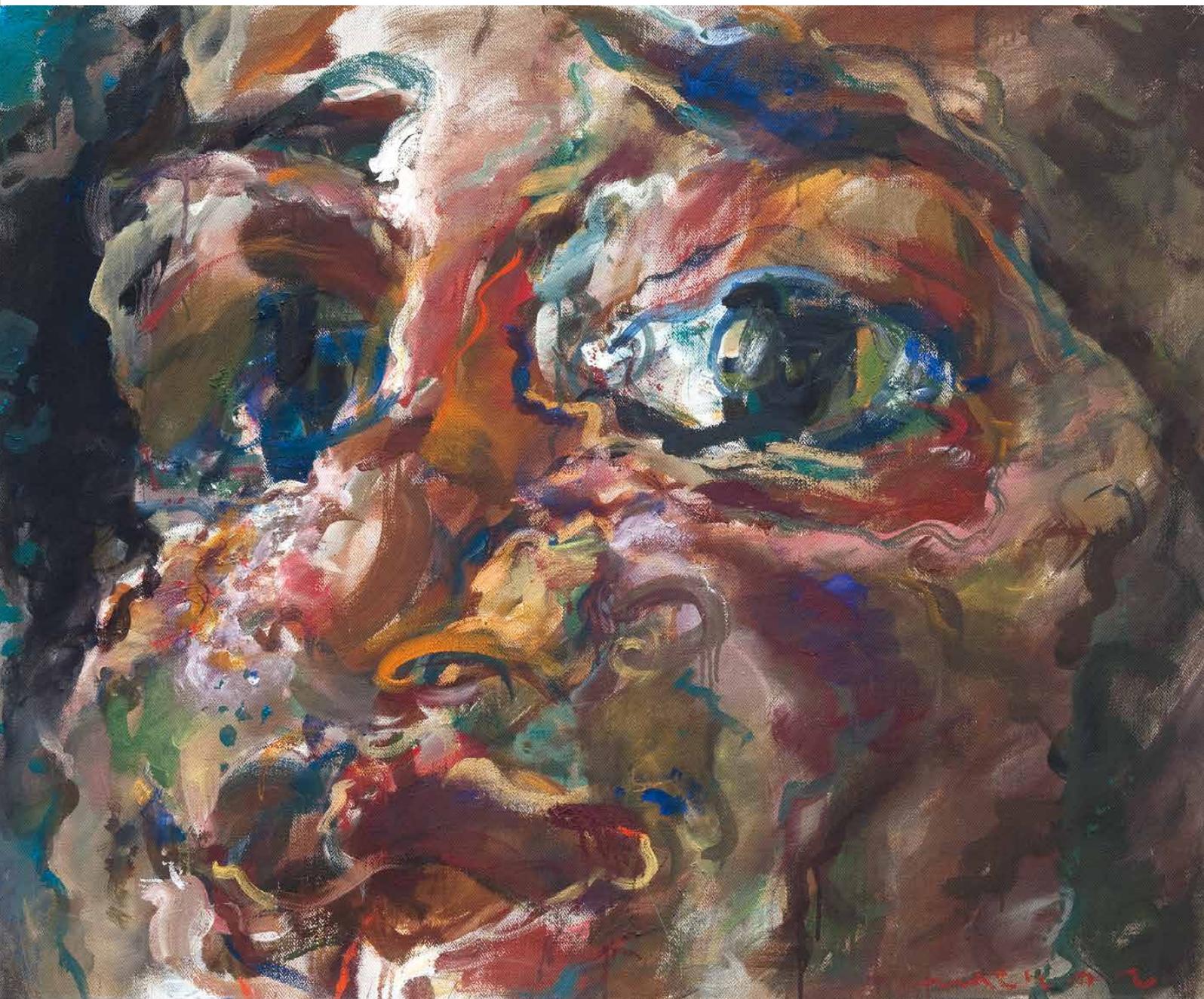


MARWAN



GALERIE MICHAEL HASENCLEVER



MARWAN

2014

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## Speech in Honour of Marwan

The first of Marwan's extant paintings shows the landscape before the gates of his home city. Reminiscent of French impressionism, it was painted with confident lightness in Damascus in 1947/48, when the artist was 13. In his studio in Schmargendorfer Straße, a large sombre image of two heads leaning together is currently emerging. We are celebrating today the unwavering journey of almost fifty years of the painter Marwan. What do I mean by "unwavering"? In the half a century from 1947/48 to today, during which time painting has often been beset by other techniques, or indeed given up for dead, Marwan has continually bestowed the medium with new triumphs of emotional imagery clearly differentiated from realistic, abstract, constructivist or installationist art. By "unwavering" I also mean that Marwan – if we attempt an overview of his oeuvre from the early landscapes to the part abstract, part figurative monsters, to the couples, giant heads, melodramatic facial landscapes, marionettes, still lives, once again monumental heads and finally pairs of heads – has always searched for a formal vocabulary that allowed the transformation into painting of existential questions.

"I think utterly existentially," Marwan once told me in his studio, and also that "a painting is like a wound." In his search for images he most probably starts from concrete occurrences, yet his painting is not an art of consternation. He knows too well that poetic language – of which he is a master, and which, for example, his friend the great Syrian poet Adonis finds in human disquiet and suffering – is radically different from visual language. To express loss in an image, to allow pain to appear, to paint the stillness of thousands of years, is a difficult process. Marwan likes to compare the artist with the architect. He needs a long time for a painting. In some years only four or five are "completed", i.e. considered by him to have been truly concluded. He applies layer after layer, with great patience and intensity, as if a crystallisation of experience were taking place. I wanted to express this in a poem, and wrote:

*"for there is only the face  
constructed rejected  
set up once again vibrating  
from death into life  
returning, the indelible countenance"*

Particularly the human images of the past few years – with their thick layers of paint, where blue and green tunnel under deepest red, where yellow breaks out of grey-black craters and broken brown tones interweave and shimmer – bring to my mind the Islamic idea of the origin of humankind: from the earth, from a seed, growing and taking on many forms before its final perfection.

Marwan is a painter above all. The story behind an image, or whatever its starting point might be – the veils of the women in Damascus or the murdered Palestinian in the arms of his friend – is not what he is finally interested in. His painting is concerned with the relationship to one another of surfaces of colour, with layers of colour, with a deft balancing, with a dark glow coming into light, bathing us in its delicacy. Nowhere in contemporary painting can it be more easily seen than in Marwan's work that colours have both physical and emotional properties. Even in the comparatively realistic so-called "Figurations" of the late 1960s he was not seeking the depiction, but rather the painterly truth, of his subjects. And, considering the lengthy creative process involved, this also means that a part of his existence has quite physically entered each painting. All his pictures, but particularly those of the past decade, are an emotionally compressed, and thus almost abstract, expression of the suffering of human existence, filled with the burning of pain, the shock of insight and the wounds of love. Compelled to name Marwan's artistic forefathers, I would place Antonin Artaud first, and his unforgettable portraits and self-portraits, created in the asylum at Rodez, which show the same balance between emergence and disintegration that Marwan attempts each day at his easel. Then Edvard Munch and Vincent van Gogh, because of the painterly intelligence and vision of their insight into human existence. Then

Alberto Giacometti, because of the collapse of proximity and distance within the portrayal; in Marwan's work too the face, on approaching it, gradually dissolves into a free play of colour. And finally Mark Rothko, who as almost no other was able to express meditation, stillness and reticence. Marwan does not share Rothko's sublimity – his paintings, for all their meditative contemplation, are too aggressive – but his monumental heads at times attain the quality of icons, of the divine countenance, of universality, and are thus – at least in my view – related to Rothko's mysticism. We can experience an almost unbearable stillness of the universe in the work of both artists.

Many years ago I was witness to a conversation between Heiner Müller and Iannis Kounellis in the Paris Bar. They were discussing what it is that makes great art. Here one should know that Heiner Müller was speaking bad English and good German, Kounellis bad Italian and bad Greek. So the two were gesticulating, laughing, making little drawings on the serviettes and using their fingers and hands, the better to explain and also to hear one another. The result of this remarkable conversation was that "great art" had to combine an international vocabulary with radical subjective and local elements. In Marwan's case the influence of his homeland Syria has often been a focus of inquiry. In ancient times, until well into the Ottoman period, Syria was an open zone of encounter between Persia and Anatolia, Egypt, the Mediterranean and the Levant. Almost the exact opposite of Berlin, the uncomfortable, divided, cold, northern city where Marwan – in the unforgettable phrase of Eberhard Roter – "found his artistic Damascus." The real Damascus of his childhood was a place of security and sensuousness. Marwan can talk very vividly about it: the violet evening light, the kites whirring in the sky, the green light in the courtyards, absorbed by vegetation, the veiled women and how arousing they were for adolescent boys. He can wonderfully evoke the sublimated sensuousness of the Orient that we can also experience in its carpets, its marvellously colourful illuminated manuscripts or in the dark and gold of the mosaics in the Great Mosque of Damascus. But I must confess that I do not know how much of all this is concretely present in Marwan's paintings. From 1955 to 1957 he studied Arabic literature at the University of Damascus. In September 1957 he came to Berlin and became a student of Hann Trier at the Hochschule der Künste (College of Art), where he got to grips for a short time with tachisme. During a scholarship to Paris in 1973 he professed to the play of festive colour that had always been within him as his Arab heritage. If the cipher of Damascus is present in his work, then as a spiritual attitude, as an invisible visual structure, as a secret within the brushwork, as transcendence.

So much to the subjective, local and hermetic elements. What about the "internationally comprehensible vocabulary"? There is a constant in Marwan's half a century of art. It is the head – we might also say the face, the countenance. The head as the site of the ultimate questions. The three parts of one of the most important novels of the 20th century, Elias Cannetti's "Auto-da-Fé" are entitled "A Head without a World", "Headless World" and "The World in the Head". Marwan conceives of the head as a world, as a landscape of the soul, as the great orb of the universe. An arena of love and melancholy, because the eyes, with or without pupils, are always turned inwards, at once glowing and rejecting. Marwan has refined this central motif over many decades, and despite its limitation in terms of content it reflects his entire artistic range. It culminates in the series "99 Heads", that incomparable collection of graphic works which may certainly be described as a quintessence of visual invention and technical mastery. As if in a myriad of reflections and visual similes, Marwan meditates here on the basic human state of being, bringing forth deeply valid statements about vulnerability, fear or timidity, but also about self-confidence and unreserved solidarity. The capacity for life of Marwan's heads is continually astounding; they stand for the whole body and thus for the human being.

In this connection we should remember that the head is one of the main themes of 20th-century art. We need only think of the heads of Brancusi, Archipenko, Hans Uhlmann or Horst Antes. The abstract portrait – although in its abstraction never idealised or anonymous – was the result of a long development that started around 1890, when the art of portraiture was released from its mimetic function to concentrate on generalised

formulations of the head. This led to the hitherto unimaginable stylisation of the cubist portraits, which radically annulled the imitative requirements of the genre. Such portrayals, including Marwan's later massive heads, are in the end artistic constructions valid only in the aesthetic realm. But there they are charged with quite a different meaning, which – in Marwan's case – touches the magical and the mystic.

Are we not all searching for a strong metaphor, for an incarnation? Marwan finds his in the head; he finds the world in the head. And so he paints the head not as a matter of preference, but from within a deeper, more passionate desire to display and explain the world. His continual return to the heads from other motifs – from the iridescent still lifes, in which objects lead a dramatic life of their own; from the marionettes, the projection surface for a sensuously liberated form of absolute painting – reflects a wish to convey his most concentrated description of the world. He varies and reiterates his motifs; he reiterates the world. If we look at these heads for a long time, letting them into us until they let us in, we enter an intermediate realm, somewhere between archaic stillness and outward sorrow – a silent scream.

Perhaps this is what the American poet Clayton Eshleman wanted to express in his poem about Marwan's "Faces":

*"... the human face ...  
is a kind of rug before its shape  
is fixed –  
in Marwan's work –  
in a between that is not  
a mystical point between us  
but a depth between the deathmask of the covering  
Persona and peeled of skin."*

This "between", which is also a depth, speaks of a tension – we might also say ambivalence or duality – present in all Marwan's work periods. It struck me as an essential quality of his paintings when I saw them for the first time in the Pudelko Gallery in Bonn in 1973. On exhibition were the large "Facial Landscapes": flat heads on cushions, emerging from sheets, some with very transparent veils; strangely isolated, inhibited people with problematic identities. It was as if they had been painted with a soft anger. They swayed between masculine and feminine, between revealing and concealing, between the fear of loneliness and the longing thereafter. And Marwan's paintings carry such ambivalences to this day.

In certain periods of work this duality is inherent to the visual construction. In 1963/64 he painted a number of pictures with two amorphous figures: monsters washed up onto a grey land under a black sky, the atmosphere leaden. This doubling is now reoccurring in large-format images of two faces, one above the other, like reflections in a dividing line of water, or side by side, the one head sometimes turned away and leaning on its counterpart. Marwan entitles these dual heads "The Friend", which in Arabic is also an expression for death. The head facing us is painted in countless warm tones – dabbings of red, yellow, orange and ochre that set the surface in motion, giving it a rhythm that flows around the other face. This second one is paler, grey and whitish and green; lifeless, in fact, a cipher for death embraced by life. It may be erroneous, but at sight of these lifeless heads I had to think of Veronica's veil – and of the medieval pietas.

The goal of Marwan's unwavering journey – which was not without its detours and sidetracks and returnings – is the recognition of all that is human. This recognition rejects nihilism. In the imperious, archaic heads of recent years we discern the transformations of a soul that has sought to join with the enigmatic, the unspeakable – perhaps even with the divine.



They are frail, these people. But their weakness – brother to longing – also gives them a strength that can immediately be seen in the frontal countenance, the high forehead, the powerful mouth; a strength that hints at something invincible, as if the person dying in the other is yet reborn. We cannot view the paintings of this most recent period without considering their metaphysical dimension. Every face is

*"eclipsed by the lightning of the invisible"*

as Adonis put it. It is a spiritual adventure. Like other great painters before him – Bonnard, Picasso, Rothko – Marwan has become ever bolder with age. From knots of colour, ephemeral dabs and lines in improvised, gesticulatory brushstrokes, he achieves a fullness that intensifies, in a series of visuamorphoses, the closer we come to the painting; a glowing, trembling fullness that stands for a reconciliation of the self and the world, of the visible world and a different world.

What do I mean by this? Marwan is a painter, first and last. But he is also a mystic whose creative power is based equally in Western and Arab traditions, through which an inner beauty emerges in his paintings. It is a magic that is not static. In the stillness of his images we sense movement; in the emptiness of an eye we apprehend the universe. In this respect his paintings, by giving a reality to the invisible, are very near to poetry. The tracings of the hand endeavour to unlock the voice of the heart – and to join it to the sound of the world.

Joachim Sartorius

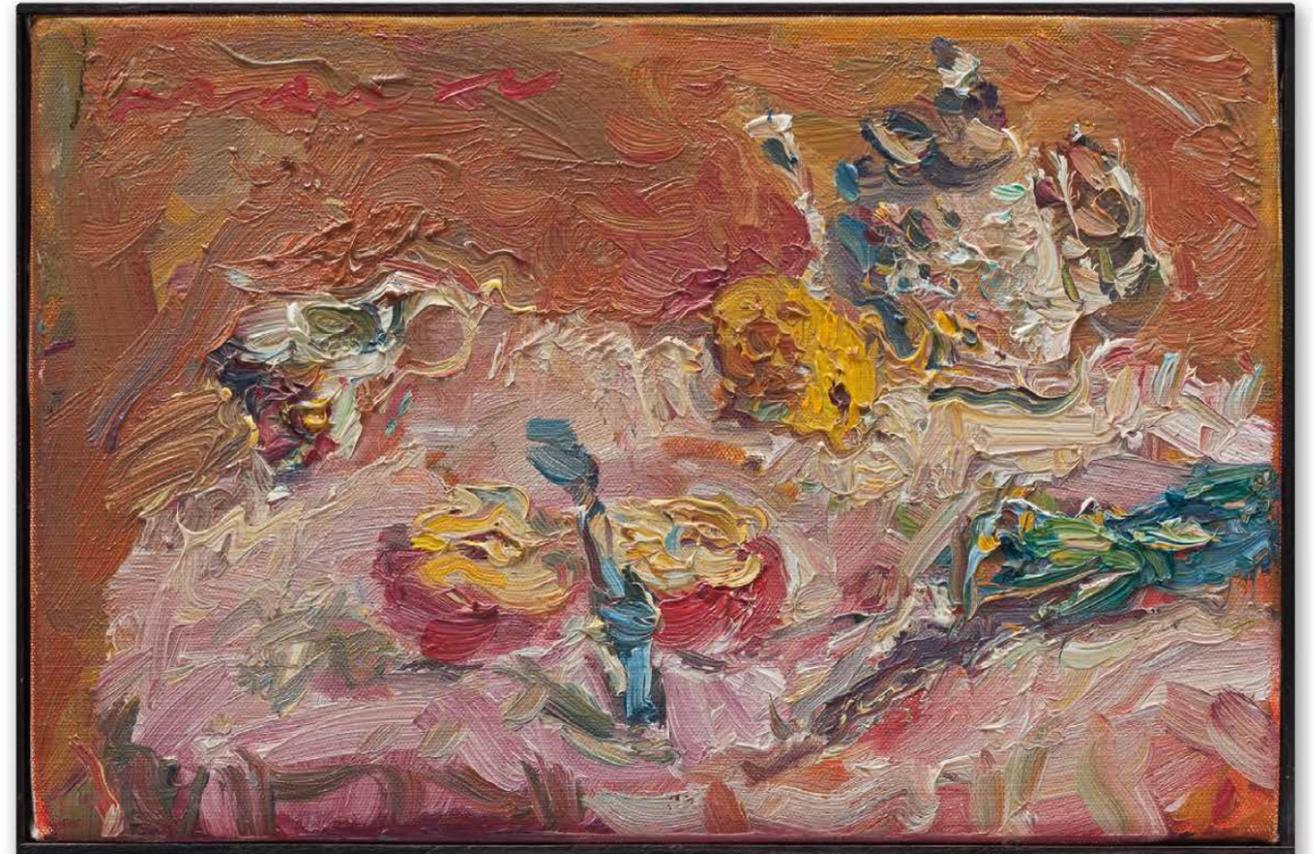
Published by Sprachgebunden, Zeitschrift für Text + Bild, issue # 5.



1 STILL LIFE  
Oil on canvas, 1978  
Signed upper left  
46 x 55 cm

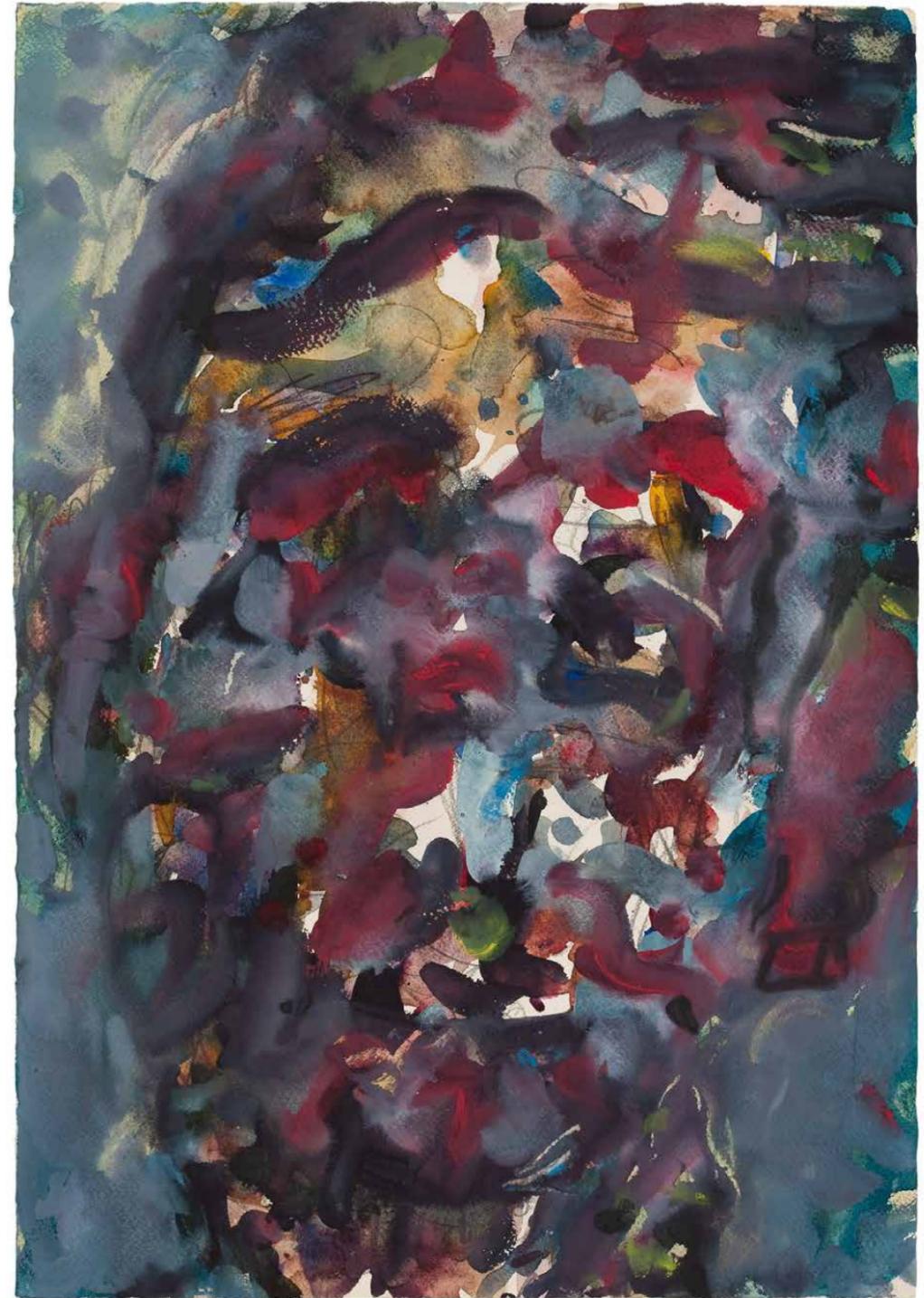


2 HEAD  
Egg tempera on canvas, 1977  
Signed lower right  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
81 x 100 cm



3 STILL LIFE  
Oil on canvas, 1982  
Signed upper left  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
16 x 24 cm

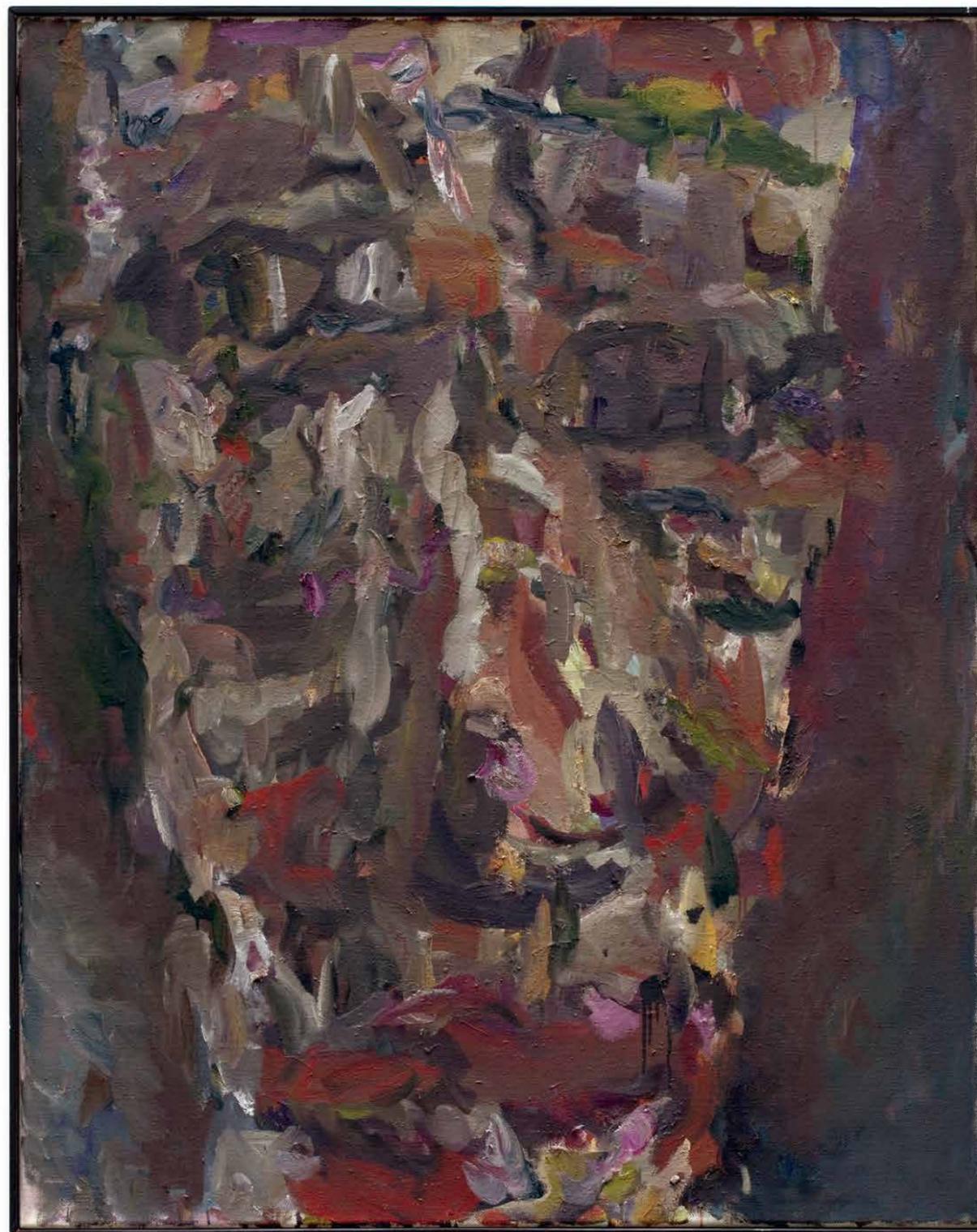
4 HEAD  
Watercolor and pencil on paper, 1983  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
Work number 927  
51 x 36 cm





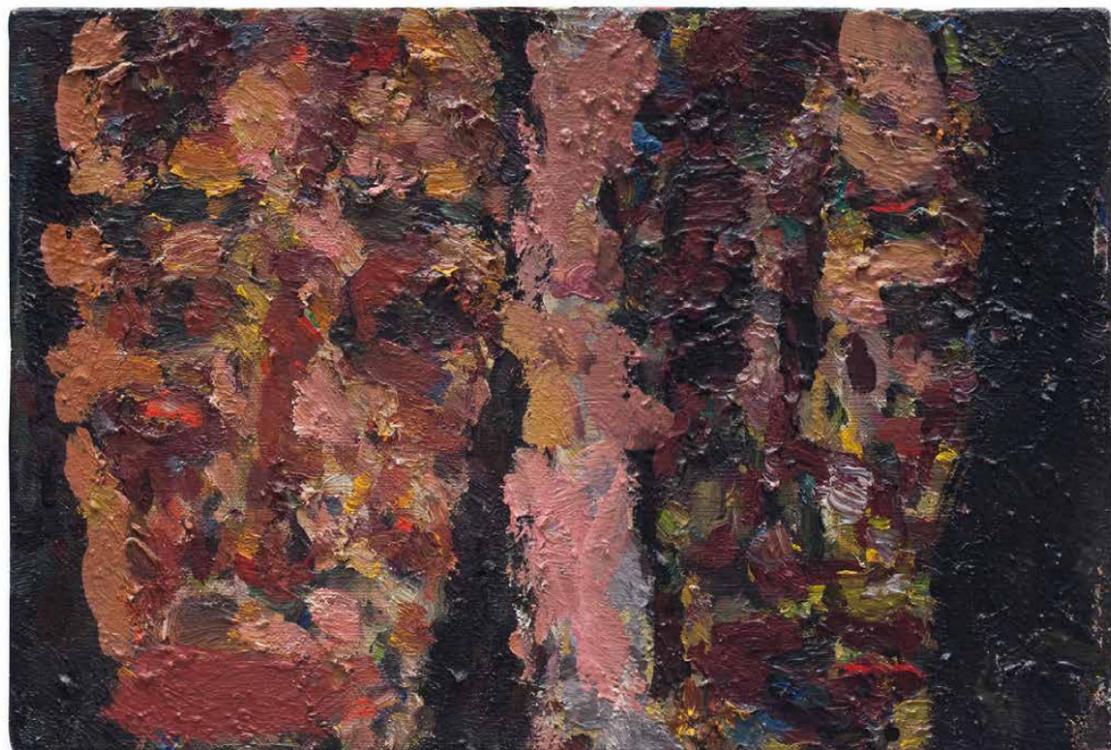
5 STILL LIFE  
Oil on canvas, 1981  
Signed upper center  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
27,3 x 22,2 cm

6 HEAD  
Oil on canvas, 1986  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
162 x 130 cm

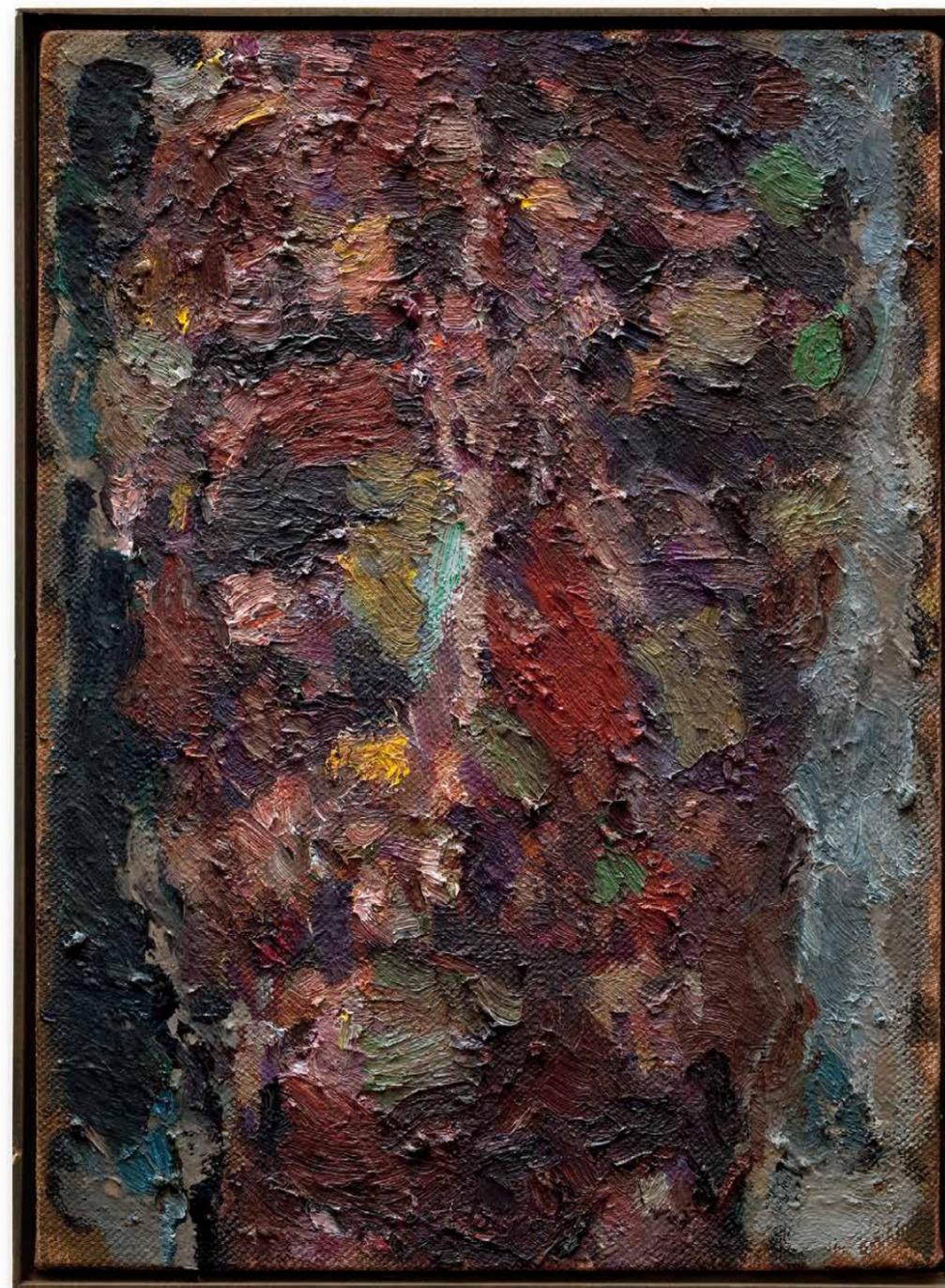




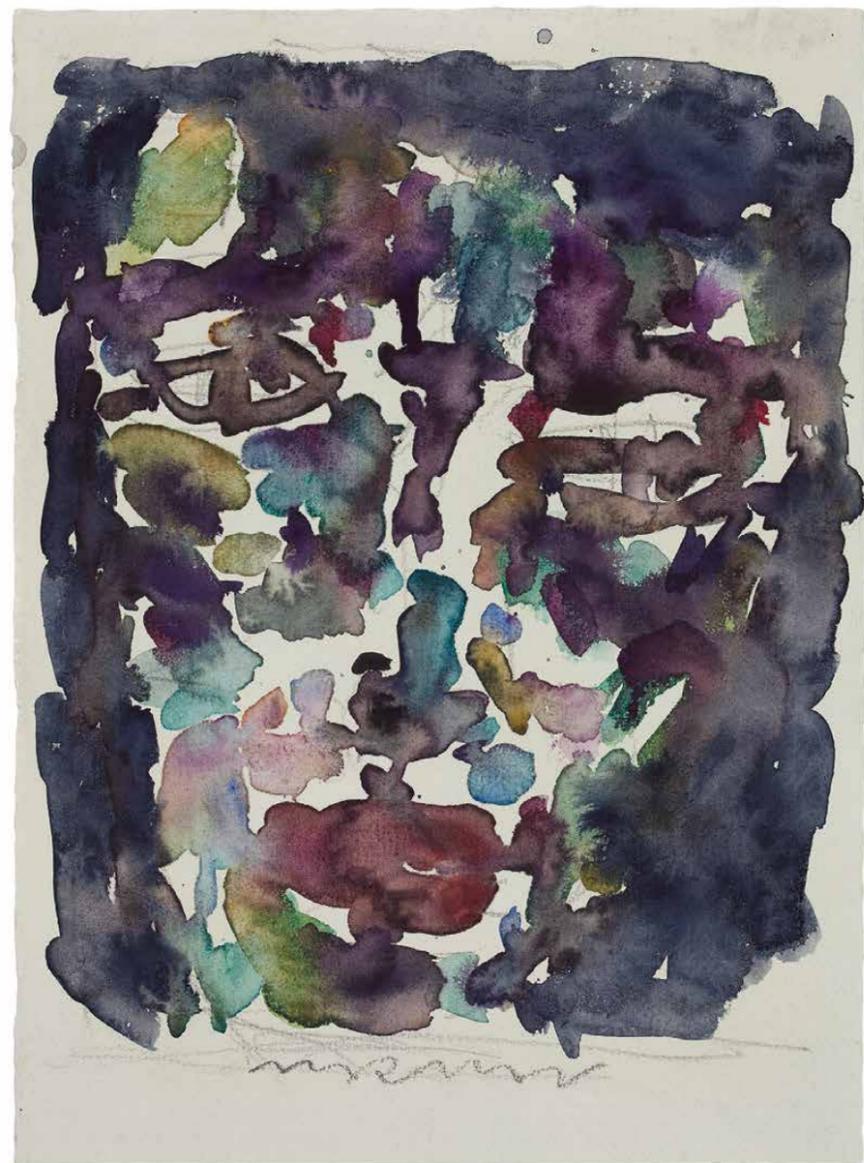
7 STILL LIFE  
Watercolor, tempera and pencil on paper, 1982  
Signed upper left  
50,6 x 56,6 cm



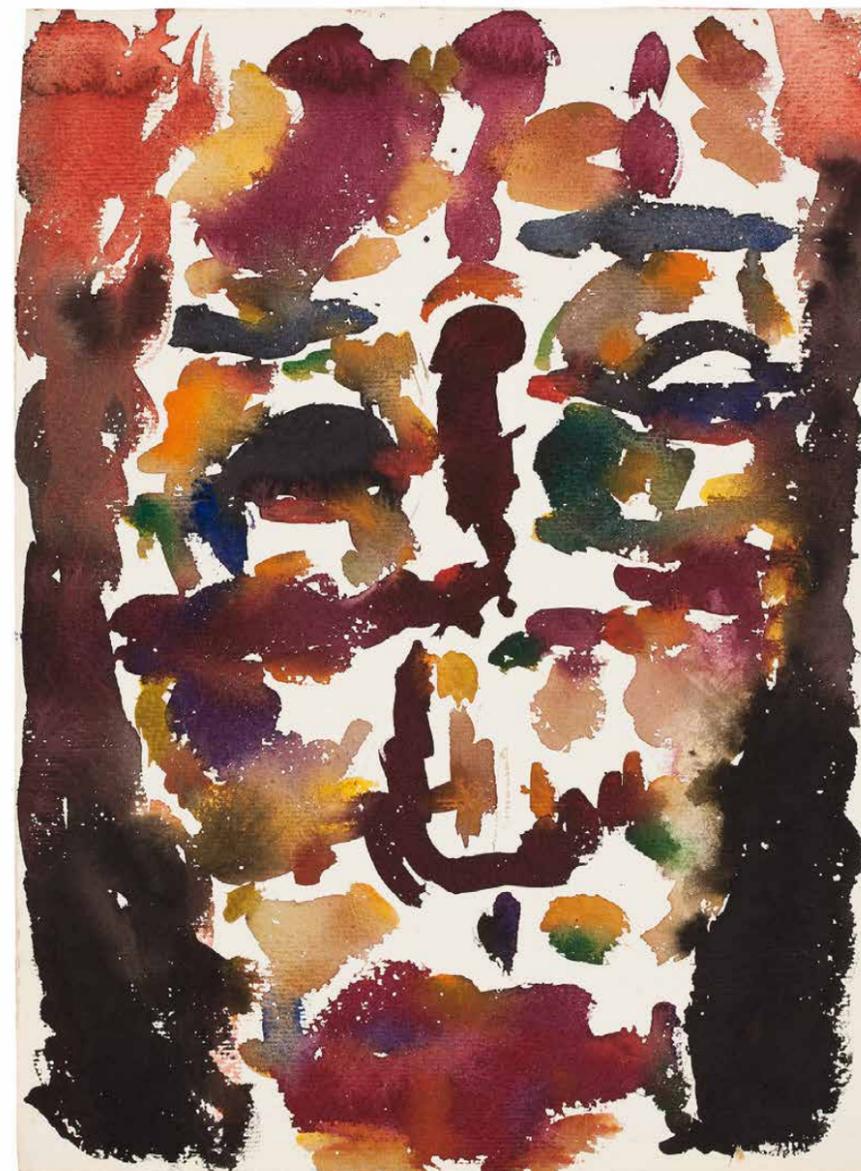
8 FRIEND  
Oil on canvas, 2001  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
22,5 x 33,2 cm



9 HEAD  
Oil on canvas, 2000  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
33,2 x 24,7 cm



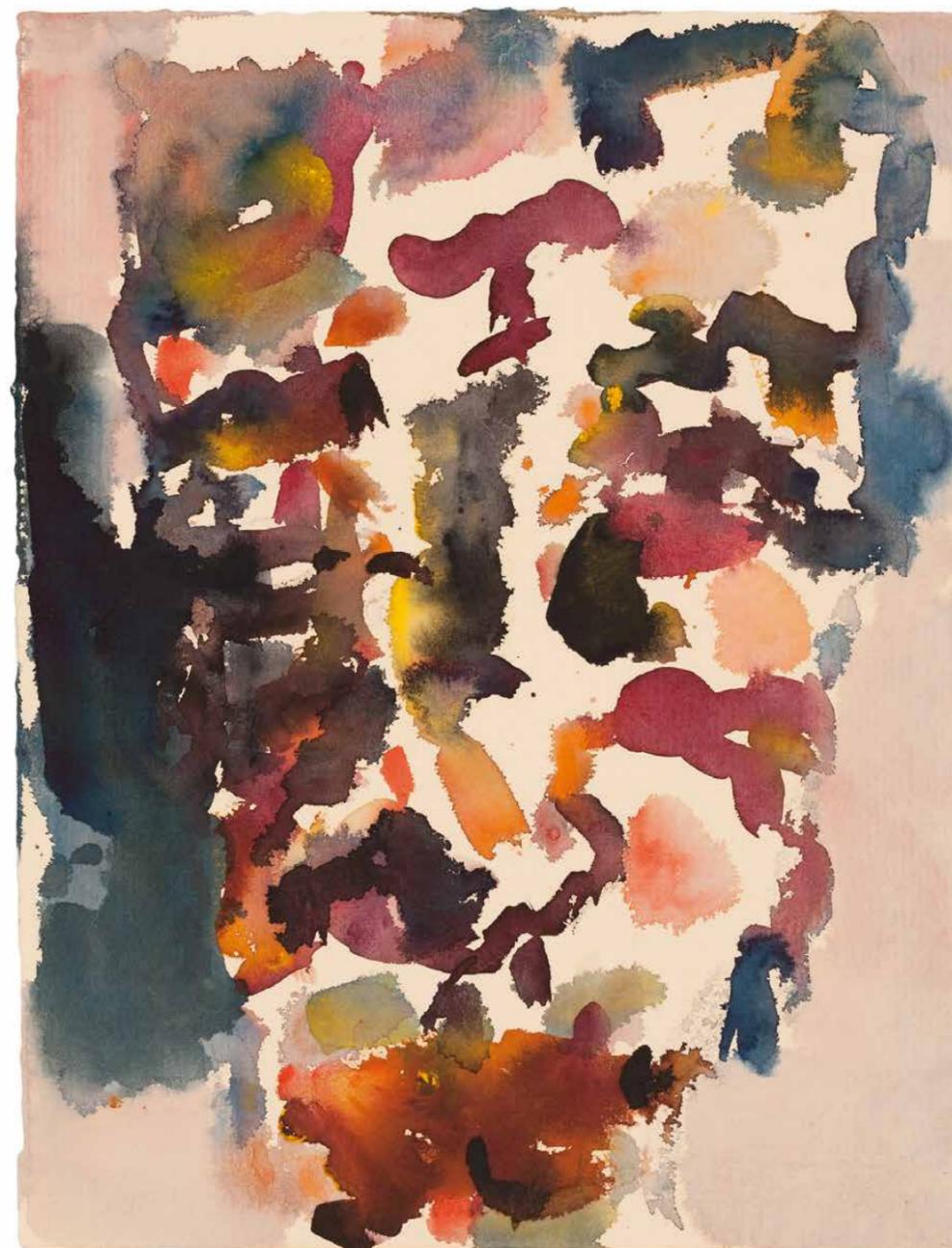
10 HEAD  
Watercolor and pencil on paper, 2004  
Signed lower center  
Dated on the reverse  
Reverse: Head, watercolor and pencil  
39,5 x 29,3 cm



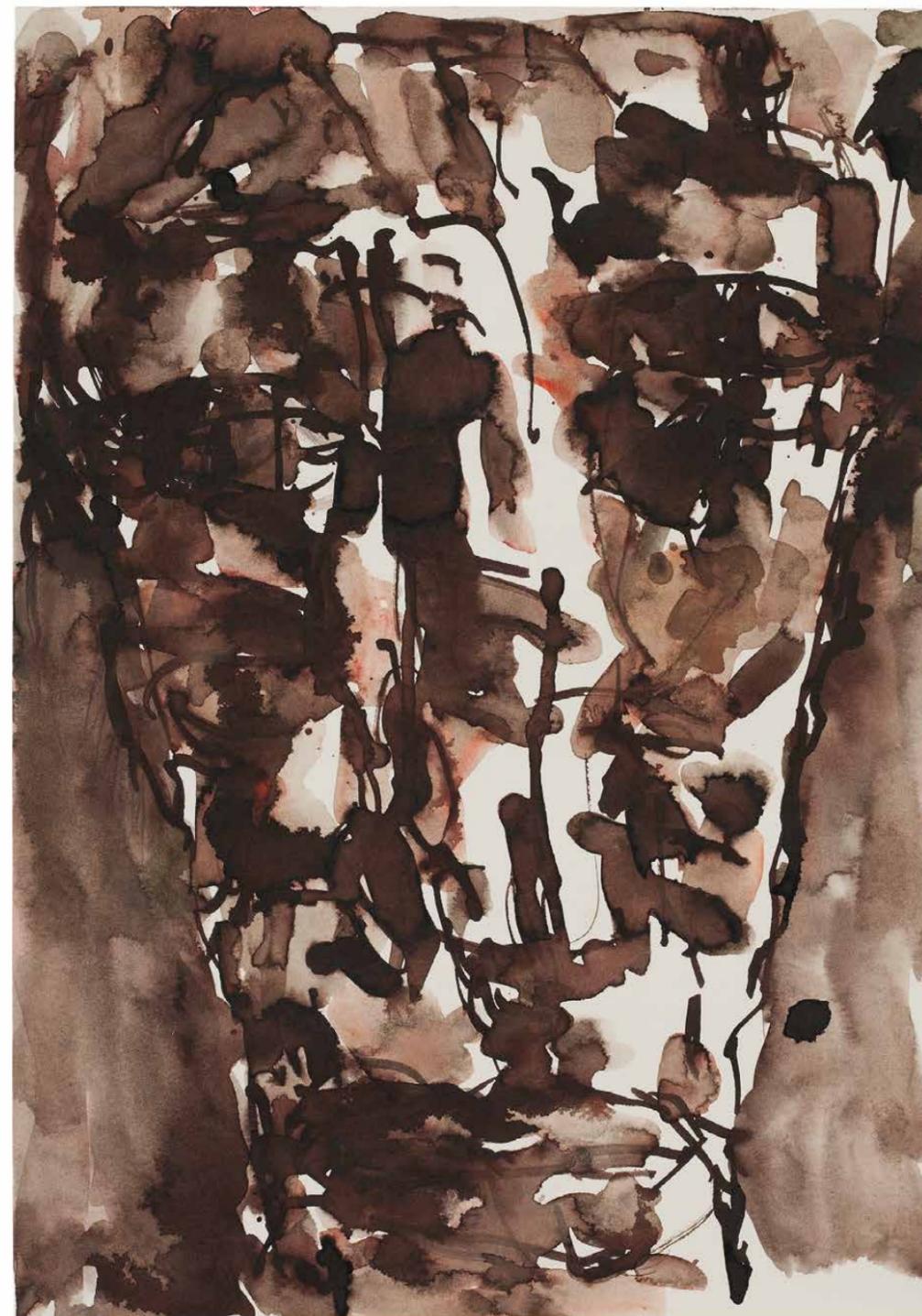
11 HEAD  
Watercolor on paper, 2002  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
37 x 27,2 cm



12 MARIONETTE  
Watercolor and pencil on paper, 2007  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
21,3 x 29,7 cm



13 HEAD  
Watercolor on paper, 2007  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
33,5 x 25,5 cm



14 HEAD  
Watercolor on paper, 2008  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
42 x 29,5 cm

15 MARIONETTE  
Oil on canvas, 2009  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
72,5 x 54 cm

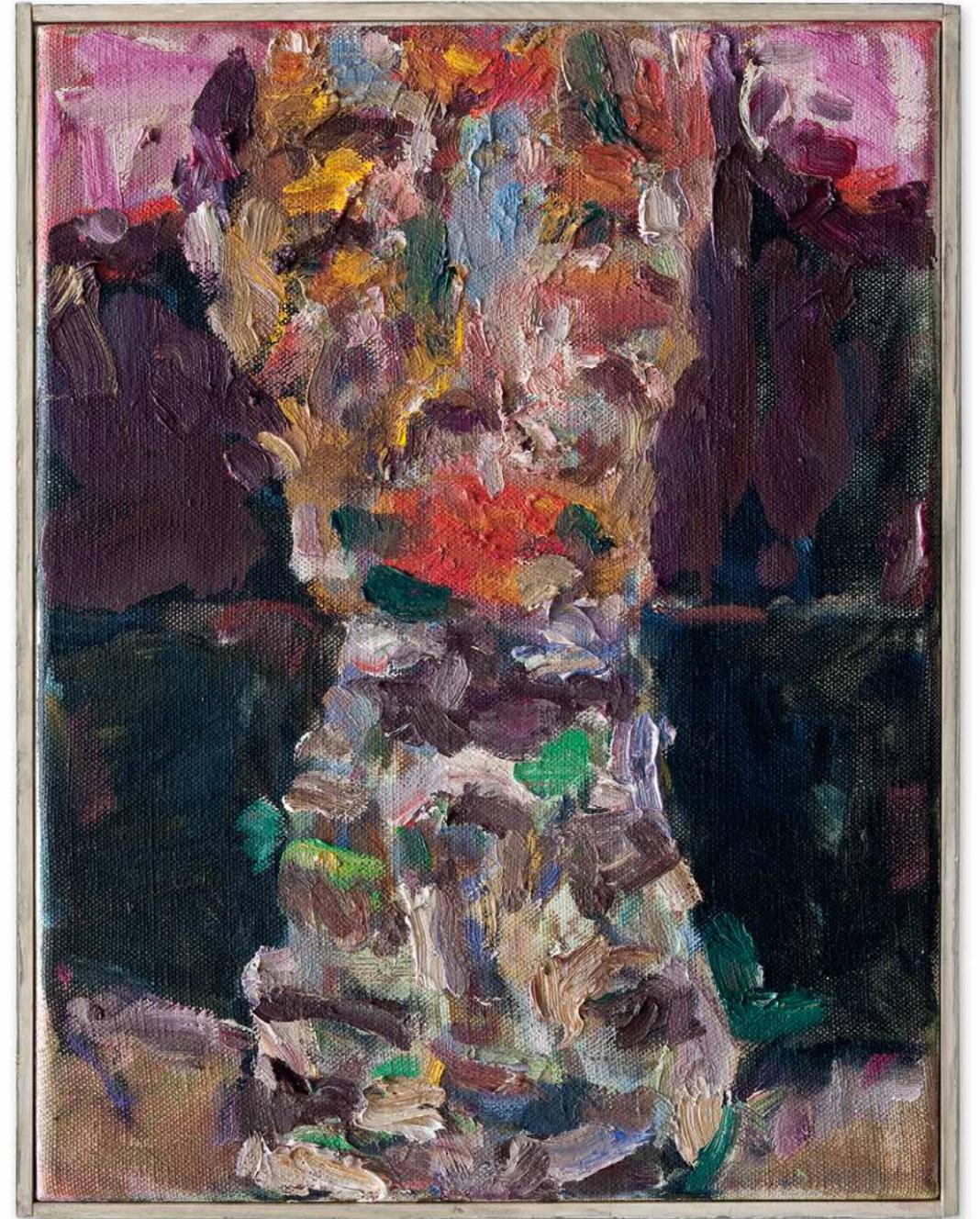


16 HEAD  
Oil on canvas, 2010  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
35 x 27 cm





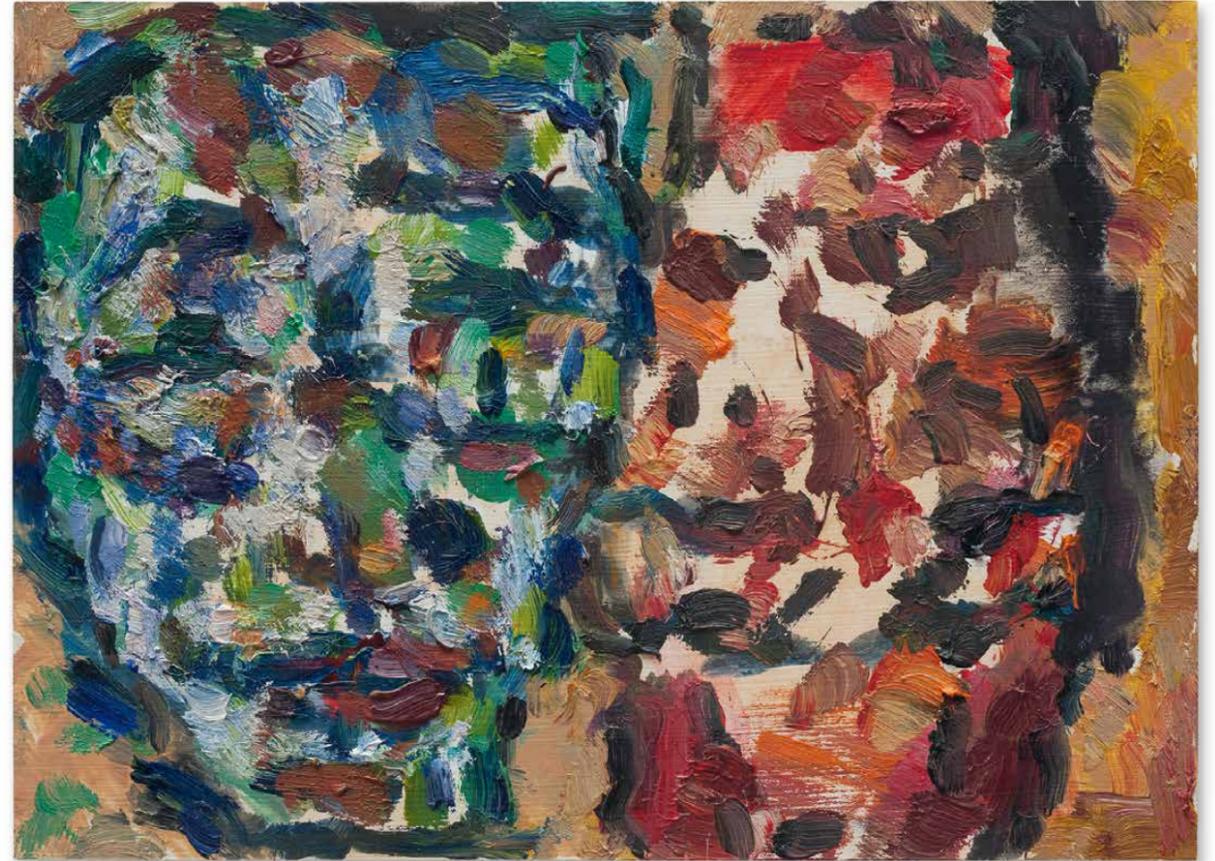
17 MARIONETTE  
Watercolor and pencil on paper, 2009  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
30 x 21,3 cm



18 FRIEND  
Oil on canvas, 2012-13  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
35 x 27 cm



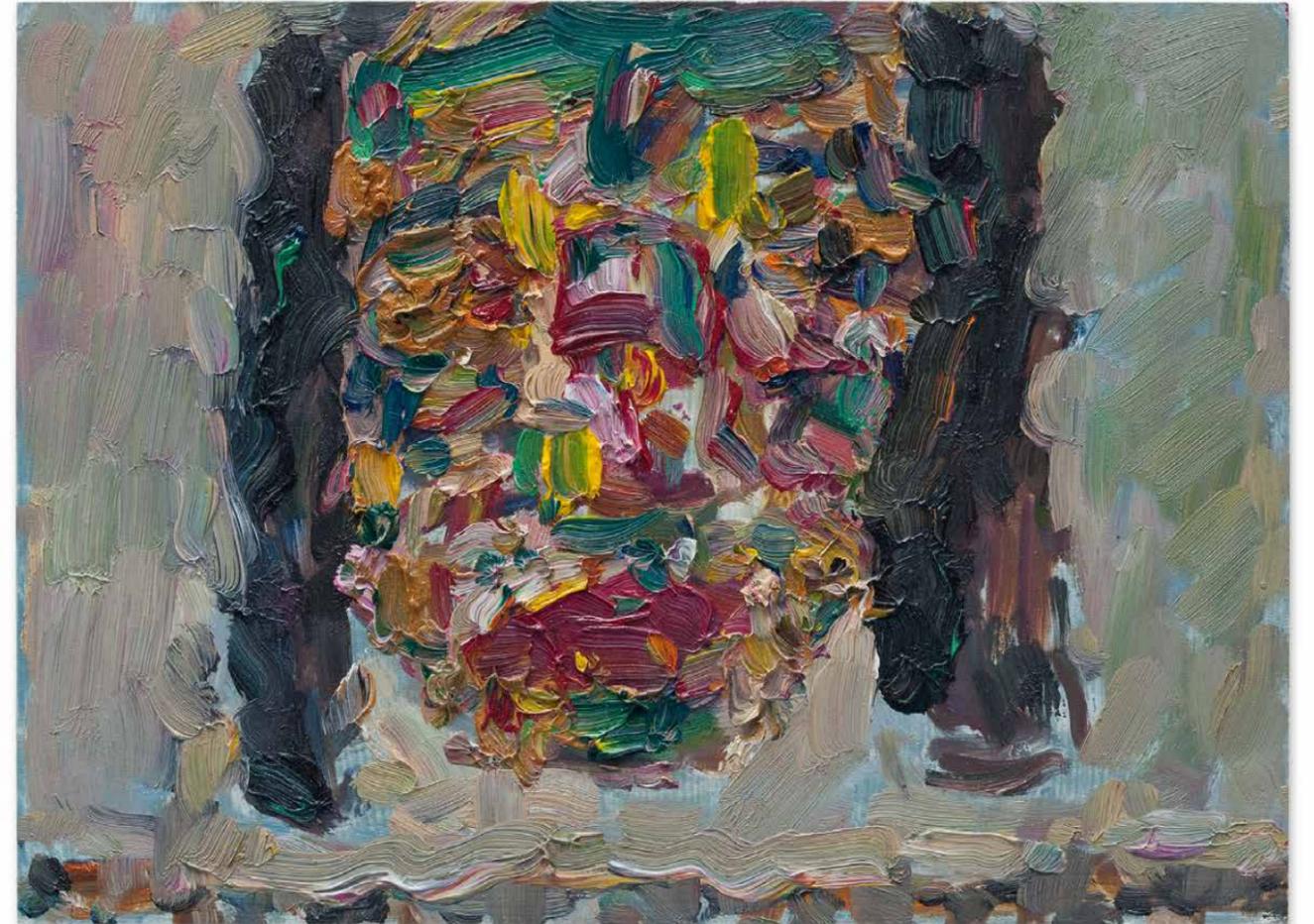
19 HEAD  
Oil on canvas, 2012  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
130 x 194,5 cm



20 FRIEND  
Oil on hardboard, 2012  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
18 x 25 cm

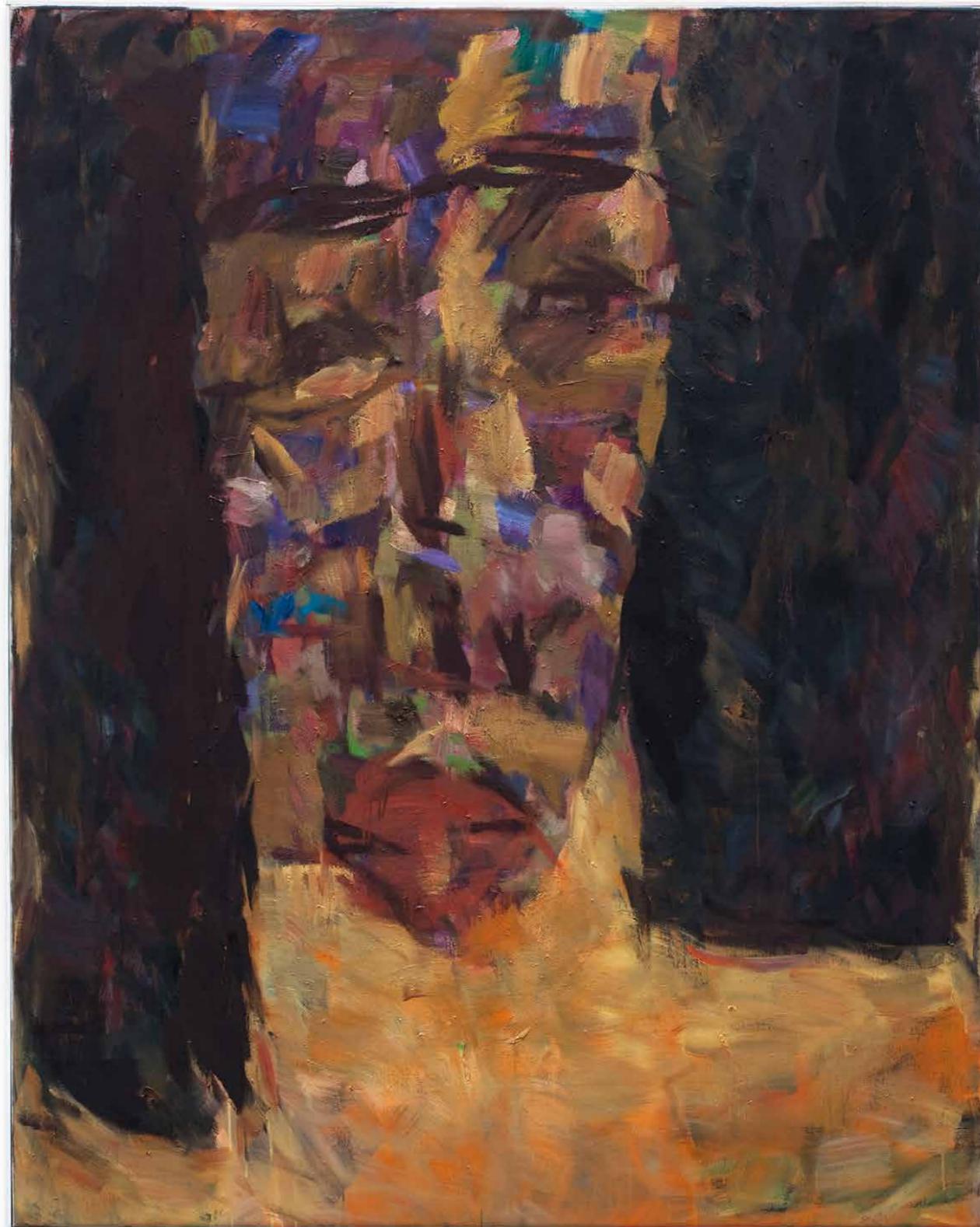
21 HEAD  
Oil on canvas, 2012  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
146 x 114 cm

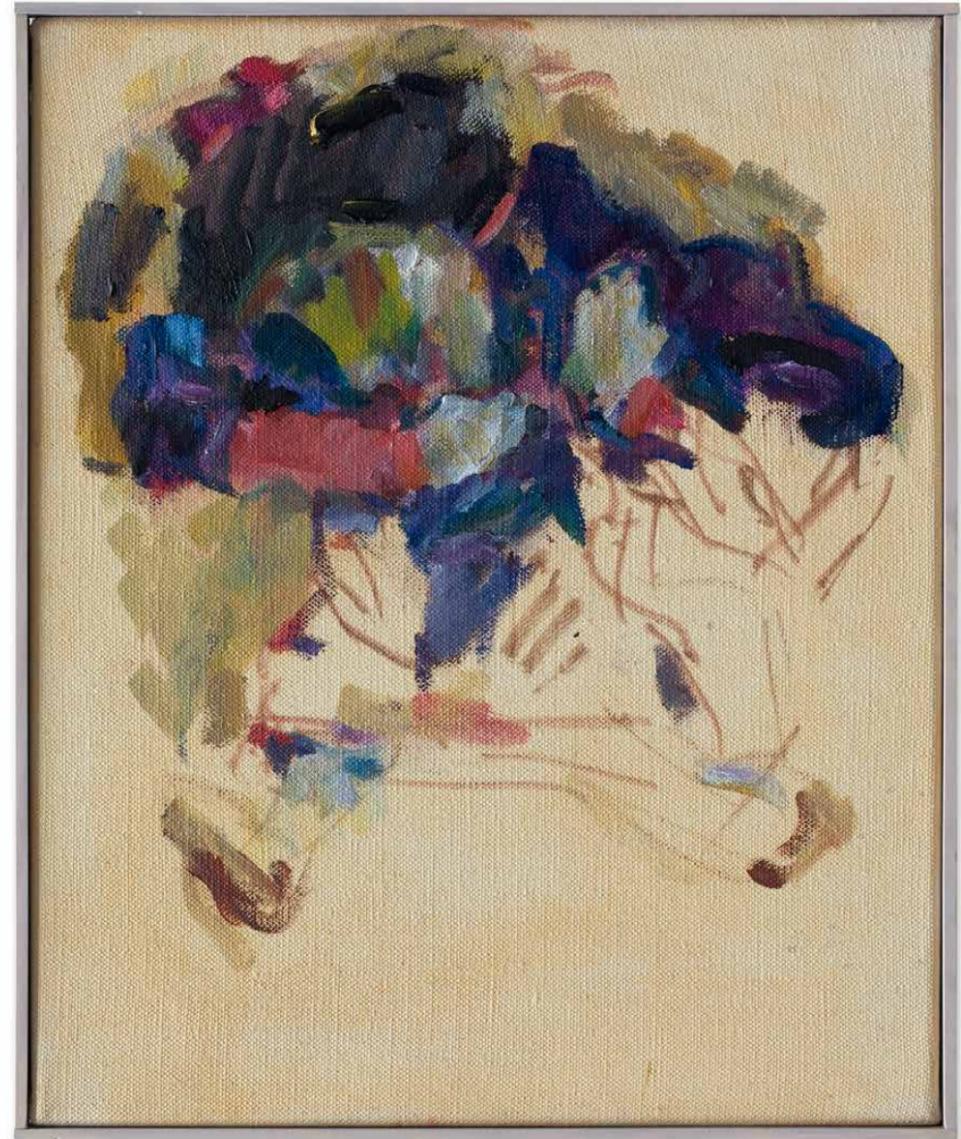




22 HEAD  
Oil on hardboard, 2012  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
18 x 25 cm

23 HEAD  
Oil on canvas, 2013  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
162 x 130 cm





24 MARIONETTE  
Oil on canvas, 2013  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
46 x 38 cm



25 HEAD  
Oil on canvas, 2012-13  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
22 x 33 cm



26 MARIONETTE  
Oil on canvas, 2012  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
35 x 24 cm



27 MARIONETTE  
Oil on canvas, 2012  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
33 x 24 cm

## MARWAN

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### BIOGRAPHY

- 1934 born in Damascus  
1955-57 studies of Arabic literature at the Damascus University  
1957 first price for sculpture in Damascus  
1957-63 attends the masterclass for painting of Hann Trier at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Berlin  
1966 Karl Hofer-Award, Berlin  
1973 scholarship of the Cité des Arts, Paris  
1977-79 guest professor for painting at the Hochschule der Künste, Berlin  
since 1980 full professor for painting at the Hochschule der Künste, Berlin  
since 1994 member of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin-Brandenburg  
1999 founder of the Summer Academy of the Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, Darat al Funun in Amman, Jordan  
2002 Fred Thieler Price  
2005 Awarded the Merit Order of the Federal Republic of Germany  
2005 Prix Forum Culturel Libanais

### PERSONAL EXHIBITIONS

- 1967 Galerie Springer, Berlin (also 87, 89, 91, 93 and 04)  
1970 Arabic Cultural Center, Damascus  
1971 Galerie Lietzow, Berlin (also 72,74, 75, 76, 78, 80, 83 and 85)  
1973 one-man show, ART Basel at Galerie Lietzow – Galerie Pudelko, Bonn  
1975 Galerie Buchholz, München  
1976 Gruenebaum Gallery, New York – Retrospective, Orangerie Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin 1977 – Kunstschau-Böttcherstraße, Bremen – Galerie Pudelko, Bonn  
1978 Forum Kunst, Rottweil  
1980 Museum of Modern Art, Bagdad  
1981 Schloß Bellevue, Documenta-Archiv, Kassel  
1982 Galerie Timm Gierig, Frankfurt/Main  
1983 Retrospective Overbeck-Gesellschaft, Lübeck – Galerie Metta Linde, Lübeck  
one-man show, Kunstmarkt Köln at Galerie Lietzow  
1984 Retrospective Kunsthalle, Darmstadt – Galerie Joachim Becker, Cannes (also 87, 90)  
1985 Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer, München – Studio-Galerie Hans Thoma-Gesellschaft, Reutlingen – one-man show Galerie Joachim Becker, Cannes, FIAC '85, XXIIème Foire International d'Art Contemporain de Paris, Grand-Palais

- 1986 Galerie Timm Gierig, Frankfurt/Main – Galerie Lüpfer, Hannover-Isernhagen  
Galerie Baumgarten, Freiburg – Studio R., Mannheim  
198 Galerie Michael Hasenclever, München (also 90 and 99) – Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Kiel  
1990 Galerie Metta Linde, Lübeck  
1991 Galerie Tobias Hirschmann, Frankfurt/Main – Kunststation St. Peter, Köln  
Haus der Kunst, München – La Teinturerie Galerie, Paris (also 93 and 97)  
1992 Galerie Joachim Becker, Paris (also 93)  
1993 Bibliothèque National de Paris – Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris  
Galerie Gardy Wiechern, Hamburg – La Teinturerie Galerie, Paris  
1994 Galerie d'Art 50 x 70, Beirut  
1995 Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, Darat al Funun, Amman – Galerie Atassi, Damaskus  
1996 Retrospective: Galerie Atassi, Damascus, Al Hanager Hall, Kairo, Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, Darat al Funun, Amman  
1998 Birzeit University, Birzeit – Khalid Sakakini Cultural Centre, Ramallah – Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, Darat al Funun, Amman (also 04) – Raab Galerie, Berlin  
Galerie épreuve d'artiste, Beirut  
1999 Stadtmuseum Göhre, Jena – Galerie am Fischmarkt, Erfurt – Kunstverein, Zweibrücken  
2000 Brechthaus Weissensee, Berlin  
2001 Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, Ramallah – Georg-Meistermann-Museum, Städtische Galerie für Moderne Kunst, Wittlich – Richard-Haizmann-Museum, Niebüll  
2002 Galerie Dr. Irene Lehr, Berlin – Lapidarium, Berlin– Kunsthalle, Emden  
2004 Lippische Gesellschaft für Kunst, Detmold  
2005 Art Convent de la misssió, Palma de Mallorca – Damascus-Berlin-Damascus, Damascus – Solidere, Beirut – Lindenau-Museum, Altenburg – Ostdeutsche Landesbausparkasse, Potsdam  
2006 Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Lübeck – Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst Photographie und Architektur, Berlin  
2007 Kurt Tucholsky Literaturmuseum, Rheinsberg  
2008 Galerie Michael Hasenclever, München - Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin  
2009 Galerie Sfeir Beirut - Galerie Braun und Hasenpflug, Berlin - Haus am Waldsee, Berlin  
2010 Tajalliyat Gallery, Damascus - Galerie Sfeir, Hamburg  
2012 Galeriartist, Istanbul  
2013 Galeriartist, Istanbul - Exhibition Center, Beirut  
2014 Villa Grisebach, Berlin - Serralves Foundation, Porto



HEAD  
Charcoal on paper, 1972  
48,5 x 62 cm

#### WORKS IN PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, Darat al Funun  
Arab Bank  
Khaled and Soha Shoman Collection, Amman, Jordan  
Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz: Nationalgalerie und Kupferstichkabinett  
Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Photographie und Architektur  
Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste  
Berliner Bank  
BerlinHyp, Berlin, Germany  
Solidere, Beirut, Lebanon  
University, Birzeit, Palestine  
Kunstsammlungen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, Germany  
Kunsthalle, Bremen, Germany  
Graphische Sammlung der Veste, Coburg, Germany  
Nationalmuseum, Damaskus, Syria  
Galerie Neue Meister, Dresden, Germany  
Städel Museum – Deutsche Bundesbank, Frankfurt/Main, Germany  
Städtisches Museum Göttingen, Germany  
Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany  
Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany  
Städtische Museen Jena, Romantikerhaus, Jena, Germany  
Tate Modern - British Museum, London, Great Britain  
Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte der Hansestadt Lübeck, Germany  
Städtische Kunsthalle Mannheim, Germany  
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst  
Staatliche Graphische Sammlung München, Germany  
Ludwig Galerie Schloß Oberhausen, Germany  
Landesmuseum, Oldenburg, Germany  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France  
Institut du Monde Arabe  
Musée-Galerie de la Seita, Paris, France  
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, USA  
Sammlung Ostdeutsche Landesbausparkasse LBS, Potsdam, Germany  
Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, Ramallah, Palestine  
Städtische Galerie, Wolfsburg, Germany



