

Silent Elegance

The Distinctive World of Safwan Dahoul



Safwan Dahoul. 'Rêve'. 2007. Acrylic on canvas. 180 x 180 cm.

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ho is this woman you're always painting?" is a question that people always ask Safwan Dahoul. "I am not painting the woman; it is the blackness that's around her - the space," he says. Space, or rather, the relationship between the human being and space, is the notion that occupies Dahoul's artistic mind. "Am I drawing the space and which makes a figure appear within? Or am I drawing a figure, and the space is a by-product? Which is the negative and which is the positive?" He answers his own question, "Most of the time, I feel I am drawing space - how the space is everywhere, surrounding us, even inside us."

Dahoul's canvases are dominated by black, with shades of grey and beige. He explains this disinclination towards colour as a natural response to his surroundings; a reflection of his personal life. "Haven't you noticed how the colours in Syria are so subdued? Even the green of the trees is pale," he says, "I don't ever remember seeing people wearing bright colours here. Growing up, nobody wore yellow or blue or pink. I don't remember a red

car, ever. Even now, among the younger generation, who are supposed to wear whatever they want to wear because they are still young, I challenge you to find colour." Stylistically and conceptually, this colour minimalism is an important aspect of Dahoul's artistic practice. "Less colour means clearer ideas, less colour asks for a more sensitive perception from the viewer," he explains. "Other painters can do bright colours, and I have full respect for them, but it's just not me."

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The images that appear in Dahoul's paintings are soulful, dreamy, seekers of silence. Masks are a prominent feature in his work. They hint at an exploration of the psyche, a questioning of the self, or the different layers of self, even the separation of body and soul. "Painting is not poetry, it's not music. I want to express the inner essence of the human being; not with word or sound, but with shape, line and colour." There are certain elements that appear in Dahoul's works such as a table, a chair, a woman, a couch or a frame. "Repetition is not a bad thing," he says. "I am fascinated by this combination...I can capture so many hidden feelings by keeping my colour

palette and my subject matter the same. They are really not the same at all."

No wonder then that 'Dream' has been the title of his work for a long time now; "20 years ago I started painting a series I called 'Dream', and I had no idea that I would keep on doing it. I can't help it. They're all 'Dream'," he says in a quiet self-reflective voice. "Sometimes it's just a gentle way to cover up the harshness of life. Sometimes it is a call for silence, Sometimes, it is a game...The space changes, the characters change, but the title is always 'Dream'." The central figure, often a woman, is simultaneously majestic, distant, tender and fragile. A luminosity glows behind his constructed world of shadows.

In his most recent exhibition, the woman he draws appears several times curled up in a foetal position, closing in on herself (or maybe the blackness is closing in around her). Her arms or fingers are often crossed and sometimes her eyes are vacant, while in other works they glance out invitingly, hinting at a possibility of liberation from the closed space. What is constant is the viewer's response - to protect this mysterious woman.

Dahoul considers his paintings to be "a daily diary" of his life; continuous, personal, spontaneous. The repetition of elements is

as natural as he is. His inspiration comes from the process of creation. His work is not the culmination of pre-meditated ideas. The question arises of how his paintings can be a personal diary when the iconography is usually a female figure? "I believe in the spirituality of things," he explains, "The surrounding blackness could be a man embracing the woman. Maybe the couch that carries and embraces her is a man or maybe the bed of nails..." The emotional force of Dahoul's paintings is stronger and deeper than they might appear at first glance, similar to the depth of sadness that lurks behind the artist's jovial façade.

Overlapping geometric shapes are a distinctive element in Dahoul's work, often resulting in a flattened perspective that emphasises the expanse of the canvas, which in turn creates the illusion of depth. Dahoul enjoys the interplay between circles and squares, sharp angles and smooth curves, which is particularly apparent around his figures' jaw-line, neck and shoulders. The corporeality of a wicker chair, table or couch also incites interplay between the abstract and the realistic. Every once in a while, Dahoul allows a tiny pair of angel wings to appear. Like a blessing, a promise or reprieve, they materialise on the woman's shoulders, or appear near to her heart. **A**



SAFWAN DAHOUL

After his graduation from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, Hama-born Dahoul moved to Belgium where he undertook a doctorate in Plastic Arts at the Higher Institute of Plastic Arts in Mons. This experience nurtured a deep attachment to the great Belgian and Dutch masters of Bruegel, Bosch and Knouf.

Dahoul's works have appeared at the Christie's (February 2007), Sotheby's (October 2007), and Bonhams (March 2008) sales of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art in Dubai and London, exceeding pre-sale estimates each time. In March, one work by Dahoul sold for \$135,000 at the Compagnie Marocaine des Oeuvres et Objets d'Art (CMOOA) auction of Modern and Contemporary Arab art in Casablanca, Morocco. Today, he enjoys great popularity among international art collectors and his works can be found in both public and private collections worldwide.

Dahoul has had solo exhibitions in Europe and the Middle East. His solo show at Ayyam Gallery, Damascus, in March 2008, sold out on the opening day. Considered as one of the most distinctive characters on the Contemporary Arab art scene, Dahoul's elegant portraits - with their clear lines and smooth characters - convey a tendency towards Cubism, while reflecting an authenticity that springs from life itself.