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THE MASADA SERIES:
ETHOS AND MYTH IN THE EARLY WORKS OF ELIE SHAMIR
La Serie Masada: Ethos y Mito en las Primeras Obras de Elie Shamir

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Resumen: El artículo aborda una profunda revisión de la relación entre el Sionismo narrativo y sus vinculación la historia de los judíos en Erez Israel. Esta permanente reevaluación y comparación transita en una visión dicotómica del referente y la plástica. Así, las primeras obras de Elie Shamir muestran su personal visión del Ethos y el Mito con el trasfondo de la narrativa bíblica. Tras esta fase inicial, evoluciona hacia una postura crítica de la utopía del nuevo judío. Su profunda preocupación por la ideología desembocó en un ciclo de pinturas, abarcando aspectos como el fanatismo, siempre desde un marco referencial dual, claramente vehiculado a través de la plástica de Masada vs los refugios subterráneos y, sucesivamente, por enfrentamientos y fusiones, Cristianismo y Judaísmo, belleza y muerte. En la fase final se observa un cambio de estilo en los aspectos formales aunque mantendrá la dialéctica dualista hasta las últimas muestra del Ciclo de Masada.

Abstract: This article addresses his deep vision of the relationship between narrative Zionism and its connection to the History of Jews in the land of Israel. This permanent revaluation treads through a dual approach out of formal and aesthetic references. Thus, his first works glimpsed his inner mood towards Ethos and Myth cast on the biblical stories background. After this starting stage, he evolves into harsh criticism of the New Jew Utopia. His deep concern with fanaticism brought about the Masada paintings cycle clustering round a pervasive dichotomy as Masada open spaces and bombing shelters might bear witnesses, along with a great array of tokens of the same ilk, for example death and beauty. In the final stages of this Masada cycle there is a change in style as formal aspects are concerned, nevertheless keeping and clinging himself to the deeply rooted dichotomy.

Palabras clave: Serie Masada / Ethos / Mito / Arte / Extremismo / Dicotomías
Keywords: Masada Series / Ethos / Myth / Art / Extremism / Dichotomy.

Elie Shamir is a reputed painter who belongs to the eighties' generation in Israel. As a genuine represent of his generation, he engaged the "return to painting" and the "reawakening" of figuration that characterized West Europe and the USA at that time. Not less important was his thematic turn. He re-examined the Zionist narrative and its connection to the ancient and new history of the Jews in Erez Israel-Palestine. For Shamir, who was born in the Jezreel valley in 1953 as the grandson of the pioneers that founded the Moshav (cooperative farm Kfar Yehoshua), it was a crucial moment to departure to a way of his own. The *Cycle of the Masada* (1984-1992) paintings, which is the main issue of this paper, represents an ideological and ethic confrontation to fanaticism through a deliberate mixing up of time and space.

The early works of Elie Shamir reflect the artist's personal dealing with myth and ethos in the Jewish-Israeli context. Shamir's early works were viewed as an anomaly in the local arena and did not receive either the impact or the critical attention they deserved. His allegorical paintings, with their abundant quotations from and references to the history of Western art and interpretation of the biblical narrative, were a sort of *assemblages* — monumental paintings that treated the theme of Jewish zealotry in its historical and contemporary manifestations. This formative period, which is critical to understanding his oeuvre and its place within the history of Israeli painting, lasted from his studies at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in 1981 and up through the middle of the nineties.

At the end of his studies at Bezalel, Shamir exhibited ***Weeding the Cotton*** (1980). (figure 1). The work depicts a group of nude figures, some quotations and some painted expressively, weeding cotton in the place over which the sculpted figure of Alexander Zaid[1] watches, in other

1 Alexander Zaid (1886-1938) was one of the founders of the Jewish defense organizations *Bar Giora* and *Hashomer*, and a prominent figure of the Second Zionist immigration (*Aliyah*) to Erez Israel-Palestina. Zaid and his wife Tzippora were founders of *Kibbutz Kfar Giladi* in the Galilee. In 1926 they moved to *Sheikh Abreik* in the Valley of Jezreel, where he worked as a watchman (*shomer)*. In 1936, Zaid reported that he had found on his place a systems of caves decorated with inscriptions. This led to the excavation of the ancient Jewish town of *Bet She'arāyim* ("House of Two Gates"), where placed according

words, the fields of Kfar Yehoshua. The statue of Zaid by David Polus appears in the painting as a signpost in the landscape, a geographic and ideological mark. The painting, which was conceived of as a vision, a kind of full-blown prophecy that appeared long before it would come to pass, was perceived by Shamir as a foundational work in which he connected his life's ambition to his art from a conscious awareness that this would be the field of his endeavours. The valley and its fields in their mythological context invites figures from the history of art — among them Raphael de Annunzio's *Three Graces* (1504-5), and Vincent Van Gogh's *Artist on His Way to Work* (1888) — to labour in the cotton fields. Heaven and earth are coloured in yellow. The statue of Zaid looks out over the people sweltering in the hot valley sun. The valley is a dream; the valley is a nightmare. The valley, as a metaphor for the Zionist and painterly act, is a surreal encounter between feverish, forced and urgent action and phantasmagorical images of ghosts and ideals of the past.

> In this work, there was a release of pain and anger. Maybe it also has to do with the experience of the lack of acceptance of my work at Bezalel. This is a work that has a lot of pent up anger inside it, but I don't think it has violence. In general, violence is not an exact word for me. I'm also not sure about anger; this is very great experience of sacrifice. Sacrifice is my father, sacrifice is also me; sacrifice is the artist. [It is] a generational sacrifice, and not necessarily [a] personal [one]. I also painted the shadow of Van Gogh there, the shadow of the artist on his way to work, and the work is of course the weeding of the cotton in the field, and the "nonsense" of art, because this is the work, working the land.[2]

Throughout the eighties, Shamir channelled these difficult emotions into learning by way of careful study of the works of the old

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to the Jerusalem Talmud, the burial place of Rabbi Judah the Prince, (*Yehuda HaNasi*). As a result of an ambush attack Zaid was killed and became a legend hero of the Zionism. On a hilltop overlooking the Jezreel Valley, in the forties was erected a statue of Alexander Zaid as a horseman, sculpted by David Polus.

2 Elie Shamir, personal interview with the author, 15 January 2013, Kfar Yehoshua.

masters, mainly Cezanne[3] whom he called "the great teacher." The search for understanding the language of painting, and within that finding a unique voice, was carried out alongside personal doubts about his place as a descendant of the settlers of the Jezreel Valley, a scion of the great agricultural ethos. From his point of view, forcing ideology onto reality was a brutally violent act. He tied this to the dogmatic approach he encountered at Bezalel over the "crisis of the brush" and the "death of painting."

In the eighties, Elie Shamir's works showed uncertainty and criticism of the utopian creation of the New Jew and the arrogance embodied in it, and mostly doubts about its human cost as a recurring phenomenon of anti-humanist zealotry. Shamir's painting in this period set testimony aside in order to tell about people he knew well and loved very much. Shamir says:

> The painting ***Blind Isaac Waits for Esau*** (1989), [figure 2], was a kind of conceptual landscape painting. I painted my grandfather in the guise of Cezanne's gardener, in the same pose, in a Cezannian triangular composition which, in effect, became a tent, and the still-life was positioned there, like Cezanne, in this case the still-life was Esau; in other words, the lentil stew, and the blind Isaac waits for Esau and not for Jacob, ... just like Esau was cut out from the story, so were Ishmael and Hagar. The biblical narrative is full of choices having to do with jealousy and separation. So I painted a kind of *tikkun* (rectification - repair) — *Abraham Calls Hagar to Return* (1993).[4]

Shamir's visual interpretation of the Bible was a reaction to way it was manipulatively recast not only in Zionist education but also in the

3 Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) was a French artist and Post-Impressionist painter whose work is considered the cradle of modern art. His new and radically different conception of what is art and what is the role of the act of seeing in art-making marks the transition from the 19th century to the 20th.

4 Ibid.

daily life of the builders of the *Yishuv*. In the first half of the decade, Shamir's heroes were akin to children of the gods, totems made to resemble farmers. Thus, for example, his father appears as Isaac in ***On the Way to the Akeda*** (1985), [figure 3], a Zionist version of the sacrifice of the generation of the sons, and his father's parents are cast as Abraham and Sarah. The bundle of tinder (*fasci*), visible here and in other works and as a small sculpture exhibited in the Mabat Gallery in 1989, is evidence of the worship of a new Moloch—the return to the land. Also notable from then are the works *Man Standing in a Field* (Self-portrait) (1982), and *Three Dancers in a Circle* (1983). The works exude feelings of gloom and terror, fulfilling their historical role as landmarks. The fasci however is not just an iconographic motif borrowed from ancient Roman myth; it is a sign that was adopted by totalitarian parties in Italy and Spain in the twentieth century to symbolize an ideology and as such it appears in Shamir's works as a warning sign for the future.

Shamir's preoccupation with the question of ideology led to a cycle of paintings that dealt with fanaticism through a deliberate mixing up of time and space. This is the cycle of the Masada paintings. ***The Final Lottery at Masada*** (1984–5), [figure 4], is the first painting in the cycle. Its iconographic source is Josephus's *The War of the Jews* where he tells about the 960 Sicarii[5] who remained at the besieged Masada, along with their leader Eleazar Ben Yair, and their agreement to a suicide pact — women and children were killed first and then they killed themselves. [6]

5 In the decades preceding Jerusalem's destruction in 70 C.E. the Sicarii was a fanatic group which pursued to put end the Roman direct rule over the Jews. The Sicarii carried *sicae*, or small daggers, concealed in their cloaks. They were headed by Menahem ben Yair, a grandson of Judas of Galilee who was the leader of the Sicarii until his assassination. His brother Eleazar succeeded him. The Sicarii operated primarily in the urban environment of Jerusalem and later, they also committed attacks in villages, which they raided for plunder and even set on fire. They kidnapped notables or others as well to negotiate the release of their own members held prisoner. See Richard Horsley, "The Sicarii: Ancient Jewish "Terrorists," The Journal of Religion, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Oct. 1979), 435-458;

6 Josephus, *The War of the Jews or The History of the Destruction of Jerusalem*, trans. William Whiston, Bk. 7, 7, 6-7, Project Gutenberg EBook of The Wars of the Jews or History of the Destruction of Jerusalem, by Flavius Josephus, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2850/2850-h/2850-h.htm#link72HCH0008; Solomon

The setting in Shamir's painting is a low-ceilinged underground space reminiscent of the contemporary bomb shelters in apartment buildings in Jerusalem. However, the year is 72 CE, and the moment is the casting of the potshards (ostraca) used as lots that will decide who is to be the last fighter to kill his friend before committing suicide. Most of the characters that inhabit the canvas are dark and brutish; dark contour lines delineate their forms. The men and women are nude, with the exception of one male figure that appears to walk towards us and is dressed in simple undergarments. The men's gestures conceal their genitals from view, while the women, most of them fair-skinned, function as the source of light in the painting, particularly the figure in the middle (the artist's wife, at the time). Her facial features and hair provide a note of calm and reason amid the foreboding stillness and gloom that prevails over the scene, her presence evoking the brightly lit girl in Rembrandt's *Nightwatch (*1642). [7] The women's presence hints at their role as witness-bearers during their flight,[8] and will be reflected in other works as well. Two figures, a dark-skinned man and a light-skinned woman, are visible in the foreground kneeling in front of the potshards.

> They then chose ten men by lot out of them to slay all the rest; every one of whom laid himself down by his wife and children on the ground, and threw his arms about them, and they offered their necks to the stroke by those who by lot executed that melancholy office; and when these then had, without fear, slain them all, they made the same rule for casting lots for themselves,

Zeitlin. "Masada and the Sicarii," *The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Ser.*, Vol. 55, No. 4. (Apr., 1965), pp. 299-317

7 Rembrandt, *Officers and Men of the Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq and Lieutenant Wilhelm van Ruytenburgh, known as the Night Watch*, 1642, oil on canvas, 379.5 x 453.5 cm (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands). See Wendy Schaller, "Rembrandt, The Night Watch," in Smarthistory, August 8, 2015, accessed February 17, 2019, https://smarthistory.org/rembrandt-the-night-watch/

8 Josephus tells that two women and five children fled and hid in the pipes that carried water to the city and were thus saved.

> that he whose lot it was should first kill the other nine, and after all should kill himself.[9]

In Shamir's painting, the underground shelter stands in stark contrast to Masada, which was elevated to a heroic founding myth of Zionist-nationalist rebirth. The story of Masada, as told by Josephus, was adapted to the needs of the nationalist-Zionist movement as a symbol of heroism in the fight for independence. Thus the events at Masada and Ben Yair's speech became a symbol of liberty procured at the cost of "all or nothing." Worship of heroic death and the call for suicide were woven into the religious concept of sacred martyrdom, and the activist ethos was built on top of this. The antithesis to the image of the passive Diaspora Jew was based on Jewish history. Micha Josef Berdyczewski[10] made the Maccabeean and Bar Kochba revolts into models of the Zionist ideal. As time passed, this myth gained in strength and became a central component of the Zionist ethos, and Masada became place of ritual and pilgrimage destination.[11] The naked, crude figures, these land markers, are not keen for a battle. On the contrary, both the men and the women look like impotent "non-actors" on a stage, exposing the nakedness of the horrifying myth. They are "New Jews," but they bear the weight of the myth's brutality.

Shamir's decade-long treatment of the Masada myth defies a simplistic or one-dimensional interpretation. He seeks to confront the myth with the ethos of the pioneer, and given the cost of its mythification, to distinguish between the two. In discussing this issue he says:

> The zealotry of Masada is not at all like the sacrifice of the pioneers of the valley. The goal of the pioneers of the valley was

9 Josephus, *The War of the Jews*, Bk. 7, 9, 1.

10 Micha Josef Berdyczewski [Berdichevsky] or Mikhah Yosef Bin-Gorion (1865 1921) was a Little Russian-born writer of Hebrew, a journalist, and a scholar. He promoted the ideal of Judaism free from dogmas ruling the Jewish religion, tradition and history, but through a new link with pre-modern Jewish myths and legends.

11 See further Muli Brug, "From the Top of Masada to the Heart of the Ghetto: Myth as History," in David Ohana and Robert S. Wistrich, eds. *Myth and Memory – Transformations of Israeli Consciousness*, Jerusalem: Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1997), pp. 203-27 [in Hebrew].

> to create new private and national life, to create a class of farmers for the Jewish People, and politically they were pragmatic and not messianic like the people at Masada. That's why they also created life as opposed to the extremists at Masada that sent us into exile.[12]

The material/visual treatment of the figures and composition apparently constitute the keys to interpreting the act, which contains a searing criticism of objects of love. The connection to Anselm Kiefer and his treatment of images from German history is revealed not only in the space where the events unfold but also in the inverted view and inversion of the myth that enables and relies on his proximity to it.[13]

The next year, Shamir paints ***Eleazar Ben Yair Sends His Men to Ein Gedi on Passover Eve in the Year 67 CE and the Angel Delivers the Annunciation to Mary*** (1986), [figure 5]. In this work the tension is heightened between the various components. Heightened in it as well is the desire to formulate the pictorial expression that will articulate the gulf between ideology and reality, where morality collapses and zealotry leads to a dead end from which messianic extremism emerges as an outlet. There are three "actors" in the events taking place in the painting: the angel (of Death) on the right, Mary (Athena) on the left, and at the centre, the Dead Sea (Death), towards which the group that set out from Masada descends. Again, basing himself on Josephus, Shamir depicts an event that took place on Passover eve in the year 67 CE. Eleazar Ben Yair sends his men to Ein Gedi. As part of their way of life and means of survival during the revolt, the Sicari would plunder surrounding communities, and the village of Ein Gedi fell victim to a terrible massacre of its men, women and children.[14] The monumental figures on either sides of the canvas are painted in different and contrasting styles: the blank stare of the Angel of

12 Interview with the author, 20 November 2014, Kfar Yehoshua.

13 Gal Ventura, "Anselm Kiefer: Folk, Degeneration and Identity," *Protocols* 20, Readings (April 2011), Bezalel, History and Theory Department [in Hebrew].

14 Josephus, *The War of the Jews*, Bk. 4, 7, 2-3. Skulls bearing marks of savagery discovered in the area of Ein Gedi support the theory of the massacre. See Avichai Becker, "Massacre at Ein Gedi," *Ha'aretz Magazine*, 13 April 2001.

Death evokes the "totems" from earlier in the decade, but as opposed to their hulking forms, his body is skeletal, a kind of living-dead; the female figure, like a Greek sculpture, her lower body covered with blue drapery, marches towards us sturdy and full of power and majesty. The white lilies at her feet serve to identify her as Mary, the mother of Jesus. Three basic components of Western culture—Judaism, Classical culture and Christianity—merge in the eye of the storm generated by extremism. In this context, it is through the image of the Virgin that Shamir seems to point to the birth of Christianity as an outcome of Judaism's rejection of Jesus.

> To what extreme have we taken Judaism; to what extreme have we taken all this segregation, this whole cultural historical-Jewish scene, this isolation? We got rid of Jesus — and what happened? We got rid of Ishmael — and what happened? We got rid of Esau — and what happened? All this separation![15]

The Angel's annunciation, delivered by Shamir as an "omniscient narrator," includes a prophecy of the destruction and warning about the devastation wrought by extremist fundamentalism. The Dead Sea visible in the background fills most of the picture surface. The deep blue colours even swallow another figure whose remains flicker like lightening. The descent to the Dead Sea is emphasized by the downward slope of the figures (also nude) on their way to Ein Gedi. The act of descending to the lowest place on Earth is interpreted as a deadly encounter of beauty and death, the point where the world vanishes inside a disastrous ideology. Shamir addresses this topic later. Thus, for example, in the 1989 work, *Sea and Vanishing Point (Water and Ideology)*, a small sculpture whose upside down pyramidal form is made of steel and glass, the blue liquid alludes to this topo-mythic link. The sculpture, a kind of valuable piece of jewellery, is a conceptual sign of the tragic encounter between water and extremist ideology embodied in the Dead Sea's history. That same year, in fact, Shamir paints the third work in the Masada cycle ***Final Lottery in Masada*** (1989), [figure 6]. This time, the scene of the lottery is smaller and square in format. There are visible differences in style between this

15 Elie Shamir, interview with author, 20 September 2014, Kfar Yehoshua.

and the earlier *Final Lottery in Masada*, apparently due to the increasing influence of his own training in the painting process on the form of the figures. In this painting, as in the earlier one, the bomb shelter or underground burial chamber serves as the location for the action. During those years, as Doron Luria has noted, Shamir was an artist who did not look into the distance: "in the eighties, I perceived the valley and its land as a kind of grave, a grave with a white sky hanging over it."[16] Inside the cave, six male figures signifying the casters of the lots stand, bend, or kneel in two groups — some naked, some dressed like *moshavniks* still in their work clothes after a day's work, while in the background a female figure who appears either moving away or leaving, holds two tablets that validate in writing the testimony about what is transpiring. This figure, similar in form to the figure of Mary in the other painting, is also nude, though her legs are covered by her blue robe. A fasci appears like a transparent white silhouette above the heads of the men casting the lots. The sketchy lines that seem like they were somewhere between haphazardly and deliberately applied on the canvas repeat in other of Shamir's works from that period. This symbol of consciousness, though perhaps lacking material mass, but having great spiritual weight, hangs above the actions of the perpetrators who are also the victims.

In those years, Shamir's works were filled with quotations of mythological motifs to create complex and fragmented narratives. He offered his own interpretation of *The Judgment of Paris,* (1987), and also started addressing his own choices in an allegorical manner. In this work, which is divided into three registers on the background of a contemporary cityscape, Shamir situated three female figures — a pregnant woman (a portrait of the artist's wife at the time), and Aphrodite and Athena painted after models, one blond, the other dark-haired — and at their feet symbolist medallions inscribed with quotations. Portrayed here mainly was the choice of a goddess, whereas his personal choice of identity would be given expression in later works. And perhaps it was not unintentional that there was no identification of the artist with Paris,

16 Doron Luria, "A Conversation with Elie Shamir," in Doron Luria, *Valley, On the Road to Kfar Yehoshua*, Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2009, p. 172.

whose choice set off the Trojan War. Shulamit Shaked writes: "The jealous goddesses who participated in the beauty contest did not ask Paris to examine them and decide. Shamir instead suggests that fanaticism is blindness, it is death."[17]

In 1992, Shamir paints the final paintings of the Masada cycle, ***The Annunciation at Masada*** **and** ***Mont Victoire in the Desert,*** [figure 7]. The latter work is a tribute to his spiritual teacher Cezanne, who dedicated many paintings to Mont Sainte-Victoire, and through them constructed his own pictorial language that succeeded in creating plasticity out of the two-dimensional experience which made palpable painting's power as a medium that unifies man and reality. "Line no longer imitates the visible but rather it brings it to the point of visibility,"[18] writes the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. These words are consistent with the representation of Masada as an isolated cliff, a lifeless rocky fortress soaring to great height against a scorching, dazzling yellow-hued desert sky. Thus, as a visual phenomenon constructed out of the narrative of the history of painting, the visibility of Masada is disconnected from the myth and pathos of heroism and self-sacrifice, and is here a picturesque cliff somewhere along the desert border. The handwritten inscription in French, "Montagne Sainte Victoire dans Le Desert", succeeds in validating this heartfelt tribute to the great Cezanne, and at the same time to laugh at the [Masada] myth and its authority. In writing the words "Mont Victoire," Shamir disconnects the signifier from the signified and exposes its emptiness. This is perhaps the meaning of the new sign: the victory of art over extremism. Once could view this as closure.

Shamir concludes his work on the Masada cycle in the nineties. Simultaneously, he continues to develop the mythological/symbolist trend in his work. Transparent sketch-like images clamber on top of images whose visibility is realistic, as is the case with *Salome* (1990) — a sketch, whose source is Botticelli's figure *Primavera*, painted as if hovering over

17 Shulamit Shaked, *Family Portrait (Achilles Chooses the String of Pearls)*, 2009, http://elieshamir.co.il

18 Maurice Merleau Monty, *The Visible and the Invisible* [translated from Hebrew, trans. Eran Dorphin, Tel Aviv, Resling, 2004, p. 69].

the body of the painter, clothed and headless or perhaps beheaded like John the Baptist, as hinted at in the title.

From the second half of the decade, the result of Shamir's careful examination of painting becomes an entire poetics that includes all the biographical components that were interwoven in it. In 1995, the painting *Family Portrait (Achilles Chooses a String of Pearls)*, marks a new shift. The mythological hero Achilles chooses the pearl necklace when he is challenged to a test of his identity. The choice of Achilles, Shamir's double in terms of beauty, unfolds in the fields of Kfar Yehoshua. The story differs from the familiar myth: Thetis, the mother of Achilles, knowing that her son was destined to die in the Trojan War tries to prevent his death by sending him to the king's court, where to conceal himself he is forced to dress in women's clothing and take up weaving. Odysseus, who goes in search of him, arrives at the palace dressed as a peddler, carrying women's trinkets as well as swords and daggers. According to the myth, Achilles chose the weapon from the peddler's array of goods, thereby exposing his identity and sealing his fate: Achilles is killed on the battlefield. Shamir intervenes in the mythological narrative. For him the choice of Achilles constitutes the beginning of a pictorial journey that unfolds before our eyes. The choice is art as the space of the sensory. The choice is sight and touch that become realized in the emerging patches of colour, in the familiar surroundings that are revealed and established in a gaze that seeks painterly beauty, as Merleau-Ponty observes: "To see means to participate in the world through visual openness to it."[19]

Today, Shamir is recognized as a figurative artist and identified with his images of the Jezreel Valley and its inhabitants. Despite the nostalgic approach attributed to his work, looking at his complete oeuvre from the eighties and onward reveals a body of work that was constructed around the attempt to expose the blindness built into in the Zionist ethos and the price it extracted by taking an aesthetic and ethical look at the work of painting and at its real and allegorical figures as one.

19 Ibid.

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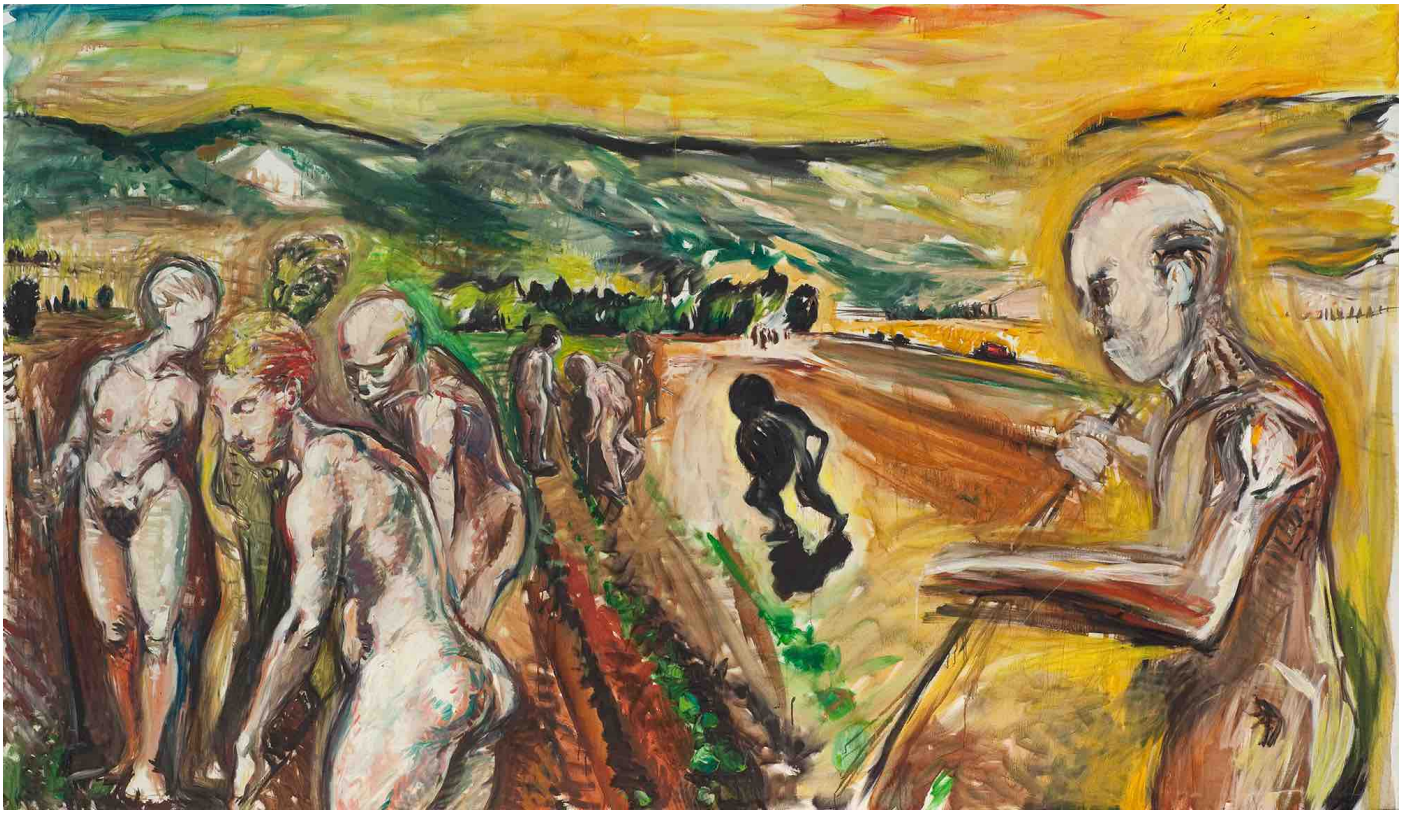


Montagne Sainte Victoire Dans Le Desert