

The background of the entire page is a dark, textured marbled paper. It features intricate, swirling patterns in shades of black, dark grey, and a hint of olive green. The texture is organic and complex, resembling traditional marbling techniques. A white rectangular box is positioned in the upper right quadrant, containing the artist's name and the title of the exhibition.

MOHAMMAD  
OMER KHALIL

**FIFTY YEARS  
OF PRINTMAKING**

Albareh Contemporary

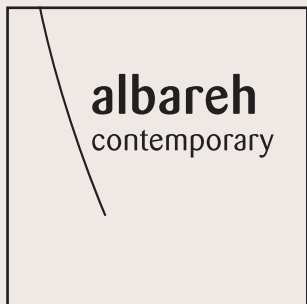








MOHAMMAD OMER KHALIL



Albareh Contemporary W.L.L.  
P.O.Box 26282, Adliya, Kingdom of Bahrain  
Tel +973 1771 7707 | Fax +973 1771 4545  
art@albareh.com | [www.albareh.com](http://www.albareh.com)

**Opposite page:**  
**Self Portrait** | Etching, 2x2cm, 1968

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# MOHAMMAD OMER KHALIL



Albareh Contemporary

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# LA NUIT.

Tu te retires, t nuit ténébreuse,  
Dans l'écorce rêche des arbres.  
Imperturbable et silencieuse  
Tu t'achemines lente vers les étoiles,  
Qui de leur glace cristalline  
Retiennent le souffle de la mort.

Les roses pleurent quand tu les quittes,  
Et de leurs larmes opalines,  
Humectent  
La voix rauque des dieux,  
Où s'enfonce incompris,  
Le cri opaque de l'homme.

Quand tu règues noire  
Sur la plaine d'été,  
L'eau et l'oiseau qui bruissent le jour,  
Se taisent  
Dans le silence de ton chant  
Et balisent de leur éclat, tes rêves d'éternité.

Complice s'enflamme l'horizon  
Pour raviver tes braises froides,  
Et de son circulaire mouvement  
Verser le voile diurne,  
Sur ton sommeil inapaisé.  
Et l'aube, clémente et régulière, hume le parfum de tes fugues.

Rajae Benchemsi

# DOORS OPEN IN THE HEART OF DARKNESS

Mohammad Omer Khalil (b. 1936) is not unique among Arab artists in the fact that he combines printmaking and drawing in his work, but rather in his complete mastery of both techniques, individually and separately, combining them in brilliant ways that showcase a level of expertise rarely seen in other artists. His creative oeuvre occupies a singular place in the history of Arab printmaking.

His chromatic approach is compelling: various shades of black interspersed with signs and symbols like an African tapestry for the performance of some obscure ritual. The print has a variety of colors, almost wild in some parts, but with a cohesive sensibility in its composition, bringing all the various elements to bear through collage, used in such a way to create both harmony and discord within the piece.

The print hints at the presence of some African shaman, rooted in both a rich oral and visual history, giving glimpses of mysterious pagan past. There is an intelligent, sensuous unity to the whole, creating an impression of transparency and weaving a contemporary spell through the discerning use of references, colors and elements, some of which are found objects that provide the sensuous pleasure of material touch.

The print's first iteration, the copper plate, is characterized with a precise attention to detail in every part, with coincidence playing a role in its ultimate value, but the whole remains clearly embedded within the artist's imagination, drawing on his own rich vocabulary of signs and symbols. On the print, the black surface creates a negative of the copper plate: it is the hidden body Mohammad attempts to repeatedly reveal like the incantation of a talismanic text, creating several layers of possible interpretation in the viewer, building his creative secrets right into



the piece as he adds sensual, tactile touches, like pieces of canvas or cloth, or vague natural materials that compete with the distant brushstrokes. This has a cumulative effect of transforming the imposed order of the shape into a whole capable of dialoguing with everything around it while preserving the rich heritage of its own details, so that the whole print becomes like a prayer rug for a free and open spirit.

There are many who try to imitate this approach, transforming this cumulative magic into a lifeless painted surface and using a collection of vague signs, and in so doing losing the creative guardian that breathes life into the whole. Mohammad's prints are built with a gradual, clear purpose, with the viewer able to distinguish both architectural and natural elements, whose value is revealed in the creation of a rich surface that discloses a central visual and spiritual intent, enriching the links between the elements and giving meaning to the spaces between the parts of the whole. This is how Mohammad's works are distinguished: they open space for innovation rather than merely bringing together architectural surfaces in one place or natural ones in others, for he works his expertise in collage to enhance the print and strengthen the invisible relationships between every part. His uniqueness lies in his mastery of the elements, the way he plays with them and sublimates them into the print, conjuring them into an inimitable universe rich with sensuality, dissociated from its past, as its essential imaginary material is mined from his mastery of the signs, commanding them without hesitation so that they are denuded of their prior connotations.

The rich magic and visual charm of the print is brought to life when it becomes a thing with meaning unto itself, providing multiple interpretations that create a symbolic, figurative heritage which in turn

generate its expressiveness, with all its attendant implications. I am not speaking here of a specific narrative intent, nor about voiceless symbols brought out of vagueness through visual trickery. His Amputee collection, for instance, is an example of some of his finest achievements, creating a visual hymn steeped in spiritual exegesis, an African shaman casting secret spells, written in ink invisible to everyone but himself, gathering them together to cast light on the ambiguity of this city and its various scenes, and all of this in actuality the result of an imagination that was able to gather all these fantastical elements in order to penetrate our own imaginary and identify us with this city, as historical entity and geographical place both. In this collection, we can see the fine, precise strings pulling all the elements of the print together and tightening them to open up the visual horizon that stretches out over every print, despite the fact that they clash with discord in some and mesh with harmony in others.

It is a vision that doesn't reference a city or its history so much as an entire varied stratum of time through excavating its very first layers, with its voids and obscure ellipses and the personal signs and symbols of all its residents, of all the explorers who came to see with their own eyes, of all the merchants and horsemen who passed through.

No matter how various the subject matter, Mohammad's prints remain visual poems whose rich details will only be revealed through a journey into the darkness to reveal all that is hidden, to uncover all the competing signs, to discover all the doors that might open in the heart of darkness.

**Dia Al Azzawi**  
London / December, 2013

Translated by  
**Lina Mounzer**  
Beirut, Lebanon





# METAPHOR OF BLACKNESS

**If we are to attempt to understand the path, is it enough to acquaint ourselves with the steps it requires?**

**What is the relation between the pressure of the footfalls, the distance they stride and the imprints they leave on the march of days?**

What are the hidden and the visible relationships between what the artist maps as carrier of material and what the observer finds in his artistic expressions? The works of Mohammad Omer Khalil stir the desires of the art lover just as powerfully as they entice the scholar to study them. They are works that attract the eye, that provide it with an assured aesthetic pleasure, no less strongly than the way in which they lure the scholar to uncover the unknown within the work, to discover its internal structures and to add new knowledge to the study of art.

## **ETCHINGS ON THE SHEET OF TIME**

Those who seek to approach Khalil's works may see in their meanderings, their stops and starts, the depiction of a long and open road. The titles of these works cannot summarize them, for they cannot indicate every marking on the road by way of its essential form and content. There are those who approach the work with a glance, like birds swooping down for a rest, and so both the hidden and clear intents behind the work are suddenly come to life, given that the artist doesn't hesitate to peck, to pick at the page of existence, driven by his love and his continuous desire to illuminate all that is obscure within us, all that is common between us. And there are those who approach deliberately, carefully, testing the blackness step by step, like a slow, multi-faceted, ever-changing descent into darkness: in the end, the pleasure is the same, and there are other pleasures to be found. And there are those who approach with a plethora of seeing tools, not content with the naked eye of emotion, but seeking to add a historical reading, to place the artwork within the context of an artistic journey that includes the artist and exceeds him at the same time.

The oldest of the works displayed dates back to 1960, etchings in specific, for Khalil has also produced paintings and art books. At the bottom of one of these old etchings, we might observe the

fingers of the right hand as if preparing to undertake the work, just as the artist himself did. With assured resolve and variety, the artist doesn't hesitate to act on his. In the background of this etching we may also see many small squares, visible from both sides, and each square contains what seems to be a multitude of small, abbreviated works of art, discharged by the artist at his first few strokes. What we can see in Khalil's first works is akin to what we see in writers' early works of literature: an artist who stuffs the work with almost everything he wishes to say, a sign of a strict, intense intention. Also true to the form of early works, they showcase a lot of variety in terms of subject and form, of experimentations with different artistic perspectives. Those who look more precisely will notice different marks and signs, some of them used by the artist in subsequent works, and some of them abandoned. And one can also see, when looking carefully, what looks to be like geographical landscapes that evoke the map of Italy, a place where the artist has many ties, both academic and artistic: an obsession with signs and markings expressed as lines both severe and undulating.

What is most apparent about these works is that they combine two different techniques in the making of etchings: one that takes a balanced, geometric approach to the elements, incorporating some decorative features as well, and a more "chaotic" or organic approach, allowing the material to seem as if it is extending and varying itself with some sort of spontaneity. Two different, or even contradictory approaches, able to live side-by-side in Khalil's open, experimental vision. It reflects the two sides in the ongoing conflict in the artist's experience: between him and the sheet metal on which he etches, between sheet like the drawing paper, the photography paper and the drafting paper and between the obscure desires that flow in the fits and starts of the hand that draws, that photographs and that drafts on the page.

As such, the careful observer of the retrospective of Khalil's displayed works, spanning over fifty years, can notice both continuing shapes and their discontinuity in the general construction of the piece or in its internal structure. One might notice the care taken in the composition of the straight lines or the curves or the squares and the rectangles: how they sometimes look like actual engineering designs. Just as one might notice that Khalil, in opposition to the architectural approach, draws freehand shapes as well, distinctive in their freedom and spontaneity, in

the lack of recourse to the ruler or other tools, coaxed forth by the whims of the hand that drew them.

But Khalil's etching is not simply a formal exercise, rather a temporal, spatial and symbolic structure at the same time. This is embodied in human markings, or in photographs, or in different shapes incorporated by the artist into the world of the etching (which is most apparent in the etchings from the 1970s, as well as some others). The etchings remain ever themselves, in a permanent and continuous state of being. These are undulations that appear as etchings on the page of time, revealing hidden desires in the invisible hand of the artist.

## ETCHING: ART WITH A CAPITAL A

Though it is no easy feat entering into this artist's world, the observer would be mistaken to look at the works fleetingly, to stop merely at the titles, for titles are sometimes amusing, referring to a "monkey" or a "hat" while the structure of the work reveals a far more mysterious game. In this, Khalil is akin to the surrealists, both the writers and visual artists amongst them. Just as other titles, referring to specific cities, for example, do not refer to the city itself but rather to the sensual observations or experiences that the artist underwent there. Thus the work represents an aesthetic account for the observer, and an intimate, emotional one for the artist.

This requires one to explore the etchings in chronological succession, to follow their continuities and discontinuities. For they are the result of trials and experiences, and the result of a continuous practice that has built up the artist's considerable skills, turning him into one of the top Arab authorities on etching, deeply influential in the initiation and training of other artists, both emerging and established. And while some of them may have given up on etching as an art form, Khalil never did, despite varying his artistic repertoire with oil paintings and art books.

That's why exploring his work is like entering the workshop one of the grand masters: each work stands like a monument that summarizes the history of etching and dates Khalil's visual experimentation. In his etchings on sheets of copper or zinc, the artist returned to a technique dating back to 1700 called aquatint. This process—whose name refers to the effect

it creates, which looks like ink or watercolor washes— involves using acid and a ground on acid-resistant metal sheeting in order to create large tonal shadows in the print, each time resulting in a print just as clean and clear as the original. Khalil also innovated in his etching, sometimes producing a limited number of prints from a single etching, and other times working to make each print slightly different and therefore unique.

His works range from large-size formats (48 to 52 inches) to much smaller ones, but no matter the size, they all share the same rich, layered structural intensity and are similar in the delicate network of formal details contained therein. They reveal an artist with great patience, precise focus and of great generosity, if one may say so. For Khalil's etching is art with a capital A, requiring equal measures of experience and dedication; it is not a hobby for one's spare time, not something one can do on a Sunday (as the French expression goes). Khalil's etchings are not mere experimentations in a different medium (as Picasso, for example, resorted to etching) or an attempt to exploit the commercial potential of the medium, just as many artists have done, promoting themselves by making postcard prints of their work.

What adds to the "honor of etching" that Khalil has pursued is something he gravitated towards after arriving in New York, where the experimentation at the time, in both the city and elsewhere consisted primarily of relying on color—bright, joyous, festive color—to create form, a school of art that later became known as American abstract expressionism and was exemplified by artists such as Jackson Pollock and Frank Stella.

Khalil never abandoned his etching or his reliance on darker shadows and shades, which made things quite difficult for him during that time abroad, as he once narrated to an audience of listeners. "In Sudan, I taught drawing and color, but when I got to New York in 1967, I couldn't find any work teaching. It was impossible, especially because I didn't have either an American or British degree, but one that was Sudanese and Italian, which didn't count for much in their eyes. I managed to find work in commercial trade carpentry and printmaking, and worked there for a year. Then I happened on a job in a national center for etching, where I met many etchers from around the world. My work consisted of cleaning the etching studios after the work was done, and I had only one day a week

on which to work on my own art. After a year of this, I found my own studio, bought a printmaking machine, and began to work on my own for myself."

The difficulties Khalil encountered in work and teaching would be repeated during his experience trying to exhibit his work. For he is not a traditional, folkloric artist, easy to categorize as a "Sudanese artist" representative of his homeland, nor is he a typical etching artist who might be simply characterized as an artisan. Nor does his work follow the usual trends, so he couldn't be lumped in with the American school either. "No one works in black and white, let alone the fact that the Americans don't even go near the color black, almost as if it didn't exist, preferring bright, warm colors instead. And so what of my colors: gray, gritty, washed-out?" he asks. "How were they to find a place amongst Stella's rainbows?" After that, Khalil moved away from all commercial work, where the primary question about a work of art, at least in America, was always: "How much will it be valued at after ten years?"

## THE ESSENCE IS THE LINE

Khalil's etchings, above all, are "syntheses," collages built of various elements, a technique that can be seen in many of his works and something suggested by the titles themselves. He synthesizes elements both convergent and divergent, gathering them from various sources both public and private: symbols of individual and collective history, deliberately gathered or unconsciously summoned by his hands as they go about their patient work on the sheet metal.

He creates as he sees fit, much as a writer gathering words onto the page. He uses existing symbols or composes them himself, using both public symbols and personal images, pulling them from street scenes or dreamscapes, evoking the joys of the body to illuminate its dark mysteries. As such, the essence is all contained within the line.

The observer might choose to follow the titles of the works, seeking clues from the elements they denote: bird, mother and son, man and woman, the faces of the assassin, dance, mountain, marriage, etcetera. Places, people, objects: together they form a human and geographical map, above all personal in nature.

Khalil often incorporates photographs into his work, in bits and pieces, almost like a personal album of some sort, except he uses them as signs and symbols, never to limit or constrain the larger work. They are simply raw materials, and he uses them not as mere images but as catalysts for transformation. He transforms them by equating or contrasting and linking them to other elements, surprising to the eye. This is why his etchings have a cumulative effect, the result of synthesis: a synthesis of material, a synthesis of different treatments and effects, coming together through his mysterious processes: shadowy, dark and vital. The result of all this, apparent in the works from the 1970s and onwards, is a searing honesty deriving from the use of these different materials, elements and effects, molten and complex, with each etching displaying a touch both light and sure at the same time.

At first glance, Khalil's works impart a clear sense of construction, and yet some final movement, quick and complex, muddles this clarity, giving the work its vitality, its immediacy, its obscurity, ultimately, its mystery. His works are singular and of the moment: "It is impossible for my mind today to be what it was yesterday. I look to what is happening around me, and while my hand might move with the same need, it is also always necessarily different."

A solid, clearly envisioned structure, built methodically, whose solidity is then broken with a single, surprising gesture. A spontaneous crafting, rooted in and shaped by the instant. A contradictory construction, with some vastly detailed areas and others left open and empty. Black and white, strength and weakness, together creating an internal tension that is also embodied by the fact that he uses two plates in his prints.

This structure suits Khalil's technical choices and artistic plans, for it allows him to absorb and incorporate a number of singular elements: vocabularies, shapes and bodies, making them, in turn, more absorbent through the use of many squares, which themselves incorporate a number of different elements. This also suits the nature of the work, which requires intense focus and patience, making it both easier and more tempting to create the whole element by element.

Another noticeable feature of his work is that his etchings manage to incorporate different styles or "schools" of thought without modifying them or

equating between them, but rather by absorbing them all to create something entirely new. His etchings appear as both records and crystallizations of the figurative and the abstract at the same time, a style based on the collection of various elements such as found materials, as in the Italian school of "Arte Povera" (literally: poor art), or elements deriving from a Sudanese artistic tradition, or the use of the name of God.

Khalil's etchings are places of encounter, of dialogue, in art especially. This is the result of the vision of an artist who doesn't hew to single movements or schools; rather, he is aware of them, their ideas and techniques, using and transforming them all, incorporating certain elements and abandoning others in order to create a work entirely his own, his etchings like the queen of the manor, enthroned in a wide, bright hall with open windows.

One of the titles from a 1969 work reads: "The Subject Was Roses," a title that refers not to the artist's content but rather to his technique, departing from a materiality not to ultimately depict it, but to treat it. And the treatments are varied, with the form used as both the starting point and the end point of the work (the treatment of the form is varied), although the form sometimes retains a certain human element. For the material, as it eats into the surface of the sheet, takes on the attitude of the artist, remains under his authority, like construction materials, like a gesture of human creation.

## ETCHING AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL BOOK

In one of Khalil's etchings, a figure enters Asilah riding on a donkey, someone Khalil used to see daily during his summers in the Moroccan city, especially on rural crossings. He also observed one of the Tunisian writers thus: entering Asilah in turn, after arriving at the train station from the nearby Tangiers international airport, riding on a wooden cart pulled by a donkey, carrying a leather satchel and a Samsonite bag. Then there is Khalil's entry into Asilah, dating from his launch of the "cultural Moussem" in 1978, and his established residency there summer after summer, which made of him almost a second citizen, especially that he oversaw the work of some practicing artists as well as some of the students as they trained yearly at the Etching

Studio. This is how he influenced the city, its artists, its citizens and visitors, always distancing himself from any sort of "stardom" and never exploiting the city or his relationship with it in any way. What he received from Asilah in return was a great leap in his work, particularly embodied by his 1992 piece about the city: his lines come thicker, and his markings are denser and denser gradients of blackness, almost as if experimenting with different rhythms and sounds, and he's incorporated splatterings of dots, decorative motifs, giving the work a completely different look than a usual etching. The work seems to be playing with some of the decorative aesthetics of Islamic art, especially on the frescoes, some elements of which can be found on the walls of the Raissouni Palace, whose work Khalil oversaw during his time at the Etching Studio.

A number of Khalil's works refer to Asilah in their titles, denoting experiences, moments and feelings he lived there, experiences etched into his consciousness in the same way they were etched into his work. Other works refer to different cities: Fez, Marrakesh, Petra (in Jordan), Baghdad (2001), Harlem (New York), Odysseus and the Sirens, and others. Here and there the artist left his workshop and took to the streets, gathering archaeological material from the outside world, measured in his own steps or the travels of his own mind, but he always returned to his workshop, coming back with treasures to enrich his unceasing research on how to coax form from shadow.

Many works, dating back to different periods in Khalil's career, explore the topographical elements of a certain place, from Italy to Sudan, passing by a number of different countries on the way. These works are characterized by an architectural approach that foregrounds the lines and structural elements in terms of importance, representing place through the use of a more graphical aesthetic. There are other certain works, such as Café in Rome, whose particular aesthetic depends on a deconstruction of shape, on chipping it down and reconstructing it in a way entirely dependent on the artist's aesthetic and structural choices without constraint from the original shape whatsoever. These take on the form of light lines, or larger swathes of blackness, or areas of shadow relieved by cross-hatchings of white. We also find—though in only few works—etchings that clearly suggest Arabic calligraphy, both Quranic and



freehand. And we cannot perform an overview of his work without mentioning one devoted to Bob Dylan (1986): in this piece, Khalil uses colors other than black and white, indicating a shift to come in a number of works, particularly in the image. In this piece, we may observe the beginnings of elements and visuals that will find their way into other subsequent works in later years.

It behooves those who are interested in a deeper look at Khalil's work—from students to collectors to artists and others—to pause at a rare grouping of his early works, those undertaken during his studies in Italy. Here we may see the first emerging shapes of his artistic oeuvre, where the external world enters through a particular treatment of realism, naturalism, humanism, as we may particularly observe in a rare piece about Khartoum (1965). The other works of note from that period include the several *Nudos*, which reveal the delicacy of his etching aesthetic and his particular treatment of the coy outlines and curves of the female body, where his light, deft lines are enough to suggest the hidden, exciting world of desire.

## THE "FREE" ARTIST

Mohammad Omer Khalil is an artist in a place and position all his own. It is a place strange and distant, and cannot be reached by the usual roads. There will be no one who helps you on your journey. Almost as if you were plunging into the dense thickets of an overgrown forest without maps or compass. And should you reach that place, you will find him there alone, surrounded by his own borders, guided by his own unique outlook.

If you were to find out that he is Sudanese, living in New York now for over fifty years, it would not help you to discover his true identity, but only to understand some of its components and implications, for it is entirely caught up and contained within the artist's personal, emotional language.

Khalil is open about narrating the milestones of his life: born in Sudan, his homeland and place of his childhood, he traveled to Italy, where he studied international art, then to New York, where he lives and works, but the narrative largely wipes away tensions with a certain Sudanese gentility: you may guess at

hardships, at obstacles in this twisting journey, but you will see them only dimly, as if peering at uncertain shapes in a thick forest.

We may call Khalil the "free" artist, an expression I borrowed from a historical book on etching and its European traditions. Apparently there were conflicts between photographers and etchers over their "rank" or place, since by British law they were not allowed to be categorized among the fine artists, while French law granted them the distinction of being called free (or "liberal") artists.

Above all, Khalil is an immigrant artist. His art remains with him, wherever he roams. He finds it wherever he finds himself: on the street, on a sheet of paper, in a found object or discarded form...

I spoke earlier about the "honor of etching," but I may also talk about the "honor of being" as well. "I dislike the atmosphere of art and artists in New York," Khalil says to me. "There is a competitiveness elevated to a sort of disease, a suspicion of the other, a stealing of artistic ideas." The artist looks for himself in comparison with others, measuring trends, styles, themes, popular color combinations, while Khalil is, as the Sudanese proverb goes, like "the one who enters the oven and emerges unroasted."

During our conversation I ask: "How do you know that you're advancing without measuring yourself against other people's work, even just to see that you're doing something different?"

He answers: "Honesty and self-reflection above all. I learned this right when I was starting out, I practiced dialoguing with the self, discovering the self, until the practice became second nature to me."

No discussion about the "honor of etching" is complete without talking about what this art form has brought to the art world since its centuries-old inception: the birth of etching was a historical moment, bringing art out of its narrow, elitist confines and disseminating it to the outside world, allowing it to be shared and seen more widely. Etching wrenched art out of the ownership of exclusive hands and brought it to the public, making it both mobile or portable and commercially viable. Etchers benefitted from being able to disseminate their works, sharing their ideas and themes and visions through productions and reproductions of the image, and that benefit spread



to others and created a broader category of art lovers and those able to enjoy art, allowing more people to collect and be touched by it: for less money, but with more dignity.

And so Khalil raised the profile of etching as a form, evolving, innovating and re-inventing it, removing it from the realm of service to other art forms—books, posters, promotional work for other artists—and raising it to a level of excellence all its own.

The Al-Bareh Fine Arts gallery mounted a solo exhibition of Khalil's work in 2012, entitled: *A Bridge Between Two Worlds*. And we may talk about how his art connects between multiple worlds, given that the artist gathers, or "synthesizes" into his etching all his passion for life that it may absorb, offering it out as an explicit call for human participation: a call away from borders—the borders between races and peoples, between cultures and art forms—a summoning of its pure aesthetic power. For he who was born in the village of Burri, close to Khartoum, in the year 1937, who studied at the Applied Art Institute in Khartoum, who left for Florence in 1963 to study fresco art, then moved to studying mosaic in Ravenna, still in Italy, then immigrated to study in New York, does not hesitate to present his art as a marker of his own unique identity, offered out for the purpose of dialogue with others.

## BLACK COLOR, BRIGHT SOUL

Blackness is a mood, a metaphor, before it is a color or a description or a race or continent or anything else: a metaphor, for it contains all these other things and is still able to surpass them. Blackness is an abbreviation of all these elements, compressing them down into a constructed symbol, illuminating all the connotations and radiations.

Black is a color that contains all the others within. It may, in its density, its thickness, its contours, evoke a colored world. To contrast with white: face to face. To draw a colored map in its path, containing dark and bright, thickness and lightness, straight and curved, stable and broken.

Black on white. White on black. Black contained within white, and white within black.

There is more than a passing correlation between blackness and etching, a relationship of production: for what is etched in negative emerges in positive, the markings made on the sheet metal, then treated with acid and filled with ink, or with color over color, then printed onto the page. A bright image emerges from the darkness of production.

It is the blackness of Sudan, of Africa that evokes its particular beauty, breaking the dominion of whiteness (in every sense of the word) over aesthetics, art, and culture. And blackness has its own particular history in the symbols and bodies of the United States of America.

Standing before Khalil's pieces, it is as if we are invited to peer into the heart of the night. We can see shapes in the shadows, but we can barely see them, used as we are to looking at everything flooded with light: "In blackness, I see degrees and shades of rich, complicated color, more intense than in other colors, roaring and loud."

He taps into the blackness, distilling its light. Its dim, quiet light, like peering into a tunnel or a nighttime jungle.

"As if you were a musician, coaxing various, different melodies out of only two notes?" I ask him.

"Someone once asked me," he answers, "what I would have done had I not become an etch artist. And I said I would have been a musician. I find music almost shocking in its expressiveness. Nothing reproduces the same emotional punch like a piece of music. In my work, I try to bring forth that capacity for emotional reaction, to explode it outward."

After all is said and done, Khalil's work has a secretiveness about it. Powerful in its muted revelations, shocking in the gloom. I find it akin to a wink. The work doesn't present itself directly, it is rather up to us to find our way to it. There is a mystery we cannot see immediately, that we must discover for ourselves.

It is a blackness of color and a brightness of soul.

Charbel Dagher  
Lebanon, 2013

Translated by  
Lina Mounzer  
Beirut, Lebanon



# LATENT IMAGES



"Latency is this 'being-there', although you don't see me; it is the necessity beyond the evidence."  
- Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige

Latency denotes a state of possibility, different from the traditional states of matter. Something latent is dormant but real, potential but not obvious; present and accessible in the unconscious mind but yet not consciously expressed. It is a territory that while altogether real, appears only as uncontrollable risk, and curiously endangers the predictability of the world. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige wrote in 2002, "It is not a defined territory, but a diffused state, uncontrollable, underground, as if lurking, as if all could resurface anew."

In the world of images that furnishes now the repertory of cultural literacy, a latent image is not an invisible body but rather, the hope of an ultimate confrontation and untimely revelation of a definite morphology: Units, segments, configurations. There's an immediate risk inherent to the operation - Disappointment. An ideal form, says Plato, contains the most fundamental type of reality while appearances are not to be trusted; they constitute optic deceptions that only seldom reveal the true nature of the idea.

The etching work of Mohammad Omer Khalil, on the other hand, loaded with its characteristic pristine blackness, and mischievously blurring the immediacy of an explosive and ever so demanding contemporary eye, is by no means withholding from the risk of latency; the sudden appearance and disappearance, the danger of the optic form not meeting the identity of its idea, the peril of the sufferings of the world, to which every living thing is subject. On the contrary, the works function as memory containers of what cannot be accurately remembered or expressed.

Using a technique invented in the European 16th century - and by tour de passage, establishing a dialogue with the great masters of the period and beyond - Khalil's works are by no means the static

images isolated in stills, against dark backgrounds with monocular perspective, typical of the Renaissance. A child of his time, his finished works behave in a cinematic manner, with close-ups, frames and elapsed motions, in the fashion of the same slow depth with which we experience abstract video-art. But he doesn't engage in pure abstraction; essential forms are readily available.

A transition takes places in his work between planes that are no longer available to the eye in wholeness and therefore contain muted meanings that may awake at any time, when the eye ceases from being the most defining element of perception. The artist is not a literalist or a collagist, as his grammar is not only a visual bravado; his is a re-arrangement of the entire sensorial order. His piecemeal fragmentation of reality is deliberate, in order to compel us to look at his artistic production, in particular the etchings, with our entire body as a territory rather than mere organs.

His use of materials is not only the exercise of an experienced craftsman, but the singular attempt to alter the syntactic order of the imagination. In this exhibition, Mohammad Omer Khalil takes us on an extended journey between the landscapes of his native Sudan and North Africa, his work and life experiences in Italy and the United States, and the Kingdom of Bahrain, where his works are traditionally exhibited at Albareh. His images are latent, yes; fraught with the risk of discovering something unseemly, at times perhaps even terrifying. Yet he is not giving away all the secrets to the gateway; as observers, we all remain at the threshold of something both marvelous and haunting.

Arie Amaya-Akkermans





# CONCEPTS AND THEMES



In these early works, composed during his still formative years in Sudan and Italy until the 1960s, and his first years in the United States as a free artist in the early 1970s, Mohammad Omer Khalil is not simply experimenting and improving upon the mastery of a technique acquired first from traditional craftsmanship and European painting.

If we look beyond the basic syntax of composition, the artist is embattled with a number of questions; confronting the history of art with its own tools against its own bearings, embedded in an innovative theory of perception that shatters the illusion of optics and liberates bodies from the prison of the single frame. Basic anatomical forms, often common place in the type of classical Italian painting that the artist both practiced and observed carefully; the themes of life and death; questions of 20th century post-war modernist painting. They all emerge here not simply as repetitions or modifications, but as an enlarged apparatus of consciousness. A number of self-portraits from the then young artist give an insight into what would later become his signature print: Documents from another era, a photographic ruin – which is a quintessential modern paradox, a snapshot delivered only belatedly and almost scorched on the contours like an old family album; the making of an image which is imperceptible by clarity but in reality, transparent by essence. At works one sees the labor pains of what is yet to come, a pluperfect narrative which is handed over as a primal and unreachable past, straining the visual field of the future. A field altogether demanding from the viewer not only empathy and knowledge, but a sensorial tabula rasa in the disposition to process works of art that refuse to let themselves be digested in one single stare. The past here, nevertheless, is still both clear and cleared, without the largesse of complex interwoven tapestries that would consolidate later as sounds and impressions; from places, emotional spaces and moments in history.

Departing from the calculated abstractions of his generation, Mohammad Omer Khalil turns his back on the blind spot of Western art history and returns to the warm singularities eroded by the collapse of tradition, yet his turn is more an elision than a transition into the past: Let us not be fooled by the use of traditional techniques, for they operate here only as a total medium. Far from the monocular view of the canvas and the restricted fields of representation, Mohammad Omer Khalil uses etching in the same manner of photographic and video-cameras; his vision covers more than is available to the eye while at the same time, the main subject remains concealed or lies in the adjacent plane, never at rest. The overarching blackness on the plates is not happenstance but remains at the very heart of the artist's practice: The necessity to inspect the works in detail in order to find the traces of the original image, or question oneself, whether there was one to begin with. Khalil's work demands to be experienced as a wholly new grammar of perception. The type of perception that is advocated here isn't a place beyond consciousness where the normal body and mind cannot reach, but rather emerges a primal locus prior to consciousness and the birth of the mind. The eyes are liberated from the historical retina and duplicate worlds appear simultaneously spread through stretchers and stretches of black, endowed with narrative powers that blur the lines between story and history, between tale and tell, because color and darkness. We begin our journey through the blackness, blindsided by something incomprehensible but yet fully formed. The mystery becomes tantamount to reality and a safe but critical distance from this mystery permits the conscious being to become more aware of his own senses, and to measure the distance in color scales. But soon all the concepts will break down, all the themes will acquire layered sources that disfigure specific readings and unfurl as magic worlds of their own.

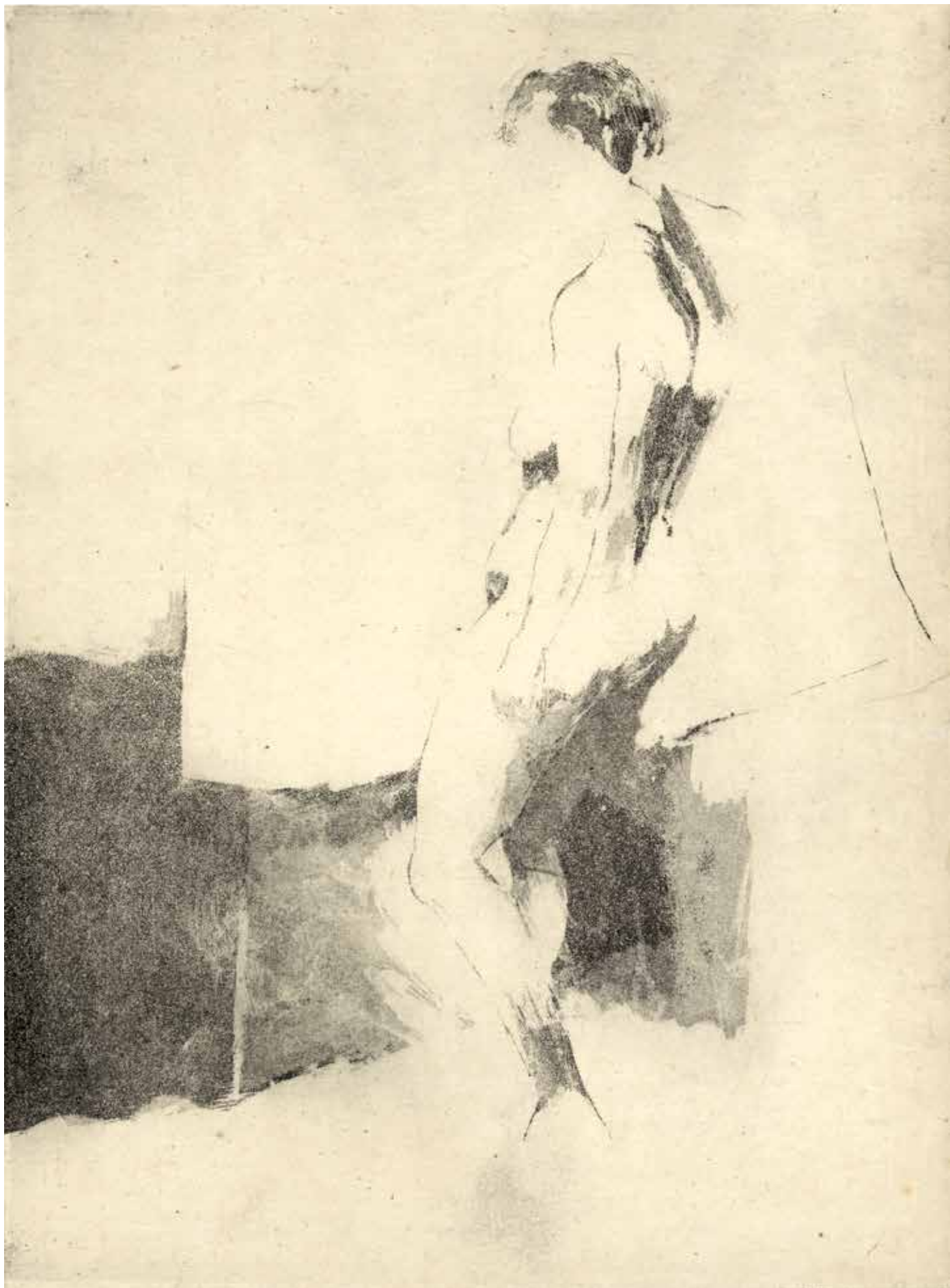


**Still Life**  
Etching  
7x10cm  
1964



**Canello (The Gate)**  
Etching, Aquatint  
15x20cm  
1965







**Nudo**

Etching, Aquatint, Chine-collé

23.5x17.5cm

1965



**Khartoum**

Etching, Aquatint

14.5x24.5cm

1965



**The Market**  
Aquatint  
18x23.5cm  
1965



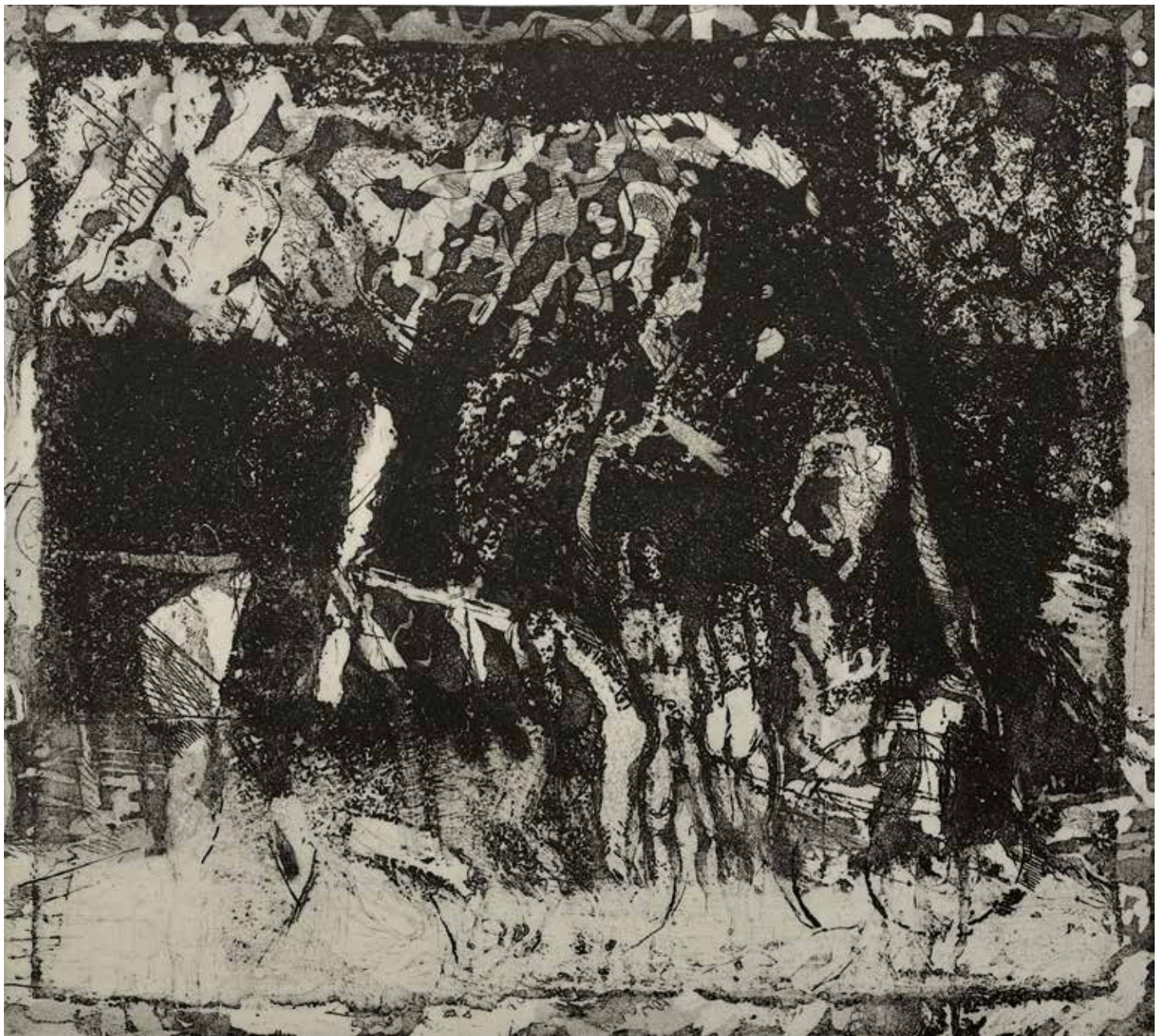
**Nudo**

Etching, Aquatint, Drypoint

49x49.5cm

1965





**Un Canto Della Divina Comedia**

Etching, Aquatint

35x39cm

1966

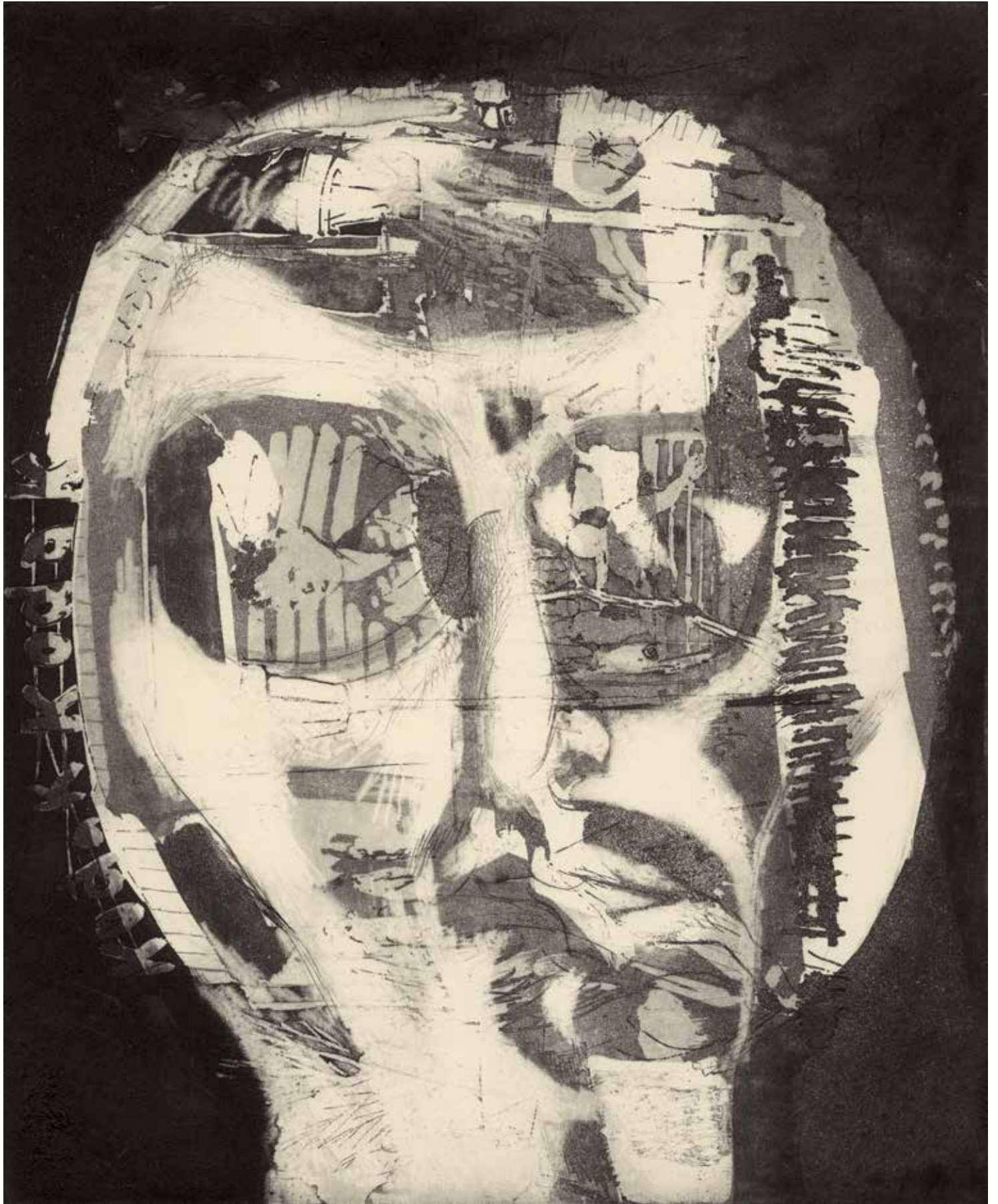
**Reflections from the World Fair**

Etching, Aquatint, Scraping

29.5x24.5cm

1965









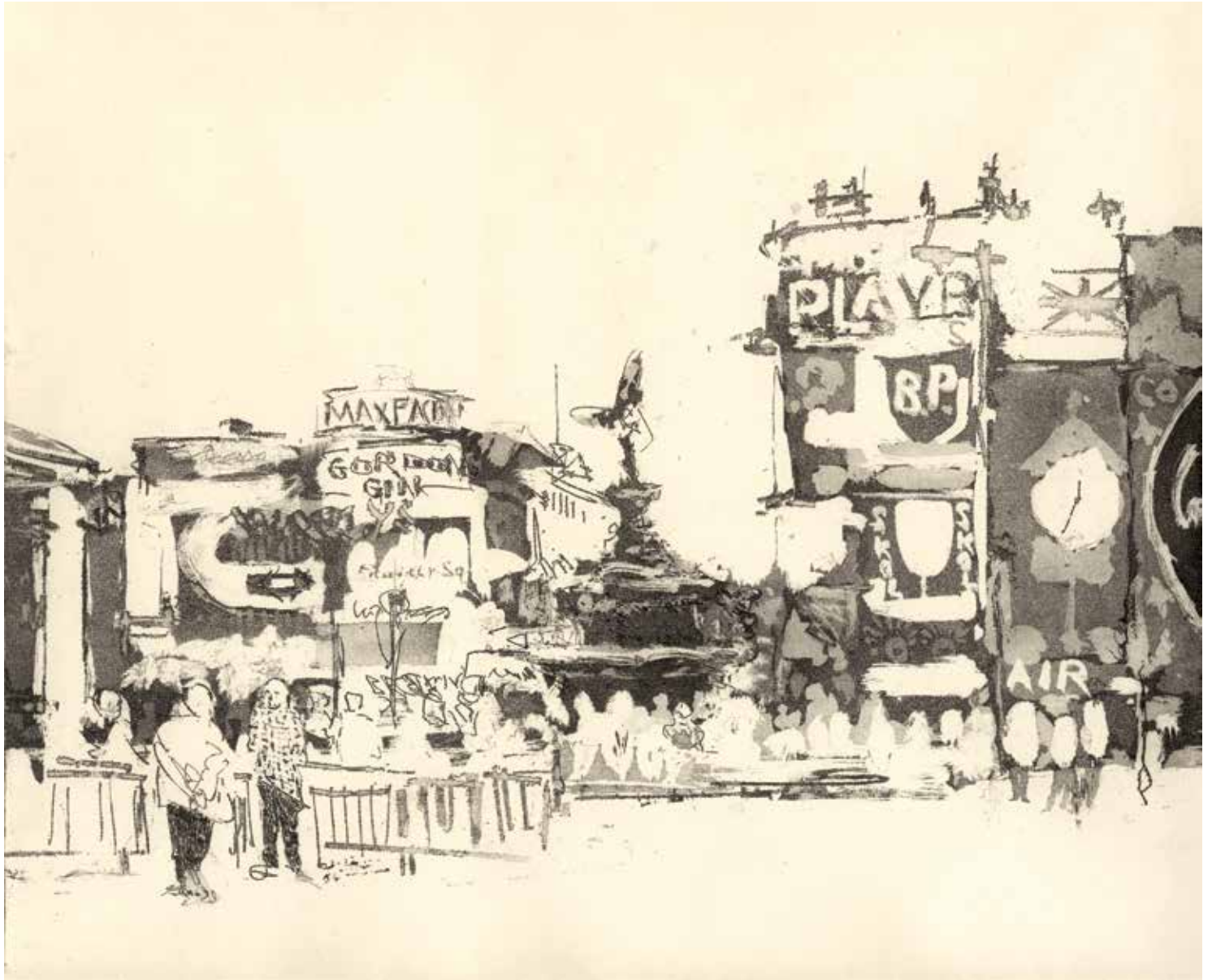
**Composition with Arabic Calligraphy**

Etching, Aquatint, Scraping

49.5x57cm

1996





**Piccadilly (London)**

Etching, Aquatint

24.5x30cm

1964



**Il Giardino Di Gesso (The Chalk Garden)**

Etching, Drypoint, Aquatint

39x49cm

1965





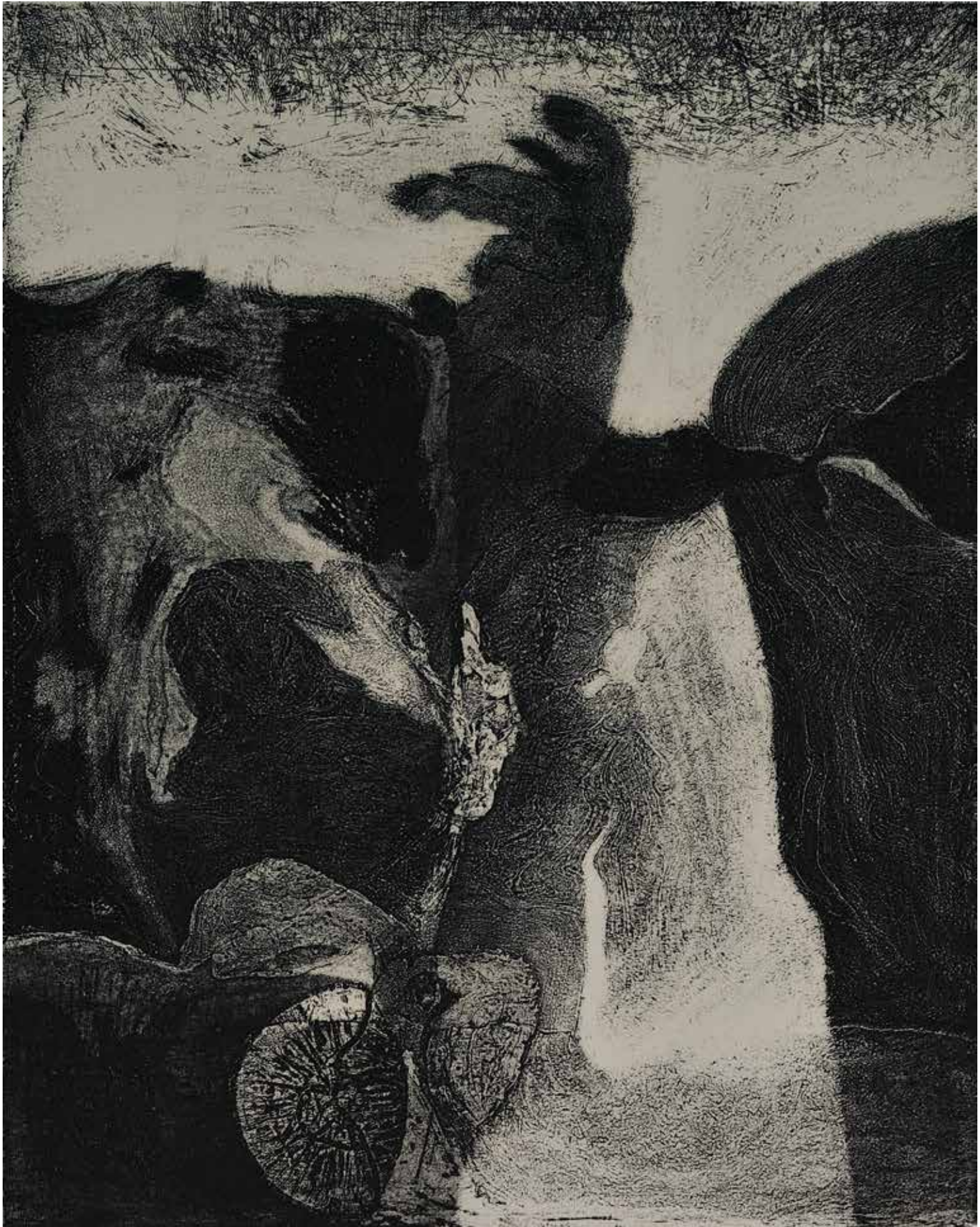
**The Worm**

Etching, Phototransfer, Aquatint

26x30cm

1968





**Solid Peasantry**

Etching, Reversed Etching, Scraping

50x39.5cm

1969





**The Old Tree**

Etching

44x54cm

1970



**The Embrace**

Marbling, Aquatint, Scraping

40x50cm

1969

**The Second Queen**

Marbling, Scraping

44.5x36.8cm

1974









**The Bird**  
Etching  
34x49.5cm  
1973





**The Wild Mushroom**

Etching, Aquatint

45.5x37.5cm

1970





**Sacrifice**

Etching, Aquatint, Scraping

50x40cm

1976





**Two Women**

Etching, Marbling, Scraping

34x41cm

1970





**Bomb Cantata**  
Etching, Surface Roll  
50x40 cm  
1970

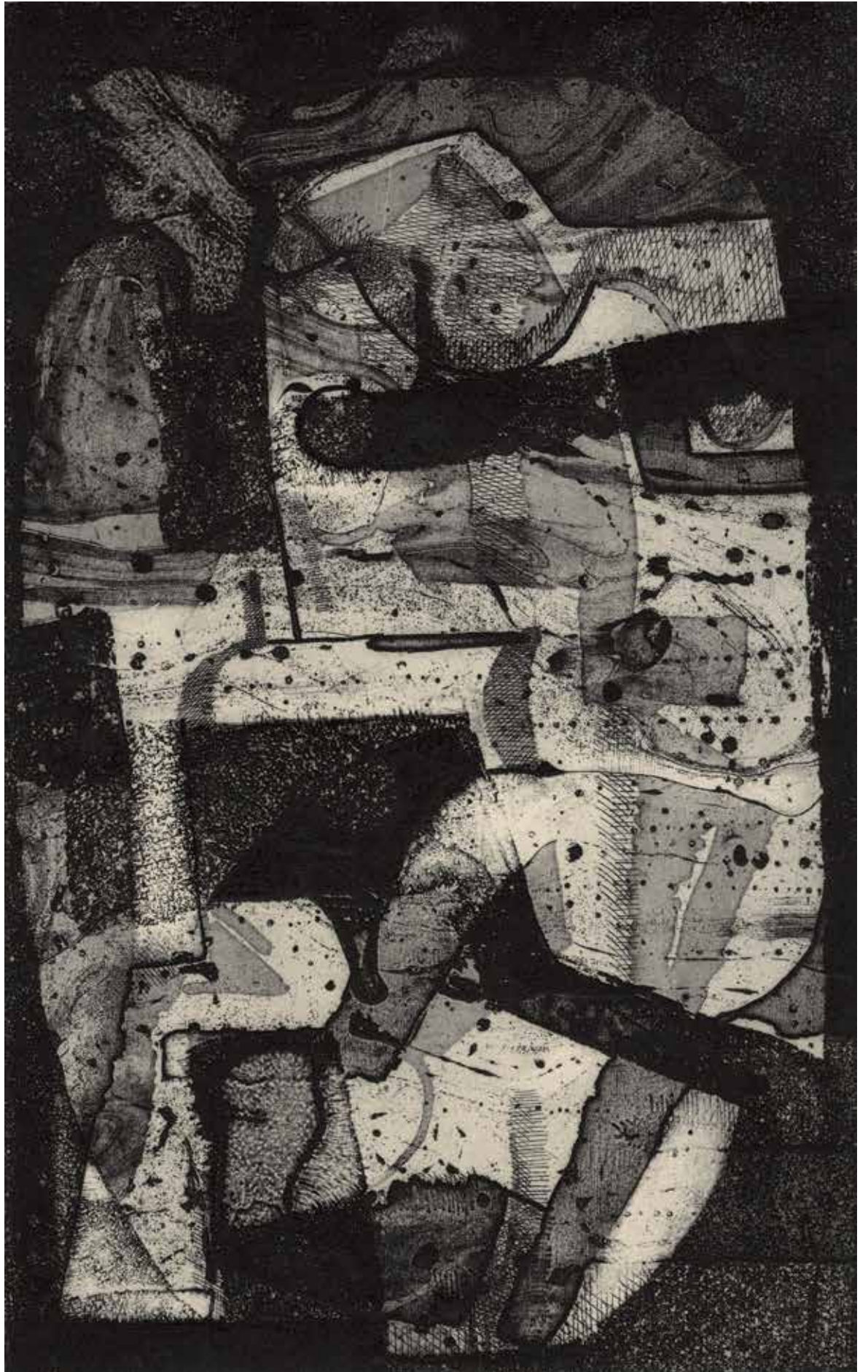
**Cubistic Head**

Etching, Openbite, Aquatint

39.5x25cm

1975









# PLACES



The entirety of Mohammad Omer Khalil's work, and not only the slow-paced etchings, is undeniably shaped by the oblique itinerary of his journeys, across Sudan, North Africa, Italy, the United States and other places. His work, in radical opposition to the neon environs of pop art and the minimal American art of his generation, insists on a different topography of color in order to assert his independence.

It is the work of an immigrant whose port of destination has remained largely undefined, from this imaginary geography, this interstice; he develops a language so intimate and subtle that at times a visual dictionary would come in handy when attempting to penetrate his image-repertory. This dictionary, nevertheless, does not exist. It would take an encyclopedia of art and history to accurately map out his peripatetic journey. His travels are not only geographic, but extend well into time and temporal-spatial relationships with objects, personas and memories. The 'places', for want of a better name, of Mohammad Omer Khalil, are always different, and new alternative readings become possible each time one revisits the works; accordingly, the mind of the artists is all too keen to re-make the curve of time and history, every new morning, on the etching place and the canvas. Some of his journeys are only brief lapses, calling our attention to raw unmediated facts, such as the depiction of the Iraqi occupation that destroyed the city of Baghdad. Some other journeys are permanent and timeless loci in the artist's memory: His native Khartoum or the north-eastern medieval port of Sawkin, both in Sudan; or the fortified walls of Assilah on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. Some of the journeys have been formative experiences, indefinite and yet on the very surface of his work; namely, his academic sojourn in the Italy of the 1960s, when his technique was still

eager to devour the works of the old masters and fed on their centuries-long expertise with the etching plate, while altogether observe the rise of Modernist painter and particularly Italian contribution to this tradition, particularly the Arte Povera and the "revolutionary" art that often is considered a lyrical response to Robert Rauschenberg, with whom Khalil has been mistakenly compared. Not all his places are painterly, though. There is also plenty of space for spiritual journeys and musical interludes, sometimes presented as body politics, taking on the shape of cities, such as Petra and New York. Mohammad Omer Khalil is an artist of the "elsewhere" par excellence; a place simultaneously real and historical, pictorial and mythical, marvelous and forgotten, gloomy but ripe with possibilities. The true location of both works and self, is the margin of a liminal border, undefined, imprecise, but always so recognizable. It could lie anywhere in the open sea, the ruins of a medieval city, the busy life of a metropolis, or simply a quiet space in the mind. He has dwelled in all these spaces, owned them, filled them with personal content, and sometimes even abandoned them. But unlike our traditional concept of places, often more associated with photographs than with something so abstract as geography and the ubiquitousness of metaphysical tropes, the artist's scenes are never at stand still. There are no backgrounds. The landscape is a trace, a line, a point, a blank dot in the plate. The material upon which the composition hangs is not a real or unreal place, but remains altogether true as a pure space, filled with the density of light weight, absorbing the pressure as it moves along a steep slope of suspended objects lined up. Mohammad Omer Khalil's places remain both ours and his, a motion picture of both imagination and memory. They are an open book; the book of art, the book of beauty, the book of life.



**Harlem III**

Etching, Softground, Aquatint, Scraping

60x90.5cm

1999





**Harlem V**

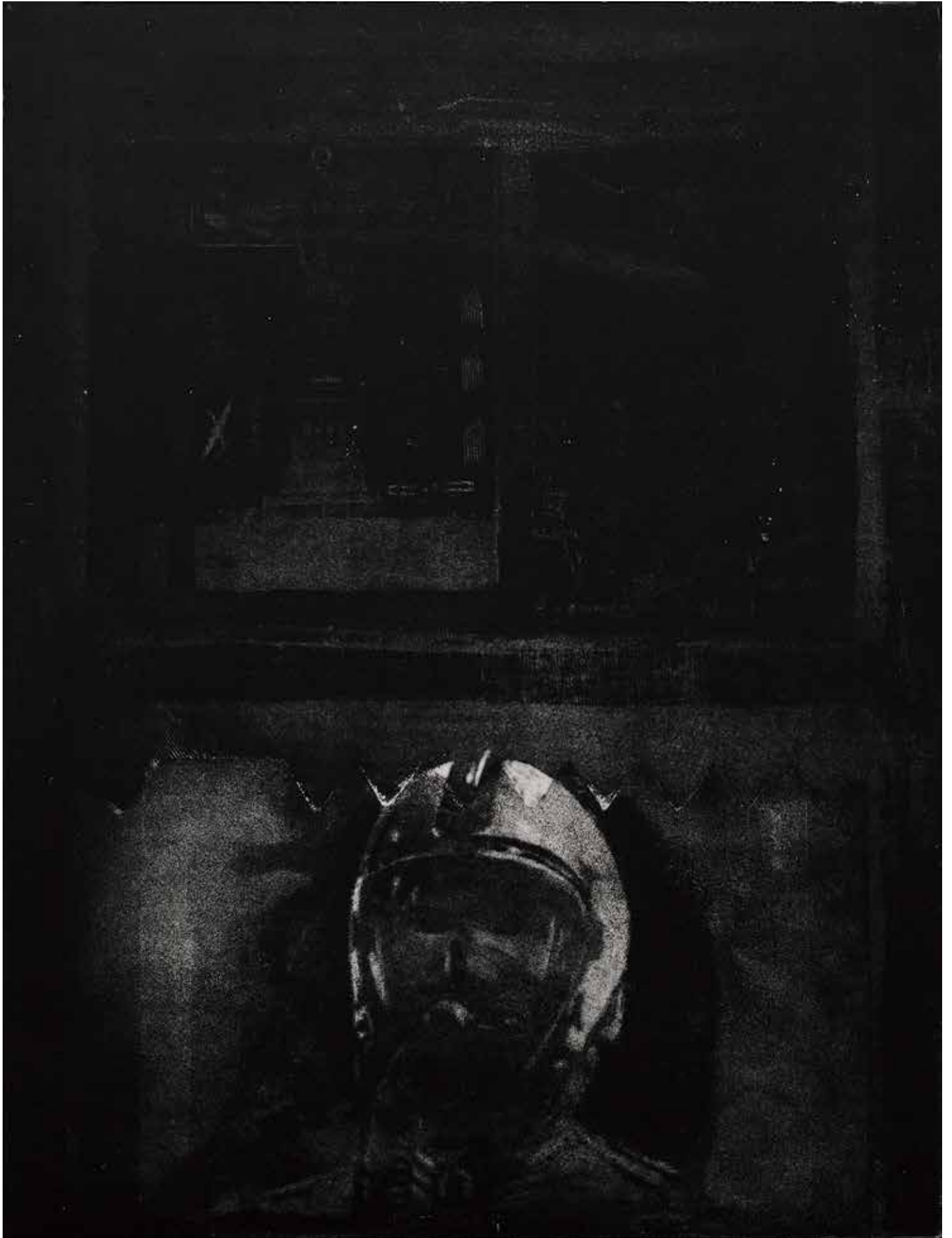
Etching, Softground, Aquatint, Scraping  
60x90.5cm  
1999

**Baghdad**

Aquatint, Purnishing

49.5x37.5cm

2001





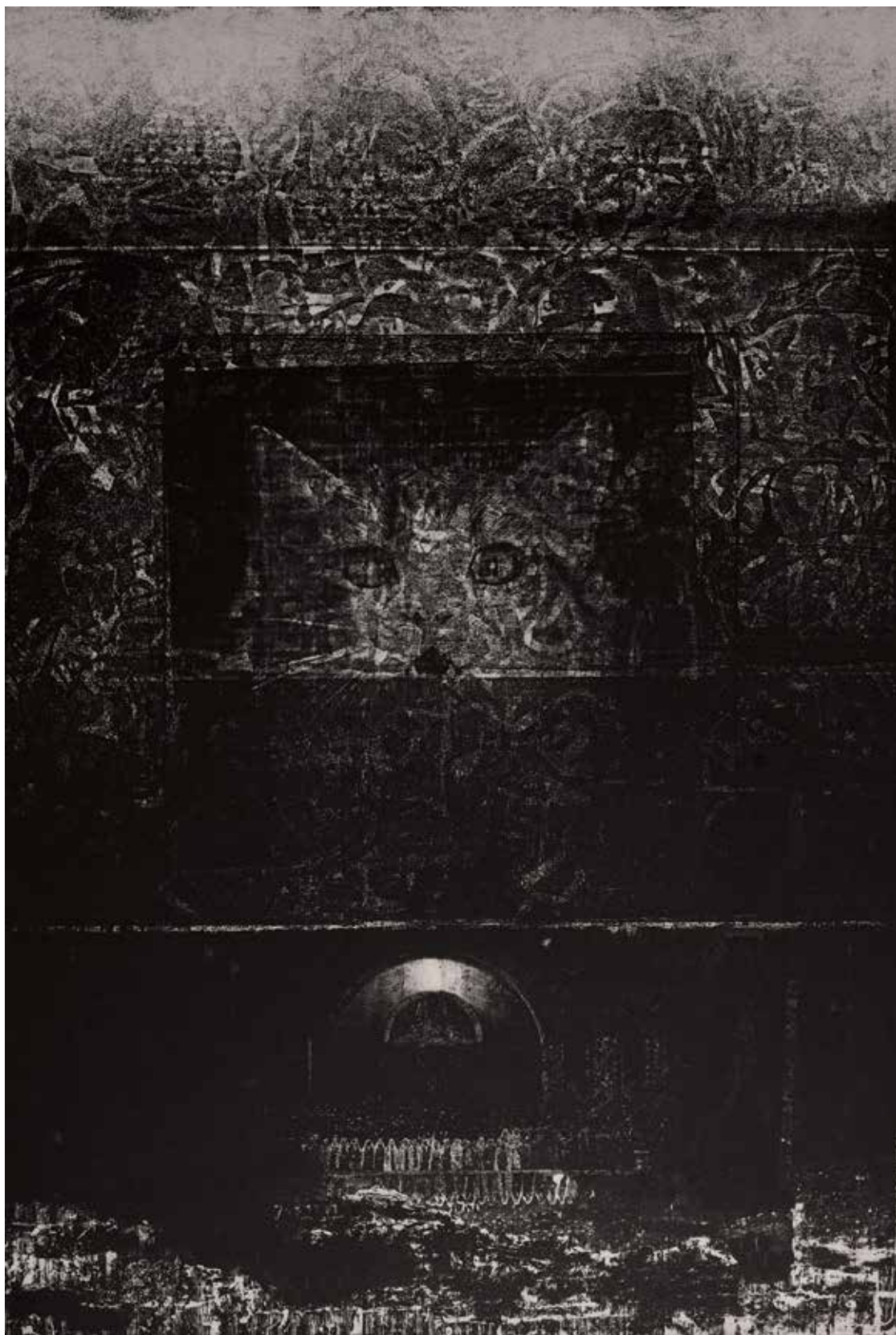


**Halfa I**

Etching, Softground, Phototransfer

60x90cm

1980



**Swakin**  
Etching, Aquatint  
60.5x90.5cm  
1980





**Petra VI**

Etching, Softground, Aquatint, Spitzbite

91x120.5cm

1995





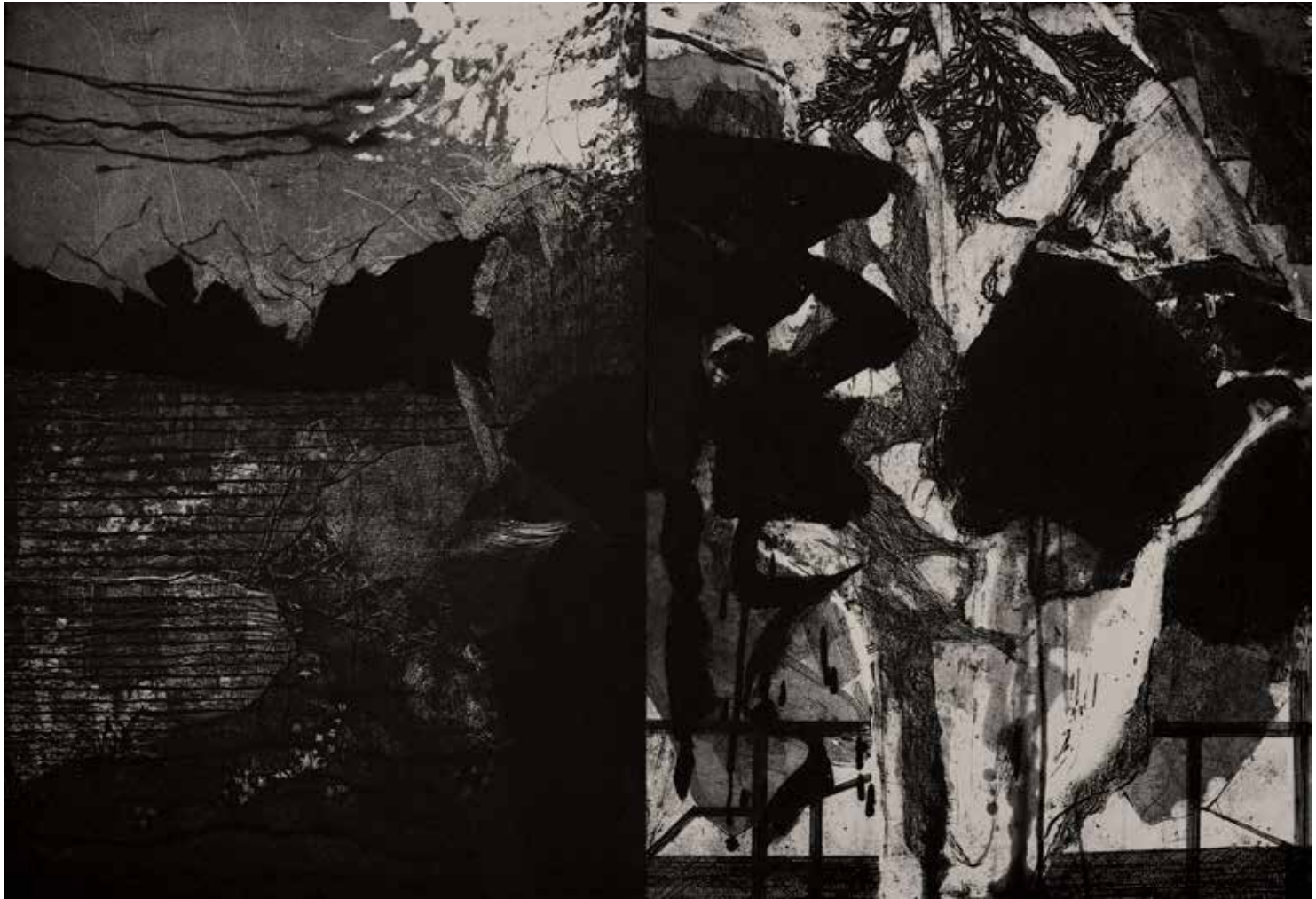
**Swakin I**

Etching, Softground, Aquatint, Transfer  
50x100cm  
1980



**Memory of Asilah**  
Etching, Softground, Phototransfer  
80x60cm  
1982



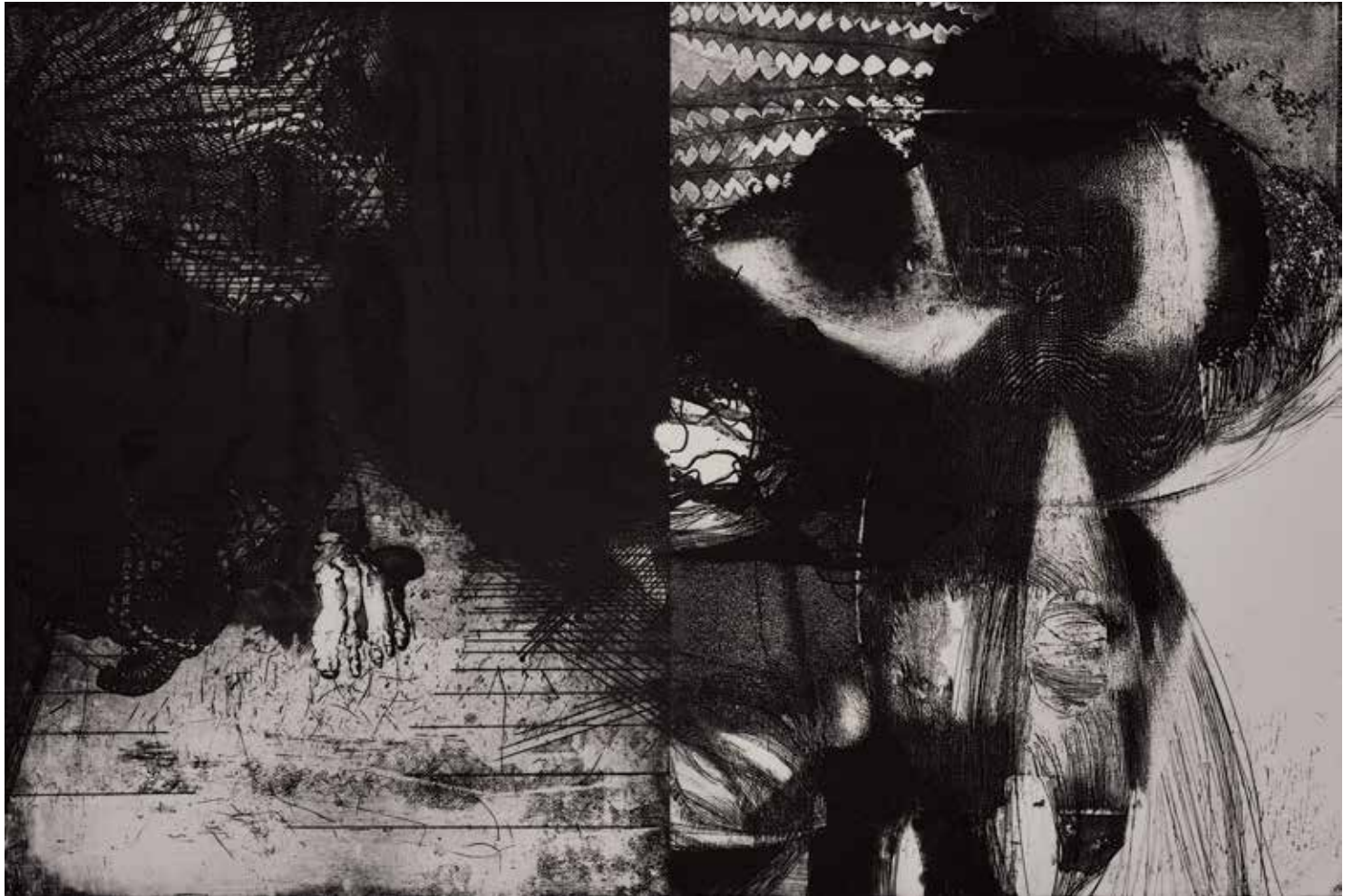


**Little Petra**

Etching, Softground, Aquatint, Sugarlift, Spitbite

60x88.5cm

1993



**Harlem IV**

Etching, Aquatint, Softground, Scraping  
60x90.5cm  
1999





**SOUNDS**

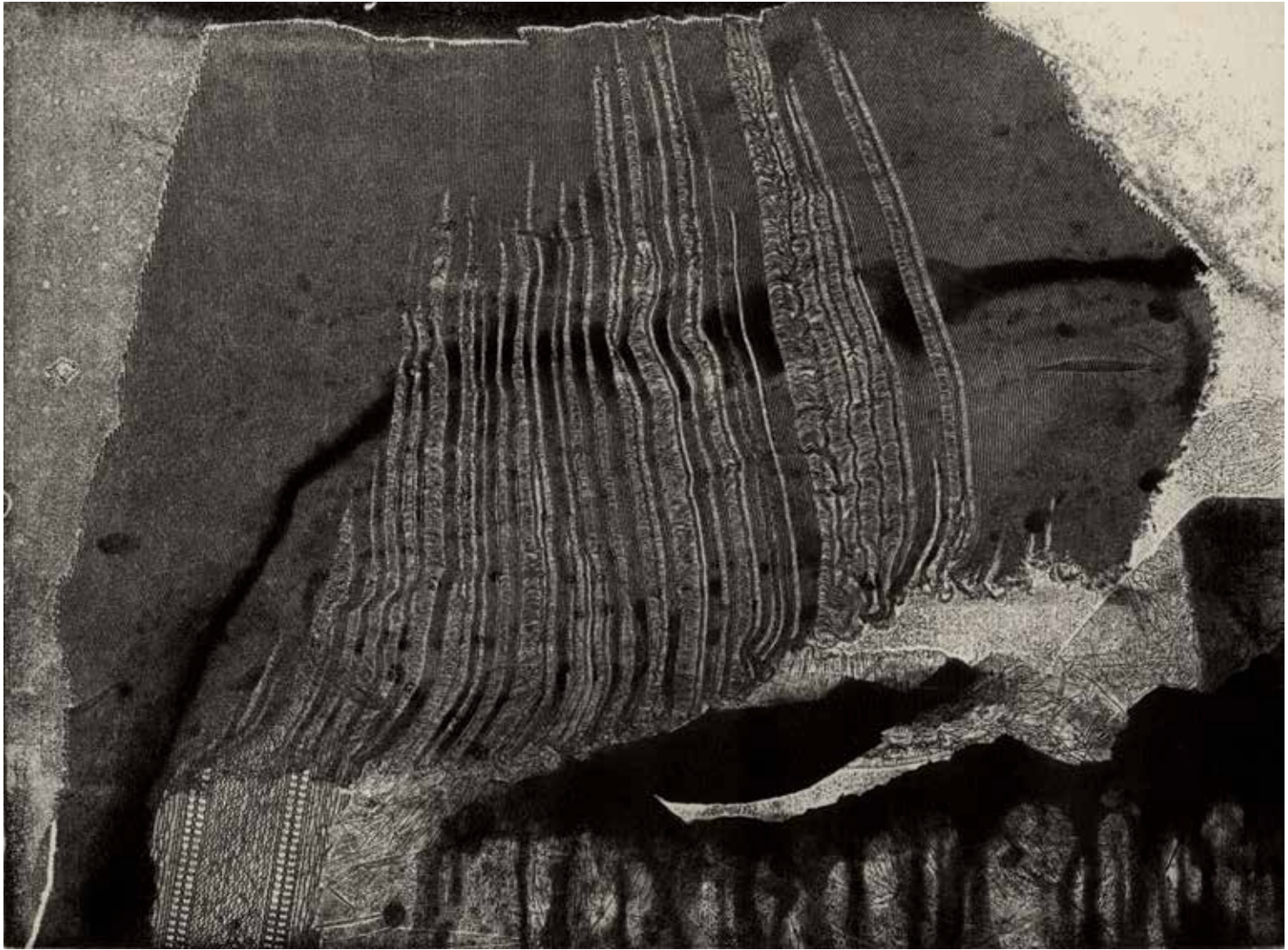


The artist whose entire vision is shaped by sounds – and his etching compositions bear the elliptical tension associated with music ensembles – to the extent that once he confessed, had he not been a visual artist, he would have become a musician. The act of becoming is central to the atmosphere constructed by Mohammad Omer Khalil's work.

He encounters the loftiest pleasure in listening to a musical piece, and then attempt to translate in codes just as complex, the emotional energy of composition into his works, as if he were occupied with delineating an abstract tonal pattern. There might be here extended time signatures, using only one or two strings of an instrument. The relationship to sound echoes throughout his etching work, creating a smooth but fragile balance out of otherwise unrelated elements that convene at the same place and become objective only for the duration of his vision's fleeting moment; only to later disappear into pure intuition, on the viewer's end. Yet, certain themes akin to music, traditional and contemporary, Arabic and Western, stand highlighted in the finished etchings. Mohammad Omer Khalil enlarges his own range of expression – and modes of consciousness – when he brings together the correct geometric forms, at times patterns but sometimes mere sculpted lines, in order to depict Koranic readings or a scene of suffering from Dante's Inferno. The cleverly stringed patterns extend on to cover other surfaces; Assilah, Sudan, New York. The complement the abstract and figurative image-repertory associated with those geographies, adding layers of tale and sound, as it were. His personal tribute to the sung poetry of Bob Dylan, finished already in the 1980s, opens up a new chapter in his work, where color begins to penetrate his universe of darkness. This in itself is significant for the text-installation context of the works, in which the poetry can now be read, as if in a crescendo in which color is the minimal unit and as black begins

to appear, the senses travel inwards in a sequence of broken parables – as in the compositional units of music – that open up additional visual and tactile fields, not available during vigil hours. But nothing heretofore is apparent yet, the images are still latent; in spite of the promise, nothing has been delivered. Rather than a parallel universe of color unfurling as in waterfall or a gigantic ball of yarn, his iconographic interpretations of Bob Dylan (or interpellations at) border on pop and conceptual art, instead of Impressionist and pointillist wholeness. New elements have appeared here for the first time: Photographic, Xeroxed, and fragmentary. The depictions of Dante's Inferno, on the other hand, reveal themselves more narrative than the work itself, opening a narrow painterly space that resembles miniatures and icons. The resemblance isn't only technical. The theology of the icon is always a pointer composite in the opposition direction of classical paintings: Spaces are always in deep relief, the viewing area is deliberately bifurcated and the icon is only a gate; everything is yet to be found, to be had, to be wanted. The ambiguity is calculated during the creative process, but the results are left alone to speak for themselves; the dripping, the duplicating, the drying. Images that change overtime as often as the perception thereof does. The texture contains all the information and almost invites the hand to enter the work in order to understand the pulsation at work inside; it is perhaps true that the attractive of the work is that its soul remains concealed, soundless, almost imperceptible and doubtless mysterious. How often have we heard something such as this? Something we can see, to hear what you can only see. Perhaps he is informed by something more than the words themselves. Here he has already abandoned the landscape and turn himself in to the ecstasy of the live performance, of lived time, of the words torn off the chest, of the immaterial. The artist has given in to a miracle.





**Asilah Connection**

Etching, Softground, Aquatint, Spitbite

24.5x33cm

1992



**Baby Blue**

Etching, Softground, Chine-collé, Spitbite, Aquatint

91x120.5cm

1986





**Dirge**

Etching, Sugarlift, Spitbiting, Aquatint

100x75.5cm

1986





**Idiot Wind**

Etching, Softground, Sugarlift

120x90.5cm

1986



**Echo III (Tattle)**

Etching, Softground, Phototransfer

60x90cm

1986





**Tombstone Blues**

Etching, Softground, Aquatint, Spitzbite

91x121cm

1986



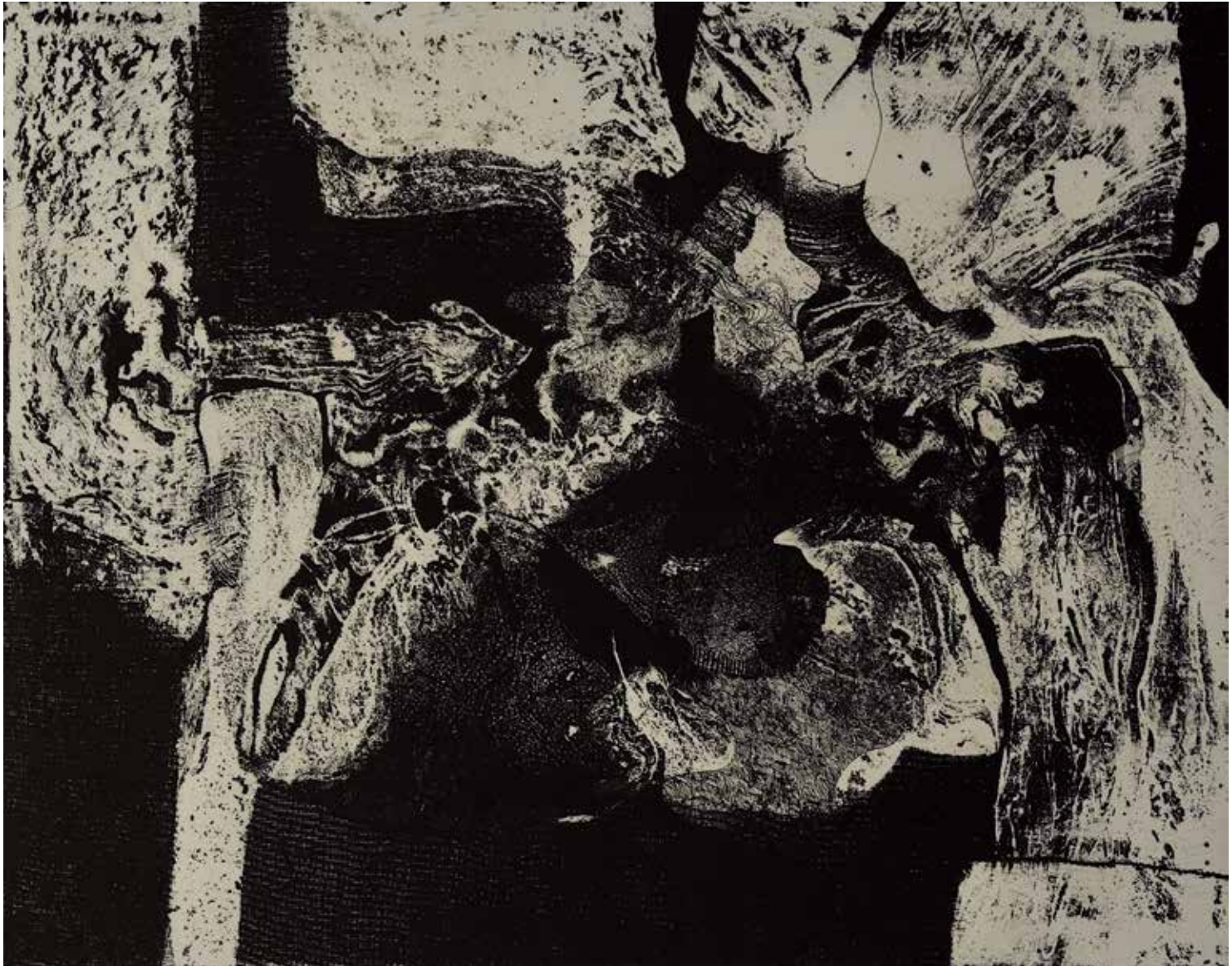
**Petra VII**

Etching, Softground, Aquatint, Spitbite, Sanding

90.5x120cm

1994





**El Condor Passa**  
Etching, Softground  
39x49.5cm  
1970





**Echo II**

Etching, Softground, Aquatint, Transfer

50x100cm

1976

**The Jack of Hearts (Bob Dylan Series)**

Etching, Sugarlift, Aquatint, Spitbite

101x 75cm

1986







**Sudanese Dance**

Etching, Aquatint

20x 24.5cm

1970





**They Were Dancing Yesterday**  
Etching, Softground, Scraping  
45x52cm  
1974



**Petra VIII**

Softground, Aquatint, Spitbite, Drypoint

101x228cm

1997







# IMPRESSIONS





What is an impression in general? An effect, feeling, or image retained as a consequence of experience. It also refers to a vague notion, remembrance, or belief. How does an image become an object of both truth and hope? If it is images, pictorial objects after all, what we are dealing with, why not call it simply a vision? It would seem that the visual field has been declared unsuitable for the largesse of human and sensorial expression the artist wants to deploy.

Once the resources of the eye have been depleted, there is a possibility for the human person to continue becoming, to break from the natural limits of mere being and then exist in a more colorful version of reality, which paradoxically is colorless; the hues are all emotional. The artist is here willing to travel very far, to take many risks, to toy with the possibility of losing the focus of the eye altogether, at the expense of more truth, veracity and intensity. The present becomes intense. By a classical definition, borrowed from art history, an impressionist image is characterized by a deliberate concentration of the immediate impression of the eye by the use of unmixed primary colors to simulate the effect of actual reflected light. Seen that way, an Impression is also a theory of pure color. Nothing could be further removed from the practice of Mohammad Omer Khalil, whose entire etching work is based on the obscuring of light, the deliberate avoidance of radiance, the centrifugal flight from primary colors. His work might be better termed counter-Impressionist, driven by the effect opposite to impression. Nevertheless, impression or Impressionist, in literature, a genre very close to the format and conceptual world of Khalil, refers to a style characterized by the use of details and mental associations to evoke subjective and sensory impressions rather than the re-creation of an objective reality. It could be said that the Sudanese artist, now at the height of his creative powers, in his most mature and developed works – not necessarily

speaking here in terms of chronology – is a literary impressionist, whose task is never to represent or abstract – abstraction is still a very rigid and formal procedure – but instead, he is set out to test and then re-arrange, the entire structure of perception. It is through the body and not through the intellect as the old philosophers thought, that we have a world, in a two-fold sense: Our body is the medium to experience the world and the experience of the world itself. Once thought of as a prison, and more recently as a tool, the body is no longer a dungeon but the central apparatus of consciousness, one from which we can never depart. The artist is keenly aware of this and without further ado, he is bypassing the blind spot – paradoxically of color – of Western art history and offering a place that although seldom comprehensible is warm and intimate, and defies the articulate dictates of Minimalism and the abstract. His places are familiar, his journeys well known to us, his impressions intangible almost, but overarching in their presence. In many respects, these works are a return to tradition on the part of the artist, but they're not traditional in any sense; rather, they are traditional only in appearance but the essence then turns against you and swallows you. The clarity of the mental picture is pristine, in spite of the blackness, in spite of the latency. The message is never delivered early; in fact it seems to never arrive. But perhaps that's where the real traces of art are; they come from a primal world, no longer available to us. The impression is not a place but a cartography of life and the world, a mapping of subjectivity under the most universal categories, and lastly, also a reminder of the instability of knowledge. In these works, Mohammad Omer Khalil sets free the scandalous and revolutionary force of the past, embedded technically and conceptually, reaching a place that overturns the contemporary on its head, and screams in the face of the minimal and clear, translucent color: Learn to look at, you still haven't seen anything.



**Collage II**

Etching, Transfer, Deepbite

50x50cm

1976





**Cynic**  
Etching, Softground, Aquatint  
45x34cm  
1973





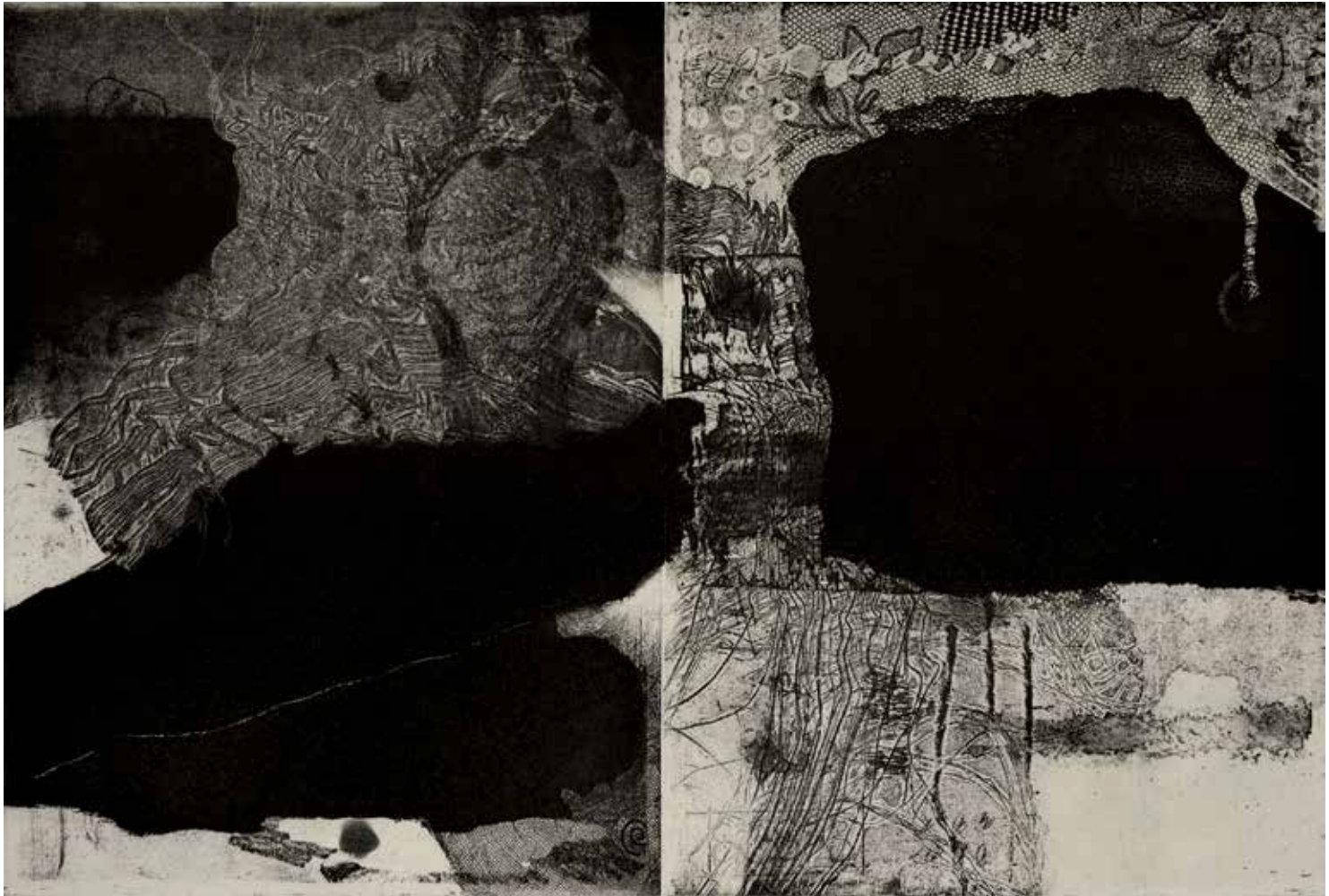
**Collage with Thread**

Etching, Aquatint, Transfer

75x57cm

1969



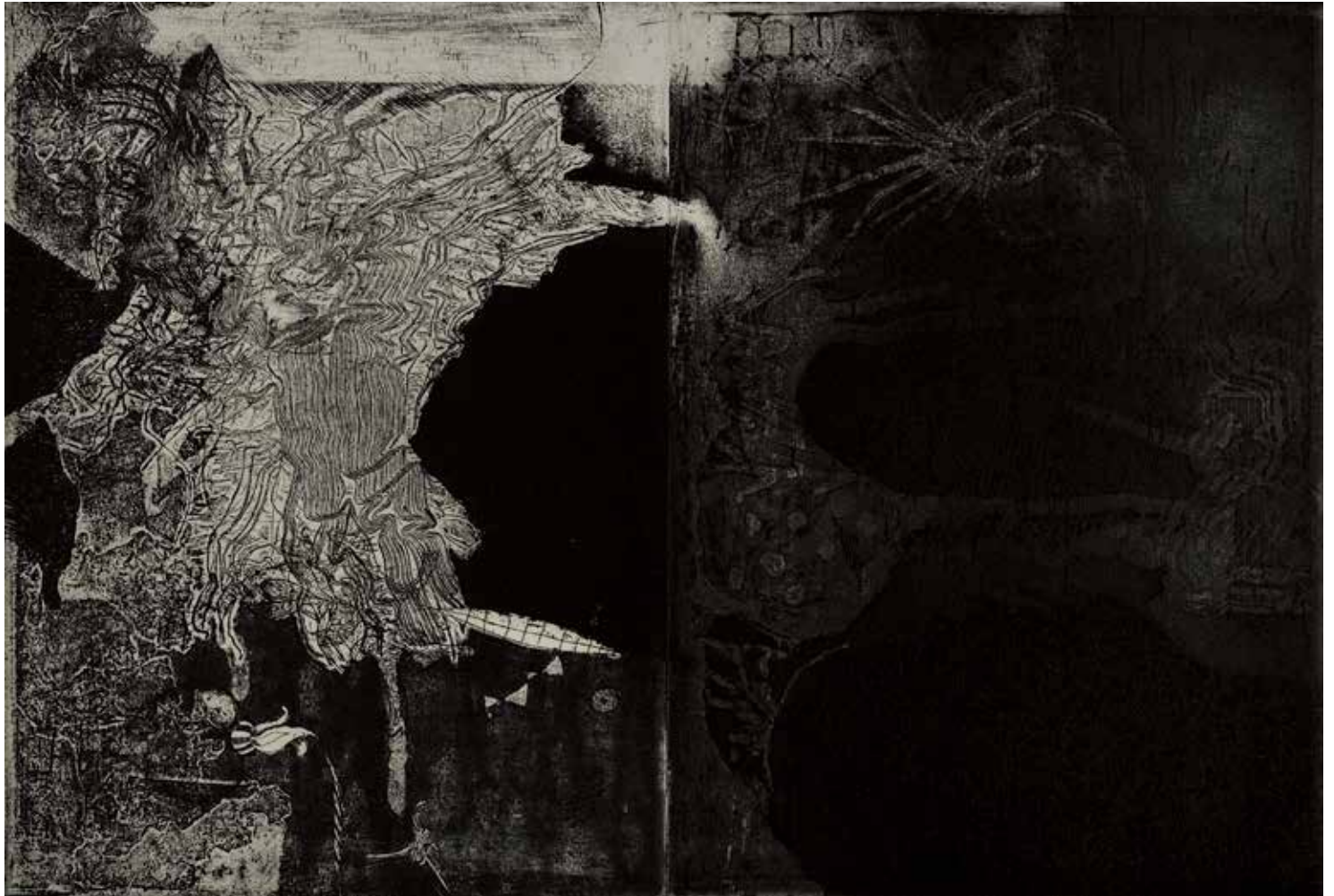


**Medea**

Etching, Softground, Aquatint, Electroetching

30x 44.5cm

2001



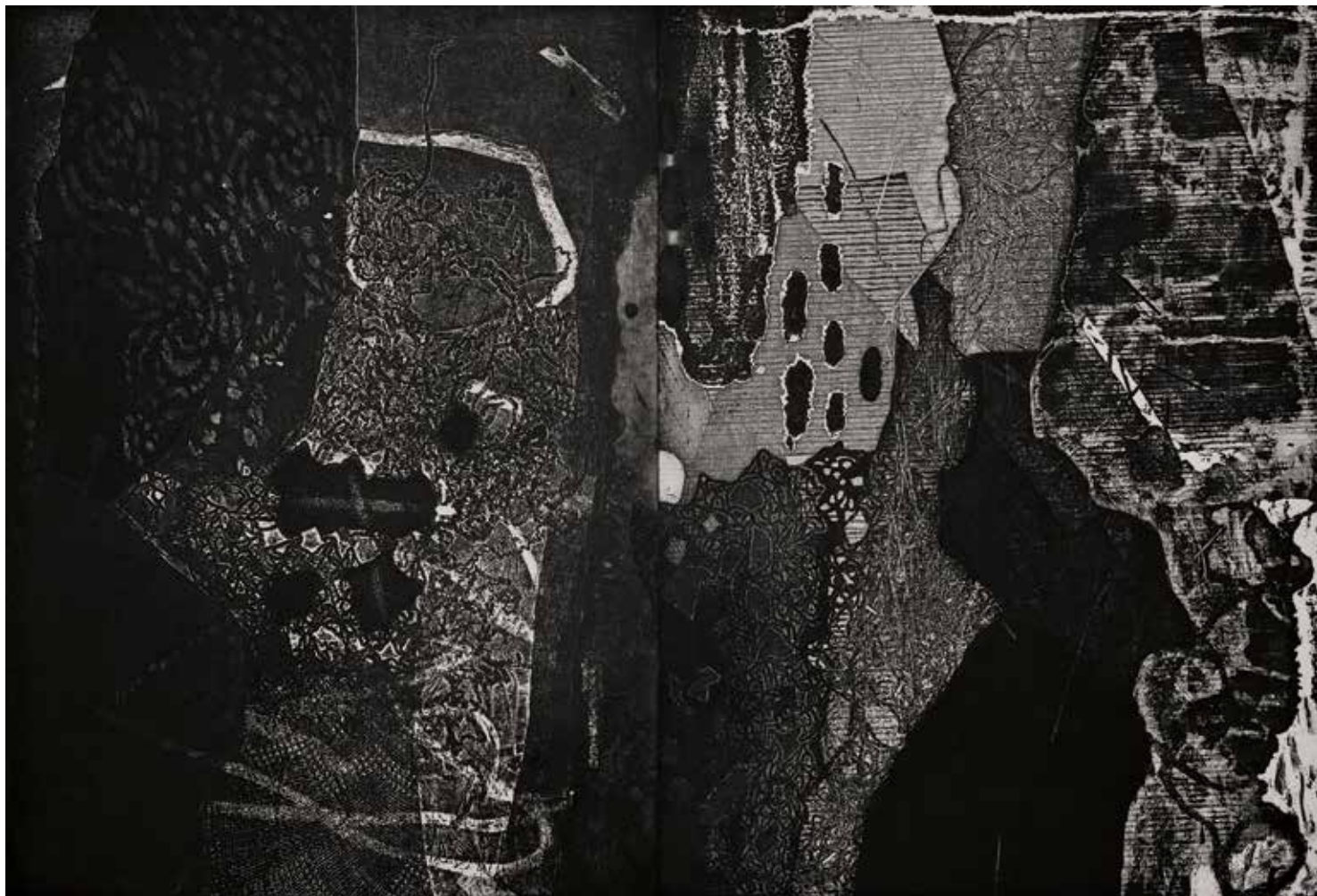
**Odysseus and the Sirens**

Etching, Softground, Aquatint, Electroetching

30x44.5cm

2001





**Petra X**  
Electroetching  
60.5x89cm  
1999





**Petra I**

Etching, Softground with Chine-collé

90.5x121cm

1992

**The Three Faces of The Assassin**

Etching, Softground, Aquatint

70x50cm

1979









**Petra IX**

Softground, Aquatint, Spitbite, Drypoint

101x226cm

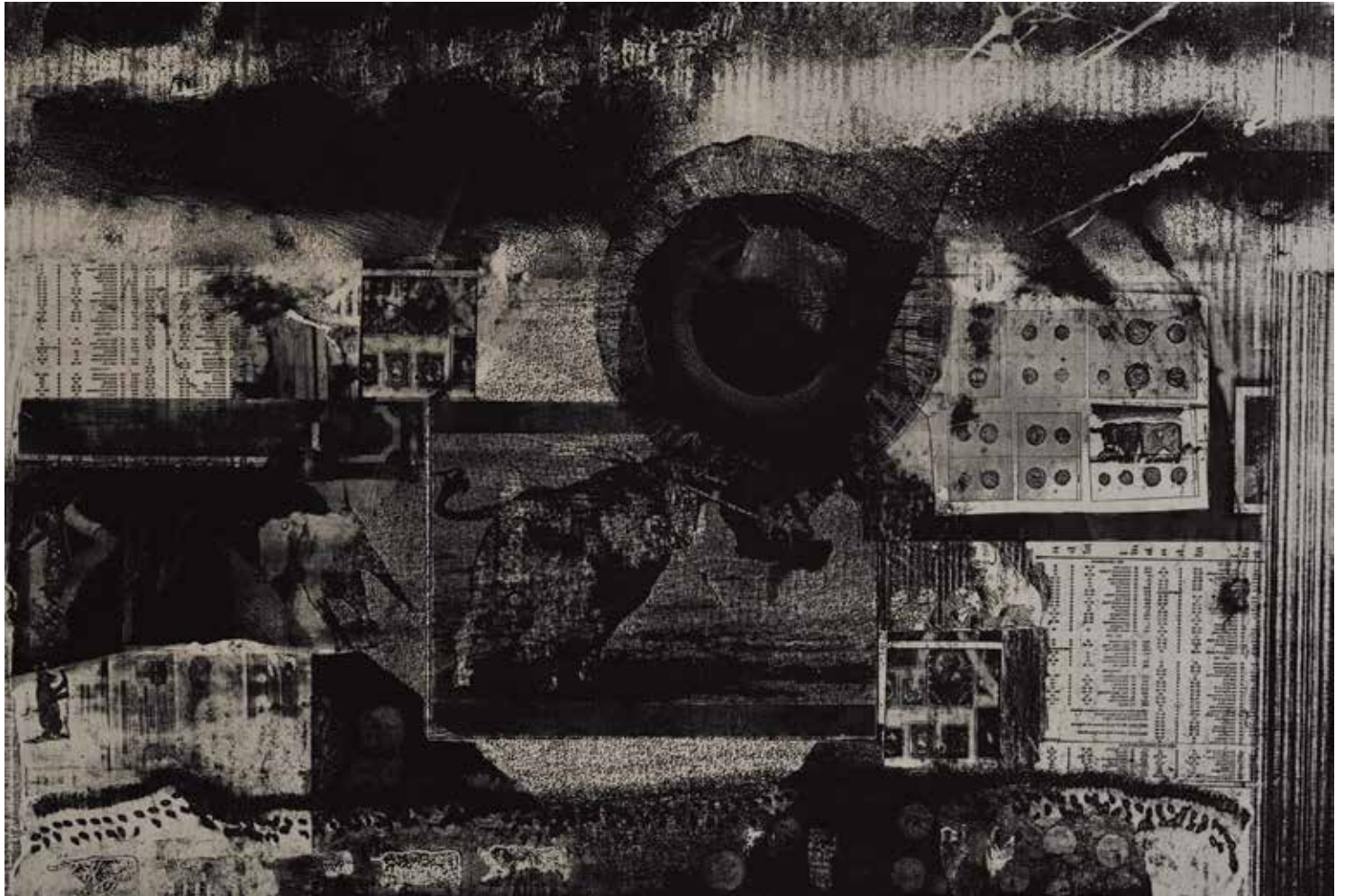
1997





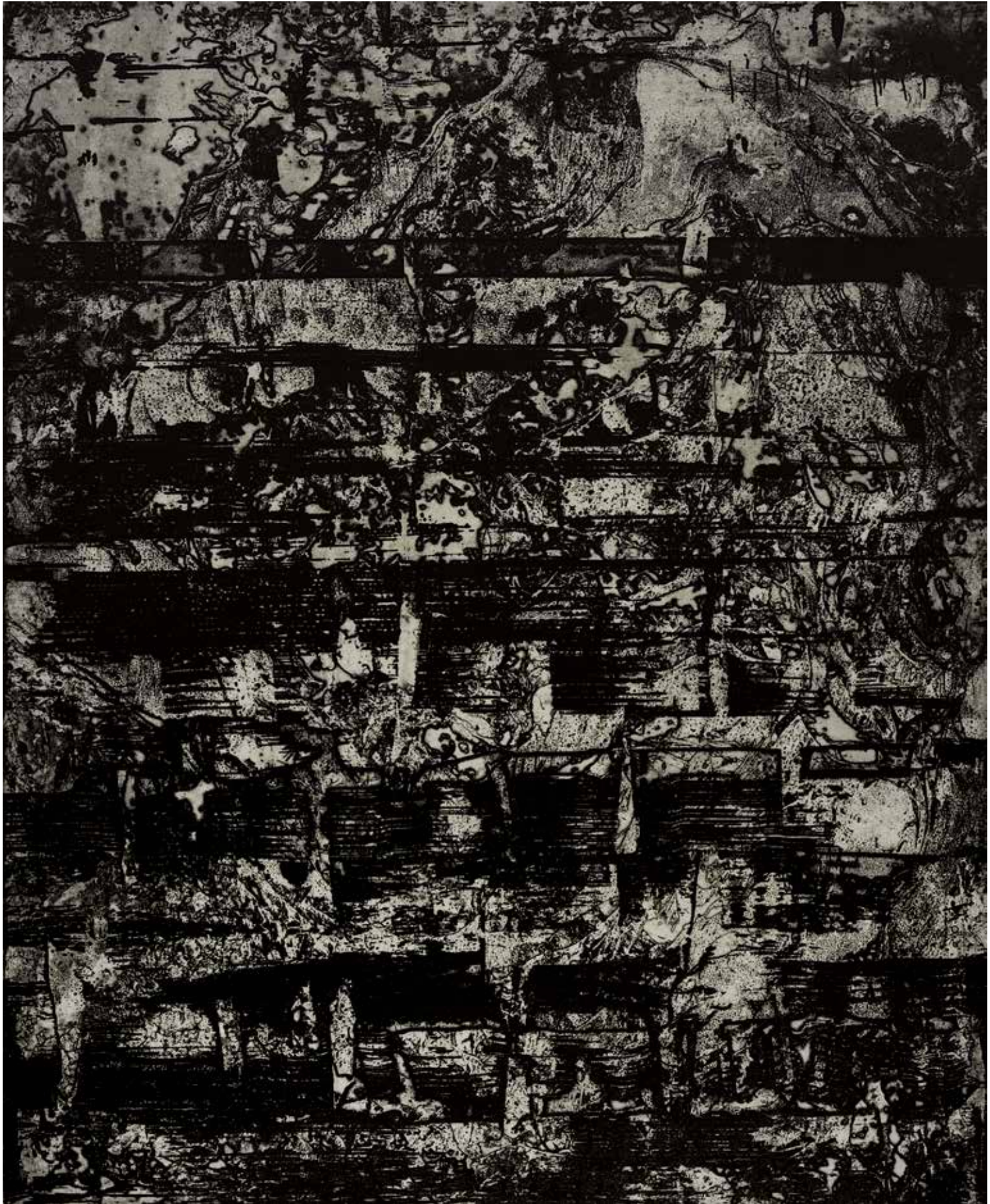
**The Subject was Roses**  
Etching, Softground, Aquatint  
39x48.5cm  
1969





**The Bull & the Bear (Wall St.)**  
Etching, Softground, Phototransfer  
60x90cm  
1980





**Top of the Mountain**  
Etching, Deep Biting  
55x45cm  
1970





**The Wind Builder**

Etching, Sugarlift, Aquatint, Softground, Spitbite

64x99cm

1993



**Collage III**  
Etching, Aquatint  
30x55cm  
1976

**Wild Woman with a Hat**

Etching

35x22.5cm

1969







# CURATORIAL CONCEPT





A careful inspection of Mohammad Omer Khalil's work reveals that in spite of the crucial associations with art history and the events of the 20th and 21st century, what we are dealing with here is not a literalist work, but that of someone who works in composite units. There're no fragments or snapshots in the artist's work; his images build up as total realities.

What we see in his paintings as much as in his etching work is that he's not concerned with the compositional elements of a collage at all, for his ambition is not even visual at all. The syntactic operation at stake here is not a re-arrangement of the visual order but of the entire sensorial order. With this underlying principle in mind, we set out to investigate the work of Mohammad Omer Khalil by means of the concept of latency introduced by Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige in a text from 2012: "Latency is the state of what exists in a non-apparent manner, but which can manifest itself at any given moment. It is the time elapsed between the stimuli and the corresponding response. The latent image is the invisible, yet-to-be-developed image on an impressed surface. The idea is that of the 'dormant' – slumber, slumbering – like something asleep, which might awake at any moment. Latency has connotations with essence, but also with the idea of the represses, the hidden, the un-testable, of an invisible element. It is an obscure form, troubling because it cannot be delineated; it is not a defined territory, but a diffused state, uncontrollable, underground, as if lurking, as if all could resurface anew." How does this concept relate to Mohammad Omer Khalil's etching work? Hadjithomas and Joreige insist that an overexposed photograph contains already everything we have to see, the grammar of what could have been and the order of possibilities; in short, all the traces of art. If we understand the blackness of the etching plate in a manner similar

to the photographic process of creating an image ruin through deliberate overexposure – we are thinking here of Man Ray of course – then we also understand the etching work of Mohammad Omer Khalil to behave in cinematic manner, or rather, the way we experience video-art in a gallery: A transition between planes that are no longer available to the eye in wholeness and therefore contain only muted meanings that can awake at anytime, once the eye is no longer the defining element. Thus, inspired by the other arts such as music, film and photography that clearly informed the artist's practice, we have made a curatorial selection of pieces in accordance to their effect on the viewer rather than affect from the artist. The sections are meant to build up a crescendo of meaning in which continuities are progressively broken and aiming to reach a point in which a theory of his practice isn't only unnecessary but burdensome: It should suffice to say that the artist is dissecting reality piecemeal and fragmenting it not in order to turn to abstract or surrealistic, but to call on us to stop seeing through the eyes and turn to other senses as well, altering the syntactic order of the imagination. His work becomes latent because the meanings associated with the formal content of the etchings is not obvious or apparent, but unfurls out of an unconscious place through the entirety of his production as if he himself were constantly changing his mind about the direction, in the same manner a musical composition arises. By remaining latent, Mohammad Omer Khalil's work remains simultaneously new and old. What we wanted to bring together in this selection wasn't a comprehensive retrospective or study, but simply to offer a glimpse into a lesser known aspect of the artist's work without reducing it to a frame, but simply letting things speak for themselves.

## EDUCATION

### 1956-1959

Diploma in Painting, School of Fine and Applied Art, Khartoum

### 1963-1966

Diploma in Fresco Painting and Mosaics, Academy of Fine Arts, (Ministry of Education of Sudan Fine Arts Scholarship), Florence

### 1966

Diploma in Mosaics, Academy of Fine Arts, Ravenna

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1979** Galerie Basamat, Casablanca  
Galerie Structure B.S., Rabat  
Galerie Layla Farawi, Casablanca
- 1981** New School University, New York  
Cinque Gallery, New York
- 1984** Limited Art Editions, New York
- 1986** Alif Gallery, Washington, DC
- 1987** Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York  
Marlene Eleini Gallery, London
- 1992** Alif Gallery, Washington, DC  
Galerie Teinturerie, Paris  
Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris  
Al-Wasiti Gallery, Amman
- 1994** Mohammad Omer Khalil, Etchings; Amir I.M. Nour, Sculpture, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
- 2001** Hunterdon Museum of Art, Clinton, New Jersey
- 2002** Rochan Fine Arts, Jeddah  
Skoto Gallery, New York
- 2004** Hassan II Centre for International Encounters, Asilah  
Galerie Hakim, Asilah
- 2008** Recent Works, Albareh Art Gallery, Bahrain  
Recent Works, Skoto Gallery, New York
- 2010** Paulo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, Albareh Art Gallery, Bahrain
- 2011** Art Sudan (with Ibrahim Salahi), Meem Gallery, Dubai

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1984** El Paso Museum of Art, Texas  
Tacoma Art Museum, Washington  
Seventh Norwegian Print Biennial, Fredrickstad  
African-American Museum of Life and Culture, Dallas, Texas
- 1985** International Triennial of Original Graphic Prints, Grenchen  
Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio  
Columbia Museum of Art, South Carolina
- 1986** Alif Gallery, Washington, DC  
Baghdad International Festival, Baghdad
- 1987** June Kelly Gallery, New York
- 1988** Al-Wasiti Gallery, Amman  
Sudan Art Aid, Sudan Cultural Center, London
- 1989** Barbican Centre, London  
Centre Cultural Ranco, Oslo
- 1990** International Monetary Fund Centre, Washington, DC
- 1991** Osaka Triennial Fifth International Biennial Print Exhibition, Taipei  
University of Hawaii, Hilo
- 1992** Alif Gallery, Washington, DC
- 1993** Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York
- 2002** Perspective on Contemporary Arab Art: The Kinda Foundation Collection, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris
- 2003** Broken Letter: Contemporary Art from Arab Countries, Kunsthalle Darmstadt and Kinda Foundation, Darmstadt
- 2006** Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East, British Museum, London
- 2007** Contemporary Print, Albareh Art Gallery, Bahrain  
Art Inspired by Poetry, Darat Al Funun, Amman
- 2008** Tawasel/Continuity: Contemporary Artists from Sudan, Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (VCUQ), Doha  
Word into Art: Artists from the Modern Middle East, British Museum, Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC)
- 2009** Faces and Letters, VCUQ, Doha
- 2010** Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha



## SELECTED AWARDS & GRANTS

- 1978** Louise Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant, New York  
**1979** Society of American Graphic Artists, New York: Purchase Award  
**1980** Third World International Exhibition, London, Third Prize  
**1987** Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York: Counsel of the Arts Grant  
**1991** Osaka Triennial: Bronze Medal  
**1993** International Biennial of Cairo: First Prize  
**1997** New School University, New York: Teaching Excellence Award  
**2001** National Academy of Design, New York: First Prize in Printmaking  
**2003** National Academy of Design, New York: First Prize in Printmaking

## SELECTED PUBLIC ACQUISITIONS

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris  
Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York  
Brooklyn Museum, New York  
City of New York Museum  
Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble  
Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris  
Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman  
Library of Congress, Washington, DC  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
Museum of History, Taipei  
Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad  
Museum of Modern Art, Cairo  
Museum of Modern Art, Osaka  
National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC  
The British Museum, London  
Mathaf Museum, Qatar

## SELECTED CORPORATE ACQUISITIONS

American Express Financial Advisors, Inc., New York  
Con Edison, New York  
The McArthur Foundation, Chicago, Illinois  
Skadden, Arps, Meagher and Flom, New York

## EMPLOYMENT

### 1959-1963

Head of Painting, School of Fine and Applied Art, Khartoum

### 1970-1985

Adjunct Professor of Printmaking, Pratt Institute, New York

### 1971-2009

Adjunct Professor of Printmaking, New School University, New York

### 1978-2005

Head of Studios, International Cultural Moussem, Summer Symposia and Workshops, Asilah

### 1991

Head of Studios, International Summer Symposia and Workshops, Asilah

### 1981-2013

Substitute Teacher, Printmaking, New York University  
Adjunct Professor of Printmaking, Parsons School of Design, New York

### 2000-2002

Adjunct Professor of Printmaking, Columbia University, New York

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### **Individuals**

Dr. Khalid Kawan

Shaikha Marwa Bint Rashid Al Khalifa

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للجمال والفن والحضارة. وهو السواد الذي له ألق خاص في سجل الرموز والهيات في الولايات المتحدة الأميركية.

أما محفوراته كمن يدعونا كي نرى في الليل. ففي الظلمة ما يمكن رؤيته، إلا أننا لا نراه معتادين على الأجسام المتاحة تحت الضوء الغاضح: "أرى في اللون الأسود درجات ومقامات لونية شديدة التعقيد والغنى، أكثر مما هي عليه في ألوان أخرى، صارخة".

يُقلب الأسود، ويستخرج منه الضوء. الضوء الخافت: كمن يرى في نفق، أو في أدغال ليلية.

أقول له: "كما لو أنك موسيقي تؤدي بوترين أنغاماً متعددة ومتنوعة للغاية؟".

يجيبني: "سألني أحدهم ذات مرة: "ماذا كنت لتفعل لو لم تكن حفاراً؟"، فأجبت: "كنت أصبحت موسيقياً. الموسيقى تعبير مدهش. لا نشعر بالغبطة الفائقة، كما هو عليه الحال حين الاستماع إلى قطعة موسيقية. إلا أنني أسعى، في عملي، إلى توليد الطاقة الانفعالية، بل إلى تفجيرها".

عملٌ خليل كتوم بعض الشيء. خافت أحياناً من دون مظهر لامع ومدهش. أشبه بغمزة عين. العمل لا يقدم نفسه مباشرة، علينا أن نجد مسرباً إليه. هناك سرية لا نقوى على رؤيتها بسرعة.

إنها عتمة اللون وبياض الروح.

وطى حوب، تموز – يوليو ٢٠١٣.

**شربل داغر**

لبنان – ٢٠١٣

لا يمتنع خليل عن سرد فقرات من حياته، بين السودان موطنه ومحل طفولته الأولى، وإيطاليا، محل دراسته الفنية العالية، ونيويورك، محل عيشه وعمله، إلا أن السرد يمسح التوترات في الغالب في نوع أكيد من الدمثة السودانية: لك أن تتبين المشقة، أن تخمن وجودها، في هذا المسار الملتوي، مثل من يرى في غابة كثيفة.

يمكننا أن نسميه بـ"الفنان الحر"... ولقد استعرت هذه التسمية مما قرأت في تاريخ الفن عن الحفر، وعن تقاليده الأوروبية. فمن المعروف أن صراعات دارت بين المصورين والحفرين حول "مرايتهم"، فكان أن منعت القوانين البريطانية تعداد الحفرين بين التشكيليين، فيما سمحت بذلك القوانين الفرنسية، وجعلتهم في عداد فناني "الفنون الحرة" (ars liberalis).

وهو فنان مهاجر، في المقام الأول. فنه فيه، حيث ينتقل. يلتقي به أينما كان: في الشارع، في ورقة، في شكل مهمل...

تحدثت أعلاه عن "شرف الحفر"، ويمكن أن أضيف إليها الحديث عن "شرف الوجود" أيضاً: "أجواء الفنانين لا أطيقها في نيويورك، على ما يقول لي. فيها منافسة تبلغ حد المرض، حد الارتياح من الآخر، من سرقة الأفكار الفنية". الفنان يبحث عن نفسه في التشابه مع غيره، في مواكبته لتيار، لأساليب، لموضوعات، لتوليفات لونية رائجة، أما خليل فهو، مثلما يقول المثل السوداني: "كمن يدخل المولد ويطلع من دون حمص". أطره عليه السؤال:

– ولكن كيف تعرف أنك تتقدم من دون قياس ما تقوم به على أعمال الآخرين، حتى حين تكون مختلفاً عنهم؟

= الصدق مع النفس أولاً وأساساً. تعلمت هذا في بداياتي، أي تدريب على محاوره نفسي، على مكاشفتها، حتى أصبحت هذه العادة شيئاً من طبيعتي".

لا يكتمل الحديث عن "شرف الحفر" من دون الحديث عما جلبه هذا الفن إلى عالم الفن منذ قرون: لحظة الحفر تاريخية، تعبر عن خروج الفن من إطاره الضيق صوب الخارج، صوب التداول الواسع. الحفر ساعد في أن يصبح الفن خارج الملكية الحصرية، لكي يكون متنبلاً ومتداولاً على أوسع نطاق. هكذا استفاد من الحفر فنانون لترويج أعمالهم، ولذيق موضوعاتهم ومفرداتهم في التشكيل وفي إنتاج الصورة، بينما أفاد فنانون غيرهم فئات واسعة من محبي الفن، فجعلوهم في عداد المقتنين: بمال أقل، ولكن بكرم مزيد.

هكذا رفع خليل من مكانة الحفر بأن جعله فناً جديراً بصفات الإبداع والتميز والتجدد، وأنقذه خصوصاً من أن يكون خادماً لغيره من الفنون: خادماً للكتاب، أو للملصق، أو لترويج أعمال الفنان الأخرى.

أقامت "البارح للفنون التشكيلية" للفنان معرضاً شخصياً في العام ٢٠١٢، بعنوان: "جسر بين عالمين"، إلا أنه يصلح للحديث عن صلات في فنه بين عوالم متعددة، طالما أن الفنان يستجمع، و"يولف" فوق المحفورة ما لحياة شغوفة أن تستوعبه، أن تطلقه مثل دعوة صريحة للمشاركة الإنسانية: دعوة بعيداً عن الحدود (الحدود بين الأعراق والشعوب والثقافات والفنون)، وقوامها الانفعال الجمالي. فالذي ولد في قرية بوري، بالقرب من الخرطوم، في العام ١٩٣٧، ودرس الفن في كلية الفنون التطبيقية في الخرطوم، وسافر في العام ١٩٦٣ إلى فلورنسا لدرس الرسم الجداري (فريسكو)، ثم تقنيات الطباعة المتقدمة في رافينا (الإيطالية)، وهاجر ودرّس في نيويورك، لا يتوانى عن اعتبار الفن بطاقة هويته المميزة، وسبيله في الحوار مع الآخر.

## عتمة اللون، بياض الروح

السواد مجاز، استعارة، قبل أن يكون لوناً أو صفة أو عرقاً أو قارة وغيرها من التعريفات أو السمات: مجاز، طالما أنه يسع هذه كلها ويتخطاها. السواد يختصر هذا كله، يكثفه في علامة مركبة، ومنيعة بعدد الدلالات والإشعاعات.

السواد لون، وفي إمكانه أن يسع غيره من الألوان. أن يتيح، بتدرجاته، بسماكته، بتشكلاته، عالماً متلوناً. أن يتعاكس مع البياض: وجهاً لوجه. أن يرسم بامتدادات خطوطه خريطة لونية، فيها الغامق والفاتح، الكثيف والخفيف، العامودي والمتلوي، المستقيم والمتكسر.

أسود على أبيض. أبيض على أسود. أسود بالأبيض، وأبيض بالأسود.

بين السواد والمحفورة أكثر من علاقة مادية، من علاقة إنتاجية: ما تحفره مقلوباً يخرج مستقيماً، طالما أن الحفر يتم على الصفيحة بالمقلوب، ثم يوضع فيها الحبر، أو اللون بعد اللون، ثم يتم طبعاها بما يخرج الصورة المطلوبة. بياض الشكل بعد سواد العمليات.

وهو سواد السودان وإفريقيا التي تبغي بدورها إظهار جمالياتها الخاصة، التي تسقط احتكار الأبيض (بمعانيه كلها)

## المحفورة كتاب تعليمي

يدخل أحدهم إلى أصيلة، في إحدى المحفورات، على حمار، وهو ما كان خليل يراه يومياً، في حياته الصيفية في المدينة المغربية، خصوصاً في انتقالات الريفيين. وهو ما عرفه كذلك عن أحد الكتاب التونسيين، الذي دخلها بدوره فوق مركبة خشبية يجرها حمار بصحبة حقييته الجلدية وشنطة "السمسونايت"، بعد أن وصل إلى محطة قطارها من مطار طنجة الدولي القريب. إلا أن دخول خليل إلى أصيلة، منذ انطلاقة "الموسم الثقافي" (١٩٧٨)، وإقامته الثابتة فيها صيفاً بعد صيف، اقترب من أن يكون مواطنة ثانية، خصوصاً وأنه أشرف على أعمال الفنانين المتمرسين أو الطلبة المتدربين سنة تلو سنة في "محترف الحفر". هذا ما فعل فعله البعيد فيها، في فنانيتها، من أبناء المدينة، أو من زائريها، خصوصاً وأنه ابتعد تماماً عن "النجومية"، وعن أي انتفاع فيها ومنها. هذا ما تلقاه من أصيلة بدوره، ما أشار إلى نقلة واسعة في فنه، تتمثل خصوصاً في عمله (١٩٩٢) عنها؛ يزيد على خطوطه السابقة، وعلاماته، تدرجات دقيقة للغاية في مقام السواد، أشبه بتنويعات إيقاعية شكلاً وموسيقى، فضلاً عن أن الفنان عمد أيضاً إلى إدخال نسق تنقيطي، زخرفي، ما أعطى العمل صورة مختلفة عن الهيئة النحتية: بات العمل يتفاعل مع شيء من جمالية الشرائط الزخرفية في الفن الإسلامي، ولا سيما فوق الجدران، ومنها زخارف جدران "قصر الريسوني" (الذي أشرف فيه خليل على أعمال "محترف الحفر").

لخليل أعمال تشير إلى أصيلة منذ عناوينها، وتشير خصوصاً إلى أحداث وتجارب وانفعالات عايشها فيها، ما انحفر في وجدانه كما في أعماله. إلا أن له أعمالاً أخرى تشير إلى مدن أخرى، مثل: فاس، ومراكش، والبتراء (في الأردن)، وبغداد (٢٠٠١)، و"هارلم" (في نيويورك) و"الأوديسة والحوريات" وغيرها. هنا أو هناك خرج الفنان من مشغله إلى الشارع، إلى الحفريات الأثرية، ما تعين في خطواته، أو في أسفاره الخيالية، لكنه عاد منها إلى مشغله، وأتى منها بما يغني بحثه الدائم في استجلاء الشكل من عتمة تكوينه.

يمكن الوقوع على أعمال متفرقة، تعود إلى مراحل مختلفة في فنه، تتوقف عند الطبيعة الطبوغرافية للمكان، من إيطاليا حتى السودان مروراً بمدن متفرقة. وتتسم هذه الأعمال بهندسية بيئة تولي الخطوط والكتل المعمارية اهتمامها الأول، عدا أنها تُعنى برسم جرافيكية

المكان في إجمالها الشكلي. وهو ما يصل في أعمال، لاسيما عن "مقهى في روما"، جمالية خصوصية تقوم على تجريد الشكل، على تفتيته، على إعادة تشكيله من جديد، ما يشير إلى خيارات الفنان الشكالية والمعمارية، من دون تقيد بمحددات المكان الأصلية.

هذا ما يتشكل في خطوط دقيقة، أو في كتل غامقة، أو في امتدادات سوداء ذات تشبيكات بيضاء. ويتشكل أيضاً - وإن في أعمال قليلة - في محفورات تستلهم الخط العربي، بين قرآني ويدوي. ولا يكتمل هذا التتبع لأعماله المختلفة من دون الوقوف عند أحد أعماله المخصصة لبوب ديلان (١٩٨٦): في هذا العمل يستعمل خليل ألواناً غير الأبيض والأسود، ما يعد نقلة في عدة عمله، وفي صورة أعماله خصوصاً. ومن يتوقف عند هذا العمل يجد صورة أولى لما ستكون عليه أعمال أخرى في سنوات لاحقة.

ومن يطلب التعرف المدقق على مسار خليل الفني، من دارسين ومقتنين ومتحفيين وغيرهم، له أن يتوقف خصوصاً عند مجموعة نادرة من أعماله الأولى، التي نفذها أثناء دراسته في إيطاليا. نتعرف فيها على تشكيلات أولى في صنيعة الفني، يظهر فيها الوجود الخارجي بمعالمة الواقعية والطبيعية والإنسانية، ولا سيما في محفورة نادرة عن الخرطوم (١٩٦٥). وتتميز في هذه الأعمال النادرة محفوراته المتعددة عن "العارية" التي تشف عن جمالية خفرة ومثيرة في الوقت عينه للجسد الأنثوي، في تشكيلاته وتجلياته، حيث إن قلة من الخطوط الخفيفة تكفي لاستجلاب عالم مثير.

## الفنان "الحر"

محمد عمر خليل فنان على حدة. غريب وبعيد. لا تصل إليه حسب الطرق المعتادة. لن تجد ما يساعدك في هذه المشقة. كما لو أنك تجتاز أدغالاً في غابة من دون دروب وخريطة، وإذا بك تصل إلى مكانه. مكانه هو وحده، بحدوده الخاصة وملامحه الفريدة.

إن عرفت أنه سوداني، وأنه مقيم في نيويورك منذ ما يزيد على خمسين عاماً، فإن هذا وغيره لن يفيدك في تتبع الهوية، بل في استخلاص بعض علاماتها أو حمولاتها، ذلك أن هذا كله مجبول بلغة الفنان الإحساسية.



## الكائن في خط

المحفورة عند محمد عمر خليل "توليفة" قبل أي شيء آخر، وهي تسمية أخرى لـ "التصيق" (collage)، وقد اعتمدها في أعمال عديدة جرب فيها هذه التقنية للبناء الفني، فضلاً عن أن بعض أعماله يحمل هذه التسمية عنواناً له. وهو توليف بين عناصر متقاربة ومتباعدة، ما يستجمع علامات متأثية من مصادر مختلفة؛ علامات من تاريخ خصوصي أو عمومي، مما يثير الفنان في عمله أو مما تذهب إليه يده أثناء عملها الصبور والمتأن فوق الصفيحة.

يأتي بما يشاء إلى سطح الصفيحة، مثلما يفعل الكاتب فوق سطور كتابته. يأتي بها ويولفها، سواء أعادت إلى صورة شخصية أم إلى رمز، إلى ما عثر عليه في الشارع أم في تدافعات الحلم أم في بهجة الجسد إذ يكشف عن عتمته. هذا ما يجعل الكائن متعيناً في خط.

يمكن للمتابع أن يلاحق عناوين محفوراتها، إذ تشير إلى أسماء تضم: العصفور، والأم وابنها، والرجل والمرأة، ووجوه القتال، والرقص، والجبل، والزواج وغيرها. وهو ما يصح في: حلفا، وسواكن وغيرها، ما يدل على خريطة جغرافية وإنسانية، شخصية في المقام الأول.

كما يأتي بالصورة الفوتوغرافية إلى العمل، ويضمنها هياكل وهياكل، ما يقرب من "ألبوم" شخصي في الغالب... إلا أن هذه وتلك إشارات وحسب، ولا تحدد البناء الفني أبداً. هي مواد للعمل، إذا جاز القول، يبدأ بها، لا لكي ينقلها، وإنما لكي يعالجها. فيحولها ويعديلها ويربطها بغيرها مما لم تعتد عليه العين في السابق. لهذا تقوم محفوراتها في صورة مزيدة على "التوليف": توليف فوق الصفيحة، في معالجات يتدبرها الفنان بنفسه أثناء العمل، في غمار عملياته الغامضة، المعتمة، والحيوية. وينتج عن هذه العمليات، في أعمال السبعينيات وبعدها، ميل صريح إلى بناء الكتل التي تشتمل على مواد وعناصر وعمليات عديدة، مصهورة، مشبكة، ما يعطي لكل محفورة شكلاً نحتياً خفيفاً ولكن أكيداً في الوقت عينه.

أعمال خليل تمثل للناظر إليها في بنية واضحة الإطار، لولا حركة أخيرة، مشخبطة، سريعة، تبليل هذا الوضوح، وتعطي العمل حيويته، لحظيته، غموضه، بل سره. لوحته واحدة ومختلفة في آن: "يستحيل أن يكون عقلي اليوم على ما كان عليه بالأمس. أصغي إلى ما يجري حولي، وأتنبين في

اليد الحاجة نفسها أحياناً، ولكن المختلفة بالضرورة"، حسب قوله لي.

بنية جامدة، متصورة، بعد أن أعمل الذهن فيها، وحركة مفاجئة "تكسر" هذا الجمود. صياغة وعفوية، ثبات وانطلاق في آن. البنية متناقضة: مساحة مشغولة ومساحة متروكة. سواد وبياض، شدة وضعف: توتر داخلي بالتالي، خاصة وأنه يستعمل بلاطتين في الحفر.

هذه البنية تناسب خيارات خليل وخططه الفنية، إذ تتيح له استيعاب مفردات وعناصر وهياكل عديدة فيها، ويزيد من طاقات استيعابها تعويله على مربعات فيها، يضمنها بدورها مواد عديدة. هذا ما يناسب أيضاً طبيعة العمل الحفري التي تحتاج إلى أناة شديدة، ما يسهل بالتالي ويغري كذلك بإضافة عناصر البناء عنصراً تلو عنصر.

وهو ما يمكن الانتباه إليه في ملمح آخر من تجربته الفنية، وهو أن محفورته تعايش أساليب الفن و"مدارسه" المتسارعة، من دون أن تهتز أو تتعدل، بل تستوعبها، على ما يمكن التحقق. إذ تبدو محفورته مثل سجل حافظ ومتبلور: لما هو تشبيهي (figuratif) وتجريدي في الوقت عينه، لما يتعين في أسلوب تجميعي سواء للمواد المهمة (كما في أسلوب "الفن الفقير"، الإيطالي المنشأ) أو لعناصر متأثية من الإرث السوداني، أو لعبارة اسم الجلالة.

المحفورة محل لقاء، محل حوار، للفن خصوصاً. هذا يصدر عن منظور للفنان لا يعبأ بانتقالات التجارب والمدارس بقدر ما يعتني بحلولها، بطرق عملها، على أنها كلها - بعد أن يعالجها ويعديلها وينفي بعضها ويبقي بعضها الآخر - تصبح خاصته، مقيمة سيدة في المحفورة، كما في دار واسعة، ثابتة ومشرفة النوافذ.

يقول عنوان إحدى المحفورات (١٩٦٩): "كان الموضوع (في أصله) وروداً"، ما يشير بصورة شرجية إلى عمل الفنان، بل إلى طريقته، إذ ينطلق من مواد لا لكي ينقلها، وإنما لكي يعالجها. وهي معالجات مختلفة، تتخذ من الشكل بدايةً ومنتهى لها، وإن تحتفظ أحياناً ببعض الهياكل الإنسانية. ذلك أن المواد، ما أن تحل فوق سطح الصفيحة، تصبح بتصرف الفنان، بل في عهده، مثل مواد بناء، مثل صورة التجلي الإنساني.

## الحفر فن بالأحرف الكبيرة

إلا أن الدخول إلى عالم هذا الفنان يبقى صعباً، مع ذلك، بل يخطيء متلقي الأعمال الفنية إن نظر إليها عابراً، أو اكتفى بالوقوف عند عناوينها، إذ هي أحياناً عناوين طريفة، تتحدث عن "قرد" أو عن "قبعة"، فيما يشير البناء إلى لعبة غامضة. وهو في هذا قريب من صنيع السوراليين، سواء الأدباء أو التشكيليين منهم. كما أن عناوين أخرى، وإن دلت على مدن بعينها، فهي لا تشير إليها، وإنما إلى ما استخلصه الفنان من مشاهدات وتجارب إحساسية فيها. هكذا يكون العمل الفني مدونة جمالية للمتلقي، ومدونة حميمة للفنان.

هذا يعني وجوب تتبع هذه المحفورات في تتابعها، من جهة، وفي تقطعاتها واستمراراتها، من جهة ثانية. إذ هي حاصل خبرة وتجريب، وحاصل بناء متماد حُصل الفنان بموجبه مهارات أكيدة، جعلته يتصدر حفاري العرب المتميزين، ويفعل ويؤثر عميقاً في تدريب وتأهيل العديد من الفنانين الأكاديميين أو المبتدئين. وإذا كان غيره تنحى عن الحفر، فإنه لم يحد عنه أبداً، على الرغم من تنوعه وتوسيع عدته الفنية ونتاجه صوب الأعمال الزيتية والكتب الفنية.

لهذا فإن الدخول إلى أعماله دخولٌ إلى مشغل أحد "المعلمين" الكبار، ما يستدعي الوقوف أمام كل عمل منها مثل عمل قائم بذاته، يختصر تاريخ الحفر، من جهة، ويؤرخ لممارسة خليل التشكيلية، من جهة ثانية. فالفنان عاد، في عمليات الحفر على صفائح النحاس أو الزنك، إلى تقنية حفرية تعود في بداياتها إلى العام ١٦٦٠، وهي المسماة: (aquatint). وتعني هذه الطريقة - ذات الاسم اللاتيني، الدال على الماء واللون في آن - قيام الفنان بتنظيف صفيحته تنظيفاً يجعل من الأعمال المطبوعة منها أعمالاً لا تقل نظافة وأصالة عن العمل الأصلي نفسه، نموذج الحفر. كما عمل أيضاً على تجديد ممارسة الحفر، فاكثف بطبع أعمال معدودة من كل نموذج، وعمد أحياناً إلى جعل كل عمل طباعي عملاً مستقلاً، قائماً بنفسه.

تتوزع أعماله بين مقاسات كبيرة (٤٨ بوصة = ٥٢ بوصة) وأخرى صغيرة، إلا أنها، في جميع الأحوال، شديدة الغنى في تكوين بنائها العام، وفي تفاصيلها ذات الشبكات الشكلية المعقدة. هذا يعكس صبر الفنان، وعمله المتأني، و"كْرَمَه"، إذا جاز القول. فالحفر عنده فنٌ بالأحرف الكبيرة، ويستوجب من الفنان كامل الخبرة والانصراف، فلا يكون عمل وقت

الراحة، ولا أن ينصرف إليه يوم الأحد (كما تقول العبارة الفرنسية). وهو، إذ يطلب الحفر، لا يطلبه حباً بالتنوع (مثلما فعل بيكاسو، على سبيل المثال)، أو لترويح صورة ميسرة عن عالم الفنان، مثلما فعل فنانون كثُر للترويح لغيرهم، فكانوا أن حفروا بعض أعمالهم، أو طبعوا صور -بطاقات عنها.

وما يزيد من "شرف الحفر" الذي طلبه خليل، هو أنه مال إليه بعد حلوله في نيويورك، فيما كانت تميل تجارب تجديدية فيها وخارجها إلى تمجيد الألوان الضاجة والفرحة والغزيرة، من جاكسون بولوك إلى فرانك ستيل، وصولاً إلى ما يسمى بـ"المدرسة الأميركية"، التي اعتمدت على اللونية وحدها (أي من دون شكل أو تصوير أو رسم) كشكل للبناء.

لن يتخلل خليل عن الحفر، ولا عن قتامة اللون، ما جعله يعيش أياماً صعبة في إقامته الجديدة، وهو ما رواه بنفسه على مسامعي في هذه العبارات: "كنت مدرّساً لمادتي الرسم والتلوين في السودان، إلا أنني لم أجد فرصة لمتابعة مهنة التدريس في نيويورك، بعد وصولي إليها في العام ١٩٦٧. لم يكن الأمر ممكناً، خصوصاً وأن شهادتي ليست أميركية أو إنكليزية، بل كانت سودانية وإيطالية، وهي شهادات غير معتمدة في حسابهم. وجدت فرصة للعمل في التجارة والنجارة والطباعة خلال سنة كاملة، ثم وفقت إلى عمل في مركز دولي للحفر، والتقيت فيه بحفارين من أنحاء العالم. كان عملي يقضي بتنظيف صالات الحفر بعد عملهم فيها، على أن أخصص يوماً واحداً في الأسبوع لعملي أنا. بعد سنة على عملي هذا، وجدت إستوديو خاصاً بي، واشتريت آلة طباعة، وبدأت أعمل على حسابي الخاص".

ما عايشه خليل من صعوبة في العمل والتدريس، عرفه في العرض أيضاً. فهو ليس مصوراً فولكلوري النزعة، سهل التعيين في خانة وطنية (: فنان سوداني)، أو خانة ثقافية وحضارية (: فنان حروفي). كما أن فنه لا يتماشى مع الجاري في العالم الفني الأميركي: "لا أحد يعمل باللونين الأسود والأبيض، عدا أن الأميركيين لا يبالون أبداً باللون الأسود، كما لو أنه غير موجود، مغضلين الألوان الحارة والبراقة". وهو ما يوضحه كذلك في هذه العبارات: "كيف لألواني، التي كانت رمادية، ورملية، وباهتة، عند حلولي في نيويورك، أن تتفاعل مع ألوان قوس القزح عند ستيل على سبيل المثال؟". إلى هذا، ابتعد خليل عن الصيغة التجارية، التي طالما تساءل الأميركي بموجيها، قبل شراء عمل فني: "كم يساوي سعره بعد عشر سنوات؟"، حسب قوله.

**هل يكفي، إذ نتوصل إلى التعرف على الطريق، أن نتعرف على الخطوات فيه؟**

**ما العلاقة بين ضغط الخطوات وانتقالاتها وبين ما ترسمه فوق دروب الأيام؟**

ما العلاقات الخافية كما الظاهرة بين ما يخطه الفنان فوق الحامل المادي وبين ما يجده المتلقي في التعبيرات الفنية؟

أعمال محمد عمر خليل تثير شهية محب الفن مثلما تثير رغبة الدارس في الدرس. إذ إنها أعمال تجذب العين، وتجلب لها متعة جمالية أكيدة، لا تقل عن رغبة الدارس في استكشاف مجهول العمل الفني، أو بنائه الداخلي، ما يضيف صفحة جديدة إلى كتاب الفن.

## حفر فوق صفحات الزمن

من يطلب الاقتراب من الأعمال المعروضة، يستطيع أن يتبين في متابعتها، في وقفاتها، رسماً لطريق مفتوح ومديد. ولهذه الأعمال عناوين، إلا أنها لا تختصر، وإنما تدل على ما تشتمل عليه كل وقعة في الطريق من غنى شكلي وتعبيري: هناك من يقترب من الأعمال بلمحة عين، مثل طائر، فيتحقق من القصد، مما يحرك الفنان في اندفاعاته المبهمة والجلية، طالما أنه لا يتوانى عن النقر، عن الضرب، فوق صفحة الوجود، بعزم المحب واشتياقه الدائم إلى جلاء الغامض فينا، والمشارك بيننا. وهناك من يقترب منها بعين المتمهل، المتأنّي، المتذوق لما يتكشف من عتمة السواد، خطوة خطوة، مثل جلاء متجدد ومتعدد ومتغير: المتعة هي هي، والمتعة غيرها. وهناك من يقترب منها بأدوات نظر مزيدة، لا تكتفي بعين المعاينة، وإنما تضيف إليها عين القراءة التاريخية، التي ترى في الحاصل الفني ناتجاً عن مسار في الفن، يشمل الفنان ويتعداه في الوقت عينه.

تعود الأعمال المعروضة، في أقدمها، إلى العام ١٩٦٠، وتنحصر تحديداً في المحفورات، من دون غيرها من نتاجه مثل اللوحات والكتب الفنية. ونرى في أسفل إحدى هذه المحفورات القديمة أصابع اليد اليمنى إذ تستعد للإقدام على فعل، مثل فعل الحفر نفسه. وهذا الإقدام لا يتوانى الفنان عن مباشرته، بثبات وتنوع أكيد. كما نقع في خلفية هذه المحفورة على مربعات كثيرة، من جهتيها، ولكل مربع منها ما يحمله في بنائه، أشبه بأعمال فنية متعددة، اختصارية، لما يريده الفنان منذ ضرباته الأولى. وما يصح في

أعمال خليل الأولى، يصح في الأعمال الأدبية الأولى، إذ إن المبدع "يحملها" الكثير مما يريد قوله، دلالة على قصده الشديد والكثيف في الوقت عينه. كما تحمل هذه الأعمال الباكورة تنوعاً شديداً في موضوعاتها وأشكالها، ما يشير إلى معالم البدايات طبعاً، وإلى تجريب إطلاقات مختلفة على عالم الفن. ومن يطلب التدقيق في تعبيرات هذه الأعمال يلاحظ تشكلات وعلامات، منها ما احتفظ به الفنان في لاحق تجاربه، ومنها ما تخلص عنه. ويستطيع (من يطلب التدقيق) أن يتبين في تشكلات بعضها صورة امتدادات جغرافية شبيهة بخريطة إيطالية نفسها (التي للفنان معها أكثر من موعد، دراسي وفني): هوس بتشكلات تتخذ هيئة خطوط متموجة أو صارمة.

ما يستوقف خصوصاً في هذه الأعمال الأولى هو أنها تجمع بين شكلين مختلفين في بناء المحفورة: شكل يستند إلى نظامية متوازنة في ترتيب عناصر العمل ووحداته بحس هندسي شديد فيه شيء من الزخرفة أيضاً، وشكل "فوضوي"، يدع المادة نفسها تتمدد وتتشكل بشيء من التلقائية. شكلان متباضان، بل متناقضان، لن ينفكا عن التعايش في مدى تجربة خليل المفتوحة. وهو ما يعكس وجهين من صراع متماد في تجارب الفنان: بين وبين الصفيحة المعدنية التي يحفر فوقها، وبين الصفيحة مثل ورقة للرسم والتصوير والتخطيط وبين ما يتدفق من رغبات غامضة في تدافعات اليد التي ترسم وتصور وتخط فوق الصفيحة.

هكذا يمكن للمتابع المدقق، في أعمال خليل المعروضة، التي تتوزع في خمسين سنة، أن يلاحظ أشكال متابعة وانقطاع، في البناء العام أو في تشكلاته الداخلية. يلاحظ العناية بالهندسة في خطوط مستقيمة أو ملتوية أو في مربعات أو مستطيلات، ما يبلغ أحياناً البناء المعماري نفسه. كما يلاحظ أنه يعمل على توليدات شكلية حرة، مناقضة للهندسية، تمتاز بتفلتها، بعدم خضوعها للمسطرة أو غيرها، فتتلوى بحسب نزوات اليد الخاطئة وميولها.

إلا أن المحفورة ليست بناء شكلياً وحسب، وإنما هي بناء زمني ومكاني ورمزي في الوقت عينه. هذا ما يتمثل في علامات بشرية، أو في صور فوتوغرافية، أو في هياكل مختلفة، يستحضرها الفنان إلى عالم المحفورة (ما يظهر خصوصاً في محفورات السبعينيات وغيرها أيضاً). لا تتوانى المحفورات بالتالي عن أن تكون هي هي وغيرها في صورة دائمة ومتمادية. وهي تموجات تبدو مثل حفر فوق صفحات الزمن، ما يدل على رغبات في خطوط اليد الخافية.



# مجاز السواد



مقلدوه وهم كثيرٌ، يحولون كل هذا السحر الى سطح لوني لاحياة فيه وبإشارات مبهمه مما يفقد العمل روحه التي هي حارسه الابداع. مطبوعه محمد يتدرج بناؤها بتتابع وفاعلية، حيث يمكن للعين ان تستشف كنه جميع الاشياء من عناصر هندسية او طبيعية وقيمتها في خلق سطح غني يساعد على خلق مركزية العمل بصريا وروحيا، انه تمرين لاغناء هذه العلاقات، واللعب بالفراغات التي تتأسس بفعل هذا التجميع. هنا يكمن تميز اعمال محمد، فهي في الغالب مساحة للفعل المبتكر بدلا من ان تكون مجرد سطوح هندسية حينا او طبيعية حينا آخر،

فهو يستفيد من اعادة استخدام تقنية الكولاج احدي خاصيته في اللوحة ، لكي تغني سطوح المطبوعه وتعطيها بعد ارمزيا يمسك بالعلاقة الخفية بينها. تميز محمد يكمن في قدرته على سلب بعض عناصر لوحته واللعب بها ليحيلها في المطبوعه الى عالم متميز وشديد الحساسية لا علاقة له بماضيهما لأن جوهرها ومادتها مخيلة تنطوي على قدرة القبض على هذه العلامات بدون تردد والغاء غوايتها السابقة.

ان سحر ومدلولات الغنى البصري من داخل المطبوعه حين تصبح موضوعا ذات معنى، وبتعدد معانيها يتكون الارث الإشاري الذي يولد التعبير ومدلولاته. لا اتحدث عن تعابير ذات طابعية حكائية ولا عن إشارات خالية من الصوت الذي يمكن تؤوله بعيدا عن الابهام ذات العلاقة بالخداع البصري. إن مجموعة البتراء مثلا نموذج لابرز نجاحات محمد، حيث انجز عبر هذه الاعمال نشيدا بصريا غارقا في التأويل الروحي، ساحر افريقي يكتب تعاويذه عن الخفاء، يكتبها بحبر لا يراه الا هو، يجمعها كي تكون عونا للاستدلال عن غموض هذه المدينة وتنوع مشاهدتها، كل ذلك هو في الواقع نتاج مخيلة تمكنت من تجميع عناصر غير حقيقية لكي تنماهى بمخيلتنا مع الشائع عن هذه المدينة تاريخا

ومكانا جغرافيا. نلمح في المجموعة هذه خيوط دقيقة توحد عناصر المطبوعه وتشدها في فعل لإغناء الافق اشاري الذي يتناوب في كلا صفحتي المطبوعه على الرغم من تنافرها حينا واثلافا حينا اخر.

إنها رؤية بصرية لا تشير الى المدينة أو تاريخها بقدر ما، وبتقنية عالية تتحدث عن طبقات زمنية بشاء سطحها البدائي المليئ بالفراغات والدلالات الغامضة والارتقاء برموزاتها مناجية من عاش في هذه المدينة ، من كتب اسمه من الرحالة، ومن مرّ عليها من الفرسان والتجار.

مطبوعه محمد مهما تنوعت موضوعاتها تبقى قصيدة بصرية لا يترجم حضورها الا عبر رحلة غامضة للكشف عن المخفي ، عن سطوح تتنافر رموزها، عن ابواب تفتح في قلب العنمة.

## ضياء العزاوي

لندن / ديسمبر ٢٠١٣



# ابواب تفتح في قلب العتمة.

يجمع محمد عمر خليل ( ١٩٣٦ ) بين الطباعة والرسم حاله حال عدد لا بأس به من الفنانين العرب، ألا إنه يختلف عنهم بامتلاكه ناصية الفصل الكامل بين كلا التقنيتين، وهو فصل باهر يعكس معرفة مهنية قلما توفرت عند الآخرين من الفنانين. إن جملة انجازاته من اعمال ابداعية لها مكانة متميزة في تاريخ فن الطباعة العربي.

في المطبوعة اقتصاد لوني مثير، هو الاسود متنوع الدرجات وتداخل لإشارات وأشكال كأنها نسيج قماش افريقي لطقوس مبهمة. في اللوحة حضور لوني متنوع ولا مبالاة في جزء منها وحس متماسك لعناصر اللوحة التي في الغالب تم اخضاعها بفعل تقنية الكولاج الى عنصر في التكوين العام، بينهما ما يجمع حينا وما يفرق حينا آخر.

في المطبوعة تهويمات لساحر افريقي ذي طبيعة حكاية ومشهدية غنية تتقاسم الحضور كأنها ملامح وثنية من زمن مجهول. في اللوحة تجميع ذكي لما هو حسي وبشغافية عالية، انه يخلق تعاويذ معاصرة بمرجعية وبالوان وعناصر بعض منها من متروكات يومية تمنح المرء متعة ذات ملمس مادي. تتشكل وحدة المطبوعة (اللوحة المعدني) عبر مدارات وانتباه محسوب في جزئياته، للصدفة في بعض الاحيان قيمة ما، لكنها تبقى ضمن مخيلته بتعاويذها وقاموسه الإشاري. اللون الاسود هو السطح البديل للوح المعدني، إنه الجسد الذي يحاول محمد مكاشفته في تكرار كأنه ضرب من قراءة نص طلسمي لكي يأخذ بالمشاهد الى تفسيرات متنوعة، فهو ميل الى تركيب اسرار العمل بما يضيفه لملمس السطح من قطعة لقماش، او وحدات طبيعية مبهمة تتصارع مع ضربات لغرشات متباعدة. كل ذلك يحوّل الشكل الافتراضي الى مادة قادرة على محاوره ما يجاورها وهي تحتفي بثناء تغايلها لتبدو المطبوعة سجادة صلاة لروح طليقة.

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# محمد عمر خليل



البارح للفن المعاصر  
ص.ب. 26282، العدلية، مملكة البحرين  
هاتف +973 1771 7707 | فاكس +973 1771 4545  
art@albareh.com | [www.albareh.com](http://www.albareh.com)

**Opposite page:**  
**Self Portrait** | Etching, 2x2cm, 1968

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محمد عمر خليل











محمد عمر  
خليل

خمسون عاماً  
من الحفر

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