

***Tomm El-Saieh***

*Run*

May 11—June 22, 2019

Opening Reception

Saturday May 11th, 6—9pm

During a panic attack the response tends to be fight or flight. There's a tingling in the arms and legs and the body gets ready to remove itself from the situation that is causing alarm. Context, a country, society, a tradition, a medium, can all provoke the same reaction.

Over the years Tomm El-Saieh has mentioned how his feeling of being 'abstracted' or removed from his scene in Port-au-Prince pushed him into a search for his personal pictorial *ground* as a vehicle for expression. While surrounded by the highly-coded pictorial tradition in Haitian painting, El-Saieh managed to translate his personal experience and feeling of *not belonging-while being a part of*, into his praxis. Trained by Haitian masters throughout childhood and adolescence, he observed their countless Voodoo and market scenes, and political narratives, as well as their emphasis on punctuation, repetition, and the economy of paint application that defines the look of Haitian painting.

He arrived at abstraction, or what we call abstraction, from a need to establish a space for subjective expression among his peers in Haiti. He analyzed and absorbed Haitian Painting's dominant characteristics, making that analysis a part of his lexicon. El-Saieh then distilled every single aspect of narration, arriving to a place filled with marks, erasures, transparencies and rhythmical layering. His paintings come to redefine how we consider Haitian painting. Tendencies toward abstraction have been seen in the works of various painters in the country, but never has there been, in Haitian painting, a full immersion into what the exportation of Modernism branded as 'abstraction'.

Upon migrating to the United States, Tomm El-Saieh encountered Modernism, the grid, and monumental scale. This introduction, running towards (and from), impacted his own painting vocabulary and provided the basis for hybridization. On this hybrid plane, is where his paintings are always running away but towards something—approaching and delaying, moving forward, mapping a dizzying vocabulary built by the merging of tensions and pictorial realities—asking us to question our own understanding of abstraction.

In El-Saieh's work the term abstraction seems to point to a lived experience, to the traumatic, to migrating, to resisting and embracing; or to a sum of ambivalences where affirmation and erasures coexist in expansion. The paintings allow for participation, for the viewer to get close or far, inviting us to take in every single element that defines them, which is in fact impossible.

As such, El-Saieh's work brings to mind the realities of what remains overlooked or in the fringes, what attention can grasp or not, pointing to the polarities and extremes that conform the now. His work is

focused on integrating, mark by mark, what was left, what was rescued, what is feared and treasured, what is running away in an ever-changing wave in slow motion.

In this exhibition El-Saieh debuts new formats, pushing the scale of his paintings even further. In one work, standing at 10 x 8 ft, the totemic aspects of modernism and all-over abstraction encounter El-Saieh's highly-personal and obsessive paint application. This is key: the macho gesture of high modernism, with pigment overflowing and taking over the surface as a defining aspect, is replaced by a nervous attention to detail. Of note, this enormous painting, in its verticality, could also signal a *poto mitan*, the column that is omnipresent at the center of voodoo temples, holding space, immense and vibrating. The *poto mitan* is a conduct, an attractor, something one cannot run away from but something that, like art, magnetizes attention, at its best, generating emotion and a trance. Can one run from history while overtaken by a trance? And then, what happens?

There's a sense of continuity in El-Saieh's paintings, one migrating into the next, keeping things in flux. This is perhaps one of the most critical tasks of painting, of making art: to open channels, to act as a conductor that impulses and propels discourse and discovery. Perhaps in running from and towards, within that act of immersion is where questions are posited, leaving the space of projection open for everyone to experience. Here, in *Run*, language, the language of tradition, and the new lexicon that El-Saieh presents, trade places generating a space for abstraction to become present, in act and in reality, in inclusion.

—Diego Singh, Miami Beach, May 4th, 2019.

*Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in 1984, Tomm El-Saieh lives and works in Miami, FL where he co-directs the artist-run space, Central Fine.*

*The artist's first institutional solo exhibition was hosted by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami last year with El-Saieh's first monograph published by the ICA in November. In 2018, works were also featured in the New Museum Triennial, Songs For Sabotage.*

*Other solo exhibitions of the artist's work have been presented at the Haitian Heritage Center, Miami (2008); Central Fine, Miami Beach (2015, 2018); and Michael Jon & Alan, Miami (2016). Currently, El-Saieh's work is on view in New Acquisitions at the Rubell Family Collection, Miami.*

*Run marks the artist's first exhibition at Matthew Brown Los Angeles.*