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Claude Lemand Gallery  
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# Shafic Abboud

by Emmanuel Daydé



Shafic Abboud. **Un Matin, 1995**  
Oil on canvas, 132 x 144 cm. Copyright Succession Shafic Abboud  
Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

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*I only stop when both  
colour and light match.  
I cannot escape from colour,  
it is my fate and nature  
- my eyes must have been  
dazzled for ever.  
The impact between two  
colours creates light.'*

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- Shafic Abboud, May 1982

**W**here will we go when the lights go out and we gather all together?, asked the feisty American-Lebanese poetess and painter Etel Adnan. 'We will all go to Paradise' seems to be the answer of her contemporary Shafic Abboud, whose paintings that are inebriated with light, woven with colours like carpets, enclosed like the Garden of Eden and rustling like Persian miniatures, appear as transfigured visions of an intangible reality. It seems that his entire oeuvre follows some of the Bonnardian aspects of the joie de vivre, as is proven through the title of one of his paintings, *Cette place pour le Bonheur* ('That space for happiness'). Abboud remains a mystical believer of the moment, who is capable of sacrificing everything to this wild god. With his troubled nature, the Levantine artist desperately fights against time that consumes us and against depression that threatens him. He does this by making his canvases flutter and vibrate with a fire that burns, warms up and consumes itself, using all sorts of yellow, orange and red colour variations from the complex East.

There are some aspects of a meticulous alchemist in this magician of colours, as is proven throughout his books of paintings or his notebooks covered with sentences neatly framed, similar to some form of patchwork that is to be read as well as being looked at. There is also the >



Shafic Abboud. **Composition**, 1973  
Tempera on cardboard, 35 x 35 cm  
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notion of a musician lost in the harmony of spheres in this man crazy about Beethoven's quartets. The latter supposedly possessed 'the gift of perpetual migration', according to his friend André Boucourechliev, the composer. For example, in his *Quatuor* ("Quartet") of 1977, Abboud's painting is never still as there is always movement, sparkling, passion, iridescence. Finally, there is a mystical approach to the flesh in this wounded hedonist, who wants to 'look at Nature straight in the eyes' and who paints nudes like landscapes and landscapes like nudes on the ceiling. Born in the Greek Orthodox village of Mhaidse in 1926, at the heart of the Lebanese mountains, Abboud the sensualist painter remained a maker of icons all his life, these '*splendors of light and beauty, glorious with liquid gold*', as the poet of the two riverbanks, Georges Schehadé, called them. Although he moved away from his childhood memories when he settled down in France, next to the enchanted garden of the Montsouris park, and that he ended up rejecting the confessional politics that sparked the fire in Lebanon, he never stopped sanctifying the secular between Beirut and Paris, painting here 'where the heat is appeasing' during the summer, and there, 'where the temperature brings the brain to a boil' during the winter.

As the paths of modernity were inscrutable, that of Post-War abstraction only served him as a way of cultivating his garden by irrigating the tradition of new lights. Just ten years before he passed away, he wanted to see again the Greek Orthodox monastery of Saidnaya one more time. Located on the Syrian foothills of the Anti-Lebanon, his mother used to take him on pilgrimages when he was a child to go see one of the three paintings depicting the Virgin Mary and attributed to Saint Luke. From his fascination with icons - and hence from Siennese painting, stemming from the latter - Abboud preserved the idea of not representing the world around us but rather transfiguring it. Even when he doesn't use the deep and absolute matt of tempera, he employs light and pure colours, from which emerge his hypothetical figures in a static and frontal way, illuminating them from within (and not from behind, as in the black Midi works of his friend Marfaing). There is no better example that alludes to the theory of saints in Orthodox deism than his painting of his golden brown Ladies of the gallery of 1977 - without mentioning his series on Simone's dress or the full-length portrait of a Saudi woman, titled *Widad Dress*. Even when all figural traces seem to have disappeared, the child of the mountain pursues his visions in ecstasies of colours: *The collision of two colours provokes light... Colour, I will never escape from it, it is a fatality, it is my nature*, he used to say; *'my eyes must have been dazzled forever'*.

Even if it was only a way into his later oeuvre, the moving poetic figuration of his paintings from 1947 to 1953 heralds a universe of dreams that are already compartmentalized, through soft grey colour tones, almost transparent. He uses a folkloric construction, similar to that of Zoran Music's small Dalmatian



horses. His slender and dreamlike strokes are borrowed from Paul Klee, whilst the little secret stories that the Fous or La boîte à images tell each other refer to the happy childhood days, when young Shafic was like a bird, living off clean air and fresh water by absorbing the stories that his grandmother used to tell him. Yet there is no need to begin such an ordinary narration in the Paris of the 1950s that strives to forget the horrors of the war through the regeneration of abstract art. Although he fundamentally rejects its components, the Lebanese painter adheres to the lyrical Abstraction praised by critic Roger van Gindertael and applies an integral abstraction in the same way as Poliakov, finding the inner realm he sought for in the Russian artist's combinations of silent shapes. However, he complicated these sensorial, and here again iconic puzzles, by building them with stacks of colours, just like in his dense cycle of the *Saisons* ("Seasons") dated 1959, depicting an imaginary muddy topography that foreshadows Eugène Leroy's rotten magmatic *Saisons*. Far from being a Middle-Eastern epigone, Abboud is a discoverer. If we attribute the invention of the 'black-light' to Pierre Soulages, then we need to attribute the invention of the 'colour-light' to Shafic Abboud, considering his skill in making his canvas colourless through the use of colours. As in the art of manuscript illuminations, he knows how to extend his monochrome neutral figures through coloured images. Yet the empty space of abstract art, that approaches strict geometry, was beginning to suffocate him. A painting such as *Enfantine* of 1964 tacitly echoes the luminous composition of Nicolas de Staël's *Méditerranée*.

At the same time as creating his abstract religious school, he illustrated fairy-tales for his daughter Christine as well as producing a magical lantern in the shape of a cinema-box, that shows movies that are

as still as the Quay Brothers' short animation films. *I do not oppose abstract painting against figurative painting*, de Staël claimed to his accusers, *'A painting should be simultaneously abstract and figurative. Abstract for acting like a wall, figurative as being a representation of space'*. This space is what Abboud wants to conquer from that point onward, taking something caused by reality as the starting point to then be blurred in the great Baroque carpets gleaming with colours, or, on the contrary, in the whiteness of immaculate snow or the dullness of minimal night. Then, the entire world wears clothes worthy of the Thousand and One Nights, whether it be in the shimmering fabrics of the Saint Pierre market, his mother's blue-stained stretched out dead body, Merce Cunningham's Zen performance at the Fondation Maeght, the nostalgic memory of Paradise on Beirut's beach, the children's beds in the room, the fields surrounding his little house on the Loire river banks or the ultimate monochrome beaches, 'so soft that they can be touched with the eyes'.

In a time where there becomes here, when the Museum of Modern Art of Paris is getting ready to dedicate a large exhibition to Iranian artistic creation and the Pompidou Centre is featuring Arab informal abstraction in its show entitled *Modernités plurielles*, it is only natural to turn towards Modern Lebanese Art and its solitary pioneers, headed by Saliba Douaihy and Shafic Abboud. Being the only Arab artist who showcased his works at the First Biennial of Paris in 1959 - exhibiting side by side to Yves Klein, Martin Barré, André Marfaing and Joan Mitchell - Abboud succeeded in escaping from the Second School of Paris, by breathing into his luminous and formal conquests an oriental incandescence, that is as dazzling as it is unexpected.♦

*Translated from French by Valérie Hess*

*Facing page, top:* Shafic Abboud. **Dimanches croisés, 1984**  
Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm. Copyright Succession Shafic Abboud

*Facing page, bottom:* Shafic Abboud. **La Chambre, 1975**  
Oil on canvas, 114 x 146 cm. Copyright Succession Shafic Abboud

Claude Lemand Gallery held 15 solo shows of works by the Lebanese Master SHAFIC ABBOD (Lebanon 1926-Paris 2004), from different periods and aspects of his Art. Claude Lemand has the most important collection of Abboud's masterpieces, both in Public or in Private collections, he wrote analysis on his personality and works, published his Monograph in 2006, curated his Retrospective in 2011 in Paris at the Institut du Monde Arabe and published the Catalogue. He initiated the Shafic Abboud Retrospective in 2012, in the Beirut Exhibition Center.

Shafic Abboud is one of the foremost Arab Artists of the 20th century. His paintings are a manifesto for freedom, colour and light, as well as being a permanent bridge between the art of Europe and the Middle East. He was very attached to Lebanon, to its landscapes, its light and his own childhood memories. He was from a Lebanese Arab Modern culture, strongly influenced by the stories of his grandmother, the paintings of the travelling story-tellers and by the Byzantine icons. The writings of the Arab Nahda were to later have a significant impact on his intellectual education. He played in Lebanon, before 1976 and after 1993, a major role for Beirut's cultural and artistic life. His mature works are 'transfigurative', because of Abboud's search for a synthesis between his fairy-tale like childhood world and his technical mastering of abstract Parisian painting. He transfigured images filtered from his memory into painting, such as his series of *Destroyed Cafés* of 1990.

Shafic Abboud  
**Robes-puzzles de Domenica II, 1979**  
Collage of temperas on paper, 45 x 35 cm  
Copyright Succession Shafic Abboud  
Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

