

Nuclear fusion

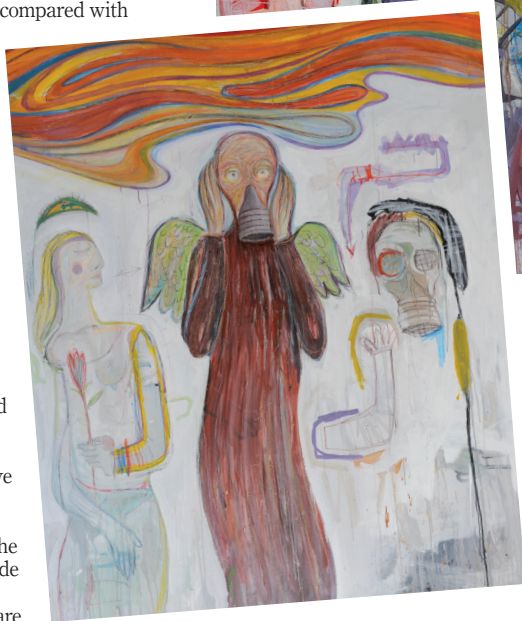
Mona Lisa in a gas mask, chanting 'Ban the bomb'?
Chris Lord checks out the edgy work of Oussama Diab

It's fitting that when we first meet Oussama Diab, he's scrawling on the walls of a corridor in Ayyam Gallery. A hybrid of bird and woman glistens in bright blue marker, with thighs speckled in red pen. 'What I'm doing is similar to graffiti,' says the Palestinian artist, who was born in Damascus. 'I'm trying to present my ideas in the way that you do when you're at school – drawing freely on a book or on a scrap of paper.'

His debut solo show is quite a daring move by Ayyam. Though fresh out of the gallery's incubator for new talent, Diab presents a sizeable collection, with elements that are markedly different from what we're used to seeing in Syria's contemporary scene. He offers something more fantastical, perhaps even demented, compared with the rest of Ayyam's signature group: a refreshingly anarchic street style.

There are two clear sections to this show. On one side, we see dresses suspended lifelessly in front of textured, blasted backgrounds. Real wooden coathangers have been inserted a little clumsily into the top of the canvas. Alongside this, faces with piercing eyes stare from washed-out grey canvases. These shimmering eyes, with more than a nod to Iraqi artist Halim Al-Karim, give focus to heads that are otherwise a chaos of interknotted lines and furiously struck dashes of paint.

But it is Diab's bizarre narrative works, subverting typical images from art history, that really make this show worth checking out. Stripped down and displaced within a white expanse,



Diab creates simplified characters with angular faces and flashing oval eyes. Flaxen-haired princesses hand flowers to vaguely grotesque figures, with obsessively etched Arabic words just visible in repeated patterns of the canvas. We see the Mona Lisa, looking rather frumpy in a gas mask, surrounded by atomic bomb symbols. Edvard Munch's 'The Scream' looks even more harrowed, if slightly ridiculous, also in a gas mask.

has always been about trying to capture the atmospheres that influence our personality at any one time. Nuclear war, he explains, is more a symbol of the general foreboding that seems to exist today – a constant uncertain precipice, with the world teetering on its edge. 'The space around an object is the main factor that affects things,' he says. 'In our case it may be political, economical – all these things will affect us one way or another.'

That accounts for the emotive messy interiors of the people represented in Diab's large-scale portraits, but how then to situate this very visual (and slightly '80s) notion of nuclear war? 'I have no prophecy

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about this. I'm just trying to send the message: be careful. If somebody throws a nuclear bomb, at that point all of us will be victims, Arab or not.'

Some of Diab's ideas need a little more development, and these Basquiat-soaked compositions suggest an artist still searching for an expressive voice that can accomplish the simplicity he's looking for. Still, the narrative works are bold, funny and, if occasionally a little naive, point to a rawness that will find more shape with time. Diab represents a wonderfully volatile movement in Ayyam's selection of new talent.

Oussama Diab's solo show continues at Ayyam Gallery until February 27

As we chat to Diab, we watch a video created by fellow Ayyam artist Ammar Al-Beik that shows Diab working frantically in his studio. Simple, even childlike, there's more than a hint of Basquiat about the world that he evokes. 'I particularly like Basquiat's technique,' he explains. 'He worked in a very natural way to express things. He didn't fake it.'

We ask about this gas-masked world he creates, which seems to discard predefined ideas of beauty as nuclear war takes hold. 'The US or Israel may be trying to have nuclear weapons while not allowing other countries to have them – this is not the central problem as I'm showing it here. It's humanity that will pay for this thing in the end. We'll end up in a world where everyone may have to wear a gas mask.'

It all sounds pretty simplistic, yet there is more going on in Diab's work than mere ban-the-bomb sloganing. He tells us that his work

