

REVIEWS NEW YORK

## Nabil Kanso

Martos Gallery | New York

By Donald Kuspit



Nabil Kanso, *Riders*, 1984, diptych, oil on canvas, overall 8' 5" × 14' 9".

Francisco Goya gave us “*Los desastres de la guerra*” (The Disasters of War), 1810–20, while Otto Dix provided “*Der Krieg*” (The War), 1924. Alongside these canonical series about bloody conflict, we should consider “The Split of Life,” 1974–94, by Nabil Kanso (1940–2019). Kanso, who was born in Lebanon, witnessed firsthand the devastations of war when his country was attacked by the United States in 1958. In 1966, he moved to the US to study at New York University, where he majored in political science and art history. When he came to America, it was during a time of extreme crisis: only two years before the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, and at the height of the Vietnam War. D. H. Lawrence once remarked that the “essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.” “The Tomorrows,” an exhibition of Kanso’s sublimely dark and brutal paintings at Martos Gallery, expertly curated by Kathryn Brennan, made this point grimly explicit.

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See, for instance, *Vietnam*, 1973–74, a tour de force of expressionistic figuration. At almost twelve by twenty-three feet, its grand scale confirms the importance of the theme. It is a monstrous picture, as though set in the deepest pits of hell: Men wielding guns, cudgels, and knives attack one another as their flesh burns (perhaps with napalm, which the US military employed throughout its hideous campaign in Southeast Asia), all while they are ensnared by the branches of crepuscular trees bearing enormous thorns. With its unrelenting intensity and violent gesturalism—an all-out assault of vivid blacks, reds, violets, blues, oranges, and yellows—the image, like severely blistered skin, pulsates with agony. Indeed, the work is a masterpiece of rage and pain. Kanso deals with the same inevitable horrors of war as Dix and Goya did, but with an even greater, more visceral zeal.

At only twenty by twenty-four inches, *The Confronting Mother*, 1991, was the smallest of the eight works included here. But its relatively modest scale belied its extraordinary power. For this piece, the artist depicted the titular subject as a wide-eyed figure of judgment overlooking a vista engulfed by flames. To the left of her is a giant dove, who appears to be half alive and vomiting up even more fire. The woman's gaze is solemn, accusatory, as if she is blaming the viewer for all the crimes that have been committed against humanity. The diptych *Riders*, 1984, seems to take as its inspiration those biblical horsemen of the apocalypse. Kanso shows two of them, apparently leaders of conflicting armies, in a vicious fight to the bitter end. Rows of masklike skulls in the upper-left and right corners of the composition—symbols of doom and all-consuming destruction—loom over this ugly scene. *Cries and Silence I and II*, both 1994, portray bodies being consumed by twisting, carnivorous plants. In the former, an upraised hand, its five fingers extended in shocked surrender, epitomizes the futility of suffering. The paintings seem to suggest that no matter how our kind decides to annihilate itself, it will inevitably be subsumed by the natural world and its ongoing, merciless cycles of death and regeneration.

Portraying the Hobbesian war of all against all, and illustrating the unremitting barbarism of humanity, Kanso's beautiful but nihilistic art conveys the failure of civilization. The nightmarish character of these works suggests they are pathologically realistic—that is, they reveal the truth of the social sickness that is war.

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