

Refusal to Lie on the Analyst's Couch

By *Bavand Behpoor*



Untitled, 2011, ink on paper, 100x100cm. Courtesy of artist.

“A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch,” write Deleuze and Guattari in the opening pages of *Anti-Oedipus* before bringing in an example from a novella, Lenz. The figures of Ali Nassir’s paintings seem to take up the advice and follow this “better model.” In the purely subjective world of these paintings—which would pass for abstract

painting were it not for the obscure presence of certain camouflaged figures—the figures resist psychoanalytical analysis. They simply refuse to lie down on the couch, as their problem is not psychological: “A breath of fresh air, a relationship with the outside world. Lenz’s stroll, for example, as reconstructed by Büchner. This walk outdoors is different from the moments when Lenz

finds himself closeted with his pastor, who forces him to situate himself socially, in relationship to the God of established religion, in relationship to his father, to his mother.” Although in times they bear indicators of social status or age, the painted figures move out of their social context, but not completely, as in a stroll in nature. The very few lines which portray them from time to time show the contours of a boot or a coat indicating that the city is nearby. They are more of personalities than “bodies”. They have not returned to the arms of Mother Nature; they are taken out of a machine (“producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines”) for a moment to be examined in isolation. Nassir provides them with a space—their own space—where they can interact with the surroundings and construct their world. Like a scientific camera, his paintings capture signals from the figures and their inner self and visualize them, without necessarily making them comprehensible: they serve as MRI images of brain displayed to a non-specialist.

This is not just the theme of one or two series of Nassir’s paintings. It is more than four decades now that Ali Nassir is recording his protagonists on a daily basis. The figures are studied on an ontological level, yet represent nothing generic. They are very particular indeed: they mainly represent the artist, his wife or their son. The figures and objects portrayed in these paintings are anything but symbols standing for something else—which was, and still is, a general characteristic of the works of many Iranian artists. They also avoid narration, again uncommon in Iranian visual arts, where literature has clearly exerted its influence. The figures in these paintings stand for themselves. They do not represent man and woman in general, or mother and father in general, or anything general: they have freed themselves from social bonds: “While taking a stroll outdoors, on the other hand, he is in the mountains, amid falling snowflakes, with other gods or without any god at all, without a family, without a father or a mother, with nature.” The figures represent, but refrain from explaining. The painter meticulously avoids formation of any semantics in his work. Anything that might refer to a concept is ruthlessly removed. The figures are transferred to a world where things have no names: “Lenz has projected himself back to a time before the

man-nature dichotomy, before all the co-ordinates based on this fundamental dichotomy have been laid down.” In such a world, figures and objects do not even own their colours or contour lines. They are rather invaded by them, and thus merge into the context: “He thought that it must be a feeling of endless bliss to be in contact with the profound life of every form, to have a soul for rocks, metals, water, and plants, to take into himself, as in a dream, every element of nature, like flowers that breathe with the waxing and waning of the moon.” Compared to Lenz, however, these figures seem to convey exactly the opposite feeling; to them, a contact with their environment is no bliss or relief. It is an ongoing challenge. There is nothing pastoral about what Ali Nassir portrays, nothing mystical. Like the protagonists of Beckett, the figures are rather tormented in this machine. The clear-cut boundaries between subject and object or inside and outside becomes porous: “There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species of life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.” Yet, Nassir’s figures fight for preserving their individuality. They are in a constant challenge with their surroundings and as such, are portrayed very dynamically: in thousands of images Ali Nassir has studied their “becoming” in one single style: every day, he probes into a world which is not completely known to him in order to translate it into colors. To his figures, color provides an escape from the cruel convictions of language. Language has never done them justice. Contrary to expressionist paintings, his paintings are mute and the figures reflect in silence and anxiety on their situation. This imbues the works with a mythical quality, as if the viewers were confronted with an ancient language which cannot be decoded. This forces the viewer to rely on what might be a very basic and universal language among men: this is the domain of mythology—in the case of Nassir, a contemporary and urban mythology.

In his recent works, the figures have come to terms with this agony and have realized the Beckettian Endgame situation to which they are subjected. They have actually come a long way. In the early phase of Nassir work (1983-6), the artist was obsessed with



Nocturnal II, 1985, Oil on canvas, 190x160cm. Courtesy of artist.

the dichotomy of the Sovereign and the Victim, catastrophe was recorded at the moment of occurrence, the figures enjoyed clear boundaries, and eroticism and violence had a clear presence. After a short period of fascination with abstraction (1988) he soon returned to figurative painting, this time focusing on the theme of death, portraying decaying figures gathering around coffins. His recent figures, however, are soothed by a Beckettian fatalism. They cannot go on, yet, they have to, and so, they will. As an Iranian artist, Ali Nassir is unique in his generation in that most characteristics of Iranian modern art is absent from his work. His bitter materialist approach to portrayal of man differentiates his work from that of most Iranian artists, with the exception of another figurative painter and sculptor, Bahman Mohasses (1931-2010). However, in the

structure of his paintings he is admittedly inspired by Iranian miniature painting in both its luminous and daring coloring as well as the flat arrangement of elements which defies perspective and allows viewer's eyes to constantly between different parts and not rest on a specific point. The different planes in his works (providing depth without the help of perspective) are also a reminiscent of miniature painting. As a German artist, Ali Nassir might be categorized very differently. Although he started studying painting in Berlin in 1978 during the high time of German neo-expressionism and has worked and lived there ever since, his works have gone down their own path, too obsessed with the personal world they portray than to react to major global or local political or artistic events. Compared to the works of the neo-expressionists (aka Neue Wilde



Untitled, 2013, acrylic on paper, 100x70cm. Courtesy of artist.

movement), Nassir's paintings prefer a less aggressive but more melancholic and philosophical approach and are not bent on intimidating the viewer with their visual might. Such a quality is shared by many other Iranian modern artists of the same generation established outside Iran whose works enjoy a milder tone in comparison to their western counterparts. The works of Ali Nassir are prouder than to focus on impressing their viewers. They are painted without thinking of the viewer and do not hide this. In their technique and the way in which colors are applied, they come in times close to Kandinsky's Blue Rider period, yet distance themselves from him in their opposition to any sort of "Spirituality in Art". The works of Ali Nassir show an introversion which is expressed through taking his figures to the open air, through putting them on stage

to show their relationship to one another, like a mute theatre. The mise en scène, the setting, the figures are all diverted towards portraying (instead of narrating) the world of his protagonist. As if looking through a keyhole, the viewer is invited to peep through the inner world of these solitary figures, who would have kept it to themselves were it not for Nassir's mediation.

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