

## Deep seated

**Walid El Masri's** solo show at Ayyam opens this week. *Chris Lord* heads to Damascus to scour the hidden depths behind all that furniture

Talking to an artist via a translator is always difficult. Trying to wander this way among the furniture of Walid El Masri's work is like a labyrinth.

But when we meet El Masri in his vast basement studio in a leafy suburb of Damascus, something previously enigmatic suddenly makes a lot of sense. El Masri's works are all around us, each featuring the signature chair and defining abundance of a single ideas that have become instantly recognisable aspects of his art.

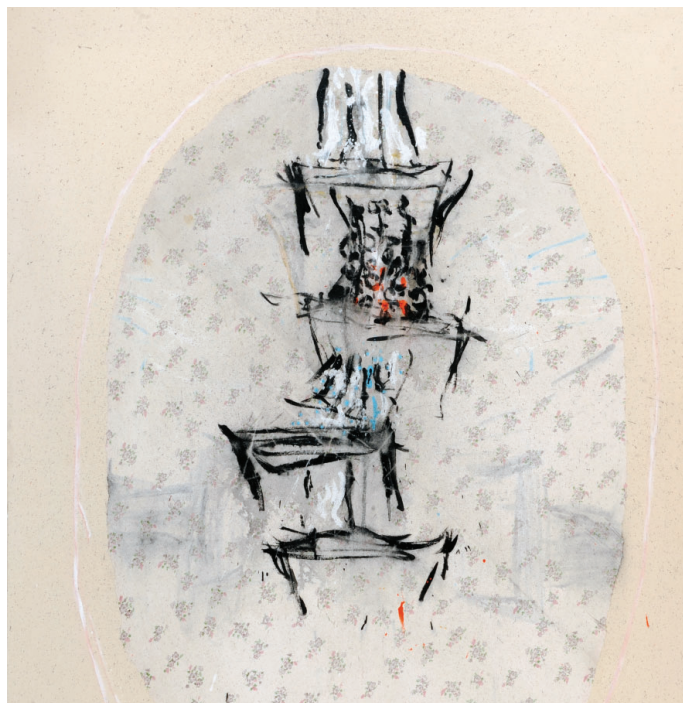
*Time Out* catches up with the Syrian artist a few weeks after his return from a show in Beijing. 'I was surprised that people understood the complexities in these works,' he explains. 'They felt there was something Chinese about my art.' He also believes it was something about the layout of the Beijing exhibition that drew passers-by into his work. 'The other artists were closed off, in small rooms separate from the space. I was given a single wall in the main space. You could pass by it – the viewer wasn't trapped in a room.'

El Masri left school at 14 to learn the family business of mosaic making. Having watched his father – a silent, peaceful man – at work, El Masri tells us he came into the trade and quickly gained an aptitude for laying vast tiled creations. This fostered in him a certain meticulousness; a propensity for repetition that we see in his continual use of a chair motif. When he eventually returned to art school, he insisted on laying out his work on the walls of the college in neat, tiled rows.

This sense of the individual works being part of a greater whole, El Masri explains, is essential to understanding what he's getting at. 'In Chinese philosophy there is always duality, empty space and an object, white and black. In my works this exists also. All of my chairs are painted as if there is a bigger whole beyond them – that's why they always run off the canvas. I want the objects that are within this empty space to give you the impression that the space surrounds you, not just in the painting.'



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We try to prompt an explanation of the ubiquitous chairs in El Masri's work, but he stops us to explain, sage-like despite the sunglasses balancing on his head. 'There is no reason that I use a chair – it's just a very simple object that everyone can understand. It's there to make you understand the idea of an object, but it's not about what this object is or represents. The first time you look, you see a chair, but afterwards, hopefully, you don't.' There are hints, as El Masri talks, of a Zen-like philosophy underpinning these works. 'Painting makes me more balanced – I need that,' he says, explaining his interest in how ideas of the Buddha and the Tao Te Ching may have permeated the Middle East.

It seems as though El Masri is seeking some common ground between the philosophies of the Far East and those of the Middle East. Attracted to the simplicity of what he calls the 'black lines' of Chinese art, this extends to an ascetic view of life that he suggests both cultures, in their deepest philosophies, aspire to. El Masri himself is of Druze heritage, and tells us that 'at their very beginning, these works come from the philosophy of the Druze'.

The Druze in Syria live predominantly in the mountainous south-west of the country. An offshoot of Islam that emerged in the 11th century, the faith draws on various esoteric and Gnostic philosophies in its interpretation of Islam. As soon as El Masri begins to talk about the ideas of the Druze, the tempo of conversation spirals out of control. But through the mass of ideas, it seems it is the simplicity of living and the contemplative traditions of the Druze that have drawn El Masri to explore his own background through the philosophies of the Far East.

After wading through this fog of complicated ideas and even more complicated translation, it's tough to return to the simplicity of El Masri's art. But as he leads us past a selection of works, hanging very close together on a plain white wall, it's hard not to take on some of the silence that these pieces carry. For all of the philosophies buzzing in the artist, it's also hard not to think of El Masri's father – silently, studiously assembling a greater whole.

*Walid El Masri's solo show continues at Ayyam Gallery until December 21*

