

Holding the Gaze

Rafik El Kamel – Drawings (1987)

We don't get into Rafik El Kamel's abstract painting. It runs through us. But first of all, the artwork imposes a posture on us: to be there, in front of it, and puts us to the test of holding the gaze. We confront it, we clash with it, we struggle with it, because the eye seeks the anchoring points from which a fragment of figure would emerge, as a path of salvation towards an understanding. "Understanding what? If I myself cease not to understand, I will no longer do anything. What I do is first and foremost a series of questions" (1) says Rafik El Kamel. Abstraction takes here its most essential meaning: to tear out, subtract and decompose to leave only a request made to the gaze. The painter counters the insinuations of the figure to remove the fabric of a mediation by familiar forms. In constructing his work, he dismantles everything that might hinder the viewer's experience in his primary task: to look the pictorial fact in the face.

For El Kamel, "The function of a work of art is first of all in itself. If we consider Art as a simple decoration - which is now outdated - we deny its true function which is to live in the one who looks at it and to impose the problems it raises on him." (2). This series of drawings made in 1987 does not fail to establish more firmly this discourse where the line tends towards nothing but itself. Although untitled, these works nevertheless follow the path of his Transfigurations, his explorations beyond the figure. And this is the demand of El Kamel's art: to undo the mechanics of the hand, the tropism of the line that appears and to rediscover the naked pictorial fact, the raw plasticity. This search leads him to break the frame of the doing and to probe a painting that is being experimented while reaching its completion. Thus, a left hand, still authentic, was tearing off the tools with the right hand, too educated, to find a drawing without a purpose, to restore a line without horizons. "I wanted, he says in 1985, at a certain point, to get rid of all my assets. I noticed that they had become disturbing. I'm talking about my academic background in the 1960s and 1970s. (...) I even had to stop working with my right hand, even if I wasn't left-handed, to break with a certain skill".

Defeat of a too skillful hand and also defeat of a painting system. To the line that joins, Rafik El Kamel opposes a line that divides. A counter-line which is already the first to be installed in the work that is being done. In a set of stencils always reinvented, a skeleton, in reserve, comes to disarticulate the jets of a gesture, the vehemence of a brush. Inked masses are born, possessed by a body in act taking possession of its surfaces. After a first eminently pictorial time, where the painter brings and roots his body, the hand that traces cadences another measure. That of giving another body to these living masses of the impulses of the gesture. A transubstantiation takes shape and a graphic body takes its place and comes to life in the body of the work. A graphic body inhabiting the paper with its black contours and outbursts, living with its moods breathed in by the pulses traced in red and yellow.

If the figure, as the essence of the word teaches us, is what pretends to be, Rafik El Kamel's pictorial experiences, in trying to abstract themselves from all figuration, show painting in its primordial being: its plasticity, stripped of all iconicity. The painter reveals this being in each crossing he makes between the body that paints and the painting that is made body and whose vital function lies within itself. These crossings, continuously questioned by reinventing the creation process, are perhaps these transfigurations that the artist constructs in each of his works. Crossings which, in a specular exchange, only give themselves to live in us if we hold our gaze until it gives way, until it gets rid of what conditions it in daily life, until it frees itself.

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- (1) Interview by Youssef Seddik, *La Presse de Tunisie*, December 17, 1977.
- (2) Interview by Youssef Seddik in « L'art entre le public et la galerie », *La Presse de Tunisie*, April 3, 1976.
- (3) « Enfin, on reparle de l'art abstrait », Interview by Bady Ben Naceur, *Dialogue*, n°549, April 15, 1985.