

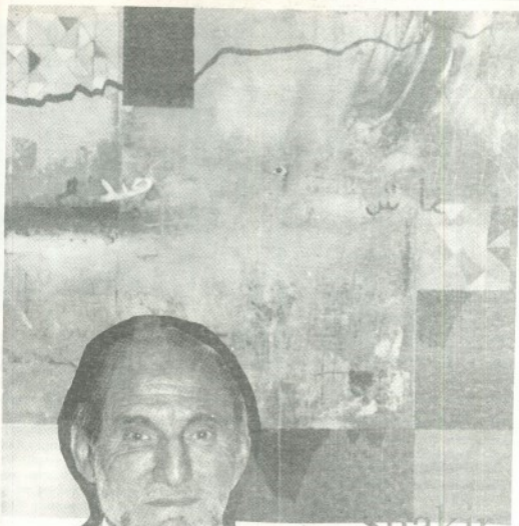
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INTERVIEW



Shakil
Hassan
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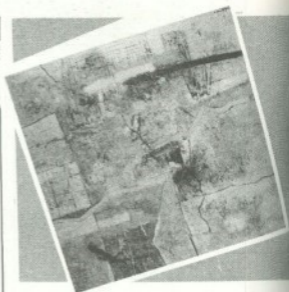
Farouq Yousuf

Can you give the ordinary reader an idea about the developments of your artistic style?

- Generally speaking, the definition of 'artistic style' is closely related the kind of dialogue between the artist and the receiver... that is to say, the style you adopt keeps changing and developing as much as the change that affects this relation in this case, the bridges of contact that the artist tries to stretch between him and the receiver are conditional upon the artist's deep understanding of the importance for addressing the kind of audience. Who is able to understand and appreciate his work of art. If we take into consideration, that the large audience is always the first critic who will face the artist, then it goes without saying that the artist becomes able to determine earlier his general attitude towards the audience, and accordingly, it will be easier for him to determine his attitude towards the intellectual or even the future audience.

As far as I'm concerned, my works are not addressed to the ordinary receiver, but he can change his point of view gradually in order to read and understand my works. This is the same step-by-step method that I usually follow in my work. I intend by this to make large audience share with the intellectual and future audience their attitude and opinions.

After this introduction, I can say that I started in the fifties to inspire the Arab heritage in art hoping to realize the modern style. And we said this in the first declaration of Baghdad of Modern Art: we adopt the modern style in painting and then we try through it to express the local elements. Thus, the first stage needed the painting to be done in accordance with the world styles mingled with the local elements at the same time... I spent five years or so in Paris trying to gain knowledge by studying and sight-seeing. When I returned to Baghdad, I found that a dramatic change had occurred to my style of painting. I departed personification, the instinct to creation and not to meditation. And I needed more years to turn to non-form abstract and began to paint with the modern style and I was satisfied with inspiring only the Arabic Alphabet in my paintings and not all the heritage values. When I began to inspire all the artistic values of the local elements in art and



worked on integrating them all in modern school of painting, I started the second stage of the development of my artistic style and that is creation of a new Arab Heritage in art that mainly requires the creation of various subjects and methods by means of Arabic Alphabet.

This stage continued until or about mid-seventies when I started the third stage of my development by turning to [painting-well]. My deep interest in using the Arabic letter as a strong element of expression had led me to consider the painting as a representation of the architectural environment of the city. I continued to verify my style at this very stage because I felt I must use [painting-environment] to document the war that threatens our country, coming from the eastern borders through art in order to fight spiritual and cultural pollution that tries to hit the human attitudes.

*** Did all that happened due to your intellectual, or was this development a reaction to the change of your artistic concepts?**

- Changes in style and intellect are two sides of a coin... I mean that there's no such kind of alienation between theory and practice. They



are two closely-related situations... Anyhow, I don't want to impose my opinions about the essential points of continuation in art on the others as long as development falls into the division of the process of doing things with energy, and not into the division of succession. Meditation was the outcome of this continuation. I can still understand the game of the creation of great works of art as a process that involves two different degrees of intellectual power. Thinking and Achievement. The Degrees of creation should indicate a prior and a subsequent creation at the sametime. I was blessed by this idea throughout all stages of my artistic development.

* Some people think, that your explanation of your art increases your isolation from the audience, because this explanation is always vague, complicated and confused? what do you think?

- From a new study of my works, one might understand the real sap that provides vigour and energy in my artistic thinking. This thing didn't really interest criticism or critics (or let's

say, the audience who is able to understand the works of art and can make judgement concerning art), at that time. I say, may be this is the reason which gave rise to this misunderstanding on the part of the receivers. What I meant by (sap) here is my comprehensive view of the meaning of life in art. I have said this and expressed it many times in the fifties when I tackled human beings, plants, animals and still things - all with equal value and meaning in speaking about the ancient Iraqi art. I was actually expressing this attitude in my paintings 'Thursday Bazar' - (1951) and 'The Assyrian Procession' - (1951), and in the sixties in my painting 'Homeless Family'. I found that the sufferings of the Palestinians are but an embodiment of my comprehensive view. That's why I made this family a representation of the palestinians. I was engrossed in my artistic meditation in non-form abstract and in the inspiration of the Arabic letters so that I could argue this energetic principles in the internal relations of the artistic painting. When I embarked on

reading the architectural beauties of the city, I dealt with 'the wall' as a representation of it, I found myself, subconsciously, expressing this principle by depicting the relationship between the artist and the receiver-through (the artistic work-the surrounding). The same thing happened as I went beyond (the painting-the well - graphic surface) to the actual space, and I began to make real gaps in the paintings and then I go back to the painting as a whole and try to deal with it from my vivid and comprehensive perspective. This is how I go beyond the traditional existence of the painting (as a graphic surface) to its surrounding existence (by dealing with it as an architectural space).

The receiver would be happy to explain a work of art according to his/her simple point of view. But I think this won't be easy when it comes to understanding my works. They don't seem naive or elegant or slavish like other painting. My paintings are easy and not easy at the same time, as some people like to describe them. Most important of all is that some people think that I try to explain my artistic works, in fact I did never try to do that but I intended to reconstruct them in a new medium other than painting, it is the medium of writing. The receiver misunderstands these writings as he starts to read them and thinks that I wanted to make my paintings clear to him. In brief, I have said and I'll say it once again: The artistic work does not more belong to the artist or to the painting, it began to expand and stretch to the limits of the community and the architectural surrounding. This will always be vague and complicated to be understood as long as there are people who insist on thinking that art is the painting itself only.

*** Some feel that there's some kind of detachment in your life... that stands between your affiliation to your inner feelings and your desire for presentation?**

- Call it detachment, rupture... contradiction...etc... I don't think it would be important to a man to know why I draw a wall crack or why there's a detachment between me

and my inner feelings, or why my inner wounds aren't healed yet. The most important thing for me is that people must understand the kind of means that I adopted so as to express the human culture... It is exactly the same things as I utilize my inner mess to gain an explicit and creative outcome in my writings or paintings.

Personally, I feel that a man is but a two-edged weapon, a coin of two sides or a paper with two pages. A man of double personalities belongs to himself and to the others at the same time. In other words, our human nature lies within the moments of our death struggle and birth. This horizontal cross between ourselves and the other lies within another cross, but a vertical one this time which represents the contrast between the relative and the abstract, the creator and the created, or the modern and the old-in the language of the mystics and old scholars.

I think I'm dangling between my detachment and continuation, between going to the absolute and going away from relativity. There are certain common points that enable me to discover the explicit in me and my spiritual extinction in the material life. From here, I can say that the concept of presence and absence in me are both birth and death struggle. I admit that what nurtured this feeling in me, in the first place, is my firm belief in God, then my firm belief in my art and finally my deep interest in spiritualism. I feel my presence is distracted between this material (or physical) existence and my non-material (or invisible) existence. My meditations throughout dozens of years had led me to this conclusion: As long as I can expand the distance between entity and existence, I would be able to dangle freely between the two. Thus, you may find me dealing with plants, animals and inanimate beings with human feelings and at the same time, I try to overstep my human (or material) existence through the human and social awareness to an invisible world, to the world of angels and spirits, to God. Perhaps, all these were reflected on all stages of my artistic quest. For certain reason I founded (the One Dimension) in the sixties, and another reason I

tackled the wall, ground and space. And for some great reason, I tackled the subjects of the universal existence and creation, as though I cast-off my seven skins, one by one at regular periods to deprave myself to descended to the (lower world), as in the Sumerian and Babylonian legends.

* You were always unstable, always changing your style. Do you care about the stability of the Iraqi painting? or least your painting?

- Doubtless to say, the artistic painting surprises the receiver, it challenges him, may be because it is unfamiliar to his intellectual level, that's why it becomes a cause of trouble or disturbance. It is like a newly-born, it has create various reactions and effects on the others, otherwise, his coming would be casual or a passing event.

I am fully aware of the kind of disturbance and restlessness the painting usually creates, which in turn depends mainly on the receiver's culture and his experience in discovering the aesthetic values of any artistic work. I think these are the natural essentials to understand a work of art. But, sometimes, not understanding the artistic work may lead the receiver to take a negative position. In such a case, we find the receiver filled with despair, unable to judge himself or the others. I have been through such a kind of situation at the beginning of my artistic career (but the misjudgement came from the other part not me). It was in 1944, when I bought a book on Pablo Picasso to the Library of Teachers' Training College. I was a student there. I failed to convince the officials of the college of the importance of the book, but I said one thing (Do you think that what we cannot understand now, we cannot understand later?). My answer was very convincing.

* Can any other humane field, like politics usually tackles?
- What characterize art from any other cultural or civilizational achievement are its comprehensives and its beauty.

That's the reason why the artist is closer to legendary hero than to human being. The same is the politician. Although the concept of authority characterizes the political activity, we find that authority is also another kind of art, for it faces the receiver and deals with him. Thus, it becomes evident that the problems tackled by an artistic work are nearly similar to other problems, especially when these problems try to express their comprehensiveness and beauty, as ethics or religion. To be brief, I can say that as much as art approaches the truth it becomes kind of behaviour and belief. And it surprises the receiver, it challenges him, may be because it is unfamiliar to his intellectual level, that's why it becomes a cause of trouble or disturbance. It is like a newly-born, it has create various reactions and effects on the individuals but it will stretch out and includes the whole humanity and mankind.

* Are you a thinker in a painter's clothing or the other way round?
- A part from selectivity and hypocrisy, I confess that the problems I tackled in my works are both extremely cultural and humane. All I wish and hope for in my career is first to gain my purpose in using my spontaneous abilities and my natural impulses and then I wish to achieve share of success and creativity in my trip between nature and culture and even in my quest for finding a correlative relationship between the two in a methodical way. Whether I'm a thinker or a painter, it's not that important to me at all. All I really care about is how to look to people without putting on a definite (costume) to be known of.

Creators other than human beings, seem naked but they resort to their own instincts to protect themselves. Then, can we single out a certain costume for the Black partridge to wear as it celebrates its masculinity in front of female? The result of such considerations became weaker to a man only if he was able to elevate his humanity to the level of creation. Hence, all considerations will crumble when we reach this point. That's why I never differentiate between the thinker and the painter.

*** Are you happy to be known as an art theorist, especially as it happens at the expense of your fame as painter?**

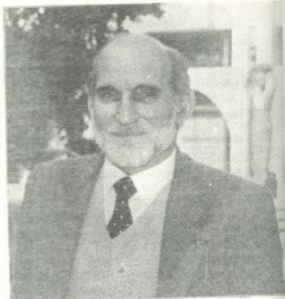
- Fame is important from the very start of any career because it gives the artist courage and confidence in his work. Moreover, it backs him up along his career because it represents the recognition of the audience and the critics of the correctness of his artistic career. But, then it becomes unimportant, that is when the artist see that it is a mere repetition of what is being said, or when he realises that it is nothing but a passing pleasure and self-conceit. Thus, it becomes unimportant for an artist to be known by getting used to wearing trousers or a tie. And there's a big difference between the children's happiness during the feast and the old folks' discontent with the old-fashioned traditions and feast's presents. Being famous for painting and for forming theories, is a matter that never attracted my attention, the most important thing is to be treated as a famous by books' readers and exhibitions' goers. By that, my fame becomes theirs not mine.

*** Now, let's go back to the old days, can you tell us about role in the Baghdad Group of Modern Art?**

- I was the right hand of Jawad Saleem. We strongly believed in the important relation between the local values and the modern styles. We believed in that though we had different explanations for this kind of relation. At the beginning, I saw that he was working on realising the principle of selectivity and harmonisation between east and west, while I was trying to open windows between the two and not to bring them into harmony with each other.

*** Now, about your relation with Jawad Saleem, was it all right or there was some points of disagreement? Or was it in between?**

- My relation with Saleem was intellectual and humane. May be the relation we shared



was different from that he shared with the other members of the group of pioneers. But, I must say that our feelings were mutual, we shared certain intellectual problems. At that time, I had just finished my studies in the social sciences at the Teachers' Higher Institute and at sometime I was a student at the Institute of Fine Arts. As you can see, this enabled me to play the role of (teacher-student) or (student-teacher), a matter that made it easy for me to deal with Jawad Saleem and others. Saleem was totally absorbed in the task of how to achieve creativity, he wouldn't pay the problem of bureaucratic education (or to create a distance between the teacher and the student), the slightest attention.

We shared the same opinions and we thought in the same way and what increased our cooperation was that we were in agreement on the point that we must work hard for the benefit of the Iraqi Art. Though I lacked many of the essential principles of the academic techniques, but I had long and more experience in the modern techniques. It is more a matter of culture and practice than an educational and academic application. The one thing that we disagreed upon was the artistic poster. In 1959

or 1960, I don't exactly remember, he asked me to take part in the first exhibition of the poster (the art of advertisement) but I refused, and he insisted and I didn't agree because I'm still far from this kind of art, perhaps I just wanted at the time to declare my point of view concerning the importance of the artist's culture and intellect in the artistic work, or maybe I didn't have the essential requirements of the art advertisement.

*** Do you think that the problems raised by Baghdad Group for Modern Art still exist? And do you think, that you represent them now?**

- On the general level, they still exist, because the Iraqi artist is not quietly acquainted with the substantial role of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, that can be briefed to the development of art to reach a world level then the universal level. Our role is briefed to exerting efforts to reach a kind of an international and a local level at the same time. The foundation of Baghdad Group was mainly a national necessity to persevere the cultural and the political activity to confront the imperialistic authority that existed before the establishment of the Iraqi Republic, which took a clear form of an intended process to normalize culture, while we were in constant contact with our origins and history due to our deep knowledge and belief in the results that stemmed from the archaeological excavations which are still under way in our country. So, we were trying to regain our cultural strength by exerting efforts to reconnect what was cut of the civilizational bond which connects us to Yahia al-Wasiti in the 13th century.

The substantial role of Baghdad Group to defend and protect art is still appreciated and adopted because it is an opposition to any attempt that tries to minimize the artistic work and to turn the attention from regarding it an important cultural activity. Of course, there are differences as regards information and variable, but the constants are still the same. Imperialism still attempts to obliterate all signs of our cultural origins and arts except when it realizes

that it wouldn't be possible to ignore these origins. But, the question is: For how long can the artist be able to have a control on himself and be able to ignore the temptations that try to carry him along by the new tide of cultural Imperialism, represented by the sophisticated technology, change of methods and the project of the input of the technocratic thinking when renouncing the western thinking? So, what is our role, as a third world, to face the cultural Imperialism. To put it in another way, how can we face the backwardness and the academic and the traditional ways of thinking in art? This is what the Baghdad Group lived up to achieve and put its faith and principles into practice to support their beliefs.

*** Did you accurately perceived your role and influence on the Iraqi art? who was influenced by you?**

- This thing never attracted my attention because it wasn't part of my ambitions. I'm a painter, a painter who is fully aware of the special and general limits of his art. What I meant by general is culture and by specialist creativity. And my artistic career depends on my ability to continue the efforts I started to revive the artist's culture in the middle east, especially when I realized that we, the artists of the third world can really undertake the responsibility of documenting our firm bond with our origins and history unlike other artists of the new world as American and other similar states. They don't usually take into consideration the archaeological researches, because they feel they are uprooted and isolated from their origins. Hence, they try through their various arts to re-create new origins of their own. But, in my opinion, what we care about is how to bring a heritage that is coeval with us, a heritage that we will rely on and consider an essential and an indispensable part of our proud and deep-rooted civilization construction-Participation in this process does not have to do with the techniques adopted or the styles and opinions that we believe in, but it requires a thoughtful and a clever evaluation of the artistic work as it is made by depending on

the new variables and without forgetting the constants on which it is built, or on the strong liaison between art as a culture and as a political achievement- in this point, the problem of creating an effect on the others becomes meaningless only if these (others) are the audience and not a group of artists.

I care about attracting the attention of the audience to the surrounding world (or the environment which resulted from the artistic work) not to the painting. I think I made myself clear now. During my search in folklore in the fifties, I drew some objects that may seem engrossed in folklore at first sight, but a close look into them we see that they were modern. My painting Zain-al Abdeen, for instance, it seems to have a traditional religious and popular subject matter when first seen, but the receiver soon realizes that I was trying to extract him from his past and then throw him evidently into his present, and soon he will realize that Zain al-Abdeen does not have the familiar documentary feature that we know save for the chains that shackle him. It seemed that I was trying to use content to achieve this integration in form, or in other words, I had controlled the content by means of the form and vice versa. But my recent works show you that I still try to give the wall inside the medium a role, to bring about a work of art that can be meditated and understood without a need for an artists. So, I think that neither the subject matter nor the means of expression can divert the attention of the audience from his traditional beliefs and points of view, but the painting can when I try hard to make it part of the wall that surrounds it, by this I denounce the subjectivism in me or I become aware of its problems and matters by its objective existence. Who can give up himself to the extent of extract it from his body?

Perhaps some artists may be influence by my ideas and art in one way or another, but the fact is that we are all being affected by some unknown power in our search for truth.

* You were so inclined to join an associations and certain groups, and now

you stand by yourself. Is this by your own choice or there were certain circumstances that compel you to take it?

- Taking the lead in the foundation of certain groups and societies was part of my own opinions and beliefs, or let's say, it was part of my cultural and social disposition. I always think that what a man chooses will always remain a personal decision that varies in degree and decisiveness according to some social and personal conditions. My participation in the foundation of Baghdad Group for Modern Art in 1952 and the One Dimension Gathering in 1971 was an important manifestation of my artistic career, or what I try to express and convey to the audience through the artistic work. At the time when I gave up myself, and my energy to the problems of testing the mutual integration principle between the current methods of the artistic work and the bases of origins (history, heritage, etc.), the Group was one of the many forms of the integration or the inclination of the individual to socialize with a group of people and then the desire of this group to express itself through this individual. When I founded the One Dimension Gathering, I meant to make its role equivalent to the intentions and purpose of this mutual integration, but in a more limited scope, that is the relationship between plastic art and the linguistic alphabet. Nevertheless, I don't exclude the educational value in the two examples that I gave previously. But when I felt that I somehow lost the main reason behind my participation in this Group, that is the strong contact of the Group with the artistic opinions that I hold, I preferred to withdraw to (myself)- (you must notice that my opinions are extremely artistic and not a mere desire that has nothing to do with the artistic creativity).

In fact, I came to realize that the work of art is the attitude of the receiver and the independancy of the artistic object. By having such a belief, I preferred not to be biased to the artist's inclination to join the gatherings whatsoever, may be because in such case I'll have to be either with the receiver or with the artistic work.

*** I conclude from your answer that the audience occupies a special place in your life. But the word is still vague. Do you paint for a certain group of audience?**

- The meaning of the word 'audience' is not clear. I mean the 'individual' is what this word means, then how can we consider this individual a certain group of receivers? Of course, I know that the process of expressing ourselves by an artistic work is not easy at all. But working for a certain audience is inconsistent with the artistic creativity. I don't deal with the audience by putting it on one side and me on the other, but I seek to meet this audience in the work itself. So, I don't feel that it is far from me as I present a work to it. My audience can define itself, willingly, when it understanding the work. I don't have to invite someone who is outside this work and cannot understand it properly because it would be difficult to invite anyone to my work and I feel that he is reluctant to understand it. Well, this ability to understand mainly depends on the mental powers and skills of the receiver to understand and digest a work of art, but these abilities are often not yet discovered by the receiver himself. I'm convinced in the fact that what attracts a receiver to any kind of art is in all cases, the closeness of the latter to the former's emotional excitement and innate impulses. This is the plausible reason for such yearn to the (natural art) or personification on the part of the audience at all times. Maybe because the (natural art) is like a mirror that reflects the image of the man, or figuratively it is a faithful representation to himself. Mirror tempts man to look at him/her self. Therefore, art seems at first sight as though it nourishes itself from the audience's love of its own image or its excessive self-admiration of itself. Thus, art becomes able to communicate with the audience from this very explanation. Therefore, if I'm painting to a certain audience it will be as if I'm painting for myself only, or to an audience that I shall meet no matter how far is the distance that separates us from each other. For this reason, must think of a large, intellectual and future audience at the same

time. So that I could become its mirror that reflects its image and nourishes its love for itself and to its humanity which raises in mind and feelings from the mere human soul to a universal one.

*** Who had the great influence on your career?**

- Of course you mean who influenced my opinions and style. But the question remains: This influence is to the account of (whom)? We, the artists of the Third World, will always be alien from the world arts unless we resort to our own arts, or rather to our own treasures that we should re-read once again. And if it happened, and we discovered that a certain artist is somehow close to us, I mean he was influenced by our culture and by the techniques and styles we used; then, does it mean that we became influenced by him for that reason? From all this, I can say that I was influenced by Paul Kelly and Paul Cezanne at the beginning of my artistic life because the former inspired the Arabic letter in his art and the latter discovered abstract in nature, and both of them were influenced by the Arabic and Islamic 'ideology' or the Ancient Iraqi 'ideology'. I was influenced by our arts but by means of the two artists' special ways to deal with these arts.

*** Mr. Shakir, why do you paint?**

- And why do not I paint. If the aim is to identify my relation with world through painting, and to observe the successive ideological alterations that stamped my style of painting, then the answer will be this: First, I began to paint simply because I had the talent and the skill to draw what I see. So, I painted like any child or a teenager who tries to prove his human existence in life by his unique skill to express himself through controlling his fingers. In the forties, I adopted the modern style in painting, this phase lasted until the sixties when I began to assimilate the world culture and thought with the local perspective. I was trying to discover the meaning of my existence in a subjective world. At this very stage, I began to focus on the mental (culture) skills that control the human being and his emotional and

intellectual being as a human and social existence rather than focusing on how to control my fingers. In this respect, I was influenced by the European, the local and heritage arts, all at the same time. Then I went back to painting in mid-sixties just re-elevate my personal liaison with the world. At this stage, I wasn't satisfied with dealing with the human being as the subject matter of my paintings, and sought to know the world, the universe and reasoning as if I began to discover my re-birth through universe and creation. This is what I meant by identifying my liaison with the world through painting. As for my ideological alterations (or the development of the nature of the search in the artistic work), I began to document myself, unintentionally, by using lines more than colours or shapes. I remember when I was in the secondary school I was so much interested in sketches and outlines, then I believed in the importance of expressing the aspect of social life in art and necessity to include our heritage in daily life. Of, course, this requires the artist to have an adequate past and present experiences in how to combine the modern styles of art with the local perspectives in one work. But my problem in searching for the right way of painting began when I replaced the social life with the universe, and the local perspectives with world and universal ones. At this point, I realized that I was standing on the threshold of the artistic knowledge which I can describe as an ocean so deep that the bottom cannot be reached, a knowledge that is too strange and too difficult to be understood.

The "search to be now is to look through carefully in order to understand the liaison between nature and culture which is reflected on the absence of well-defined forms and go beyond the familiar gradation of colour by concentrating on the aesthetic values of the form and ornaments, or realizing the distance between the intensity of the physical existence and the transparency of the universal existence (in the language of the spirit-world). This search had gone beyond its ordinary limits, as though it is a trip between life and death, that

aims at praising God, and an attempt to realize a complete integration into the divine beauty.

This culture explanation tries to get to the bottom of the being and refers it to its subjectivism or to discover it in its subjective state, or we can express this concept by referring to the power of controlling oneself (by then our explanation will be religious and mystical because, here, we will examine the human and moral behaviour of the human being), and it can also be expressed in the light of thinking because it is a search, a study and a theory as well. But if we expressed this concept in art, then it will be an occasion of communication with the world, and art will become the medium through which one can get in active contact with the world because the production of a painting becomes the consequence of some material additions in a material world. By then, the artistic research will develop and renovate as certain techniques and styles were adopted to produce a painting. So I paint because, simply, I cannot but paint.

*** Is art a necessity? For whom and when?**

- Yes art is a necessity because it is closely attached to our need for beauty. Art can never be separated from beauty. Without beauty, art becomes an abstract phenomenon in which any man can react with another like any chemical process but I believe in the fact that gudging beauty is always a relative, because it differs from one man to another and from one creature to another. Art became limitless; thus, it is necessary for anything and at any time because it is reflected on the behaviour of every thing on this planet including the human beings. It is a (pray), it is a merely the bird's singing or the rustling of dry leaves of trees

*** have you ever felt that you made a mistake when you chose painting?**

- I have never regretted choosing painting, because it enabled me to discover the truth in our existence. Perhaps I will continue painting after I die or in the other world through my spiritual existence.

Translated by Vian rassoul