



Kais Salman
Civilised Society

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Ayyam Gallery Beirut

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The Portraits of Kais Salman

By Maymanah Farhat

Portraiture, as an artistic form, dates back to ancient times. Employed in diverse cultures across centuries, it is a rich and complex tradition that continues to be reinvented in art scenes from Johannesburg to Shanghai. Not until the modern era, however, did artists begin to reconsider the central concepts of the genre by destabilising the underlying motifs of class and power that have informed it. In the early twentieth century, image making took a different turn due to the growing accessibility of photography; in industrial societies, nearly anyone could have their portrait rendered with a camera.

Historically, satirical art played a key role in expanding the boundaries of the genre by pinpointing its essential elements, mainly its purpose as a pictorial approach that could capture the likeness of a model with the added subjectivity of the artist. Working in painting and printmaking, William Hogarth, Francisco Goya, and Honoré Daumier elevated satire to the level of fine art with deliberate execution and the studied consideration of form as they produced caricatures of personality types or exaggerated the social statuses of real life figures with grotesque depictions. Perhaps the most successful satirist in the history of Western painting was Diego Velázquez, the royal court painter of King Phillip IV of seventeenth-century Spain. The artist often portrayed his regal subjects without idealising their physical features, an apparent irony that offered a subtle critique of power under the guise of realism. Velázquez used the abstraction of laboured brushwork and its implied volume to situate his model in space and time. By approaching realism in this way, Velázquez questioned the veracity of art as a reflection

of the observable world, opting instead for visual allusions to what might exist beyond immediate perception. In his paintings of the head of the Spanish Empire, for example, the inbuilt psychology of portraiture is brought to the fore with an emphasis on the plasticity of the artist's medium; the formal qualities of paint are treated as representational elements equal to subject matter and composition.

Beginning with Édouard Manet, modernist painters adapted their unrestrained sense of formalism from the works of Velázquez. This distinguishing facet developed throughout the next century, as Manet's loose handling of paint quickly inspired the Impressionists—the movement that confirmed the arrival of modernism in art. The lineage that followed and which led to the emergence of international schools of expressionism, including significant circles of abstraction, are indebted to these breakthroughs. Portraiture has never been the same, as the works of Chaim Soutine, Francis Bacon, and Lucien Freud confirm.

Kais Salman's works belong to this long trajectory of art. For nearly a decade, the Syrian artist has approached painting in a similar way, using form to achieve what Ernst Van Alphen identifies as 'an act of thought,' a concept that parallels Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall's description of 'pictorial intelligence.' Building on theories outlined by Alpers and Baxandall in addition to Hubert Damisch—who advocates a transhistorical reading of art—Van Alphen argues that certain images can be analysed according to their 'intellectual thrust,' namely how philosophical, social, and

political questions are presented to the viewer. In order to understand a work of art in a historical context, it must first be considered as an articulation of a greater phenomenon. Art is historical, Van Alphen writes, if it stands as an active history of something. With this theoretical framework in mind, one can begin to see how Salman's paintings transcend the conventional limits of pictorial representation, entering the realm of semiotics. Whereas the study of signs that came into prominence in the second half of the twentieth century examined the symbolism and interactions of images as an indication of an artwork's meaning, Van Alphen and others propose that form can also serve semiotic functions.¹

Over the years, Salman has utilised the fundamental properties of painting to emphasise content while providing viewers with an initial way of entering contentious subject matter. As a satirist and social commentator, Salman uses form to achieve what Clement Greenberg referred to as the 'reflected effect.' In his seminal 1939 essay, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, Greenberg describes Pablo Picasso as an artist who allows the spectator to arrive at the 'ultimate values' of his paintings through the 'immediate impression left by plastic values.' According to Greenberg's assessment, Picasso realises this effect as he 'paints cause,' an aspect that activates the process of cognition through the 'necessarily difficult' details of art.

When discussing recent developments in Salman's painting style it is crucial to review his earlier works, as several previous experiments led to his current approach. In a

2007 series depicting the wreckage of car bombs, the artist isolates sections of devastated sites by covering the surfaces of his canvases with overlapping areas of abstraction (spatial planes that indicate piles of debris) and contrasting colours—namely black, white, and grey with interspersed hues such as mustard yellow or orange-red. Space is defined, and restricted, by the voluminous masses that are shown in each painting, as images of destruction occupy the length and height of the composition; depth is depicted only to the furthest point at which rubble mixed with metal pieces and tyres can be measured, recreating environments that have consumed everything in sight. The tidal sense of movement suggested by Salman's gestural brushstrokes recreates the aftermath of such unforeseen havoc, capturing ceaseless moments of horror.

With his subsequent paintings, Salman transferred the visual ferocity of car bombs to anonymous female figures, as he sought to describe another type of violence. Set against sparse backgrounds, the nude or scantily clad protagonists of his Fashion series (2008-2010) are outwardly ravaged by bleeding washes of white paint and thin black lines that spread across the contours of their exaggerated bodies. Rendered with deformed features, the monstrous yet sensual portraits are at once a comment on the objectification of women in the hyper-sexualised imagery of fashion and a critique of the global culture of consumerism that now shapes daily concerns. Early on in the series, flat, brilliant colour fields accentuate figures, whether depicted alone or in groups, offering a place for the eye to rest amidst the cyclonic markings that overpower his fictional models, if

only momentarily. In later works, Salman placed his vanity-driven heroines in the familiar scenes of clothing shops—interior spaces that situate his phantasmic creatures in reality.

After an especially dark collection of works produced with the start of the war in Syria, Salman shifted to a classic mode of portraiture with standing or sitting figures shown in identifiable settings or against ambiguous backgrounds. At times, his protagonists are depicted with commonplace objects belonging to particular contexts, such as the grinning macho that poses on a vintage motorcycle in *Ghost Rider* (2014). The recent series displays a significant break in Salman's work with meticulously painted facets, a method of realism that evokes the recognisable surroundings of the viewer. The artist's return to tradition, so to speak, serves to ease the spectator into his paintings. Yet, the longer one lingers in the composed domain of his characters, the more its sinister undercurrents are detectable. The reflected effect is meant to shock. In this specific collection of works, the artist's figures are painted with variations of pink flesh, suggesting exposed muscle tissue—a ghastly sight that betrays the supposed normality of their scenes. The portraits of bearded men reference a militant turn among groups in the Arab world that seek to reinstate (and politicise) the socioreligious norms and identities of a bygone era. The glaring ideological contradictions that exist within these movements as followers indulge in the superfluities of modern life—such as social media, competitive sports, and celebrity culture—are scrutinised through representational subtleties.

In the works of *Civilised Society*, Salman turns his attention to the international political arena, gradually dissolving the aura of authority and charisma that masks its archetypes. The artist's new portraits emulate the staging of theatric productions with spotlights, large circles for blocking, and elaborate costumes. The backdrops that position his characters also reference stage design with vibrant coloured panels. Several works titled *Joker* (2015) show self-assured protagonists, brawny men whose clothing brands are prominently displayed and worn with pride as they wait for cues to begin rehearsed monologues. Salman renders their faces in grey hues, signalling lifelessness. In *Imported Democracy* (2015) two decapitated figures are shown side by side as one holds the crowning costume detail: a large smiling head that fits either body. Salman outlines one of the models with a thin red line that appears in several other works and travels up and across a portion of the composition. This simple form gives his works a graphic look—perhaps a nod to the pictorial evolution of satire—and reminds the viewer of the artifice of painting, and his subject matter.

¹ Ernst Van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005)



Kais Salman

(Syria, born 1976)

Kais Salman utilises satire to subvert the normalisation of greed, vanity, and ideological extremism that is rapidly defining our era. Each series of Salman's work has sought to reflect a type of psychological violence that occurs when excess becomes rationalised and accepted by societies. Seeking to confront and exorcise sociocultural manifestations of such depravity, Salman taps into ugliness and abjection through intentionally hyperbolised imagery accentuated by punches of colour and aestheticised forms. Terrorism, consumerism, cosmetic surgery, religious fanaticism, imperialism, and the voyeurism of the digital age have all served as topics of Salman's carnivalesque compositions.

Born in Tartous, Syria in 1976, Kais Salman lives and works in Beirut. He received a Bachelor of Art from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Damascus in 2002. His paintings are currently housed in private collections throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. Solo and group exhibitions include the Alexandria Biennale (2014); Ayyam Gallery DIFC, Dubai (2014, 2010); Ayyam Gallery Beirut (2015, 2014, 2012); Ayyam Gallery Al Quoz, Dubai (2014, 2011, 2010); Damascus Museum of Modern Art (2009); The Park Avenue Armory, New York (2008); Carthage Festival for Coast Mediterranean Sea Artists, Tunisia (2005). In May 2010, a work from his Fashion Series appeared on the cover of the Wall Street Journal's Weekend Edition magazine, a first for an Arab artist.

World Cup
2014
Acrylic on canvas
160 x 110 cm



Dead CHE
2014
Acrylic on canvas
160 x 110 cm



Heart
2014
Acrylic on canvas
160 x 110 cm





Parasitic Bourgeoisie
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 220 cm



Poker
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 200 cm



UN Mission
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 200 cm



The Anonymous Arab
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 200 cm



Under the Microscope
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 220 cm



Brands
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 220 cm



Joker I
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 120 cm



Joker II
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 120 cm



Joker III
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 120 cm



Joker IV
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 120 cm



Joker
2014
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 40 cm each



The First Dinner
2014
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 200 cm



Magic Lantern
2015
Acrylic on canvas
180 x 200 cm



Imported Democracy
2015
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 200 cm

Playing Card
2015
Acrylic on canvas
160 x 100 cm



Ayyam Gallery

Founded in Damascus in 2006, Ayyam Gallery is recognised as a leading cultural voice in the region, representing a roster of Middle Eastern artists with an international profile and museum presence. Spaces in Beirut, Dubai, and London have further succeeded in showcasing the work of Middle Eastern artists with the aim of educating a wider audience about the art of this significant region.

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