ALMINE RECH

Mehdi Ghadyanloo
Monuments of Hope

Sep 7 — Oct 5, 2024 | Paris

At times all I need is a brief glimpse, an opening in the midst of an incongruous landscape, a glint of lights in the fog, the dialogue of two passersby meeting in the crowd, to think that, setting out from there, I will be able to put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments, until now mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out not knowing who receives them. If I tell you that the city my journey aims towards is discontinuous in space and time, more or less condensed in places, you must not believe that the search for it must stop. Perhaps, as we speak, it is rising, scattered, on the confines of your empire.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, (Marco Polo to Kublai Khan) – translated from French

At a time when screens and many augmented-vision digital devices – which are widely used by contemporary art and biennales – reign supreme, Mehdi Ghadyanloo's painterly work may intrigue us for many reasons, and even challenge many of our ways of thinking and other discourses on contemporary painting. Indeed, the expression “social mobility” seems perfectly fitting for someone who, far from Western galleries and art newspapers, comes from an agricultural background in northern Iran, and has gone beyond set social boundaries by attending the fine arts university of Teheran (Iran), where he would be taught in a particularly scientific and rationalist, and mainly figurative, manner[(1)].

Although his work is now mainly seen in galleries, Mehdi Ghadyanloo developed his art mostly in the field of murals and urban paintings on a large scale, namely in Teheran, where he spearheaded a fresco proto-movement in public spaces, authorised and commissioned by the city's fine-arts department. Between 2004 and 2014, from the end of President Khatami's mandate to the early days of President Ahmadinejad's, Mehdi Ghadyanloo created over a hundred frescos tens of metres high, scattered around various districts of the Iranian capital city. The main aim of this movement of a few painters with a “realist”, and in some cases “hyperrealist” or “surrealist”, background was to *reform* the previous generation's frescos. These were frescos of martyrs that resonated with the Islamic Republic of Iran's death-oriented ideology during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), seen on much of the mural space since the 1990s; they commonly showed portraits of children and adults who had died for Iran, in dolorous, metaphysical poses and expressions in dark, depressive colours. Taking advantage of a break in the last hints of reform in Khatami's mandate, Mehdi Ghadyanloo and his peers strove, from around 2003-2004, to impose another fresco style: less dramatic (the religious frescos of the Iran-Iraq war were often based on an amplified dramatisation that some may describe as kitsch), without any direct representation of martyrs, more colourful and, not least, more evocative – in other words, less ideological and more open to visual interpretation and wandering. This could be described as a slow transition, or *reform* (where the post-9/11 context must be taken into account), from the Islamic or martyrological realism that typified the Iranian regime to Mehdi Ghadyanloo's own “magical realism”.

While the artist's work has taken a completely different turn and other aesthetic functions over the past ten years, there remains a strong connection to his original approach in his current works and often incongruous compositions, which are always unsettling for their virtuosity and ambiguity. For this reason, I would suggest deterritorialising the concept of *magical realism*, starting from South-American literature to connect it to the journey of a painter who is unquestionably Iranian (having grown up during the Iran-Iraq war, at the heart of a period of intense, and even imposed, nationalism), but who now deals with the critical vagaries of "global art". Indeed, Mehdi Ghadyanloo's compositions are both "Pop", without relating to any specific form of consumerism, and "hyperrealist", while playing with the norms of perspective or geometric reality. The reasons for the distance they seem to seek with reality are neither strictly surrealist, post-modernist or post-colonialist, but rather all at once as magical realism aims, in my opinion, to bring them together. Admittedly, this literary and poetic genre has often been defined, strictly speaking, as the preserve of southern countries. For example, Alejo Carpentier, in the foreword to his novel *El reino de este mundo* [(2)](1948), confined *magical realism* to regions and countries where there remained rites and beliefs that go against Western rationality. This integral definition of *magical realism* can be extended, through various women authors (Wendy B. Faris in critique, Maryse Condé and Toni Morrison in fiction), to the post-colonial issue of an immoral, perverted or manipulated local or national culture that must be recovered, rehabilitated or reinvented. Hence, Mehdi Ghadyanloo's *magical realism* seems to me to deal with a utopian form of narration, or rather a distorting mirror, based on mundane, architectural and urban organisational structures – with their discriminatory chasms (centre/periphery, men/women, people/elites...), which the artist distorts and challenges with a range of more or less dream-like or nightmarish counter-structures. These structures, chasms and norms are undoubtedly all the stronger – giving rise to a variety of transgressions – in a country like Iran where public space is itself entirely subject to rules and managed like a chess board.

One of these iconic counter-structures abundantly used by Mehdi Ghadyanloo is the image of the slide in amusement or public parks, which can easily be identified with the rollercoaster and its intertwined tracks. The artist uses this image as much as a symbol or metaphor as an optical labyrinth. A great deal of his painting's originality comes from his ability to make us focus and try – often in vain and with disappointment – to *understand* the formal complexity and logic of what we see. Where does it start? Where does it stop? Which way do you go exactly to get around it? Are all those detours and intertwined lines only aimed at creating paths that do not lead anywhere, and inexorably plunge viewers into a state of intense concentration, the better to entertain them? Here, meditation and entertainment, usually deemed opposites, merge against all odds.

Similarly, Mehdi Ghadyanloo's paintings present this other striking paradox between the technical rationality of their painterly construction (as surfaces) and the deliberate absurdity of their architectural construction (as volumes). They borrow as much from the post-modernist of Donald Judd's minimalist sculptures (serial and translucent as if to show their components unambiguously) as from the surrealism of Giorgio de Chirico's *Metaphysical Interiors* (studio scenes with quantities of stretchers and canvases, falling one on top of the other for no reason). They display, in equal measure, perfectly rational mathematical and geometric formulas on the one hand, and trompe-l'oeil, visual traps and playgrounds where madness and the absurd await, on the other hand.

Mehdi Ghadyanloo's more recent paintings, where slides give way to even more enigmatic volumes and counter-structures, further express the feeling of worry, and perhaps melancholy, that were already present in his slide series. This melancholy is admittedly subjective and relates to his lost childhood and its symbols (funfairs, amusement parks, toys...), but it is also more metaphysical and existentialist, linked to an overall feeling of instability and incompleteness. This feeling is represented by the omnipresence of volumes that perfectly combine – or stand there, but always on the verge of collapse, like a house of cards. It all hangs together, but always with the possibility of collapse ahead of us.

These paintings' philosophical and poetic dimension (Mehdi Ghadyanloo is an avid reader of Rumi and Omar Khayyam) stems from the art of anticipating this collapse, a sort of "knowledge through the abyss[3]". Its symbolic counterpoint is the shafts of light that can be seen in almost all of the painter's pictures. These shafts act as revelations of the unique or "perfect" moment where *it all hangs together*. These are reminiscent of the shafts of light that come through mosque or church domes, structural elements of the transcendental link that connects the faithful to the religious building. Besides, this ray or beam of light that seems to miraculously pierce through the picture as if angels (or demons) were about to fall through, can be seen more pragmatically[4] ,too. It emanates from a photogenic – if not photographic (like the hole in the *camera obscura*) – revelation, in other words, from an image that is not fully or immediately perceptible, but one that takes shape progressively, through light, but also through our retina or reflected in our soul.

Mehdi Ghadyanloo's masterly hyperrealism, insofar as it displays brilliance and transparency, is therefore also a kind of veil that obscures and blurs the lines: between painting and photography (or the computer image), day and night, memory and erasure, but also the social world and our inner world.

- Morad Montazami, Zamân Books & Curating

(1) Habibollah Sadeghi, one of Mehdi Ghadyanloo's teachers, was of the generation of teaching painters who took part in the 1979 Iranian aesthetic revolution.

(2) Translation: The kingdom of this world.

(3) *Connaissance par les gouffres* (knowledge through the abyss) is the title of a collection of poems by Henri Michaux, 1961.

(4) Mehdi Ghadyanloo is very interested in the use of light by architects such as Tadao Ando.