song by The Beatles. This is also suggested in the overall title of the exhibition, *Marie Marie, the devil in me has taken you for a ride – a Ticket to Ride* perhaps. Sahmarani when asked about the exhibition title spoke of the shift in his work from painting devilish characters which still play on him, but; “in this body of work the intention is to de-construct all the Marys that have ever been painted, all the Nativities, all the families....it's going to be rock and roll.”

Laura Egerton  
Curator  
Abraaj Capital Art Prize  
Dubai, December 2011

Three drawings from *The Feast of the Damned*, Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2010 are currently on view at the Dubai International Financial Centre, Building 8, Podium level lobby. For more information email [abraajprize@artdubai.ae](mailto:abraajprize@artdubai.ae) or visit the website [www.abraajcapitalartprize.com](http://www.abraajcapitalartprize.com)







*Lonely I feel, lonely I trust 1*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
170 x 130 cm







*Lonely I feel, lonely I trust 2*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
170 x 130 cm



*Post Madonna and Child 1*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
75 x 75cm





*Post Madonna and Child 2*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
75 x 75 cm







*Lonely I feel, lonely I trust 3*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
170 x 130 cm



*Lady Madonna*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
170 x 130 cm









*Lonely I feel, lonely I trust 4*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
170 x 130 cm

*Lonely I feel, lonely I trust 5*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
170 x 130 cm

*Spanish Princess*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
170 x 130 cm







*Lonely I feel, lonely I trust 6*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
170 x 130 cm



*Rock-a-bye baby*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
240 x 140 cm









*Post Madonna and Child 3*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
75 x 75 cm





*Post Madonna and Child 4*  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
75 x 75 cm







*Study 1*  
 2011  
 Water colour and paint on paper  
 75 x 50 cm



*Study 2*  
 2011  
 Water colour and paint on paper  
 75 x 50 cm





*Study 3*  
2011  
Water colour and paint on paper  
75 x 50 cm



*Study 4*  
2011  
Water colour and paint on paper  
75 x 50 cm



Born 1970, Beirut, Lebanon  
Lives and works in Beirut

#### EDUCATION

1994 Atelier Met de Penninghen Paris, France

#### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2010 The Wolf Was Crying Like a Child, Galerie Kashya Hildebrand, Zurich  
2010 The Feast of the Damned, Museum of Art & Design, New York, USA  
2010 The Dictators: Studies for a Monument, Selma Feriani Gallery, London, England  
2010 The Feast of the damned Art Dubai, UAE, Abraaj Capital Prize  
2009 The Dictators: Studies for a Monument, Boutique 1 Gallery, Dubai  
2007 Can You Teach Me How to Fight? , The Third Line, Dubai, UAE  
2006 Paintings And Drawings (1990-2005), Mogabgab Gallery, Beirut  
2006 Masturbation, Ardbia gallery, Ireland  
2005 Beirut el koubra, Mogabgab Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon  
2004 Mecca Cola, Clair Obscur, Montreal, Canada  
2004 No-body, Mogabgab Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon  
2003 Non-dit, Alternative, Montreal, Canada  
1997 Le prophète, Mogabgab Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon

#### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2011 “Between a Rock And a Hard Place”, 3rd Thessoliniki Bienale, Greece  
2011 “Subtitled: With Narratives From Lebanon”, Royal College of Art, London, UK  
2011 The Changing Room: Arab Reflections on Praxis and Times, Turin, Italy  
2011 Reborn: Lebanon 21st Century Contemporary Art, Beirut Exhibition Center, Beirut, Lebanon  
2010 Told/ Untold / Retold, Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar  
2010 “All about Beirut” Kunsthalle whiteBOX, Munich  
2010 American University Museum-Washington  
2007 Contemporary Art from Middle East and North Africa, Mexico  
2004 Arteast, New York, USA  
2004 La Fabriq, Montreal, Canada  
1994 Espace E.S.A.G, Paris, France

#### PRIZES

2010 Abraaj Capital Art Prize winner

#### Artist Description

Marwan Sahmarani’s painting is tied to art history in general. He surfs between his Western cultural education and his oriental identity. Islamic and Mesopotamian art with its iconography and history mixes in with a Greco Roman influence as well as the paintings of the great masters including Uccello, Rubens, and Picasso. He sources themes from art history that remain timeless and that reflect current issues. His starting point is usually fictional and is often a story inspired by his own reality and then placed in a historical light: His art is relevant to his contemporary experience and directly connects with his cultural background, experience of war, exile, and travel. His identity as an artist has always been deeply influenced by his Middle Eastern origins; his artistic work is a reflection upon the medium itself and its support in the face of sociopolitical problems

Sahmarani uses oil painting, ink, and watercolor as his primary mediums of expression. His work is often about politics, sociology, war, and sexuality. The content of his paintings bathes in a surrealist mood where the limit between dream, fiction and reality no longer exists. With just a few strokes of charcoal, light brushes of paint and traces of pastel, all of which merely graze the paper, his paintings suddenly transform from tender caress into full-fledged battle. The artist brushes with death and flirts with madness, leaving no viewer untouched. Perfectly mastered strokes translate a unique language that is at once raw and bare, and has become Sahmarani’s very own signature.

In spite of his roots in painting and drawing, he stretches his practice onto other forms including sculpture, ceramics and performance. What strengthens his skill is the fact that all of facets of his work are tied together and support each other completely, forming part of a stable, strong personal expression, which is his very own.

#### Written Biography

Marwan Sahmarani was born in Beirut in 1970 and graduated from the Atelier Met de Penninghen in Paris, France in 1989. He derives his inspiration from the themes of art history, surfing between his Western cultural education and his oriental identity. Islamic and Mesopotamian art with its iconography and history mixes in with Greco-Roman influences as well as the paintings of the great masters including Uccello, Rubens, and Picasso. Sahmarani has participated in a variety of solo exhibitions in London, Dubai, Canada and Beirut as well as group exhibitions in Munich, Washington DC and Mexico. His most recent group museum exhibitions are “Told/ Untold / Retold” at the Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar in 2010 and The Feast of the Damned at the Museum of Art & Design, New York, USA in 2010. Sahmarani was also one of three recipients of the prestigious Abraaj Capital Art Prize in 2010.







The publication of this catalogue coincides with an exhibition of the same title at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai 13 December 2011 - 16 february 2012.  
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