

FADI ELCHAMAA

WHAT REMAINS

A PRACTICE, 1982-2026

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MONOGRAPH

الشعر

Thanks to the collectors who made works from their collections
available for this monograph.

THE PRESSURE

At an early age, I rejected the affiliations offered to define me. I did not want Lebanese, Syrian, Turkish, Muslim, Christian or any other inherited name to tell me who I was.

Removing those identifiers did not end the question of identity. It left me with a more basic one: what allows anything to remain itself?

Painting gave me another way to look at identification. I could recognize a human face through its features, an apple through its contour, a body through its anatomy and a landscape through its horizon. These visible features allowed me to name what I saw.

In the work, I began changing and removing these visible identifiers. I wanted to see how much could disappear before the subject disappeared with it. Sometimes the image was no longer recognizable, yet something still felt present.

Abstraction came gradually as I removed the subject's physical identifiers and worked with what remained.

The periods that follow overlap. One question became more prominent for a time, while earlier questions remained in the work.

THE PRACTICE, 1982-2026

1982-1990	The Visible World
1991-1997	Repetition
1998-2013	Faces Across the Arab World
2011	Transformations
2011-2018	Identity Under Pressure
2019	And Tomorrow Who Am I?
2019-2023	Portrait Without a Face
2024-2026	Presence

THE VISIBLE WORLD

This was a period of learning. I was self-taught, painting faces, bodies, interiors, objects and fragments of the surrounding world to discover what painting could do.

I was not consciously investigating identity. Still, I found myself loosening the visible features of what I painted. My resistance to inherited social identifications had already entered the work before I understood it.

Color disturbed what I saw. Surfaces became agitated, figures moved out of proportion and space followed feeling more than perspective.

The subjects were still recognizable.



Seated Man, 1984. Watercolor on paper.



Early portrait, 1980s.

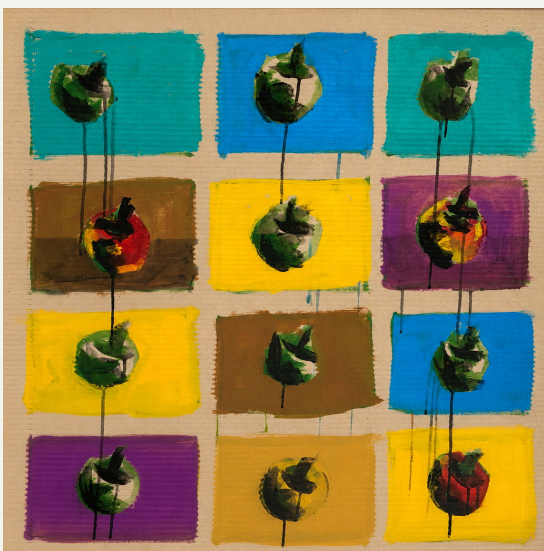
REPETITION

I discovered the apple as the simplest form I could find capable of carrying millions of expressions without losing its identity.

I isolated it, multiplied it, reorganized its position and altered its color. One painting led to another, and no version became definitive.

No matter how much I changed its color or surface, the contour was enough to recognize the apple.

I stayed with it because it could change almost without limit and still be an apple.



Apple variations, 1991-1997.



Untitled (Apples), 1992. Pastel on cardboard, 25 x 35 cm.

REPETITION



Apples, 1995. Acrylic and pastel on canvas, 100 x 70 cm.



Untitled (Apples), 1997. Oil on canvas, 35 x 50 cm.

FACES ACROSS THE ARAB WORLD

Portraiture brought these questions closer to people. Facial features can identify a particular person. The same face also carries identities assigned through ancestry, religion, nationality, class and place.

From the late 1990s, portraiture became central to my work. Between 1998 and 2013, I lived and worked successively in eight Arab cities: Beirut, Damascus, Al Khobar, Manama, Cairo, Riyadh, Casablanca and Doha.

During those fifteen years, I encountered people living within different histories, religions, social structures and customs. They understood themselves in different ways. The word Arab identified them all, yet it could not explain how differently that identity was lived.



Portrait archive, works made across eight Arab cities, 1998-2013. Three hundred small portraits mounted on canvas, 2.5 x 5 m. Presented at ARTLAB Gallery, Beirut, 2019. Photograph: Fadi Elchamaa.

FACES ACROSS THE ARAB WORLD

Arabic provided the clearest common bond among the twenty-two Arab countries. I found no second bond of equal force. Beyond language came divisions of religion, sect, ethnicity, class, region, generation, family and politics.

Close observation was also part of my work as a copywriter. Before arriving at a concept, I had to understand how people saw themselves. That professional attention reinforced what daily life in the eight cities was already teaching me.

After each move, a single definition of Arab identity made less sense to me.

This uncertainty entered the portraits. Faces split, distorted, hardened and multiplied. Their features still identified them as faces, while the coherent identity those features seemed to promise began to break apart.

I could still recognize the face, but I no longer believed it could tell me who the person was.

FACES ACROSS THE ARAB WORLD



Untitled, 1999. Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 50 cm.



Untitled, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 50 cm.



Untitled, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 cm.



Untitled, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 cm.

TRANSFORMATIONS

In 2011, I converted thirty complete portrait paintings into thirty painted rods. Each rod contained one portrait in its entirety. The face could no longer be seen because the painting itself now formed the object.

My experience of Egypt and Saudi Arabia fed the work, together with thoughts about burial, concealment and continuation beneath a changed exterior.



Transformations, 2011. Acrylic on cotton; 30 rods containing 30 portraits; elements from 60 cm to 2.5 m. Joanna Seikali Gallery, Gemmayzeh, Beirut. Photograph: Fadi Elchamaa.

TRANSFORMATIONS

When installed together, the rods gave no visible evidence of the portraits they contained. Looking at them could not reveal their history.



Transformations, 2011. Partial installation view, Joanna Seikali Gallery, Gemmayzeh, Beirut. Photograph: Fadi Elchamaa.

IDENTITY UNDER PRESSURE

During the years surrounding and following Transformations, visible features remained in the paintings, but under increasing pressure.

Faces were obscured, divided, doubled, interrupted and painted over. Paint followed its own demands. Brushmarks, thickness and surface competed with the likeness taking shape.

I kept disturbing each face until I was no longer sure it was still a face.

At times I could still recognize it; at other times I could not.

I no longer expected a likeness to contain all the histories, affiliations and contradictions of one life.



Selected works from
Identity Under Pressure,
2011-2018.



Untitled, 2015. Acrylic,
charcoal and oil on canvas,
50 x 35 cm.

IDENTITY UNDER PRESSURE



20 Politicians, 2016. Acrylic on wood panel, 140 x 125 cm.

AND TOMORROW WHO AM I?

In 2019, context became part of the question. A face is always seen beside something, selected by someone and looked at by someone else.

And Tomorrow Who Am I? brought approximately two hundred portraits, made over thirty years and across different geographies, together as an open archive.

Visitors selected works, moved them and assembled groupings of their own. Every arrangement was temporary. The portraits did not physically change, but each new grouping changed how they were read. A face placed beside another could seem to become someone else.



Public intervention, 10-16 October 2019.
Participants selected and arranged works from
the archive. Photograph: Fadi Elchamaa.

AND TOMORROW WHO AM I?



Public intervention and installation view, ARTLAB Gallery, Beirut. Photograph: Fadi Elchamaa.



Installation view, ARTLAB Gallery, Beirut, 2019. Photograph: Fadi Elchamaa.

PORTRAIT WITHOUT A FACE

Around 2019, the visible identifier began to leave the painting itself. Recognizable faces receded, although I continued to understand much of the work as portraiture.

I began giving a concentrated shape within the surrounding space the attention I had once given to a face. Rounded forms gathered, touched, separated or pressed against one another. They suggested entities without describing them.

There were no eyes, mouths or recognizable anatomies. I could not identify the forms as people, bodies or objects, yet they did not feel generic. Each seemed to carry a particular presence.

I continued to call them portraits and landscapes, even when neither a face nor a horizon remained.



Untitled, 2019. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 110 x 65 cm.



Abstract portrait, 2019-2023.



Seated Woman. Installation view, Lynn Modallal Gallery; part of *The Disappearing Act*.

PRESENCE

Since 2018, I have increasingly treated light as one of the materials I paint with. It gives forms weight, sets their distance and builds atmosphere. Forms advance as the light intensifies and recede as it weakens.

Color establishes relationships within the painting. A shift in hue can separate one form from its surroundings or bind several together.

I let light lead the composition. Translucent biomorphic forms gather and drift through spaces whose depth I leave unresolved. They hover somewhere between bubbles and clouds. They feel specific to me, although I cannot say what they resemble.

Presence is what remains: the fact that something is there.

I continue to think of the work as both portraiture and landscape.



Selected works from Presence, 2024-2026.



Untitled, 2025. Acrylic on paper, 55 x 55 cm.

PRESENCE



Untitled, 2025. Acrylic on paper, 65 x 110 cm.



Untitled, 2026. Acrylic on paper, 25 x 25 cm.



Untitled, 2026. Acrylic on paper, 75 x 110 cm.

WHAT REMAINS

Human beings cannot escape identification. Even when they reject ancestry, nationality and religion as authorities, they remain marked by them, as well as by occupation, biography, age, history and the perceptions of others.

The ultimate painting, on the other hand, is free from the demand to be defined by its history. It is not limited by its creator. Color, light, scale and surface are enough. It becomes reality.

This is why I say:

**“My paintings are real.
More real than me.”**