

Encounter with the Alienated Familiar

Visiting “Beyond Alienation” Landscapes, Abbas Nasle Shamloo’s Latest Painting and Drawing Series

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Alienation is the separation between two entities that properly belong together; a pathological and deeply problematic separation. “Beyond Alienation”, the new series by Abbas Nasle Shamloo, expresses two facets of alienation: between man and nature and between man and himself, in other words, his own inner nature, which is an inevitable outcome of losing touch with the natural environment. Once we review the evolution of the relationship between humankind and nature from being absolutely and utterly at the mercy of the environment, to learning how to harness natural elements and coexist in relative peace, to overpowering and mass exploitation of natural resources, we realize the title of the series is addressing the very present moment. Environmental alarms have gone off all over the world and the denying voices are growing weaker and weaker. Our Homosapien has now become aware of the consequences of what he has done. It is time to stop, turn around and come face to face with the formidable truth he had been ignoring for so long; that is when Nasle Shamloo’s ominously beautiful landscapes come to life before him – before all of us.

A year after the artist had begun surrounding himself by the lush and equally mysterious nature of northern Iran, observing and recording details and rhythms of life in this nature, the series came into existence first through a large number of drawings in the small and intimate scale of a sketchbook and then culminated with six large-scale paintings on canvas. The scenery is more or less realistic, yet all these images share one secret: what we see are not fragments of objective reality but visions of the artist’s imagination. Nasle Shamloo has created these landscapes relying on his cultivated visual memory and mental explorations. The drawings are largely improvised and the paintings are germinated from early abstract forms. What is eventually visible on canvas are, in fact, the fortunate select few out of multiple layers of creation and destruction; a relentless game the end to which even the artist admittedly could not tell from the beginning. Yet the rules of any game of creation dictate that it all must stop at some point; out of a myriad of potential visual narratives only one remains, and that will be called the *oeuvre*.

The drawings of this series depict scenery of natural elements together with stylized buildings of unclear functions and sometimes animal figures in the distance, often framed within what seems

to be a door, window or another form of opening; an indirect contact with nature. These improvised landscapes bear a spontaneous quality. The artist's unleashed creative energy is palpable in semi-abstract lines, stains and splattered inks, and the combination of various techniques with a rapid, liberal touch yield a synesthetic effect creating a noisy, dynamic visual experience. The arrangement of geometric forms and straight lines with more organic lines and stains and the delicate balance among brighter and darker greys, which is the result of a series of bold but skillful creating and eliminating marks, create appealing compositions and reds, greens and blues applied here and there break the monotony of space, breathing extra life into the construct of the images. A multitude of branches of bare trees acts as a veil between us and the events in the background, like long, slender fingers that seem to protect us from the external environment while, at the same time, concealing parts of some truth from our curious gazes.

Dark frames intensify our focus on these landscapes and bring a jewel-like quality to each image while also suggesting a feeling of being placed within some indoor space. The trees and leaves are drawn swiftly and expressively yet they also appear to be more detailed and closer to the supposed observer than the vegetation in the paintings. The feeling of being enclosed inside invisible architecture, together with the protrusion of natural elements out of the frames strangely bring the viewer closer to the creator of these vistas; as though, for an instant, they are both staring at the same view – of the artist's inner world, no less – from a same otherworldly spot, being inundated with a rush of similar emotions. Moreover, the variety in frames and views, indicating a variety of places, turns these drawings into pages of a visual – and of course, mental – diary.

Rendered in a variety of dark lines on a brighter background, most trees appear as silhouettes, suggesting a vague light source coming from the horizon of these realistic yet imaginary scenes. The absence of any distinct shadows indicates the absence of the sun; a common characteristic among the drawings and paintings of Nasle Shamloo's post-alienation universe where everything takes place under a gloomy sky in an endless twilight state. There is no telling whether this in-between situation is going to end in sunrise or all these forms are about to sink into the inky darkness of the night; a condition parallel to the dreadful suspense that is looming over the future of humans and their environment.

In spite of unity of theme and technical coherence, the transition from drawings to paintings involves a significant change of spaces. Thus far, it seemed that some truth had been kept under wraps. As if we had been watching everything from the romantic eyes of an unseen individual residing in Nasle Shamloo's drawings; deeply fanciful and eager to return to the *warm*, affectionate arms of nature and ignoring the foreboding heaviness of the clouds or the long absence of the sun, we do not realized when exactly we have stepped outside; until we come face to face with the first painting and that hypothetical yet still comfortable interior instantly

falls apart; we feel a cold, humid wind on our cheeks and we find ourselves directly exposed to vast, bare and peculiar landscapes. The playful chatter of clusters of delicate lines, scratches and splatters is suddenly silenced and a penetrating quiet takes over the space. The dramatic difference of scale between drawings and paintings doubles this sense of vulnerability and exposure instilled in the viewer. The sense of place associated with those dark frames around many of the drawings turns into a dreadful placelessness. The most significant transition here, however, is the change of focus of power and agency. Nature in these paintings is no longer an object. It has presence, character and consciousness. Nature becomes the subject and before it, the human entity – whether it is the supposed man in the universe of paintings or even the viewer – subdued and inactive, recedes to the state of an object; in awe; in a catatonic state. Although the viewing angle in the paintings has freed itself from frames and the spaces have grown wider, interpreting this change of space as a form of extroversion would be a mistake. From the moment our painter has decided to set foot out onto an apparent outdoor space he has actually taken a long, brave step further towards his inner realm. In this universe, the inner and outer vistas are reflections of each other and, therefore, inseparable.

These paintings, more than drawings, are settings for a confrontation between structures – as representatives of human achievements – and nature. Various structures have been tested: from whole to damaged concrete structures to temporary, fragile shelters of wooden and metal bones and skins of plastic and tarp. Yet, one can hardly call this a close match between equals. Man-made structures may be the key elements in the composition of the paintings but visual strategies such as depicting solitary structures, their distance from the observer, their occupied spaces in proportion to the rest of the scene and the proximity of mild tonalities of the structures to the vast grey of the cloudy sky and the earth tones of the wet ground indicate which force will ultimately gain dominance: these structures are already doomed to nothing but either destruction or being devoured by nature. What appears to be a concrete water tower at the center and an almost-bare temporary structure in the mid-ground are each losing a battle of survival and significance in a different manner. The plastic covering of the scaffolding is about to be blown away, while the ostensibly firm concrete tower, which is pushing the trees sideways at its base, begins to lose its contours with the grey of the clouds behind it. Voracious wild grasses are growing taller and multiplying themselves and thin branches, which seem to have grown out of the wall of the concrete structure, are telling us nature's game of reclaiming the artificial has quietly begun. The contrast between the broad sky and static concrete structure, on the one hand, and the dynamic rhythm of the trees, grasses, and the fabric covering the temporary structure, on the other, together with the interplay of horizontal and vertical elements, each leading the eyes to a section of the image, create a balanced aesthetic whole.

Another temporary structure indicates an equally transient or seasonal activity: a teahouse? a fish market? Is someone's gaze meeting ours from behind the folds of that translucent shelter?

Our call remains unanswered. Although semi-transparent, the structure firmly resists any further decoding. The unlit string lights are reminiscent of happier, livelier times. Were it not for the foreboding mass of wild plants in the foreground, the viewers' eyes would probably move along the horizon, spend some time admiring the brushmarks and various tones of the structure and its neighboring trees, and the visual story of the painting would end there; but this menacing, textured vegetation that forms the visual center of gravity, turning balance into tension, reveals glimpses of a deeper layer of narratives; narratives or sub-narratives which are covered under a semi-opaque blanket of dirt but which are not yet completely hidden from view. Surely, this stillness is not synonymous with a lack of events. Slender trees break the prevailing horizontal order. The dark belly of the sky in the upper third of the image weighs heavily on the landscape. Suspense continues.

Next, we meet the only wall left from a once quadrilateral space, with an opening for the entrance and another one for a window, like two eyes without eyelids, forced to gaze on forever; another remnant of a previous presence, which now, having lost its original purpose, appears ludicrous and pathetic. This painting is perhaps the most explicit and cynical manifestation of alienation; of mortality and estrangement. The landscape we see is increasingly metaphysical and introverted. Suspense gives way to acceptance of an inescapable reality and time cannot be reversed; time, whose traces are visible on the molds and scratches on the wall and across the passing clouds in the background. If we could open a window into the mind of an alienated human being, this is the view we would expect to find. The simple composition of this scene is rightly asymmetrical: a combination of rectangular surfaces and vertical and horizontal lines. The absence of any shade in the absence of sunshine takes away any sense of depth from the landscape, rendering it crueler and more impenetrable. Even the sea in the background, far from its characteristic endlessness, has been reduced to a flat, static grey-blue area. One feels as if two arms are stretched out of the canvas, practically forbidding us from coming any closer. Even those not-so-friendly wild grasses are nowhere to be seen. The muddy, dark ground appears neither fertile nor generous but rather like a greedy swamp that wants to suck in everything from life to structures to air and even the viewers' gazes. As we further examine these openings inside the decaying wall, particularly the doorway, we discover another case of a frame-within-a-frame that indicates the presence of one space within another. It is as though those small fragments of landscape framed inside the openings are a place different than a mere continuation of the waterline; that they are portals to a different universe; an invitation to delve even deeper within; to rethink; to contemplate. Or perhaps this is just our overwhelmed spirit imagining an escape route from this terrible dream; even if this escape would mean plunging deeper into the landscape.

As with Nasle Shamloo's earlier works, we rarely meet any living beings in most of these works, and even when we do, it is a lonesome creature whose presence only highlights the feeling of

loss and loneliness. The final act of "Beyond Alienation" however, which is also the largest work of the series, breaks with this tradition. The twilight mood continues to prevail and the sky is cloudy, but we are dealing with a completely different compositional language. This time, trees are the main characters of the scene. Not few or far apart or small - like in the other paintings – but tall and in plentitude; and a timely intervention finally shatters the heavy silence and its catatonic inaction. The passionate rhythm of the branches of trees ends the hegemony of those cold, apathetic geometric shapes and, most importantly, life begins to bloom! As we look for each of those countless birds from branch to branch, we find something more than just a handful of halfhearted “V” shapes and lazy spots: each bird is delicately portrayed with a unique character and in a particular sitting or flying position, a fact that demonstrates the artist’s keen visual and artistic sensitivity and deep respect for nature. The structures are present here but are pushed to the background. There is a great irony in the contrast between the bare trees which are still full of bustle of life and the buildings which remain unlit during these dark hours, suggesting they are uninhabited: that which is made to be a container of life is devoid of life, but nature still is, as it has always been, the cradle of life; another humiliating defeat for mankind and his fabrications. Further down, we see those string lights again, adorning the tree trunks, but still unlit. Is this piece a counterargument to peaceful coexistence? One is led to imagine all the inhabitants of those concrete buildings and the dancers around these string lights had to go away for nature to breathe a sigh of relief and for all these birds to be able to come together in peace. Different interpretations are of course welcome, and adherents of pessimistic readings may well point out that these crows – or any other kind of birds – are, in fact, frightened by the sudden presence of onlookers and are beginning to fly away, that what we see is just a few seconds before another bitter, deathlike quiet. However, one cannot simply overlook the other subtle distinction of this painting, namely the pale but undeniable redness of the sky along the horizon; a quality that does not go unnoticed from the now sensitized eyes of the viewers of this series. Whether a sign of sunset or sunrise, such warm addition to Nasle Shamloo’s predominantly cold palette is bound to introduce relief and invigoration in the aesthetics of a restrained palette.

Abbas Nasle Shamloo’s pure and profound love for nature is evident in his words and he considers himself a pupil of nature. Free from any particular manifesto or philosophical ideas, he has established a simple relationship with his subject and he considers his mission, first and foremost, to develop forms; forms that gradually come to life and become impregnated with content thanks to the artist’s sound painterly approach and explorations. Neil Evernden, professor of environmental studies and author of “Humankind and Environment”, believes that humans are *natural aliens*: we come from nature and yet we are strangers to it. There is no escape from this contradiction. Only the realm of culture and art can heal the endless feeling of placelessness and alienation caused by this duality; especially art whose role has often gone beyond a mere sedative, by constantly asking us questions, inviting us to contemplate ourselves and the universe and to reconsider our actions, beliefs and behaviors. It is the deep-seated need to revisit such

contradictions, again and again, that makes the longstanding landscape painting genre still relevant today. Whatever the fate of the environmental crisis of our time might be, "Beyond Alienation" paintings and drawings provide a space, away from those big, scary headlines, anxiety-inducing statistics and political polemics, for us to be able to quietly deal with our external reality and internal truth; an ultimately uplifting space, too, since the landscapes oozing out of Abbas Nasle Shamloo's mind and brushes may invoke a wide array of emotions in their viewers except for malaise – the sensation to which one often succumbs on a cloudy day – for every single frame stands testimony to the triumph of the ecstatic truth of art over objective reality. The artist's creative and stimulating response to the question *how* rather than *what* in his representations puts up a small, yet magical display of virtuosity within every otherwise familiar-looking landscape. The artist leaves us with glimpses of hope; that the scarlet horizon in the final painting may signify the dawn of enlightenment and a brighter future for mankind and the environment.