

Mohammad El Rawas

RECENT WORKS

MARCH 8 ♦ APRIL 20, 2019

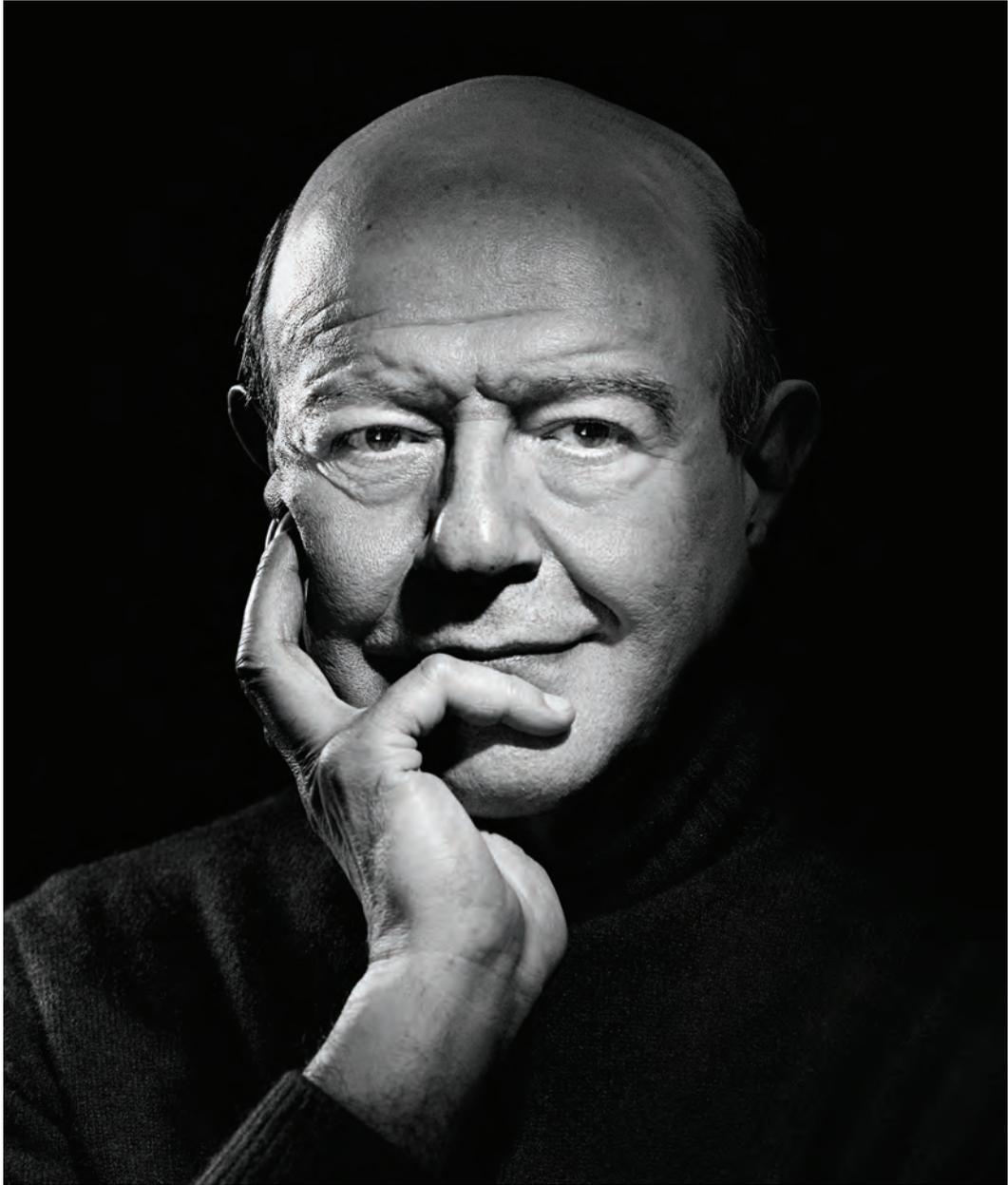


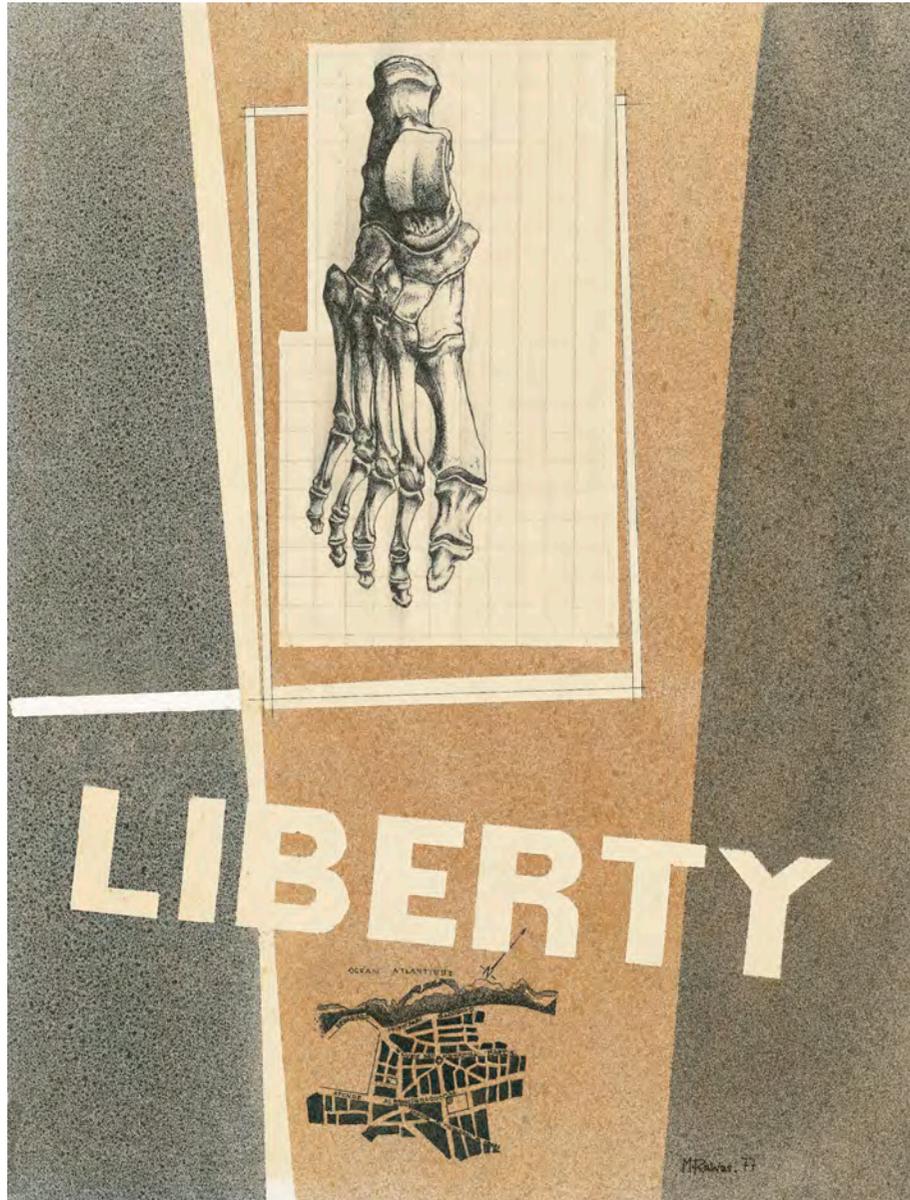
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“...The works that define an era are not, that is to say, merely those thought likely to influence the as yet inconceivable art of the future, but those that have the power to alter, 'if ever so slightly', works of the past – and, therefore, our understanding of them...”





Liberty, 1977 | Gouache, pencil and ink on paper, 62 x 47 cm

Preface

This is Mohammad El Rawas's twelfth solo exhibition since he first showed in Beirut in 1979. He had returned from Rabat [Morocco], where he took refuge in 1976, searching for peace and normality and far from the raging civil war that erupted in Beirut in 1975.

In his first Beirut exhibition, El Rawas's works fell on an audience that was numbed by the civil war and who, as a result, was oblivious to the ongoing changes that were transforming the art scene in the world. His use then, of a technique simulating photolithography on paper, was alien to his audience's taste and sensitivities, which were more conventional; as well as the appreciation of most art critics of that time who, politely, ignored his show. However, art critic Marie Thérèse Arbid, did not miss noticing his work; she perceptively singled out his works in her review of the exhibition in l'Orient le Jour's September 19, 1979 issue: *"... A complex sentiment emanates from Rawas's works, it is neither an acceptance of the Orient, nor a rejection of the Occident ... His strong and eloquent graphic works represent his first attempts in search of a new [visual] language ... It is comforting to witness the emergence of new talent and especially, one that is striving to find a particular eloquent language that can replace our current moral solitude..."*

Since his first appearance on the Arab art scene, El Rawas has been assiduously searching for that particular illusive universal language of art expression, which he developed and tested through his work.

In the last four decades, the world had seen intense cultural shifts and changes, including great strides in science, communication and digital technology. These changes left a marked impact on art, its mediums, styles, and diffusion. However, it left behind, a newly formed Arab world, one that was in a state of intense confusion regarding its values and objectives; an Arab world whose communities were grappling with issues of cultural identity. During that time, El Rawas had kept his career focused and totally concentrated on the process of learning and testing a new visual vocabulary for his own art expression. From the beginning, for instance, he tested and employed photography as one of his earliest vocabulary tools. Photography was

already playing a central role in modern visual culture. The early integration of the photographic image in his paintings was first introduced by literally redrawing in ink dots a photo detail realistically, before he moved to using the photo print transfer technique. Later and while attending the UCL Slade School of Fine Art in London, El Rawas was introduced to new advanced artistic means and innovative applications that show forcefully in his work since his final return to Beirut.

El Rawas's paintings reflect, issues that dominated his honed cultural sensitivities: memory, culture and heritage, language of communication, modern life and its symptoms of built in dialogues and arguments and tradition; as demonstrated in his daring piece, which was an argument with the great Abbasside poet Abu Nawas¹. The piece was an installation and video work for which he received the first prize in the Mediterranean Alexandria Biennale in 2007. Women issues, as well as geometrical construction, were also central, and still are, in many of his works, as can be seen throughout his paintings in this exhibition and through a single included sculpture² which appears as a continuation of the series of sculptures he began working on in 2013.

El Rawas's paintings continue to produce potent and seductive canvas surfaces. Often experimenting with the relief *assemblage* inclusions, the latter infuses his compositions with a sensual delicacy and a structural tension. Certainly, his works stand out in the predominant aesthetic confusion that currently dominates the global art scene.

In my opinion, what gives El Rawas's work its singularity in the Arab art scene, is the universality of its art expression language which, as a result, bypasses the local identity issues that often shackle our contemporary Arab Art and thought. His language of expression is very much in line with a modern version of the primeval universal language of the cave artists of Altamira and Lascaux, with which these primitive artists communicated to us their precise and enchanting comments, describing their encounters with life and its time realities.

Waddah Faris | 2019

¹Sit Down, Please opposite page | ²An Accident in a Manga Girls' Colony pages 44-45



Sit Down Please! 2007 | Installation and video



Train I, 1975 | Oil on canvas, 198.5 x 247 cm



Train II, 2016 | Oil and acrylic on canvas, 200 x 250 cm



Study for Train I, 1975 | Chalk Pastel on eight sheets of paper lined on conservation quality mounting boards, 200 x 250 cm

Lost and Found on the Train Journey

The first of the centerpieces of this show, *Train I*¹, is extraordinary for a number of different reasons, some circumstantial, some artistic. It is a work from Mohammad El Rawas's youth, done as his final graduation project at the Lebanese University's Institute of Fine Arts in 1975. Shortly after its completion, El Rawas left the country, fleeing the encroaching civil war, and the painting was believed to have been destroyed in the chaos that ensued. Only one poor quality color picture of it survived, taken by a classmate in the university studio. As if miraculously, however, in 2015, forty years after having last been seen, the painting reappeared, and the artist restored it to its current state. This is its first public exhibition since 1975. All the new paintings in the show [there are a handful of other works from El Rawas's early years as well, the reason for which will become clear shortly] were executed in the aftermath, of its rediscovery. All, in some measure, take up the challenge posed by the reemergence of something that had, for so long, lived in the psyche of the artist as no longer being in existence. *Train I* stands as the opening salvo in a charged philosophical struggle concerning the way in which art, and painting in particular, should proceed in relation to the visible world.

In the second centerpiece of the show, *Train II*², begun once the restoration project was completed, El Rawas revisits the earlier work. As though starting again, he re-examines the same subject matter. The painting stands as a majestic overview, encapsulating many of the key themes explored by the other canvasses in the show, and proposing a definitive, considered response to the position staked out in *Train I*. Let us begin with a comparison between the two.

In *Train I*, the first thing that strikes the eye is the enormous dynamism with which it is done. It is a riot of colors, lines and shapes in the idiom of Arshile Gorky's abstract expressionism. Only after a few moments' perusal do individual figures begin to appear. The easiest to make out might be the seated female nude at center left. In the middle, one can decipher a couple, with a female figure in front, her head tilted slightly backwards, in front of a male figure. He embraces her from behind, his brown hand and forearm visible on her waist. She appears to be at least semi-nude. Slightly to the right of the couple is another female nude, and below her,

¹*Train I* page 10 | ²*Train II* page 11



The artist next to *Train* at the Lebanese University, 1975

to her left, a further reclining nude is visible. There are other figures in the scene, but they are difficult to discern within the welter of graphic and coloristic activity. At the upper left the ghostly letters TRAI, from which, presumably, the painting derives its name, can be distinguished. In general, the image has an explosive, orgiastic feel to it both in its subject matter, with its nudes, and its style, with its high energy, gestural markings.

Train II revisits the scene directly, but refigures it. Gone are the distorted figures with sketchy, unclear outlines, difficult to apprehend, replaced by individuals of limpid clarity. Faces, bodies, skin, clothing are all executed with meticulous care, resulting in realistic forms painted in the most illusionistic fashion possible. Moreover, all but one of the nudes are substituted by clothed figures, and other individuals, based on shadowy, latent shapes in the first painting, are added. In general, it might be said that *Train II* lowers the temperature, replacing hot, chaotic expression with the cooler, less passionate visibilities of reality. At the outset, it therefore appears that the two pictures stand as two opposing poles, two different ways of making art, divided between a highly expressionist mode of representation, and a less-excitabile realist mode. As we will see, however, matters turn out to be rather more complex than this, but all of the paintings in the show take this dichotomy up as a central theme and mull over it, each in their own way.

*The Unveiling*⁴ provides a useful introduction to some of the questions at stake. Perhaps the most striking feature is the style in which the main female figure is done. She is a young woman in the contemporary dress of the second decade of the 2000s, represented in the same, sharp, highly realistic mode as the figures from *Train II*. She turns slightly, pulling aside a curtain to reveal two paintings, one slightly below and just in front of the other. The foremost one shows a single, reclining nude female figure. In the rear one, we can make out a male figure on the floor, probably nude, and three nude female figures behind. All are rendered in quick,

⁴*The Unveiling* page 37

gestural, expressive strokes. In both style and content, these pictures within the picture harken back to the nudes of *Train I*, and it comes as no surprise to discover that the rear scene is a direct quotation of an earlier work of the artist, *Nudes and Figures in Nature*⁵, done in 1974.

As a whole, then, the painting is juxtaposing the two opposite modes of representation that we touched upon earlier, as well as two time periods. The first is the artist's past, in which he painted sensuous subjects sensuously. The second is the artist's present, in which the subject of the female model in her surroundings remains constant, but the way in which she is shown is transformed. Now, she is clothed and a functioning member of a meticulously crafted world of reality. And, as if to dissociate her from the raging world of passion that had characterized the earlier work, above her head we can make out what looks at first sight to be a diagram of a building or a three-dimensional object. On closer inspection, however, perhaps the most salient feature of the form is that it is composed entirely of basic geometrical shapes, both two and three dimensional: straight lines, rectangles, flat planes, and circles. They all appear as mathematical projections, quantifiable, measurable, and reproducible with geometrical instruments. These lines, surely, are to be contrasted with the fervent markings with which the earlier scenes were done. The message is clear: painting should concern itself with real subjects in the world, all objectively rendered as reality itself on the basis of rational, measured techniques of representation.

This point about the "correct" subject and manner of representation, especially in relation to the female figure, is made even more explicit in *Matters of No Grave Concern*⁶, in which our first impression is of an artist in the process of depicting his model. The main figures are done in El Rawas's mature, illusionistic style of tight, impeccably finished brushwork, and the scene is definitively set in a contemporary time frame. This is specified both by the appearance of the model and the graying hair of the artist, given the face of the actor Richard Gere. A closer look at the drawing paper before the artist reveals that he is reducing his live model to a series of geometrical forms. That this is his fundamental mode of operation is further made evident not only by the calipers in his hand, but also by the apple and pear in the precise measuring device behind him. This painting thus extends the association of the portrayal of the female body with geometry that we noticed in *The Unveiling*. Indeed, it ponders the question of whether that body should not be rendered exclusively in geometrical terms [a thought we find again being considered, for example, in the angular female bust in the foreground of *An Avatar*⁷]. At a minimum, though, it makes clear that the job of the contemporary artist is to depict the female subject in particular, and the world in general, in modes governed by observation-based, almost-scientific precision, not led by the emotions. This series of ideas is only enhanced by the fact that the artist in the scene is derived from a painting of another man whose job it was to examine the world around him and render it in precise, quantifiable terms, a geographer [Vermeer, *The Geographer*, 1668-69].

⁵*Nude Figures in Nature* page 36 | ⁶*Matters of no Grave Concern* page 20 | ⁷*An Avatar* page 26

Yet, things are not quite as simple as that. *The New Visitor*⁸ stands as perhaps the most complex statement of the field that El Rawas is investigating, laying out in the most comprehensive way the problematic that the other paintings are pursuing. Here, the nude model, painted as reality itself [and with the by-now familiar geometrical building directly above her head], is contrasted with three other depictions of the female body. She holds under her arm a canvas of a somewhat sketchily painted nude woman, arms above her head, that again quotes an earlier work of the artist⁹ from 1974 . Next to her is a woman in the Pre-Raphaelite style of the mid-19th century, and to the right, another woman depicted in a heavy outline almost covered by a Japanese cherry-blossom tree. We thus have four different ways [amongst so many others not listed] in which to portray the female form. The painting seems to be saying that within representation, the female model is liable to transformation, and inevitably becomes something else. And this, in turn, sets the question for almost all the pictures in the exhibition. So often a large female form, marked by the style in which she is rendered as reality, anchors the painting. What will become of her as she undergoes representation? And what is the ethical or moral way to portray her, including even as reality itself? The paintings are about nothing less than the adventures of the female model under representation, and the philosophical challenges that these adventures pose for the artist.

In *Matters of No Grave Concern*, the position staked out is clear. However, in the context of the other paintings under consideration, that position constitutes only one side of the argument. The artist in *Matters* believes in geometry, but beware of conflating him with El Rawas himself; in the other paintings, the situation is decidedly more complex. Take, for example, *Forging a Bond*¹⁰. In the background, to the right, three bare-chested men pause in their labor of toiling over sheets of metal. The group is a direct quotation of a section of a painting by the Spanish artist Velazquez, *Apollo in The Forge of Vulcan* [1630]. The story is retold there of the ancient Roman myth in which the god Apollo comes to tell his fellow-god Vulcan of the infidelities of his wife, Venus. In *Forging a Bond*, the men look towards the left, their line of sight coinciding apparently with the familiar contemporary young women, realistically portrayed, with the again, familiar geometric building resting half on her lap. But, perhaps what Vulcan and his fellows see, or at least, what occupies their thoughts, is not the “real” woman before their eyes, but the naked woman sprawling in the foreground, her legs provocatively pointing back towards them. And significantly, this woman is painted not in the polished, illusionistic style of the clothed woman at her side. Rather, she is rendered with full freedom of gesture, showing irregular but flowing sensuous lines and tactile surfaces that revive the artist’s earlier charged, sensuous style and mimic her state of desire. However, this is but one theme of the painting. There is another that revolves around the principal figure, the “real” woman. Not only is she devoid of the obvious traces of expressive sensuality that mark the woman at her feet, but she is also shown in the act of intellection. At her right, a tousle-haired youth,

⁸*The New Visitor* page 35 | ⁹*A Nude with Arms above her Head* page 34 | ¹⁰*Forging a Bond* page 23

swathed in a sheet but with bared shoulders and arms, leans towards her making a counting gesture with his hands. This figure, deriving from the painting *The Inspiration of St. Matthew* [1602] by another 17th-century artist, the Italian Caravaggio, shows the angel in the process of listing a series of distinct and lucid points to her, just as he does to St. Matthew in the original.

The scene thus lists a series of opposites in relation to femininity. On the one hand we have the woman of reality, associated with an objective precision and rationality in her style of representation, her connection with the building, and her intellectual activities. On the other we have the woman as a hotbed of passions, indicated by her story, her physical position, and the style of her representation. Yet these two views of woman are not equally balanced in the painting. The argument might well be made that scene is taking aim at the old stereotype so often found in both art and culture, of the virgin vs. the whore; the idea that a woman is either a saintly, chaste figure of virtue or a wanton sexual predator. Not so, the painting seems to say. Perhaps this was the case in the past, in the time of Velazquez or Ancient Rome, but now the modern woman, the real woman, does not need to be sexualized. She is a woman of intellect, of reason, of engagement with the real world. And what is more, it is this modern woman who dominates the scene, is its main figure.

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These thoughts lead us back to the *Train* paintings. All the concerns discussed above can be seen again in the transition from the earlier scene to the later. As mentioned, the figures are redone, mostly in the sober, illusionistic manner that we recognize now to be typical of the artist's mature style. But this is not a direct transcription, with the expressionist figures brought back to their original state of reality. Just the opposite. Those earlier figures are subject to further transformation that alters much of the original meaning of the first painting. The central couple are disengaged from what might have been an amorous encounter and are given a different, non-romantic reason for the positions they occupy with each other, as a pair of ballet dancers. The two nudes on the right are replaced with two clothed females, the front one looking like she has emerged from a pre-Raphaelite painting, the rear one quoting an orientalist painting by Charles Landelle, *Jewish Girl from Tangiers* [1874]. The figure on the left, replacing the original expressionist nude, is still nude -- indeed, she is the only nude left in the scene -- but, although rendered precisely, she is not a "real" woman; rather, she is a figure derived from Japanese Manga comics. Once again, we see the many guises of the woman under representation; a "real" woman [the dancer], the clothed women from previous epochs of painting, and the naked woman in comic form. Strikingly absent here, however, is the one body that filled *Train I*, the expressionist, passionate nude.

As we have seen elsewhere, the mature artist is thus retreating both from his previous expressionistic style and its flamboyantly erotic subject matter. The geometrical building-models that are associated with this more mature world in the other paintings have not yet entered the

scene [those were done later], but the work of the geometer has already begun, in the sleeve of the man to the left who, quoting Rembrandt's *Portrait of Philips Lucasz* [1635], appears to have stepped out of a 17th century Dutch painting. Not coincidentally, this figure, who might be the most realistically-rendered one in the whole canvas, has the mark of the measuring device upon him in the dotted line and circles that run up his sleeve. The point being made again, is surely that the secret of the illusion of reality lies in abstract, geometrical calculation. In general, however, *Train II* poses the same question that we have been considering all along: how many ways are there to represent the female form, and what are the moral stakes of each of them? Or, perhaps a better way to put the question is, "how many ways are there to paint the female form once one abandons the flamboyant nude, with its many passions?" because, make no mistake, *Train II* declares that that nude, in particular, must be abandoned.

Yet, even this phrasing does not quite capture all the complexities of the canvas. Those multiple female figures may no longer be nude, but we may well ask if, for all that, they [and their sisters in the other paintings in the show] are any less erotic. In all their many guises within their clear and clothed state, whether as real figures or ones deriving from the history of art, their sensual qualities persist. It is almost as though the painter is declaring that the mere act of representing the female body, even if not in the flamboyantly nude guise it takes in *Train I*, already carries an inherent erotic charge. Perhaps the best phrasing for the question posed by the painting is therefore, "how to paint female forms in ways that are still sensually alive, but not so overtly and extravagantly sexualized that they almost disintegrate before our eyes, dissolving into chaos? How to paint them so that, irrespective of their style, the figure is left intact, as an easily recognizable element of reality?"

On this question of reality, however, we should also pause a little longer. The figures in *Train II* may be clearer and more distinct than their counterparts in *Train I*, but the scene as a whole cannot, by any stretch, be labeled a realistic one. The presence of those figures does not amount to a singular, unified, universe. Rather, each individual seems to have arrived from a different universe, and they now sit inchoately juxtaposed to each other, with neither spatial nor personal coherence between them. Indeed, the world they occupy might best be described as unravelled, or better, unravelling. This impression is further compounded by the fact that many zones of rampant linear and coloristic energy, reminiscent of *Train I*, still remain; they still infiltrate every space, every corner, every nook and cranny. Indeed, upon closer scrutiny, it appears that those areas, far from having been removed, constitute the general setting for the scene as a whole. The realistic humans are but visitors to this jumbled world in upheaval. For the painting as a whole, we might say that the febrile atmosphere may have been calmed to some degree, but the result is not much less irrational, nor, for the viewer, less confusing.

Drawing all of these threads together, *Train II* seems to be delivering a pessimistic message about the possibility of overcoming the impetuous passions of youth, as the mature artist has discovered is necessary. The efforts to reach a less agitated form of sensuality, one that is imbricated within a settled reality, are only partially successful at best. If the nude in its riotous state of representation is blocked, then a different form of erotic reality comes forth, but it is a reality that does not add up, a reality that is fragmented and disjointed.

Yet, to read *Train II* in this pessimistic mode is, surely, to miss the point of the artist's journey. The goal is not to start with the passionate universe of *Train I* and finish with a photographic-like rendering of an ordinary, conventional world. Rather, it appears that the artist is looking back on that youthful universe and finding that it is impossible to live only in that state of being. Perhaps it is too intense, too exhausting. But, in that case, the solution is not to eradicate that universe entirely, but to attempt to allow it to interact with the other, less tempestuous world of reality. [It is surely significant, in this respect, that in *Train II* a driver, wearing a peaked cap, has been brought to life, his hand on the controls. The artist has clearly decided that this vehicle, unlike *Train I*, needs to have someone in charge].

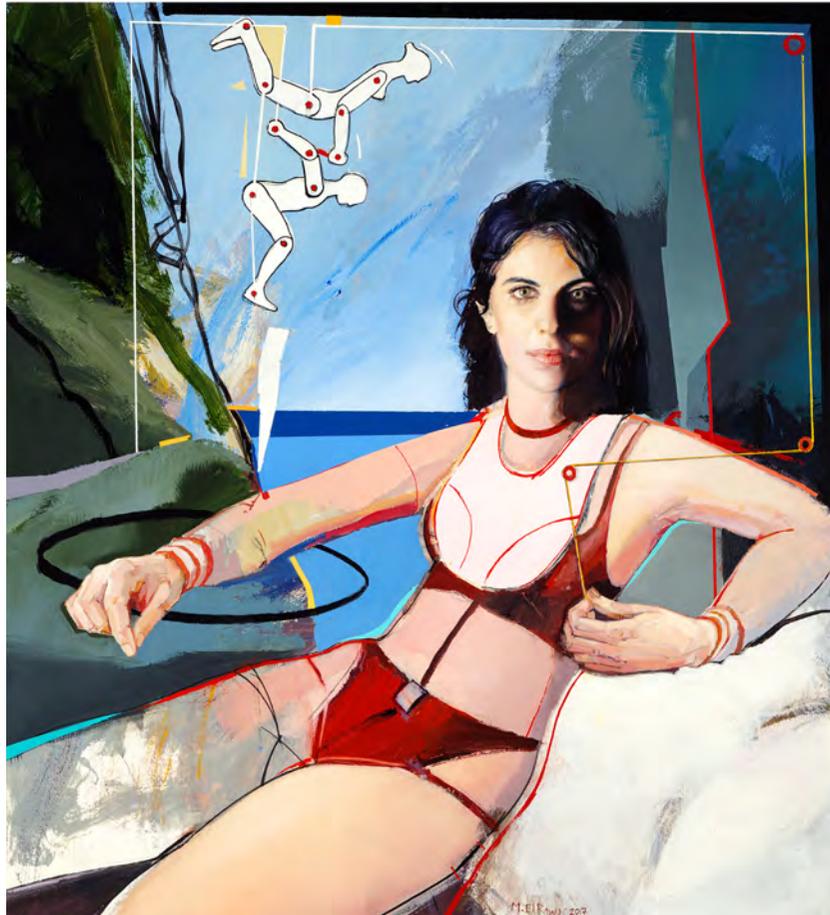
Train II, then, is the thinking-through of how that interaction between the two opposing worlds of unbridled passion and conventional reality might take place. That it is not an easy, smooth collaboration is made abundantly clear; in fact, the painting represents it as a struggle. As we have just seen, the real world, imagined as a state of peaceable sensual co-existence, never quite materializes in its entirety. It only ever appears intermittently, disconnectedly, and always contained within, set against, the unstable universe of the passions that threatens to overrun or overturn it. The true subject matter of the conjoined paintings I and II is not the triumph or failure of one or the other of the conflicting sides. It is, rather, *the struggle* itself; the one that, the scenes declare, we have no choice but to live.



Matters of no Grave Concern, 2017 | Oil and acrylic on canvas, 130 x 140 cm



A Domestic Scene, 2017 | Oil and acrylic on canvas, 130 x 140 cm



Pulling the Strings, 2017 | Oil, acrylic and graphite
on paper marouflaged on canvas, 66 x 61 cm



Forging a Bond, 2017 | Oil, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 130 x 140 cm



The Initiation, 2017 | Oil, acrylic and charcoal
on paper marouflaged on canvas, 66 x 61 cm



Reading Sappho, 2017 | Oil, acrylic, charcoal and graphite on canvas, 130 x 140 cm



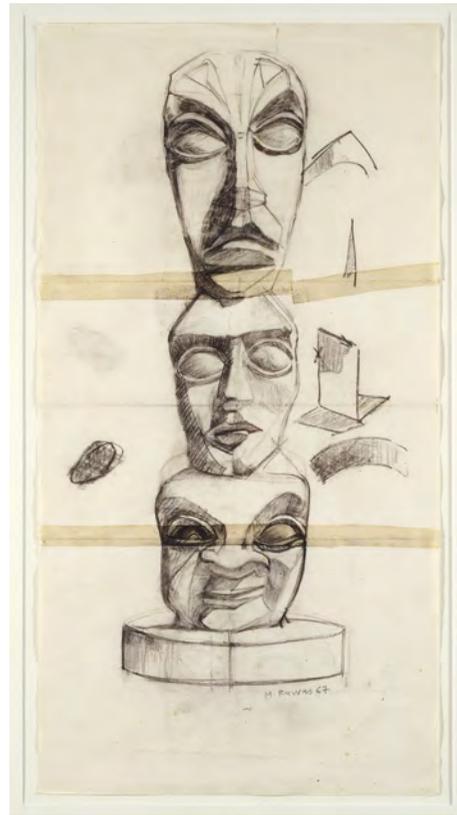
An Avatar, 2017 | Oil and acrylic on canvas, 130 x 140 cm



Bubbles, 2017 | Oil, acrylic on paper marouflaged on canvas, 66.5 x 61 cm



A Nude by a Window, 1975 | Oil and charcoal
on colored board mounted on canvas, 100 x 70 cm



Three Heads Totem, 1967
Black crayon on paper, 62.5 x 32.5 cm



The Magic Circle, 2017 | Oil and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 130 cm



Drawing of a Sculpture, 1967
Black crayon on paper, 50 x 35 cm



A Wedding Ceremony, 2018 | Oil, acrylic,
charcoal and graphite on canvas, 120 x 130 cm

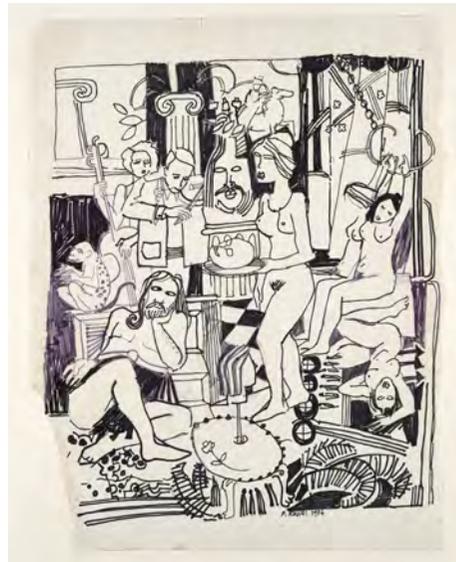


Devil, 1967 | Black crayon
on paper, 50 x 35 cm



Ghazi Al Banat, 2018 | Oil, acrylic,
graphite and charcoal on canvas, 120 x 130 cm

A Surrealistic Composition,
1974 | Ink on paper, 35 x 37.5 cm



King Saradanapalus' Harem, 1974
Felt pen on paper, 34 x 29 cm



A Nude with Arms above her Head,
1974 | Oil on paper, 49.5 x 35 cm



The New Visitor, 2018 | Oil, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 120 x 130 cm



Nude Figures in Nature, 1975 | Oil on canvas, 52 x 42 cm



The Unveiling, 2018 | Oil, acrylic, graphite and crayon on canvas, 120 x 130 cm



A Girl Sitting on the Floor, 2006 | Graphite on paper, 20.5 x 20 cm



The Masons, 2018 | Oil, acrylic, graphite and charcoal on canvas. 120 x 130 cm



The Bride, 2018 | Oil, acrylic and graphite on paper marouflaged on canvas, 66.5 x 61 cm



Easing the Burdens, 2018 | Oil, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 66.5 x 61.5 cm

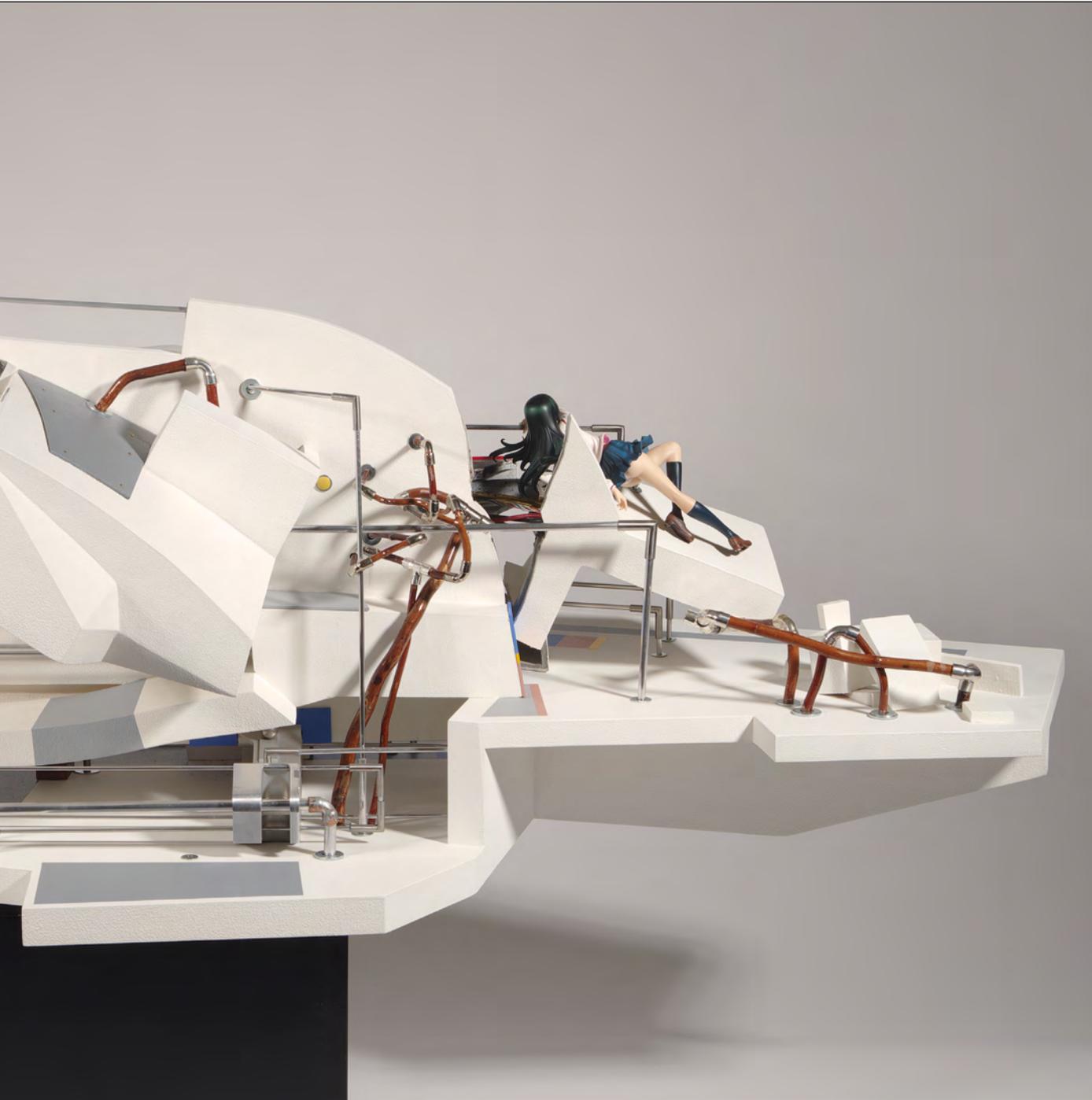


Yasmina's Helmet, 2018 | Oil and acrylic on canvas, 66.5 x 62 cm



An Accident in a Manga Girls' Colony, 2019
3D Printing, wood, aluminum, stainless steel, salix branches
and readymade plastic figurines | L.W.H 155 x 77 x 58 cm





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Mohammad El Rawas Recent Works

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