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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

YZ Kami, Endless Prayers

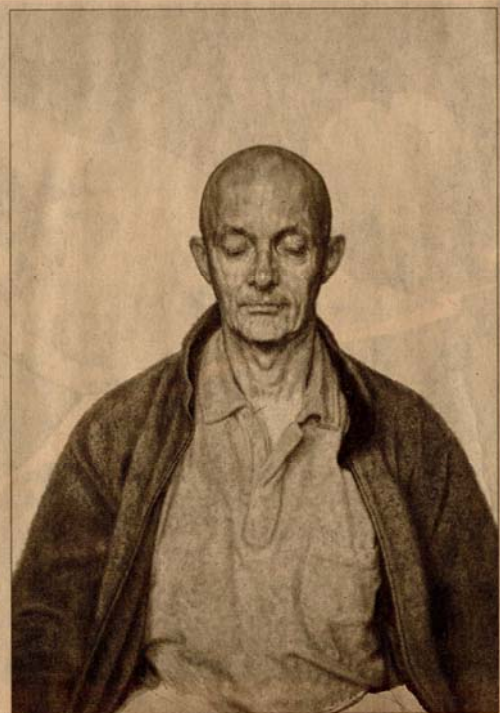
Parasol Unit, London N1

The Iranian artist YZ Kami's giant, unsettling oil portrait series *In Jerusalem*, based on a New York Times photograph and depicting a sheikh, cardinal, Armenian patriarch and Sephardic and Ashkenazi rabbis in their ornate official garbs, was among the most haunting works at last year's Venice biennale. Political strife? Religious oppression? Patriarchal domination? Hopes of unity? Although it suggested many themes, none quite fitted these portraits, whose subjects gaze down or look away, denying emotional contact just as Kami's blurred brushwork deliberately frustrates attempts to focus.

It is a pleasure to see them again in this broad, intelligent retrospective, which establishes Kami as a distinctive 21st-century conceptual portraitist. Here, amid crowds of everyday faces, all singular but also painted as expressionless masks, ordinariness

emphasised by nondescript clothing, Kami's overriding theme becomes clear: the unknowability of the Other, the loneliness of the individual in an identikit global society. The vast, alienating scale, and Kami's flat, fresco-like textures, enhance the sense of detachment and cloistered muteness.

Kami studied philosophy at the Sorbonne and his second project here, collages of Arabic texts evoking ornamental Islamic art and occasionally the Christian cross, has a spare, cerebral grace that complements the portraits. Both series are multicultural, democratic, contemporary, yet Kami's work also recalls Genet's words on another existentialist artist, Giacometti: that the resemblance of the sculptor's figures to one another represents "that precious point at which human beings are confronted with the most irreducible fact: the loneliness of being equivalent to all others".
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YZ Kami's 'Untitled', 2005