

The Tears of Painting: Recent Works by Elham Shafaei.

The artworks featured in this exhibition stem from her current doctoral research on the role of melancholy as a drive that produces intensity of experience leading to artistic creation. Knowing Elham for the last five years, first supervising her M.A study and now her PhD, I can't think of a better project that suits her sensibility, both in art and life.

The blackness of the solitary female figure in Elham's paintings – her hair and the hue that outlines and shades her body - hearkens to the ancient root of the philosophical fascination in melancholia, to ancient Greece, the Galenic theory of humors that delineates human psychology according to the cosmos, with the four humors corresponding to the four elements and four planets: (1) Sanguine/Air/Jupiter, (2) Choleric/Fire/Mars, (3) Phlegmatic/Water/Moon, and (4) Melancholy/Earth/Saturn. Saturn-Melancholy is doomed into the least favored or desired of the humors. The melancholic is personified with a dark complexion, black hair crowning her black face. The blackness of melancholia is triggered by the excessive black bile. She is typically represented resting her head on his hand, a cue to her sadness and depression.

The value of Saturn and melancholia was nonetheless revised later on, elevated from the lowest to the highest of the four temperaments. This radical change was indebted to the influential text attributed to Aristotle. In the thirtieth of his medical treatise, *Problemata physica*, Aristotle analyzes melancholy as the temperament of geniuses. Centuries later, during Renaissance Europe, Cornelius Agrippa, drawing from Aristotle's treatises and Plato's notion of *furores*, wrote of *inspired melancholy* as the essential ingredient producing superb painters, musicians, philosophers, intellectuals and prophets. Agrippa's contemporary, the art historian Giorgio Vasari considered painters to be prone to melancholy due to increased sensitivity.

The significance of melancholia continues temper the arts throughout history, as expressed by the Elizabethan writer , George Chapman. His poem *Shadow of Night* opens by describing a "humour of the Night," a sad and weeping humor but one devoted to abstruse studies. The humour of the Night is none other than the black bile of melancholia, the humor of inspiration which Chapman appeals to all serious poets to steep themselves in, to lead the "working soul" through inspired *furor* (the senses being asleep) to reach her highest pitch. Blackness thus defines the traits of both Night and Melancholy, and Chapman's Night is indeed personified as a female figure with a black face:

*Mens faces glitter, and their hearts are blacke,
But thou (great Mistresse of heauens gloomie racke)
Art blacke in face, and glitterst in thy heart.
There is thy glorie, riches, force, and Art.*

Elham's women certainly embody such nocturnal shadow, the *facies nigra* of melancholy, the dark figure with the black face, secretly imbued with power and wealth and all the force of Art. The specular ambiguities of her paintings – the isolated (thus placeless) individual, levitating within the gravity of the canvas, the elusive visage dripping away to form and re-form itself – tell us that this wealth and force of art is rooted in a fundamental inarticulacy deep within any image or art. As the great artist Joseph Beuys had once pointed out: art does not speak. It simply does not communicate (*What is Art? Conversation with Joseph Beuys*). Thus the painter's struggle is not so much about articulating but instead to be with the canvas as the place where anxiety of inarticulation lives on, the painted surface a hymen torn by melancholia as the condition of art. Painting doesn't know how to speak, a speechless art that demands from the painter the dark labor of silence.

Elham gives us this silence, the melancholic pitch that undulates her objects; she gives us the tears of painting.

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