

# THE LEFT HAND PAINTING

---



OCTOBER 2018

# The Left Hand Painting

By Ramsey Chahine

It was in 2016 during the rigorous months making The Endurance Painting that an ache in my arm became a subject of great fascination. Try holding up one arm for twelve hours a day, for one year, for no apparent reason. A searing pain will stretch from the shoulder to the base of the brain, locking up the neck. It's how I imagine it'd feel to be dipped in the River of Styx, a kind of wet chemical fire coating the muscles with lye.

A key to enduring is the ability to offload stress to different muscle groups in order to stave off acid buildup, fatigue, pain, and the desire to give in. Endurance is not just bulldogging through a tough spot but tactfully using the tools of one's body and mind to continue with grace. Offloading is the skill of tuning into one's body to disperse responsibility throughout the anatomy, constantly and consistently adjusting and accounting for error.

In the year spent holding up my right arm slowly and deliberately painting 20,736 squares, I often fantasized about switching hands for relief. I wasn't inclined to do it right then though, it seemed to be a way of easing the process instead of deepening the pain, as was the objective at the moment. There was something pure about steering into the misery. Furthermore, the Left Hand seemed to have potential for its own uniquely tedious and deliberate journey.

In November 2016 I began sourcing material for the development of the Left Hand Painting. Early on it was clear that the goal was to make a painting that revealed the ability of the hand, not to just make a painting with the hand. The pursuit was to paint something that could demonstrate that the left hand was competent across time, capable of intricacy, consistency, straight, square, curved, tight, and free. It would have to be a painting that would be difficult for the strong hand to paint and punishingly difficult for the weak.

I remember as a kid seeing complex arabesques adorn the houses of my Lebanese relatives, hidden in old-looking books and covering the floors of certain rooms. The technical mathematics of Middle-Eastern and Persian imagery, given priority in the culture over the representational imagery of The West, has perhaps had no rival in its visual intricacy. Quranic illuminations (the decorative illustrations of the Quran) and Persian Rugs display complex variations of impossible endless knots, abounding geometric spirals jeweled with tendrils, infinite variations of flowers, palmettes, shapes, and perfect seamless mandalas with hundreds of unique varied details.

It became apparent that the imagery of the Middle East would serve as a perfect obstacle course for the Left Hand to develop and demonstrate proficiency. And that's what was required—an obstacle course. After all this was a mechanical challenge, the goal of which was to undeniably prove the left hand was no longer something to be regarded as weak.

The 6-month project began with a detailed left-handed drawing on the canvas mapping out the image. After about a month I began painting. Each day I improved, brushstroke by brushstroke slowly becoming more efficient and confident. As the layers built up on the canvas I grew more comfortable and capable, and began using my left hand in other areas of life--brushing teeth, cooking, chopping, carrying etc. It became a small element of mindfulness to be implemented sporadically throughout a typical day's rituals.

Fast forward to now and The Left Hand Painting hangs in the studio-- a symbol of this strange desire to hunt down weakness and transform it. That's what I see when I look at this painting, a curious urge to steer into difficulty and make something there.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity to arise from these challenging endeavors-the Endurance Painting, the 100 Mile Run, the Left Hand Painting--is the opportunity they present to make peace with discomfort--to make difficulty a resting place. It's a way of living that opens one up to the possibility of accomplishing what others may find impossible. If our normal impulse is to relax into what is familiar we quickly become stagnant and dead. At the very core of my practice is a deep desire to reverse that impulse, to live with vigor and enthusiasm, and to embrace difficulty to see what may be uncovered therein.



















The Left Hand Painting  
Oil on Linen,  
4 x 3 feet,  
2016-17.



To inquire