

I know that face

In Damascus, *Chris Lord* meets **Mohannad Orabi** to search for meaning behind those enigmatic faces

We're led down a crumbling and sun-bleached alley to Mohammad Orabi's studio. The young Syrian artist, who has recently moved from a modern apartment block in New Damascus to this relic, embedded in the depths of the Old Town, heaves open the iron door and leads us into the paint-blasted cave within. 'Something different came into my art when I moved here,' says Orabi, visibly sweating in Syria's summer heat and pushing his long hair away from his glasses as he scours for coffee cups. 'I didn't feel good in that new building. I was looking for something more emotional. I think. I can see people walking past here. I can hear the watermelon seller's call in the morning.'

The faces that have come to define Orabi's art stare at us from all sides. There are huge canvases stacked against a wall, each dominated by his signature ever-so-slightly unnerving, childlike and sexless faces. In the recesses of the room, we can see scraps of paper etched with more faces – some are disembodied, others have vague, almost ethereally cherubic bodies.

Orabi explains that he's been feverishly preparing for his solo show in Dubai, which opens this week. The artist exhibited in Beijing earlier this year, where, we're told, his work was well received. These newer paintings, scattered around the studio, still bear the shapes and simplicity of his earlier style – but there's no doubting that he has come on since he first joined Ayyam, as part of their Shabbab programme for new talent in 2007.

But what exactly is this change? Back with empty cups, Orabi sets them down on a wooden table piled high with sketches and starts grabbing the small canvases that are piled up in the corner of the room. 'I want to display 12 of my pieces in a grid, with one larger one in the centre, for the solo in Dubai,' he says breathlessly, placing his canvases in this shape on the studio floor to show us.

Soon, we're looking over a scratchy mosaic of Orabi's faces (top) set over panels of block-colour. There's an evidently sharper maturity in how he is handling his compositions now.



'It's like when you know a friend's face well, but you don't know what's behind it'



He now seems more comfortable with the stripped down appearance of the stronger, earlier works. The latest pieces rely entirely on this simplistic face, merely an arrangement of

a square and a circle that gives a mouldable structure to what he's trying to achieve with colour.

We ask Orabi about these faces. 'I want to make something very simple,

but something you can think about deeply. It's just a circle and a square, but it's the colours within that are important.' The colours are turbulent in this 13-panel piece. The central canvas (a grey background with a face given a decayed green and white wash) captures the ambiguity of his style. A blue polka-dotted body is set against the murk of the background. The colours lead us to question the apparent cheeriness of the face he constantly returns to in his work.

It's hard to overlook the influence of Damascus's discoloured, weathered walls in the colours of this face, while the perspective of Orabi's faces is reminiscent of the Byzantine-esque religious icons that line shopfronts on the alleys leading to his studio.

Yet despite this, the faces remain enigmatic – and equally so to Orabi it would seem: 'It's like when you sit with someone, a good friend, your wife or a brother. You know their face very well but still you don't know what they're thinking about, you don't know what's behind their face.' He goes on to suggest that there is no certainty in his own mind as to the atmosphere or the emotion he is trying to portray with these faces. 'When I fall in love, maybe it's red. When I'm angry, it's also red.' The faces, then, are as elusive to Orabi as they are to us. The artist, as he progresses, continues to search for a palette to sufficiently contain the emotions he hopes to express. There's always an ambiguity in the images; what, at first glance, appears to be a joyful image can, with one circuit of this 13 panel piece, begin to look sinister. We can't pin anything down in what Orabi is doing. The works remain an ambiguous flurry of oscillating emotions and disconcertingly unknowable faces.

Coffee is quickly forgotten and we step out into the evening, and the buzzing, cloudless blue of Damascus's sky. 'If you ask anyone in Damascus, they will all like blue,' says Orabi. 'We have so many colours and shades in the walls of this city. But when he looks up to the sky, it's always that same blue.' Typically cryptic, but he continues: 'I put all these colours around me into my work. I feel harmonious, more comfortable after I have painted. My artwork is like that sky,' he says, pointing up, 'where I go to feel more balanced, emotionally, afterwards.' *Mohammad Orabi is at Ayyam Gallery until October 24*