

Humans and Dark Matter

First and foremost, a painting is a point of contact, a surface.

It is the surface with which the painter comes into contact when creating it, and it is the surface to which the viewer's eye turns, seeking to penetrate past it and see beyond, inside, into the content.

Surface – superficiality – is commonly regarded as something light, slight, insignificant, unstable. In a painting, however, it is precisely the surface – colours, patterns, images – that enables what we call meaning. In a painting, the surface is everything, it is its very essence.

And though the painted surface makes things visible to our eyes, it can also hide and mask them. A painting can cloak itself in black, a painting can make things disappear.

Antero Kahila often paints the naked, uncovered human form – children, young people, the backs of old people – making no effort to conceal the subject's age. While he paints the people and their skin with the utmost precision, the skin in his images is ultimately an illusion created by paint, as is the darkness that surrounds the figures. And paint on a surface is also the sheer luminosity of the light in his images. In fact, Kahila's works abound in blackness and whiteness, creating a backdrop all other things. If truth be told, most of the surface area in Kahila's works consists of background, an unbroken field of colour. But can that in honesty be still called a background? What if the emptiness around the figures is in fact a key element in the painting? And if it is, we may well ask whether light is ultimately empty. Might not darkness, too, rather than being empty, be a fullness – especially in a painting?

Kahila has mastered and introduced to contemporary art many traditional painting techniques, time-honoured technical devices whose purpose has always been to recreate the deceptive appearance of real-world objects on a two-dimensional surface. Yet, in a strange way, all the images we observe in Kahila's paintings – people, voids, small houses that seem like shells, wrappings, piles of clothing, curtains, plastic membranes – all remind us of the fact that they are ultimately made of paint, a physical substance manipulated to create an illusion. They are visually perceptible, but also suggest something else.

It remains a fact that the only way painting has ever been able to depict the human being and their “deepest” essence is by portraying their exterior, the skin and the clothes that cover it. The surface is the only thing painting can actually show. And yet, when we look at a painting, we see something more than the surface. We attempt to see something more than the subject’s external appearance.

In the *Resurrection* series, Kahila’s motif is surfaces that are associated with humanity: piles of abandoned clothing that rise like beanstalks against yet another laconically incontrovertible background colour. The subject is a huge heap of clothes, empty shells that people used to protect and present themselves in. These accumulations make us think of waste and destruction, of historical evidence, even concentration camps.

We see shrouds left behind when the life and soul they once covered have departed. Even in its desolation, the pile recalls the life once borne by the clothes. That is why Kahila’s mounds of clothing retain a sense of hope, an echo of how a piece of discarded cloth came to symbolise hope by having served as the burial shroud of the resurrected Christ, just like the cross, an instrument of torture, came to be seen as a symbol of hope. Here, too, what we see are clothes, shells, surfaces, yet our thoughts are with the people who wore them, now distant fellow humans. The rags towering in the paintings may seem disturbing, yet their melancholy appearance as a fullness in the void somehow makes them appear comforting.

And after all, is not the human face too a surface we observe, searching for something deeper? The intense, contorted heads and faces in Kahila’s *Ritual* series are in a state of transformation, dissolving, being erased, as if shaped by a deranged artificial intelligence. These are faces, gateways to the soul, yet once they have been processed by the peculiar artificial intelligence of painting, they no longer suggest any specific, nameable individuals. What is most peculiar is that these painted people, constructed on the canvas, do not seem particularly distressed; they appear resigned to being both human and mutable masks at the same time.

Instead of the current flavours of painting, such as expressionist gestures or the many genres of abstraction, the long and well-trodden road chosen by Kahila, the path of illusionist representation, appears quite unexpectedly to be an excellent method of refocusing the viewer’s thoughts and contemplation on that which ultimately lies beyond the visible world: unspoken emotions. Adjusted for the contemporary mindset, traditional methods can have a stronger emotive impact than painterly devices designed to evoke a “pure” emotional impression. When a

“neutrally figurative” painting seeks to portray something as complicated and nebulous as the feeling what it is to be human, it feels more serious and real than a conventional (and hence too easily overlooked) device for expressing an emotion or the ineffable.

In other words, Kahila’s paintings remind us that although paintings belong to the traditional domain of illusion, representation, and realistic depiction, what we actually *hope* for is to see into the realm of the intangible, into the fundamental elements of existence, even while we *know* what we are looking at mere matter. In spite of all our profundity, we are doomed to deal only with the interface, the skin of the painting.

The motifs in Kahila’s paintings are often archetypes. The figure of a naked child seems like a generalised naked “human being”, an archetypal human, pure humanity stripped of all dross, or perhaps humanity that not yet stifled by the dross of the world. On the other hand, the paintings of old people’s backs show us how we are all shaped by the world – yet they are already looking elsewhere, beyond the surface – in the same direction we, too, are looking.

There is an image type in which shapes emerge from darkness, ghost-like, for a moment, only to disappear again. Kahila uses the effect in *Eternal Recurrence*, where we observe a headless equestrian statue, a boy with a veil, a wing, and a small tank – theatrical, almost magical or spiritualist symbols of the thematic interplay between fragility and force. We are plunged into the depths of night, with apparitions and phenomena wandering untethered. Perhaps at their root lies a sense of the impossibility of reconciling matters on a global scale. Phenomena appear from nowhere, unconnected, and linger to haunt us. The only link between them is blackness.

There is something reductive in Kahila’s works, or perhaps concentrated: just a back, just a face with the rest of the head missing, a lone wing, an isolated statue. That is also why the works transcend everyday observation, suggesting that what we see ultimately tends to organise itself into meaningful configurations, and that we always want to find a truth behind the mere act of seeing. However, the recurring emphasis on the shell, on concealment, and on the mask in many of Kahila’s works also reminds us that the ultimate hidden truth and meaning may in fact be emptiness.

But the coverings in Kahila’s earlier paintings – wrappings, shells, membranes, even straitjackets – nevertheless seem to remind us that the world is suffocating. Even the bumper cars in an abandoned amusement park are like shells of people: joy has fled. Indeed, at times Kahila’s work almost seem to suggest that

all there is in life are the limits afforded us by surfaces. With Kahila's paintings, we viewers are caught in a struggle between belief in a fundamental sense of meaning and a cynicism that undermines it.

However, the black that often dominates Kahila's paintings, as well as the white that sometimes replaces it, are both archetypal colours of the highest order – the very first or the very last. It is said that black and white contain all the other colours. Some people even think they are not colours at all, because they do not appear in a prism. And yet, seeing as they cover so much of the surface of Kahila's paintings while also delineating and highlighting their motifs, these black and white expanses are equally active elements in the paintings as the human figures.

It should be noted, however, that in building these large tonal areas, Kahila avoids creating a monolithic black ground or surface; instead, he constructs it from numerous layers, allowing points of colour from deeper layers to shine through the topmost blackness, creating an embodiment of depth, space, and the time it takes to paint the work. Far from being plain, the ground is a composite of many kinds of matter. It might be poetically compared to the "dark matter" of physics, a substance that accounts for most matter in the universe and affects everything, yet is impossible to see or detect – impossible, even, to truly understand.

Black, of course, alludes to darkness and night, and as such is associated with evil. But what if black, darkness, were instead – as it is in Kahila's paintings – that ubiquitous original embrace which envelops everything and makes all of us, and everything else, visible, both psychologically and materially? Once, when I interviewed him, Kahila said of blackness, "It can indeed contain a depth that is not evil at all, a depth that can be a refuge, a hiding place." Perhaps it is the same with white, with light. The same foundation, the mother of everything. Perhaps the black that embraces all colours is where we remember having been at home and what we ultimately strive towards. The beginning and the end.

Just like people, a painting too has a skin, a shell, a surface, a boundary that hides something alive behind it. It touches us. It is between those points of touching that we must live our lives.

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