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YOUSSEF ABDELKÉ

Bleak and Black

Opening: 10 November 2016

Ausstellung: 11 November 2016 - 14 January 2017

Youssef Abdelké

Born in Qameshli (Syria) in 1951. Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Damascus, 1976. Studies at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1986. PhD in Arts, Université Paris VIII, 1989. He lived and worked in Paris as from 1981 until his return to Damascus in 2005.

After 25 years of compelled exile and of being forbidden to go back to Syria, it was finally possible for him to go to Damascus in 2005 and to organise a large exhibition there. Since 2010, his Syrian passport was confiscated and he could neither exit the country nor return to France where his wife and daughter live.

The works of Youssef Abdelké are in a large number of museums and institutions, including The British Museum in London and the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris.

Youssef Abdelké was arrested in Syria on the 18th of July 2013 by the régime forces, and liberated five weeks later on the 22nd of August.

YOUSSEF ABDELKÉ

by Alain Jouffroy

A great observer of living phenomena, a meticulous, disciplined and methodical engraver, yet also a poet with images, Abdelké first depicted groups of humans wearing masks over their faces, actors looking for authors, just like Pirandello's characters. He placed them in the night, a terribly dark night, where death and monsters were omnipresent. That was his 'human comedy', a tragic comedy from which the grotesque was never excluded. Humans progressively disappeared whilst animals and plants loomed from that same night. Their presence is so significant that you can almost touch them or skim them with the eyes. There is no hyper-realism in all this, not even 'realism', in the traditional sense of that word: everything happens as if he was re-inventing, with each line, nature, a sort of encyclopedia of natural phenomena which is done with care and at a slow pace.

His vision is so intense that you have the impression of waking up from a dream when looking at his works. It is as if you had never really seen, in depth and in relief, what a simple fish is. Abdelké penetrates the skull, or the fish, or a woman's shoe, just like Michaux 'entered' in an apple. Maybe he had ripped apart the fish before reconstituting it. Hence he never 'represents' the fish, the woman's shoe or the ox's skull : he resuscitates them. This is his power to fascinate : everything is destined to die and to disappear, yet everything can be saved, as if from a deluge. Each living phenomenon is a material miracle, a treasure and an enigma. Such a surprise it is when you rediscover it ! I do not know how he manages in order to reach it. Observation and the utmost attention are not enough. Everything happens as if he wanted to re-invent the world, protect it for good from offence, indifference and omission. It is as if he was himself dead in front of the ox's skull and that he wanted all living phenomena to replace him, the Syrian engraver. It is not 'Abdelké' who interests him but rather everything that Abdelké isn't, everything that will survive to Abdelké and everything that goes beyond, far beyond, Abdelké.

I am sure that Baudelaire would have been impressed by his engravings and that he would have dedicated them poems and enthusiastic texts. There will always be day, night, and light, at least for another couple of billion years or so, and there will always be darkness. It is in that light and in that darkness that Abdelké works, similar to a candle's glimmer, a simple little candle, flickering in its candle-holder. When he reaches this result, which I call resurrection, he smiles, he is happy, he stops and puts down his chisel ; no point in adding anything. It lives or it doesn't live. It emerges, it re-emerges or it does not emerge. The entire question of art lies there. Actually, the word 'art' is inadequate. It is not a matter of art, but rather of a metamorphosis of death into a live existence. Abdelké's fish is not a fish : it is an arrow, a beam, a breath, a whispered call to life. Yet it is also a fish – I don't know maybe a salmon, a sardine or a pike. But it flies like a bird in the night in which we find ourselves once again immersed. In a large charcoal drawing on canvas, he drew the head of a fish in a box and that massive head stares at us, as if the image of death was more alive for Abdelké than that of life.

King of Darkness.

Profile of Syrian painter Youssef Abdelké

(Syria Today Magazine)

Artist Youssef Abdelké's highly acclaimed work is renowned for its sinister undertones and unique symbolism which expose the brutalities of life.

Based in Paris, the Syrian painter breaks with tradition through his unique approach to still life drawing. His intriguing works have turned heads the world over, selling in such international auction houses as Christie's and Sotheby's. In addition, his long-awaited exhibition in Damascus in December 2007 generated huge interest among art lovers.

Trivial items such as a nail, a fish or a shoe are the focal point of Abdelké's works. "In order for a bone fragment, a dish or an empty sardine to do what a king and his horse or a woman and her possessions usually did, the artist is required to exert exceptional efforts and to display great skills," art critic Emil Manaem writes in his introduction to Abdelké's book. "In his drawings, Abdelké allows simple things in life to impose their sovereignty over spaces, pushing them from the very beginning from the realm of realism to the realm of symbolism."

According to Manaem, true artistic talent does not reveal itself in the way a fish is drawn or the manner in which its details are captured, but in its power to make the fish an expression or a symbol of life. "A fish embodies free movement and the vast sea. In the fish, there is both coherence with place and the impossibility of living outside it," writes Manaem. "In its eternally wide-open eyes, there is a blatant challenge and condemnation of death." When the fish is depicted sliced open or pierced by nails, the brutality of this image conveys an underlying message about the world.

Symbolism has always been integral to Abdelké's vision. His early ink drawings were full of symbols expressing clear-cut political messages. The 'People' series from the 1980-90s expressed oppression in the Arab world with its images of jails, guards, crowds of people and horses. "I revealed the darkness I felt inside in my 'People' series," Abdelké said. "This helped me move on to more positive and peaceful projects."

However, Abdelké's harsh style and severity of subjects remained, even in his still life drawings in the form of skulls, bones and sharp knives. "Artists can't change their skin even if they change their subject matter," Abdelké explained.

Abdelké's concept of space has however changed. "I've been inspired by the philosophy of people in South East Asia. They see man as a small part of the universe; space in their paintings reflects the huge space we have in our universe. Europeans on the other hand, see man as the centre of the world, that's why you find their paintings full of people and elements," Abdelké said.

Abdelké now integrates both European and Eastern perspectives into his paintings. "Europeans developed scientific rules for perspective so that things would look the same as in reality," Abdelké said. "Easterners like the Arabs, Turks, and Chinese ignore perspective; they paint the most important elements of their paintings in a bigger size regardless of how they see look in reality."

Finally, after more than 20 years of living and working in France, Abdelké is returning to Syria. "Unlike many of my friends, I never planned to settle down in Paris," he said. "I've always wanted to come back to my homeland, Syria."