

RUPTURE INTO LIGHT



MARWAN SAHMARANI

**RUPTURE
INTO
LIGHT**

**THE
FARJAM
FOUNDATION**


SAHMARANI

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Foreword

Throughout history, artists have been agents who give shape to expressions of human experience. Their work and legacy carry forward in an enduring way the essence of what matters. **“Rupture into Light”** is Marwan Sahmarani’s exposé of the battle between destruction and renewal; it is testimony to an artist’s journey as he navigates the realities of human behaviour.

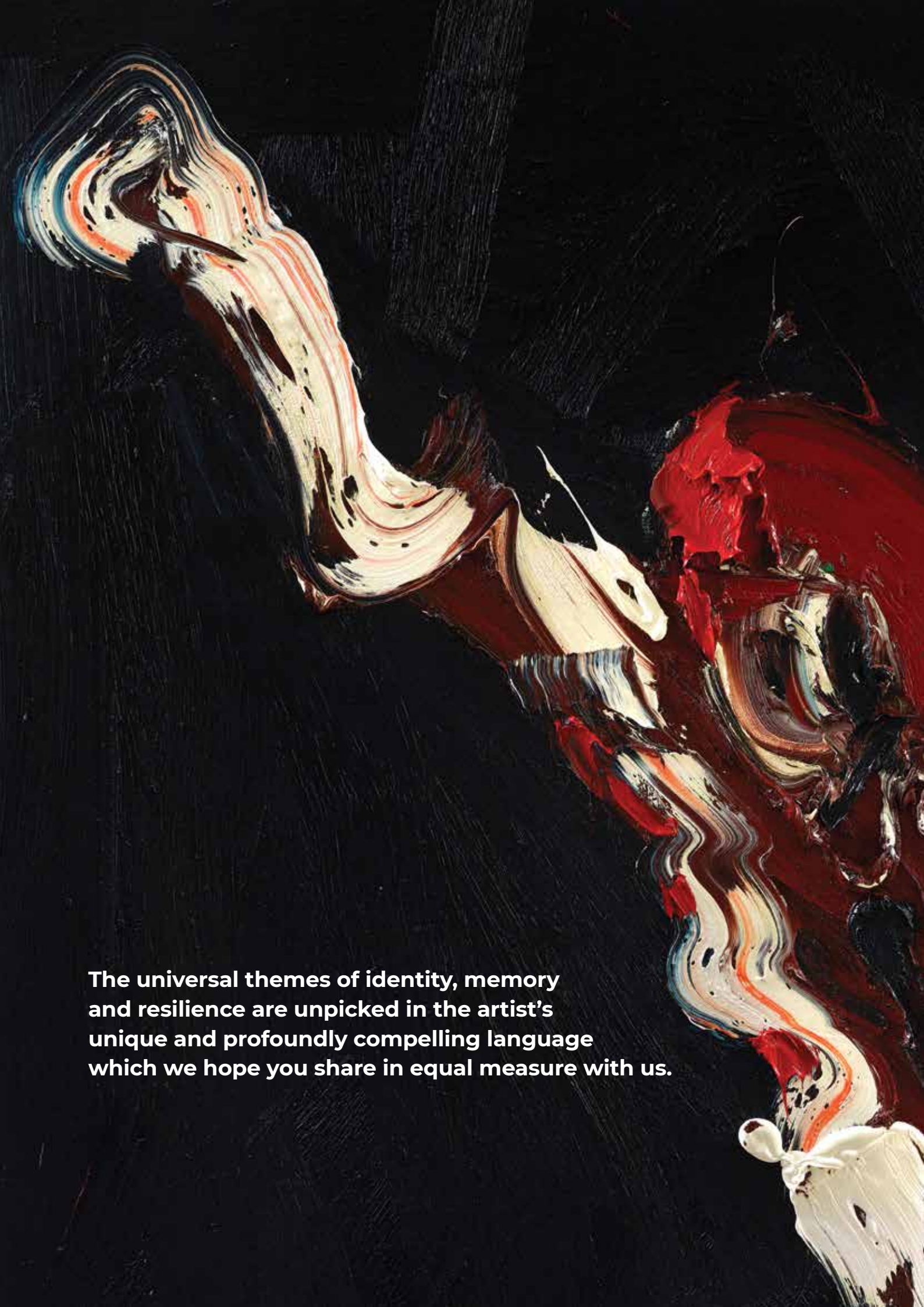
The Farjam Foundation subscribes to the idea of art as moral compass. Art records not only beauty but also courage, honesty, and perseverance – qualities that underpin the true meaning of advancement in human civilization. These values are powerfully explored in Sahmarani’s work: bearing witness as he does to conflict and violence, illuminated by the human capacity to rebuild meaning from the ashes of collapse. We proudly present this moving exhibition which is in line with our mission of preserving art which resonates beyond a single moment.

From a personal point of view, I was struck by Marwan’s rare combination of intellect, creativity, and humility since our very first encounter.

His quiet kindness belies the extraordinary force of his art. Standing before his canvases, one is confronted by a world of emotional and psychological intensity – where colour and gesture become the language of inner conflict and renewal. His unique style transcends the personal and the political, probing the perpetual struggle between good and evil, the individual and society. But when he turns to nature, his brush finds serenity – a reflection of harmony and reconciliation, as if there he finds a state of peace. In my view, Marwan’s work embodies a profound understanding of both the turbulence and the grace of human existence, revealing new depths that define his mastery.

I would like to express my gratitude to Marwan for his candour and trust, and to the Foundation team for their research.

Dr Farhad Farjam
Founder and Chair
The Farjam Foundation



The universal themes of identity, memory and resilience are unpicked in the artist’s unique and profoundly compelling language which we hope you share in equal measure with us.

Curatorial Essay

Lebanon has long held an important place in the development of modern and contemporary Arab art. From the mid-20th century onward, Beirut emerged as one of the Arab world's most dynamic artistic capitals—a cosmopolitan meeting point where regional and international influences intersected. Its unique position, at once Mediterranean and Middle Eastern, gave Lebanon a cultural fluidity that allowed it to absorb European modernist ideas while fostering a distinctly Arab aesthetic identity. Its leading artists adapted Cubism, abstraction, and expressionism to reflect regional themes, philosophies, and aesthetics. They strove to embody the search for an authentically Arab modernism rather than a derivative European style. Even amid the disruptions of the civil war (1975–1990), Lebanon's artistic legacy persisted. The postwar generation—emerging from trauma and diaspora—continued to redefine Arab visual culture through new forms and global dialogues. In this sense, Lebanon remains not just a participant but a crucible for Arab modernism: a space where tradition, innovation, and identity continually converge. Marwan Sahmarani was born into this culturally rich yet fractured environment - wartime Beirut - to a Palestinian Christian mother from Jaffa who had fled her homeland and settled in Lebanon and who later married a Lebanese Muslim of Jewish descent. Atypically, he grew up with three religions, at a time of turmoil and uncertainties. His family hid their religion, confusing for a young child who nevertheless thrived on his own inner world, making drawings from observing the few that were hanging on the wall at home. In traditional cultures where success is defined by following such professions as medicine or engineering, it is little surprise that Marwan only made the decision to be a full-time artist at the age of 30. Prior to that, like many Lebanese artists before him, he studied art in Paris, followed by a period of exploring other options.

As an artist, Marwan was part of a generation whose artistic formation was shaped by the post-war context, by international exposure, and by return to a culture that engages with local realities as well as the wider art discourse. His practice can be seen as part of the legacy of Lebanese modernism: absorbing the global modernist vernacular while moving into the contemporary condition of Arab art – one where the trauma of conflict, memory, rupture and identity are central themes. His technique engages with post-colonial, mid-twentieth century developments in abstraction and deconstructed figuration, drawing both on classical mythology and regional heritage. Favouring interrogation and provocation over intellectualization, Sahmarani's work above all welcomes interpretation (of which there have been many) and emotional response. The visceral, unbridled use of impasto, the swirling forms and energetic gestural brushstroke all evoke a larger-than-life personality and a seamless connection between artist and artwork. He has talked about seeking the essence and core of a truth, to extract the reality of a situation by means of an aesthetic language that refers to a wide panoply of influences. Even when painting struggled as a medium, Marwan firmly remained a painter's painter – bold, uncompromising and not yielding to trends, working in the manner of masters that tackle the great – almost Shakespearian – themes of death, tragedy, destruction and redemption. How then, do these five major works illuminate Sahmarani's journey as artist and his narrative as a story-teller?

RUPTURE INTO LIGHT as a title was inspired by the notion of the disruptive, violent forces which may – or may not – give birth to a light beyond. It came from the conceptual framework behind the Quadriptych where the awesome power of dark destructive forces wrestle with accents of 'light' that struggle to emerge from beneath the amassed textures of layered paints. In 'Solitude of Lightning', one sees the same battle of nature's brutality versus its man-made counterpart. This duality transcends the simplistic binary of good vs evil and dives more into the complexities of the human condition where the paradox of creation itself forces the co-existence of chaos and clarity. It would be all too easy and formulaic to concede to anything other than complex realities. Rather, Marwan invites us to stare at and interpret his brushstrokes in the same way that he experienced them in the act of painting – with passion, urgency and reckoning. The Studies, exhibited for the first time, are a valuable glimpse into the process of the artist's ideation.

The primal energy proposed by violent gestural strokes mirror the Sturm und Drang of the tornado that sweeps human life during war or displacement. We are transported by this energy, literally enacted as a form of turbulence rather than having it proposed to us. This charged intersection between the gestural and the existential takes us to the space where the personal and political trauma converge. While the physicality of this type of mark-making aligns with the legacy of Abstract Expressionism, the tenor of it is rooted in a specifically Lebanese experience of fragmentation and survival. Marwan takes the viewer on a journey where the visual field takes over the specificities of external events, and invites us to decipher for ourselves the rhythms of the painting, the movement and dance of the artist around the canvas, akin to a form of music. This type of 'performative painting' lends itself particularly well to grand story-telling as we see for example in 'Collision I' where explosive bursts of colour are transformed into an apocalyptic narrative by preserving the physical effects of the 2020 Beirut blast on the canvas. Ultimately this exhibition offers an immersion into the artist's experience of conflict, collision, dissolution and re-emergence. A state of transformation reflecting life itself – our atoms, energies, and impulses – is proposed in a distilled presentation where Marwan Sahmarani's finest and most characteristic works are assembled to move the viewer into a shared journey, negotiating between despair and understanding yet testifying to the resilience of the human spirit.

Roxane Zand

THE ETHICS OF REPAIR: PAINTING AFTER RUPTURE

If a surface is torn, the painter has to decide whether the rupture is a flaw to be hidden or a truth to be seen. In Marwan Sahmarani's 'Collision I' (2020), the decision was irreversible: to repair without concealing could propose a travesty of what took place. The work, damaged during the Beirut Port explosion that devastated the artist's studio, bears on its surface the physical evidence of catastrophe. Glass fragments pierced the canvas; a long tear split its field. Sahmarani refused the option of restoration that would make the wound disappear. Instead, he stitched it back together, leaving the seam exposed—an act of defiance as much as preservation.

The repaired canvas stands as both painting and document. The violence done to it is not metaphorical but literal, and yet the near-surgical process of mending it becomes a statement of survival, leaving the scar that would always remind.

Artwork restoration is always intended for repair and reverting to the original state. Sahmarani has inverted the act of repair and made it integral here to the creative statement itself. The scar becomes the work's centre of gravity, showing that its moral value may depend precisely on its capacity to bear witness to a deadly explosion. Up close, the painting's surface reveals a layered choreography of textures: impasto ridges of crimson and ochre, scraped passages of grey, glints of embedded glass that catch the light sharply. The stitches pull the torn fabric together but never quite flatten it. They create a subtle relief, a topography of resilience. Through these tactile details, 'Collision I' bridges the physical and the metaphysical—the material evidence of trauma with the metaphoric labour of reassembling meaning.

The ethics of repair here are not passive - they carry a critique of power. The artist's refusal to smooth over the wound asserts that beauty and damage can coexist: the painting thus becomes a moral object, bearing witness not by illustrating tragedy, but by surviving it.

Sahmarani joins a noble tradition of artists who turn integration of damage into a creative practice. The Japanese art of kintsugi which repairs broken ceramics with veins of gold, elevates fracture into ornament. Postwar European painters such as Georg Baselitz or Anselm Kiefer transformed ruin into renewal, re-treating the surface. Yet Sahmarani's gesture is distinctly his own—spontaneous and local. His suture was a singular act and a statement, neither decorative nor monumental.



In 'Collision I', the seam also becomes a compositional line dividing the canvas between two chromatic zones: one cold, metallic, and hierarchical; the other hot, fleshy, and collective. This duality mirrors the political tensions that inspired the work—the "cold" authority of power versus the "heat" of protest and popular will. The stitch, running between them, functions as both scar and horizon, proposing separation as a form of dialogue.

Illustrations:



1. Detail of Collision I, central stitched seam

Shared Ground: The Mapping of Artistic Relationships



Marwan Sahmarani
The Solitude of Lightning (Detail)
2024

"You've got to realize that influence is not influence. It's simply someone's idea going through my new mind."
Jean-Michel Basquiat

The instinctive recognition of visual parallels and connections in artistic practice has deep cognitive roots. It's an evolutionary characteristic that helps us understand and appreciate by analogy; it enhances our experience and provides insight into patterns of artistic cohesion. That moment of recognition when we spot 'kinship' and affinity between two artists is a keenly satisfying event which helps us understand the inspiration of the artist, his choices or approach to something, his shared cultural or technical features, or even his innovations. These cross-fertilizations and channels of inspiration may be deliberate by the artist or not; what is universally acknowledged is that they are enriching and inevitable.

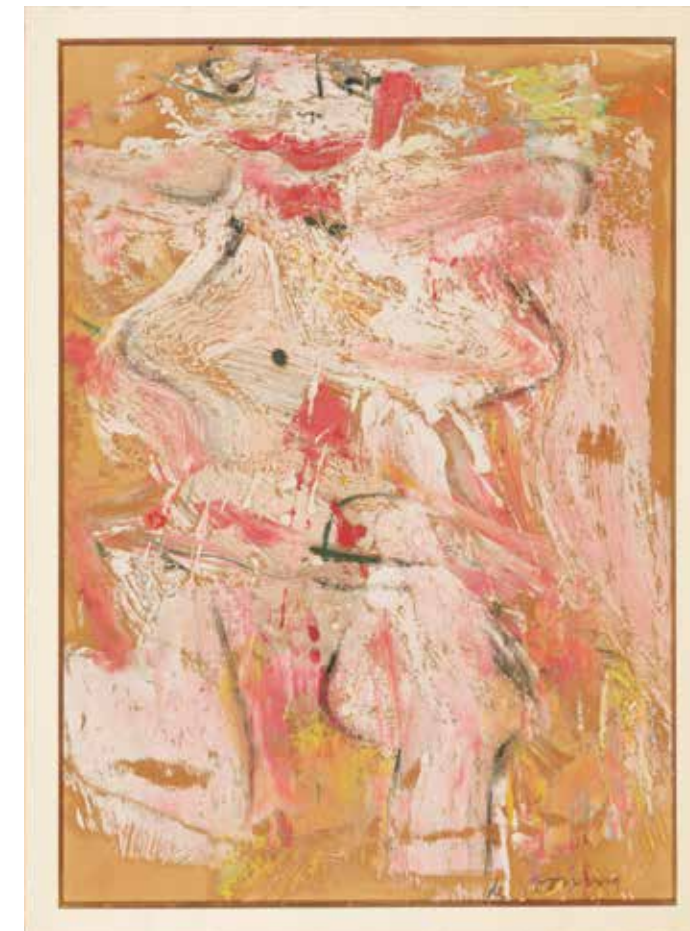
Sahmarani has been compared to many other artists – more so than his peers. His work invites speculation, interpretation and musing. Perhaps the seeping of ideas and influences into his compositions may have something to do with his own wide understanding and knowledge of art history and cultural environments, provoking others to glimpse these sparks; whatever the reason, his work provides fertile ground for relational conversations and dialogues, and all the richer for it. Have Bacon's blurred lines given him a technical nudge? Did Basquiat's raw deconstruction play a hand in pushing his own boundaries? Many comparisons have been proposed, and yet a few stand the test of time: those peers with whom Sahmarani has more than a passing correlation – artists whose affinity adds meaningfully to the viewer's appreciation of the oeuvre.

Post-War Neo-Expressionist Georg Baselitz, like Sahmarani, uses figuration as a tool for subverting narrative and emphasizing emotion or gesture over story. His figures become strange, undone forms that are prioritized over content, forcing the viewer to confront the painting before interpreting the image. In Coellin Schön



Georg Baselitz, *Coellin schön*
2009
The Farjam Collection

we see the body as metaphysical terrain, in the same way that Sahmarani's 'Solitude of Lightning' deconstructs a monumental figure verging on dissolution. Both artists are gestural painters – one with the brutalist immediacy of rebellion against sanitized German post-war imagery, the other with the fury and frenzy of his own heritage; both believe in the expressive and explosive power of paint as medium, and utilize this to disrupt representation in order to reach something more primal. Both excel at enacting the drama of transformation.



Willem de Kooning, *Untitled (Woman)*
Circa 1965
The Farjam Collection

Sahmarani also shares with Willem De Kooning - a New York School Abstract Expressionist of European descent who approaches the body as a mutable field – a brushstroke that is not descriptive but performative. De Kooning's style, akin to Baselitz and Sahmarani, is vigorous and gestural. All three artists revel in expressive use of paint, glorifying the medium in a modern incarnation that gives it relevance and innovation. Similar to Sahmarani, De Kooning was known never to repeat himself and released his creative energy into fields of action painting that defy deciphering or categorization. All three addressed the issue of drawing (as distinct from mark-making) in their work, chasing the line and building a flow. While Baselitz often turns the figure upside-down to unsettle perception and De Kooning teeters between figuration and abstraction in a lyrical push-and-pull, Sahmarani fuses these approaches with a culturally specific intensity (see *Collision I*), producing work that is both immediate and resonant with deeper historical consciousness. In their gestures, each painter demonstrates that the act of painting itself can be a language of transfiguration, one that communicates emotion and narrative beyond literal representation.

Ultimately, the comparison of Sahmarani with Baselitz and De Kooning reveals how gestural painting can be at the service of navigating temporal, geographic, and cultural concerns. Each artist, through their performative brushwork, challenges conventions of form while foregrounding the emotional and physical presence of paint. Their works underscore the enduring power of gesture as a conduit for expression. In recognizing these affinities, viewers gain not only a richer understanding of Sahmarani's oeuvre but also a broader appreciation of gestural painting as a dynamic and evolving discourse.

Roxane Zand

THE WORKS



The Solitude of Lightning
Oil on canvas
200 x 160 cm each (triptych)
2024



Fade Into You
Oil on canvas
 160 × 200 cm each (Quadriptych)
 2021



Collision I
Oil on canvas
225 x 400 cm
2019



The Passage of the Black
Oil on canvas
250 × 200 cm
2019



Man Alone
Oil on canvas
225 x 175 cm
2019

Interview with the Artist

1. How do you begin your artistic process? Do you start with a clear idea, or is it more spontaneous?

Every painting follows its own unique process—there are no fixed rules. Each work feels like a new journey, a fresh beginning, and that's what keeps the practice exciting for me. I dislike falling into repetition or routine; it makes the process feel lifeless. Sometimes the work unfolds effortlessly, while other times it demands great patience and labour. The blank canvas is always intimidating, even after all these years of painting. I know I won't repeat myself, and that uncertainty makes it an adventure—full of surprises, accidents, ups, and downs.

Usually, I begin with an idea or a feeling in mind. But if not, I spend time in the studio and wait for inspiration to surface—it might come from something I see or experience in daily life, or from an event, a piece of literature, philosophy, or poetry. When an idea or emotion strikes, I often sketch it on paper first, translating thoughts into lines and forms, much like a writer shaping words. Once the idea is transferred onto the white canvas, it begins to take on a life of its own. The painting develops its own will, guiding me in unexpected directions. If I feel the need to shift course, I do so freely, without guilt. Ultimately, the process becomes a dialogue between my mind, my subconscious, and my hand—and perhaps something more metaphysical, beyond my full understanding.



2. Your paintings often reinterpret mythology and history in contemporary ways. How would you like your artistic legacy to be remembered 100 years from now?

It's difficult to imagine what societies will look like a hundred years from now—or if they will even resemble what we know today. The desire to be remembered, to leave behind a legacy, can feel somewhat egotistical or self-centered. After all, so many of us are constantly creating, leaving behind countless traces of our existence. And now, with the emergence of artificial intelligence, I often wonder how sustainable or meaningful that legacy truly is.

I believe the role of an artist in society should be closer to that of a mystic—someone who seeks to delve into universal consciousness and touch the mystery of life itself. Whether or not the artist becomes a witness to their time or tells the story of their era is secondary. For me, legacy comes far behind the metaphysical journey an artist undertakes throughout their lifetime.



*Study for painting
Charcoal on paper
50 × 70 cm
2022*



*Study for painting
Charcoal on paper
50 × 70 cm
2022*

3. How do you see the role of the artist in the Middle East?

This is a question I often ask myself. I paint primarily in Lebanon—so does that automatically make me a “Middle Eastern artist”? Should the artist's role be defined by nationalism, identity, or geography? Is it about addressing the questions and concerns of their immediate environment through their practice? Perhaps during an artist's lifetime, their work inevitably echoes their personal journey and surroundings. But once they are no longer here—many years later—I believe their art transcends history and identity. The true power of art lies in its ability to resonate beyond time and place. What ultimately remains is like a faint melody of that era, carrying the sincerity of the artist's soul and the authenticity of a practice which endures regardless of where or when it was created.

4. Much of your art deals with violence and chaos. Yet, ultimately, your message speaks of hope and the beauty that can emerge from turmoil. Can you share more about the path from tragedy or violence to the good in life?

Yes, my paintings often explore themes of violence and chaos—they serve as a testimony to my reality. As an artist living in the Middle East, a region marked by constant turbulence, I have absorbed its intensity over the past fifty years, both consciously and unconsciously. My art naturally becomes a translation of that experience. Yet I believe that art stands as a form of resistance against the violence of history. Beauty arises through art because it can serve as a remedy to the madness of humankind—a way to defy despair and resist death itself. Through art, we can transcend harsh realities and reach toward forms of perfection that reflect the true essence of existence.



Study for Collision I
Charcoal on paper
70 × 100 cm
2019

Artist's Biography

Marwan Sahmarani

Born 1970, Lebanon | Lives and works in Beirut and Spain

Marwan Sahmarani is a Lebanese artist whose practice bridges painting, drawing, and performance in an ongoing investigation of humanity's contradictions: beauty and brutality, violence and revival. A graduate of the Atelier Met de Penninghen (ESAG), he lived in Paris for nearly a decade before returning to Beirut, where his work evolved into a strong dialogue with the city's fractured history and its capacity for renewal.

Sahmarani belongs to a generation of artists who transformed figuration in the Arab world into a language of intense and powerful abstraction. His canvases, at once gestural and narrative, bear the traces of painterly struggle: dense impastos, broken contours, and a palette that alternates easily between monochrome and colour-bursts. Through these, he confronts themes of revolution, exile, and selfhood—not as isolated political events but as recurring states of being.

In the aftermath of the 2019 Lebanese uprising and the 2020 Beirut Port explosion, Sahmarani's work assumed a new urgency. The act of painting became a means of repair and survival; torn canvases were sutured, scars left visible. His art situates the human body within larger fields of tension, where expressive gesture becomes both statement and journey.

Sahmarani's work has been exhibited internationally, including solo and group presentations at the Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris), the Singapore Art Museum, the Beirut Art Center, Leila Heller Gallery (Dubai / New York) and Art Dubai. His works are represented in significant private and institutional collections.

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