



Asaad Arabi's duality: nakedness and the veil

THE SYRIAN PAINTER JUXTAPOSES NUDE AND VEILED FIGURES IN HIS WORKS

Social taboos seem to weigh heavily on Asaad Arabi. The subject predominates in the Syrian artist's work, in which the recurrent theme is the contrast between oppressed veiled figures and their uninhibited naked counterparts. Through art Arabi invariably makes a commentary about the social restraints that have come to define Arab culture – even though he long ago escaped Arab society's stifling grasp, having lived in Paris for well over 30 years now.

"Memories nurture what I do," says Arabi, while at the same time emphasizing that he himself experienced "a very open way" growing up in Damascus. Arabi, who came of age in the '60s, was part of the *nahda*, the Arab Renaissance. During this period of cultural awakening, Middle Eastern artists like Arabi embraced Western influences without abandoning the artistic heritage specific to the region.

In the liberating works that came out from the '60s, the depiction of nudity – an important theme in the history of Western art – was widely accepted. In fact, Arabi

recalls that when he was studying at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Damascus University, there were several nude models in the art studios. The climate was one of "permissiveness and open-mindedness." Arabi bemoans the abrupt turnaround that transpired in the late '70s and likens the conservative movement to a "contagious disease" that spread into all types of cultural expressions, including the arts.

Mounting social pressures and its hold on free expression provide the inspiration for his artwork, which are a study in contrasts – the artist's favorite subject. "There is no symbolism in my art, only direct messages. But the message is philosophical, and it isn't meant to provoke any kind of moral issue in society," says Arabi, who maintains a studio in Damascus where he spends a few months every year.

At Arabi's most recent solo exhibition, "Masked Bodies," held at Beirut's Ayyam Gallery last December, the poignant works on display depicted the irresolvable inner turmoil of the suppressed soul who must conceal its

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"Sleepiness"

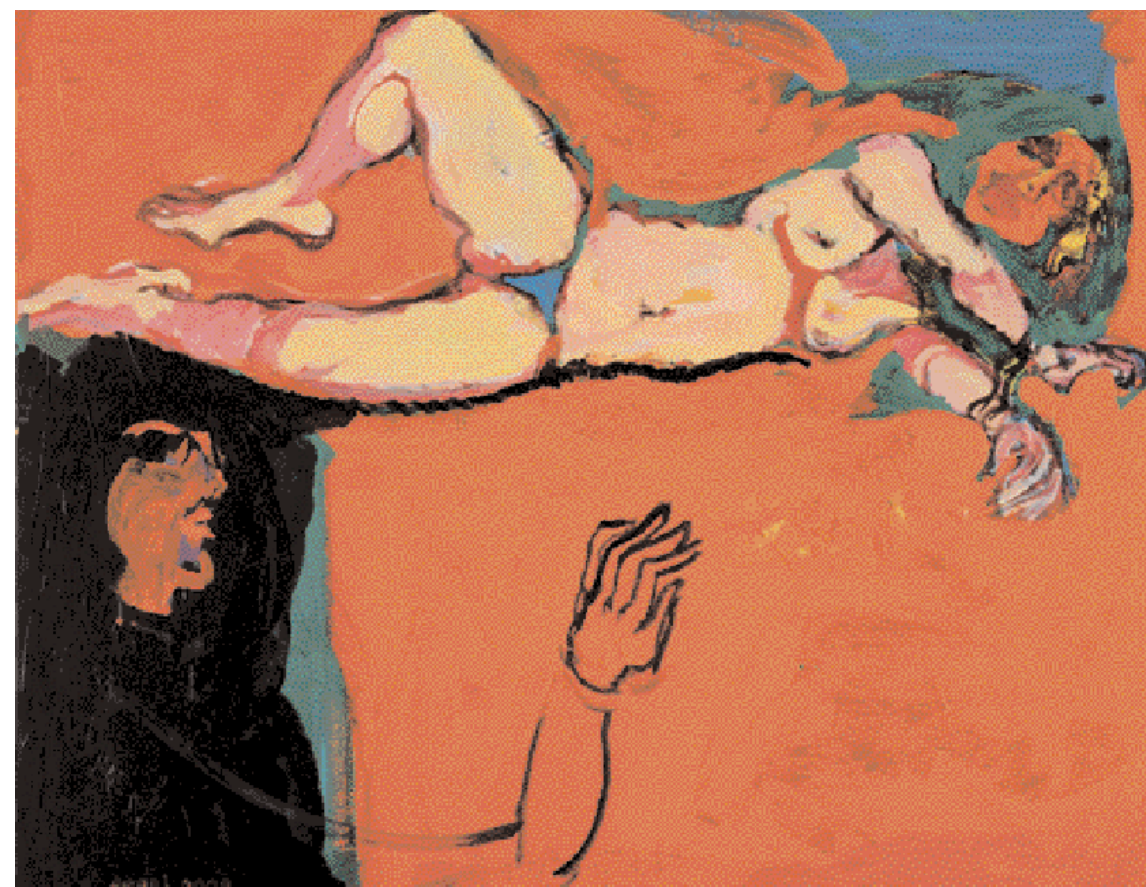
innermost feelings. Take for instance "The Passing to Orange," in which a figure cloaked in black at the forefront reaches out with an invisible hand to a naked body suspended in the air, but with wrists tied together.

"It's not necessary that the veiled character and the naked one are different people. They could be the same person, the nude being the yearnings of the character cloaked in black," explains Arabi, adding that sexuality is an underlying theme, but not the main message. "It can be about sexual extremes – perversion and purity – and the bold mixture of colors is also about extremes."

A master with color, Arabi uses bold hues and applies different grades of the same shade to create the effect of light as opposed to using white. While color abounds in Arabi's paintings, veiled characters are always dark, while nudes shimmer with light.

"Light translates into freedom," he says.

Natasha Tohme



"The Passing to Orange"