

Master of Dreams

Words Nadia Muhanna
Photos Manaf Hassan

Auction houses from London to Dubai are lining up to place his works into their sales, yet Safwan Dahoul remains unfazed. “My greatest joy is still to sit down in my studio and paint!”

Soft opera music plays in the background. A man in a stained overall stands in front of a canvas with a measuring stick in one hand and a brush in the other, taking measurements and calculating dimensions with mathematical precision. At first sight, his moves seem like those of an engineer, yet when you turn to the canvas you will find the representation of a melancholy woman who looks at you so tenderly that you can almost hear her heart beat. That's Safwan Dahoul: a unique combination of meticulous calculations and moving spontaneity.

According to Dahoul, the recipe is very easy. “It’s just like writing,” he explains. “To make a clear sentence you need a perfect structure; then you spice it up with good style.”

All his paintings are entitled ‘Dream’, as painting is a dream that he long struggled to fulfil. Born in Hama in 1961, Dahoul is the

youngest of eight children in a family that thumbed its nose at art. “I used to sneak to the atelier of a painter who lived next door to watch him work,” Dahoul remembers. “By then I knew that art was my destiny.”

Despite the fact that his parents enrolled him at the “Suheil Al Ahdab” art school at the age of 12, they turned their backs on him when he announced that he wanted to make painting his profession. “They were afraid that I would end up being a poorly paid art teacher,” he smiles.

Against his parents’ will, Dahoul registered at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus. “It was very hard at the beginning,” he says.

“At the end of the day, it’s just me and the canvas.”

“I felt estranged in the capital; it was very different and liberal compared to Hama.”

Things got better though: Dahoul found his place in the capital and obtained a BA in Art in 1983. Two years later, he obtained a diploma and wrote a thesis on the Flemish school. “I like the Flemish school because it’s so human,” he says. “Their art is so popular and true that you can easily associate with it.”

In 1987, Dahoul came top of his class and was offered a scholarship by the Ministry of Higher Education. Without hesitation, Dahoul chose Belgium. He applied to the High School of Fine Arts in Mons, and was immediately accepted.

Getting a visa wasn’t easy though. “The Belgian Embassy didn’t give me a visa,” Dahoul says. “But I was determined to go!” For five long years, he repeatedly applied for a visa – in vain. As a last resort, he visited the Belgian ambassador to Syria, Michel





Lastschenko, who was interested in art. “I showed him my works and asked him to help,” Dahoul says. “And he did!”

In 1993, Dahoul’s dream came true. He



travelled to Belgium and was dazzled by its museums, churches and art history. “My years of study in Belgium had a great influence on my style,” he says. “But most importantly, I learned how to make use of other artistic styles without imitating them or losing my own identity as a painter.”

He developed a special style by breaking all the rules of space, colour and anatomy. “I enjoy geometrical figures,” Dahoul explains. “I’m ready to sacrifice the anatomy of the body for the sake of painting it in a circular way.”

When it comes to elements and colours, Dahoul is sparing. “More elements and colours don’t make a painting,” he says. “Besides, look around! There are almost no colours in Syria. How can I paint what I don’t see?”

Dahoul compares his paintings to a series of photos taken at the same time and in the same place with slight differences. “I like to

capture a moment in my paintings,” Dahoul says. “The next moment is another painting even if its elements are almost the same.”

Dahoul’s particular style and approach make him one of Syria’s most important contemporary artists. His paintings, which have been showcased in more than 15 solo exhibitions around the world, are now featured in international auction houses such as Christie’s and Sotheby’s. One of his



“There are almost no colours in Syria. How can I paint what I don’t see?”

paintings has been sold for USD 40,000 at Christie’s in February 2007 and another was sold for USD 71,300 at Sotheby’s in London on October 24.

And yet, Dahoul is surprisingly modest about his success. “At the end of the day, it’s just me and the canvas that are left,” he says. “For me, the greatest joy is still to sit down in my studio and paint!”