



أركاديا

عبد القادري

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A METAPHORICAL ARRIVAL

Abed AlKadiri

"The path to paradise begins in hell" *Dante Alighieri*

It's been more than ten years that our regional sociopolitical conflicts, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the American war on Iraq and the recent events in neighboring Syria, among other thorny issues sweeping away our part of the world, have been lurking in my mind. How did these pictures of violence crop up and take over my art? I can't quite put my finger on it, but I know that it started in 2005, when I showcased a collection of paintings depicting scenes of torture from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The bleak images left my memory brimming with flashing scenes of war and death dating back to the Lebanese Civil War.

It was then that the theme of violence seeped through most of my artistic practice until my latest collection showcased in Beirut depicting the drowning of Arab migrants in the Mediterranean Sea in an exhibition entitled *Ashes to the Sea* that I worked on for three years, following a previous collection on the Islamic State (IS) destruction of the Mosul Museum in Iraq expressed through all-black canvases representing a funereal truth.

After having spent nine years in Kuwait, I returned to Beirut where I found myself picking up what was left of a memory I had abandoned in the alleys of the city streets: I could still smell the fresh rain on a cold winter morning, I could still see the jasmine and gardenia branches creeping up on the walls of ground-floor houses and I could still feel the reflection of sun rays on my face. As much as I wanted to hold on to that feeling of comfort, I found myself trying to clear a few cobwebs from my memory, a place in my mind bruised by images of the war I lived as a child.

It's been a year since I settled in Beirut, and I have steered away from watching the news. In a world saturated with images of death and torture spread all over conventional and social media, which were the main sources for most of my art in the past years, I suddenly found myself unable to translate those same images into my work. In their stark reality, they became a normal sight for many people, almost a circumstance of their existence.

The habit of witnessing these scenes turned into desensitization, which in itself became indifference.

I scouted for a small ground-floor studio in an old neighborhood, where I would take care of the backyard filled with flower pots and

leave enough space for the branches of the Bougainvillea tree, or "al-Majnouna" [meaning crazy] as Beirutis call it, to grow and attack the neighbors' fence. And I found what I wanted: I created my own escape tucked away beneath the concrete where I surrounded myself by oceans of lavish greenery and untamed colors; a three-month ceremony of its own.

"So, what do I paint now?" That was the first question I asked myself. I had just finished my exhibition on the drowning of migrants, particularly on the bodies washed up on the Greek shores. I later found inspiration in a charcoal drawing of a man and a woman by an unknown amateur artist. A relative of the couple told me that they had travelled to Greece by sea, only to vanish off the face of the Earth. I began painting my own rendition of the man and woman, whom I saw in that drawing, wearing a lifejacket trying to hold on to life, but instead of being swallowed by the sea, the couple gave birth to a new life and grew plants on their bodies that crept up on their shoulders; my botanical surroundings at the studio unexpectedly appeared on the canvas morphing the blue hell the couple sunk in into an exotic nature, wild, yet peaceful and harmonious.

I did not realize at the time that my little corner would spawn my vision or that the couple surrounded by trees, flowers and birds would mark all my subsequent artwork. They became the heroes of my paintings—the main bearers of life, a new life. They firstly appear through charcoal on cork—an impermeable buoyant material— and then on canvas where, like a spectrum, they seamlessly blend in a fertile land and a promise of existence.

I was perhaps trying, through them, to take the shackles off my own two feet and liberate my mind from the morbid images imbedded in my memory and maybe also emancipate the people who died on Western coasts from the burden of arriving on shore. It is a metaphorical arrival—the arrival to Arcadia.

Now that I have designed my own version of heaven on earth, I am able to retrieve back to my garden and isolate myself, even if temporarily, from the horrors of our world, and I unwittingly find myself wishing for the souls of those who have paid their debt to nature to be able to break down the gates of heaven and find peace.

الوصول مجازاً

عبد القادري

"الطريق الى الجنة يبدأ بالجحيم" دانتى

«والآن، ماذا أرسّم؟» كان السؤال الأول! انتهيت من معرضي عن مأساة وغرق المهاجرين، وتحديداً تلك الأشلاء التي التقطت من على السواحل اليونانية. بدأت برسم رجل وامرأة نقلاً عن لوحة بالفحم رسمها فنان غير معروف تصور زوجين أو حبيبين يقول قرييهما أنهما سافرا بالبحر، وجهتهما اليونان ولم يعرف عنهما شيئاً بعد ذلك. رسمتهما بسترتي النجاة، وبدلاً من أن يتلعهما البحر، نما العشب على جسديهما، تسلق أكتافهما، واستحال ذلك الجحيم الأزرق الذي رسمته في معرضي الأخير جنّة. لم أدرك حينها أن ما بدأتُه سينسحب قسراً على جميع ما أنتجته خلال هذا العام، أن يكون هنالك رجل وامرأة في كل اللوحات، هذا هو الشرط الرئيسي لولادة الحياة، يظهران في وحدتهما، في عالم تخيليّ لأرض جديدة غناء، لوعد بالعيش، ربما لأحرر نفسي أنا أيضاً عبرهما، أو ربما هي محاولة لتحرير أولئك الذي قضوا على شواطئ الغرب من وطأة الحلم بالوصول، إنه فعل الوصول مجازياً، الوصول الى «أركاديا».

بالفحم، المادة نفسها لتلك اللوحة التي عثرت عليها لهذين الزوجين رسمت المجموعة الأولى تبدأ في ظهورهما أولاً على قطعة قطن - مادة غير قابلة للغرق- وبالفحم على القماش في مرة ثانية، يستحيلان طيفاً بين الأشجار والورود والعصافير حتى يتوحدان مع الطبيعة- الحلم ويصبحان لهما المعادل اللوني والكيميائي نفسه.

في عالم مليء بصور القتل والتعذيب عبر وسائل الإعلام التواصل الاجتماعي -التي كانت مصدري الرئيس لمعظم ما أنتجته خلال السنوات الأخيرة- لم أعد قادراً أن أنقل أو أترجم تلك الصور في أعمالي في حين أن تلك الصور بكل واقعيّتها وقسوتها بات يتعامل معها الكثيرون ببرود شديد، أو لنقل الاعتياد حد اللامبالاة أريد أن أرتاح في جنتي التي صنعتها، وترتاح أرواح من رحلوا ويرحلون في كل يوم.

أكثر من عشر سنوات وأنا مشغول بشؤوننا العربية الإقليمية، قضايانا الشائكة وصراعنا الداخلي والخارجي، فلسطين والاحتلال الإسرائيلي، العراق والحرب الأميركية، السجون والتعذيب، الدمار والارهاب. كيف ولد ونما هذا الإحساس واستحوذ على ممارساتي الفنية؟ لم أعد أذكر تحديداً. بدأت بمجموعة جداريات أنجزتها العام ٢٠٠٥ عن صور التعذيب في سجن أبي غريب في العراق. كان ثقل تلك الصور لا يحتمل، صوراً قاسية استفزت إنسانيّتي وذاكرتي المشبعة بصور القتل والملاصق في الحرب الأهلية اللبنانية. حينها قررت أن يكون العنف بأشكاله الثيمة التي أشتغل عليها، وقد طبعتم مجمل أعمالي الفنية حتى آخر معارضي التي قدمتها العام الماضي في بيروت بمجموعة فنية عن غرق المهاجرين العرب في البحر المتوسط، المعرض الذي عملت عليه لسنوات ثلاث، سبقه معرض عن تدمير متحف الموصل على يد داعش، تضمن مجموعة لوحات سوداء بالكامل كدلالة على واقع شديد الظلام.

عدت إلى بيروت بعد تسع سنوات قضيتها في الكويت، ووجدتني ألامم ذاكرة ثانية تركتها بين أزقة شوارع هذه المدينة: رائحة أول المطر على الإسفلت في صباح شتائي، تسلق أغصان الياسمين والغاردينيا على جدران ومداخل البيوت الأرضية، انعكاسات أشعة الشمس على سفوح المدينة، لكنني وعلى الرغم من انحيازي لهذه الذاكرة، وجدتي بين الحين والآخر أعود إلى تلك النقطة السوداء، تلح علي صور الدمار والحرب التي عشتها طفلاً منذ عام تقريباً وبعد استقرارنا هنا، انقطعت نهائياً عن متابعة الأخبار، وبدأت أبحث عن محترف في مدينتي القديمة الجديدة. كنت أريد شقّة أرضية في أحد الشوارع القديمة: أوّثت حديقتهما الخلفية بأصص الزهور، وأترك لأغصان شجرة «المنجونة» كما يسميها البيراتة المساحة التي تتسلقها وصولاً إلى سور الجيران، وكان لي ما أردت..





The Garden
Abd AlKadir's studio, Beirut.

THIS IS THE TALE OF A JOURNEY... IT BEGINS WITH A PROLOGUE.

Kevin Jones

A plump blue couch sits centered on a gravelly floor, its floral cushions echoed in a suspended needlepoint of exotic birds craning amidst leafy wilds—imaginary fauna as stately and probable as the dangling chandelier. A third image-in-the-image is propped awkwardly on a wooden side table: a charcoal portrait of a couple, partially obscured by a small potted plant.

This single static image deftly heralds the visual narrative of movement and transition that lies beyond in Abed Al Kadiri's *Arcadia*. As a prologue, it has done its job: characters are announced, a scene is evoked. Yet it also crystallizes the tensions that course through *Arcadia*, while underscoring the fundamental shift this new body of work has ignited in Al Kadiri's practice.

Al Kadiri has long been preoccupied with the collective—the migrant crisis, sites of war, destruction, detention, and the living legacy of the *malheur arabe*, as Samir Kassir would have it. His previous work on the refugee struggle, *Ashes to the Sea*, foregrounded the wreckage of mankind—a murderous sea heaving with death, claiming lives indiscriminately.

Arcadia constitutes a major re-framing of Al Kadiri's worldview. The personal micro-story overtakes collective drama: the charcoal portrait sparks the unraveling of an almost filmic narrative, complete with a backstory, sequencing and episodes. Gone is the freeze-framed maelstrom of the conquering sea, littered with instantly understood media imagery. Instead, we as viewers, much like the protagonists of *Arcadia* themselves, begin a story.

The portrait is by an unknown hand, offered to the viewer in a photograph—an image twice removed. We are told the sitters were relatives of one of Al Kadiri's friends: a couple that set out to sea and have not been heard from since. As part of the prologue, excerpted words from a sailing dictionary (yet another work by an unknown hand, some amputated voice of authority) swirl across the wall, testing and blurring the lines between sport and survival. We begin disoriented, uncertain where we stand.

Are they already dead? You ask. You will never know.

Al Kadiri cultivates a delectable distance. He stands behind appropriated imagery—the “found” portrait, for a start, but also the recognizably photo-like poses in the cork-based works, the hero couple monumentalized, haloed by tiles bearing Ottoman, Byzantine and Levantine decorative motifs, reminders of rooted identities. *Arcadia* itself is an inherited myth—a metaphorical mindscape, as desirable as it is unattainable, a pursuit and a lie. Al Kadiri's *Arcadia* is dense and sometimes obscure, so teeming in its luxuriant detail that it becomes overpowering, almost turbulent.

It is hard not to see a tinge of irony here, as the real *Arcadia* is in Greece, those longed-for shores that suddenly morph into sites of migrant tragedy and loss. As much as the artist revels in the landscape as a curative retreat from war-torn mayhem and the harrows of death, *Arcadia* is still inextricably wound up in what he poetically calls “the burden of the dream.” Here, everything is a fiction. Impermanence is part of the journey.

Charcoal is a slippery material in an artist's hands: it shifts, changes and will ultimately vanish. An unknown artist rendered the couple in charcoal, as did Al Khadiri for almost all of the subsequent drawings and paintings (with the exception of the final “Vows” sequence, in which they transubstantiate, Sufi-like, into the surrounding oil-painted thickets). Charcoal-on-canvas images of joined hands—reassuring invitations to venture into the Edenic wilds—punctuate the flow of works in *Arcadia*. Nothing lasts, we understand. The “real-life” couple, framed in a sunny moment for a portraitist, melds into an idyllic fiction. Can *Arcadia* exist?

Of course, *Arcadia* lends itself to different readings. Yet it seems deeply concerned with the notion of recollection. How do we remember? By memorializing loved ones in a portrait? Documenting a dressy moment in a photo? Holding a fleeting image of imagined bliss? For all its painterly virtuosity, *Arcadia* feels somewhat like a chronicle, itself an attempt to commit to memory what risks being lost. Thus, the craft of the artist lies as much in the framing gestures that toy with memory and representation, as in the realization of swarming landscapes. Ultimately, *Arcadia* is less the face-value story of a journey towards salvation, than an examination precisely of how stories are told in the first place, and which voice we can trust in telling that story.



SALVATION



Salvation 1

2016

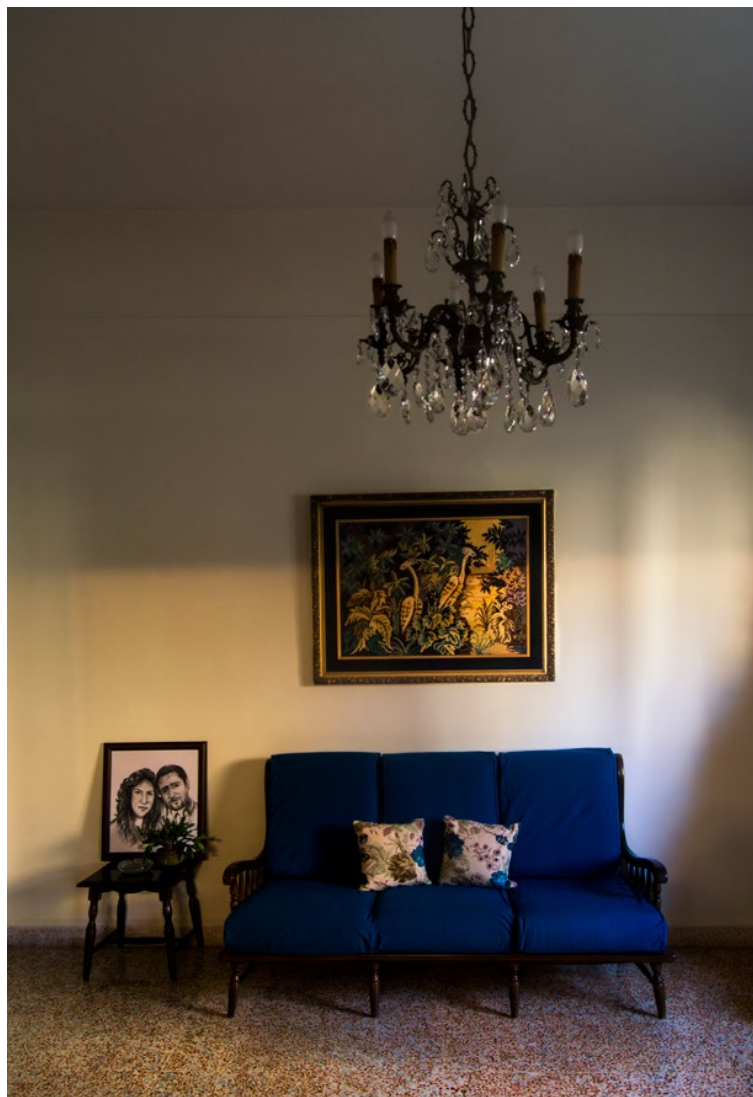
Charcoal, ink and engraving on cork
90 x 60 cm



Salvation 2 & 3

2018
 Charcoal, ink and engraving on cork
 90 x 60 cm





"ARCADIA ITSELF IS AN
INHERITED MYTH—A
METAPHORICAL MINDSCAPE,
AS DESIRABLE AS IT IS
UNATTAINABLE, A PURSUIT
AND A LIE. AL KADIRI'S ARCADIA
IS DENSE AND SOMETIMES
OBSCURE, SO TEEMING IN ITS
LUXURIANT DETAIL THAT IT
BECOMES OVERPOWERING,
ALMOST TURBULENT".

Kevin Jones



ARRIVAL & REUNION

Previous page:

Birds, Detail

2016

oil and charcoal on canvas

90x70 cm

The Arrival

2016

oil and charcoal on canvas

150x130 cm



ARCADIA

Gaby Maamary

The tale of a creative spirit dawns on the instant and spawns in the reminiscence. Ad hoc, the creation dictum anchors in the anima, awaiting, to burst into flame. Flamboyant, its genesis consumes even the artist himself. His artistic testimony cast an inevitable aphorism: my art is an eternal convent between joy and sorrow and I am its embodiment. I am Abed AlKadiri.

A conceptual neo-expressionist artist with a deep belonging to the contemporary world and strong attachment to humanity. His iconographical allegories stand as a unique exultation founded on the agonies of humankind.

A free spirit gravely tormented by the horrific events in the realm of Poseidon, Abed AlKadiri, had lucid dreams preventing him from sleep. One, in particular, awaits in his subconscious. There was a boy who wanted to overcome his fear of water. Henceforth, he hoists his courage and sets his mind on crossing the pool moving his petite hands across the ledge. Just halfway there, the lightning struck. He felt something squeezing his exhausted fingers. Across his tears, the boy beheld a hideous biped's elephantine feet crushing the boy's hopes. No one came to the rescue. The sun disappeared, and the sky was painted pitch black. A satiric laughter echoed in the emptiness.

Abed AlKadiri's last exhibition at Marc Hachem Gallery in Beirut was a pure apocalyptic transfiguration of a raging sea, drowning souls and disfigured faces. Like Goya's "Saturn devouring his son" the Kadiri Sea was eating his... by the hundreds, by the thousands. A craving, famishing, insatiate, voracious sea, yearning for more. A sea of a nightmare. A Greek tragedy where the heroes faced the inevitable destiny. Incapable of escaping fatality, the hopeless, expressionless hostages finally surrendered to their doomed faith.

The tenor message Abed AlKadiri transmitted through the "Ashes to the Sea" was even more frightening than the sceneries themselves. It went straight through him to those afflicted by the calamities. Not he nor anyone could have done anything to rescue them.

It seems that the artist had built a thick, impenetrable transparent wall around his sceneries imprisoning not his figures but the people outside in a fake crystal world. Reincarnating Nero's persona was not a preference of mine. Still, the artist was playing Nero; I was playing Nero, and the spectators were playing Nero on a Shakespearean stage. Unaware of the human bi-polar moment, we all stood and admired the subliminal beauty of the artwork.

The inferno's aftermath was unbearable. Therefore, the artist decided to put a blissful closure to his torment. He had to make peace with himself. Thus a new vision came to light— a vision of salvation. He settled the debts to Kharon, the ferryman of Hades who carries souls of the newly deceased to the world of the dead, and dismissed him. Afterward, he constructed a cork arch to save the perished. He even came to an agreement with Poseidon to grant the poor souls safe crossing. Thereon, he sets on searching for a land of hope. A contemporary generic image of a Never-never land where oppression and death, lamentation and requiems recede.

Abed AlKadiri's new collection is a serenade for peace and love dedicated to those who reached his shore. For them, he drafts and paints a silent yet reverberant storytelling of the human quest for the Kingdom of Man. For those fleeing the wars, the lesser children of God, he reinvents a sanctuary somewhere in a faraway dream.



For them, the disunited, he reconstructs an entire universe of love. A universe populated by the afflicted animus in a fabulous nature. A universe of a longtime forgotten heaven to fit whoever escaped Poseidon's fatality. A universe of rebirth, a new beginning, and a new life.

Abed AlKadiri condenses his visual novel into four main chapters: The salvation, the arrival, the reunion, the vows. They narrate the Hermitage Genesis and the life of its occupants. Man and woman completed in charcoal, a ballad of charcoal and oil paint, or a crystal soprano of the oil paint itself.

The narration transcends gradually in content and elements of art to transmit the symbolical meaning of his drawings and paintings. The materials and the processes of the artworks amplify the diverse potency of the human condition.

THE SALVATION

This chapter illustrates groups of figures executed with ink and charcoal on cork panels. It depicts a series of portraits and unified backgrounds decorated with diverse ceramic patterns. Abed AlKadiri's choice of materials magnifies the idea of salvation and dramatizes the figures' moral attitudes. The ink washes and charcoal diaphaneity and softness contrast with the cork's resilience and coarseness. Both media mature to the figures' fragile essence. And, the cork, an insulated ground, expands to float the portraits across the water to safety.

The subjects' stillness, the absence of cast shadow, and the gazing wide open eyes disclose an air of indifference. However, their presence in the foreground and the emanating baroque environment enhance an esoteric commitment and involvement.

The ceramic walls cast an oriental atmosphere, a reference to various Arab cultures. The classic compositions and dynamic low-key rendering simulate the aspect of daguerreotypes. The ambiance is atemporal.

THE ARRIVAL

The second series of imago is an attribution to the landing of refugees in the Never-never land. The painting of the couple in their life-jackets echoes the arrival. Aghast, the figures drift in Arcadia. Colorful trees and exotic birds surround them. Bewildered, the lovers detach from each other and from reality. The charcoal sketches the survivals in ghostly-like figures. The rest flourish in a chromatic circle of oil paint. Uneasy and uncertain, they retreat to the background. Speechless, their empty eyes gaze to the horizon. Only trees and birds break the silence.

THE REUNION

The third sequence reunites the lovers after their disparity. Abed AlKadiri stresses on the reunion as an inevitable outcome, a necessity. Time casts away grief and sorrow. Less and less charcoal and more and more oil paint render life to their complexions. They discovered the Kingdom of Man, the Never-never land, Arcadia, and they feel secure. The sense of belonging is evident. Arcadia is their home now. Reconciled with nature and themselves, the ghostly-like figures are forevermore birds of a feather. Shameless, they cajole and embrace in a rococo atmosphere. Romance is their chromatic canopy.

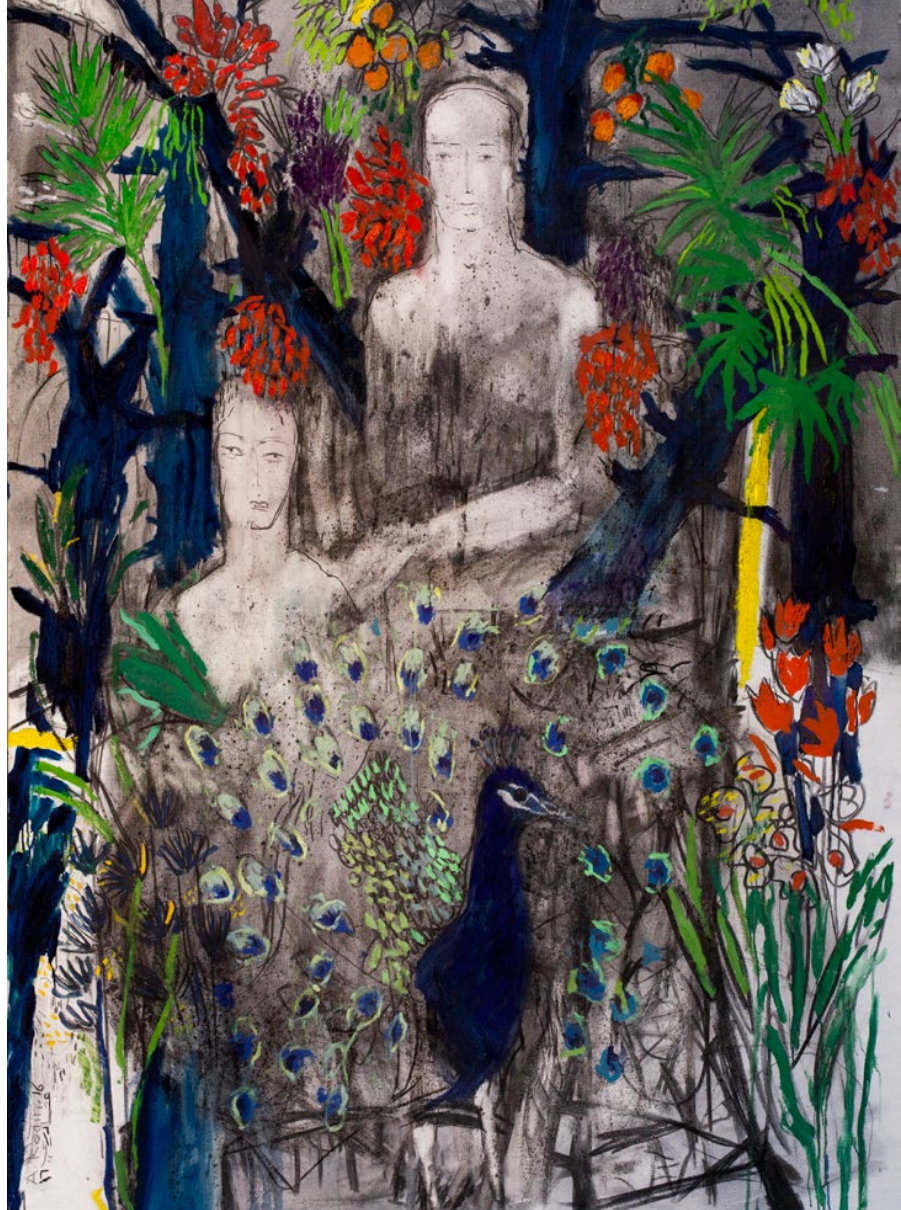
THE VOWS

The ultimate causatum is revealed in the fourth and last episode. Settled in Arcadia, Adam and Eve rediscover themselves, reunite and repledge their vows. It is the romantic age. Abed AlKadiri, with a delicate sensibility, twins with the -18century mystic writer Novalis. While the novelist's hero, Heinrich von Ofterdingen, sets to search for the blue flower that haunted his dreams, Abed AlKadiri, a wandering poet, sets to search for his. The artist's epic journey came to an end when his eyes caught the red flower amongst the pure white fields of the Greek pastoral land. The unfading red flower symbolizes Adam's eternal, undying love to Eve. Through the power of love, the human race is vindicated.



Reunion 2

2016
oil and charcoal on canvas
130 x 90 cm



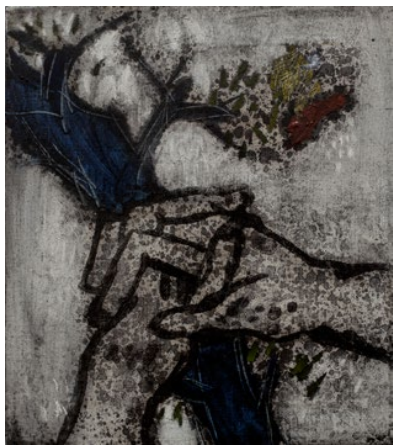
On the left:

Reunion 1

2016

oil and charcoal on canvas

200 x 140 cm





Unity (1 to 5)
2016
oil and charcoal on canvas
40x35 cm (each)



Reunion 3

2016

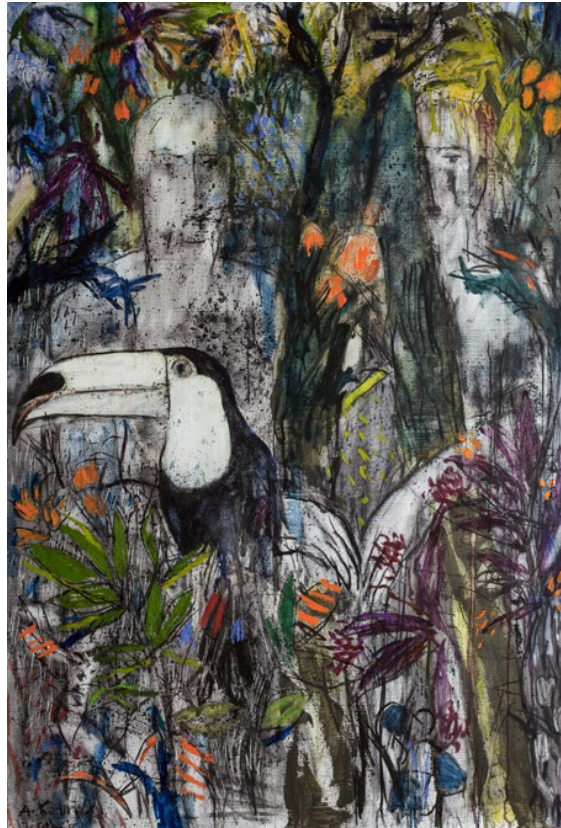
oil and charcoal on canvas
130 x 90 cm

Next page:

Gaze on the horizon

2016

oil and charcoal on canvas
108x202







"..HE RECONSTRUCTS AN ENTIRE
UNIVERSE OF LOVE. A UNIVERSE
POPULATED BY THE AFFLICTED
ANIMUS IN A FABULOUS NATURE.
A UNIVERSE OF A LONGTIME
FORGOTTEN HEAVEN TO FIT
WHOEVER ESCAPED POSEIDON'S
FATALITY. A UNIVERSE OF
REBIRTH, A NEW BEGINNING,
AND A NEW LIFE."

Gaby Maamary



THE VOW



Longing

2016

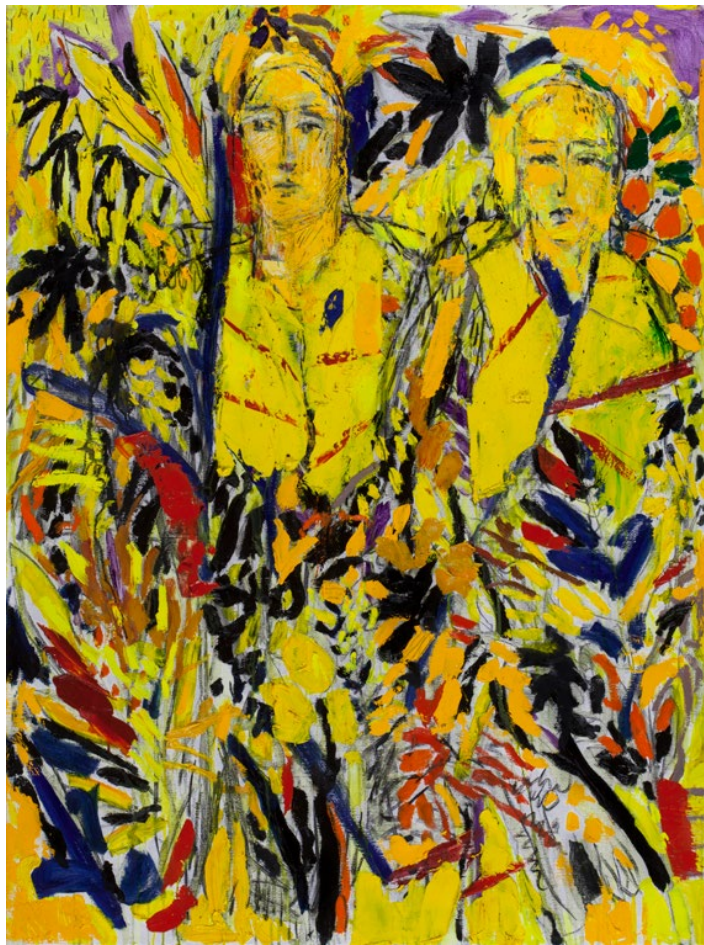
oil and charcoal on canvas

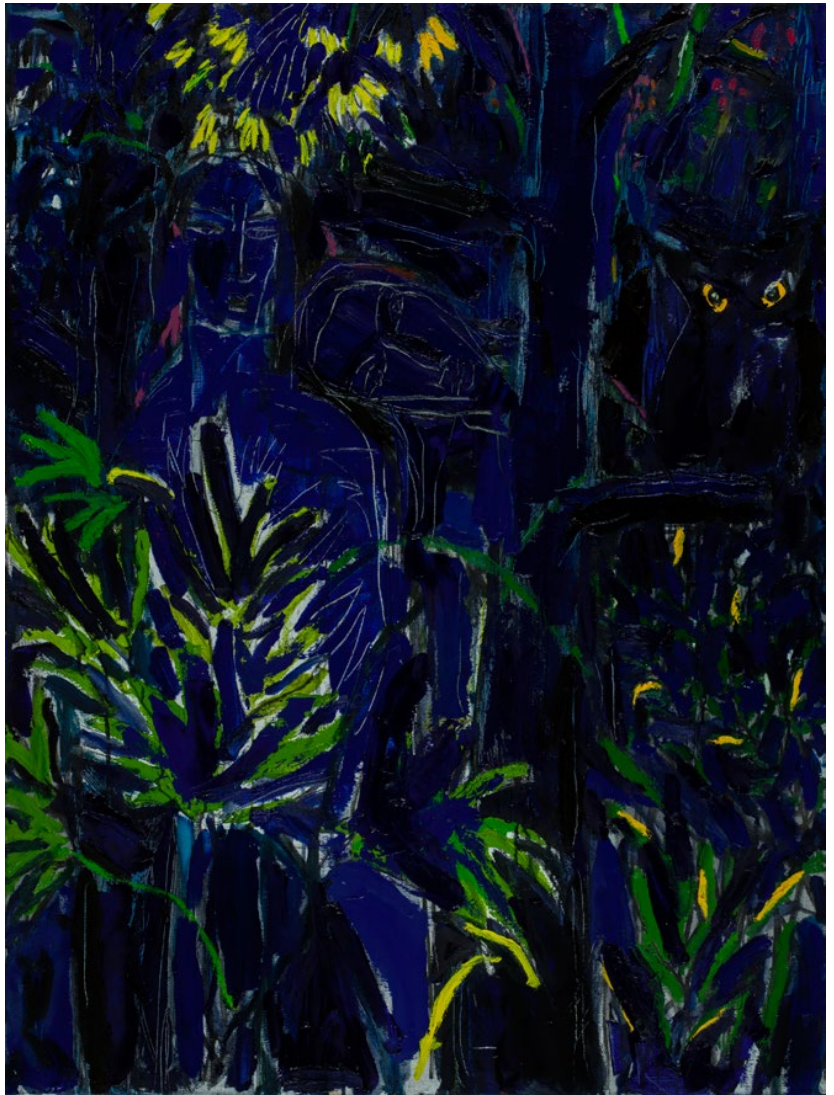
200 x 140 cm

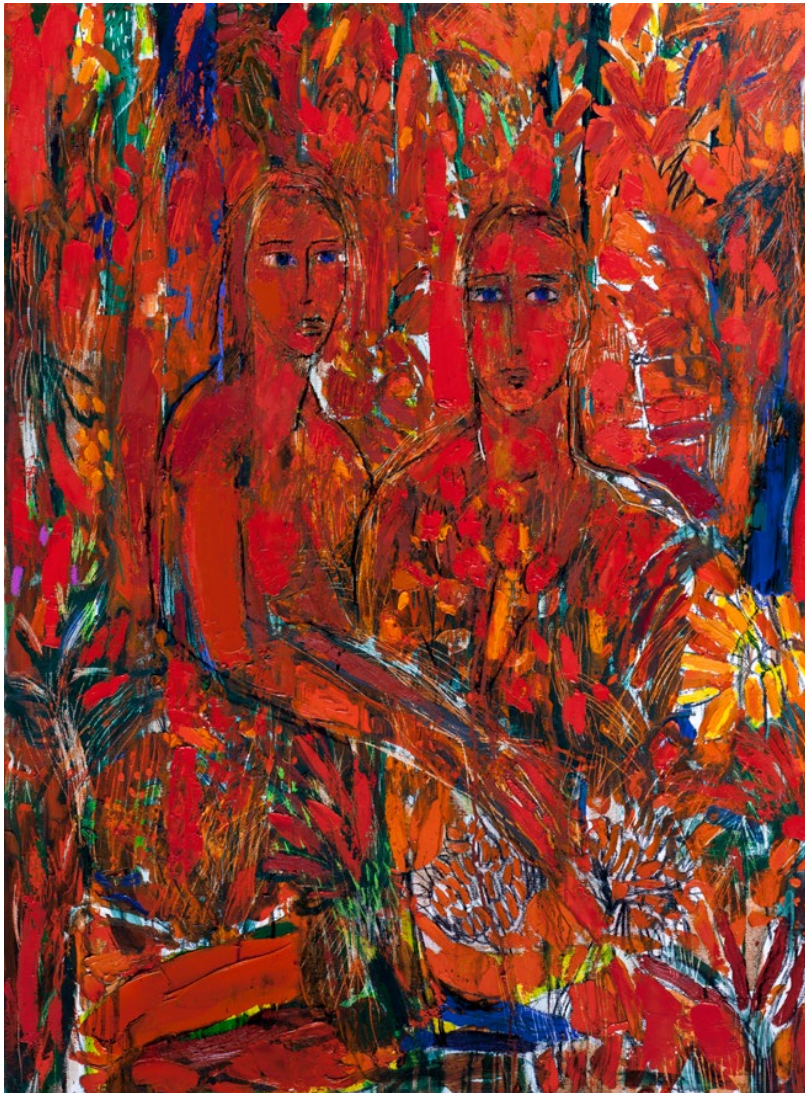
Longing 2

2016

oil and charcoal on canvas
120 x 90 cm







On the left:
Starry Night
2016
oil and charcoal on canvas
120 x 90 cm

Longing 3
2016
oil and charcoal on canvas
120 x 90 cm



Obscurity

2016
oil on canvas
120 x 90 cm

The Vow 2

2016
oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



The Vow
2016
oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm







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