



## PAUL GUIRAGOSSIAN

### Beirut Exhibition Center

A self-portrait, seemingly made under the spell of Van Gogh, has a thin scar cutting across the young man's cheek. Encountered early on in 'Paul Guiragossian: The Human Condition', this small painting was made in 1948, but the scar is from three decades later, when a shell destroyed the artist's Beirut studio. The portrait has been restored, but the scar remains.

It would be too tempting to say that many of the thousands of paintings Guiragossian made in the five decades before his death, in 1993, are also damaged by the past. But the feeling is hard to shake. He was, after all, born in Jerusalem in 1925 to survivors of the Armenian genocide; his family were evacuated from Palestine 1948 and settled in Beirut soon after. (As Robert Fisk grimly observed, the Armenians were 'the only people this century to flee to rather than from Lebanon, for comfort and protection.') Across five decades of work, exile and dispossession, Guiragossian's themes endured.

'The Human Condition' was the most comprehensive retrospective of the artist's work since his death. Organized by Sam Bardouil and Till Fellrath, a curatorial duo who work together as Art Reoriented, the exhibition came at time when attention, better late than never, is being paid to Guiragossian's Lebanese contemporaries Etel Adnan (included in Documenta 13 in 2012) and Saloua Raouda Choucair (the subject of a Tate Modern retrospective last year). Despite having been an influential professor at the Lebanese Academy in Beirut, as well as exhibiting internationally, Guiragossian has been a little overlooked in recent years, with no solo shows outside of the Middle East since his death. This exhibition – initiated by the family-run Guiragossian Foundation and hosted at the space-for-hire Beirut Exhibition Center – explicitly aimed to redress the balance, and it probably wasn't coincidental that it came at a time when his market prices have increased, abetted by a flurry of auction houses popping up in the Gulf.

Guiragossian was primarily a painter of clustered people: elongated figures, huddled close together, hunched or squatting. They crowd the canvas, never over-spilling its edges. Togetherness usually feels threatened,

somehow, but also a spell that might ward against loss. Guiragossian's nudes, gathered in the section 'Woman', such as *Le Mirroir* (1966), are crepuscular, skin over bone, seemingly moonlit. These early works wear their influences heavily: Degas, Van Gogh and Gauguin. Later, though, in the gestural almost-abstractions of *Ombres* (Shadows) and *Silence* (both c. 1969), his interlocutors become increasingly subtle: Clyfford Still, perhaps, or Barnett Newman and Arshile Gorky (himself a survivor of the Armenian Genocide). Towards the end of Guiragossian's life, he painted thickly impastoed figures, greasy striations of white describing creased shirts, as well as many scenes of dances and musicians. Though they have titles such as *Fiesta* (1988) and *Festive* (1992), they remain somehow solemn and always silent.

Each section of 'The Human Condition' contained a well-judged intervention that introduced the work of Guiragossian's elders and family members: earlier works by the eminent Khalil Saleeby and impressionist Omar Onsi, paintings by his wife and muse Juliette and his son Jean Paul. They trace the life and work of an artist who seemed devoted to his family and who remained active in several fields. As well as being a friend of the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, Guiragossian often strayed into the theatre world: in 1969, he painted a backdrop – photos of which were presented here – for a version of Brecht's *Mother Courage* (1939), titled *Souk Al Fåle*.

The exhibition was divided thematically rather than chronologically. While this could feel overdetermining, it allowed for some devastating effects. One early gallery was dedicated to family, moving through loving portraits of Guiragossian's young children and elderly parents, while his wife appeared in a striking full-length portrait. But this domestic bliss was followed closely by a section titled 'Despair', where one of several masterful large-scale works was displayed. In *Deir-Ezzor* (1963–64), titled after an area of the Syrian desert that witnessed a massacre in 1915, family is decimated: bodies totter and stretch, babies are strewn around. Guiragossian returned to this subject over and again. Each time there was a new inflection, depending on his circumstances: exiled from Jerusalem; civil war in Lebanon. If these desolate history paintings do depict life, then it's bare life, experience stripped down to the smallest things. Even moments of celebration remain haunted and subdued.

#### SAM THORNE

1  
Paul Guiragossian  
*Le Cycle de Vie (The Cycle of Life)*,  
1955, oil on masonite,  
1.2 x 1.6 m

2  
Athi-Patra Ruga  
*The Lands of Azania (2014–2094)*  
(detail), 2013, wool  
tapestry on canvas, 2 x 1.8 m

3  
Amol Patil  
*Asylum for dead objects*, 2013,  
video still

## ATHI-PATRA RUGA

### Whatiftheworld / Gallery, Cape Town

The title of Athi-Patra Ruga's recent solo exhibition, 'The Future White Women of Azania Saga', composed of mostly large-scale embroidered canvases and portrait photographs concretizing the mythology surrounding a series of performances the artist initiated in 2010, took me back to a day at my all-white pre-democracy high school. Politics was on the agenda: a left-leaning gay wit in class remarked that he couldn't understand all the fuss about South Africa transforming to a black majority state named Azania, as some black nationalists were moaning. 'At least we'll be seated at the front of the United Nations,' he remarked. As things transpired, South Africa remained South Africa, seated nearer the back. And Azania, that imprecisely defined utopia first pinpointed in Roman times? Well, it never materialized.

Ruga, an out gay man living in Cape Town who studied fashion illustration in Johannesburg, is not the first South African artist to immerse himself in an imaginary republic reflecting a perfectly distilled fictional state replete with the symbolic trappings of nationhood. Walter Battiss, possibly the country's first indigene avant-gardist, came up with the cartoonish, nonsense universe of Fook Island – an 'island of the imagination' – in 1971. 'You will seek in vain on maps for the location of the island, for it eludes conventional cartography,' offered Battiss, a gifted teacher, art historian and closeted homosexual living in a state where sodomy was a criminal offence.

Like Ruga in his 2013 work *The Lands of Azania (2014–2094)*, an embroidered map depicting the Horn of Africa (homophobic Uganda is christened 'New Sodom'), Battiss also created maps; he even issued stamps and passports for Fook Island. There was, as there still is, though with different inflections nowadays, a serious correlative to this artistic tomfoolery. During Battiss's time, a number of legally constituted, albeit fake, black democracies were dotted across South Africa's political territory; Ruga was born in Umtata, formerly the capital of one of them, Transkei. Like Battiss, Ruga is no less motivated by the social context in which he operates.

In the past, Ruga's performance work – which has the gaudy splendour of Leigh Bowery's, even though it was decisively influenced by Tracey Rose and Sharon Bone, a notorious Johannesburg drag performance artist who starred in Stanimir Stoykov's gay underground films – has deployed camp pageantry to tactically comment on Swiss and South African xenophobia, as well as escalating homophobia across Africa. But these performances, and the fragmentary photographic evidence they produced, often seemed random; by comparison, 'The Future White Women of Azania Saga' presented an imaginative and cohesive statement, one in which humour, colour, fashion and a vivid pop sensibility have as much agency as anger, outrage and the right to say, 'Fuck this!'