

Syrian Childhood Unmasked

Mohannad Orabi

Ayyam Gallery, Dubai

From a monograph edited by Maymanah Farhat (2015)

Back in the 1950s, the Romanian artist and forerunner of modern sculpture Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) once famously told a journalist, 'When we are no longer children we are already dead.'¹ Damien Hirst later quoted Brancusi in relation to his own experimental practice. Art comes instinctively to young children, who use whatever materials are available to create work simply for the exhilaration of creation itself, while rarely worrying about the quality of the final results or how they will be judged. Developmental psychologists have determined that by age three children can identify their own reflections in the mirror and go on to develop a growing sense of self-consciousness. Yet, with this knowledge of self comes a fear of embarrassment and a desire for pride in relation to others, which grows increasingly more urgent through adolescence, and is nearly debilitating to most people's decision-making processes and ability to take risks in adulthood. To artists including Brancusi, Hirst, and Mohannad Orabi, silencing self-consciousness and returning to the natural childlike state of creativity in the studio is equated with the most unpolluted, most aspirational form of art.

Orabi, who was influenced by the tradition of Syrian painting in the vein of Safwan Dahoul and Fateh Moudarres, graduated from the Faculty of Fine Art in Damascus in 2000 and then took first place in the Syrian Young National Artists exhibition in 2006. The following year, Ayyam Gallery recognized him as a member of the prestigious Shabab Ayyam group—a close-knit cohort of ten rapidly emerging, highly intellectual painters selected to receive incubation, support, and mentoring from the gallery. Ironically, Orabi's first solo show with Ayyam in 2008 was titled *Artist of Freedom* and centred around a series of self portraits presenting both male and female characters with round features and narrow almond eyes, painted in an anarchy of colour and texture. The show was a metered ode to an unrestrained yet serious studio practice.

In 2012 Orabi left his Damascus studio with unfinished portraits still nailed crookedly to its centuries-old walls and scooped up several jars of dirt from the floor to keep as a memory. He then travelled to Cairo, originally planning to stay for only a few months' time, but ultimately remaining for well over a year due to steadily worsening conditions in Syria. A prodigious studio practice culminated in a 2012 solo show *It's No Longer About Me*, followed by *Profile Portraits* in 2013. During his time in Egypt, Orabi's paintings became more realistic, less whimsical, and directly connected to stories coming out of Syria. Suddenly, the innocent, childlike faces became gaunt from hunger and tear-streaked from sadness. Boys

¹ Giedion-Welcker, Carola. *Constantin Brancusi*. Translated by Maria Jolas and Anne Leroy. New York: George Braziller, 1959. Originally published in German {Basel: Benno Schwabe and Co., 1958, p. 219

held guns and it was often disturbingly unclear if the weapons were toys or not. Girls were posed eerily immobile with eyes that projected a despair typically reserved for aging widows.

Last year, *Syria's Apex Generation*, a group exhibition curated by Maymanah Farhat, travelled between Ayyam Gallery's spaces in London, Beirut, and Dubai, bringing together work from five Shabab Ayyam artists who are now displaced and scattered between cities. Mohannad Orabi, Kais Salman, Abdul Karim Majdal Al-Beik, Nihad Al-Turk, and Othman Moussa, were presented as a single bloc from a new school of Syrian painting activated in response to the uprising. The international media response was tremendous, due not only to the innate strength of the work presented, but also stemming from a wide Western curiosity (bordering on voyeurism in certain cases) towards understanding the realities of life inside Syria and its expanding diaspora communities. Orabi was soon after named one of *Foreign Policy's* 100 Global Thinkers for 2014 for his part in bringing awareness to the plight of Syrian children.

Orabi, his wife, and young daughter then relocated to Dubai in 2014, where he set up a studio at the rear of Ayyam Gallery's flagship space in the gritty heart of the industrial district of Al Quoz, and began preparing for his next solo show. During the last year, he has completed more than twenty new portraits, while the situation for Syrian children has continued to deteriorate.

The facts concerning the youngest generation transcend political allegiances, ethnic identities, and religious beliefs. UNICEF reported in March 2015 that as a result of the protracted conflict 7.5 million Syrian children are in need of immediate humanitarian assistance, while 2 million currently hold refugee status in other countries, and an overwhelming 2.6 million are unable to attend school.² Orabi's *Family Portrait* series was conceived with these overwhelming statistics in mind, but with the idea of honouring and shedding light on the stories of ordinary Syrian families. In his studio, rocking in his madras-draped glider while sketching in a notebook with a stub of charcoal, Orabi explained, 'I set out to make something that would make people from every nationality around the world feel that our [Syrian] struggle is like their struggle, like the story in the paintings is also their story. I don't want them to feel pity, but to realize that this could happen to them too.'

Completed canvases for the show spill out of the boxy studio and lean against the surrounding hallway walls, staring out with a mixture of pride, grief, and expectation. The hallway is a gauntlet—the heavy reproach of the children's eyes is nearly unbearable. Each of their pupils' reflect light—which Orabi uses to symbolise a kind of stubborn hope, particularly in the faces of children who have witnessed and survived the worst side of human behaviour. One cannot help but wonder cynically if that light will be extinguished by future events. Orabi says that while he

² UNICEF Online Report, March 2015:
<http://www.unicefusa.org/mission/emergencies/conflict/syria>

paints he has conversations with each character and they guide him towards what to add to the scenes next. As their creator, he knows their narratives, but wants viewers to form their own connections, attachments, and stories.

Although mascara is running down her cheeks, a mother holds her posture rigid, one arm encircling her young daughter, while her other three children pose for an unseen camera with solemn, controlled expressions. Their father is notably absent. Has he been killed fighting, been arrested or disappeared? Given that everyone is posed in coordinating outfits, the family portrait resembles the glossy 10 x 12 images staged and printed in an affordable neighbourhood photography studio.

With her moon-shaped face, the mother resembles the Madonna, and each character's form is outlined in a thick band of white, which references the traditional Christian iconography that can be found in Damascene churches and are often printed onto wooden frames and baseball card-sized stock and sold in local *souks*. While he may have mindlessly thumbed past similar photographs on his Facebook newsfeed in the past, since leaving Syria Orabi has paused to study images such as these with new emotion, scrambling to take a pulse check and also keep a virtual connection with friends and family who are not physically accessible.

It is significant to note that none of the characters in the *Family Portrait* series are presented behind masks. In *It's No Longer About Me*, many of the characters wore satirical clown-like guises, as if to hide their true states of pain or vulnerability from the outside world. By way of explanation Orabi elected not to enter into a political discussion and would only say, 'When I was younger and more naïve, I was shocked to meet people who appeared beautiful, but underneath were actually quite ugly.' It is easy to presume this corresponds to mounting disillusionment with the situation in Syria.

Orabi has collected polished wooden African masks for years, some of which are nailed to the walls of his new studio. In Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and many other Sub-Saharan African countries, masks are traditionally believed to contain powerful spirits waiting to be summoned when someone is weak with sickness, in danger, or in need of divine intervention. In the early twentieth century, African masks found their way into the paintings of Picasso and Braque. The fathers of Cubism each owned a number of carvings, and there is an unsettled debate about whether their interest was purely Colonial in nature or based on a studied appreciation for African art and tribal customs.

In Orabi's case, the mask (or its pointed absence) is less associated with depicting the volume of the human form onto a two-dimensional surface than it is with conjuring an archetype of the Syrian individual coming into his or her full power and revealing that presence to the outside world out of a desire to be seen and heard. This is in line with the theories of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, who reasoned that each individual has a *persona*, or the outer mask that she or he

projects to the external world in order to protect and conceal a true inner nature. He wrote:

Whoever looks into the mirror of the water will see first of all his own face. Whoever goes to himself risks a confrontation with himself. The mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the *persona*, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face.³

Like Jung, Orabi connected the mask to the experience of encountering one's own reflection in water. Once years ago, while walking in the woods he came upon a shallow river. He paused at the edge looking down through the clear water, arrested by a pair of eyes, which he recognised after a moment to be his own. As his vision adjusted he saw that the rock bed below, which initially appeared a dull grey, was actually composed of a wonderfully nuanced palette of moss, mud, and mineral.

As Orabi stands at the easel in his Dubai studio, he tries to conjure that moment at the river and makes his characters' eyes the focus of his portraits. From a distance or when photographed, his paintings appear sternly monochrome and deceptively simple, but when viewed more closely the fabric of a girl's blouse mimics rolling hills, while a boy's neck contains ragged fields of pink. Each painting is composed of a minimum of four layers of acrylic paint that have often been mixed with found materials from wherever Orabi is based at the time—dirt from the floor of his Damascus studio, ash from *shisha* coals taken from cafes in Cairo, and recently, desert sand collected from the streets of Dubai.

At times he returns to that childlike place of uninhibited creation, discards his paintbrush completely and experiments with his hands and objects laying around the studio—coffee grinds, the rim of a teacup, dirt, or the fraying edges of a scarf. If the experiment does not succeed, he simply paints over it, and counts the scars as part of the piece's history. Dubai's straight, orderly streets and overgrown garden of skyscrapers has quietly seeped into the *Family Portrait* series, particularly in the flat grey of the paintings' backdrops, which mimics the city's dusty concrete. Navigating the main boulevard downtown, he sometimes squints so that the buildings take on human forms with eyes, mouths, and even masculine or feminine attributes.

His most recent painting depicts a young boy of eight or ten who holds a bouquet of red roses under one arm. Orabi made the piece in memory of a well-known street child who once sold flowers for coins in Beirut before giving up and going back to his native Syria, then dying in crossfire. Petals drift towards the ground around the child as though he could be walking in a wedding procession. In reality he is headed towards his own funeral and the flowers are the same pigment as the blood he will soon shed.

³ Jung, Carl Gustav, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious" (1935). In CW 9, Part I: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. P.43

Orabi spontaneously swirled a finger across each wet flower and manually opened the buds, as if progressing time prematurely—the life cycle from seed to rot. Red roses, which are a cross-cultural symbol of passion or loss, have turned up in his paintings from the beginning—tucked into the button-hole of a lapel or bundled into a young girl's arms. While the use of an iconic flower would seem like an art school cliché in most paintings, in Orabi's work it has a cinematic effect of breaking up a black and white still with a surprise that pulls the viewer into a narrative, perhaps even a private scene from the past that has been sealed in an envelope and set aside in a corner of the mind.

Who does not have a strong memory concerning a red rose hidden somewhere behind the mask that they wear out into the world? It is through this realization that viewers come to understand that there is only geographical distance between Damascus and the gallery wall. Mohannad Orabi does not title or number his individual paintings for a reason—the unmasked reality is that the experience of a Syrian child and the circumstances of the characters in the *Family Portrait* series could happen to anyone. The Syrian situation is in fact a global situation, and all people have a part to play in ensuring that the youngest generations have a shared future.

-Danna Lorch