

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE CHANGING OF HORSES:
COMMITMENT, REALISM, AND THE UNCANNY
IN THE ARTWORK OF AREF EL-RAYESS

by
NATASHA ROGER GASPARIAN

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submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of Fine Arts and Art History
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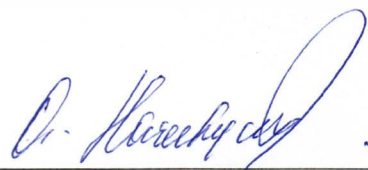
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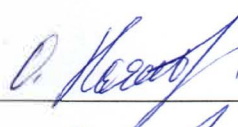
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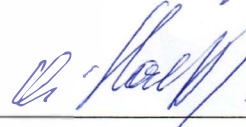
Advisor

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Fine Arts and Art History

 on behalf of Hala Auji

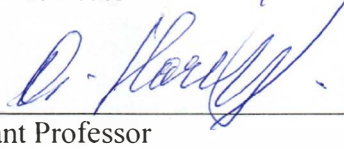
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Dr. Nadia Bou Ali, Assistant Professor
Civilization Studies

 on behalf of Nadia Bou Ali

Member of Committee

Dr. Anneka Lenssen, Assistant Professor
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Natasha Roger Gasparian for Master of Arts
Major: Art History and Curating

Title: The Changing of Horses: Commitment, Realism, and the Uncanny in the Artwork of Aref El-Rayess

In April 1968, ten months after the Arab defeat of the 1967 June War, Aref El-Rayess's *Dimā' wa Hurriyya* (Blood and Freedom) opened to the public in the exhibition hall of the *L'Orient* newspaper headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon. *Tabdīl Al- 'Ahsina* (The Changing of Horses), a realist mural painting on canvas, was the exhibition's centerpiece. With this artwork, El-Rayess declared his commitment to national liberation and socialist revolution.

The Changing of Horses was presented and received as an allegory of political commitment, but the slips, silences, and repetitions in the public reception point to its excessive, disturbing, and fundamentally uncanny character. In this thesis, I show that The Changing of Horses is only legible as the crystal of its social totality—as the nexus of a constellation of art criticism, intellectual debates, dominant ideologies, available modes of representation, social classes, political struggles, and historical processes. By attempting to reconstruct a social art history of this artwork and tracing the caesuras in the discourse around the work, I expose the social antagonism that is repressed and obfuscated in the idealized narrative sustained by El-Rayess and his audiences. I argue that the *oversight* in the reception—the critics' and audiences' inability to see—attests to the delay in grasping the work historically and signals its avant-gardism.

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INTRODUCTION

Aref El-Rayess (1928-2005) is a notoriously difficult artist to write about. The art critics in Lebanon who followed the trials and tribulations of his practice throughout the years knew as much. Joseph Tarrab, for instance, characterized the artist in a pithy blurb in 1973 as:

[T]he most mobile and versatile of our artists, one who rushes from one extreme to another without a break, as if he were looking for his own center of gravity which is always escaping him. He is constant only in his fidelity to change. He always seems to be running the risks of artistic adventure from scratch, denying his achievements to assert himself unceasingly as other than himself. It seems that a fundamental incredulity pushes him to always seek, through his works, a new approval of himself.¹

Tarrab's remark apprehends constant flux and transformation as central to El-Rayess's practice. Written after the turning point in the artist's career in 1967, this blurb intimates that Aref El-Rayess is impossible to pin down—to give a name. Although primarily a painter and sculptor, he deployed a gamut of styles, forms, and ideologies over the span of his career. Ideologically, he was neither strictly a nationalist nor a socialist; neither a mystic nor an atheist; neither an idealist, nor a materialist. At various moments throughout his lifetime, his practice was delimited and superseded by all these characterizations. For

¹ “Aref Rayess est, on le sait, le plus mobile et le plus versatile de nos artistes, celui qui, sans désespérer, se précipite d'un extrême à l'autre, comme s'il était à la recherche de son propre centre de gravité qui toujours lui échapperait. Il n'est constant que dans sa fidélité au changement. Il semble toujours courir à partir de zéro les risques de l'aventure artistique, reniant son acquis pour s'affirmer sans cesse autre que lui-même. On dirait qu'une incrédulité fondamentale le pousse à toujours rechercher une nouvelle approbation de soi-même à travers ses œuvres.” See Joseph Tarrab, “Aref Rayess à La Recherche de Son Centre de Gravité.” *El-Safa*. February 21, 1973. This, and all subsequent translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

instance, in 1964, he produced a monumental metal sculpture of a Phoenician soldier—an emblem of Christian nationalism—for the Lebanese pavilion at the World Fair in New York, as well as a tapestry whose subject matter was the Greek myth of the Phoenician prince, Cadmus.² The specter of Phoenicianism in his work, however, came and went like a flash, and his subsequent allegiance to the cause of Arab nationalism diminished with the Arab defeat of the 1967 June War—the colossal defeat of Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian military and paramilitary forces by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the latter of which seized the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan heights in as little as six days.

Tarrab was correct in diagnosing the non-identical character of El-Rayess's practice—to put it plainly, that his work is not always recognizable as his³—but the political and aesthetic shift signaled in his 1968 *Dimā' wa Hurriyya* (Blood and Freedom) exhibition, in

² Denise Ammoun, “Sarcophages et Tablettes Phéniciennes Pour La Foire de New York,” *Magazine*, February 27, 1964. The tapestry was commissioned by the Lebanese government in 1958 and offered to the UNESCO in Paris once it was completed.

³ A symptom of the non-identical character of his work is the difficulty faced by the art market in “authenticating” it. A recent scandal around the sale of allegedly forged works is a case in point. See Tim Cornwell and Anna Brady, “Collectors Tackle Rise in Fake Modern Middle Eastern Art,” *The Art Newspaper*, November 1, 2017, sec. Art Market, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/beirut-collection-quarantines-paintings-as-it-tackles-forgeries>; India Stoughton, “Collectors Hunt down Forgeries as Arab Art Market Flourishes,” *Al-Monitor*, January 31, 2018, sec. Lebanon Pulse, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/01/arab-collectors-struggle-to-weed-out-fake-art.html>; Tim Cornwell, “Middle Eastern Artists Are Charging a Lot of Money to Certify-or Condemn-Their Works,” *The Art Newspaper*, February 15, 2018, sec. Art Market, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/when-does-guarding-an-artist-s-legacy-go-too-far>; Rebecca Anne Proctor and Tim Cornwell, “On Preserving A Middle Eastern Art History: Part I,” *Harper's Bazaar Arabia*, March 22, 2018, sec. Art, <https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/art/news/on-preserving-a-middle-eastern-art-history-part-i>.

which *The 5th of June/The Changing of Horses* (hereafter, *The Changing of Horses*)⁴ first appeared as its central painting, was determinate for his practice (figure 1).⁵ El-Rayess repeatedly revisited his past styles after 1967, but he did so only through the prism of his political commitments. To produce *The Changing of Horses* and the other twelve paintings of *Blood and Freedom*, he reworked, perhaps unconsciously, the formal techniques and compositions of the works he exhibited a year prior at Gallery One. There he had shown watercolors of non-mimetic landscapes of Provincetown, Massachusetts, which were produced on a state-sponsored trip to the United States in 1965, and a series of oil paintings of abstracted Senegalese landscapes, known by their French title, *Tapis Volants* (Flying Carpets). One of the *Tapis Volants* paintings, made up of vertical and horizontal lines of transparent red, orange, and mauve, served as the basis for the painting *Ila Rūh Martin Luther King* (To The Spirit of Martin Luther King). The latter work, which was first shown in *Blood and Freedom* surrealistically introduced the social into the former's undisturbed world of form (figures 2 & 3). In a later article published in 1975 in the English-language weekly magazine, *Monday Morning*, Tarrab claimed that "behind the apparent contradictions, a deep coherence asserts itself in Aref's ever-changing aesthetics: all these

⁴ El-Rayess often gave multiple titles to his works, and he maintained the gap between the French and Arabic titles (they were intended for different audiences). The title *The Changing of Horses* (Tabdīl Al-Ahsina), appears once in an interview between El-Rayess and a reporter for the daily newspaper, *Al-Sayyad*. It is a title that I take up and preserve here, for it does not reflect a record of the event of the defeat, but it underscores the work's propositions for social transformation. See "Fann Dimā' wa Hurriyya," *Al-Sayyad*, April 18, 1968.

⁵ *Blood and Freedom* was El-Rayess's first exhibition after the June War, and it marked his return to Lebanon after sojourns in the 1950s and 60s in Dakar, Paris, Rome, Florence, New York, and Mexico City.

years he has been developing his original themes in accordance with inner necessities and the vicissitudes of his unpredictable relationship with the outside world.”⁶



Figure 1. Aref El-Rayess, 5 Huzayrān / Tabdīl Al-Ahsina (The 5th of June / The Changing of Horses), 1967, Oil on Canvas, 200 x 149 cm. Courtesy Saradar Collection, Beirut.

⁶ Joseph Tarrab, “A Self-Debunking Debunker,” *Monday Morning*, January 1975.

It is not my intention in this thesis to follow Tarrab in offering a psychobiographical account of the artist and his work, but I dwell on Tarrab's two statements, which he only articulated in the seventies, for they at once speak to the consistency in El-Rayess's motifs and forms over the years, as well as to the internal contradictions of his artwork after the June War. To grapple with the coherent, yet contradictory character of El-Rayess's work, it is my contention that one has to begin from the perspective of his committed practice. The *Changing of Horses*—as the first painting he produced after the shock of the June War and the one with which he publicly declared his artistic and political commitments—provides a critical entry point.

A. Toward a Historical Materialist Social Art History

A work of impressive scale (two-meters wide and one-and-a-half-meters high) and subject matter, *The Changing of Horses* is peopled with historical figures and colored in bloodlike crimson, deathly black, porcelain white, and moldering green. Its narrative can be summed up as follows: a revolutionary figure in Aref El-Rayess's likeness rides a horse in a mass-led procession to vanquish the monarch of Saudi Arabia, King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud (1906–1975). Meanwhile, skeletal forces thwart the revolutionary's efforts and attempt to tamper with the march, adversaries bleed to death, the monarch throws up his arm in a cry for help, and martyrs witness the event. Produced in a realist idiom in the immediate aftermath of the 1967 June War, it was, for El-Rayess and



Figure 2. Aref El-Rayess, *Tapis Volants* (Flying Carpets) series, 1965, Acrylic on Canvas, 152 x 102 cm. Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut. © Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.



Figure 3. Aref El-Rayess, *Ila Rūh Martin Luther King* (To the Spirit of Martin Luther King), 1968, Oil on Canvas, 150 x 101 cm. Courtesy Saradar Collection, Beirut.

his critics, an allegory of the commitment to the struggles for national liberation and socialist revolution. However, the idealized narrative of the work and the familiarity of its historical characters served to conceal its deeply unsettling character. When it was first shown in *Blood and Freedom* in 1968, it terrified and fascinated its viewers. The shock and awe in the work's reception, conceivably in response to the host of animistic, globular organs and other floating facial features—the martyrs, or, the masses of soldiers killed in battle—that appears on the painting's surface like an apparition, signaled its uncanny (*unheimlich*) aesthetics,⁷ and disrupted the artwork's legibility. The *oversight* in the critics' and audiences' responses—their inability to see—attests to the delay in grasping the work historically. This lag between the work's display and its legibility cannot be accounted for by El-Rayess's worldview, actions, and aims. Here I take my cue from the social art historian TJ Clark, for whom the modern artwork is not the product of an artist's free, unalienated activity. It is not an illustration of an ideological position, nor is it simply a text, document, or historical artifact of a given era. As an object whose value in capitalist modernity is no longer premised on its symbolic function (cult value), but which is not entirely subsumed within commodity exchange relations, the artwork has a privileged position in relation to the social world. Its partial, though historically variable, autonomy makes it a *crystal* of its social totality.⁸ It is only legible as the nexus of a constellation of

⁷ Freud describes the uncanny as that which is at once familiar and unfamiliar. It is the return of the repressed (what was once congenial) as strange and anxiety-provoking. See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," trans. Alix Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud XVII* (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works (1919): 217–56.

⁸ Karl Marx characterizes commodities as crystals of their common *social* substance (value as abstract human labor, which is a relation between commodities, rather than inherent to any single commodity), but an artwork—unlike the commodity—is potentially legible,

art criticism, intellectual debates, dominant ideologies, available modes of representation, social classes, political struggles, and historical processes.⁹ In this thesis, I foreground *The Changing of Horses* as the crystal of its social totality and aim to reveal that it is an avant-gardist work whose legibility is only apparent to a present that recognizes itself as intended in it.¹⁰ I attempt to do so by deferring my formal reading of the work to the final chapter of my thesis. Only retroactively is it a narrative painting about social antagonism; unparadoxically, it always already was.

B. Modern “Arab” Art and the Impasse of Postcolonial Theory

This thesis comprises the first scholarly engagement with the artwork of Aref El-Rayess.¹¹ While I study a single artist’s activity, it is not my ambition to provide a

criticizable, and truthful. See David McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 460.

⁹ See T.J. Clark, “On the Social History of Art,” in *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Thames and Hudson, 1982), 9–20; T.J. Clark, “Manet’s Olympia,” in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 79–146.

¹⁰ Here I borrow from Walter Benjamin’s fifth thesis on the concept of history: “[t]he true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again. ‘The truth will not run away from us’: this statement by Gottfried Keller indicates exactly that point in historicism’s image of history where the image is pierced by historical materialism. For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image.” See Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, vol. 4 (1938-1940) (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 391.

¹¹ Omran Al-Qaissi, a faithful critic of El-Rayess in the later years of his practice, published in 1987 a book of interviews and unprocessed reflections on the artist’s formal engagements, in which many of El-Rayess’s works are attributed erroneous titles. See Omran Al-Qaissi, *Aref El-Rayess*. Beirut: Mou’assasat Al-Muhtaref, 1987. Brief, and occasionally misinformed, biographies on the artist’s life appear in survey texts on

biography or a comprehensive survey on El-Rayess's art and thought. Rather, by narrowing my focus to the social art history of a single artwork, I contribute to a broader and gravely understudied area of research, the artistic production of the 1960-70s in Lebanon. I shift the emphasis away from the artist as the supposed agent of history and aim to demonstrate that the artist's commitments do not directly inform the politics of his artwork—the latter necessarily exceeds the former. I therefore depart from the identitarian impulse present in much of the scholarship on modern “Arab” art within global art historical debates, which takes the artist and hence, his or her will and claims, as its starting point and primary object of analysis.

Largely guided by postcolonial theory, scholars and curators such as Kamal Boullata, Salwa Mikdadi, Nada Shabout, Silvia Naef, and others have sought to demonstrate in their work that modern Arab artists have masterfully combined formal strategies of local traditions with Western mediums, forms, and practices in order to forge a distinctive postcolonial Arab identity in their artwork.¹² These studies have aimed to

Lebanese art, including Joseph Abou Rizk, *Regards Sur La Peinture Au Liban*, Publications de La Section Des Beaux-Arts Du Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 1956); Michel Fani, *Dictionnaire de La Peinture Du Liban*. Paris: Editions de l'Escalier, 1998; Frieda Howling, *Art in Lebanon, 1930-1975: The Development of Contemporary Art in Lebanon* (Beirut: LAU Press, 2005); Edouard Lahoud, *L'Art Contemporain Au Liban*. Beyrouth: Dar El-Mashreq, 1974; and Nour Salamé Abillama and Marie Tomb, eds. *Art From Lebanon: Modern and Contemporary Artists, 1880-1975*. Vol. I. Beirut: Wonderful Editions, 2012.

¹² See Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* (Saqi Books, 2009); Salwa Mikdadi, *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World* (Washington, D.C.: International Council for Women in the Arts, National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994); Silvia Naef, *A La Recherche d'une Modernité Arabe: L'Évolution Des Arts Plastiques En Egypte, Au Liban et En Irak* (Geneva: Éditions Slatkine, 1996); Nada

provide a corrective to the dominant art historical narrative (according to which non-Western art is lagging and derivative) by appealing to the coevalness of Arab art in the periphery with artistic production in the Western center. The term “Arab art” for these authors indicates a cultural—rather than a racial or religious—category. Shabout establishes that Arab art does not develop out of Islamic manuscript illumination or calligraphy; instead, it is posited as a conscious break, on the part of certain artists, with an “Islamic” past. The qualifying term “Arab” signals an identity that was consciously “formulated in the mid-twentieth century as an ideological weapon of resistance.”¹³ Similarly, Naef states that “Islamic art” was replaced in Arab countries by “Western art” at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, only to be rediscovered again (as tradition) in the second half of the twentieth century “when it became an identity issue in the art production of the Arab world”.¹⁴

The revisionist historicism of these mutually compatible accounts signals a partiality to artists who saw themselves engaging in modernism (and its preoccupation with tradition) as a practice of resistance. They valorize, as exemplary of Arab modernism, the formalist practices of the 1950–60s that, on the one hand, safeguard tradition—“Islamic art”—from its newly assigned function as a decorative art, and on the other hand, articulate their local character and hence their cultural difference from mid-twentieth century Western

Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007).

¹³ Shabout, xiv.

¹⁴ Silvia Naef, “Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab World and Its Relation to the Artistic Past,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 43, Islamic Arts (Spring 2003): 165.

abstract painting. Shabout claims that Arab art “does not denote a unified movement or style,”¹⁵ but she is selective about the group of artists deserving of this category. They comprise a second generation of modernists who reacted against the academicism of a previous generation. She regards the earlier generation as imitators of Western forms, and therefore unworthy of the descriptor “Arab art.”¹⁶ With the exception of the surrealist group *Jamā‘at al-Fann wa-l-Hurriyya* (Art and Freedom Group),¹⁷ active in 1930s Egypt, the second generation is represented by artists whose practices emerged with the rise of the discourse of Arab nationalism. From this perspective, any interpretation of the artwork is reduced to the artist’s agency—to his or her choices and political commitments—or ideology—as a signifier of authenticity. On the one hand, El-Rayess’s practice would appear anomalous in this evaluation. Even on the level of his agency, he resists a culturalist reading of his artwork. Unlike, for example, The Baghdad Modern Art Group who actively sought to cultivate a postcolonial national identity through the interweaving of images, motifs and symbols in Iraqi cultural heritage (*turāth*)—namely, in 13th century manuscript

¹⁵ Shabout, xiv.

¹⁶ Ibid. 13–23.

¹⁷ This group is often referred to in English as the Art and Liberty Group, but I opt in for the translation Art and Freedom Group, where freedom is translated from the Arabic *hurriyya*, rather than from the French *liberté*. Whereas liberty denotes a relationship between the individual subject and institutions (such as the state) that are regarded to be external to it, freedom is a speculative *a priori* category, particularly in the tradition of critique following Kant. The former connotes an atomistic understanding of the subject and maintains the antinomy between private and public, and individual and state, while the structure of the latter can arguably accommodate the Marxist and psychoanalytic notion (befitting surrealism) of an alienated, split subject whose conditions for freedom are grounded in (unconscious) human activity rather than in consciousness.

art—with what they considered to be Western *styles* of modern art,¹⁸ El-Rayess insisted that Lebanon had no specific heritage upon which to base a postcolonial artistic style or identity; he explicitly stated that “we in Lebanon do not have any of these fixed norms that guarantee the future of art and thought through its consolidation and nationalization”.¹⁹ On the other hand, the art historical preoccupation with authenticity risks de-historicizing works of art by repeating without critical interrogation the modern Arab artists’ existentialist and nationalist articulation of authenticity.²⁰

Prita Meier reveals that the paradigm of authenticity in studies of modern art in the Middle East and Africa results in a tension between the local and the global, or more pointedly, between particularity and universality (she describes this as “the authenticity paradox”).²¹ However, at stake for Meier in these art historical accounts of cultural difference is their reliance upon the West/non-West binary; they remain mired with Eurocentric norms and values,²² from which local experiences of colonial and pre-colonial encounters and systems of knowledge are to be liberated. She calls into question the very analytic categories of modernism and modernity, for she argues that “they uphold the West

¹⁸ See Baghdad Group for Modern Art, “Manifesto,” in *Modern Art in the Arab World*, ed. Aneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, Primary Documents (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018).

¹⁹ Aref El-Rayess, “Rusūm Thatiyya,” ed. Ibrahim Al-Salahi, *Hiwār*, no. 26–27 (April 1967): 141–61.

²⁰ For a discussion on the twentieth-century debates on authenticity and commitment in the Arab-speaking parts of the world, see Chapter II of this thesis, “The Committed Artist”.

²¹ Prita Meier, “Authenticity and Its Modernist Discontents: The Colonial Encounter and African and Middle Eastern Art History,” *The Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1, Visual Arts and Art Practices in The Middle East (Spring 2010): 18-21.

²² *Ibid.* 19

as normative center” and accordingly “demand a teleology of artistic originality”.²³ She instead proposes to “contextualize cultural practices in more precise localities, but also to seek to capture how artistic practices are claim-making strategies within a shifting web of new and old forms of territoriality”.²⁴ The (escapist) tendency in recent decolonial thought to jettison the categories of modernism and modernity (for upholding the West/non-West binary) has seen global art historians turn to networks of cross-cultural interaction in concrete spaces like the sea where multiple temporalities converge on a single spatial plane.²⁵ This gesture betrays, a romantic, and ultimately impossible, desire to capture moments or places that lie beyond capitalist exchange relations, and therefore outside of modernity altogether.

In contrast to Meier, I contend that the postcolonialist model of cultural difference cannot be overcome by disposing of the categories of modernism and modernity, or the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. 36.

²⁵ The fixation on “de-territoriality,” or what has been referred to as “the spatial turn,” in global art history has largely been informed by the work of the leading decolonial thinker Walter D. Mignolo. See Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000); Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011). For decolonial interventions in art history, see Aruna D’Souza, “Introduction,” in *Art History: In the Wake of the Global Turn*, ed. Jill H. Casid and Aruna D’Souza, Clark Studies in the Visual Arts (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2014), vii–xxiii; Prita Meier, “Beyond Multiple Modernities: East African Port Cities as the Space Between,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 28 (May 2020): 116–25; Prita Meier, *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere*, African Expressive Cultures (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016); Piotr Piotrowski, “On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History,” *Umeni/Art* 56, no. 5 (2008): 378–83.

universal and particular. These categories are inextricable from the totalizing logic of capitalism from which there is no outside, not even in language or discourse (commodities have agency in our topsy-turvy world; they speak, or rather, we are spoken for through them). Postcolonial and decolonial theories fail, in sum, in their reduction of historical process and social relations to a question of discourse and representation (the concrete image of the sea perfectly captures their impossibility to grapple with the abstractions mediating the various binaries they so badly wish to escape). These discourses often rename categories of thought without rethinking their logic. This is typified in the newly circulating terms, “Global South” and “Global North”, which have come to replace the Cold-War era terms, “Third World” and “First World”. Symptomatic of the post-1989 ‘post-ideological’ discourse, the former set of terms erase the connotations carried in First World (capitalist modernity), Second World (the state socialism of the Soviet Union), and the Third World (anticolonial socialism, and obversely, a belated capitalist modernity). The former set of terms make manifest the constitutive relationship of colonialism between the two entities, but they maintain from the latter a relationship of economic dependency rooted in a model of core/periphery. They also fail to account for the capitalist determination of the colonial relation, thus resulting in a new kind of provincialism—a paradox for terms with supposedly global reach. The shift from core to Global North and periphery to Global South is only a linguistic substitution—or, more profoundly, a return of the repressed of modernist issues.²⁶ Fredric Jameson diagnoses this recurrence as paradoxical, for the end of

²⁶ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London and New York: Verso, 2012, 5–6).

grand narratives was presumed to have been superseded by the “postmodern condition” since Lyotard’s proclamation in 1979.²⁷

Rather than thinking through the temporal disjunctions within a singular capitalist modernity, global art history has taken up the discourses of postcolonial and decolonial theories and staged a large-scale nominalist project that functions according to a logic of summation—an expansion of the geographical boundaries of the canon. Multiple or alternate modernities (and consciousnesses) are posited, each with a culturally defined modernism and its set of exemplary artists.²⁸ Eschewing the category of the universal, the central preoccupation for global art history becomes one of the translation of cultures, or rather, their very untranslatability. For example, Aruna D’Souza proposes to reimagine the discipline of art history by being attendant to “the ways in which art history is spoken differently.”²⁹ This is at odds with her declaration that such an approach, which “thrives on misunderstandings, incommensurabilities, the misprisions of our conversations across geographies and times”³⁰ is disruptive of the discipline, precisely because the attention to

²⁷Ibid; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Reprint, vol. 10, *Theory and History of Literature* (Manchester and Minneapolis: Manchester University Press & University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

²⁸ Chika Okeke-Agulu introduces the category of the “exemplary” postcolonial modernist, therefore making explicit what remains unuttered in global art historical interventions: the singularity of the postcolonial artist. See Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Duke University Press, 2015). For more on the seminal debates around the plurality of modernity, see Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001); S.N. Eisenstadt et al., *Daedalus* 129, no. 1, *Multiple Modernities* (Winter 2000).

²⁹ Aruna D’Souza, xviii.

³⁰ Ibid.

art histories' many tongues (if they even exist!) relies upon the *recognition* of the (Western or non-Western) Other. Implicit here is the supposition that the speaking subject is whole, and can fully identify with its language and discourse, or, in the case of the Arabists mentioned above, it is the supposition that the "Western" speaking subject is whole, and the art historian's task is to demonstrate the self-sufficiency of the Arab individual subject. Both postcolonial and decolonial tendencies in art history reproduce the liberal fantasy of the plenitude of the atomistic subject—of an individual artist who can fully identify with him/herself with no excess; an exemplar whose hybrid forms are a solution to the problems of imitation and derivativeness. They fail to see that all subjectivity is internally split; They are not cognizant of the misrecognition that is constitutive of discourse.

Sam Bardaouil, who claims to move beyond a postcolonial framework in his study of the Egyptian surrealist Art and Freedom group, shares this blind spot with the global art historians. His tacit overvaluation of the group's actions, beliefs, and commitments—his emphasis on its members' "role as active catalysts who contributed to the evolution and widening up of the formalistic qualities of Surrealism at the time"³¹—comes at the expense of an engagement with surrealist *aesthetics* (the uncanny as the common denominator of surrealism).³² He limits the latter to the content of (visual and literary) works, particularly

³¹ Sam Bardaouil, *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group* (London / New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 32.

³² The lack of engagement with the aesthetics of the uncanny is noteworthy, not only in Bardaouil's book but also in the scholarship on surrealism in Egypt at large. See for example Monique Bellan, "Defying the Order from Within: Art et Liberté and Its Reordering of Visual Codes," in *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making*, ed. Nadia von Maltzahn and Monique Bellan, *Beiruter Texte Und Studien* 132 (Ergon Verlag Würzburg, 2018), 135–63; Patrick Kane, "Art Education and the Emergence

to depictions of modernity's marginal figures, such as the prostitute. He largely follows the group's self-definitions, and in so doing, reproduces the classical narrative of surrealism as a practice of tapping into the unconscious to achieve individual liberation.³³ In the absence of a theoretical engagement with the group's aesthetics and its impact and stakes for politics, Art and Freedom appears in Bardaouil's account as a political faction within a large organization, to whose singularity he must attest. It is instructive to recall Hal Foster's argument of the uncanny as constitutive of surrealist practice, even as it was not recognized by the surrealists themselves; he claims: "the uncanny is nowhere directly thought in surrealism; it remains mostly in its unconscious," and "it is everywhere treated in surrealism; it is all but proposed".³⁴ Bardaouil's project is ultimately an archaeological investigation into a previously undisturbed chapter of the history of surrealism. However, his excavation merely serves the "reconstruction of an alternative canon"³⁵ (and consequently, the expansion of surrealism's geographical boundaries). Facts are accumulated, but there is nothing to be learned. Far from challenging the commonly held assumptions of surrealist practice, this approach contributes to the repression of

of Radical Art Movements in Egypt: The Surrealists and the Contemporary Arts Group, 1938-1951," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 95–119; Patrick M. Kane, "Politics, Discontent, and the Everyday in Egyptian Arts, 1938-1966" (PhD Dissertation, New York, Binghamton University, SUNY, 2007). Here I focus solely on Bardaouil's account of Art and Freedom for it remains the most authoritative on the subject in spite of its significant drawbacks.

³³ Bardaouil uses the common parlance term "subconscious," in the place of the speculative "unconscious". The former is a hierarchical notion which relies upon the metaphor of surface and depth, whereas the latter is topological.

³⁴ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), xviii.

³⁵ Bardaouil, 237.

surrealism's other side, its story of "traumatic shock, deadly desire, compulsive repetition."³⁶

C. Notes on Structure

Sidestepping the ideology of multicultural pluralism permeating the field, and anxieties of the artist as a postcolonial subject-supposed-to-know, I deliberately maintain the discord between artistic commitment (as conscious and avowed), and the *sur*-realism of El-Rayess's painting. While El-Rayess upheld a commitment to realism as a *style* (he defended the realism of Blood and Freedom as privileging humanistic content over form), this self-definition falls short of diagnosing the peculiar historical character of his realist work—it emerged some thirty-plus-years after the various realist experiments, including those of the Mexican muralists to which El-Rayess was indebted. Rather than dismissing El-Rayess's realism as defunct or belated—in relation to the West, or to a supposedly more advanced modernism—it is useful to distinguish between realism *as* art (realism as style) and realism *in* art (realism as method).³⁷ The former posits realism as oppositional to an external object or practice like abstraction or modernism. It conceives realism and modernism/abstraction as a binary pair.³⁸ This view is consistent with the critical reception of El-Rayess's untitled

³⁶ Ibid. xi.

³⁷ See John Robert's contribution in "Realism Today?," ed. Octavian Esanu, *ARTMargins*, Roundtable, 7, no. 1 (2018): 61–62.

³⁸ Locally, the historian, novelist and literary critic Elias Khoury upholds the binary between realism and modernism in arguing that the June War led to a "new sensibility" (*al-hasāsiyya al-jadīda*) in literature. Khoury claims that this new sensibility rejected the realism that preceded the war and surpassed the politics of commitment in its experimental, self-reflexive approach to language. However, this does not take into account the realism of visual artistic production after the war. Khoury reproduces a narrative of post-1967 political disenchantment and overlooks the continued importance of realism in the aftermath of the

Gallery One exhibition and *Dimā' wa Hurriyya*, which separated them respectively as abstract and realist (the critics of the Gallery One show commented on color, composition, the choice of paper and technique, while those of *Dimā' wa Hurriyya* emphasized the works' content). By contrast, the latter—realism in art—regards realism as dialectically intertwined with modernism. In this sense, realism is an internally contradictory concept that is constituted by and constitutive of its very antinomies: its social claim to truth, on the one hand, and the aesthetic pleasure (and terror) it promises, on the other.³⁹ Its negative—critical or destructive—function has historically been one of demystification. It undermines genres and highlights those features of social reality which the genre in question fails to accommodate.⁴⁰ Its positive function is a modernist impulse, which transforms the technique of demystification into one of defamiliarization and gradually results in a renewal of perception in the viewer or reader.⁴¹ Realism is a contradictory historical process whose “emergence and development at one and the same time constitute its own inevitable undoing, its own decay and dissolution.”⁴² This process is crystallized and made visible in *The Changing of Horses*—an untimely work that shared with Mexican muralism of the 1920s–1970s an epistemological claim to social truth but which surpassed the conventions of realism (as style) and resulted in a defamiliarization in the viewer.⁴³ Its avant-gardism,

war. See Elias Khoury, “Beyond Commitment,” in *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature Since the 1940s*, ed. Georges Khalil and Friederike Pannewick, vol. 41, *Literatures in Context* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2015), 79–88.

³⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2013), 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 5.

⁴² *Ibid.* 6.

⁴³ His work was discernably surrealist in the years following the June 1967 War. I take surrealism to denote what is more real than reality, rather than what is unreal or fantastical.

which came *after* modernism, could not be apprehended in its own time and required a new optic for its perception.

The Changing of Horses is a work that demands art *historical* attention. To regard it historically (and therefore materially) is to challenge the evolutionist historicism of the ideology of the avant-garde—modernity as the teleological progression of history, advancement in modernization processes as favorable conditions for revolution, and the modern artwork as “advanced”—and that of postcolonial theory, which presumes the West to be the locus from which modernity emerges and then spreads. The anachronism of The Changing of Horses cannot be explained as the material consequence of uneven power relations between the West and rest of the world. Instead, I contend that to make sense of its untimely character, it is imperative to grasp the totalizing structure of capitalism. Critical reevaluations of totality in the Hegelian system reveal that it cannot be understood as a process that ends in union and synchronicity. Its asymmetry is structurally constitutive (but historically overdetermined).⁴⁴ Capitalist modernity, as the historically overdetermined model of our social totality, is a singular but uneven historical process. It is internally contradictory and asynchronous, rather than oppositional to another, culturally defined modernity. Slavoj Žižek explains that its asynchronicity is

ultimately not only the delay between the elements of the same historical totality, but the delay of the totality with regard to itself, the structural necessity for a totality to

Here, it is instructive that the prefix ‘sur-’, from the French, is equivalent to the English ‘super-’ or ‘over-’.

⁴⁴ Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 125, cited in Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and The Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 439.

contain anachronistic elements which alone make it possible for it to establish itself as a totality—is the temporal aspect of a gap which propels the dialectical process...⁴⁵

It would therefore be futile to record moments of synchronicity among places, people, and artistic forms, or to yearn for the ostensible end point in which these all converge. The art historical task is rather to grapple with the structural asynchronicity and asymmetry within the social totality, and in relation to the artwork. In *The Changing of Horses*, the conjuncture of muralism and surrealism, political commitment and painterly experimentation exposes the structural asynchronicity across avant-garde practices globally, as well as the lag between the artwork's appearance and its legibility. Far from signaling backwardness or derivativeness, the anachronism of *The Changing of Horses* is its very promise.

In what follows, I foreground the gap between El-Rayess's social experience and his artistic activity. I piece together, by way of introduction, an account of the former in Chapters I and II: the declaration of El-Rayess's artistic commitment after the June War, and the concomitant change in his stance toward the social role of the artist, artmaking, and artistic institutions. I then shift the focus entirely in Chapter III to a formal reading of *The Changing of Horses*, which proceeds negatively through the cracks, slips, and repetitions in the discourse around the work—in other words, in relation to what remained invisible to, and unstated by, the artist and the audiences of *Blood and Freedom*. In deferring my analysis of the work to the third chapter of this thesis, I stage the retroactive operation at work in the reception of the artwork—the belatedness in its legibility—and bring its avant-gardism to the fore.

⁴⁵ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 438.

THE BLOOD AND FREEDOM EXHIBITION

Aref El-Rayess's *The Changing of Horses* was first exhibited at *Salle de L'Orient* in April 1968 in an itinerant solo exhibition of thirteen oil paintings entitled *Dimā' wa Hurriyya* in Arabic and *Sang et Liberté* in French (Blood and Freedom). It was the centerpiece of the exhibition display, and it provided the narrative context for the other twelve works, which included homages to the revolutionary figures Che Guevara (assassinated in October 1967) and Martin Luther King (assassinated in April 1968), to the French president Charles de Gaulle,⁴⁶ and to the armed guerrilla combatants of the Palestinian Resistance (the *fidā'iyīn*), as well as scenes of struggle and protest in Lebanon, Palestine and Vietnam.

Blood and Freedom opened just ten months after the Arab defeat of the 1967 June War. In an effort to recover swiftly from the devastating events, the official discourse in Arab states historicized the June War in euphemistic terms, as the *Naksa* (setback), following Abdel Gamal Nasser's use of the term on the last day of the war. The local and regional press symbolically referred to the war by the first day of battle, as "The 5th of June," to

⁴⁶ Charles de Gaulle's reelection as president of France in late May 1968, after widespread protests by students and workers, was considered a defeat by the European left. By contrast, El-Rayess celebrated de Gaulle for having taken anti-imperialist measures against Israel. The events of May 1968 in France had their reverberations in student protests and worker strikes in Lebanon, but the local events had already been provoked by the 1967 June War. For more details on the local reception of May 1968, see Yoav Di-Capua, "The Slow Revolution: May 1968 in the Arab World." *The American Historical Review* 123, no. 3 (2018): 733–738.

which El-Rayess owed the commemorative title of his painting.⁴⁷ Although Lebanon was the only state of occupied Palestine's neighbors not to partake in the war, the effects of the Arab defeat were instantly apparent on the streets of Beirut. Daily life was interrupted by bank closures, breaks in the working day, and live news broadcasts. On the last day of the war, the Coca-Cola bottling plant was burned as a response to the company's investments in Israel, and in the evening, Nasser declared defeat in his resignation speech, which was broadcast throughout the region.⁴⁸ Samir Kassir compares the upheavals that followed in Beirut to those in Cairo, where "thousands and thousands of people descended into the streets to proclaim their refusal to accept defeat and their loyalty to the vanquished leader [Nasser]...and to execrate the United States, which no one doubted for one moment had been the true instigator of this lightning war."⁴⁹ Several companies including Coca-Cola and the Ford Motor Company were thereafter officially boycotted in a gesture of anti-imperial resistance.⁵⁰

During the six days of the war, El-Rayess knocked on the doors of the intellectuals he knew, had met or heard about, for he claimed that in spite of their divergent ideological dispositions, they were people with whom he could "act."⁵¹ He rushed to army headquarters

⁴⁷ The 5th of June (Le 5 Juin) was also the title of a commemorative group exhibition in which *The Changing of Horse* appeared in June 1968 at Dar El-Fan wa El-Adab. For further details, see the following chapter, "The Committed Artist".

⁴⁸ Samir Kassir, *Beirut*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2010), 469.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Mona Iskandar, "Three Lebanese Intellectuals in Profile" (Unpublished paper, American University of Beirut, January 1970), 2.

and commando camps but was turned away on account of him being an artist.⁵² He was told that he could better serve the anti-imperialist struggle in his professional capacity as a painter, rather than a fighter with no previous military training.⁵³ This refusal on the part of the military was crucial, for it eventually geared the artist's political commitments toward his artistic practice. Less than two months later, after Nasser was reinstated as president of Egypt, El Rayess penned a critical article in the London-based newspaper *The Sunday Times* in response to a piece in the Cairo-based *Al-Ahram*, which was written by the newspaper's editor-in-chief Mohamed Hassanein Heikal. El-Rayess defended his stance as an Arab nationalist—a position he explicitly rejected one year later⁵⁴—but he critiqued Heikal, a ghostwriter for Nasser and a state representative of pan-Arabism, for his entitlement in representing the Arab people. He concluded:

Now [the people] are in a mess, and the leaders who got them into it are strutting about, with their heads bowed only enough to hide their blushes, pretending to have the right, the authority and the power to cure the Arab peoples of their shock. The last defeat of the Arab world in the Arab-Israeli battle was a defeat for the Arab leaders, not for the Arab peoples.⁵⁵

El-Rayess began to read Lenin and Marx.⁵⁶ He also subscribed to the Maoist journal *Littérature Chinoise* and to a selection of periodicals distributed by *Guozi Shudian: China Publications Centre*.⁵⁷ Despite his avid support of the head of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), Druze leader and leftist militant, Kamal Jumblatt, El-Rayess was never

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Aref Rayess," *L'Orient*, June 11, 1968.

⁵⁵ Aref El-Rayess, "Arab People Undefeated." *The Sunday Times*. September 17, 1967.

⁵⁶ Iskandar, 2-3.

⁵⁷ Pai Wan Tchouang, "Littérature Chinoise," subscription letter, July 8, 1968, Aref El-Rayess Foundation; Qian Shengfei, "Guozi Shudian China Publications Centre," subscription letter, 1968, Aref El-Rayess Foundation.

formally registered as a party member.⁵⁸ Although the reach of Marxism-Leninism after the war exceeded party affiliation, it is not insignificant that The Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), which had been sidetracked throughout the 1950s and 1960s on account of its Stalinization, “was now on its way to becoming once again a mass party.”⁵⁹ In the months that followed the war, a disunited left was aligned with the revolutionary cause of the Palestinian resistance, which was starting to fill—in military and economic resources—the void left by the Arab states’ impotence following their defeat. The resistance had already infiltrated the refugee camps, the peasant-populated southern border, and the working-class neighborhoods encircling the city before the war, but the *fidā’iyīn* were now seen as liberators by the peasants in the south, leftist militants and intellectuals in Beirut.⁶⁰ For El-Rayess, the radicalization of a leftist politics following the June War first culminated in *Blood and Freedom*, an exhibition that was purported to have “brought in more spectators than any other painting exhibition in Lebanon.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Importantly, the shifts in El-Rayess’s interests were congruent with those of Kamal Jumblatt. The poetry of the artist’s earlier years was inspired by Jumblatt’s philosophical and practical investment in Hindu and Sufi mysticism. His burgeoning interest in the writings of Marx and Lenin likewise followed the shift in Jumblatt’s politics, who became in 1969 the head of a coalition of leftist and nationalist groups called *The Front for Progressive Parties and National Forces* (Jabhat Al-Ahzāb wa Al-Quwa Al-Taqaaddumiyya wa Al-Wataniyya), and which was transformed into *The Lebanese National Movement* (Al-Haraka Al-Wataniyya) during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). Their mutual interest in Marxism-Leninism was also informed by the importance of this thought for the Palestinian resistance. See Rosemary Sayigh, *The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries*, 1st edition (London and New York: Zed Books, 1979), 161.

⁵⁹ Kassir, *Beirut*, 469; For a more detailed history of the Lebanese Communist Party, see Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), and Waddah Sharara, *Al-Silm Al-Ahlī Al-Barid: Lubnan, Al-Mujtama‘ Wa Al-Dawla, 1964-1967* (Beirut: Dar An-Nahar, 1980).

⁶⁰ Kassir, 474.

⁶¹ Iskandar, 5.

A. The Artist and the Masses

On April 9, 1968, Blood and Freedom opened in a large exhibition hall in the building that housed the francophone newspaper, *L'Orient*, on a busy street named *Shāri' Trablus* (Tripoli Street). Until the early twentieth century, *Shāri' Trablus* had been the site of a train station from which travelers would journey to the northern city of Tripoli. It was home to the Arabic daily newspaper, *Annahar*, as well as to *Al-Ajami*, a reputable teahouse and restaurant which was frequented by journalists, artists and tourists. Perpendicular to the *Souk Al-Ayass*, which was populated by vendors of fabric and affordable ready-to-wear clothing, *Shāri' Trablus* was a commercial thoroughfare with heavy footfall.⁶² The Salle de *L'Orient* was not different from the other commercial galleries in the Beirut of the time: it sold artworks and held solo exhibitions for prominent Lebanese and foreign artists including Bernard Buffet (1928-1999), Rafic Charaf (1932-2003), and Paul Guiragossian (1926-1993), as well as lesser-known artists such as Jean Haddad.⁶³ However, unlike the privately owned galleries of the mid-1960s, such as *Alecco Saab* and *L'Amateur*, and the hotels *Phoenicia* and *Carlton* where El-Rayess, Guiragossian, and others could and *did* show their work, the exhibition hall at *L'Orient* attracted a particularly diverse audience, owing to its location in the city center (*al-balad*) where men and women of different walks of life rubbed shoulders.⁶⁴

⁶² Kassir, 435.

⁶³ Jean Haddad belonged to the generation of Guiragossian and El-Rayess and is likely to have been born in the 1920s or 1930s, however the exact dates of his birth and death are yet to be established.

⁶⁴ For a digital map of the exhibitions hosted in the cultural institutions of Beirut between 1955 and 1975, visit the website *Perspective #1*, hosted by the Saradar Collection in Beirut and co-curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath: <http://saradarperspective.com/perspective1/>.

For an artist's solo exhibition, *Blood and Freedom* had an exceptionally wide reach. In Beirut, it was visited by local artists, including Huguette Caland, Seta Manoukian and Michel El-Mir; friends of the artist who were visiting from abroad; critics, including those who did not review the exhibition like Dorothy Parramore; gallerists and dealers, including Odile Mazloun, the owner of L'Amateur, and Waddah Faris, who later in 1972 co-founded the gallery *Contact*; the renowned historian of the Middle East, Peter Mansfield; the future art historian of Arab art, Salwa Mikdadi; political and diplomatic figures, including Henri Seyrig; foreign delegations, including a group of fifty-four engineers from l'Institut Catholique des Arts et Métier de Lille who were promoting their institute's activities in the city; other tourists, local students and passersby.⁶⁵

After showing at Salle de L'Orient, *Blood and Freedom* went on a cross-country tour. It traveled to El-Rayess's family residence in Aley in May, the cultural club *Nādī Al-Jām 'iyīn bi-l-Shmāl* (University Club in the North) in Tripoli in June and other venues in Saida, Sour, Zahlé and Baalbek later in the year, as well as the Beirut Arab University in Beirut in 1971. Like the state-sponsored exhibition, *Le Musée Imaginaire*, which received vast audiences when it was held at the UNESCO Palace in Beirut in 1957,⁶⁶ *Blood and Freedom* was addressed to the so-called masses. However, the latter extended beyond the dominant artistic practices of bourgeois society and replaced the civilizational discourse of the former

⁶⁵ "Dimā' wa Hurriyya Guestbook," April 18, 1968, The Aref el-Rayess Foundation; "Les Ingénieurs de Lille à l'exposition Aref Rayess Dans La Salle de 'L'Orient,'" *L'Orient*, April 20, 1968.

⁶⁶ Genevieve Maxwell, "Famous Paintings [Sic] Reproductions During Second Surssock Exhibit," *The Daily Star*, December 29, 1961.

with a call for political commitment. El-Rayess made it his task to involve his audiences: he gave regular tours of the exhibition and offered a detailed description of every artwork for the exhibition's second catalog, which was printed for the show's Aley iteration; he advertised Blood and Freedom in posters and flyers on which The Changing of Horses was reproduced as the exhibition's representative image (figures 4 & 5); he put none of the exhibition's thirteen works up for sale. The Changing of Horses was the exhibition's most significant artwork. It appeared as the second item on the list of works, after *Ba'th Che Guevara* (The Resurrection of Che Guevara), in the two catalogs produced for the Beirut and Aley iterations of Blood and Freedom.⁶⁷ It continued to be featured for the next decade in popular group exhibitions in extra-artistic spaces. In addition to its inclusion in *Le 5 Juin* show at Dar El-Fan in 1968 and in El-Rayess's solo retrospective exhibition at the National Museum of Damascus in 1969, it was featured in the exhibition *Al-Fann Fi Khidmat Al-'Amal Al-Fidā'ī* (Art in the Service of Militant Work at Nādī Al-Rābita Al-Thaqāfiyya in Tripoli in 1969, which commemorated the 1968 battle of Karameh in Jordan. Even several years after the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), in 1978, it was exhibited at a festival for the arts in Aley.

⁶⁷ The first item on the list of works was *Ba'th Che Guevara*. Its place at the top of the list, before The Changing of Horses, is symptomatic of his place as *the* revolutionary hero in the leftist imaginary. For more on this, see the following chapter.

معرض
أرف الريس
عاليه



« دمآء وهريية »

المكان : ملك نجيب الريس

يستمر المعرض من ١٥ الى ٢٥ ايار ١٩٦٨

يستقبل الزائرين من الساعة العاشرة صباحاً حتى الثامنة مساء

الدعوة عامة

Figure 4. Aref El-Rayess, *Dimā' wa Hurriyya*, Aley, May 1968, Poster.
© Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.



Figure 5. Aref El-Rayess, *Dimā' wa Hurriyya*, Aley, May 1968, Flyer.
© Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.

At Salle de L'Orient, *The Changing of Horses* took up most of the curtain-covered wall in the back of the rectangular hall at L'Orient and was the show's eye-catcher (figure 6). Painted on easel but displayed as a mural, its dimensions (200 by 149 cm) far exceeded what could be sold in a gallery and accommodated in the bourgeois home. It was produced as a realist history painting—its figures are historical (King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, the masses returning from the lost battles of the 1967 June War)—that El-Rayess cloaked in an allegorical, and therefore idealist, narrative. Significantly, the picture's narrative did not record or memorialize the events of the Arab defeat, as is suggested by the work's more common title, *The 5th of June*. Rather, it intervened in the public discourse and the imaginary of defeat by presenting the event of the war as a *reminder*—El-Rayess described the subject of this painting as “the memory of the defeat”—to commit to the struggle for national liberation and socialist revolution.⁶⁸ El-Rayess alluded to the work's universalist dimensions beyond its national particularity in the concluding paragraph of his catalog text:

In the *Blood and Freedom* series, I embark on the battle with the sons of my nation to share the pains of our psychological, intellectual and national battle, which is restricted for some to submitting to the bitter reality whose loud tragedy we are experiencing in Palestine, in Vietnam, in South and North America, in Africa, and in other places of this inflamed world.⁶⁹

The two other mural-sized paintings on view, the homages to Martin Luther King and Che Guevara, were displayed perpendicularly to the central wall of *The Changing of Horses*, on either of its sides (figure 7). The central position of *The Changing of Horses* within the

⁶⁸ Aref El-Rayess, “Dimā’ wa Hurriyya,” May 1968.

⁶⁹ Ibid.



Figure 6. *Dimā' wa Hurriyya* Visitors at Salle de L'Orient, 1968, Photograph. © Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.



Figure 7. *Henri Seyrig and Victor Hakim at Dimā' wa Hurriyya Opening in Salle de L'Orient, 1968, Photograph. © Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.*

exhibition display framed its subject as the node of emancipatory struggles against fascism, slavery, colonialism, imperialism, nuclear warfare and capitalist domination.

The Changing of Horses demanded a collective viewership, which was to seize upon the work's call for commitment. The weight of the work was conferred onto the masses. El-Rayess's reliance upon the masses as representational motif on the picture plane, and his appeal to them as audiences, in Blood and Freedom is reminiscent of the role of the masses in David Alfaro Siqueiros's painting, cultural-political activities and interventions in the debates around *arte popular* (popular art).⁷⁰ El-Rayess might have not deliberately sought to emulate the muralists in his campaign of a committed art for the masses in 1967, but The Changing of Horses retroactively confirmed his commitment to muralism, which he later avowed in 1974. In an essay published in *Al-Tarīq* (the LCP's mouthpiece), he defended David Alfaro Siqueiros's muralism as the model for an art of painting in the Third World (figure 8).⁷¹ El-Rayess's investment in the masses (as an ideological, rather than descriptive, notion) in the populist artistic campaign of Blood and Freedom, as well as the idealist narrative, muralist format and historical trajectory of The Changing of Horses endowed local painting with an unprecedented public character.

⁷⁰ See Jennifer A. Jolly, "Siqueiros' Communist Proposition for Mexican Muralism: A Mural for the Mexican Electricians' Syndicate," in *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greeley, and Leonard Folgarait (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 75–92.

⁷¹ Aref El-Rayess, "Fann Siqueiros," *Al-Tarīq*, no. 2 (February 1974): 25–37. In addition to laying claim to mural painting in his piece of Siqueiros, he openly declared in 1978 his commitment to realism in a discussion with artists Abdulhamid Baalbaki and Seta Manoukian in *Al-Tarīq*. See Seta Manoukian, Aref El-Rayess, and Abdel Hamid Baalbaki, "Al-Wāqī' iyya Wa Al-Funūn Al-Tashkīliyya," *Al-Tarīq* 37, no. 1 (February 1978): 185–97.



Figure 8. Al-Tariq, *Al-Fann wa-l-Thawra (Art and Revolution)* issue, February 1974, Cover Image. Courtesy Ziad Kiblawi Archives, Beirut.

THE COMMITTED ARTIST

Two months after *Blood and Freedom* was held in *Salle de L'Orient*, *The Changing of Horses* was once again put on public display in a group exhibition, entitled *Le 5 Juin*, at *Dar El-Fan wa El-Adab* (or *Dar El-Fan*, as it was commonly referred to for short). Held in June 1968 over the duration of six days, 5 Juin commemorated the 1967 June War. A widely attended conference was held in tandem, in which Aref El-Rayess declaimed against dealers, collectors, and critics in his seminal speech on artistic commitment. The speech, which gained the apt title *The Artist as a Fidā'ī in His Everyday Life* (Al-Fannan fi Hayātihi al-Yawmiyya ka Fidā'ī) in the daily newspaper *Al-Muharrir* where it was transcribed and published, was the artist's second foray into public discourse—it succeeded the catalog text he wrote for the second iteration of *Blood and Freedom* in Aley in May 1968—and it exemplified his declared political and aesthetic commitments. He had already argued against the neutrality of a purportedly apolitical position in his catalog text:

to submit to bitter reality is cowardice, and to fail to address and deter evil is to be an accomplice in the crime, and to rush to the armed battlefield with weapons of mercy, forgiveness, love, and faith is foolishness...[t]o stand cross-armed in the face of the holy duty to go into the battle of honor is more difficult than death.⁷²

He rearticulated a version of this statement in his speech for *Le 5 Juin*, and later reworked and expanded upon other excerpts from his catalog text and his speech in his 1972 political manifesto, *Ma' Mann wa Dudd Mann?* (With Whom and Against Whom?).⁷³

⁷² Aref El-Rayess, "Dimā' wa Hurriyya," May 1968.

⁷³ In *Ma' Mann wa Dudd Mann?* El-Rayess allusively takes a stance against the feudal and sectarian underpinnings of Kamal Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and

These three interventions are each in their own right charged manifestos which share the same diagnosis of a prevailing existential terror. Replete with hyperbolic metaphors, his speech and catalog text elaborate a social critique of the current capitalist and colonial material conditions in romantic, anti-capitalist terms. Unlike the 1972 manifesto, these two political statements also evince an aesthetic commitment to a realist painting that foregrounds humanist content.

In this chapter, I trace the nodal intellectual currents undergirding El-Rayess's proclamations on artistic commitment. While the fervent language in his manifesto attests to his romantic longing to be perceived as a lone politicized figure, his writings on the artist's social role, and the forms he deemed appropriate for imparting his political position, echo the predominant local intellectual debates on commitment (*iltizām*). In particular, El-Rayess heeded the call for the revolutionary commitment (*al-iltizām al-thawri*) commanded after The June War by the editor Suhayl Idriss (1925–2008) of the influential literary journal *Al-Adāb*. The artist's stance resonated with Idriss's militant notion of *iltizām*, which was itself built on the voluntarism of the existentialists and the populism of the Marxists in the older debates of the 1950s and 60s. I situate his dramatic statements within their intellectual context to uncover the conditions that motivated the shift in his attitude toward the politics of artmaking and artistic institutions. Crucially, I do not read *The Changing of Horses* through this shift. Rather, I set up the intellectual, political and institutional stakes around the debates on *iltizām* in order to accentuate, ultimately, the unbridgeable gap

party politics in Lebanon at large—a gesture for which he went into short-term voluntary exile. See Aref El-Rayess, *Ma' Mann Wa Dudd Mann?*. April 1972.

between the artist's experience and the artwork's revolutionary propositions, which exceed his claims and actions.

The debates on commitment in the Arab world predated The June War and were centered on literature. The term *iltizām* gained critical currency in the late 1940s with the Arab reception of Jean-Paul Sartre's collection of essays on the artist's commitment, entitled, "What is Literature?," "Why do We Write?," and "For Whom Does One Write?" that had been published in 1947 in the French journal *Les Temps Modernes*, and compiled in the book *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948).⁷⁴ Egyptian literary critic Taha Husayn (1889–1973), an intellectual of the class of *udabā'* and a staunch supporter of high culture, translated Sartre's term for commitment, *engagement*, as *iltizām* in his discussion of the latter's essays in 1947 and argued against the term's relevance for the non-European experience.⁷⁵ Reacting against the work of Marxist and socialist literary critics Salama Musa (1887–1958), Umar Fakhuri (1895–1946), and Ra'if Khuri (1913–1967), Husayn aimed to neutralize the debates on political commitment. He defended literature's autonomy as *al-fann min ajl al-fann* (art for art's sake).⁷⁶ The idea of literary and artistic autonomy was highly influential for writers, poets, art critics, and artists in Lebanon and the

⁷⁴ Verena Klemm, "Different Notions of Commitment (Iltizām) and Committed Literature (al-Adab al-Multazim) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq." *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* 3, no. 1 (2000), 52.

⁷⁵ The term *udabā'* is plural for *adīb*; a man of letters. The *udabā'* were the liberal cultural elite and the proponents of Nahda thought. See Taha Husayn, *Mustaqbal Al-Thaqāfa fī Misr*. Cairo: Matba'at al-Ma'ārif, 1938.

⁷⁶ Husayn.

Arab world, but a strong counter-model was being promulgated by the Beirut-based literary journal *Al-Adāb* in its popularization of a certain politics of *iltizām*. It offered a platform of debate for leftists across the spectrum and was circulated all over the Arab world. The opening statement, written by co-editor Suhayl Idriss and published in the journal's first issue in 1953, called for a literature of *iltizām*:

The current situation of Arab countries imposes on every citizen, each in his own field, to mobilize his laboring efforts toward the liberation of the homeland and the elevation of its political, social and intellectual level. In order for literature to be truthful it ought not be isolated from the society in which it exists...The kind of literature that this journal calls for and encourages is the literature of commitment (*iltizām*), which issues from Arab society and pours back into it.⁷⁷

Idriss's editorial was "a near-copy" of Sartre's mission statement in *Les Temps Modernes*.⁷⁸ *Al-Adāb* infused Arab nationalist politics with an existentialist rhetoric of freedom and authenticity. The journal redefined the Arabic terms *hurriyya* (freedom) and *asāla* (authenticity)—they had previously circulated in the register of Arab *Nahda* (revivalist) thought—in Sartrean terms.⁷⁹ For Sartre, freedom is a necessary and unalienable property of all conscious human beings. To be authentic is to affirm this freedom by choosing how to act and be in the world, and to assume responsibility without resentment or regret. The writer or artist affirms his freedom through a socially committed practice, and in turn, triggers a free choice in the reader or viewer to commit to the cause in

⁷⁷ Suhayl Idriss, "Risalat *Al-Adāb*," *Al-Adāb* 1, no. 1 (January 1953): 1.

⁷⁸ Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization*. London / Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, 68.

⁷⁹ With modernization processes underway in nineteenth-century Lebanon, Arab *Nahda* (revivalist) thought attempted to safeguard a purportedly authentic Arab identity from an identity that was thought to be imposed by the West, by rooting it in a pre-modern cultural heritage (*turāth*). In the 1950-60s, *Al-Adāb* foregrounded the ethico-political responsibility of the individual writer (or artist) in carrying out such a program, and in awakening a corresponding commitment in the reader (or viewer), toward decolonial ends.

question. The individual, for Sartre, is therefore the sole locus of agency in a world otherwise determined by the historical processes of capitalism. Calling upon the writer to take responsibility toward his people, Al-Adāb deployed the notion of iltizām in terms of an individual praxis of self-determination and decolonization.

Al-Adāb's notion of commitment was the dominant model for artistic practice in the Arab world.⁸⁰ It was not only opposed to the models of artistic autonomy, including those advocated by the prominent journal *Shi' r* (Poetry), but it also distinguished itself from the Marxist theories of commitment, most notably those elaborated by the Lebanese literary critic Husayn Muruwwa (1910–1987), as well as by the Egyptian philosopher Mahmud Amin Al-Alim (1922–2009) and mathematician Abd al-Azim Anis. Muruwwa, who had just returned to Beirut from the Second Congress of Writer's in Moscow in 1955 prefaced al-Alim's and Anis's seminal book of essays entitled *Fī-l-Thaqafa al-Misriyya* (On Egyptian Culture; 1956).⁸¹ In it, the three figures critique the writing of the *udabā'*, the individualist politics of iltizām and the existing forms of realism which, in their view, did

⁸⁰ Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut*. Translation / Transnation. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019, 38.

⁸¹ *Shi' r* was a journal dedicated to poetry and poetry criticism. Founded by Yusuf Al-Khal in 1957, it remained active for eleven years (1957–64; 1967–70), during which time it published manifestos, poems, translations of foreign poems into Arabic and criticism. For the Al-Adāb writers, the *Shi' r* poets represented the opposite literary camp. *Shi' r* came under frequent attack by Al-Adāb on the grounds that its poetic program advanced propaganda which was disguised in a rhetoric of artistic autonomy. For more on the *Shi' r*, see Creswell, *City of Beginnings*. For Muruwwa's account of his time in Moscow, see Husayn Muruwwa, *Qadāya Adabiyya*. Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1956, 66–85.

not adequately represent class struggle.⁸² The following year, Muruwwa published his programmatic theoretical work *Qadāya Adabiyya* (Literary Issues) in Cairo. Al-Adāb in turn focused on salvaging a voluntarist notion of commitment from Muruwwa's Marxist understanding, which was considered to be dogmatic and deterministic, and closer to the notion of *ilzām* (compulsion) than *iltizām*—that is, imposed rather than arising from an individual's free choice.⁸³ In the same period, Muruwwa, who was a member of the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), along with another two distinguished party members, Niqula Shawi (1912–1983) and Farj-Allah Al-Helo (1906–1959), established the journal *Al-Thaqāfa Al-Wataniyya* (National Culture). There the three thinkers defended their ideas on socialist literary theory, literature and poetry until the late 1950s when the journal shut down and its writers reluctantly returned to Al-Adāb.⁸⁴ Al-Adāb maintained authority over the debate on commitment until the June War. The journal lost its sway, the historian Yoav di-Capua argues, amid the intellectual disenchantment following Sartre's declaration of support for Israel on the eve of June 5th, 1967.⁸⁵ The Arab existentialists rebelled against Sartre, their father figure, and largely turned away from the question of *iltizām*. However,

⁸² Mahmud Amin al-Alim and Abd al-Azim Anis. *Fī-l-Thaqāfa al-Misriyya*. Edited by Mahmud Amīn al-Alim and Gha'ib Tuma Farman. Cairo: Dar al-Thaqāfa al-Jadīda, 1989 [1956].

⁸³ Verena Klemm, "Different Notions of Commitment", 57.

⁸⁴ Younes, Miriam. "A Tale of Two Communists: The Revolutionary Projects of The Lebanese Communists Husayn Muruwwa and Mahdi 'Amil." *Arab Studies Journal* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2016), 101.

⁸⁵ Di-Capua, *No Exit*, 3–4, 229–249.

their disillusion did not preclude the continuation of a politics of iltizām and it cannot be generalized to all intellectual and cultural practices after the war.⁸⁶

Historians have treated the June War of 1967 as a historical rupture which ushered in new forms of political and aesthetic engagement radically different from those that came before. It is instructive that Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab and Ibrahim Abu Rabi', for example, begin their respective monographs on contemporary Arab thought with the event of the war. Kassab premises her ruptural reading of 1967 on the alleged demise of the left.⁸⁷ Abu Rabi' adheres to a periodizing model of rupture and continuity, whereby he argues that the war initiated important transitions in the Arab world, but did not institute a "brand new" phase in the intellectual history of contemporary Arab thought.⁸⁸ He suggests, rather, that the debates grew urgent with the exposure of the crisis of the Arab nationalist state.⁸⁹ Yoav di-Capua distinguishes between the established "Old Arab Left" that had relied on state patronage before 1967, and a "New Left" that emerged after 1967 and "associated itself

⁸⁶ It is suspect that Yoav Di-Capua leaves out of his account Al-Adāb's influential shift toward a revolutionary notion of iltizām. He argues that in spite the Arab existentialists' disenchantment with Sartre, Al-Adāb's Sartrean existentialism continues to be relevant in conceiving of a decolonial politics today. However, by failing to address the shift in the journal's priorities after The June War, he tacitly affirms the thesis of a break in intellectual thought after 1967. As I hope to make clear in my analysis of El-Rayess's speech on commitment, the difference between Al-Adāb's pre-1967 conception of iltizām and its post-1967 notion of al-iltizām al-thawrī was actually negligible; it was still conceived in terms of an individual praxis of decolonization. Di-Capua's thesis is symptomatic of a historicist fear of the association between revolutionary commitment and its relationship to the Lebanese Civil War.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

⁸⁸ Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*. London and Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2004, 10.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 11.

with radical European groups and developed a worldly and independent operative vision to which the cause of Palestine was central.”⁹⁰ Undoubtedly the June War was a watershed moment in the history of the Arab world. However, to suggest that it instituted a new historical period is to separate the local and regional events from the global struggles for emancipation in the 1960s and 1970s, and hence to provincialize it. Rather than observing the 1967 June War as the marker of a new historical period, and endorsing the clear-cut division between old and new, I treat it as the result of an intensification of already-existing, though repressed, social and economic contradictions in Lebanon (the high point of which was the outbreak of the Civil War in 1975) and in the region within a singular, asynchronous capitalist modernity. In this regard, it should be stated that the Arab defeat is not reducible to its political outcome. It was also a symptom of the expansion of capitalism, whereby the expropriation of Palestinian land by the state of Israel was a confounding instance of the accumulation of capital. Faced with the effects of this extraordinary violence, Arab intellectuals and artists either retreated from politics or were radicalized by an armed Palestinian resistance who were prepared to retaliate directly with a corresponding violence. The war had brought the crisis of the Arab left to the fore, and it emphasized the deadlock of the old discourses and practices of existentialism, Arab nationalism and orthodox Marxism in conceiving a political practice adequate to the intensifying capitalist, colonial conditions.

⁹⁰ Di-Capua, “The Slow Revolution,” 734.

A. Revolutionary Commitment after June 1967

El-Rayess's self-styling as an intellectual, his stance on the social role of the artist and the suitable forms for conveying his commitment in *The Artist as a Fidā'ī in His Everyday Life*, as well the shifts in his institutional practices, coincided with Al-Adāb's radicalized politics of iltizām, which was only articulated and expressed by artists and intellectuals after 1967—that is, after the defeat of the ideology of pan-Arab nationalism, and of Nasserism in particular. Significantly, iltizām had not featured as a key word around visual art prior to the June War.⁹¹

In the immediate aftermath of the June War, Suhayl Idriss wrote an editorial entitled, “Al-Adīb fī Al-Ma‘raka!” (The Writer in Battle!) in Al-Adāb's June issue, in which he calls on the Arab writer to participate as a fidā'ī in the intellectual battle against imperialism, Zionism, and conservatism.⁹² He was responding, in large part, to the widespread defeatism among writers:

The true writer cannot stand on the margins in battle. It is his duty to drive the convoy, to push citizens forward and to nurture in them a combatant energy. The Arab writer in Lebanon, in particular, is faced with a dual task: he is to mobilize the crowd, and to confront those campaigns of uncertainty and defeat that we have begun to see foregrounded in the pens of some hired journalists and in those of mercenary *udabā'*, who are caught in the wheel of the Arab conservatism and neocolonialism complicit in global Zionism. It is up to the free writers in this country to be a steadfast front against those campaigns. Free writers must continue to expose these pens, as long as the regimes—with their excuse of protecting free speech—do not to lift a finger to shatter them... Today more than any day that has

⁹¹ See the digital archiving project of Beirut art spaces of the 1950-70s and their exhibitions for more details on this shift in visual activity, “Perspective #1,” Saradar Collection, 2018–2019, <http://saradarperspective.com/perspective1/>.

⁹¹ “Dimā' wa Hurriyya Guestbook,” April 18, 1968

⁹² Suhayl Idriss, “Al-Adīb fī al-Ma‘raka!”, *Al-Adāb*, no. 6 (June 1967): 1–2.

yet passed, the Arab writer is called upon to weaponize the word, to sharpen and free it, from time to time, from the effects of the intellectual prostitution practiced by these treacherous scribes. This is the only honorable battle for the Arab writer. In this period of his history, he must fight this battle to support the Arab people, so that they, in turn, endorse him as their loyal leader.⁹³

Here, Idriss shifts from a Sartrean *littérature engagée* toward a more radical notion of committed literature, now dubbed al-adab al-thawrī (revolutionary literature). At Idriss's behest, writers and artists took the fidā'ī as the model for their artistic commitment, which they enacted in artistic technique and political posture. Politically committed artists and intellectuals might not have joined the ranks of the fidā'iyīn in their raids on Israel from across the Southern Lebanese border, and in their clashes with the Lebanese army in front of foreign embassies and the headquarters of British and American oil companies, but they supported the fidā'iyīn in their struggle for the liberation of Palestine by other means. El-Rayess, for instance, showed *The Changing of Horses* in a 1969 exhibition entitled *Al-Fann fī Khidmat Al-'Amal Al-Fidā'ī* (Art in the Service of Militant Work) at Nādī Al-Rābita Al-Thaqāfiyya in Tripoli, which commemorated the 1968 battle of Karameh in Jordan. He thereafter visited the training grounds of the fidā'iyīn (figures 9 & 10). For committed artists, the figure of the fidā'ī of the Palestinian resistance corresponded to a universal representation of a guerilla combatant. This representation was itself concretized and immortalized in the image of Che Guevara following his assassination in 1968. Examples in music, film, and poster art abound, but a few are worthy of note. In addition to Sheikh Imam's elegiac song, *Che Guevara Mat* (Che Guevara died), in which he laments, "the ideal freedom fighter died / a hundred losses for men", Marcel Khalifé, a composer and

⁹³ Ibid.



Figure 9. *Aref El-Rayess in Fidā ī Training Camp, c. 1970s, Photograph.* © Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.



Figure 10. *Aref El-Rayess in Fidā ī Training Camp, c. 1970s, Photograph.* © Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.

singer famous for his commitment to the Palestinian resistance, converted a poem by ‘Abbas Beydun on the *fidā’ī* in southern Lebanon into the song, *Tango li Che Guevara* (Tango for Che Guevara).⁹⁴ Similarly, El-Rayess who rarely engaged in poster-making, collaborated with the designer Waddah Faris in producing a poster out of his painting, *Ba‘th Che Guevara* (The Resurrection of Che Guevara), which was annotated with the title, *The Palestinian* (figure 11).⁹⁵ For El-Rayess, then, Che Guevara was resurrected in the figure of the *fidā’ī*.

The radicalized politics of *iltizām* after 1967 approximated, in some respects, the earlier model of commitment defended by Al-‘Alim and Anis, as well as Muruwwa, according to which the realist writer served the role of a revolutionary hero who was to lead a class struggle for emancipation.⁹⁶ El-Rayess presented himself in his writing and public appearances, and even represented himself visually in *The Changing of Horses*, as such a revolutionary figure. The description he provided in the catalog text of the bespectacled character with whom he bears a discernable resemblance attests to such an understanding of the committed artist as taking up the plight of the masses; he is “the Arab revolutionary on the back of a new horse representing ‘the will of the people’.”⁹⁷ Importantly, El-Rayess’s

⁹⁴ For an English translation of an excerpt of Beydun’s poem, see Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London / Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2007), 180–181.

⁹⁵ This poster was donated to the *Friends of Palestine* organization and proceeds went to the West Bank in Palestine. See “Fann al-‘Arab Min Beirut Yusā‘id al-Daffa al-Gharbiyya,” *Annahar Al-Mulhaq*, May 19, 1968.

⁹⁶ Samah Selim, “The Politics of Reality: Realism, Neo-Realism, and the Village Novel.” In *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985*. New York: Routledge, 2004, 140–141.

⁹⁷ El-Rayess, *Dimā’ wa Hurriyya*.



Figure 11. Aref El-Rayess and Waddah Faris, *The Palestinian*, 1968, Poster. Courtesy Saleh Barakat Archives.

allusions to the revolutionary hero in his work were not explicitly derived from the literary criticism of local theorists, nor were they consciously sourced from the social realist paintings of the Mexican muralists, although both practices had an imprint on his work.⁹⁸

The call for revolutionary commitment did not only inform shifts in representation, but also resulted in the increasing politicization of art institutional practices. Before the June War, exhibitions in Lebanon were principally organized by the nascent government's Ministry of Education. These activities were limited to the biannual group exhibitions and juried salons held at the UNESCO Palace in the spring and the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum in the fall. The ministry aided Lebanese artists in securing scholarships to study abroad, but it did not itself fund or otherwise protect the practices of these artists. With the lack of state sponsorship, infrastructure and cultural policymaking, an increasing climate of laissez-faire economic policies in the 1960s gave rise in the cultural milieu to the dominance of commercial art galleries. Faced with a highly competitive art market on one hand and a lack of cultural policy on the other, artists established public institutions, such as unions and pedagogical institutes, many of which were regional and international in scope.⁹⁹ El-Rayess became a founding member in several of these independent and non-commercial institutions, which had internationalist, anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist ambitions. These included Dar El-Fan wa El-Adab and the Lebanese Artists Association for

⁹⁸ To restate a point I raised in the previous chapter, El-Rayess only articulated the influence of the Mexican muralists, and of David Alfaro Siqueiros in particular, on his practice in 1974. See Aref El-Rayess, "Fann Siqueiros," *Al-Tarīq*, no. 2 (February 1974): 25–37.

⁹⁹ Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds., *Modern Art in the Arab World, Primary Documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 303.

Painters and Sculptors (LAAPS; he was its president in 1969). A particularly active institution, Dar El-Fan was speedily founded in the aftermath of the June War by Janine Rubeiz—a wealthy socialite known in the cultural milieu as Janine La Rouge for her left-leaning politics—in the Beirut neighborhood of Zuqāq al-Blāt.¹⁰⁰ Rubeiz ran the space collectively with a committee of artists and intellectuals (among them Farid Aouad, Shafic Abboud, Amine El-Bacha and Aref El-Rayess), who were elected by a group of over a thousand members.¹⁰¹ It worked with the state’s cultural organ, The National Ministry of Education and Fine Arts, embassies and other institutions who aided in sponsoring a robust, varied and politically engaged program of talks, plays, conferences, concerts and film screenings.¹⁰² It also sought to collaborate with political groups such as the Confédération Nationale du Travail (CNT) in France in order to bring intellectuals such as Louis Althusser to Beirut (an unsuccessful project for reasons yet to be ascertained).¹⁰³ Prior to its establishment, there was no single venue that provided a forum for intellectual exchange

¹⁰⁰ Evelyne Massoud, “Dans La Fièvre Des Préparatifs ‘Dar El Fan’, La Maison Des Artistes et Intellectuels, Voit Le Jour,” *La Revue Du Liban*, November 1967, 51 & 93.

¹⁰¹ Kassir, *Beirut*, 469.

¹⁰² Dar El-Fan opened with an exhibition of Le Corbusier in December 1967 and went on to host events that ranged from talks on Brecht and structuralism, screenings of avant-garde Soviet cinema, solo exhibitions of local painters and thematic group exhibitions. It hosted Roger Assaf’s play *Majdalūn*—which was raided by the military on its opening night and subsequently shut down on account of its denunciation of the Lebanese government and its call to support the Palestinian resistance—and Jalal Houry’s adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* to the Palestinian context. For the list of events hosted at Dar El-Fan, see Nadine Kassab, ed. *Janine Rubeiz et Dar El Fan: Regard Vers Un Patrimoine Culturel*. Beirut: Editions Dar An-nahar, 2003. For further discussion on theater production in Beirut following The June War, see Ghassan Salamé, *Le théâtre politique au Liban (1968-1973): Approche idéologique et esthétique* (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1974).

¹⁰³ The Confédération Nationale du Travail was an anarcho-syndicalist union who were inspired by the Situationists International. For more details, see “Dar El Fan 69-70 vu Par Jeanine Rebeiz: Une Profession de Foi Dans l’efficacité Culturelle.” *L’Orient*. November 12, 1969.

among visual artists, writers, musicians, playwrights, actors and militants.¹⁰⁴ It operated unofficially as a union—its thousands of members paid a minimal annual fee of 25 Lebanese Liras, and they were represented by a committee of artists and intellectuals for decision-making processes.¹⁰⁵ Beyond Beirut, El-Rayess joined artists from Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon in founding the General Union of Arab Artists, which played a coordinating role among the various national unions and associations of artists. The Union was supported by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), before the Iraqi government became its primary source of funding and the union settled in Baghdad as its permanent headquarters.¹⁰⁶ El-Rayess also developed strong ties with artists and intellectuals in the post-revolutionary context of Algeria—he gifted the Algerian embassy in Beirut an artwork he made in 1972, and settled in Algiers for a brief period in 1976, where he produced his acclaimed diary of the Lebanese Civil War, entitled *Tarīq Al-Silm* (Road to Peace).¹⁰⁷ Other committed Arab artists with whom he was likely to have been in contact formed new artist groups and unions including the Casablanca Art School in Morocco, the Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts in 1972, the New Vision group in Baghdad who launched with a manifesto in 1969 signed by Dia Al-Azzawi and five other Iraqi artists, and Galerie 68 an experimental literary journal launched in Cairo by Hassan Soliman in 1968.

¹⁰⁴ Le Cénacle Libanais, which was active in the 1940s and 50s, was solely dedicated for conferences and talks. For an overview of the debates that took place at the Cénacle Libanais, see Nadim Shehade, *The Idea of Lebanon: Economy and State in the Cénacle Libanais, 1946-54*. Oxford: Center for Lebanese Studies, 1987.

¹⁰⁵ “Dar El Fan 69-70”, *L’Orient*. 1969.

¹⁰⁶ Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds., *Modern Art in the Arab World, Primary Documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018): 374.

¹⁰⁷ Aref El-Rayess, *Tarīq Al-Silm*, 1976, Illustrated book. Aref El-Rayess Foundation.

Notwithstanding the inescapable overlap between market, state and semi-independent cultural institutions, El-Rayess's attack on critics, dealers and collectors should be considered in light of the shift in his political commitments and institutional investments. While he continued to work with the official cultural organs of the state (in his capacity as head of LAAPS and instructor of Painting at the Lebanese University) and commercial galleries (as an artist whose livelihood depended on the sale of his work), he no longer participated in state salons and ceased to show work he deemed politically engaged in private galleries. *Le 5 Juin* was one of the last official state-funded exhibitions in which his work appeared, and it represented the gap between the political interests of committed painters in Lebanon and the state's official position.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Presided over by the Ministry of Education, *Le 5 Juin* commemorated the Arab defeat of the War. It brought together artworks by seventeen artists, including Aref El-Rayess, Toufic Abdel Al, Wahib Bteddini, Georges Corm, Cici Sursock, Guv, Mustapha Heidar, Jabbour, Hassan Jouni, Mohammed El-Khatib, Olga Limansky, F. Mansour, Ziad Moumena, Wajih Nahlé, Stelio Scamanga, Jean Tarpinian and Colette Turquieh. These seventeen artists—all primarily painters—had different political and stylistic commitments, and varying levels of visibility on the artistic scene. The exhibition and its selection of artists is reflective of the state's patronage choices, such as the investment in El-Rayess's artistic career since 1948, or in lesser known artists such as Turquieh or Tarpinian. Palestinian artists were excluded from state sponsored salons such as this one, in spite of the sizable group of Palestinian artists in Beirut, both within and without of refugee camps. It is even more remarkable that they were excluded from this particular exhibition, considering the centrality of the liberation of Palestine to The June War and to the struggles which ensued. The only Palestinian artist whose work was shown was the painter Toufic Abd al-Al. This exclusion signals a gap between the kind of artwork that the state supported (the fine arts) and other, more popular forms of artmaking that were prevalent but remained unsupported by private galleries, and consequently the state. This foreclosure is not only indicative of a failure on the part of the state—and commercial galleries—to recognize and represent growing populations of refugees since the 1948, but more importantly, telling of the imminent threat that the looming presence of an armed Palestinian resistance was perceived to pose to its survival. For more details on *Le 5 Juin* exhibition, see "A 'Dar El Fan' Des Peintres Exposit Sur Le Theme: 'Le 5 Juin.'" *La Revue Du Liban*, June 8, 1968, sec. L'Actualité Libanaise. For an overview of the artistic practices of Palestinian artists in

B. The Artist as a Fidā'ī in his Everyday Life

On the opening night of Le 5 Juin at Dar El-Fan, El-Rayess sat on a conference panel with the artist Samia Osseirane and the journalist Maurice Sakr. They each delivered speeches; El-Rayess on the role of the artist, Osseirane on the role of the woman and Sakr on the role of the journalist after 1967.¹⁰⁹ El-Rayess extemporized on the artist's commitment (iltizām al-fannān), and while he made no direct references to *The Changing of Horses*, it was on display as his professed model of commitment.¹¹⁰ He gave more or less the same talk once again three days later at the headquarters of the Lebanese Association for Artists, Painters, and Sculptors (LAAPS), now presented as a written address and entitled “Mawqaf al-Fannān wa Dawr al-Nāqid Tijāh al-Jamhūr” (The Position of the Artist and the Role of the Critic toward the Public).¹¹¹

In both versions of his speech, El-Rayess diagnosed a state of ubiquitous corruption at the hands of the members of the ruling class and the cultural elite, or the foxes (*al-tha'ālib*), as he called them. The fox—a solitary, sly, and possibly deceptive animal who seeks its own individual interests—referred to local politicians, imperialists, ideologues of liberalism

Beirut, see Kamal Boullata, “Artists Re-Member Palestine in Beirut,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2003): 22–38.

¹⁰⁹ S. Nasri, “Cinq Voix et Le Souffle d’Un Poète Pour Dire Le 5 Juin.” *Le Jour*. June 8, 1968. For a transcription of his speech at Dar el-Fan, see Aref El-Rayess, “Dawr al-Fannān Ba’d 5 Huzayrān.” *Al-Muharrir*. June 8, 1968.

¹¹⁰ It appears, from the difference between the archival traces of the talk indicated by his meager handwritten bullet-pointed notes, and the transcription of the talk in the daily newspaper *Lisān Al-Hāl*, that he elaborated on the (visual) artist’s commitment (iltizām al-fannān) extemporaneously.

¹¹¹ For this second iteration, he made slight modifications to the structure of his presentation and expanded upon his vision of the role of the artist. For a transcription of his speech at LAAPS, see Aref El-Rayess, “Dawr al-Fannān al-Lubnāni Ba’d 5 Huzayrān: Al-Fannān fī Hayātihi al-Yawmiyya ka Fidā’i.” *Lisān Al-Hāl*. June 15, 1968.

and more generally, to capitalists: “al-tha‘ālib are numerous in societies. They hide under national slogans and make claims to nobility for monetary and moral spoils at the expense of honest citizens.”¹¹² The corruption at the hands of the foxes, El-Rayess claimed, is itself an existential catastrophe, which “threatens all of society with the breakdown of humanist values”.¹¹³ This purported catastrophe was not, for him, a justification of a defeatist position, but rather an opportunity to commit art toward political aims. Throughout his manifesto, he defended a humanist position radically opposed to a liberal notion of humanism, the latter of which was emblemized by the United Nations:

And how am I to relax in my existence and survival as an artist as long as the United Nations looms in my imagination as the headquarters of al-tha‘ālib who suck the life out of the den of justice only to corrupt it, and boast about their love of man, of the defense of his rights and of world peace, while the world turns into a swamp of blood and our enemies debase humanity and justice and mock nations at large.¹¹⁴

He affords the artist an exceptional role in society, which separates him from the ordinary man. It is the artist’s intuition, for El-Rayess, that predisposes him to truth and integrity and bears him responsibilities that surpass those of the ordinary man who is

¹¹² El-Rayess, “Dawr al-Fannān,” *Al-Muharrir & Lisān Al-Hāl*. It is intriguing that El-Rayess speaks of al-tha‘ālib the way that Bertolt Brecht – who was familiar to Beirut audiences through the work of the influential playwright and critic Jalal Khoury – spoke of “the wolves” in his short piece on commitment, entitled “On Non-Objective Painting,” in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison. London: Harper & Row Ltd., 1982. In this text, Brecht provocatively states that: “You would do better to show in your paintings how man in our times has been a wolf to other men, and to say then: ‘This will not be bought in our time.’ Because only the wolves have money to buy paintings in our times. But it will not always be this war; and our paintings will contribute to seeing that it will not be.” In the catalog for the second iteration of *Blood and Freedom in Aley*, El-Rayess describes al-tha‘ālib as “the international class of those conspiring against the peoples’ peace in order to protect its own interests”.

¹¹³ El-Rayess, “Dawr al-Fannān,” *Al-Muharrir & Lisān Al-Hāl*.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

merely concerned with problems of daily life, such as food and shelter. In other words, whereas the ordinary man's anxiety is mobilized toward guaranteeing security, the artist is compelled to challenging the existing social order. However, this compulsion (*ilzām*), he will go on to suggest, is not a sufficient condition for the artist's commitment (*iltizām*). Whereas the artist-as-citizen is compelled to take up arms as a *fidā'ī*, he, in his professional capacity as an artist, *chooses* to be committed in his work. Here, the artist is not born a genius; rather, he becomes an artist through his (committed) practice. *Iltizām*, as opposed to *ilzām*, requires the artist to live authentically—which is to say, in accordance with his beliefs and values. El-Rayess sought to safeguard a conception of authenticity from its exploitation by dealers and collectors who, he claimed, deploy it in a restricted ethnonationalist sense (in its more common Nahda revivalist use, rather than in existentialist terms) “in the[ir] hopes of earning ludicrous profit,” and from critics—he referred to them as “classified informants” (*mukhbirīn musannaḥīn*)—“who only write empty statements in their criticism.”¹¹⁵ He criticized dealers and collectors as a particularly vulpine breed of capitalists in their logic of pragmatism, their assumptions that an artist's freedom can be bought, and their denial of an emancipatory freedom. In the social order of things, the artist is aligned with the so-called masses. Here the relationship between the dealer or collector and the artist is an expression of the relationship between the capitalist and the worker. While he remained firmly grounded in the existentialism of Al-Adāb, he also attributed to the artist the capacity to play the role of a revolutionary hero in awakening, not simply the individual viewer, but also the masses. The authentic artist (*al-*

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

fannān al-asīl) unlike a charlatan (*al-mutafannin*) is, for El-Rayess, “a fidā’ī in his everyday life.”¹¹⁶

He defines the role of the artist as a fidā’ī in the orthodox Marxist sense of striving against false consciousness: “our role is to strip off falsehood and deceit and to display it in scandalous pictures as an incentive to urge others toward virtue and resistance in the face of the ruling savagery and the corpses that are rampant among us.”¹¹⁷ For El-Rayess, the artist fights false consciousness through the act of representation. To be a committed artist, he asserts, does not preclude producing beautiful pictures. Rather, in the aftermath of June 1967, the meaning of beauty (*jamāl*) can be apprehended in a painting with a menacing subject matter. Here he suggests that the meaning of beauty itself has changed; it is rooted in its “potential to awaken the drugged, defeated, and duped out of their torpor”.¹¹⁸ He conceives of the artist’s role as “express[ing] the crises of life and help[ing] others to understand them” through his impartiality and his total love of humanity.¹¹⁹ He did not advance formal prescriptions for artistic commitment, but tacitly conveyed his devotion to painting and to the category of beauty. He specified that the role of the authentic (i.e. committed) artist is to battle academicism, as did movements of modern art which defined themselves against the imposed bourgeois tradition of the fine arts. He specifically states that the contemporary artist (*al-fannān al-mu’āsir*) has revolted against the shackles of tradition (*al-quyūd al-taqlīdiyya*) that were “imposed by a particular class of society that

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

distinguished itself by its assumed right to influence the capabilities of man and his intellectual output.”¹²⁰ Here he refers to the European bourgeoisie (against which artistic practices after the French revolution defined themselves), as well as the local bourgeoisie and colonial elites (against which he positioned his own practice). He argues that “the role of the committed artist in a capitalist world is like the role of the *fidā’ī*: explosion (*taffīr*), subversion (*takhrīb*), combustion (*lathi*), and mockery or ridicule (*sukhriyya*)”.¹²¹ The artist’s responsibility is “to incite (*tahrīd*) [his public], in defiance of resignation, indignation, and the fate imposed on the individual.”¹²² El-Rayess intended for these tactics to be carried out *within* painterly representation rather than through its overcoming. For El-Rayess, what was to be destroyed was not the canvas, but untruthful depictions of the world on the picture plane. The tactics he listed were aimed at guiding the artist “to express the suffering of his contemporaries and his society,” and to provoke collective action.¹²³ It was therefore a painting’s content that could render social truths visible. It was for this reason that he based the explanations of his thirteen paintings in the second catalog of Blood and Freedom solely on their allegorical content. He privileged content over form (*shakl*): he explicitly states the artwork’s content (*madmūn*) that represents the human universe, and therefore determines its value. With idealistic aesthetic content, art serves as a weapon in its battle for the elevation of the backward world (*al-‘ālam al-mutakhallif*).¹²⁴ Art was, for him, a universal ideal; its universality was grounded in humanistic content.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

The idealism of Aref El-Rayess's painterly humanism—the elevation of humanistic content over form—was not peculiar to his practice. In mid-twentieth century Lebanon, this tendency persisted in the writing and painting of El-Rayess's contemporary, Georges D. Corm (1896-1971).¹²⁵ In the work of Corm, it was particularly evocative of Nahda thought and earlier, local, *beaux arts* practices. Art historian and curator Octavian Esanu identifies a painterly humanism in Corm's "grammarian beliefs in the rules and norms of the Arts and Letters, as well as his belief in a rational and centered subject, in a soul well-shaped by culture and civilization, in a morality determined by religious faith, in a genuine knowledge of good and evil", which "stood in sharp contrast with the radical thinking of the 'progressive intellectuals'."¹²⁶ It is worth noting here that El-Rayess, like Corm, was suspicious of technology, particularly in its mobilization in war. Anthropomorphized destructive machines return as motifs in the former's painting after their first appearance in *Blood and Freedom*. He also referred to capitalism itself as an enormous machine in his speech. However, El-Rayess's painterly humanism differed from Corm's in that it was not melancholic over the loss of an ideal past (for Corm, it was the European Renaissance). Rather, it expressed a longing for a future in which man would be free. In this sense, Corm and El-Rayess represented the two opposing tendencies of painterly humanism—the former, *arrière-garde* and the latter, perhaps, *avant-garde*.

El-Rayess's painterly humanism was perhaps more congruent with the discourses and practices of his Syrian contemporaries, Nazir Nabaa, Elias Zayat, Naim Ismail and

¹²⁵ Octavian Esanu, *Lebanese Painterly Humanism: Georges D. Corm [1896-1971]* (Beirut: American University of Beirut Art Galleries, 2013).

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 103.

Fateh Al-Mouddares. Like El-Rayess, they gave up formalism after the June War and committed their practices to the changing social circumstances. They were driven to portray humanistic content in their work, but they did not privilege content over form. Art historian Aneka Lenssen argues that they deployed the notion of *plasticity* to resolve the antinomy of form and content.¹²⁷ She notes that in a roundtable discussion published in *al-Talī‘a* journal in November 1969, critic Naim Ismail suggests that art before June 1967 was abstract (*tajrīd*) and art after it was plastic (*tashkīl*).¹²⁸ The Arabic term *al-fann al-tashkīli* (plastic art) was a direct translation of the French term *arts plastiques*, and replaced the older term *al-funūn al-jamīla* (the fine arts), which had appeared in Arab countries in the 1950s and 1960s.¹²⁹ Lenssen explains that “form provided [these artists] an occasion to demonstrate mastery over internationally regulated formal techniques, such that the content of an artwork was its testimony to its own artistic discipline and humanist ethic.”¹³⁰ While El-Rayess explicitly privileged content over form, he also claimed that what raises a work above material particularities—what makes art *Art*—depends upon technical skill which is gained in daily practice and intellectual nourishment.¹³¹ Here, content is not itself extricable from form, as form is not simply a vehicle of delivery. It is rather through the artist’s

¹²⁷ Aneka Lenssen, “The Plasticity of the Syrian Avant-Garde, 1964-1970.” *ARTMargins and Massachusetts Institute of Technology* 2, no. 2-Special Section: The Longevity of 1967 in Art and Its Histories (June 2013): 67.

¹²⁸ Nazir Nabaa, “Al-Fannān Huwa Wajh al-Wāqi‘ al-Ta‘bīri li-l-Mujtama‘,” *al-Ba‘th*, September 16, 1968, reprinted and translated into English in *Ahmad Nawash* (Amman: Darat al Funun, 2008), 6–9. See Aneka Lenssen, “The Plasticity of the Syrian Avant-Garde, 1964-1970.” *ARTMargins and Massachusetts Institute of Technology* 2, no. 2-Special Section: The Longevity of 1967 in Art and Its Histories (June 2013): 67.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 48.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ El-Rayess, “Dawr al-Fannān,” *Al-Muharrir & Lisān Al-Hāl*.

method, or technique, that content is molded in form. In the second catalog *Blood and Freedom*, El-Rayess legitimates his *painterly* commitment—painting was still the dominant medium for visual representation in Arabic-speaking countries after the June War—in precisely this way: “For it is no wonder that I feel like I am living in a swamp of hot blood in which I dip my brush to paint my love of man, and I color the honor of the citizen and I compose the glory of the struggling peoples.”¹³²

El-Rayess might have argued for the elevation of content over form in his speech, but his fervent enunciations on his painterly commitment attest to the impossibility of their separation. Although he rejected academicism in art, and the academicism of socialist realism in particular—locally, he had in mind the artist Wahib Bteddini who studied in the Soviet Union, at the Surikov Art Institute in Moscow, and participated with El-Rayess in *Le 5 Juin* (figure 12)—he himself described his paintings in *Blood and Freedom* solely in terms of their allegorical content. To read content and form dialectically would then entail moving past El-Rayess’s idealist approach to realism and his insistence that the artist’s will constitutes the artwork’s political propositions. The futural promise of social transformation in *The Changing of Horses*—one that I argue continues to be relevant for the present—requires a reading that is able to cut through the texture of the utopian imaginary that El-Rayess pictured in his descriptions.

¹³² El-Rayess, *Dimā’ wa Hurriyya*.



Figure 12. Wahib Bteddini, *Harvesting / Picking Apples in the Mountains*, 1966, Oil on Canvas (photograph).
Courtesy The Nicolas Sursock Museum Archives, Beirut.

THE PUBLIC RECEPTION

Aref El-Rayess developed an elaborate program to bring his exhibition, *Blood and Freedom*, to the so-called masses. He was working according to an assertion that Sartre had underscored in his essay “For Whom Does One Write?” (1947) on the constitutive role of the reader—or in El-Rayess’s case, the viewer—in the formation of the artwork.¹³³ For Sartre, in this essay, the artwork has the agency to impart freedom onto the viewer who realizes its unalienating possibilities in the act of looking.¹³⁴ El-Rayess made concerted efforts to demystify his work for a wide public. In nearly all the printed material, he referred to *The Changing of Horses* as *The 5th of June*—a title that would have been familiar to his audiences and served a commemorative function. The venue for his exhibition in the city was centrally located, and the show traveled to all the major districts of Lebanon in 1968 alone. He gave frequent tours, delivered addresses and, for the second iteration of the exhibition in Aley, provided a bullet-pointed description for each of the exhibition’s thirteen artworks for the catalog text. This set of descriptions—or explications, rather—solely emphasizes the works’ narrative content and makes no remarks on their formal properties or techniques. The explication of the Changing of Horses comes after the first entry on the list, herein entitled *Ba’th Che Guevara, Al-Falastīnī* (The Resurrection of Che Guevara, The Palestinian) and goes as following:

The 5th of June:
The memory of the defeat.

¹³³ Jean-Paul Sartre, “For Whom Does One Write?,” in *What Is Literature?* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 67–160.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

- The skulls represent the opportunistic colonial powers who conspire against the line of national struggle.
- The Arab revolutionary is on the back of a new horse, [representing the] “will of the people”.
- The masses slap the backwardness of the palaces, as well as the brothels (*mawākhīr al-layl*).¹³⁵
- The eyes of martyrs watch from behind the curtain of death.
- Conspirers shed their blood.¹³⁶

El-Rayess represents *The Changing of Horses* as an epic tale of a revolutionary hero who follows the lead of the masses in overcoming the forces of monarchism and feudalism (the palaces and brothels to which he refers) and colonialism (the conspirers) in order to achieve national liberation. Here, he presents the event of the 1967 June War as the mainspring of ongoing revolutionary struggle, rather than as a record of the defeat of the Arab forces. By elaborating on the content of his work, he was fulfilling his existentialist task as a committed artist to incite his audiences. Most critics, friends and members of the audience (or, at least, those who left paper trails of their responses to El-Rayess’s various exhibitions) reacted favorably to the call to commit themselves to his cause. With his explication of *The Changing of Horses*, El-Rayess succeeded with his audiences in sharing

¹³⁵ Here, the palaces stand in for the monarchies of the region, namely, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The figure of the brothels is a metaphor for the Lebanese ruling class—El-Rayess makes this explicit in a later article in *El-Safa*, which doubled as a manifesto, on the topic of his 1973 exhibition at Contact Gallery, entitled *Azhār al-Shāri‘ al-Mutanabbī*. In it, he makes a twofold argument. On the one hand, he shares his recognition that sex work is a form of labor like any other, and he makes visible the class-relation between the sex worker and the men who solicit her services. On the other hand, he relies upon the normative associations of prostitution as an undignified activity to portray it as an allegory for the corruption of the Lebanese state, particularly as the brothels were frequented by local politicians. Prostitution was in fact legalized in Lebanon under French mandate rule to serve the foreign elites.

¹³⁶ Aref El-Rayess, *Dimā’ wa Hurriyya*, May 1968.

a fantasy of freedom—an ideal of reality—which is obfuscated in the picture upon closer examination.

It is insufficient to take the explication that El-Rayess presented to his audiences at face value. Beyond the artist's conscious activity, the artwork is itself encoded with the contradictions of the social reality it mirrors in distorted form. This is the point that Theodor Adorno drives home in his critique of Sartre.¹³⁷ For Sartre, the task of commitment is to provoke a choice in the otherwise passive and neutral spectator. It is a task that El-Rayess decisively took on for *Blood and Freedom*. This choice makes of the spectator an agent, which allows for the possibility of an authentic life. Adorno argues that according to Sartre's principle, "the work of art becomes an appeal to subjects, because it is itself nothing other than a declaration by a subject of his own choice or failure to choose."¹³⁸ He critiques the notion of choice, itself derived from Kierkegaard, on account that it takes for granted "the fact that the very possibility of choosing depends on what can be chosen."¹³⁹ This reasoning suggests that while it could be said that El-Rayess provoked in his audiences a recognition, if not an avowal, of the struggle for national liberation, the very possibility of this struggle and the terms that defined it were within conscious reach at that particular

¹³⁷ For Adorno, an artwork's *truth content* does not simply lie in the picture's verisimilitude. It is constituted both internally, by the dialectical interplay of content and form, and externally, in relation to the social contradictions of capitalist totality. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Continuum, 2002 [1970]).

¹³⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment." In *Aesthetics and Politics*, by Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukács. *Radical Thinkers*. London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2006: 181.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* 181.

historical juncture. It is therefore implied that there could have been options that did not seem available to the so-called chooser. It is perhaps for this reason that Adorno asserts that “in aesthetic theory, ‘commitment’ should be distinguished from ‘tendency’.”¹⁴⁰ Whereas tendency encapsulates both the subjective and the objective dimensions of the artwork, which is to say, the politics of its producer and receiver as well as the artwork’s own internal contradictions, commitment “slides towards the proclivities of the author”.¹⁴¹

In this chapter, I will put forward a formal reading of the *Changing of Horses* by undertaking an analysis of the reception of *Blood and Freedom*. I will strive to reveal the invisible structural relations of the artist to his public. Here, I do not conflate the terms public and audience, for the subjective position relative to the work, and upon which its legibility depends, is not reducible to the individual audience member. I follow the lead of the social art historian TJ Clark who has perceptively argued that whereas the audience of an exhibition can be the object of empirical analysis, the public is a classification that belongs to the realm of the unconscious.¹⁴² Clark presents the relationship of the public to the audience as analogous to the relationship of the unconscious to conscious representations. The public, like the unconscious, is a wider category that encapsulates not only what is seen and said by audiences, but also what remains unseen and unsaid. The public therefore cannot be studied empirically, but can be detected in the slips, silences, and

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 180.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 181. This does not simply indicate that commitment entails the subjective intentions of the writer. Rather, Sartre wants to situate commitment on the level of the writer’s humanity itself.

¹⁴² Clark, “On the Social History of Art,” 12, 14–15.

repetitions in discourse. In uncovering the relationship between El-Rayess and his *public*, I aim to expose the social antagonism that is repressed and obfuscated in the ideal picture of reality he presents on the level of his catalog description, and which is sustained by his audiences.

A. The Revolutionaries of the Salons

The narrative that El-Rayess presents to his readers in the catalog is allegorical. However, certain elements within the picture are grounded in the material reality of the Arab world of the time. An emphasis on the painting's composition is required for their elaboration.

The *Changing of Horses* is crowded with throngs of figures. These are grouped in clusters which structure the painting's composition along a diagonal axis and split it into three planes of slightly varying depths. The composition follows a dynamic narrative order, which moves in a circular trajectory beginning and ending on the deepest plane. On this plane, a row of skeletons with gaping holes for eyes and mouths reach their arms around a mustached and bespectacled man in a collared jacket—an intellectual riding a frenzied white horse who escapes their grasp. Steadfast and focused, he continues riding, even as another horse falls to the deathly skeletal force. The horses, and the skeletal arms around them, emerge out onto the most shallow plane where a marching mass of blinded men, huddled under military (dis)colored cloaks, move in a procession in the opposite direction toward a red-eyed *sheikh* garbed in a headscarf and a gold-colored *'igāl*. On the

intermediary plane, a swarm of bloodied onlooking eyes, some seemingly floating, and others attached to simian-like masks uncannily goggle at the viewer from behind a curtain of blood cascading out of the mouths of recently perished youths above on the deepest plane.

The elements that make up the shallow plane, the masses and the sheikh, can be attributed a historically determinate character. With their drab covers, their closed eyes and slouched posture, the masses embody the Arab fighters returning from a lost war. Meanwhile, the sheikh whose face one of the former fighters strikes at the head of the procession is not merely representative of the local moneyed and landed feudal powers. His double-layered gold-colored headband, held together with black clips, resembles the distinctive 'igāl worn by the King Faisal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, and by his father King Abdulaziz al-Saud (1875–1953) before him. King Faisal was a controversial figure. Before the June War, Saudi Arabia, a pro-West monarchy, and Egypt, a pro-Soviet republic, were fighting for dominance in the region via a proxy war in Yemen.¹⁴³ King Faisal then shifted Saudi Arabia's foreign affairs' priority to Palestine just days after the war ended. Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, he established close ties with Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and the latter's successor, Anwar Sadat, as well as with Yasser Arafat. He offered large subsidies generated by oil revenues to the Egyptian regime and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Saudi petrodollars funded the Palestinian

¹⁴³ See Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East*, The New Cold War History (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

struggle against Israeli settler-colonialist rule and a modernization program within Saudi Arabia—two projects for which Faisal was highly esteemed. Despite this seemingly progressive shift in the monarchy’s politics, Faisal was, like Nasser and Sadat, a staunch anti-communist.¹⁴⁴ El-Rayess exposes this fact in *The Changing of Horses*. The painting’s depiction of the king—a monarch of “the palaces”—captures his interests as incongruous with the interests of the people, for despite having the liberation of Palestine as their common cause, Faisal was, unlike the masses, far from furthering an emancipatory project. In the picture, he stands in the people’s way on their path to a potentially liberating future (uncoincidentally, to the *left* of the canvas, as seen by the viewer) with his back turned to freedom. His stance is, quite literally, backward. Here the masses, in spite of their blindness, are propelled to forcibly remove the most influential ruling monarch of the region.

The historically delimited features of *The Changing of Horses* were likely to have been recognized by the exhibition’s audiences, but they were not mentioned in any of the critical reviews or comments. *Blood and Freedom* received at least a thousand visitors throughout its cross-country tour, over four hundred of whom left comments thanking and celebrating or condemning the artist in a guestbook present in the Beirut and Aley shows. For the most part, they singled out the paintings of Che Guevara and Martin Luther King, which in

¹⁴⁴ Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 8th ed. (Boston/New York: University of Arizona, 2013), 267, 273, 314–319. For further commentary on the geopolitics of the 1967 June War, see Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

addition to the Changing of Horses, comprised the show's large-scale paintings. The homages to Guevara and King inspired a fervent avowal of the artist's own position, particularly as it concerned the perceived need for heroes to lead the revolution. By contrast, the discussion of The Changing of Horses was scant even though most critics seemed to acknowledge the centrality of its subject matter for the exhibition. Yollande Ajemian, for instance, asserted that The Changing of Horses "bec[ame] in some way the flag of the exhibition. Its expressive *graphisme* and the harshness of its subject matter gives it an intense dramatic character."¹⁴⁵ Of the twenty or so reviews, and the four-hundred guestbook comments, only five explicitly address The Changing of Horses. When it was discussed, the comments did not exceed a few general lines. In addition to Ajemian's brief comment, Walid Shmeit mentioned the work only fleetingly, and treated the painting of Che Guevara as the core painting around which the other works in Blood and Freedom revolved:

The path of the revolution, for El-Rayess is split in its appearances, but is unified in its concept and its depth. He paints the deceased revolutionary Che Guevara with the same suffering with which he draws *The 5th of June* (5 Huzayrān), *The inferno of foxes and the masked* (Jahīm al-Tha'ālib wa al-Muqanna'in), *After the 5th of June* (Ba'd 5 Huzayrān), *The Path of Freedom* (Tarīq al-Hurriyya), *To the Spirit of Martin Luther King* (Ila Rūh Martin Luther King), and *Napalm City* (Madīnat Napalm).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ For this, and all subsequent audience responses, I will provide the citations in their original language. Yollande Ajemian, "Sang et Liberté' ou l'Expressionnisme Moderne de Aref Rayess." *Le Soir*. April 16, 1968 : "Le 5 Juin' devient en quelque sorte le drapeau de l'exposition. Son graphisme aéré, l'âpreté de la matière lui donnent un caractère dramatique intense." (Yollande Ajemian was an art critic and the wife of Lebanese-Armenian caricaturist Diran Ajemian, as well as the mother of curator and conservator of the Sursock Museum in the 1980s, Sylvia Ajemian).

¹⁴⁶ Walid Shmeit, "Al-Tullāb al-Jāmi'a al-Lubnāniyya Laysu Zunūjan!" *Al-Yawm*. April 11, 1968:

" تنتشعب خطوط الثورة عند عارف في مظاهرها، لتتوحد في مفهومها وعمقها، فيرسم الثوري الراحل تشي غيفارا بنفس التي يرسم 'ه' حزيران' و'جحيم الثعالب المقتنعين' و'طريق الحرية' و'إلى روح مارتن لوثر كينج' و'مدينة النابالم'.

Shmeit's fixation on Guevara speaks to a romanticist longing for a revolutionary hero—a role he identified in the suffering El-Rayess channeled into his work. Another critic anonymously reviewing *Blood and Freedom* in *Le Jour* expressed a similar opinion: “Aref [el-] Rayess thereby delivers to us his anguish, deception and hope through the faces of “Blood” [and Freedom]; he thinks that the message of heroism can be carried as far as his eyes, which are fixed on the painting, to a beyond that surpasses us.”¹⁴⁷ Salwa Mikdadi's guestbook comment also affirmed this view. She wrote to El-Rayess, “[y]ou showed through a revolutionary spirit an individual inner conflict”.¹⁴⁸ Thérèse Ghorayeb shared these critics' longing, but praised El-Rayess for the opposite reason, that is, for being exempt as a revolutionary from such ordinary suffering:

The oils *The 5th of June, After the 5th of June, The Path to Freedom, Napalm City* [represent] a period from our history in pictures and recount our reality in its truth and with a lot of precision. [They are] painted with the heart of an artist who is not pained insofar as he is a revolutionary against subjugation and ignorance.¹⁴⁹

He was endearingly dubbed Che or Guevara in several guestbook comments: “in art, I call you Aref Guevara El-Rayess”; “[s]ir, good you were not *guévariste*, good for your resurrection of Che”; “[i]t doesn't matter if the guefaras [sic] die now, does it.”¹⁵⁰ The only

¹⁴⁷ “Sang et Liberté,” *Le Jour*, April 1968: «Aref Rayess nous livre ainsi ses angoisses, ses déceptions, ses espoirs, à travers ces visages de ‘sang’; il pense que le message de l’héroïsme portera aussi loin que ces yeux qui fixent, sur la toile, un au-delà qui nous dépasse.»

¹⁴⁸ Salwa Mikdadi, “Dimā’ wa Hurriyya” Guestbook (English), April 18, 1968. Aref El-Rayess Foundation.

¹⁴⁹ Thérèse Ghorayeb, “Ma‘rad Aref El-Rayess: Ahdāth fi Suwar.” *El-Safa*. April 14, 1968: “أن زيتيات 'هـ حزيان' بعد هـ حزيان نزييف المقاومة العربية، طريق الحرية، تحية إلى أرواح الفدائيين، مدينة النابالم... حقبة من تاريخنا في رسوم، تروي واقعا على حقيقته وبكثير من الدقة، رسمت بقلب فنان ليس متألما بقدر ما هو نائر، نائر على الخنوع والجهل.”

¹⁵⁰ “Dimā’ wa Hurriyya” Guestbook. April 9, 1968. Aref El-Rayess Foundation: “في الفن اسميك عارف غيفارا الرئيس”; Abdallah Comaty, “Dimā’ wa Hurriyya” Guestbook April 19, 1968. Aref El-Rayess Foundation: «Monsieur, bien que n’étant pas guévariste, bien

interpretations of *The Changing of Horses*, however minimal, were provided by Hanna Yaqub Hanna and Victor Hakim. Hanna, who wrote for the newspaper of the Progressive Socialist Party, *Al-Anbā'*, asserted that the painting “symbolizes the renewal of the revolution, and its continuation, despite the hands that nearly suffocated it”¹⁵¹, while Hakim, argued in the Francophone weekly cultural review, *La Revue du Liban*, that:

The 5th of June and its sequels suggests not only the event itself, but also the reactions that it has aroused, the world of *resistants*, and the homage [El-Rayess] proposes under an ardent corset. We perceive exasperated masks everywhere, figures with bulging eyes, and a whole climate of terror and hate.¹⁵²

Little was actually said about *The Changing of Horses*, and it is of no small importance to question the cause for this silence. On the one hand, the above comments attest to a likeness that rendered the picture familiar to its viewers and therefore likely to be taken for granted. The critics seemed to recognize the exhibition’s realist character, and it is on this basis that they disputed the criteria by which to judge its merit or lack thereof. They made little to no comments on the painting’s formal properties. They responded by arguing for art’s commitment against claims to its autonomy, and concomitantly, for the artist’s commitment against a “bourgeois” position of neutrality.¹⁵³ While the novelist and critic

pour votre resurrection du Che » ; Waddah Faris, “Dimā’ wa Hurriyya” Guestbook (English). April 18, 1968. Aref El-Rayess Foundation.

¹⁵¹ Hanna Yaqub Hanna, “Fi Ma’rad Aref El-Rayess.” *Al-Anbā'*. April 12, 1968:

“أما لوحة 'هـ' حزيران' فترمز إلى تجدد الثورة واستمرارها رغم الأيدي التي كادت تخنقها وتودي بها.”

¹⁵² By the 5th of June, Hakim refers both to *The Changing of Horses* and to the defeat of June War. Victor Hakim, “Sang et Liberté’ Exposition d’Aref Rayess à ‘L’Orient.” *La Revue Du Liban*, n.d., sec. La Vie Artistique: «Le 5 Juin et ses séquelles lui suggèrent non seulement l’événement en lui-même, mais aussi les réactions qu’il a suscitées, le monde des résistants et l’hommage qu’il propose sous un corset ardent. On aperçoit partout des masques exaspérés, des figures aux yeux exorbités, tout un climat de terreur et de haine. »

¹⁵³ Hanna; Shmeit.

Ghada El-Samman alluded to detractors of the art-for-art's-sake school in her written piece, the reviews of *Blood and Freedom* were favorable on the whole if not downright adulatory.¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, some critical and public comments betrayed, and even quoted, strong affective reactions of disquiet, anger, and horror, such as those mentioned by Victor Hakim in his brief remark on *The Changing of Horses*. Their comments did not address what is on display as much as the ensuing terror and dread that the exhibition awakened in them. They made allusions to visions, nightmares and imaginings of hell, and detected a resemblance with the work of Hieronymous Bosch and Francisco Goya (presumably Bosch's visions of Hell in the third panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* [c.1490-1510] and Goya's *Black Paintings* [1819-1823], though no particular works were cited; figures 13–16). They commented on the evocative power of the red in paintings, almost as if to suggest that the artworks were themselves painted with blood—Ajemian claimed that “color is, as it should be, violent.”¹⁵⁵ Some visitors rejected the exhibition altogether, and one visitor even commented, “Aref El-Rayess, you have become: cheap...cheap...cheap”.¹⁵⁶ For these critics, the picture was too real and too excessive to the point of being indescribable and unrecognizable as a picture of reality. Adonis Tohme wrote to El-Rayess in the guestbook that the exhibition was “tormenting in its reality” while

¹⁵⁴ El-Samman did not specify who she was responding to, but it is likely that she was addressing the literary figures in her milieu—perhaps the writers and subscribers of the *Shi'r* journal. See Ghada El-Samman, “Rihlat Aref El-Rayess Bayna-l-Ilitizām wa-l-Ilzām.” *Al-Hawādith*. April 25, 1968.

¹⁵⁵ Ajemian, «...la couleur, comme il se doit, est violente par la stridence des accords. »

¹⁵⁶ “Dimā' wa Hurriyya” Guestbook. April 18, 1968. Aref El-Rayess Foundation: “أصبحت يا عارف الرئيس رخيص...رخيص...رخيص”.



Figure 13. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1490-1510, Oil on Oak Panel, 220 x 389 cm. ©Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 14. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *The Inquisition*, 1823 1820, Mixed method on mural transferred to canvas, 127 x 266 cm, 1823 1820. ©Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 15. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *The Pilgrimage to San Isidro*, 1823 1820, Mixed method on mural transferred to canvas, 138.5 x 436 cm, 1823 1820. ©Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 16. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Witches' Sabbath, or the Great He-Goat*, 1823 1820, Oil on mural transferred to canvas, 140.5 x 435.7cm, 1823 1820. ©Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

a certain visitor with the surname Nammour cautioned that “[the works] should not be seen everywhere”.¹⁵⁷ Similarly, a reviewer for *Al-Jadīd* narrated:

A climate of dread surrounds the place like the office of a school principal for a guilty student. The exhibition hall where thirteen paintings of varying sizes hang, most of them large, has been transformed into mirrors that do not reflect the external appearance of man but rather reflect the harshest of interiors, of visions, dreams, and fears.¹⁵⁸

The visitors’ reactions were not restricted to a particular painting—generally, their remarks appertained to the whole exhibition. However, nowhere other than in *The Changing of Horses* was the uncanny more strongly evoked and felt.¹⁵⁹

It is worthwhile asking: what did the critics make of the red-eyed figures—the not-wholly-human, undying dead—staring back at them directly from behind a film of blood in the background of the picture? What of the frantic horses who are coming to a halt before the abysmal darkness of non-representation—a blind spot—within the picture? Why were the masses blinded if El-Rayess claimed that their coming to self-consciousness was the driving force of revolutionary struggle? These unsettling features were ignored or went unnoticed, and yet the critics’ anxieties persisted. They were displaced onto a zealous exaltation of the artist’s commitment, or for some, a rejection of the paintings’ form.

¹⁵⁷ Nammour, “Dimā’ wa Hurriyya” Guestbook. April 19, 1968. Aref El-Rayess Foundation: «Il ne faut pas les voir partout. »

¹⁵⁸ “Aref El-Rayess: 13 Sarkha fi Wajh al-Naksa,” *Al-Jadīd*, April 19, 1968, sec. Fikr Fan: "يخيم على المكان جو من الرهبة يشبه جو غرفة مدير المدرسة بالنسبة إلى التلميذ المذنب، وكان غرفة المعرض حيث تنتصب ١٣ لوحة متفاوتة الحجم أكثرها كبير، قد تحولت إلى ماريلا لا تعكس المظهر الخارجي للإنسان بل تعكس أفسى ما في الدواخل من رؤى واحلام ومخاوف."

¹⁵⁹ *Ila Rūh Martin Luther King* is arguably the most surreal of El-Rayess’s *Dimā’ wa Hurriyya* paintings, but the figure of King at its center—a revolutionary hero—seemed to have rendered the picture more familiar, and easier for audiences to identify with and consume.

Hanna, for example, extolled Blood and Freedom for diminishing El-Rayess's paintings from their privileged status as art: "[El-Rayess's] art is not a luxury and his expression is not play without a purpose as the bourgeoisie want it, but rather [his] art is not art. His art is humanist and its expression conscientious."¹⁶⁰ Shmeit made a comparable argument in concluding of his piece: "art for art's sake is a bourgeois trend. Art that expresses a cause is committed to a position unlike our requirements for aesthetics and artistic luxury. It is for this reason that Aref El-Rayess's exhibition is a revolution in itself, regardless of what it represents."¹⁶¹ By and large, the critics were embroiled in the debate on commitment which relegated politics to the morality of the artist—to the duty he fulfilled as a citizen. This stance was explicitly stated by an anonymous announcement for Blood and Freedom, published in the francophone daily newspaper, *L'Orient*:

Without wanting to pass judgement of artistic value on the paintings of Aref El-Rayess—this would be beyond our competence here—permit us to pay homage to the morality of a man for whom art, freedom and the blood of others (like his own blood, if the time comes) merge, at the moment of testimony, to become one and the same thing.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Hanna:

"فنه ليس مترفا ولا تعبيره لعبا غير هادف كما يريد البورجوازيون، الفن عنده ليس للفن، بل فنه إنساني وتعبيره وجداني."

¹⁶¹ Shmeit:

"الفن للفن موضه برجوازيه. الفن الذي يعبر عن قضيه، يلتزم موقفا، هو ما نحتاج إليه في هذا الوقت، أكثر من حاجتنا إلى الجماليات الترف الفني. ألهدا فمعرض عارف الرئيس هو ثوره في حد ذاته، بغض النظر عما يمثله."

¹⁶² "Demain, à 'L'Orient': 'Sang et Liberté'—Aref Rayess, Ou La Colère Froide,"

L'Orient, April 8, 1968: «Sans vouloir porter—cela dépasse, ici, notre compétence—un jugement de valeur artistique sur les toiles de Aref Rayess, permettons-nous un hommage à la morale d'un homme pour qui l'art, la liberté et le sang des autres (comme, si l'heure sonnait, son propre sang) se confondent, au moment du témoignage, en une seule et même chose.»

El-Samman's long review, in which she attempted to safeguard a voluntarist notion of commitment from an ostensibly dogmatic social realist one on the one hand, and from art's separation from its social context on the other, exemplified the committed critic's position:

I believe in "the freedom of the artist" in all its tendencies... I believe in [the artist's] freedom to commit and in his freedom to assume that he is not committed, even though he is committed whether or not he is a true artist. Commitment (ilitizām) is not compulsion (ilzām). Authentic commitment and creation stem from within the artist. Ilzām is imposed by external forces. Thus, internal ilitizām is part of the freedom of the artist, it animates the creator [in him].¹⁶³

She relates this view of the artist's commitment to Blood and Freedom by concluding that El-Rayess succeeded in elevating local and regional events (the Lebanese University student protests and the June War, in particular) to universalist representations of human struggle:

The criteria [for whether El-Rayess elevated these events to a universal dimension consists in questioning]: are [his] latest paintings of the 'occasions' [history painting] kind, [are they] revolutionary advertisements, political preaching in the form *Dear Citizen, he who sold his voice has sold his honor* of state paintings, or have his paintings visually actualized human struggle, through our struggle as Arabs, well beyond the events? I say: Aref El-Rayess succeeded to the extent that he returned to embody human struggle and to challenge death and its conspirers in most of his paintings...and he was able to express all of this through sophisticated artistic means.¹⁶⁴

Even the most cantankerous of Beirut's formalist critics, Nazih Khater, praised the artist's exhibition, somewhat reluctantly, on moral grounds:

¹⁶³ Ghada El-Samman, "Rihlat Aref El-Rayess Bayna-l-Ilitizām wa-l-Ilzām." *Al-Hawādith*. April 25, 1968:

"أنا أؤمن بحرية الفنان في الاتجاهات كلها... أؤمن بحرية في 'أن يلتزم' وبحريته في أن يظن أنه غير ملتزم بينما هو ملتزم شاء أم أبى إذا كان فنانا حقيقا، فالالتزام هو غير 'الإلزام'، 'الالتزام' هو ذلك الذي تفرضه قوى خارجية... هكذا فإن الالتزام الداخلي هو جزء من حرية الفنان، هو محرك مبدع."

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

"المقياس اذن هو، هل لوحات عارف الرئيس الأخيرة من نوع 'المناسبات' أو الإعلانات الثورية أو الوعظ السياسي على طريقة لوحات الدولة أياها المواطن، من باع صوته باع شرفه' أم أن لوحاته نفذت إلى ما وراء الأحداث لتصور الكفاح الإنساني عبر كفاحنا نحن كعرب؟... أقول: نجح عارف الرئيس إلى حد يعيد في تجسيد كفاح الإنسانية وتصديها للموت ولعملاء الموت في أكثر لوحاته... واستطع أن يعبر عن هذا كله في أداء فني راق."

The thirteen oil paintings of the Blood and Freedom exhibition impose on us the image of the maturity of the citizen, and the triumph of this citizen over the artist to the point of obliterating any milestones of aesthetic value. The citizen is frank, committed, progressive, humanist, militant, and bears other such virtues that come naturally to Aref El-Rayess. The painter is anxious about the components of his painting, lost between its parts, disarrayed about its construction, the writing of its narrative, and the coloring of its forms [...] In reality, talk about such an exhibition is difficult inasmuch as it makes all criticism seem like chatter. I, for example, am with Aref El-Rayess and against Aref El-Rayess, I am with the artist and against the painter, with the citizen and against the exhibition.¹⁶⁵

Khater, whose criticism was informed by his Kantian inclinations, was wary of the conflation between moral and aesthetic judgments and said as much in his review of the commemorative Dar El-Fan exhibition, *Le 5 Juin*, in which *The Changing of Horses* later appeared:

What we see hanging on the walls of Dar El-Fan Wa El-Adab is nothing more than work produced quickly, intuitively, declamatorily—its value lies in its allegiance to its humanist fervor more than in its polished artistic expression. Therefore, most of the thirty-five pieces that make up the exhibition are substandard for such an occasion. The calamity of local art is that some still confuse aesthetic values with ethical or political and national values. Such disorder in appreciation allows for an exhibition of this kind to be installed [...] However, what is most noteworthy in this exhibition is the failure of the Lebanese artist in arriving at control in his treatment of painting subject matter. This is how *fann al-Naksa* becomes *Naksat al-fann*.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Nazih Khater, “Aref El-Rayess Fi 13 Lawha Min Dimā’ wa Hurriyya’: Shu’ūr al-Mūwatin Yataghallab ‘ala Shu’ūr al-Rassām.” *Al-Nahar*. April 11, 1968:

"الثلاث عشرة لوحة زيتية التي هي معرضه 'دماء وحرية' تفرض علينا نضج المواطن فيها، فانتصار هذا على الرسام إلى حد طمس معالم قيمة جمالية. المواطن صريح، ملتزم، تقدمي، إنساني، محارب، وان مثل هذه المزايا الطبيعية عند عارف الرئيس. والرسام قلق في عناصر لوحاته، ضائع بين اجزائها، مرتبك في بنائها، في كتابة موضعها، في تلوين أشكالها [...] والواقع أن الكلام عن معرض هكذا من الصعوبة بحيث يبدو كل نقد ثرثرة. فانا مثلا مع عرف الرئيس وضد عرف الرئيس. مع الفنان وضد الرسام. مع المواطن وضد المعرض."

¹⁶⁶ Khater, Nazih. “5 Huzayrān ‘ala Lawhat 27 Fannānan: Jean Khalifé al-Injāh fi al-Ta’bīr.” *Al-Nahar*. June 2, 1968:

"ما نراه معلقا على جدران 'دار الفن والأدب' لا يتعدى كونه عملا سريعا بديهيا انفعاليا تكمن في إخلاصه التعبير الفني المصقول. إذ أن معظم الخمس والثلاثين قطعة التي يتألف المعرض هي دون المستوى اللائق لمثل هكذا مناسبة. ومصيبة الفن عندنا هي أن بعضا لا يزال يخلط بين القيم الجمالية القيم الاخلاقية أو السياسية الوطنية [...] لكن أهم ما يلفت في المعرض هو فشل الفنان اللبناني في الوصول إلى السيطرة في مجال معجلته للرسم ذي المواضيع. وهكذا يكون 'فن النكسة' هو نكسة الفن."

One wonders if it is Khater rather than El-Rayess who is anxious, lost, and disarrayed in confronting the composition, color, and components of the artist's painting. The language in his latter review—"calamity", "disorder", "failure [to] control"—is equally exaggerated. He was the only critic to disparage El-Rayess for the supposed lack of formal sophistication in his paintings, and he was alone in publishing a reproduction of the artist's *Ila Ra`is de Gaulle* (To President de Gaulle) in his review of *Blood and Freedom*, undoubtedly because it was the only abstract work of art to be featured in the exhibition (figure 17).¹⁶⁷ His dramatic reaction was not supported by an argument grounded in an analysis of the painting's form. The critics on both ends of the debate, those who did not address the artistic qualities of El-Rayess's work, as well as those who disparaged it, did not substantiate their emphatic claims in formal analyses of *The Changing of Horses*. Their brief comments largely conform to the narrative that El-Rayess presented of his work and exhibition. They read the work allegorically, or metaphysically (as a representation of hell), rather than concretely or historically. Their neglect, or disavowal, of the picture's contradictory character—of its form *and* content—is suspect and therefore worth investigating, not least because the picture does not hold up to the epic tale that El-Rayess recounts.

¹⁶⁷ The francophone critics, including Victor Hakim, fleetingly remarked on El-Rayess's formal achievements in *Blood and Freedom* in general terms, but their remarks were unsubstantial and are not worthy of further comment.

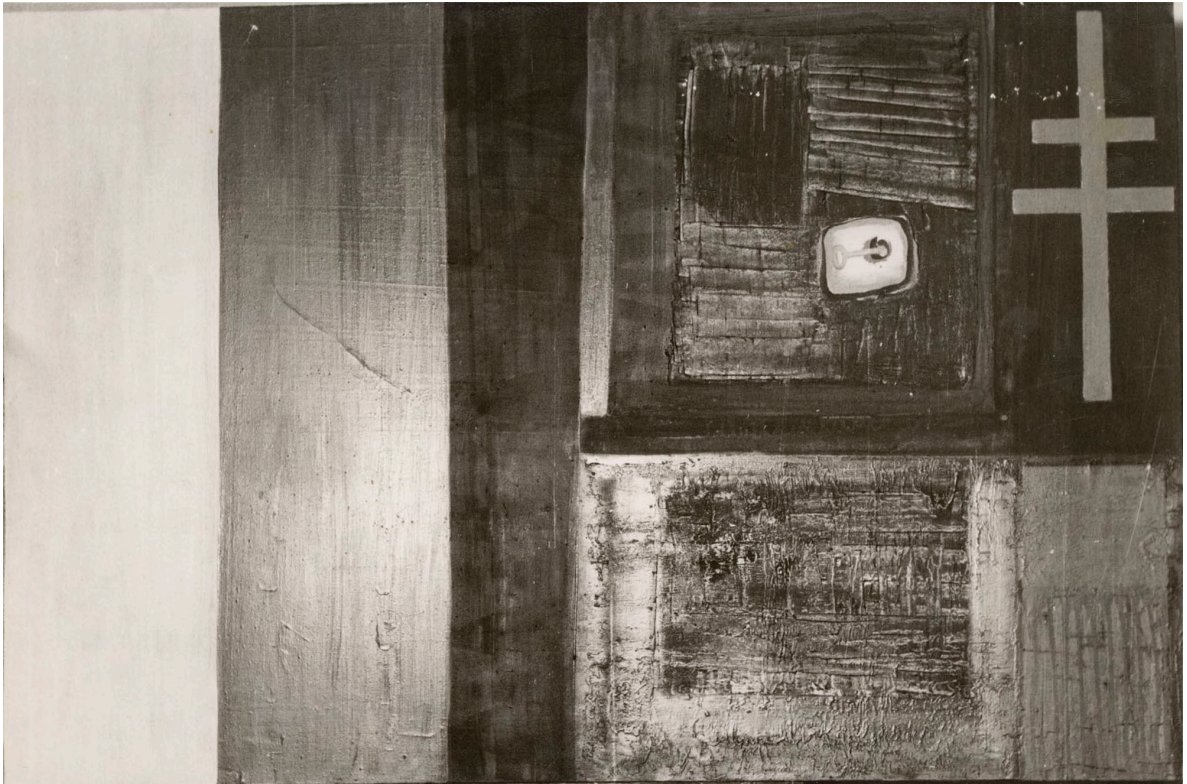


Figure 17. Aref El-Rayess, *Ila Al-Ra'īs de Gaulle*, 1968, Oil on Canvas (photograph). © Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.

B. Like a Nightmare on the Brains of the Living

The Changing of Horses is, in spite of its apparent realist idiom, an enigmatic painting. It exceeds the limits of the conventions of realism, but in ways that are difficult to discern at the level of the whole picture. Its verisimilitude breaks down when its component elements are individually scrutinized. At 200 x 149 cm, a scale to which Beirut audiences were generally unaccustomed, the painting encroaches upon its beholder. The figures represented in the picture—alive and dead, human and animal, or not wholly one or the other—are life-size. At eye-level, the viewer is confronted with free-floating red circles specked with a white that makes of them spherical and reflective forms. A multitude of spectating eyes stare right back at the spectator's own. A visitor at L'Orient, Simon Géara, jotted down in El-Rayess's guestbook, "It's horrific!...The red, the blood, it splatters the eyes...".¹⁶⁸ He did not name the object of his dread, but it is tempting to think that he was referring to the eyes at the center of *The Changing of Horses*—the eyes that constitute for the viewer the single most uncanny moment of *Blood and Freedom*. The verb he used in his comment, to splatter (from the French, *éclabousser*), conjures up an image of viscous red paint, or blood, gushing out from the painting's surface and onto the viewer's eyes so that he is no longer able to see. In another review, a commentator exclaimed: "In overcoming his horror, this shaken man [Aref El-Rayess] throws it at us. This man is a witness, a terrible witness. [He is] [a] witness of a hell that has not changed since Bosch and is perhaps unchangeable: evil."¹⁶⁹ Here again, the concretely historical elements of El-

¹⁶⁸ Simon Géara, "Dimā' wa Hurriyya" Guestbook. April 9, 1968. Aref El-Rayess Foundation: «C'est horrible! ...le rouge, le sang, nous éclabousse les yeux... »

¹⁶⁹ "Aref Rayess ou Le Devoir Politique." *L'Orient*. March 23, 1968: «cet homme bouleversé, surmontant son horreur, nous la jette aux yeux. Cet homme est un témoin, un

Rayess's painting are obscured by a metaphysical reading of the forces of evil that possess the world. The commentator's banal comment is nevertheless worth pondering, for what hell is, in the paintings of Bosch or El-Rayess, is not self-evident. Jacques Lacan hints at a possible interpretation in his famous "Mirror Stage" essay. In a passing reference to *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, he claims that Bosch captures the "fragmented body", that is, the sense of one's insufficiency and fragmentation—the infant, in his essay—which brings one to identify with the seemingly stable and unified *imago* of one's own mirror reflection. This process of identifying with an external image is undergirded by a fantasy structure that is constitutive of subjectivity.¹⁷⁰ His brief reading suggests that hell—denoted by the fragmented limbs of the third panel of Bosch's painting—and heaven—denoted by the wholeness of the human figures in the first panel—do not correspond to transcendental realms of the afterlife. They are rather the two sides of Bosch's Janus-faced modern reality. Similarly, what is perceived as hell in *The Changing of Horses* is simply the other side of the painting's utopian narrative. Bosch's proto-surrealist triptych already apprehended that the otherworldly is nothing but the projection and introjection of collective fantasies whose structuring logic is constitutive of our being in the world—that is to say, of reality itself, but the imaginary realms of heaven and hell which mediate the subject's relation to the

'terrible témoin'. Un témoin de l'enfer inchangé depuis Bosch, et peut-être inchangeable : le mal. »

¹⁷⁰ Lacan remarked: "[the fragmented body] appears in the form of disconnected limbs or of organs exoscopically represented, growing wings and taking up arms for internal persecutions that the visionary Hieronymous Bosch fixed for all time in painting, in their ascent in the fifteenth century to the imaginary zenith of modern man." See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 75–81.

symbolic sphere of reality (as representation), obfuscate a third realm—the *real* that is not reducible to any signifier and can therefore not be represented. The uncanny is its signal.

In El-Rayess's account of *The Changing of Horses*, the picture follows a particular narrative sequence that begins with the colonial powers and the revolutionary on the horse on the deepest plane, and ends with the masses vanquishing the monarch and the martyrs watching from behind the curtain of the conspirers' blood on the shallow and middle planes. His description of the work in the catalog text has a pedagogical aim—it instructs the viewer on how to look at the work. The reception of *Blood and Freedom*, quite literally, paints an alternative picture. It attests to a difficulty in seeing, on the one hand, by the critics and visitors whose ideological position blinded them to form, and on the other hand, by the commentators for whom the picture was too much to look at. It is as if El-Rayess's painting arouses in these viewers something they did not know they knew, something which was once familiar to them but has been fended off and remained out of sight. They could not put their finger on the strangeness the picture elicited. It exceeded the artist's aims and confounded the audience. Leila Ogden Smith enthused, "it's violent, it's explosive, it's macabre but oh! How appealing!!!"; Mona Mekkady lamented, "your paintings deeply troubled me. Before entering the exhibition hall, I was in a normal mood; When I left, I was completely shaken" and Abdallah al-Masri cried out, "this torrential blood...these red waterfalls...why?! Why the blood, my brother Aref!".¹⁷¹ The strangeness,

¹⁷¹ Leila Ogden Smith, "Dimā' wa Hurriyya Guestbook". April 18, 1968. Aref El-Rayess Foundation: «C'est violent, c'est éclatant, c'est macabre mais oh! Combien attachant !!! » ; Mona Mekkady, "Dimā' wa Hurriyya Guestbook". April 18, 1968. Aref El-Rayess Foundation: «Vos tableaux m'ont énormément troublé. Avant d'entrer dans la salle

I contend, is localized at eye-level in the center of the painting, and yet is cordoned off from the rest of the picture.

In addition to occupying the intermediary plane between background and foreground, the separation of the so-called curtain of blood from the other represented elements is apparent in the technical decision El-Rayess took to round its edges. Shorter and swifter brushstrokes curve around an inexplicable negative space at the bottom corner of the painting. His brushstrokes here denote a certain dynamism in the flow of blood, like lava churning in a volcano, but the liquid at the base of the curtain is so static that it gathers, rather than flows, behind the figure at the top of the masses' procession. If representation here is to be demarcated by its realist style, then the blood accumulating between the black of nothingness and the figure in the foreground—that is, on another plane—remains formally unresolved. However, the watchful eyes of the dead exceed the picture's realism. They are more real than reality itself—*sur-real*. Imprisoned behind a thin screen of blood, they materialize like an apparition. El-Rayess's rounded edges contain them within the bounds of the fountain of blood seeping from the mouths of dying men. These men El-Rayess called *conspirers*, by which he meant the national, colonialist bourgeoisie whose self-interest—the furthering of capital—was at odds with the project of emancipatory struggle.¹⁷² The thick blood flowing from their mouths thins out into narrow and irregular lines behind which a hallucinatory vision of eyes as red as blood opens up and comes into

d'exposition j'avais une humeur normale ; en quittant j'étais complètement bouleversée » ; Abdallah al-Masri, "Dimā' wa Hurriyya Guestbook". April 11, 1968. Aref El-Rayess Foundation: "هذه الدماء الغزيرة... هذه الشلالات الحمراء.. لماذا؟ لماذا يا أخي عارف!"

¹⁷² See Aref El-Rayess, "Dawr al-Fannān Ba'd 5 Huzayrān." *Al-Muharrir*. June 8, 1968.

view. Some of these eyes seem to float about, while others are circumscribed within the contours of a mask. These contours do not quite materialize into faces, but they are nevertheless animate, like primitivist masks that have come alive for their beholder.

El-Rayess had previously painted portraits of the tribes he encountered in Senegal, but the masks in *The Changing of Horses* do not connote fetish objects and their function in precapitalistic modes of social organization. In his description, El-Rayess refers to the masked figures as *shuhadā'* (martyrs). They are the recently deceased martyrs of the June War. Here, the masks evoke the specters of past struggles in the artist's own modern capitalist society. Interestingly, the term *shahīd* (martyr) is also a witness, a figure who pays testimony and who therefore points in the direction of the truth. At *Salle de L'Orient*, the dead figures in *The Changing of Horses* stared directly at the living viewers and watched them from behind a screen of their past struggle, precisely in a moment when Arab elites and intellectuals were mourning their defeat in the war. The dead are the only figures in the picture who *see*. The revolutionary's eyes are concealed by his tinted spectacles; King Faisal, the horses and the skeletons all look in horror at the dark unknown that lays beyond the picture's frame—their own demise; the conspirers and the masses are blinded. Then and now, the dead appear to emerge onto the frame like the return of the repressed. In *The Changing of Horses*, they warn the viewer against assuming the disguise of past struggles.¹⁷³ They are awakened to serve “the purpose of glorifying new struggles, not of

¹⁷³ Peter Osborne explains that in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, “masks are presented as a means of historical borrowings that register a weakness in the revolutionary imaginary.” See Peter Osborne, *How to Read Marx*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005, 65.

parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk about again.”¹⁷⁴

Embedded in the picture is a clue that reconfigures El-Rayess’s narrative of revolutionary renewal. The mask closest to the surface of the red fountain-like screen materializes into a human face. The grayish-white brushstroke that makes up his nose extends upward and to the left onto which a red eye, and a black line for an eyebrow, rest. The space underneath the eyes is shaded a charcoal black of sleeplessness. He is the only figure on the other side of the curtain who appears resolutely human. Seemingly unlike the masks circling around him, he is stripped of his disguise. Upon closer examination, strokes in muted dark colors make manifest eyebrows and foreheads on masks that now appear as faraway faces. The masks are enmeshed with human faces—they conceal the figures’ humanity. In the picture, an unalienated humanity is presented as the promise of an emancipatory act: the ripping off of the mask. This act would effectuate the self-abolition of the proletariat as a class; it would thereby abolish class relations *tout court*.¹⁷⁵ The conditions for the actualization of this freedom are framed by the human figure’s position between King Faisal and the three figures at the top row of the masses’ procession. Although the masses are blinded, and therefore do not come to self-consciousness as El-Rayess purported in his description, a red blaze emanating at an oblique angle casts light

¹⁷⁴ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 3rd ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 17.

¹⁷⁵ See Osborne, 67–69.

upon the sides of their faces. They bask in the glow of the past struggles that are unable to see. They are unconsciously propelled forward by “the tradition of all dead generations [which] weighs” on them “like a nightmare on the brains the living.”¹⁷⁶ The human figure goggling at the viewer from behind the curtain of blood frames the masses’ imminent attack on Faisal as a fight for national liberation which can only be achieved by means of class struggle. If not fought on these terms, the specter of lost struggles will haunt the present and old struggles will recur without the possibility of emancipatory renewal. The masks staring at the viewer from the center of *The Changing of Horses* form a cautionary yet prescriptive image, which was misrecognized if not entirely unacknowledged at Salle de l’Orient (Figure 18).¹⁷⁷ This uncanny image gestures toward the real of class struggle, which is unrepresentable, for its irruption would break with the texture of symbolic reality.¹⁷⁸ In *The Changing of Horses*, the uncanny apparition of the awakened dead comes to indicate that past traditions of struggle *must* inform present ones, without simply being farcically repeated.

¹⁷⁶ Marx, 17.

¹⁷⁷ The artist Vladimir Tamari, for example, left a zany hand-drawn illustration in the guestbook of a mask which, though plain and hastily drawn, bears a resemblance to the masks in *The Changing of Horses*. For each of its eyes, Tamari shaded a coin of twenty-five piasters and drew a circle for its mouth, inside of which he wrote “ma’rad jamīl” (beautiful exhibition). Here, the very instrument of disguise is subliminally reproduced. See Vladimir Tamari, “Dimā’ wa Hurriyya” Guestbook. April 19, 1968. Aref El-Rayess Foundation.

¹⁷⁸ It is Slavoj Žižek who posits class struggle as belonging to the Lacanian register of the Real. He argues that “one should always bear in mind that, for a true Marxist, ‘classes’ are *not* categories of positive social reality, parts of the social body, but categories of the real of a political struggle which cuts across the entire social body, preventing its ‘totalization.’” See Slavoj Žižek, *Living in The End Times* (Verso, 2010), 198.

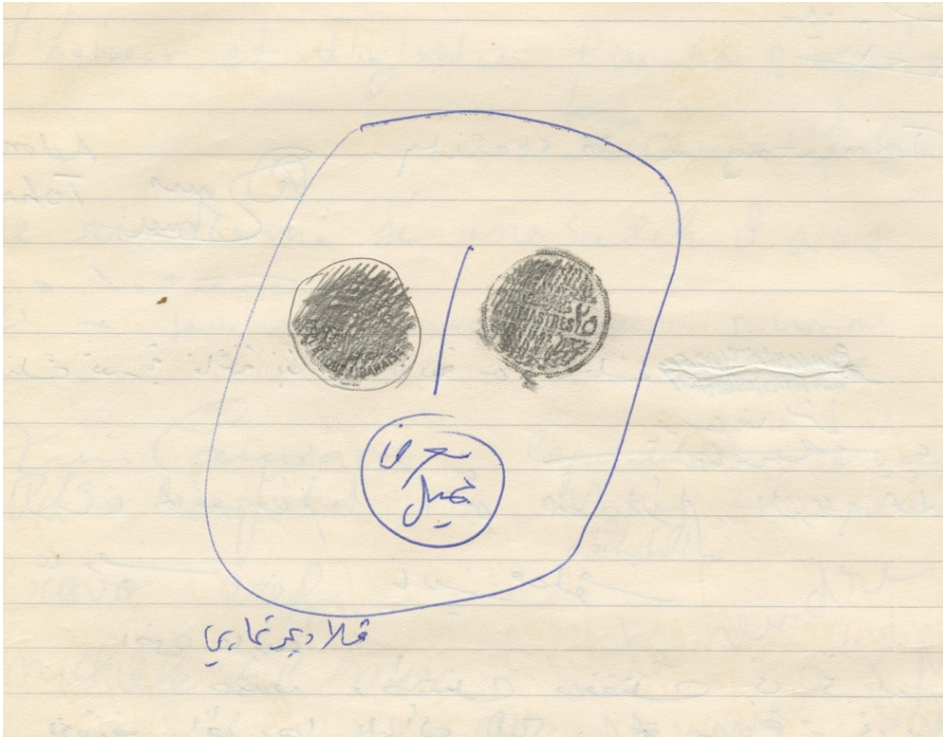


Figure 18. Vladimir Tamari, Dimā' wa Hurriyya Guestbook (detail), 1968, drawing.
© Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.

CONCLUSION

Blood and Freedom ushered in a new, politically committed, chapter in Aref El-Rayess's artistic practice. Aesthetically, his political commitments were translated into varying, and at times incongruent, forms. He remained devoted to the medium of painting, in spite of his critical attitude toward the academicism that permeated even the most modernist of practices.¹⁷⁹ His paintings continued to lay claim on the social world, but they grew stranger, uncannier—in other words, more surrealist—over time. For instance, the masks that had first appeared in *The Changing of Horses* returned in a series of paintings, entitled *Ru'ūs wa Aqdām* (Heads and Feet; Figure 19), in the solo exhibition, *Al-Hub, Al-Mawt, Al-Thawra* (Love, Death, Revolution) at Dar El-Fan in 1970. There the masks took on a life of their own—entire paintings were dedicated to nothing other than variations on these motifs. Similarly, the image of the blinded masses in *The Changing of Horses* reappeared in the twenty-two small-scale paintings in the 1974 solo exhibition, *Fusūl min Wāqi' Alam al-Thālith* (Chapters from a Third-World Reality; figure 20).

Apart from his realist method—which restaged, with every work, the contradiction between striving for demystification and the modernist strategy of defamiliarization—El-Rayess also curiously retreated to traditional genres such as the still life in between bursts of militant productivity. Critics, even those who knew him intimately, often did not know

¹⁷⁹ He collaborated with artists and writers on other projects—he acted and designed sets in plays, notably in the Rahbani brothers' production of *Jibal Al-Sawan* in Baalbek in 1969, and illustrated a book of poems by Nadia Tueni in 1968 and Issam Mahfouz's book of essays on Louis Aragon in 1975—but remained, principally, a painter.



Figure 19. Aref El-Rayess, *Ru'ūs wa Aqdām* (Heads and Feet) series, 1970, Oil on Canvas. © Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.



Figure 20. Aref El-Rayess, *Fusūl min Wāqī' ʿĀlam al-Thālith* (Chapters from a Third-World Reality) series, 1973–74, Acrylic on Canvas. © Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.

what to make of such lapses in consistency. A statement in the catalog accompanying El-Rayess's 1974 show, and which was issued under the institution's name, hints at El-Rayess's self-contradictory practice:

[Aref El-] Rayess's passage from one style to another is as violent as his changes in humor, which represent the entire range of human reactions, from blind anger to exquisite reveries of the passage through love, politics, ideas and principles. Since June 67, the political event has not ceased to be his principal preoccupation. His exaltations at nature and his vacations among the flowers of his garden are followed by harsh and surprising awakenings. They constitute a commentary on the event, as seen through an optic that is sensitive to an exasperating degree, and which is faithful to progressive thought. A pioneer of a new conception, his work is a testament to the struggle between conservative tradition and the avant-garde, between dilettantism and commitment and between the dynamism of the new man and the static spirit of a society that has remained for a long time now solely concerned with consumption.¹⁸⁰

This anonymous, and possibly collective remark sheds light on the fact that the militant phases in El-Rayess's practice were punctuated by moments of withdrawal from the social. If an avant-garde impulse is to be detected in his work, as is suggested in the statement, it did not have a destructive character. Rather, it was grounded in an internally contradictory realism. It was not limited to his revolutionary aims and commitments, but rather, was mediated by counter-revolutionary impulses. For example, the artist's "vacations among the flowers of his garden"—the series of still lives he had produced in 1971 for a solo exhibition at Galerie Manoug—were "followed by harsh and surprising awakenings". In other words, in 1973, with the same materials—wax crayons and canson paper—and formal gestures, El-Rayess produced another series of works in the genre of the nude, for an exhibition titled *Azhār Shāri ' Mutanabbī* (The Flowers of Moutanabbī Street). They were

¹⁸⁰ Aref El-Rayess and Dar El-Fan, "Fusūl Min Wāqi' Al-'Ālam Al-Thālith" (Dar El-Fan wa El-Adab, January 1974).

pictures of the prostitutes of the Mutanabbī Street, who were for El-Rayess “the real flowers in our manure society.”¹⁸¹ Unlike the naturalized and ahistorical still lives of flowers, the nudes represented real, historically determinate, sex works and not an eternal feminine essence (figures 21 & 22). His method of interpolating the social into the purely formal was repeated elsewhere in his practice between 1967 and 1976—for instance, in El-Rayess’s painting, *Ila Rūh Martin Luther King* (1968), to which I allude in the introduction of this thesis (figure 3), and in the *Fusūl min Wāqi‘ ‘Ālam al-Thālith* series, which injected a social dimensions in works whose formal basis is to be found in painting experiments that predated the June War.

This dialectical movement of advance and retreat was permanently obstructed by the defeat of the National Liberation Movement during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990)—a war that emerged out of colonial-backed class contradictions, but which masqueraded as a sectarian war.¹⁸² El-Rayess no longer possessed the discursive or practical tools to fight the prevailing discourse of sectarianism, now that its logic had usurped the logic of an emancipatory class struggle. The non-identical, contradictory character of his painting was gradually replaced by the longing for the sameness and divine unification evoked in the mystical Sufi notion of *tawhīd*. In 1980, he moved to Saudi Arabia where he was commissioned to produce public sculptures around the theme of *tawhīd* as part of a state-led beautification project. The supersession of *tawhīd* over *iltizām*

¹⁸¹ Joseph Tarrab and Aref El-Rayess, “Aref Rayess à La Galerie ‘Contact’ à Partir Du 28 Février: Les Ouvrières Du Corps,” *El-Safa*, February 21, 1973, sec. les lettres-les arts.

¹⁸² Mahdi ‘Āmil, *Fi ‘ilmīyat al-fīkr al-Khaldūni*. Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1985. p.73-74.



Figure 21. Aref El-Rayess, *Zuhūr (Flowers)*, c.1971–73, Wax on Canson Paper. Courtesy Saleh Barakat Gallery.



Figure 22. Aref El-Rayess, *Min 'Ahshā' Shāri' al-Mutanabbī* (From the Entrails of Mutanabbī Street), 1971, Wax on Canson Paper. Courtesy Saleh Barakat Gallery.

was permanent in his practice. Already in 1978, El-Rayess's discourse shifted from one of antagonism and struggle to one of peace among sects. On the occasion of a festival in Aley, Aref El-Rayess proclaimed:

I am with the unity of the land, the people, the politics and Arab Lebanese culture, which is activated by whoever breathes with cultural, civilizational and social activity. This brings the people of the one, undivided Lebanon closer to each other, against the intentions of some for division and loss.¹⁸³

However, in this very festival, he put *The Changing of Horses* on public display one final time. The work was shown on a portable panel alongside other monumental, mural paintings on canvas, including the artist's own surrealist work, *Al-Sharq wa Al-Gharb* (East and West, 1970) and Abdel-Hamid Baalbaki's work, *'Ashūra* (1971) (Figure 23).¹⁸⁴ Despite the overt indications of a burgeoning disenchantment with politics in El-Rayess's thought, the display of *The Changing of Horses* attested to the persistence of a revolutionary tendency in the local painting. This is paramount, for the work continued to gesture toward a struggle on the horizon—one that was to be affirmed and fought—beyond the stances the artist consciously avowed. In the chasm between El-Rayess's political position, or lack thereof, and his aesthetics of realism, there was the picture. It is not, I dare

¹⁸³ Marcel Faraj, "Film 'Al-'Ard' Fi Mahrajan Aley Wa Fanānūn Yusahimūn Fi Injāhihi," *Al-Liwā'*, September 5, 1978.

¹⁸⁴ Abdel-Hamid Baalbaki was a student at the Lebanese University's Institute of Fine Arts, where El-Rayess taught. El-Rayess served on his graduation committee in 1971, where Baalbaki defended the painting *'Ashūra* as his project. Baalbaki became, for El-Rayess, a comrade in the arts when he returned to Beirut from Paris in 1974, and they often participated in public events together. See, for example, their discussion on the topic of realism, Seta Manoukian, Aref El-Rayess, and Abdel-Hamid Baalbaki, "Al-Wāqī' iyya Wa Al-Funūn Al-Tashkīliyya," *Al-Tarīq* 37, no. 1 (February 1978): 185–97. For more on Baalbaki's life and art, see Gregory Buchakjian, *Abdel-Hamid Baalbaki* (Beirut: Saleh Barakat Gallery, 2017).



Figure 23. Studio Starko Aley, *Aley Festival for the Arts*, 1978, Photograph. © Aref El Rayess Foundation, Aley.

repeat, a history painting of the Arab defeat of the 1967 June War. It is a painting in which the revolutionary past has not yet happened; it lies ahead in the future.

Perhaps painting's current status as an anachronistic medium can render *The Changing of Horses* legible to the present—its scale is now familiar and its *sur*-realism intelligible. In the contemporary present when the emancipatory dreams of the 1960s have all been extinguished, and there no longer exists an international liberation movement capable of leading the struggle against universal capitalist domination, *The Changing of Horses* is a flashing reminder of oppressed (and repressed) traditions of struggle—ones that sought to bring about total social transformation, rather than the sameness that hides under the banner of reform.

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