

***When the portrait is no longer the face*, by Danny MALLAT (L'Orient-Le-Jour, 06/02/17)**

The “**Markings**” exhibition at the Galerie Alice Mogabgab traces the journey of a scientist, **Henry Jabbour**, who has given his life over to the service of art, to probe bodies, decypher men and put the human condition in pictures.

After studying biology at the American University of Beirut, Henry Jabbour moved to the University of Sydney where he obtained a PhD with distinction. As a researcher with a chair at the University of Edinburgh, there was nothing that seemed to link him to the world of art, except for his passion for drawing and his collector's spirit.

He resigned his post in 2010, enrolled on a drawing course at the Leith School of Art (in Edinburgh), then left for New York after being accepted to pursue a Masters in Fine Arts. From then on it is with the strength of his ink and the power of his charcoal that he has probed bodies, deciphered men and drawn the human condition.

Appropriation

Thanks to his scientific and medical background, which allowed him to get familiar with all the known clichés in his laboratory, Henry Jabbour has unfailingly succeeded in looking at the body in all its stability; yet, more important in his work is his quest for movement.

A keen enquirer, he scrutinizes the psychological intensity of his models with great acuity: the essence of a portrait comes from the attitude, the gesture of the model as well as from the underlying reflexion. HENRY Jabbour possesses this capacity to observe, as if the sole act of looking enabled him to make his own what he sees by way of extracting some strength from a subject that seems vulnerable. Being faithful to his subject does not seem to be an essential criterion.

His portraits are never idealised, yet are imbued with a great deal of humanity: they are the mirror where each meandering visitor can superimpose his own life experiences and emotions. Clearly influenced by Giacometti's genius who took research into portraiture to its paroxysm, Henry Jabbour never ceases to erase the lines of his drawing until nothing is left of the original sketch and a new image comes forth. The artist's eye deciphers – in a vision that is specifically his own and in a setting that is often spontaneous, such as a slick of ink that extracts a leg from the frame and creates movement in the subject – all emotions almost. Sadness, guilt, ambiguity or vulnerability, so many emotions which sometimes mingle with anxiety and anger.

Presence and continuity

All his pictures are born and developed from light. Henry Jabbour ignores the portrait, jettisons conventions and deliberately takes risks. Gone are the days when portraits were a mere calling card, where you could tell the age and the social background of the sitter. What matters is no longer to depict a moment or a life experience but to explain a presence, to ensure a sense of continuity and to consider a human being in his or her essence. The artist never gets lost in the minutiae of the narrative and leaves total freedom for the person contemplating his work to find their own story in front of them - a man who is clasping becomes a believer fingering a rosary. The energy and the breath that emanates from each look succeed in creating a contact between the visitor's eye and that, non-existent- of the model. There are those who look at you and those whose look goes beyond the field of vision.

His paintings destabilise as much as they attract the viewer; his work is underscored by delicate and free flowing brushstrokes. It is all about intuition and intention is a secondary concern, which answers to the needs of the human condition, that which springs from the pictorial signature of the painter. Paradoxically, his paintings are prisoners of the lines but also free themselves from these in powerfully flowing moves which bestows upon them a surprising presence. It is through the isolation of his model that he succeeds in bringing out a benevolence and a great deal of compassion towards man.

As well as exuding a freedom of "plastique", his work is testimony of singular vigilance and specific rigour, both inherited from his scientific background. His powerful strokes, his drawings "a l'arrache" and the dynamic lines, which veer sometimes away from the frame, sometimes inside it create a visual narrative that engages the portraits and liberates the act of creation.