On the Rhetoric of Void and Fullness in the Works of the Iraqi Artist Safa'a Salem Iskander

How does the void become responsible for fullness in art? The Iraqi artist Safa'a Salem Iskander uses the void as a technique and an essential tool in his work in a manner that gives value to the idea of fullness in art.

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The three notions - the art of writing the void, painting the void, and shaping the void - are related to the philosophy of the void, giving it value and substance beyond a mere void. This idea of the void as an existence generates a transformation in the artwork not because it points to an absence of things but because it is the primary condition for fullness, freedom of movement, and collaborative activity that creates a balance in the painting and its architecture and depth in the treatment of memory, place, and the self.

In his definition of his relationship with the void, the Iraqi artist Safa'a Salem Iskander says:

"The void is the realm of the imagination, and imagination is our reality that we haven't seen yet, but we recognize. This incomprehensible realm is a reservoir and an open space for the viewer or the addressee, and the pure whiteness, not completely blessed, complements the space."

Thus he sets the unavoidable existence of void and absence as a condition defining the presence of things in the heart of the painting.

The void becomes a poetic flow connecting the viewer and the artwork and separating the parts of the work in an attempt to imagine its internal relationships. It exists in Iskander's work in different ways, including turning the known into unknown and silencing the areas of whiteness supported by a sense of familiarity instead of strangeness and alienation from the content of the painting.

1.jpeg



[1]Untitled, Acrylic on cardboard, 2020, 70X50
Courtesy of the artist

The initial aspect of the void to be revealed is the visual one, expressed in the artist's decision to paint faceless portraits. This intentional emptying is, in fact, a process of condensation, reduction, and even transformation (metamorphosis) of the face into a semantic structure representing and expressing the painted figure. Within the face are thin, dark, diagonal, circular, horizontal, and vertical lines, spreading in geometrical formations in all directions. The empty, flattened faces draw attention to these lines and their compression, increase, and even reduction in the painting. This attention can cause discomfort in the viewer and raises thoughts about the lines as another way to condense the blandness and continue watching the non-obvious and direct meanings of the faces.

The technique of emptying (of facial features, objects, things), then, is supported by the fullness of a different kind (compensation of the space by compacting varied, complex, disharmonious lines.) This technique acquires the attribute of acceleration. Instead of multiple details, the consistency that obligates maintaining the harmony between the painting's components breaks down and becomes confused. This, in turn, may evoke a sense of anxiety in the viewer on the one hand, and a feeling of solace on the other, since the void (the missing details in the painting) becomes a hybrid, borderline space between the known and the unknown, pointing to the multiplicity of meanings behind the profundity of the void in the painting, which undermines what is absolute, comprehensible, and direct.

The second kind of void involves colors. In several of the paintings, the color acquires an abstract significance since it focuses on the form of the objects. The artist opens voids in them, creating hybridity (a single eye instead of two, joining incomplete objects, adding shapes and elements that introduce variety and strangeness), as color is behind this whole game, supporting the shading of this strangeness. We see forms controlled by dark and light colors, while the many-shaded monochromaticity of a specific color creates an illusion of volume in the painting, emphasizing a presence that compensates for all the missing details.

In this context, the artist says:

"My encounter with the colors started quietly, and I returned to them after some time in which I had forgotten that I paint like any person who likes to paint. Ten years is not an easy time to redefine something for yourself and maybe for your new reality. My new encounter with colors came from noise and voices in my soul. I had to find something to remove this darkness, and there was nothing but colors."

2.jpeg **[2]**



[3]Untitled, ink on cardboard, 2020, 70X50
Courtesy of the artist

3.jpeg **[4]**

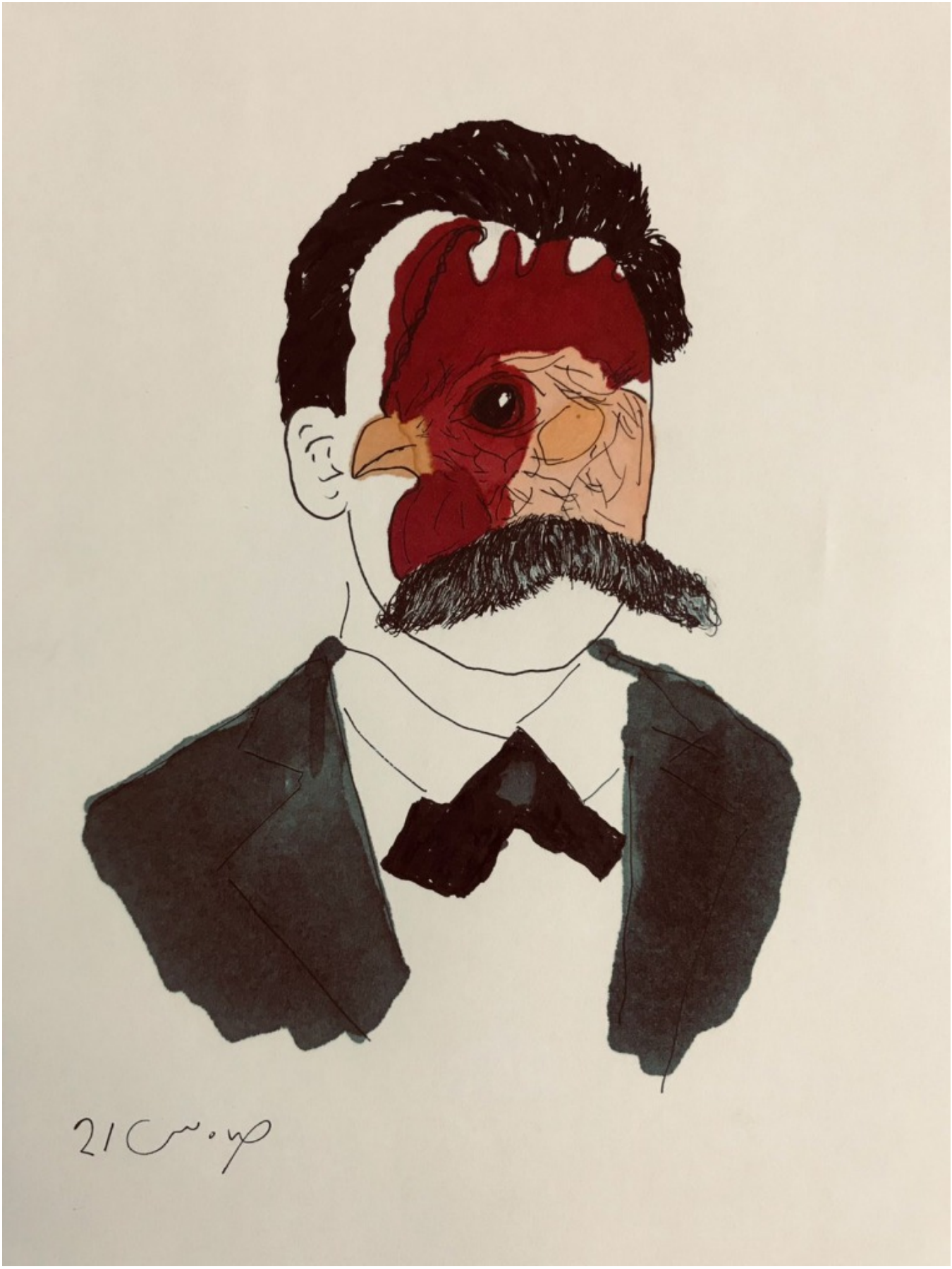


[5]Watercolors and ink, 2020, A5
Courtesy of the artist

The darkening and lightening of colors face objects and details made present or absent. It becomes a visual, symbolic play that creates an effect of the void that is not really a void and a colorful fullness that does not complement the painting but creates a visual illusion of a volume filling up the empty space in the painting.

The third kind of void is manifested through subtracting details and materials from the work. Often, when a multiplicity of detail characterizes paintings, it generates noise, and we search for quiet within the excess, the absence in the full heart. The painting here, with its bold colors and accumulated plastic details that envelope content related to body, soul, and nature (fish, doves, potted flowers, a rooster, severed limbs, and more) will not allow the viewer to be satisfied with them because the paintings are characterized by the idea of lack, which makes itself present on the semantic level, fortifying both the thing and its opposite: sadness is chased by hope, the monochromatic by the colorful, the black by the white, death by life, and the present is pursued by the absent.

4.jpeg **[6]**



[7]Watercolors and ink, 2021, A5
Courtesy of the artist

5.jpeg **[8]**



[9]Watercolors and ink, 2021, A5
Courtesy of the artist

skander's art becomes a mediator between the idea and the absence. In the artist's words, absence is "the point of erasure, the goal toward which the idea is going, the inaccessibility, or the lack or actual loss of the idea."

This rambling between the hidden ideas, which comes by way of the concealment of details in the awe-inspiring, surreal, and abstract heart, is the quintessence of the work, in which the colors and details become simultaneously harmonious and dissonant, and the visual fullness and its treatment of the void are being redefined.

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