

# Oil City on Canvas

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By Valerie Behiery

*Abadan-born artist  
Mohammad Hossein Maher  
describes the lasting effect  
that memories of his  
hometown have had on  
his work, and the enduring  
power of cultural traditions  
in a rapidly changing  
present.*

**M**ohammad Hossein Maher's paintings are grounded in autobiographical particulars and the regional and cultural identity of Abadan, while also addressing universal, existential issues. The colourful son of Abadan explains: "The human's inner world or soul has always interested me. In my paintings, you can always find a part of me – my thoughts and perceptions. When I create, I follow my intuitions, and try to listen to the universe inside the painting itself." He recently spoke to Underline about the guiding themes of his work, keeping Persian influences alive and responding to momentous social changes through art.





*Stairs* (detail), 2016. All images courtesy of the artist





*Migration, mix on cardboard, 52 x 68cm, 2012*

**UNDERLINE:** Your long and fruitful career has been characterised by a succession of different periods and themes. I'm interested to hear what your current preoccupations are in your work.

**MOHAMMAD HOSSEIN MAHER:** Each series has emerged from the questions that I struggled with at the time. Today, on the eve of my seventh decade, these questions now transcend myself and my immediate surroundings, and deal





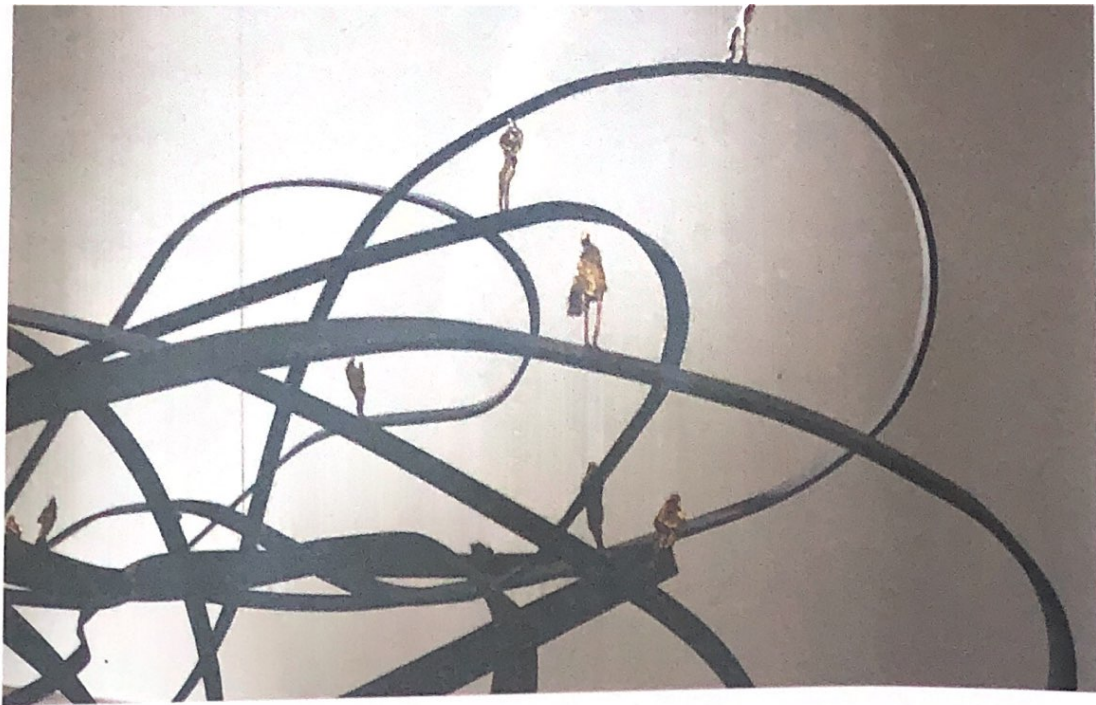
with things like the influx of information or the flood of migrants, a phenomenon that we witness daily. All of this makes me more determined to pay particular attention to my cultural and historical heritage and roots and explore the

ways in which the remnants of the past are reflected in the present. Extensive human migration leading to a no-man's land, a place with no coordinates, is a theme that I address in my new works. I'm drawn to painting canvases that represent placeless spaces, vague and mysterious, like stairs purposefully leading to nowhere. Here, my sole interest is the act of 'displacement' itself.

**UNDERLINE:** You grew up in Abadan when the city was at the height of fame and glory. Tell us something about the Abadan of your childhood.

**MAHER:** I moved to Tehran with my family in the 1960s, but a part of me remained behind, later becoming the driving force urging me to return. The Abadan of my childhood was full of joy and unforgettable memories. I remember the neighbourhoods where I lived: well-planned areas with green walkways that called us to play outdoors and the networks of long pipes leading to the refinery resembling veins connected to the city's heart. The music halls, theatres and open-air cinemas topped by the night sky and the glowing flames of the distant refinery were also truly magical. My memories also include diving in the ponds – the sole cure for the sun's burning heat – gazing at the beautiful palm trees adorning the urban landscape or the cowherds with their cattle on the riverbank, as well as enjoying the wafts of the thin Tiri bread Arab women baked





Untitled (detail), metal and bronze, 160 x 297 x 60cm, 2015

on the teak, and the fragrant spices in the Arab bazaar. I returned to Abadan many years later, to obtain a new birth certificate. Leaving the train station, I took the bridge towards Abadan and opened my arms wide halfway across, as I felt like Khorramshahr on one side and Abadan on the other side were each pulling me towards them. Many years had passed, but the way I felt for my hometown had somehow stayed the same.

**UNDERLINE:** After studying at Tehran's College of Decorative Arts and later in France, you felt compelled to return to Abadan to find a style of painting that could translate the intensity of life there.

**MAHER:** I grew up in the south. My imagination is inspired by my childhood memories and experiences. The figures

that you see in my paintings mostly portray the people from the south. Even the objects and settings have a southern touch. I travelled a lot during my studies, which helped me learn about form, composition and colour. However, I always wanted to return to Abadan to draw what I had in my mind. When I did go back, I came to a new understanding about the relationship between a people and their climate, natural environment and architecture, which I explored in my paintings. I focused on the miniatures, monuments, handicrafts, and hand weaving that were originally practised in the area. These formed the foundation of my research which continued for seven years.

**UNDERLINE:** Although the war ravaged the city in the 1980s, you still feel drawn to Abadan?



MAHER: I served in the military in different cities during the war: Abadan, Khorramshahr, Ahvaz, and Susangerd. I saw many people injured and cities destroyed. On my days off, I used to wander in Abadan's alleys, disturbed by the scars of bullets and mortars that had pierced through the walls and the palm trees with no fronds. My beautiful Abadan was injured; the wounds haven't healed yet. I still go back sometimes and stroll in the streets. My face and body, like those of Abadan, have changed over all these years, but we still understand each other in our silence.

UNDERLINE: Persian art, history and myth are central to your work. Do you believe they still shape Iranian identity in the twenty-first century?

MAHER: Besides the Western analytical courses that we had at university, Iranian art also held a significant place in our curriculum. But beyond the university context, it was, for me, inevitable to incorporate ancient and medieval Persian art into my practice. Iranians take pride in their country's rich cultural and artistic heritage, and this quality is evident even in Iranian contemporary pop culture. Take the Persian rug in my room as an example. It is basically a Persian garden that I live in, symbolically speaking; a garden that provokes the fantasy of other times and spaces. Gardens



Mohammad Hossein Maher

constitute a fantastic landscape in which our poems, myths, and tales – like the *Shahnameh* for example – take place and so it is certainly present at the core of all Iranians, including me. My paintings are essentially a throwback to Persian myths and history. My choice of colours, forms, and compositions are inherently inspired by what I grew up with. My subjects, as well as my visual methods such as equilibrium, exaggeration, and the balance between positive and negative space, all express what resonated with me as a child. Of course, they have been transformed over time and have become more blended with the contemporary language of art.

UNDERLINE: You are known mostly as a painter, although you also produce interesting sculptures. What does it afford that the other visual mediums do not?





South, oil on canvas, 130 x 90cm, 2013

MAHER: I don't see sculpture as a medium far from painting and drawing. Whenever the colours and brush alone don't seem enough, I turn to sculpture. My metal and glass sculptures emerged from my inner lucidity and passion. Sculpture became the medium of my migration series. I always return to it because it possesses a spiritual power. I believe that a medium itself is not art. Art is to be found in how that medium is used, the way in which the content is expressed. In the process of creation, many conditions and skills must coincide to give birth to an artwork. For me, this very process is as valuable as the artwork itself.

**UNDERLINE:** Many Western art historians keep proclaiming, wrongly, that painting is dead. How do you view your relationship to painting now?

MAHER: After forty years of painting, I can't separate myself from my art. Now, it is painting that pulls me along! It's not an exaggeration to say that my main motivation for living is to paint. As for the death of painting, I believe nothing ends in this world. That is to say that there are infinite possibilities, especially in art, which is an ever-changing cycle in which things accumulate and are transformed over time. Iran is an ancient, multicultural land with numerous ethnic and linguistic groups. I see this as a 'potential'. Each ethnicity has its own set of beliefs and traditions, but they all share the same history, the same geography, and the same cultural heritage. Certainly such a rich, old culture has the ability to constantly innovate, as the history of its art has proved. ■





South, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 61.5cm, 2015