

SHAWKI YOUSSEF

9 MORNINGS & 13 GOOD NIGHTS

أجيا
للفنون التشكيلية



AGIAL
art gallery

AN ORDINARY STRANGENESS

Shawki Youssef paints partial, often headless, figures in putrid colors – skin in a sickly yellow, lesions on a free-floating limb in bright red, exposed joints and muscle tissues in orange, burned flesh in gray and black. In his process, Youssef copies and combines body parts of different people – this person’s elbow, or that other person’s lip curl– which do not yield a whole, upright individual. The represented body is not an anatomical study, but a strange, jumbled-up assemblage of parts coming together as if from a mass grave. Youssef’s bodies rest on, or float above, a flat and angular surface made up of lines and thick linear brushstrokes which gives depth to the painting. The surface has the air of an operating table or a medical restraint. Occasionally the figures are hollowed and flattened out so as to become one with the table on which they lay, or, the table appears on its own, though bright and transparent brushstrokes indicate a ghostly presence, as if it were a liquid body melting down the legs of the table, or ether withering into air. The body in Youssef’s work is not only represented; it is also present in the artist’s gestural technique. Youssef is driven to take the canvas, or paper, onto several different surfaces – the table, the window, the wall, and the floor (coincidentally also the spatial limits that make up the enclosed space of his paintings). The movement of his hand is light and expressive, and representation is contingent upon the accidents that emerge out of the artist’s process.

Every piece of writing on Shawki Youssef thus far alludes to his work’s expressionist style, most often through its affinity with the work of Francis Bacon. When asked to comment on this observation, Youssef concurs that the source of his painterly meditations is the modernist tradition of expressionism. One might ask: what is it about Youssef’s work that makes it expressionist, and what does it entail for his work to be characterized as expressionist? Rather than take this term for granted and operate on clichés presumed from the etymology of the word *expression*, I propose to reconsider the art historical term, “expressionism,” in order to consider its implications for Youssef’s work.

The various manifestations of expressionism – German expressionism, abstract expressionism, and others – extend the Romanticist critique of Enlightenment thought and its rationalist assumptions – scientism and its claims on objective reality, as well as the positively-constituted subject. The twentieth-century expressionist response to the persistence of Enlightenment ideals has generally been historicized in relativist terms, as a subjective evocation of an artist’s feelings –feelings which are themselves incongruous with “reality”. To consider the stakes of this claim, I invoke two conventional and wide-reaching descriptions of the term which characterize expressionism as “art in which the image of reality is distorted in order to make it expressive of the artist’s inner feelings or ideas,”¹ and the expressionists as artists who “sought to depict the world as it felt rather than how it looked.”² These seemingly mundane definitions of expressionism expose an unresolved tension between subject and object. On the one hand, the relativist position is maintained. On the other, the claim that expressionists “distort” the image of reality presupposes that this image must have existed outside of the subject, objectively, prior to its distortion. The second definition takes this further by suggesting that this objective reality is

¹ “Expressionism.” Tate Art Terms (web), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/e/expressionism>.

² “Expressionism.” MoMA Learning (web), https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/expressionism.

subjectively perceived and universally shared, despite the range of emotions which cloud the possibility of judging reality “purely”.

Against such contradictory notions of the separation between inside and outside, Jacques Lacan coined the term *extimité*, or extimacy in English, as opposed to *intimité*, or intimacy. Applying the prefix ‘ex,’ from *exterieur* to the word *intimité*, Lacan problematizes the binary opposition between inside and outside.³ Inside and outside are mediated by a third speculative (rather than physical) category – the unconscious. As a relational and intersubjective structure, the unconscious is not present within the subject, but it mediates between subject and object so that the real is as much inside as it is outside.

Shawki Youssef’s work is not reflective of an affective outpouring of his subjective experience, which obscures reality ‘as it is’. He does not attempt to render visible the abstract, negative, and ultimately, unrepresentable relationship between the subject and object within the painting. Rather, Youssef evokes the subject of the unconscious (which is intersubjective and involves the Other) in the slips, accidents, and contingencies of his gestural – and to a certain extent automatistic – technique. His technique results in an ordinary strangeness, the uncanny [*Unheimlich*]⁴, which arouses dread and horror, but also pleasure, the combination of which results in an anxiety that gestures toward the real. It is perhaps less relevant to defend the claim that Youssef’s work is expressionist, or even surrealist, than to think of the aesthetic response it stirs in the viewer, and how this captures what is disconcerting in everyday life.

Natasha Gasparian

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60*. Trans. Dennis Porter. London: Routledge, 1992. p. 139.

⁴ Sigmund Freud introduces the concept of *Das Unheimlich* in his 1919 essay by the same name.





Untitled | Mixed media on canvas | 105 x 150 cm | 2019

WHAT MATTER

Shawki Youssef's paintings are about processes of thoughts and inquiries into what matters. Matter is physical substance, which is allegedly distinct from the mind, the spirit, and energy. Youssef's habitual and almost obsessive subject, the human body, dissolves or vanishes, and is replaced by tables/beds. Tables, beds, and human bodies blend in the emerging space they occupy to assert that they are made up of the same matter. Delicate lines, shades, and transparencies of color interact with the white and textured surface of the canvas, giving ethereal form to things—tables, human figures, walls, etc.—that transmit, like when touching, this “uncanny sense of the other,” of oneself, and “the transience of matter's existence.”

Zéna M. Meskaoui

Untitled | Mixed media on canvas | 150 x 160 cm | 2019



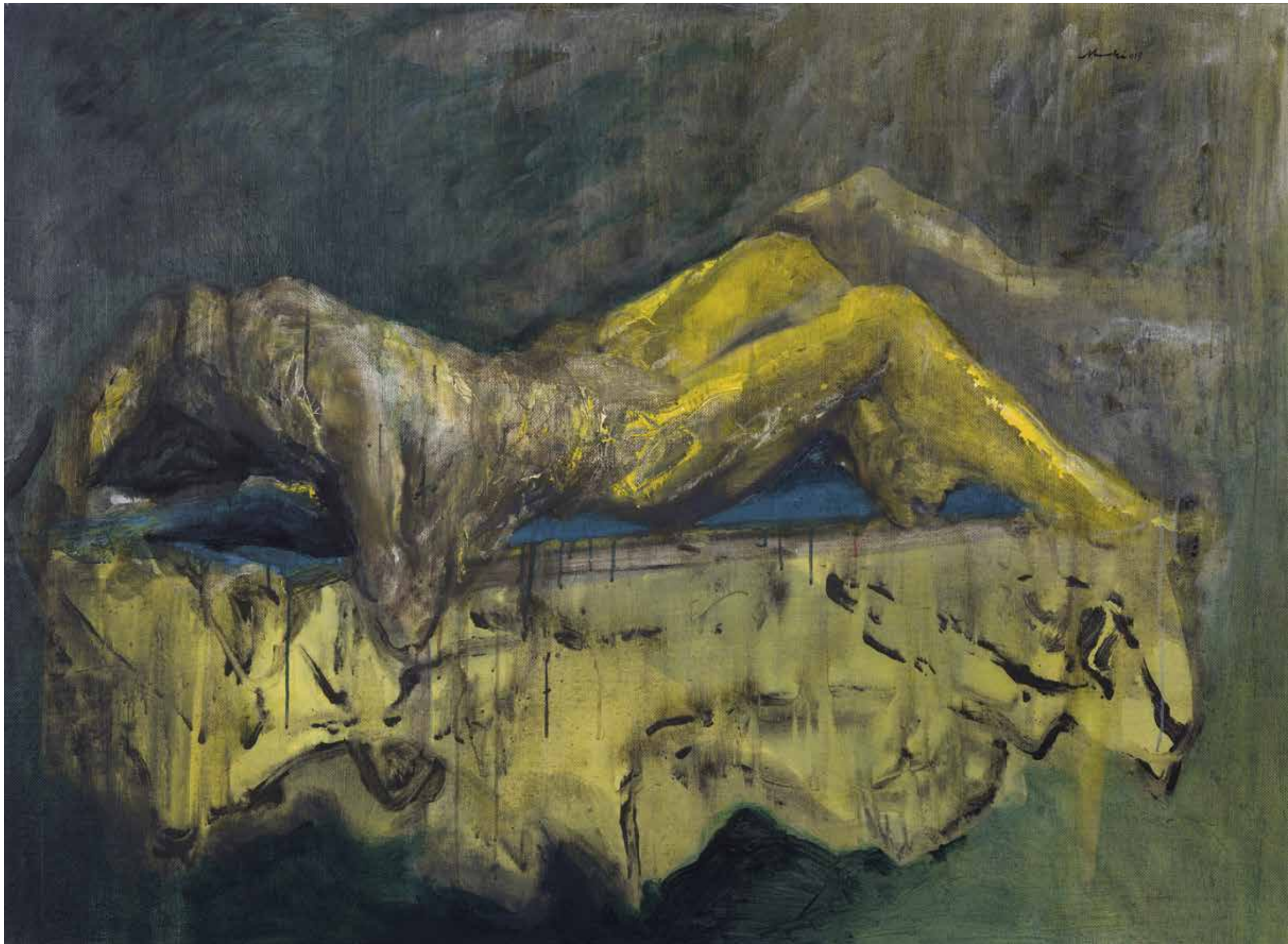


Untitled | Mixed media on canvas | 110 x 180 cm | 2019 (The previous pages 10&11)

Untitled | Mixed media on canvas | 124 x 156 cm | 2019







Untitled | Mixed media on canvas | 102 x 210 cm | 2019 (The previous pages 14&15)

Untitled | Mixed media on canvas | 105 x 143 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on canvas | 110 x 180 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on canvas | 115 x 156 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 70 x 100 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 70 x 100 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 40 x 30 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 30 x 40 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 40 x 60 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 40 x 60 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 70 x 100 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 70 x 100 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 40 x 60 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 40 x 60 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 70 x 100 cm | 2019



Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 70 x 100 cm | 2019

Untitled | Mixed media on carton Untitled | 150 x 95 cm | 2019





Untitled | Mixed media on carton | 150 x 82 cm | 2019



Shawki Youssef | Jounieh | Lebanon | 2017

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Shawki Youssef was born in Beirut in 1973. He received his bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from the Lebanese University in 1994 before going on to complete a Master's in science in 2007 at Saint Joseph University in Lebanon. Youssef's work extends across multiple mediums to include painting, drawing, video, and installations. Recent solo and group exhibitions include "My Last Century Remains", Al Markhiya Gallery, Doha (2014); "Acid Fields", Green Art Gallery, Dubai (2013); "Le Corps Decouvert", the Institut Du Monde Arabe, Paris (2012); "Rebirth: Lebanon 21st Century Contemporary Art", Beirut Exhibition Center, Beirut (2011); "Hollow Flesh," Agial Art Gallery (2011); and "Fluid Being", Green Art Gallery (2011). His work can be found in the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, and in the Salsali Private Museum, Dubai. He lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon.

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