

# *In Search of Painting*

The idea that one must always paint something, namely, that every painting has a subject matter, central to the work of Shafic Abboud, is indeed perplexing today. Familiarity with this body of work, particularly the earlier period encompassed in this presentation -albeit not only, reveals a difficulty: How to locate the actual content of a composition? Content is not a descriptive approach that reveals syntactic elements or what actually is in a painting. Nobody seriously asks the question, 'what does this painting mean?' For art critics speak in terms of value, tone, scale, vibration; all terms borrowed from the composition of music. Meaning and content do not have compositional value as they refer to the thingness of the world; not to the objects, senses and phenomena of art.

The shift from the old Aristotelian space to the infinite Copernican space is the decisive moment of the modern project, and this applies to painting too. How to withdraw from the deception of optics and completely flatten surface into material, while keeping the history of art intact? For Manet, the question wasn't what things are, but where do painting-objects stand? Underneath the three-dimensional room, there is nothing but empty air; the horror of pure space. For Shafic Abboud himself, who writes in 1968, "*Do not imagine space - see it*", this newfound space, intuitively discovered, is however nowhere near the purity of abstract expressionism: "*Do not have a cult of pure color*". Abboud would never turn his brush to the blind spot of Western art, keenly aware that painting could, in fact, reach a terminal end. He continued searching for painting, asserting that painting is still possible, as he wrote in a telegram to Roger van Gindertael.

Subject matter for Abboud can be understood in a two-fold manner: The subject is not simply an element in sight but the subjective element; in order to paint it is necessary to do it in the first person and not merely as authorless formal work in the pursuit of higher (un)consciousness. The matter is not simply the event or recollection, but the material properties of painting (wood, pigment, canvas, watercolor etc) that invest the work with the history of civilization and technology. The struggle between figuration and abstraction in his work has been thoroughly elucidated by Christine Abboud and one could add either too little or too much, but suffice it to say that however interested in the subject matter he became, Abboud was only rarely a narrative painter; he remained loyal to composition.

A closer look at his work makes a further clarification necessary: The early 'compositions' are far from being a single historical period; they resurface again and again in his work, alongside a number of "Untitled" canvas, throughout his work from the following decades. What we are looking at here is not a process in time but in space; the attempt of the painter to decompress and liberate the purity of space, legacy of abstraction, as we can see in his more mature works, such as "Matin à Montsouris" (1973) or "La Mer" (1986). Are these color fields? Perhaps to a degree, but they are not too distant from the spirit of the early compositions: Lived space as opposed to pure space is not a topological coordinate but a human geography. It is only in those spaces that we exist, at the threshold of the real.