

Memories, Dreams, Obsessions: Sketching A Portrait Of Y. Z. Kami

By Vali Mahlouji

Preface

The present essay is the result of a series of discussions between myself and the artist Y. Z. Kami in order to gain a transparent, closer look into the reticulated complexities of the oeuvre and worldview of an artist who seldom appears in public discussions, sits on panels or engages in interview.

The idea came about after we first met in London during his show at the Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art in November 2008. The retrospective show opened to huge acclaim and this was the first time I came face to face with Kami's work traversing a span of two decades. Subsequently, I wrote a brief response to Kami's work in my preface for a group exhibition at the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris in February 2009, which included three of Kami's works. The notes that form the basis of this essay were compiled over many hours of conversation and several visits to New York, including many weeks at Y. Z. Kami's studio in Chelsea. Sometimes we recorded our talks at gallery visits, or in parks, examining particular works of art, or reading texts we both found interesting. Spontaneous thoughts and reflections on a variety of topics and obsessions were pondered and scrutinised in order to shed more light on the proclivity and direction of enquiries in the artistic production of Y. Z. Kami over the past quarter of a century.

This essay here, will formulate only a section of these ideas, focusing on what we are primarily concerned with on this occasion. It will specifically reflect upon works exhibited in this retrospective of Y. Z. Kami's work in Athens, contextualizing some of the artistic processes involved, and the constellation of ideas, tracing some of the dreams, memories and obsessions embedded in them.

Introduction

Kami arrived in New York twenty-something years ago, an aspiring painter. New York was a new world – and a very new beginning for Kami as an artist. Previously he had spent a year at Berkeley, California, but a short trip to France had compelled him to opt for the aesthetic and intellectual actualities of Paris. Creatively saturated with the permeating inspirations of some of his most revered cultural personages from Cezanne to Proust, Brancusi to Matisse, Giacometti to Genet, Corbin to Barthes and Levinas, Kami settled in Paris for nearly a decade. There, Kami engaged first with studies in Philosophy at the Sorbonne and later Film at the Conservatoire. Paris also provided a relative proximity with the homeland, to which Kami always returned on every possible occasion away from studies until a drastic shift in the Iranian historical narrative changed the reality of home and of motherland for good.

A decade of violent transformation saw Iran go through a metamorphic transfiguration, the devastating injuries of which are still traumatically at work. The combination of the inexorably ferocious dismantling and internal restructuring of socio-political structures

and urban and intellectual life, and the deep psychic and real wound of a murderously unwarranted eight-year war, transformed the historical climate of Iran for good. In this context, the relative liberty of New York provided not only a sheltering anchorage from the sheer weight of the severance from home, a lingering homelessness, but also the concrete specifications of a densely congested European cultural identity. This new beginning in some ways coincided with a decision – conscious or unconscious – to leave the homeland behind forever, physically and geographically.

The psychological circumstances and consequences of exile, however, only become consciously and actually realised after a trip back home in 1989. In the wake of that decade during which Kami had not returned, home had “become a foreign land”, to use Kami’s own words. An acute feeling of ‘a disconnected stranger in a strange land’ was the experience of a man returning after a decade’s absence, during when the complex historical narrative had altered the socio-cultural reality of home too much. On return to his life in New York, the condition and psychology of the émigré became a reality – with all its sensitivities, pre-occupations, dilemmas, and its inherently deep, associated sense of dislocation and loss – and most importantly an acute consciousness to the nature of loss. After this, Kami knew that he was never going to live in Iran again, at least for the foreseeable future.

Displacement And Loss: The Myth of Origins

Self Portrait As A Child

Almost immediately upon return from Tehran, Kami embarked on a series of self-portraits, or compositions including self-portrait. These paintings visit and revisit a unique portrait. This repeatedly painted image shows Kami as a child, eleven years of age, formally dressed in jacket and bow tie, looking with what I shall refer to as the prototypical Kami gaze: sternly, detachedly at the spectator, and through the spectator to the beyond. The stark image is taken from a photograph recovered during the trip to Iran. Kami’s obsessive attachment to the image – or more precisely, the gaze – and his insistent revisiting of the image says something about its poignancy. It is only now that one can, like Kami himself, discern in the boy’s focused gaze a prescience of the long solitary journey ahead towards a vague horizon, an unknown destination.

In *Self Portrait As A Child* (p. 46-47), the monochromatic image of Kami cuts across the hazily tranquil domestic scene of three women at tea. They are absorbed under a layer of thin white paint, like sheet-cloaked furniture from a bygone era, abandoned, as though condemned to the “pastness of the past”¹, in Susan Sontag’s words. The illusory device, like a taut, stretched gauze, an elastic membrane, or a seamless skin of light, is like an illusory film on the retina compelling the eye to penetrate the scene as memory does. Like an archaic memory, the romanticised magisteriality of the women is frozen in a moment of history. Frozen here is only implied in the sense of their relative spatial and temporal compositional dislocation from the central position occupied by the image of the ‘self’. Sharp, looming and omnipresent, the ‘self’ occupies an isolated centre of focus. The ‘self’, as it were, has come gradually into clear focus and to the fore, emerging from the haze, the past, the rest of the world. Its presence in this regard is enhanced and empowered by its compositional juxtaposition and its relationship with the surrounding world. The centrality of the ‘self’ here is no mere compositional accident - it emerges through the compositional conflict of opposites. Within

the oppositional conflict, psychologically regarded, there coexists the dual possibility of both the discarding or the recalling of repressed psychic material by the 'self'. Self-historical material is simultaneously condemned to the past and remembered or brought to light within the dreamscape of memory. The severance with the past (as an act of individuation) and the re-emergence of the past (as a wishful act of reintegration of that which has been wrenched apart) are conflicting operational forces at play in relation to the 'lost object'. Enriched with the nostalgic fantasy of the 'lost object', there is also a relationship to the real outside world, a meticulous mapping of the psychological geography of individuation. Paradoxically, the central figure – in one sense an emergent protagonist and in another the author of the narrative – asserts a poised stillness whilst the hazy background is imbued with theatrical vivacity. This frozen moment assumes Jungian archetypal stature.

The 'self as author' here narrates the story of the 'own-self'. It is exploring the "own-most" self, or in Heidegger's words, the "being that we ourselves are" (which he termed "Dasein," a German word for existence). Authenticity here is ingrained within the 'selfness of the self', or in the 'self being its own'. It is the singularity of existence that comes into focus and the very meaningful reflection upon what is most one's own: "me". In the Jungian sense the Self is defined as the central organising function that guides us toward individuation. Here this is perfectly professed. From the perspective of Jungian psychoanalytic discourse the Self "as a unifying principle within the human psyche" is seen to occupy "the central position of authority in relationship to psychological life, and therefore, the destiny of the individual"². Both constructs of authority and destiny in relation to the self are valid in the recognition of the unconsciously-coded material emerging in *Self Portrait As A Child*. The authority and destiny of the isolated self resonate powerfully with the real-life experience of severance from home. In one sense they constitute individuation and in another they are charged with the iconography of exile and the mutilations of displacement and loss. The individuated self here is also the exiled self.

Through the prism of the exiled self one can discern faithful attributes of exile: an abstracted, introspective sense of a displaced self, the fragmentation of a cultural and linguistic identity, the dislodging of a personal history and the severance of its continuity. It appears to be a perfect visual depiction of a condition once described by Edward Said as, "the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of the earth: homecoming is out of the question"³. Within the specifications of the discourse of exile – for the self to be in Edward Said's⁴ words cut off from his roots, from his land, from his past – *Self Portrait As A Child* constitutes a perfect 'frozen moment of exile'. Reflecting on the interchangeability of the individuated and the exiled self, the notion of the 'lost object' may be applied to the original and universally primordial relationship between the mother and the child. Oedipally, *Self Portrait As A Child* articulates the anxiety of the universally felt tragedy of severance from the mother (motherland) and constitutes a wishful restoration to unity. The workings of the conscience of the hero in exile is perfectly communicated in Joseph Conrad's words, when he describes the exiled man's difficulty upon finding "himself a lost stranger, helpless, incomprehensible, and of a mysterious origin, in some obscure corner of the earth"⁵. It is this obscurity – *the obscurity of the 'self' in relation to the mystery of its own origins* – that becomes the very central existential drive behind the introspective enquiries of Y. Z. Kami.

Paradoxically, home as painted here is more akin to a Georgian or Russian interior dating from the turn of the twentieth century, than that of Kami's own childhood. Constructing geographical and chronological mazes, and the use of simultaneity of eras, becomes itself a negotiating device for an expression of displacement and the mastery of its associated anxieties. The artist, like W. G. Sebald's hero Austerlitz, feels "more and more as if time did not exist at all".⁶ Psychoanalytically, the notions of synchronicity and suspension of time and the psychic relativisation of time and space – especially as they appear in the contexts of Freud's interpretation of dreams or Jung's transcendent function – are applicable. More appropriately, from the philosophically existential contemplation of Y. Z. Kami's artistic endeavour, there is a cursory underlying allusion to the cyclicity of time.

According to Y. Z. Kami himself, conscious thought does not play an important role in the realisation of his paintings. Kami confesses that in the process of painting he is totally unaware of a thinking process, the driving force welling up purely from the "urge to paint certain persistent images". It is in fact this unintentional drive that brings to the fore a non-sensationalised sentiment, lending the relationship between the viewer and the work the authenticity of a direct, unencumbered connection (akin to a dream).

During this initial period, between 1990 and 1995, the 'divided character seeking unification' remains a significant undercurrent theme in the workings of the embattled 'self' across the artistic contemplations of Y.Z. Kami. Within the framework of this process, the unique image of the introspectively detached Kami as a child metamorphically evolves into the prototypal portrait for the archetypal Self. The Self, Child, and Mother (Motherland) assume archetypal stature, transcending their own inherent historical context. Their repeated appearance and re-appearance becomes a kind of homecoming expressed through defiance and repetition, undoing the crippling sorrow of estrangement, dislocation and loss. The insistent presence of the past and the expressions of residual memories serve as springboards for introspective meditations on the subjects of individuation, displacement and the solitude of the 'exiled self', reticulating an awareness of 'the consciousness of alienation'. Their repetitive and cyclical engagement becomes their procedural resolution in enabling a new orientation in the aftermath of the trauma and terror of severance and the forging of a new reality.

Mourning And Melancholia: A Close Embrace Of The Earth

Untitled (18 Portraits)

Concurrent with these, Kami embarked on a persistent and compulsive cycle of painting single portraits of male youths. These appear individually, in groups, and sometimes in composite compositions of photograph and paint. In *My Mother Was A Falconress And I A Falcon At Her Wrist* (p. 50) portraits of youths appear painted on the photographic image of a monumental tomb tower. Strawn like stars or dead heroes, their paint drips down the tower's brick body. In *Untitled* (1994) (p. 51) hovering earthy portraits of young men blend into the baked brick façade of an ancient wall. In *Joseph* (p. 48-49) the portraits are painted across enlarged photographic images of pages from *The Book of Genesis*, the narrations of worldly creation, chronicles of man's archetypal ancestry: Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, Tower of Babel, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, and the story of Joseph.

In these works the singularly isolated 'self' transmutes into a constellation of youths. Singularity expands to a community of singles. These portraits are strikingly reminis-

cent of the Kami-child, each individually, profoundly faithful to the prototypical portrait of the archetypal Self, their faithfulness intently rooted in the signature gaze: detached, isolated, towards a vague horizon, their stillness reminiscent of the original melancholic introversion. They appear unadorned, stripped of the formalities, unified simply in white shirt or T-shirt. Their collective resemblance to the prototypical portrait of the Self blurs the boundary between the 'self' and the 'non-self', the other. The 'self' graduates further towards the archetypal and in parallel the notions of Mother, Motherland, Land, Earth, Creation and Origins metamorphose into indistinguishable myth.

In *My Mother Was A Falconress and I A Falcon At Her Wrist* the youths dominate the massive grandiosity of the relic of history, as they would the psyche, intensifying/magnifying their archetypal aura. Their intense presence is complemented and reinforced by their gentle ascent. Masculinity is augmented by the phallic interplay between the youths and the imposing rising relic. The dripping paint here both enhances ephemerality as well as the erotic. They are victorious claimants of civilization as well as dead heroes, corpses against the rubble of civilization. Appearing as rectangular plaques against the monumentality of the vast, empty relic they are reminiscent of ancient votive figures offered for sacrificial ritual. They are entombed within the material of history, enshrined within the memories of man in a close embrace of the earth. To borrow from Nietzsche, it is as though they belong to or are yearning for "the remote states of human culture".⁷

In *Untitled* (1994) five interspersed portraits of young men appear literally embedded in the materiality of human history's earthy relic, like seeds sowed in earth, as though yearning for, in Simone Weil words, "perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul"⁸ which she called the "importance to be rooted". Absorption into or emergence from the roots of life, the cycles and psyche of man, is monumentalised in the expanse of *Joseph*. Joseph himself an iconic symbol of beauty and male love for the mystic Persian poets as for Kami, exemplifies the notion of youth's beauty, divine beauty. Claimed by Mohammed once that, "one half of all the beauty God apportioned for mankind went to Joseph; the other one half went to the rest of mankind", Joseph's story is one of the longest continuous Biblical stories and claims a whole chapter in the Koran. Here 'everyday youths' become Joseph and by extension David, Apollo, Cupid, Hyacinthus, Narssicus, Adonis, Hippolytus, Endymion, Antinous, conjoining the real with the myth. Enhanced with boyhood's noble and narcissistic beauty, the male love object is immortalised and this aspect of the works connects them in a deep bond with the poetics of loss, longing and the homoerotic space. The works are saturated with a vibrant erotic climate and latent phallic power in their directness and simplicity. Voyeuristically charged with a sense of yearning, they are reminiscent of passages such as that of Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night*:

*Methinks I feel this youth's perfections
with an invisible and subtle stealth
to creep in at mine eyes.*

Or the words of Tyrtæus in 7th c BCE:

*But youth's fair form, though fallen, is ever fair,
and beautiful in death the boy appears,
The hero boy, that dies in blooming years.*

In Kami's own words these are elegiac creations. These elegies in paint, however, do not solely lament the beauty of youth, the immortalized hero-boy, the slain soldier impervious and enduring in his eternal youth. The slain soldiers and youthful heroes here make a particularly stark contemporary reference to the thousands of victims of AIDS, one of whom was Kami's best friend and cousin the theatre director Reza Abdoh whose death was contemporaneous with the painting of *Untitled (18 Portraits)* (p. 52-53). The portraits of this period are emotionally imbued with mournfully potent personal undercurrents, associations and references to real people in Kami's life, emphasizing the very real lives and attributes of the individual sitters. Reza's image appears both in *Joseph and My Mother Was A Falconress And I A Falcon At Her Wrist*. In Kami's own words "these paintings are in some ways all of Reza".

As elegies of a very personal mourning, here the sublimated melancholy of loss assumes reticulated dimension. Loss becomes a direct confrontation with death, each portrait a death mask of a personal tragedy, collectively a ritualistically cyclical act of mourning. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud describes the process of mourning as unfolding "bit by bit" through obsessive and repetitive acts of listing and reliving the memory, visiting and revisiting again and again as an attempt to build up sufficient defense and sever the attachment between bereaved and the lost object. If this severance does not successfully complete its cycle then the ego attaches itself to the lost object, excluding the outside world.⁹ In *Untitled (18 Portraits)* such exclusion takes place, not however in the sense of a negative resolution of the mourning process. The repetitive contemplations of the years between 1990-1996 reflect intimately, perpetually and resolutely – both consciously and unconsciously – upon the dimensions of love and loss at the intersection between Eros/Thanatos. In a narrative chain of metamorphoses the iconographies of beauty, love, sexuality and death converge on a continuum and coalesce into a magic square. These intimacies with beauty and death become a catalyst for an entry into a deeper reality of the human condition propelling the evolutionary unravelling of the oeuvre of Y. Z. Kami on an existential crossing between the representation of the 'self' and the 'non-self' as well as the individual and archetypal identity.

In *Untitled (18 Portraits)* the portraits of young men become disassociated from settings, liberated from contexts, untitled, appearing purely as a constellation in space, enunciating the existential apologue of 'solitude expressed outside of the group'. Tension between the 'self' and the 'non-self' brings to the fore the 'anyone' and accentuates the consciousness of alienation. 'Lostness' in a crowd is abstracted beyond the dichotomies of time and place, devoid of the harmonizing and unifying contextualisations of setting, transcending the boundaries of nostalgic idealism and romantic notions of youth. The pure white wall as setting constitutes an abstracted non-background signifying the void in-between. *Untitled (18 Portraits)* epitomizes the elegiac expression in the works of Y. Z. Kami. Their much discussed association with the Coptic funerary portraiture of Fayuum is self-evident not only in their form, format and composition but also in the particular surface of paint and a palette that shimmers in reds, greens, purples, and blues yet is overwhelmingly unified in the tones of flesh. However, more essentially, it is their transcendental spiritual association in the Eroto-Thanatotic dimension so reverently epitomised in the literary poetics of the classical notion of love that lends them their power. As commemorative monuments their vitality is rooted in this source of energy. In their 'magnificence poised on the edge

of destruction', they memorialize the Nietzschean injunction of remaining true to the earth, the Bataillesque metamorphoses of sexuality into death, the Mannean symbiotic interlinking of life/ethics and death/beauty, and the elegiac lyrics of Constantin Cavafy.

In *Untitled (18 Portraits)* the 'self' and 'non-self' remain unified within a dialectical evolution of abstraction through the proto/archetypal spirit of the face-on gaze, the dry earthy surface of the paint, the everyman's white T-shirt, and the formal order of three rows and six columns organized into an abstracted society of men. The formal juxtaposing of the eighteen canvasses itself achieves an almost conceptually minimalist aesthetic, were it not for the slightly varying sizes of the individual canvasses. Individuality is ensured along the border of the real and the abstracted. The 'me' of the 'self' is sensitively defended, subtly guarded - each portrait a unique centre of focus; collectively a community of man.

Such images are examples of works whose dimensions interact powerfully with the context of their exhibition. Perhaps unintentionally, they assume a provocatively political dimension in the recent historical context of Iran. Apart from their resonance within a war-torn society saturated with the exhaustive iconography of the martyr, the mythologising of the slain soldier also extends to the heroic potency of images of fallen victims in the wake of the most recent political traumas of dissent and oppression in Iran.

Untitled (16 Portraits) (p. 64-65) demarcates the end of the elegy and liberation from the domination of the momentous totality of the "business of exile": exigencies of the self, mourning and melancholies of the lost object, and classical allusions of Eroto-Thanatotic poetics. *Untitled (18 Portraits)* epitomises the elegy in paint, beyond which point Y. Z. Kami's community of man individuates from the angsts of history, the pain of reality and the reality of pain. In *Untitled (16 Portraits)* this community is identified by male and female personages. Contemporaneity and individual personality are visually enhanced. Narrative is reduced and aesthetic uniformity is relaxed in the wake of the ascendancy of the Self. The fact that this composite work singularly constituted the entire show when it was originally exhibited therefore comes as no surprise. This poignant gesture on behalf of Y. Z. Kami established his intellectual and artistic relationship with the idea of the 'totality of being' and the 'universality of experience'.

The Pain of Reality / The Reality of Pain

Dry Land

In *Dry Land* (p. 66-67), a composite work of painting and photography, Kami sets twenty-three portraits of people gazing out in solemn isolation against a monochromatic hallucinatory vision of urban decay. This apocalyptic narrative of post-industrial urban decadence uses actual images of a deteriorated Detroit as setting. The painted portraits – the inhabitants – puncture the monochromatic, photographic cityscape with subtle colour. Piercing brutality with their colour – an affirmation of their life – these people 'brought to focus' remain souls embedded in the materiality of the derelict landscape, in much the same way as the earlier portraits of young men against ancient relics, albeit here with distinctly accentuated individuality within an actual context. The landscape and its inhabitants, the inanimate and the animate, the living and the artificial are once again bound in symbiotic synergy. Existential angst is not only

collectively shared by the quarantined, compartmentalised community of inhabitants, but also by the myriad of hollow cavities that pierce the dry flat building facades, like squares of void. However, *Dry Land* is a far cry from the mythologizing lyricisms of *My Mother Was A Falconress And I A Falcon At Her Wrist* and the works of the early period. The individuated reality of the individual sitters and their real pain is very palpable. If *Dry Land* exposes pain, it empathises with the reality of individual pain and situates it in the very near and actual reality of the 'everyman'. *Dry Land* becomes at once a powerful comment on community, politics, citizenship, participation and urbanism.

Dry Land, literally translated from the Persian *Barahut*, a place of no vegetation, is a parody of a lifeless place, a soulless location where nothing grows – the epitome of desert, a wasteland. It is physically and spiritually a direct antipole and antithesis of the Garden of Eden – the heaven of Adam and Eve. In *Dry Land*, Y. Z. Kami decides to lay bare the painful reality of the descendants of Adam and Eve in their contemporary condition. Unembellished, unglamourised, unconceptualised, and unintellectualised, Kami mirrors the unknown men and women, the 'everyman' in candid, transpicuous intimacy. The candour of *Dry Land* is possibly a direct reflection of Kami's own "depressed mood" during the period of its production. In *The Waste Land*, the great poet T. S. Eliot, one of Kami's most revered poets in English visited the same place:

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.*¹⁰

The Ephemerality of Existence

Untitled 2005; Untitled (Woman In a Green Sweater); Untitled 2007

In 2005 Kami painted *Untitled (2005)* (p. 73), the large format portrait of a middle-aged bald man almost double the size of his largest portrait to date. The sitter sports a casual sweater worn over a loose shirt. Sitting on his axis, he appears still and consumed in meditation, his gaze averted, turned down and no longer toward the viewer. This marks a new departure and the first of a group of large portraits of everyday people with their eyes lowered or closed and their torsos in view, down to the waist, always clothed in whatever they happen to be wearing. The idea for these portraits had come from Kami's visit to a monastery and his confrontation with individuals who spent long hours in total silent stillness, a lot of the time with their gaze lowered. In Kami's own words, "The sense of this immobility and the sense of the interiorised focus magnified the presence of the figure like a mountain. The portrait's monumentality is a reflection of my own experience of confronting the contemplation of the sitter." Scale clearly relates not only to the pictographic but also to the 'essential' or as Anish Kapoor quoted Barnett Newman, "Scale is not a matter of size, it is a matter of content"¹¹. In Anish Kapoor's view it is by "pushing aside subject matter [...] that a content arises out of certain seemingly formal considerations – about form, about material, about context – and that when that subject matter is sufficiently far away, something else occurs [...] something that one might call content."¹²

The tension between the subject and content poses a central question in the understanding of these painterly monuments to the human spirit. In *Untitled* (2005), *Untitled (Woman In a Green Sweater)* (p. 75), and *Untitled* (2007) the human figure is absorbed in a certain haze, or in Kami's own words "a tremor - a form of internal movement within an immobile figure". The sitters are, of course, depicted as real people literally absorbed in meditation and their contemplative reality is painted with a meticulously exacting passion. Quoting Alberto Giacometti, Kami adamantly believes that "the closer the work is to the real sitter the closer it gets to truth". However, the tremor that occupies the figures brings an uncannily vibrating sense of life to them. These hazy 'mirages of people' become a kind of 'human reality in soft focus' evoking the universal fragility of human existence. The haze that occupies the colossality of the portraits points to the ephemerality of what is most real to us - our own human life (existence).

This existential energy radiates from and around the figures, blurring their boundary, or rather unifying them with the background. They emerge from the shimmering light of the surrounding space and are absorbed by it at the same time. They flow and ebb, appearing from and submerging back into the same originating material, rather like Michelangelo's 'unfinished' figures in stone. This emergence/absorption is far more deeply realized – in the plastic as well as the 'essential' sense – than the earlier relativist notions of the 'self' and 'other' or the 'self' and the reality of the surrounding world whether Mother, motherland, earth, or history. Those were by far more cursory attempts in this respect. Sophistry here is in the achievement to render the surrounding reality as internalized. In a sense the boundaries between the 'self' and the 'non-self' have evaporated, and this is palpable even in relation to the viewer. In these colossal paintings the skin boundary between the human and the space occupied by the human has blurred as though the skin does not provide an absolute boundary and a concrete limitation of the sense of the physical being. There is a sense of fusion with the environment. This sense of fusion appears to powerfully transcend the physical parameters of the pictographic representation, such that the viewer is brought closer to experiencing the 'presence' of the sitter. Bill Viola's remark to Kami upon confronting the works (as quoted by Kami) comes as no surprise that, "The figures still appear to be breathing". Sensing the breath of the sitter is precisely what Y. Z. Kami has intended and masterfully achieved in paint.

The belief that the plastic image has the capacity of rendering the true spirit or the hidden essence of an object – the *tao* of things – in the work of art exists in the genre of Chinese painting as well as the world of Iranian miniature painting. In the Chinese paintings, whilst the painted image depicts an actual landscape, a solitary tree at the sheer edge of a mountainside for example, it is not merely the thing-ness of the tree and the mountain that is being represented but also their magical essence beyond the captured illusion of visible reality. In a somewhat different dimension, in miniature paintings a visual depiction of a tree symbolically represents the idealised vision of the tree through the eye of the Creator. It is a similar notion of abstraction towards the essence that is inherently at work in *Untitled* (2005), *Untitled (Woman In a Green Sweater)*, and *Untitled* (2007). The formal compositional iconography of Y. Z. Kami arrives determinedly closer to visualising the totality of the person in paint, intact with all its physical, psychological and spiritual actualities converged into a 'relatively constant and unified core', rendering the Self as an archetype of unity and totality, depict-

ing in paint what Jung called the “God-Image” implying the notion that the Self has aspects of the divine.

The ninth century (A.D.) Chinese painter Wen Tong was said, “‘to lose self-consciousness when painting bamboo, to identify with bamboo,’ thus enabling his painting to live the life of the trees.”¹³ Confronting Y. Z. Kami’s colossal portraits of people one can only but succumb to the awe-inspiring essence of the ideality-of-the-person and of the being-in-the-world.

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Endnotes

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