



Maria Saleh Mahameed / Tangle of Vines

Introspection

Maria Saleh Mahameed's artwork is grounded in a process of introspection, the horizons of which delineate a search for the meaning and value of life. This much is true of her work "Tangle of Vines", which unfolds before us like a fabric of life, charting her personal milestones and mapping them like a visual diary of emotions, thoughts and memories. This work is inspired by traditions from the homes of her father, who was born here, in Umm al-Fahm, and her mother, born in Kiev, Ukraine, by references and associations from her cultural landscape and lived experience, and by times and places where the real and imaginary converge. "Tangle of Vines" is a 30-meter-long panoramic pictorial installation that enables both a linear and a circular reading. The images interlaced in it have mostly emerged all at once, without a preparatory sketch or prior planning, as an action painting that evinces bodily contours, feet and fingers as a physical and spiritual presence. Whereas the work may seem black and charred, a closer look reveals subtle notes of paint, breathing life into the painting.

Conflict

Similar to other examples of Saleh Mahameed's oeuvre, this one is also charged with irritating tensions and contradictions. Such is her image of the sabre: disproportionately large, cumbersome and charcoal gray, its palms bearing the burden of symbolism that the inhabitants of this land customarily carry – the struggle for rootedness, belonging and identity. Facing it is a pile of weapons, a silent reminder to an ongoing passionate, bloody and aimless conflict. A thicket of barbed wire entangled with severed sabre palms, denuded of their prickles and dying in the sun, gives the conflict its symbolic appearance of gloomy purposelessness.

Life and Death

The double portrait of the artist and Mashka's white figure, the artist's beloved cat, are at the heart of this work. The feline's death awakened a maelstrom of emotions in Saleh Mahameed: "My Princess Mashka who used to sleep by my side almost every day, and who was with me wherever I went. Her toe prints may be found in many of my canvases. I did not want to include her in this sketch, but could not avoid it". Next to the cat, the artist's self-portrait is sketched, part of which is inclined downwards, towards the ground, while the other is turned upwards and skywards. Her palms, shaped like a *Hamsa* amulet, and the pictorial duality that merges sky and soil, body and soul, become a heroic attempt of sorts to capture an ephemeral moment between life and death. Also painted here is a mound of stones that echoes the tombstone in the other section of the painting, as a holy place.



Moment and Eternity

In another section of the work, the artist's figure is seen, perhaps lying, perhaps hovering over what may be perceived as a bed – mattress, pillow, backrest – or alternatively as a tombstone. Saleh Mahameed elaborates: "I'm lying sad, thinking of life and death. I recall my dearest relatives – grandpa Farid who spent the last seven years of his life bedridden, and grandma Luba, who died in her bed". Additional images – including a rooster, a grape bunch, a vine tendril, a trellis window, a pair of radiators and the table of her maternal grandmother, complete with a glass of kefir (thin yoghurt), a slice of bread, reading glasses and an olive leaf's – describe a living environment inspired by Arab as well as Ukrainian iconography and folklore. This entire assemblage encapsulates a journey to the momentary experience and at the same time, a reflection on what is beyond the immediate time and place of experience.

Iconography

This triptych echoes iconographic influences from popular Cuban art, Ukrainian folklore, Arab traditions, Pietà representations, Ivan Kramskoi's "Christ in the Desert", Giorgione's "Sleeping Venus", Picasso's "Guernica", Chaïm Soutine's "Red Gladioli", and other paintings by Edvard Munch, Diego Rivera, and Frida Kahlo.

Yaniv Shapira