

The Samawi Collection

Curated selections of Arab art

Volume I

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The Art (History) of Collecting

Art patronage in the Middle East has existed for thousands of years-since the Fertile Crescent gave birth to the world's first civilizations. In ancient times, artisans and architects created artworks and monuments that spoke of the glory of rulers and the flourishing of cultures. This gave way to the formation of aesthetics and the fashioning of complex visual languages that marked every facet of life. Advancements in technology and the improvement of techniques led to the sustained progress of artistic approaches over centuries and throughout the rise and fall of dynasties, empires, colonies and regimes.

With the rapid spread of Islam from the Arabian Peninsula throughout the Levant, North Africa, Asia and Europe, art continued to be critical to the defining of spiritual, political and cultural realities. From its modest beginnings in Mecca and Medina, where the earliest plans of mosques were executed during the time of the Prophet Mohammad, to the grandiose structures of the Ottoman Empire, the impact of art patronage was realized in the development of visual culture.

This has been carried on through countless elements of the modern Middle East, as the fashioning of Arab society has frequently been felt through the building of its cultural patrimony. Behind these developments have been individuals who commissioned, supported and encouraged breakthroughs in art.

Although the collecting of art in the region as it stands in its current manifestation has its roots in the Ottoman Empire, the widespread use of easel painting in the Arab world was seen under colonialism, with artists in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria regularly creating commissioned portraits or landscapes. In Palestine the art of Christian iconography and the studios of artists from which paintings could be purchased were equally important during this time. The use of professional photography in a similar manner became a local art form in the Middle East at the end of the nineteenth century.

The process of collecting changed as modernism spread throughout the region by the 1960s and artists gained greater creative freedom. The prevalence of works that sprung from independent explorations brought on a new dimension to the acquiring of art, prompting patrons to reexamine the ways in which they amassed collections. Concurrently, art became increasingly drawn to the political arena while artists began to express the Arab world's teetering social currents. Despite its often-challenging content, this type of work was not only met with great enthusiasm from audiences, it became essential to private and public collections.

Today's art patronage reflects the range of this history. Official initiatives and collections are changing the face of local society in myriad ways, while a growing number of private collectors and an increased interest in the region's culture are encouraging (and making it financially feasible for) artists to chart new ground at an

unprecedented rate. Overall, this fairs well for the grounding of the Middle Eastern art scene even further, in both its creative growth and its market, as artists are supported in their individual practices.

More often than not, these collections come with a distinct vision, be it based on specific tastes in art or larger intentions for the assemblage of works. Fundamentally, the act of curating is intrinsic to the art of collecting.

The forty-seven works that makeup the four part exhibition “The Samawi Collection: Curated Selections of Arab Art” represent some of the region’s most prominent artists, beginning with its modernist masters and ending with its recent trendsetters. Although divided into distinct themes, three critical views are offered.

Organized according to two separate time periods, (1960 – 2000) and (2001 – 2010), “Then What?” examines the ways in which artists have responded to the inescapable effects of a politicized reality. Several of the examples that are featured in the second half of this segment were commissioned by Khaled Samawi, the founding partner of Ayyam Gallery, after the 2008 Israeli bombardment of Gaza, an attack that left over one thousand Palestinian civilians dead and thousands more displaced. “Looking Forward” proceeds from the recent experiments that are hinted at in “Then What? (2001 – 2010)” with over a dozen paintings by artists who are currently redefining Middle Eastern art. “A Tribute to Samia Halaby” provides an in-depth look at a seminal figure whose fifty-year career has traversed many of the threads that have shaped contemporary Arab art.

As an overview of the countless aesthetics, experiments, narratives and subjects that have dominated regional visual culture since the 1960s, “The Samawi Collection” expounds the importance of championing their contributions.

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Then What 1960 - 2000

Of Poets and Men: Allegory, Reality and Abstraction as Intersections of Art and Politics

Since emerging from the furrows of colonialism during the first half of the twentieth-century, modern Arab history has been punctuated by struggles for independence (and power), the formation of nation-states (and political parties), and the carving out of collective (and independent) identities. While in the scheme of politics, narratives are written according to the accounts of the victorious and the defeated, artists have sought to provide greater nuance. Laced with the lyricism of a rich literary heritage, a deep understanding of the potency of visual culture, and the legacy of interlacing civilizations over the millennia, Arab culture has functioned as a vast tableau upon which artists have projected, deconstructed and challenged the shifting peripheries of their surroundings.

Shortly after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and amidst European mandates, painters and sculptors sought to reckon with the collision of two distinct modes of representation-that driven by the imposition of colonial decrees versus a centuries-old empirical aesthetic. As World War I brought increased entanglement among international forces and European art could no longer deny the influence of non-Western cultures, modernism evolved as a global movement. Encountering this school through various channels, Arab artists began to heavily identify with its range, recognizing details of their own visual culture among the works of its masters-from the influence of ancient art to the inherent abstraction of Islamic art-while simultaneously finding alternative means of communicating their newly found position in the world.

With the shedding of direct colonial rule came periods of social reckoning amidst the dawning of nations. Uncertainty loomed as European forces attempted to maintain a degree of political hold behind closed doors and Arab leaders vied for command. While the region faced an acute period of domestic instability as foreign powers continued to sustain or depose heads of state, the founding of Israel in 1948 and the preceding annexation of Palestinian lands produced catastrophic effects. Rippling through the Arab world with disastrous consequences, in many ways the establishment of the Zionist state solidified the strangulation of the Middle East by imperialist agendas.

As states developed under systems of governance that were essentially put into place for imminent failure, culture became a dire asset to the masses, summoning the political vision that was needed to move forward. In the 1950s and 60s a modern renaissance occurred in which poets, writers, artists, intellectuals and activists came together in cities such as Cairo, Beirut and Baghdad. This vibrant environment inspired work that was inline with global art movements, its impact trickling down to every aspect of Arab society as the political and creative worlds engaged in intense conversation.

It was during this time that Syrian modernist pioneer Louay Kayyali painted his masterpiece “Then What?” (1965), a prophetic composition that speaks of the post-Nakba experience. Grand in scale (and in impact), its depiction of a displaced people calls to mind the mass exodus that occurred when Zionist occupiers began to descend upon Palestine under the British Mandate, terrorizing inhabitants while expelling those who had survived the onslaught. Culminating in one of the largest refugee populations in the world, the Nakba (or “catastrophe”) has defined many aspects of recent Middle Eastern history. The decades that followed witnessed the further seizure of Arab territory by Israeli forces during violent conflicts that drew in neighboring Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. That “Then What?” was painted prior to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War demonstrates the extent to which the cultural subset was hyper in tune with the political sphere.

Part of a significant group of artists who trained in Europe, Kayyali was instrumental in the development of a specific school of regional painting-one that employed figurative representation to address and project larger sociopolitical concerns. Intensely committed, the artists of this movement often injected vivid realism with weighty metaphors, a logical practice given the vast tradition of poetry that has colored Arab culture for centuries. This provided an additional layer of complexity that allowed viewers to draw multiple conclusions from the topic at hand while also suggesting an apparent universality.

Although incorporating symbols and imagery that were easily identifiable to Arab audiences, Kayyali and his colleagues also depicted their subjects within everyday environments that could represent virtually any locale in the world. Utilizing the extensive knowledge of international art history that they had acquired while studying abroad or in local cities that served as cosmopolitan crossroads of thought, they relied on a bold mix of influences.

At times when political instability verged on the abject, this worked to ease an overwhelming sense of isolation, reminding communities that their struggle to obtain peace and justice correlated with a common appeal from mankind. Such details also stood to have a similar effect on foreign viewers.

In the 1970s, as contemporary trends began to sweep across the globe, there was a shift in Arab art. Abstract schools of international painting and sculpture took hold, influencing regional practices namely through artists who lived and worked in Europe and the US but were active members of the Middle Eastern art scene. As an emphasis on color, design, space and surface became paramount to aesthetic concerns, realist depictions became secondary. That is not to say that figurative art was done away with completely. On the contrary, it remained vital to a number of artists. What changed, however, was a general approach to representation with greater formulaic experiments leading to the development of local movements. Remarkably, as this progressed into the mainstream, Arab artists continued to create works that were infused with social commentary. What resulted were new and innovative ways of addressing issues of war and political strife.

Some artists, such as Mahmoud Hammad, turned to Arabic calligraphy, locating the roots of nonrepresentational art in the history of Arab visual culture. Updating this longstanding form with contemporary modes-a bright palette, intersecting planes that create depth and dimension, and broad, visible brushstrokes-words began to take on new meaning. Hammad, a prominent Syrian painter, was one of the first artists to incorporate Arabic text in art through abstraction.

Others, such as New York-based Palestinian artist Samia Halaby, produced works that sought to advance our understanding of the world, interpreting phenomena originating in nature through abstraction. Throughout her career, Halaby has simultaneously found inspiration in revolutionary struggles as she was motivated by new advancements in art. Driven by leftist ideals, a number of her abstract canvases explore the energy, motion and spatiality of particular political movements. With such titles as “War Women (for Dalal Mughrabi)” she invokes the strength of Palestinian resistance fighters.

Variations in figurative art during this time are observable in paintings by Naeem Ismael and Omar Hamdi, whose canvases exhibit preoccupations with space. When contrasting the two Syrian artists, it is interesting to note the generational gap that existed between them. In the mid 1970s Ismael was in the latter part of his influential career, while Hamdi was just emerging as a young artist. Nevertheless, Ismael’s work reflects contemporary techniques and Hamdi’s demonstrates a command that is usually only associated with established artists. Both embraced complete abstraction at some point in their careers, the evidence of which is visible in their politically minded works. This is most apparent in how they place their subjects against backgrounds that are dominated by large areas of uninterrupted color, setting their figures in contrast to moments of painterly abstraction that have an ominous feel, an abyss that creates an overall tension. It is this use of non-readable space that concerned contemporary painting of the time.

Regional art in the 1980s was marked by a noticeable change in the sentiments of artists. As large-scale violence swept the Middle East with the Iran-Iraq War, the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli occupations of Palestine and southern Lebanon, contemporary art took on a darker appearance. What began just a decade earlier in small doses now became magnified by the sociopolitical contexts that dominated cultural hubs. For many artists, it was impossible to escape. Depicting the brutality that engulfed their cities became a process through which to mourn, while for some it was a way of defying the odds, a means of asserting one’s existence as a survivor. For others, it was simply a way of recording history while calling out to the world. Figurative compositions became graphic, or, if not explicit, defined by shattering visual chaos. There was little optimism, and yet artists refused to remain creatively immobile. Their aesthetics evolved, despite the disruption of art movements.

In the 1990s, with the increasing entrance of technology in visual culture, contemporary Arab art was transformed by cutting-edge experiments and the influence of new media. As a growing globalized world brought the advent of new forms of communication, artists gained endless opportunities to engage with their peers among international developments, this brought greater freedom in representation with the clear influence of popular culture and other disciplines such as cinema.

That several examples of prominent schools of Arab art are brought together in “Then What? (1960-2000)” speaks of a lineage of culture that has evolved despite all odds. At the helm of this history have been artists who have insisted on charting the intersections of art and politics. Beginning with Louay Kayyali’s monumental canvas, this selection of work underscores the great extent to which Arab artists have reflected upon the ravaged state of our modern world with an outpouring of grief, optimism and defiance. Brought together for the first time, they demonstrate how a socially conscious milieu in regional art has been thriving for decades.



When Syrian pioneer Louay Kayyali painted the masterwork “Then What?” in 1965, he created one of the most iconic images of Arab visual culture. Although reflecting the torment and anguish of a displaced people, its epic narrative also contains a devastating sense of premonition. Produced just two years prior to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the painting seems to provide an eerie look into the catastrophic events that were to come.

Marking the demise of Pan-Arab Nationalism and the defeat of Arab forces with the onset of Israel’s annexation of the Palestinian Territories and the Golan Heights, the war would change the geopolitical face of the Middle East forever. With vast implications, the conflict would also increase the number of Palestinian refugees worldwide while further fragmenting communities that remained under the terror of constant attacks.

It is possible that Kayyali was simply responding to the legacy of the Nakba, as the Palestinian question had been etched into the consciousness of the Arab masses since 1948. Yet the exceptionality of “Then What?” lies not only in its monumental subject matter-the formidable exodus of a population that possesses neither shelter nor protection-but in the distinct manner in which it is painted.

There is an apparent rawness to Kayyali’s figures, one that deviates from the crisp lines and smooth surfaces that he is otherwise known for. Employing a highly expressive method of painting that allows his brushstrokes to be detected, his coarse application of medium resembles the fresco techniques of early Renaissance giants like Masaccio. This connection is obvious when considering his biography, as Kayyali studied in Rome like many Syrian artists of his generation. Upon closer examination of “Then What?” a direct link to the Italian master becomes indisputable.

In Kayyali's work eleven figures (seven women, two boys and one man) are crowded together as though walking in unison. With most of their gazes turned away from the viewer, they are lost in the suggested horror of their surroundings as several peer up at an invisible, looming force. In the center of the canvas is a man whose features are distorted as the artist has rendered his face with quick brush marks and few details. Hunched over and overpowered by an incomprehensible weight, he seems to carry the burden of mankind. His arched back, angular chin and hidden face resemble Masaccio's Adam in "The Expulsion from Paradise" (1427). Behind him stands a female figure in profile, her head stretched far into the sky, as she beckons the heavens for reprieve and reflects the inescapable posture of a body that is overrun by grief. Kayyali has painted her face in a near identical rendering of Eve in the above-mentioned fresco, as he simply rearranged the central figures of Masaccio's composition.

This tie is enunciated as the title of the Italian fresco lends to the poetic sorrow of Kayyali's "Then What?" with Palestinians standing in for the mother and father of humanity while their homeland is equated with paradise. Even Adam and Eve's feet seem to have been models for those of Kayyali's. The biblical heritage of Palestine is also not to be ignored. What the Syrian artist achieves with this subtle yet grand use of art history is a universal overtone that stretches beyond the physical (and political) borders of the Arab world.

The artist's disoriented subjects are placed tightly within the composition. Their feet cover much of the foreground. Their dark forms are set against a scant background. They are essentially trapped, as they look up towards the sky, anticipating further attacks. The bright yellow tone of their nondescript setting suggests the beating down of an unforgiving sun. Their distraught expressions are highlighted by this invisible light source, drawing attention to their faces.

Executed early on in his career, "Then What?" stands out from the rest of his oeuvre with its loose rendering of forms, an approach that gives the image of his gathered subjects a ghostly semblance. Do they appear as a mirage before the viewer or are they merely visions of the future? That his composition provides no visual clues as to the identity or nationality of his subjects, and makes no reference in place or time, gives birth to its initial sense of forecasting. His displaced figures could be Armenian or Vietnamese or any other of the countless populations that were made refugees by violent assaults in the twentieth-century. Today "Then What?" still resonates as residents of Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan escape conflicts at home and more Palestinians are shutout from their land by Israeli policies and offensives.

Although considerably short and riddled with personal turmoil, Kayyali's career has impacted Arab visual culture in ways that were unforeseen in his lifetime. There are traces of his influence throughout, as he defined Arab modernism with his revolutionary aesthetic. At the height of his career, he was sometimes viewed as an extreme pessimist, as critics and fellow artists challenged the place of such brooding compositions. Kayyali, however was anything but a cynic, he was essentially a realist, and a visionary at that. In one of his many writings on art and society the late artist proclaimed:

When art assumes a new understanding in the collective intellectual repository and a form of social consciousness, attaining to it an aspect of struggle, this essentially constitutes a rebellion against and refusal of the given social condition. In other words, it constitutes an unceasing desire for radical change and the beginning of a struggle to improve the social condition (excerpted from "Art's Linkage to the Reality of the People," translated by Hiba Marcos, www.artecast.org)

As much of what Kayyali foretold in his paintings was later confirmed by history, many Arab artists have heeded his words.



Louay KAYYALI 'Then What' 172 X 190 cm. Oil on Canvas 1965

Although Adham Ismail's "The Refugees" (1960) was painted five years prior to Louay Kayyali's "Then What?," it demonstrates the strand in visual culture from which the latter was able to produce his masterwork.

One of the most distinguishing aspects of Ismail's canvas is that although by the mid 1950s he had already developed a painting-style that utilized advanced modes of modernist representation, in "The Refugees" he chose to render crisp portraits amidst a magical realist setting to combine an austere reality with a dream-like state. This is visible in the differences that appear in the foreground and background of the composition, which are divided by the image of a lone figure that sits contemplatively in an olive orchard. Thus there are three scenes that represent individual moments in time.

In the lower part of the composition sits a woman who is consoling a debilitated man, perhaps her husband or son. As she kneels down to tend to him she also holds a small child, who appears distraught. An adolescent boy stands behind them, staring off into the distant image of a village that is depicted in twilight. As clouds hover and stars veil its streets, it is inferred that the village is actually the vision of the family's former home. The boulevard of the town leads towards the foreground into yet another apparition, one of wide-open land that they have also left behind. All that remains of their former lives are the few belongings with which they travel, their destination unknown.

The artist's multi-scenario narrative not only communicates the displacement of Palestinians after the Nakba, it elucidates the details of their uprooting alongside the overbearing sense of loss and disorientation that accompanied their expulsion, making it one of the most explicitly detailed depictions of their plight within modern Arab art.



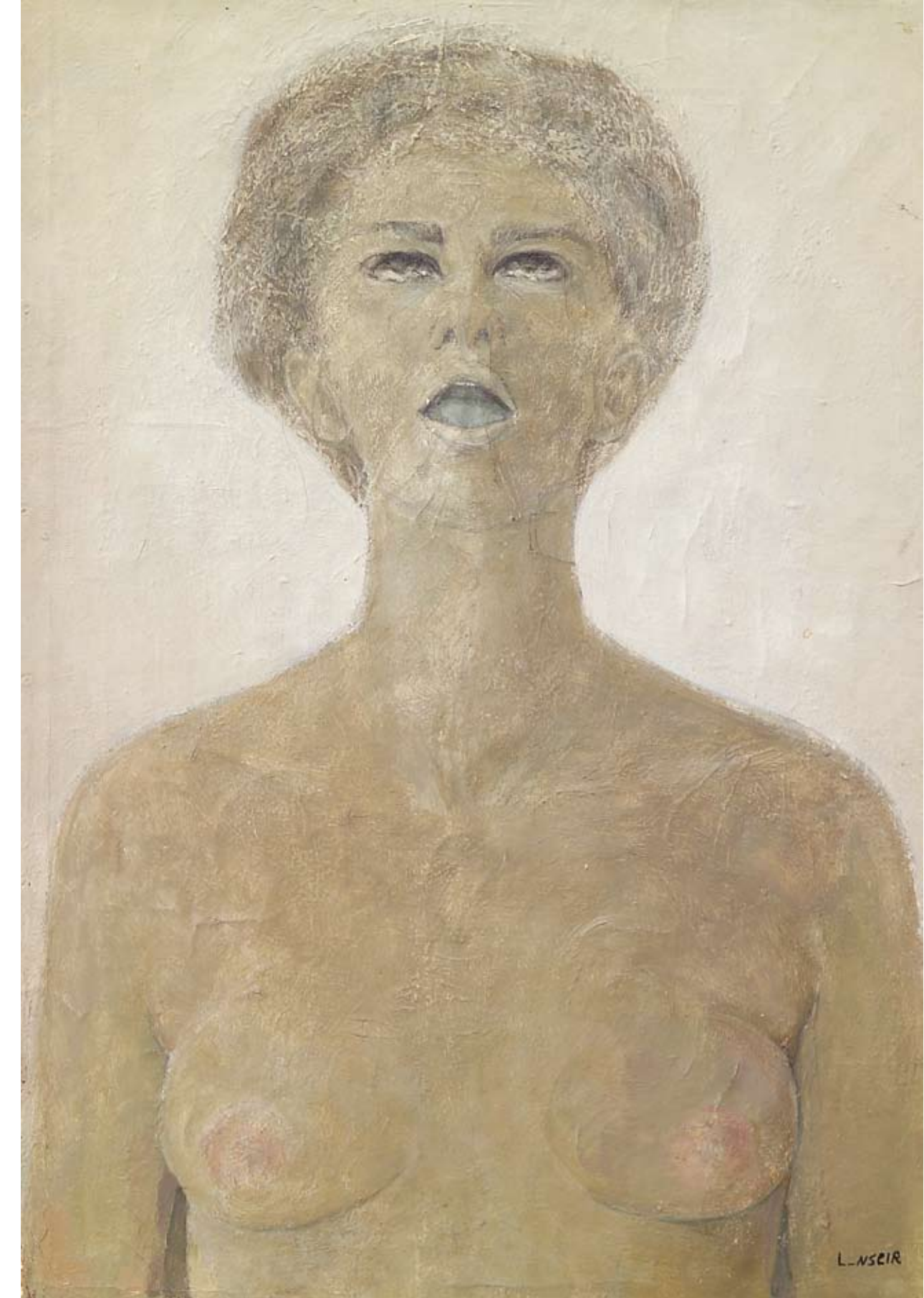
Adham ISMAIL, 'The Refugees' 65 X 85 cm. Oil on Canvas 1960

Leila NSEIR ►
'Portrait'
56 X 39 cm. Oil on Canvas 1965

Although, Leila Nsier's "Portrait" (1965) is an early example of her work, having painted it while still in her 20s, it reveals how the artist was already confident in her approach, devoting herself to investigating the human condition from the onset of her career. Often dominated by solemn figures, her canvases speak of a perpetual state of distress, be it in explorations of existentialist subject matter or in forthright depictions of dismal political circumstances.

In "Portrait," Nsier communicates this sense of torment without visually specifying the context or cause of her subject's angst, leaving the narrative behind it open ended. A nude woman is shown from her torso up, as she stands directly before the viewer. With a disrobed body she remains vulnerable, as nothing shields her from their gaze. Her head is raised as she stares at an unknown presence that lies beyond the composition. With her mouth opened as though calling out, it is suggested that she is in a moment of need or want, desiring something that lies outside of her grasp. She stands before a soft white background that appears solid flat in comparison to Nseir's painterly execution of her body, which exhibits variations in tone and the use of highlights. And yet her figure is sickly, her face devoid of warmth.

The depiction of her naked form is provocative not in the sense of challenging conservative sensibilities but in the way it comments on the experiences of women. Nseir presents a subject that is trapped in a metaphoric space, as she occupies much of the composition and is unable to escape.



Although the title of Nazir Nabaa’s “Napalm” (1967) makes an obvious reference to the use of a deadly weapon that is now largely associated with the Vietnam War, the work predates the notorious photograph of a young Vietnamese girl who was nearly burned alive by the chemical agent-an image that drew international outcry.

Eerily similar in that Nabaa’s also shows a nude woman who is caught in a moment of attack as she is surrounded by the heat of an immense fire, the timing of the Syrian artist’s work resonates more with the use of napalm during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The entire composition is painted with slight differences in the hues of an earth tone that reflects areas of light to give the illusion that the canvas is glowing. This implies a flash in the sky, as an unseen force descends on the artist’s subject.

Nabaa’s female protagonist is turned, partially concealing her naked body while she screams up towards the sky in horror. This level of despair as communicated in her upward glance and beckoning gesture, would continue to be a predominant representation of war in Arab visual culture throughout the twentieth-century, spilling over into new examples that are found today. It is a posture that every viewer can comprehend, an expression of a universal predicament, as the world’s history has never been free of conflict. The woman’s figure is composed with attention to her muscular form, as the sharp lines of her back suggest that her body is physically strained to its furthest point. It is unclear whether she is in the moments before or after she is blanketed in napalm, yet the fear that is shown on her face is chilling. Her twisted body could suggest that she turns away from the viewer to hide her horrid state, with Nabaa refusing to reproduce the extent of this monstrous assault.



Nazir NABAA '*Napalm*' 115 X 70 cm. Oil on Canvas 1967

Omar HAMDI ►
'Crying Against White Extent'
100 X 100 cm. Oil on Canvas 1974

Omar Hamdi began his artistic career at one of the most pivotal points in regional art-when a number of transformations in local visual culture (and in Arab society in general) coincided with an era of politics and war that impacted nearly every nation in the Middle East. As such his early painting style is distinguished as an evident expression of this period, whereas his recent work has traversed from ethereal abstractions to airy landscapes.

Hamdi's "Crying Against White Extent" (1974), an example of such work, reflects a powerful outpouring of mourning that emerged in Syrian art following the bombing of Damascus by Israeli forces during the 1973 October War. Shaking Syrian society with the killing of over fifty civilians and the destruction of numerous buildings in the capital's diplomatic quarter, many artists continued to be haunted by memories of the attack long after the war had ended.

Set against an empty background that appears turbulent and vast, Hamdi's female figure is shown as though overcome by an insufferable grief. The rendering of his subject amidst such an extreme state of emotional collapse is characteristic of the themes of despair and trepidation that surfaced in local painting of the time. Expressionist markings in the foreground of the composition seem to engulf her fragile form, as this tumultuous movement of brushwork is also used to execute her hair and clothing. She is so consumed by this metaphorical storm that she appears to be drifting off into unconsciousness, as hope vanishes into oblivion.



Omar HAMDI ►
'Untitled'
75 X 75 cm. Oil on Canvas 1975

Omar Hamdi's "Untitled" (1975) stands in stark contrast to his 1974 painting "Crying Against White Extent," in which a tormented figure has been psychologically defeated by the world around her. Although rendered with the same palette, the two seem to represent vastly different mindsets.

In the center of "Untitled" is a figure that is shown with her hands extended before her. Enveloping her arms are massive rock-like shackles that she seeks to break free from. Although the burden of these chains inhibits the woman's reach she continues to move towards the sky. Hamdi has depicted these restraints as though they are swaying with the force of her movement. His subject stands before a backdrop of bricks, the shapes of which are similar to that of her chains. Whether she is able to physically tear away from the force that holds her captive is unclear, as her posture can also signal a plea to the heavens. Yet her imprisonment is visually rendered with such severity and physical magnitude that it undeniably implies an allegorical representation of a separate state of confinement.

If through "Crying Against White Extent" Hamdi portrayed the acute trauma of war, then "Untitled" can be viewed as a follow up to the artist's outward exclamation of collective despair. Although the compositions are similar in that they both revolve around a single female protagonist who reflects (and seems to internalize) her environment with heavy underpinnings, the latter, despite its weighty symbolism, offers hope with an evident way out.



Nacem ISMAIL ►
'A Commemorative Photograph from Lebanon'
91 X 73 cm. Oil on Canvas 1975

By the time Nacem Ismael created his powerful depiction of war in 1975, he had been long established in the regional art scene, having made a significant impact with his unique painting style during the height of Arab modernism. With an apparent resolve and little concern for upsetting the status quo, he portrays a chilling episode of brutality.

Blue, yellow and green vertical color fields work to counteract three menacing looking figures-soldiers, mercenaries or hit men, who stand over their victims. Adding a sense of drama and tension, the background appears as a near abstraction. His scene is visually devoid of details that would identify his villains or the location of where they execute their horrific crimes. Ismael's three ominous figures could represent militiamen, a reference to the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War that same year. They could also be representations of the superpowers that struggled to define the modern Middle East during World War I, standing in as French, British and Ottoman forces. And in the same regard, this imagery could surpass immediate narratives, providing commentary on the general history of atrocity that has plagued mankind.

Ismael's martyred subjects lie in the foreground of the composition, as the explicit details of their murders are laid out before the viewer. A small hand pours an unknown liquid into the wounds of the dying woman, her body responding by seeming to rise, as the artist suggests the resurrection of one of the last remaining survivors. In the meantime, the three perpetrators of this massacre stand looking wickedly at the viewer, their weapons aimed for further onslaught, although the gunman on the far left seems unsure.

Ismael's subject matter is reflective of a breaking point in Arab society, as political instability had spread throughout the region and artists became disillusioned. The remainder of the painting however- in the way that it employs thick brushstrokes, a highly stylized rendering, a near florescent palette and heavy shading- hints at methods that had surpassed the earlier efforts of his colleagues. In essence although quite dark and disenchanting, Ismael's painting demonstrates the ways in which artists of the time chose to fight back, boldly confronting the violence.

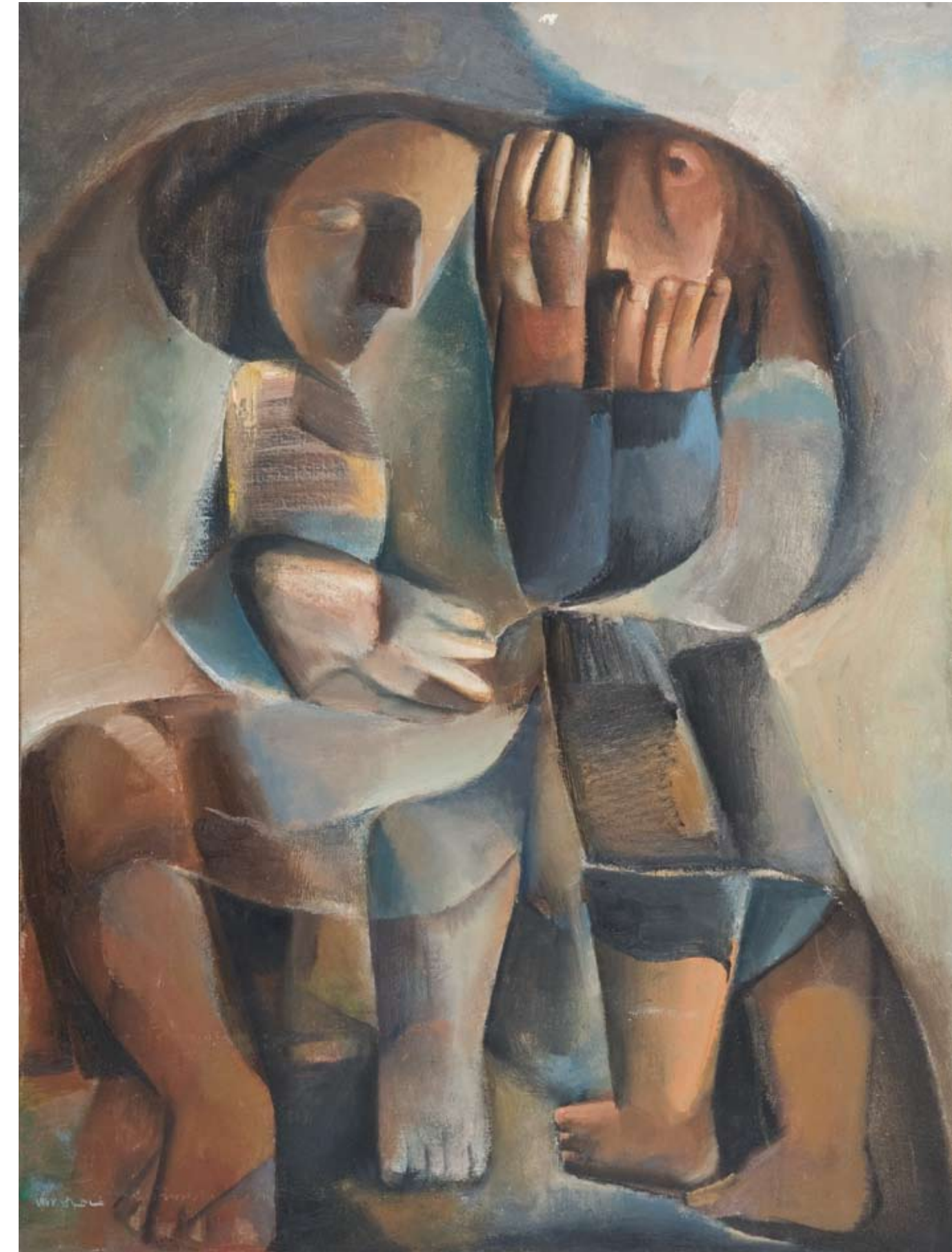


Ghassan SIBAI ►
'Fear'
80 X 60 cm. Oil on Canvas 1977

A leading Syrian painter whose early artistic training was in Alexandria, Egypt during the height of regional modernism (and Pan-Arab nationalism), Ghassan Sibai has continued to explore sociopolitical issues throughout his career. Having adopted a distinct painting style that utilizes cubist forms amidst symbolically driven visual narratives early on, Sibai depicts abject subject matter with potent expressionism. “Fear” (1977) is an example of the artist’s brazen use of art as a form of political protest.

Huddled closely, his mask-like figures appear twisted in piercing terror as they seek refuge from an imminent doom. With warm browns, deep blues and billowing white, the palette that Sibai used to render the couple insinuates a connection to earth and sky, an aspect that is accentuated as they are engulfed by their surroundings. A dark area of grey looms in the upper left hand corner of the composition, while a stark light shines onto their outlines from an unseen source.

With their bodies simultaneously appearing in several positions, the artist suggests a sense of movement across different moments in time. Sibai’s figures are in flight. The title of his painting further suggests their frantic state as they seek to escape. Created just a few years after the 1973 October War, in which Damascus was attacked by Israeli forces and just after the start of the Lebanese Civil War, “Fear” can reference several regional conflicts. Like Kayyali’s “Then What?” it can also be interpreted as depicting the ongoing expulsion of Palestinians under the Israeli Occupation, as the portrayal of a displaced people has long been used in Arab visual culture to depict the post-Nakba situation.



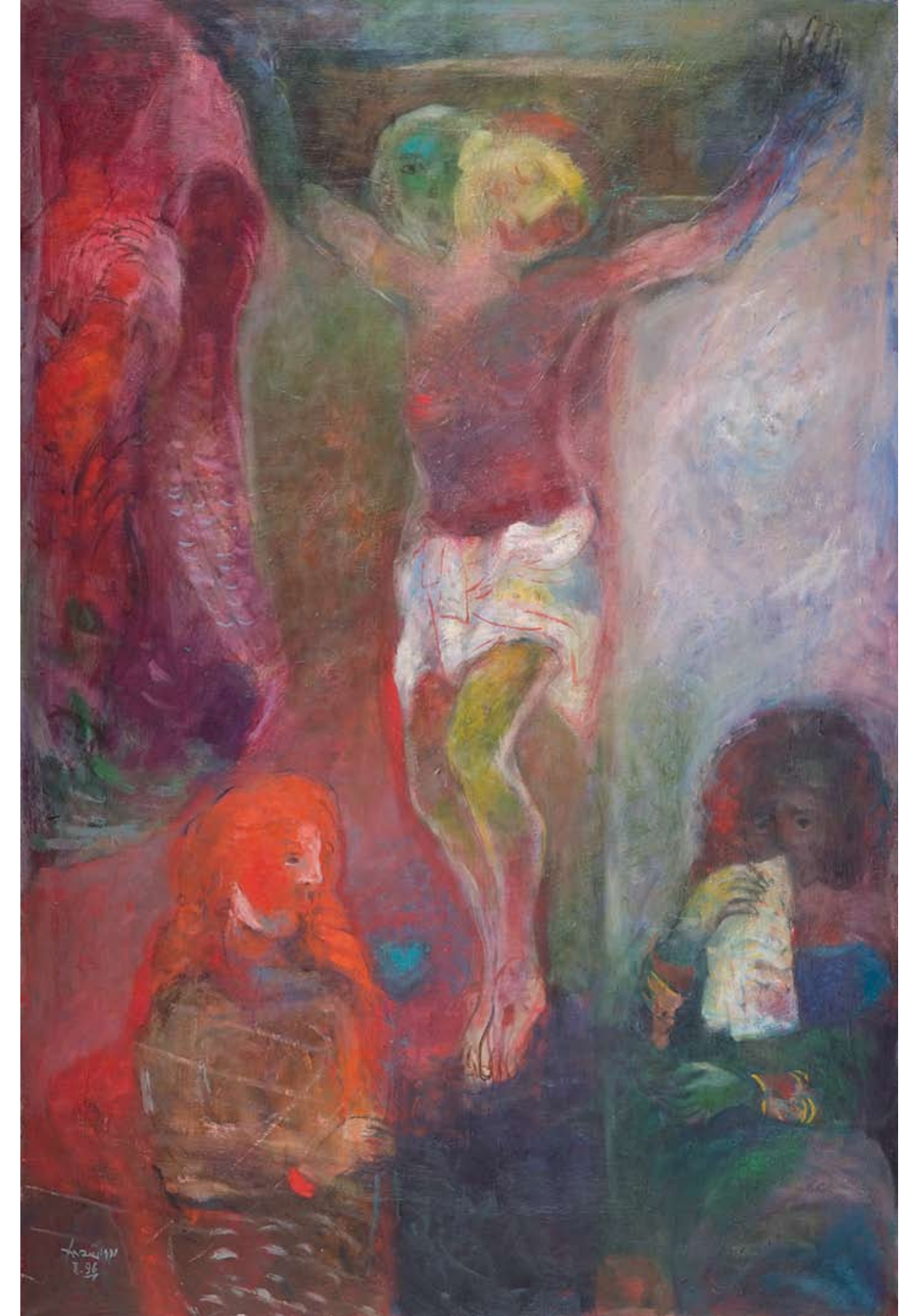
Edward SHAHDA ►
'Qana'
120 X 80cm. Oil on Canvas 1996

Using Christian iconography to describe the 1996 bombing of a UN shelter in southern Lebanon by Israeli forces, Edward Shahda evokes the killing of over one hundred civilians without showing them amidst their final moments. Following in the footsteps of Arab modernists, he employs allegorical representations when depicting the abject. Torment and death are thus conveyed in “Qana” (1996) through the suffering of Christ as he is crucified before his followers.

The artist emphasizes the magnitude of this narrative through color and brushstrokes that give the appearance of being applied with pastels despite being executed with oil paint. This adds a tactile quality to the composition that is meant to eliminate any aesthetically jarring detail, be it in the rendering of the subject matter or in surface, so that the focus is on carefully placed hues and their emotional pull. Turmoil is communicated through subtle cyclonic areas of brushwork, while sorrow visually translates into a grieving onlooker who is cast in shadows.

Christ’s body does not appear to have the gruesome markings of other crucifixions, where the emphasis is on detailing his slow and painful death. Shahda understatedly cloaks his body in a red light, as his yellow faces shows his quiet anguish.

The use of the universally identifiable scene also draws historical parallels between the Biblical narrative and the site of the massacre, the town after which the artist’s work is titled. Some believe that it is in Qana that Jesus performed his first public miracle of turning water into wine. A cave with twelve ancient bas-reliefs representing his apostles is just feet away from the site of the 1996 massacre.



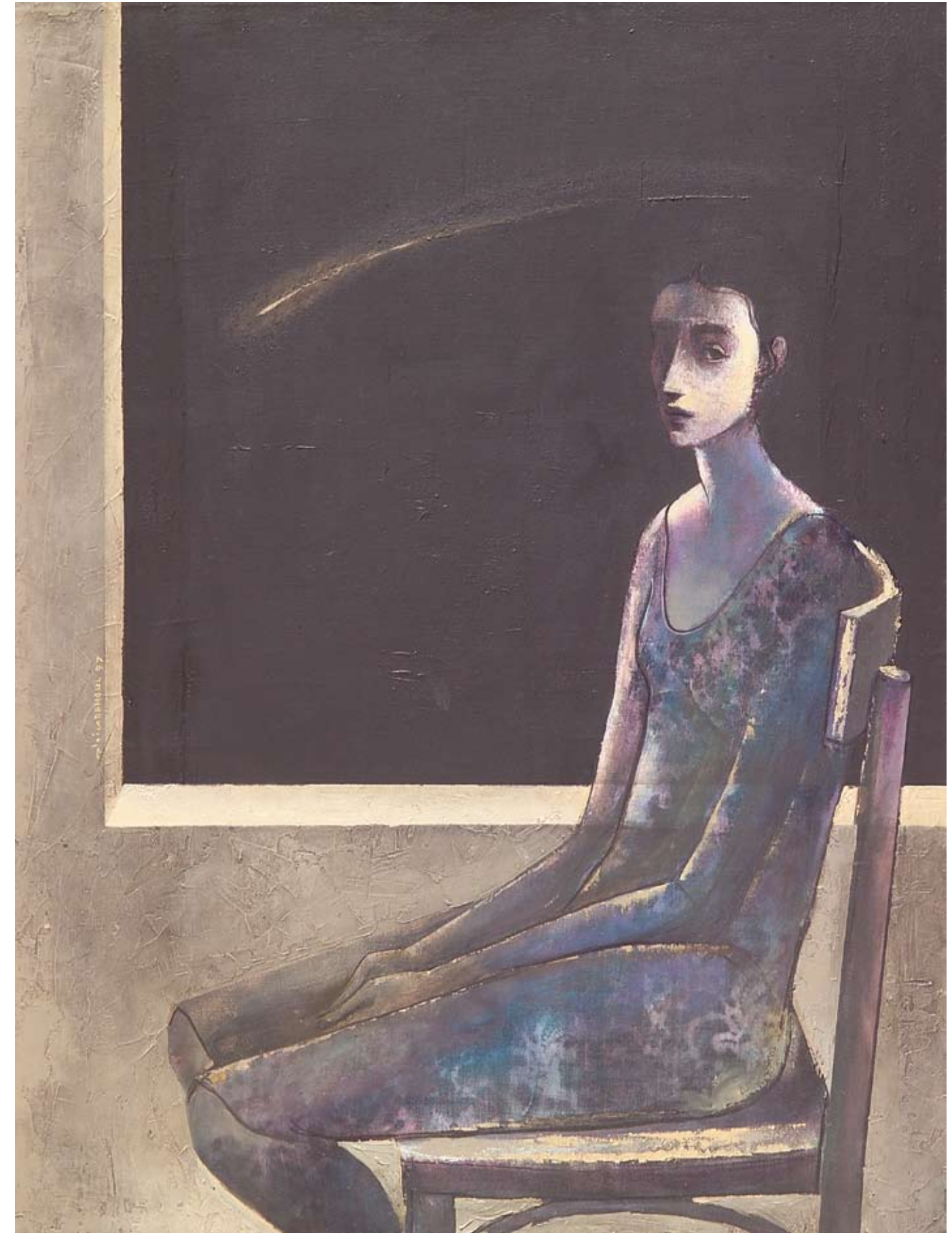
Safwan DAHOUL ►
'Dream'
80 X 60 cm. Acrylic on Canvas 1997

Although predating the large monochromatic canvases for which Safwan Dahoul is best known by nearly a decade, “Dream” (1997) reveals the initial stages of the artist’s explorations of a solitary figure whose minimal surroundings contribute to the projection of heightened alienation.

Depicted within an interior space, his female protagonist is positioned before an open window that looks out onto a blackened sky. A thin white line emerges from the darkness, perhaps suggesting the light of the cosmos despite the succumbing of day into night. Executed in a cool palette of white, blue, purple and black, Dahoul has carefully utilized color as a defining aspect of his composition.

The windowsill is lit so intensely that its reflection seems to give his subject a slight glow, her body appearing nearly transparent as a ghostly form that once dominated the space. That which surrounds her, however, is concrete—the chair that she sits on, the walls of the room that she is confined to, providing the distinction between the here and now and a condition of detachment that is about to slip into the abyss of the night sky, an otherworldliness that is ostensible. Although turned to one side, she stares directly at the viewer, her eyes surrounded by the shadows of fatigue, as her retreating posture speaks of a body (and soul) that has been vanquished. She is detached, staring into nothingness while offering little entry into her world.

In later works, Dahoul portrays his central figure within claustrophobic settings, rooms that seem to close in on her form. “Dream” diverges from this compositional detail in that it presents the viewer within an open environment, a room that exits onto the outside, yet the intensity of his subject remains, as she is held captive from within.



Then What 2001 - 2010

Of Demons and Angels: Arab Art After 2001

Although indebted to the dozens of seminal movements that have propelled regional aesthetics since the 1950s, contemporary Arab art is versatile and borderless. The centers of its art scene have become global, as a significant number of artists now work between the region and such locales as Paris, London and New York. As these international hubs are engaged with the Arab world, namely through initiatives in the Gulf via satellite universities and new museums and art fairs, the Middle Eastern cultural panorama has entered a dizzying new phase.

The number of galleries and nonprofits in the region has increased exponentially, expanding the art scenes of practically every major city. Auction records, which were virtually unheard of some five years ago, are now commonplace and are often enlisted as forms of leverage.

Overall, young and emerging talents have experienced an easier passage into prominence as cultural practitioners have offered greater support. With the Middle East's profile in the global art scene rising every year, quite a few prominent figures have finally been honored with the stardom that they deserve.

Running parallel to these developments has been a geopolitical climate that has shook the region. Since 2001, a long list of international conflicts has scattered cataclysmic violence across the Middle East. From the launching of the War on Terror to the ongoing American occupation of Iraq (and everything in between), the Arab world has faced escalated aggression.

Whether these disparate circumstances have intersected or clashed at certain junctures is the topic of endless debate. What is indisputable, however, is that many Arab artists have responded to this intensified political state with vehemence, all while attempting to navigate the refashioning of creative spheres and the simultaneous unhinging of social norms as youth populations become increasingly restless.

The selected works of “Then What? (2001-2010)” provide an unprecedented look into some of the compelling approaches that artists have adopted in their efforts to address this destabilized reality. Illuminating a distinct thread of contemporary Middle Eastern art, this segment of The Samawi Collection exhibits a wide range of aesthetics, focusing on art that proceeds with the tradition that Louay Kayyali so staunchly advocated for.

Syrian artist Safwan Dahoul explores the effects of a fragmented condition on the psyche. Although deeply personal, Dahoul's moving “Dream 4” (2008) strikes a cord with Arab audiences as tragedy is experienced on intimate and shared levels. Showing his reoccurring female subject in her final moments of life, the artist's composition exudes a haunting calm with the elegant form of a body that is slowly collapsing into eternal departure.

The cathartic process of mourning that is communicated in Dahoul’s painting has also surfaced in the works of painters who have instinctively responded to the deaths of civilians in regional conflicts.

Rima Salamoun’s “Untitled” (2008) reveals how this has been applied alongside components that are directly tied to Kayyali’s artistic contributions. Her emphatic triptych of grieving women presents death in a way that is akin to Dahoul’s “Dream 4,” yet her expressionist style belongs more to an aesthetic that was favored by Kayyali in his masterpiece “Then What?” (1965).

A prevalent theme among such artists is the Israeli occupation of Palestine, namely the regular attacks on Gaza that have been launched during the past five years. With each new Israeli offensive there have been significant outcries of protest from the creative and intellectual communities. This solidarity among artists has been seen across generations and throughout the Arab world and its Diaspora, culminating in the form of new artwork or grassroots activism.

The paintings that reflect some of the greatest utterances of political dissent in “Then What? (2001-2000)” were created in direct response to the onsets of these invasions. Reading like a visual history of the plight of Gazans in recent years, they begin with Asaad Arabi’s large collage “The Sixth War” (2006).

Dominated by a large, painted image of a woman who screams into the sky, Arabi presents an apocalyptic view of two coordinated attacks on Gaza and Lebanon by Israeli forces. Surrounded by dozens of black and white photographs that show destruction and human loss, she becomes the maternal protector of the abandoned and forgotten victims of war. Painting sections of the composition with white and silver brushstrokes, Arabi intensifies the spiraling chaos that threatens to engulf his matriarch with forceful markings.

Asma Fayoumi’s “Gaza” (2008) takes a similar approach, as she situates an unknown victim within an expansive space. This helpless child, the only figure that is completely realized in the painting, lies lifeless in the arms of an unseen individual who suspends her in midair. Unlike Arabi, however, Fayoumi leaves the remainder of the canvas devoid of any other human presence-all that remains are broad, colorless brushstrokes that offer the viewer little respite.

Abdul-Karim Majdal Al-Beik’s “Children of Heaven” (2009) follows suit with a composition that contains a similar palette and a small corpse at its center. Wrapped in white as she lies at the intersection of two broad areas of grey, she is placed at the heart of a cross. As white paint drips beneath her feet, the infant is positioned as though crucified-a metaphor for war that has been used throughout contemporary Arab art. Al-Beik has written frenzied illegible messages nearby, cryptic texts that appear urgent nonetheless. Outside of the boundaries of the cross are the receding bodies of other children whose outlines are overcome by an arid landscape.

Although also portraying the dead in “Angels of Gaza” (2009), Leila Nseir shrouds her entire composition with a thin white wash so that her subjects are shown behind a semi-transparent covering, an effect that indicates a transient stage after death. Above their heads are several hands that clench stones, a reference to the Palestinian Intifada, which was ignited by youth protests in 1987 and lived on through the actions of rock-slinging boys. The location of the hands imply a connection to the figures in the foreground of the painting, resilient spirits that stood before incursions with little more than their will.

As hinted at in Nseir’s work, there is also a branch of contemporary Arab art that seeks to pushback against hostilities with imagery that is not only defiant but challenges prevailing perceptions. It is a certain bravado that aims to impact facets of world culture as Arab society reaches yet another breaking point.

This is exemplified by young Palestinian painter Oussama Diab, whose “New Mona Lisa” addresses the increasing interconnectivity of global society with desires for peace despite perpetual states of discord. His strident rendition of the iconic da Vinci portrait speaks with forthrightness. Diab’s twenty-first century Mona Lisa is wrapped in a keffiyeh and holds an AK-47. Dressed as a Palestinian resistance fighter in two likenesses, she peers through these checkered scarves with piercing eyes. As one holds a martyred infant (who has been canonized), the other holds the massive gun. This loaded weapon, however, is decorated with a floral design, from the end of its barrel pops out a flower in full bloom-one of many symbols that are rooted in historical narratives.

Although the examining of such inconceivable aggression through visually descriptive works has been part of a general reaction that surfaced during the 1980s, Arab artists have since pushed for the progression of artistic styles and movements. Many are in the process of establishing new ones.

If the content of such art is difficult or initially displeasing, it is not because aesthetics have been sacrificed for the sake of a political message. On the contrary, as the examples of “Then What? (2001-2010)” confirm-Arab artists have carefully considered the most effective ways to engage the viewer while producing works that are consistent with their own formulistic concerns.

Moutecaa MURAD ►
'Slavery till Abolishment'
170 X 170 cm. Acrylic on Canvas 2003

Moutecaa Murad's "Slavery till Abolishment" (2003), an example of the artist's earlier work, lies in stark contrast to the vibrant, spiritually oriented geometric abstractions that he has been producing in recent years. Although occupying opposite ends of the spectrum, in both formalistic and conceptual terms, his dark, figurative subject matter is important to understanding the Islamic-driven themes of his current work, one that seeks to visually decipher a beauty found in the surrounding world as it speaks of the infinite wonder of the divine.

For Murad, this early body of work posed a specific question about the philosophical nature of man's actions and how ethics (or a lack there of) are part of a world that is ravaged in pain. They are dark, haunting compositions that, although delving into existentialist investigations and the importance of considering the teachings of Islam, reflect an all-consuming dejection, a theme that spoke to many viewers when they were shown in the Arab world.

In "Slavery till Abolishment" Murad paints the image of a man who is bent over in agony, his head appearing as a heavy mass that is pulled towards the ground. His shoulders collapse as he sits with his legs crossed and contorted in front of him. He is without clothing and upon closer examination it can be seen that his body is emaciated, nearly skeletal in form. The artist has executed his figure using a combination of thin markings that have been applied with such force that they appear to cut into the surface. They run violently up the front of the man's body as Murad coats it with thickly layered paint to create a visual connection between his subject and his surrounding environment. In other points in the composition he paints such areas of white in circular motion or as collisions of brushwork, an aspect that contributes an added appearance of turbulence. The upper portion of the painting is covered completely in these strokes, as it encroaches on Murad's protagonist.



Using black and white photographs that were amassed from the media, the mural-sized canvas “The Sixth War” (2006) is a collage of imagery that speaks of pandemonium. Depicting the 2006 Israeli bombardments of Lebanon and Gaza, Asaad Arabi revolves his composition around a frantic elderly woman who is dressed in white garb, a color associated with Muslim funerals.

She appears with her hands stretched to the sky, begging the heavens for an explanation. Shown as though consumed to the point of collapsing, the lower left portion of her face is painted in red, suggesting the streaming of blood or a lingering shadow. Violent, rapid brush marks are used in the rendering of her dress, mirroring the cyclonic distribution of newspaper clippings that surrounds her.

Emerging from a tumultuous sea, Arabi’s figure is suspended in time. The dozens of photographs that comprise the abyss from which she rises show screaming women and children as they escape the ruin and destruction of their neighborhoods.

Other, more graphic images provide shocking evidence of the hundreds of civilians that were killed, as bodies are strewn amidst the rubble. The artist has placed these pictures in a disjointed manner, capturing a hellish environment that knows no order.

While “The Sixth War” is different in subject matter (and in execution) than the sensual portraits that the artist is most recently known for, he impassionedly asks viewers to consider a reality that has befallen the Arab world one too many times, emphasizing that the brutality of war often preys on the most defenseless.



Asaad ARABI *The Sixth War* 130 X 190 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas 2006

Kais SALMAN ►
'Car Bomb'
190 X 200 cm. Acrylic on Canvas 2007

Kais Salman's "Car Bomb" (2007) takes a catastrophic moment of destruction and violence and deconstructs it to a point that teeters on abstraction. The result is a complex rendering of a sight that has become all too common in the Middle East, creating an eerily melodic moment that is visually suspended.

Using heavy brushwork throughout the painting, he allows his medium to drip in areas where positive and negative space is delineated by the circular outlines of mangled tires. This implies that the bomb has only just gone off, as the aftermath settles into the crevices of shards. Missing from his depiction however are any signs of human life (or death), an aspect that reserves the act of mourning that might follow for other compositions. In "Car Bomb" Salman is instead concerned with confronting the horror of such episodes through aesthetic inquiry.

Stretching from one end of the canvas to another, the massive pile of metal debris dominates the picture, making the remnants of the deadly explosion pop out with noticeable force. Although certain details of the car can be deciphered, Salman has painted broad areas of white and black brushstrokes to balance the composition with as much non-representation as possible. Crisscrossing from equidistant points along the surface, the artist utilizes thick diagonal lines to focus the viewer's gaze on the center of the canvas where two tires are situated as small openings into the devastation.

If he were to delve completely into abstraction he would risk losing his shattered masses. The process of rendering his painting along this fickle formalistic line then becomes delicate and quite involved, especially since he employs an expressionist brush.



Safwan DAHOUL ►
'Dream 4'
180 X 180 cm. Acrylic on Canvas 2008

Safwan Dahoul's "Dream 4" (2008) is part of an ongoing series of paintings that the artist began in 1982. Revolving around a central theme of a woman who experiences an isolated state of existence, her narrative takes place within the interior (or occasional exterior) of an ordinary room where she appears surrounded by inanimate objects—a deck of cards, a chair, an empty table. In some works she is accompanied by a male figure, a partner who embraces her, giving her comfort. At times his body reflects her defeated condition as he takes on the burdens that she faces so as to offer relief.

In 2008 shortly before Dahoul created "Dream 4," he lost his wife Nawar, an accomplished artist in her own right, to cancer. The paintings that have come after her passing are marked with the title of his series "Dream" but are now followed by a number that signifies the sequence in which they were made. In essence, they are memories and dreams of Nawar as he mourns her through his art, with the same reoccurring female figure from before, as he painted his wife throughout their twenty years together.

"Dream 4" shows her nude form as it is curled up in a hollowed depression of a table. Seeking shelter, she has pulled herself in so tightly that her face remains hidden. The curvature of her back and the side of her leg are rendered as zigzagging areas of flesh that define a weakened body. Gripping her shoulder, the woman's right hand appears to be the last remaining part of her that has strength.

The perspective of the composition is from a vantage point that is slightly above the table so that the viewer clearly sees the position that she is in. Light shines down on her from an unknown source that beckons, causing areas of highlights to add a soft glow to her skin. Flanking the table are two chairs that have rounded backs, a compositional detail that frames her image even further, providing a contrast between the angular and solid appearance of the furniture and the contours of Dahoul's retreating subject.



Rima Salamoun's untitled triptych summons a number of symbolic and visual references to create an affecting work that reflects an agonizing condition of despair. Amongst all the works of "Then What? (2001-2010), Salamoun's demonstrates the most discernible link between Louay Kayyali's influence and the torch that is fearlessly carried by today's generation of artists. Her expressive figurative compositions explore the darker sides of the human experience with a muted palette, uninhibited brushstrokes and sobering subject matter.

Her three-paneled painting from 2008, depicts a funeral scene in which twelve grieving figures (all presumably women) stand over the muslin wrapped body of a loved one. Overcome by grief, they are shown with various stricken stances as they console each other. The body of the departed lies in the center of the composition, radiating with a white light that is reflected in the faces of the twelve mourners whose bodies remain in the shadows.

The number of women surrounding the deceased brings to mind the biblical reference of the twelve apostles. This would suggest that Salamoun's central figure is an allegorical incarnation of Jesus Christ. The notion of a crucified subject points to the long held view that civilians (and resistance fighters) who have been killed in war or political struggles are honored with the status of martyrdom in their communities, most specifically in Palestine, where just surviving the everyday violence of the Israeli occupation is understood as a heroic act of defiance. This image of martyrdom is further communicated with the figure's mummy-like appearance, a reference to the paradise of the afterlife that awaits his or her soul.



Rima SALAMOUN 'Untitled' 120 X 360 cm. Acrylic on Canvas 2008



Asma FAYOUMI ►
'Gaza'
120 X 120 cm. Acrylic on Canvas 2008

Throughout her career, Asma Fayoumi has painted women and children with expressive fervor. Although she has frequently captured them in the formative stages of life, she has also shown them in intense moments of grief. “Gaza” (2008), which was produced shortly after a vicious Israeli attack on the poverty-stricken sliver of Palestinian territory that runs along the Mediterranean Sea, is arguably one of her most impacting works.

At the center of her somber composition is a small child that is lifeless. Her head falls to one side as several pairs of adult hands carry her tiny figure. Although her legs dangle towards the ground, her body appears wrapped in muslin, a detail that Fayoumi emphasizes with thick, textured areas of medium that are applied to the canvas on both sides of her image. It can thus be inferred that the artist depicts the girl as family members carry her during her funeral. An extended hand to the sky holds a young tree branch, a plea for peace as the body is taken to its grave. The artist has executed the piece with hastily applied markings that are placed at random with a painterly approach, as the overall sentiment of the work is of disorienting sorrow.

The painting's limited palette is reminiscent of that used in Picasso’s “Guernica” (1937), which gruesomely depicts the bombing of a Basque town by German and Italian planes during the Spanish Civil War. That Fayoumi would consciously (or even subconsciously) reference the iconic painting in her work, shows that a strong connection between the atrocities of both historical moments can easily be made. This also demonstrates how the artist seeks to trigger an association that might already lie in the viewer’s mind so that the imagery of ongoing attacks on Gaza is placed within a larger context. The parallel is also politically fitting, given that both Basque and Palestinian communities have long struggled for sovereignty.



Leila NSEIR ►
'The Angels of Gaza'
100 X 100 cm. Acrylic on Canvas 2009

Leila Nseir's "Angels of Gaza" (2009) juxtaposes the dead with the living, as those who have fallen join the ranks of those who continue to resist. The artist coats her portrait of Gazans in a thin film of white medium, placing them in a state that is neither of the past nor present, a lingering point in time that is fixed between moments of life and death.

Nsier shows the deceased as lying side by side in a neat row, an arrangement that suggests a methodical handling ritual, as burials are conducted in mass when so many lives are taken during instances of war. It is a common reality for Palestinians living among occupation, one that the artist is intent on visually enunciating. They appear as outlines of their former selves. The artist details only their faces, leaving their bodies in thin lines and light washes. While they fade into oblivion, their spirits remain.

Above their wrapped bodies are fists that clench stones, a ubiquitous symbol of Palestinian resistance to Israeli offensives that was first brought to consciousness during the 1987 Intifada (or "uprising"), as adolescent men fought off incursions with slingshots and small remnants of the earth. Although indicating the widespread poverty and desperation of civilians, who attempt to ward off such destruction with few resources, this symbol was also utilized to mobilize the masses with its simple act of defiance and valor. Nseir recognizes this spirit in both the frontline of raised hands and the corpses of victims as they are forced to confront death.



Abdul-Karim MAJDAL AL-BEIK ►
'Children of Heaven'
120 X 120 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas 2009

In “Children of Heaven” (2009) Syrian artist Abdul-Karim Majdal Al-Beik places the bodies of deceased children in an arid, unforgiving landscape. Positioning one of these small figures in the center of the canvas, he shows it crucified within a tiny white box, a coffin in which it is buried or perhaps a prison in which he succumbed to death.

Intersecting in the background behind this cubicle are broad areas of layered paint, a grey cross that emphasizes an association with the persecution of Christ. As the cross divides the composition in four parts, Al-Beik depicts the skeletal remains of more children amidst the brutal landscape, mass graves that seem to have been forgotten.

The texture that defines the artist’s painting is drawn out with a limited palette so that contrasts are made between starkly white land and the shadowy cross section that looms like an ominous force. With great detail he has built up the surface of the canvas with medium, as it appears to protrude with the cracks of an environment that is in dire need of the cleansing, life giving nourishment of rain.

Painted after the 2009 invasion of Gaza, “Children of Heaven” is an evident comment on the fundamental essence of war, as human vitality fades into oblivion and civilians are abandoned (and caught) in the crossfire of conflicts. Moreover, Al-Beik describes a violence that consumes everything in its path. A state of abjection that is so great that even the land cries out for help.



A native of Lebanon who was born shortly after the start of its civil war, much of Oussama Baalbaki's work is concerned with what he describes as "visual reality" versus "visual memory." It is thus fitting that the artist has created a series of paintings that depicts abandoned cars. Functioning as relics of past lives or evidence of recent collisions, these tattered objects make for poignant representations of the modern Lebanese narrative.

Such wreckage also brings to mind the ominous force of car bombs that, although having defined much of Lebanon's modern past, has never truly been eliminated as a threat to its fragile state. The remains of these events are situated as both a memory and reality for many, an actuality that is steeped in a history that only repeats itself.

Baalbaki's "Untitled" (2009) depicts a lone car after a collision along the side of an empty road. Angled so that much of the foreground of the composition is filled with the wreckage, the artist places the viewer immediately within this tattered realm. Painting its punctured body with labored brushwork, he creates a stylized rendering of its frame. As light is cast against the side of the car, a shadow forms encircling its scattered parts.

Although the scene is depicted in daylight, no sign of human life can be found. The boulevard lies empty, as though the ghastly sight has cleared the street of other motorists. The artist makes no reference to possible victims of the crash, perhaps because such destruction is common in a society that has grown accustomed to the sight of death.



Oussama BAALBAKI "Untitled" 150 X 180 cm. Acrylic on Canvas 2009

Throughout her career, Samia Halaby has created works of art that directly address sociopolitical issues despite working primarily as an abstract painter. The handful of instances in which the artist has utilized figurative representation have functioned as deliberate expressions of political protest.

Having been forced into exile at a young age, the Jerusalem-born artist has long identified with (and contributed to) the Palestinian struggle. As both an artist and activist, Halaby has dedicated much of her life to leftist causes. Since the 1960s, as she has organized with various political nonprofits and committees, she has often taken to producing political posters that outwardly support the liberation of Palestine from Israeli occupation. In the late 1990s, she researched and documented the violence and oppression that is encountered under a constant state of siege by sketching the scenes of civilians just moments before their deaths during the Kafr Qasem massacre of 1956, when Israeli police opened fire on a Palestinian village, killing dozens of civilians.

“Gaza” (2009) was created in response to the catastrophic attack on the Palestinian territory by Israeli forces in 2008. Although the monumental composition depicts moments of death and destruction, the overall theme of the work is that of resistance. Depicting a large group of men, women and children, Halaby portrays an empowered people who refuse to be defeated as they engage in armed resistance. At the heart of the large sketch is a woman who stands looking directly before the viewer. With her arms wrapped around several children, she holds several rocks in her hand, symbols of the Intifada. Halaby’s use of a central female figure suggests woman as a metaphor for the homeland, a powerful icon of Palestinian visual culture that has been essential to post-Nakba art, one that remains an embodiment of *sumoud* (steadfastness) and is utilized to inspire (and mobilize) the masses.



Samia HALABY 'Gaza' 180 X 266 cm. Sketch on Canvas 2009

Ammar AL-BEIK ►
'Gaza'

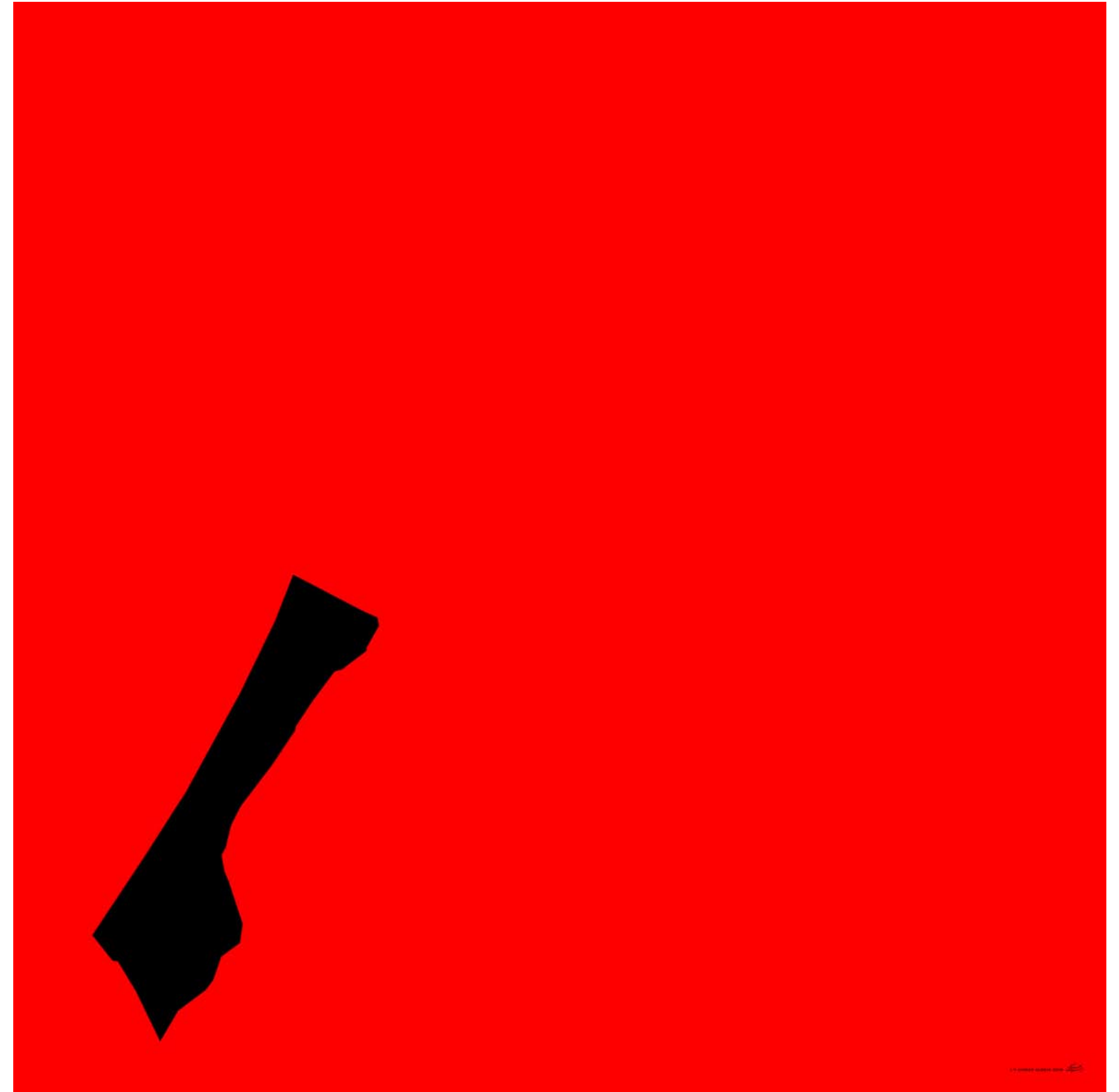
110 X 110 cm. Archival Print on Cotton Paper Editions of 7 2009

With “Gaza Fist” (2009), Syrian photographer and filmmaker Ammar Al-Beik creates a visual dichotomy that is representative of the ongoing defiance of a population that has survived some of the most desolate conditions of modern history.

The title of the work offers a loaded modification of “Gaza Strip,” the common term in English that is used to describe the territory. Carved out by Israeli forces in 1948, as land and homes were taken for Jewish villages and cities along the coast of Palestine, the no more than eight miles wide area is home to over a million residents-generations of refugees who face a stifled economy, heavy blockades, grim futures and persistent onslaughts of heavy bombardment.

Al-Beik communicates this bleak reality by surrounding a black map of Gaza with an area that has been washed out in red. A color universally associated with blood, he suggests the carnage that has resulted from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for over sixty years. This large crimson mass can also be understood as the apathy of the world as it stands by while Gaza faces disproportionate attacks in complete isolation. The black color of the map also carries multiple meanings as it references a state of mourning yet can also imply a blackout of resources and basic goods, such as food, medicine and clean water-essentials that many Gazans often go without.

Despite the ghastly conditions that the artist describes, he also offers a clear expression of defiance. Noting the coincidental shape of the territory, he procures it for a symbol of Gaza’s strength amidst adversity.



Although quite graphic in its depiction, Mustafa Ali's "A Woman from Gaza" (2009) hints at several historical references. The artist's seemingly unconventional use of sculpture to represent the abject calls to mind a number of examples, including the preserved corpses that resulted from the 79 AD volcanic explosion of Mount Vesuvius in Pompeii and the ancient high relief gravestones that were part of burial tombs in Palmyra, Syria.

Against a square bronze slab, Ali has placed the body of a woman who is curled in the fetal position. Captured in the moment just after her death she is shown shielding herself from wreckage. Using slivers of wood to suggest the debris of an attack, Ali adds another layer of realism to the work. Her body is sculpted in great detail, as every fold of her dress is outlined.

The links to ancient culture are reiterated in this garb, as she appears to be wearing a flowing Greco-Roman costume in addition to a thin headdress and a pair of sandals. This association is a logical one in that Palestine was governed by both Hellenistic and Roman powers. The connections between Gaza and Syria, specifically Palmyra, are strong in that both were under Canaanite rule then later became Roman outposts during the first century BC. Ali's figure seems to hold a book in her hand, perhaps a reference to the development of Gaza as a center for knowledge during the Hellenistic period.

In essence, although the artist's work initially illustrates the tragic death of Palestinian civilians under Israeli bombardment, his sculpture possesses additional underpinnings. Ali draws the viewer's attention to the ancient civilizations from which Gazans have descended, the rich cultures that have thrived in the now stifled, meager strip of land whose residents Israel continues to imprison and assault. The death that is portrayed in "A Woman from Gaza" thus reflects the death of civilization.



Mustafa ALI 'A Woman from Gaza' H110 X W110 X D70 cm. Mixed Media Sculpture 2009

Mustafa Ali's gruesome sculptural installation "Guillotine"(2010) is an exceptional example of his work in that it diverges from the subtle themes that have defined his oeuvre for over thirty years. Often exploring the fragility of humankind, he underscores man's experiences in the modern world with introspective renderings of elegant figures.

"Guillotine," which is part of a recent series revolving around a number of freestanding large heads, is a resounding departure for the artist. Upon a small wooden platform, Ali has placed a sculpted severed head. Just beside it, lies the blade of an execution device that is splattered with red paint, which can also be found along the neck of his head, indicating a freshly killed subject.

Unlike Ali's previous work, the artist allows little room for existentialist contemplation, as "Guillotine" is direct with its intentions to shock the viewer into intense discussion. An overtly political work, it leaves perpetrator and victim unidentified, indicting the global community at large with its grotesque depiction.

His reference to the antiquated device (which was invented by a French doctor during the 18th century), conjures up associations of an outdated and barbaric technology, as though suggesting that as a global community, we have not progressed very far. It is a representation that matches the intensity of the images of war that we are bombarded with in the media on a daily basis.

Ali offers the extreme end of visual culture to counter the conflicts that plague our existence, one that chooses to fight fire with fire.



Mustafa ALI 'Guillotine' H100 X W275 X D180 cm. Wood and Metal Installation Unique 2010

Oussama Diab’s “The New Mona Lisa” (2010) is part of a small, yet powerful, series of works that the artist produced using Leonardo da Vinci’s iconic heroine. By taking the sixteenth-century portrait and flanking it with popular imagery, he introduces her to the realm of the twenty-first century. Injecting each composition with additional historical references, Diab updates the Mona Lisa according to the last four centuries in art. There are traces of Gustave Klimt in the intricate patterns that pop up in areas of the background. Jean-Michel Basquiat and street art are abound. This also works to emphasize that past narratives have played an important role in where we are as a global society today and that artists, although employing vastly different aesthetics, have maintained similar concerns across cultures.

Diab’s expansive diptych shows two portraits of the beloved female figure that are placed side by side in the center of the composition. Wrapped in red and black keffiyehs, only her eyes and hands are visible to the viewer. The rest of her body is either draped in the checkered scarf or covered in her black garb. Each representation holds a potent image of war. One holds an AK47, a gun that is popular with militias across the globe, while the other holds a small child whose lack of color in his face suggests that he is dead. He is martyred, as a small crescent moon (similar to those used in Russian icons) crowns his head. Diab’s other figures appear as saints—the pair of Mona Lisas, a quickly sketched creature that wears a gasmask, even an anti-nuclear weapons sign is made holy.

Symbols of war are subverted as the artist transforms them into the tools of peacemakers. Mona Lisa’s gun sprouts a flower and is adorned in ornamental design. Her seemingly aggressive stance is further subdued as she holds a black and white photograph of two woman who embrace as they are overcome with sorrow. Diab’s protagonist simultaneously holds a single flower, a modest offering to an unseen grave. Although taking on the image of a Palestinian resistance fighter, Diab’s “new” Mona Lisa combats war through expressions of non-violent struggles for peace.



Oussama DIAB 'The New Mona Lisa' 180 X 300 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas 2010

Looking Forward

Looking Forward: the New Wave of Arab Painting

Arab artists today are faced with a broad history of visual culture as they work within regional and international art scenes. It has been some sixty years since modernist techniques were widely embraced throughout the Middle East; over a century since Gustave Courbet planted the seeds of European modernism; and hundreds of years since Islamic and African artists and architects first fashioned the aesthetics that would liberate international art when twentieth-century movements such as Cubism and Constructivism would draw from their work.

To proceed from this legacy is no easy feat. In fact, just working within the confines of regional art history while trying to reshape it poses a great challenge. Over the past ten years, however, there have been a number of artists who seem to be undeterred. Some are in the early stages of their careers, others are established-collectively they are spurring a new wave of Arab painting that subtly takes from previous art movements while breaking free of any predominant influences. In essence, they are rebelling against the old guard in exciting ways.

One of the most influential artists to do so is Syrian painter Safwan Dahoul. Although beginning his ongoing “Dream” series in the early 1980s, between 2002-03 there was a pronounced reduction in the details, brushwork and palette that was used to render his isolated female protagonist-igniting a significant departure in his work. As the content of his paintings remained, his subject began to take on robust forms. His compositions were simplified, verging on the abstract with geometric divisions of space and flattened planes. This accentuated his figure (which is sometimes accompanied by a male subject), visually increasing the volume of her appearance so that her presence is staggering, pulling the viewer in with intense psychological underpinnings. This resulted in a painting style that is unprecedented in the Arab world. It is impossible to link Dahoul’s current work to an earlier school, as he has broken away from dominant regional traditions. What can be established, however, is that subsequent artists have followed his lead, striving to forge their own paths with the same certainty.

“Looking Forward” highlights painters who are changing the face of mainstream art in the Middle East and North Africa. From Morocco to Lebanon, these up and coming and midcareer artists have offered daring new styles that range from abstraction to hyperrealism, presenting subjects and techniques that are expected to have longstanding effects on local trends. If in “Then What? (2001-2010)” artists demonstrate a continued commitment to the exploration of sociopolitical issues as they seek to expand aesthetic horizons, those of “Looking Forward” makeup a contrasting, albeit equally important, facet of Arab art. Using cutting-edge techniques, they produce highly introspective works, many of which focus on existentialist questions. Accordingly, despite possessing diverging concerns, many of the featured artists in “Then What? (2001-2010)” are also part of this remarkable overhaul.

Although other media such as photography and video have been prevalent for years, a focus on painting when examining the latest breakthroughs in Arab visual culture is imperative to establishing the ways in which

formulistic approaches have evolved over the last one hundred years. Since easel painting became prevalent under colonialism during the early twentieth-century, artists have been trained with a solid foundation in the medium throughout. In the beginning, Arab painters were interested in traditional subject matter of the time-genre scenes, portraits of dignitaries, and landscapes that were usually produced under official patronage. With the rise of nationalist movements came a particular focus on cultural identity, giving an increased importance to art as a vehicle through which to realize and project collective aspirations.

Arab artists have long surpassed the initial expectations that were held of easel painting. Although not one subject matter dominates the creative output of a particular nation or art scene, historically the content of work has been heavily influenced by one's environment. In Lebanon, for example, its civil war (1975-1990) has held a major presence in the work of artists that came of age during the conflict since the early 1990s, whereas in Palestine the ongoing Israeli occupation has understandably been a predominant focus for more than fifty years. Given that such formidable conditions persist, it is of no surprise that politically overt art is reinvented virtually every decade.

Of late, artists have encountered greater schisms in their communities as they witness the surfacing of pandemic materialism, acute alienation, and standoffs between old world traditions and globalized lifestyles, creating a fluctuating reality that they are constantly forced to navigate. This is coupled with the looming threat of large-scale violence, as the volatile nature of current geopolitics could mean a sudden outbreak of war at any time.

For many, the most intuitive reaction has been to turn inward, opting to delve into the place of the individual in society through their art. This has led to a significant number of portraits, be it of the self or of others, making for compositions in which the inherent psychology of the human subject is reflected, examined or deconstructed.

Sara Shamma's "Self Portrait" (2008), shows the artist strewn across a small couch. The size of the couch implies an intimate space for two. Across the edge are articles of clothing that presumably belong to a man, perhaps a lover or husband. The symbolic/physical space that she occupies is a gendered one-a realm that is meant to immediately situate her existence as a woman. Despite this prescribed role she remains confident, even slightly confrontational, as she coyly stares directly at the viewer, her hand in midair as though indicating a pregnant pause.

Conversely, Flavia Codsi's "Don't Let the Cuckoos Nest" (2009), makes reference to the well-known 1960s novel turned movie, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" by Ken Kesey, which describes a tyrannical nurse who tortures her patients at a mental institution with psychological abuse in the form of humiliation, a monotonous regiment and physical punishment. Codsi's female figure is dressed in white with her arms around her torso, imitating the grip of a straightjacket. Appearing in a daze, she does not notice the birds that pick at her disheveled head. Although Codsi's direct reference is clear, the title of her work suggests that she intends it as a metaphor for something else. Based in Beirut, the artist could be referring to the intrinsic mood of the city, which never seems to be without impending disaster or further fragmentation. And at the same time, her depiction of a female subject who has gone mad could also function as a comment on the social pressures that are placed on women.

Tackling notions of gender head on has been a noticeable trend in Arab art during the past decade, as male and female artists seek to question social constructions. This has paralleled other issues, such as the region's growing fascination with stardom and celebrity culture in addition to its plunging into excessive material consumption.

Pierre Koukjian extracts the dynamism of some of the regions most well known public figures, be they politicians or pop stars, in the silhouetted close-ups of his "Impressive People" series. Capturing the high-profiled status of each, his focus runs the gamut of influence, from Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to sexpot singer Nancy Ajram, discarding their political or cultural affiliations so that the essence (and magnetism) of their image can be unearthed.

Kais Salman concurrently looks at the process of altering one's appearance in order to conform to a particular type of branding. In a series of paintings that subvert our understandings of beauty through a visual assault on vanity, greed and consumerism he takes aim at the extent to which the fashion industry targets women. With aggressive brushstrokes he paints soulless, monster-like creatures that have been stripped of their identities. Their naked, grotesque bodies illustrate the extreme outcomes of subjecting oneself to the endless scrutiny of an image-obsessed culture.

A subset of this split from previous traditions is a revitalization of abstract art among young painters. Two artists who have been at the forefront of this are Thaier Helal and Mouteaa Murad. Both Helal and Murad merge the spiritual with the personal by applying abstraction as it was utilized in Islamic art. With meditations on uniformity, space and color alongside precise applications of geometric principles, they renew the basic components of this international art form with contemporary experiments.

While the repositioning of the individual self in Arab society has inspired both contemplative and provocative works, a dichotomy that indicates a push and pull between the private and the public realms, artists such as Khaled Takreti and Mohannad Orabi have straddled these philosophical realms with playful portraits, indicating a whimsical, buoyant side.

Peering into the future with this range of painting, it is too early to determine if full-fledged movements will arise from the advancements that are currently taking place. With this grouping of artists, however, we can begin to identify the nature of what they might look like. As the Arab world rapidly changes, its artists are well equipped for the challenges that lie ahead.

Sara SHAMMA ►
'Self Portrait'
175 X 175 cm. Oil on Canvas 2009

Sara Shamma's "Self Portrait" (2009) is a bold example of a provocative new path in contemporary Arab art, one defined by artists who are candidly deconstructing and challenging gender roles. Although this line of social investigation has been simmering beneath the surface for years (and has long existed in other disciplines such as literature), it has only been over the past twenty years that female artists have taken it on with such fortitude. Shamma's portrait demonstrates how artists are quickly leaving behind longstanding traditions by providing the current discourse with fresh content.

In a hyperrealist style that uses color as a potent agent of psychology, the young Syrian artist establishes a particular mood. Sitting sideways across a small couch, Shamma's body language speaks of a certain discomfort, as she is physically unable to stretch out despite an apparent desire to. Undeterred, she refuses to adjust her position so that she is directly facing the viewer. Working as a signifier of domesticity (and of intimate space), this simple piece of furniture becomes loaded with meaning. Draped along her knees is a bright orange shirt with a nearby pair of pants, presumably belonging to a male subject whom Shamma shares a connection with—a lover, husband or father. The articles of clothing are familiar yet seem to accentuate the rigidity of a psychic state that holds the artist captive.

Despite the cold feel of the room with its near monotone color scheme, the warm tones of her skin seem to offset the space. She appears unconcerned with the limitations of her surroundings, as she stares at the viewer with icy calculation and projects an unwavering sense of confidence.



Flavia CODSI ►
'Don't Let the Cuckoos Nest'
213 X 186 cm. Oil on Canvas 2009

Flavia Codsi's "Don't Let the Cuckoos Nest" (2009) uses hyperrealism to heighten the sense of drama and urgency of her subject. Toying with the idea of insanity or psychological breakdown, the self-taught Lebanese artist references the famous novel-turned-film as a way of setting the tone of her painting. A disturbing description of a mental institution, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" is known within popular culture for its frightening scenarios. And yet the Lebanese artist finds a powerful metaphor for the experience of her subject, a woman who appears lost in a tortured daze and on the verge of self-destruction.

Sitting before a large wall that is painted as though it is the exterior of a building that is in need of repair, Codsi's figure holds the sides of her upper body, seeking comfort. This posture mimics the grip of a straightjacket, which is also alluded to by her white garb. Her disheveled hair makes for an added effect, as two small birds relentlessly pick at her head. There is a consistency between the tumultuous feel of the background, which is painted with frantic brushstrokes, and the energy that is exuded by the artist's subject.

The conclusions one can make are vast. Codsi is known for a type of portraiture that is unrestrained, one that freely takes on an often ignored (or hidden) side of reality. The obvious gravity of "Don't Let the Cuckoos Nest" could represent several things-the plight of a woman who faces acute alienation, or a metaphor for the current state of Lebanese society as political tensions remain. The artist leaves it open ended, however, allowing the viewer's intuition to decipher its meaning.



Othman MOUSSA ►
'Near You'
145 X 120 cm. Oil on Canvas 2009

Among a number of young Syrian painters today there has been a deliberate exploration on the emotive potential of inanimate objects as representations of greater things. For most the approach has been to isolate subjects such as a chair or a dress within compositions that otherwise speak of vast, uninterrupted space. This has been frequently executed with an expressive style of painting so as to project a sense of inherent energy and force that is believed to lie within the object, giving way to metaphors that are infused with weighty philosophical conclusions.

Othman Moussa's still lifes of everyday objects take a quieter approach with a hyperrealist painting style that presses the viewer to contemplate the hidden meaning of his subjects with careful observance. Portraying the seemingly inconsequential things that define Syrian life, his highly cerebral meditations rely on subtle details.

In "Near You" Moussa places a large white pumpkin next to a small black coffee mug. Bathed in the sunlight of a window or opening that lies outside of the composition, the two objects occupy the opposite ends of a table that is covered in a white cloth, as the artist makes reference to classical techniques. On a wall behind this centerpiece is a note that is taped to the right of the squash, perhaps a love letter. Although it is unclear, this abandoned document adds another layered inference while visually balancing the composition.

The pumpkin and mug are elevated to the light of the space by a platform upon which the table has been positioned, further emphasizing their prominence. The contrast in his objects, the robust, misshapen body of the pumpkin versus the understated sculptural appearance of the mug, alludes to an interaction or relationship that although seemingly at odds could be harmonious, given the proper environment.



Hakim GHAZALI ►
'The Letter Noon'
200 X 200 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas 2005

Hakim Ghazali, a contemporary artist who studied the art of calligraphy in his native Morocco before continuing his academic training in France, often focuses on the expressive splendor of Arabic letters and words, accentuating their elegant forms while visually alluding to their underlying spiritual meaning. Ghazali does so in the extensive tradition of Islamic art, which has upheld calligraphy as an essential element of intricate designs that communicate the inherent magnificence of the divine.

“The Letter Noon” (2005) is an early example of a significant body of work that places Arabic text at the center of explorations of femininity as they are understood through Sufism. In Islamic mysticism “noon” is seen as symbolizing the profound nature of womanhood. In Islam, the Divine Reality of God, although ultimately one, possess a dual nature, the absolute and the infinite. The infinite is a principle of the feminine. Beauty is associated with the infinite and thus the aim of Islamic art is to reflect such with the highest form of aesthetics. Thus, exquisite renderings of Quranic texts (or Surahs) are the most valued visual expressions of spirituality.

By focusing on the letter “noon” or the feminine, Ghazali makes the immediate connection between the infinite nature of calligraphy, (i.e. the endless possibility for arabesque forms from the basic curvature and lines of Arabic letters) and its use in Islamic art as an abstracted representation of divinity. Heavenly vastness is also implied with a textured background that appears to have no end as it bears a blue “noon.” The simplicity of the letter’s rounded outline is loaded with complex meaning as its end seems to return to its beginning, a cyclic nature that suggests boundless creation of life. Blue is understood as a color that protects. In some Sufi texts, woman as mother is viewed as a reflection of God as the creator.

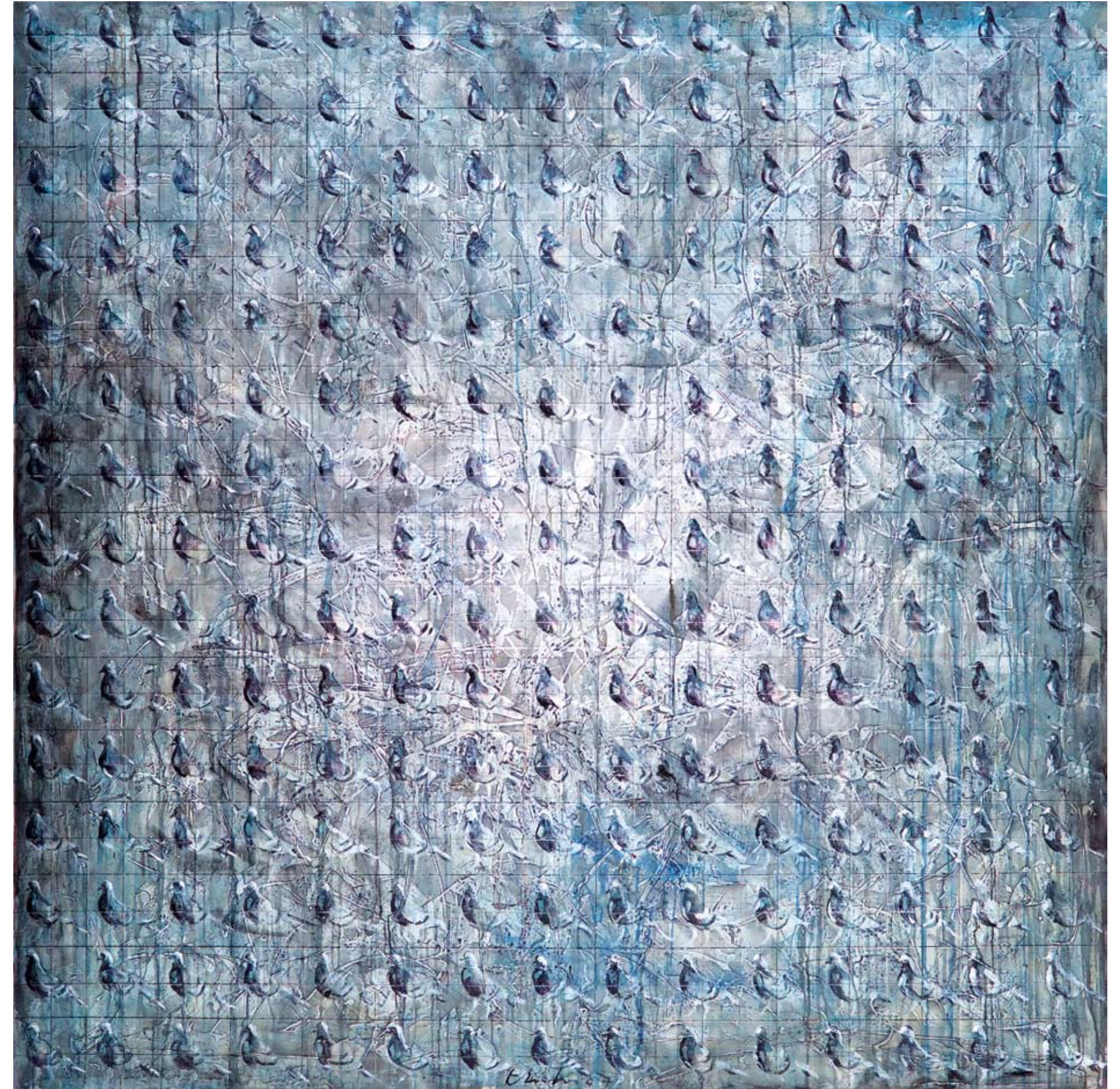


Thaier HELAL ►
'Untitled'
200 X 200 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas 2007

In recent years, many of Thaier Helal's mixed media paintings have utilized color, texture, and compositional design to capture the energy and essence of visually obscured subjects. Creating a complex matrix of abstraction, in which images are repeated to create the appearance of a unified pulse—a large mass of individual bodies that come together as they shift and change course as one—Helal often finds inspiration for his expressive canvases in the natural world or in the actions of man.

As he relies on repetition, the viewer is reminded of the significance of recurring forms in Islamic art, which suggest a profound relationship between humanity, nature and the sublime. Dividing the canvas into dozens of square compartments, as symmetry is essential to his composition, the artist communicates the sensations of such movement amidst order and chaos.

In “Untitled” (2007), a lone pigeon occupies each square that is delineated by a massive grid. Varying slightly in appearance, their small bodies are either pronounced or disappear, depending on their placement against a metallic background. Painted so that they are positioned in the same direction, they seem to move slowly in unison. Helal has depicted their forms as though exuding the kinetic forces that create the physicality of a larger motion. Functioning as individual centers of power, the birds possess a shared rhythm, their image giving way to an abstraction of light and dark areas of muted color. From afar, their minute bodies are just composites of a greater manifestation of life.

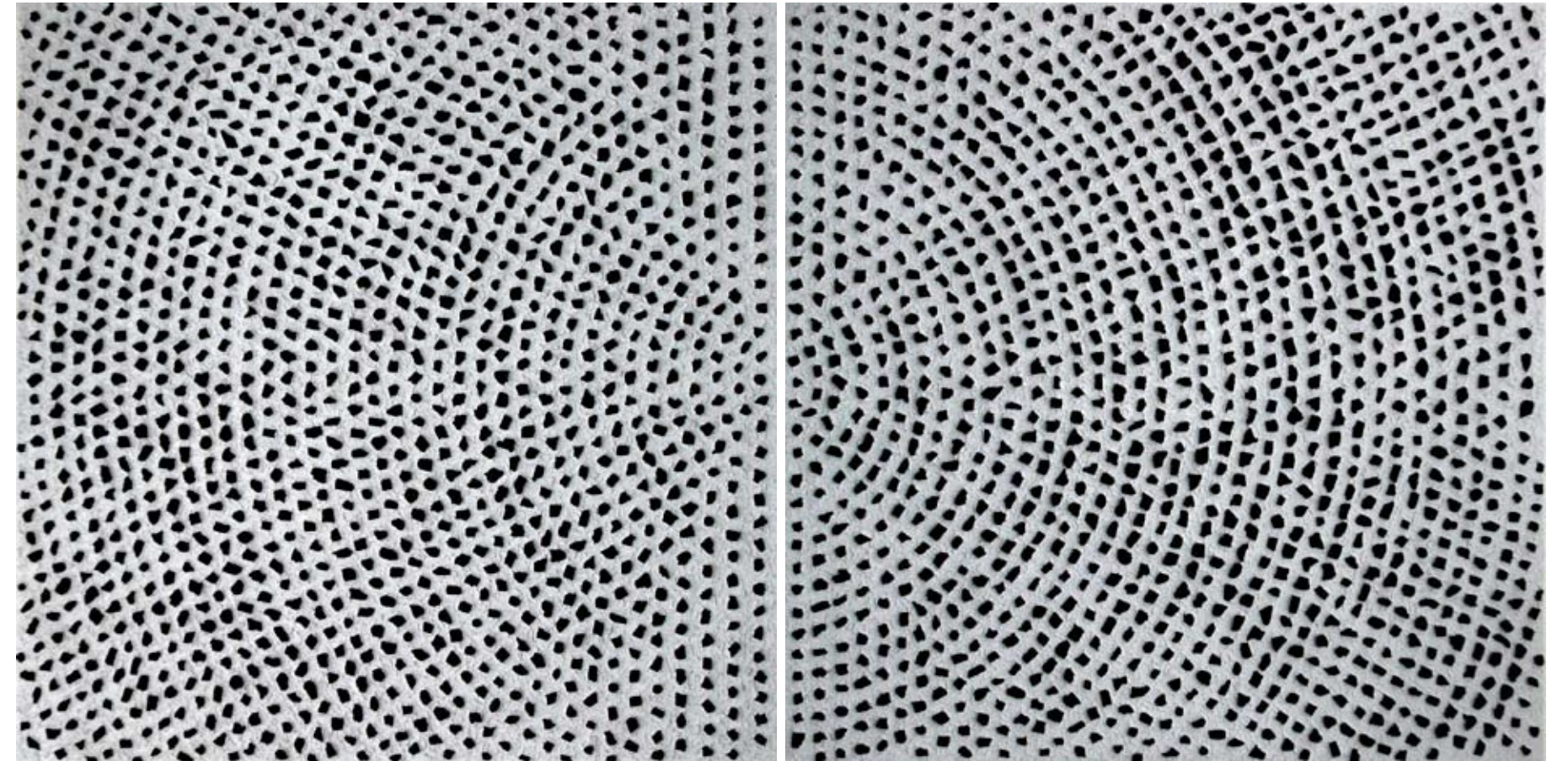


Thaier HELAL ►
'Black & White'
180 X 360 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas 2010

Although continuing from a direction in his work with which he delved further into total abstraction, Thaier Helal's "Black and White" (2010) demonstrates how the artist has never abandoned his exploration of repetition as a visual point of entry for other meditations. Accordingly, he has also proceeded with investigations into the tactile qualities of medium and surface and how both are essential to drawing the viewer in, particularly when non-representational forms are used to communicate existentialist themes.

Created using hundreds of lumps of coal, the large diptych exemplifies this as the artist maps two semicircles against a textured background. Treating the canvas with medium so that it appears to ripple and crack throughout, this works to offset the small pieces of black material that makeup the focal point of his composition while creating the illusion of depth with positive and negative space. With great precision, the artist has placed each lump so that it is aligned in perfect form.

Beginning in the center of the foreground, Helal's imposing arcs grow symmetrically across the composition. Comprised of individual half circles that increase in size as they approach the top of the canvas, they appear to go beyond the boundaries of the picture plane, signifying no end to their expansion. The circular shape of these two arrangements implies an uninterrupted cycle. Set against the fractured surface of the white background, Helal implies disparate stages of existence, that which radiates with life-giving elements, expanding beyond the mind's eye and the present, and that which recedes into death, slowly diminishing into the distance.



Tammam AZZAM ►
'Laundry Series'
200 X 200 cm. Mixed Media 2010

Tammam Azzam's "Laundry Series" (2010) revisits previous experiments in which the artist created depth, texture and space by taking cues from ordinary objects and particular environments. In his earlier body of work, Azzam attached clothespins to large canvases, breaking up their uniformity with vivacious areas of expressionist brushwork and layered medium. Appearing as unconventional clotheslines, the surfaces of these canvases resemble the rugged terrain of his native Suweida, Syria, which is known for its volcanic landscape. In these initial paintings, Azzam juxtaposes the industrial traces of man with the untamable, organic patterns of nature.

In his most recent "Laundry Series" he moves further into abstraction, eliminating the use of these objects altogether while still referencing the imprints of our everyday world. His rapid markings are now situated as strips of cloth that he has painted and shredded into hundreds of pieces. As they are suspended from thin strings that are attached on each side of the painting's frame, they have the appearance of "laundry" that has been hung out to dry.

The cutting of this painted canvas adds another dimension of complexity to the work as it is contrasted with a bright yellow background. Sliced into various lengths, they seem to emanate with the same varied motion as the multihued brushstrokes that adorn them. Negative and positive exist between the solid color field of the background and the frayed canvas, creating opposing visual forces. Hanging from beyond the flat picture plane and past the bottom of the frame, these "markings" blur the lines between painting and installation.



Kais Salman's 2010 "Untitled" triptych is meant to elicit strong reactions. A provocative take on the Arab world's growing dependency on material goods and its further acceptance of fabricated notions of beauty, he identifies the fashion industry as one of the main culprits. Never shying away from potentially disconcerting subject matter (see his earlier paintings on car bombs), the Syrian painter employs an expressive style with a limited palette and an emphasis on hollowed spaces that delineate a symbolic void.

It is the absence of freethinking minds and emphatic souls that characterizes his gluttonous subjects. Mounds of flesh spill over their disfigured frames. Their glazed-over eyes carry haunting stares, as they stand poised for the bright lights of the runway. His heroine's bodies are nearly stripped bare, with the exception of a few articles of clothing, paralleling the reduced (or perhaps overworked) features of their faces. And yet they are adorned with elaborate headgear and flowing capes, details that are not to be forgotten.

Their heads are oversized, inflated so that they have become mere caricatures of their former selves. On the underside of a figure's cloak is the terrifying reflection of a skeletal face, perhaps an image of the future that awaits her or a rendering of the mastermind behind her demise-an additional comment on the correlation between excessive consumerism and our moral decline. Gone is a sense of identity and individualism. What remains are mere embodiments of unsightliness as they fade into the background.

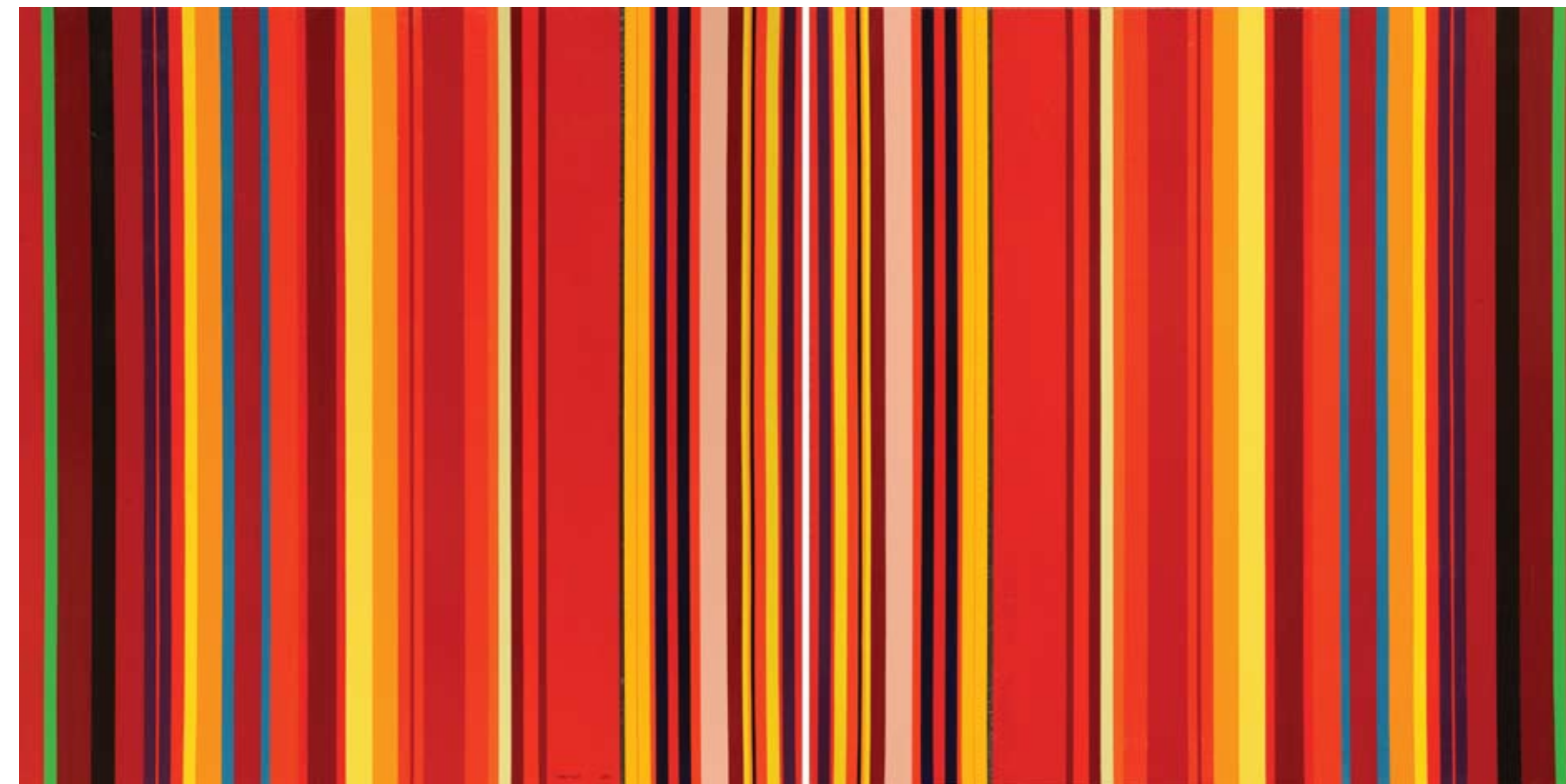


Kais SALMAN 'Untitled' 200 X 300 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas 2009

Although Mouteea Murad's 2007 break from highly psychological subject matter was abrupt, he emerged from a dark expressive painting style with an accomplished take on abstraction and an equally consummate understanding of color. This sudden departure is indicative of a painter who is confident in his vision, as he sought to reflect a new direction in both his life and art. It is also demonstrative of the manner in which many of today's artists are personally redefining the regional art scene, boldly breaking from (or building upon) previous aesthetics.

From morose, turbulent depictions of mankind to vivid geometrically driven compositions, Murad approaches his work with a deep spirituality-one that reconfigures abstraction with the principles of Islamic art in mind. Utilizing contemporary techniques, he explores the core facet of this tradition by creating compositions that suggest a divine presence in the world around us so that wonder, beauty and complexity are depicted as originating in (and always returning to) God.

In 2009, he began labeling these recent works with the word "trial," an indication of a continuous path of experimentation. The diptych "Trial No. 26 Oriental Extension" (2010) is painted with various strips, vibrant parallel lines that are mirrored on each side of the composition. These reflections of color fluctuate in thickness, as a dominating red hue makes thin yellow lines radiate from the canvas. This charting resembles that of sound waves, which have the same direction of vibration as their direction of travel. If the two canvases are turned and placed side-by-side these parallel lines form continuous bands of color, thus "Oriental Extension" suggests continuity in form and infinite interconnectedness.



Mouteea MURAD 'Trial No.26; Oriental Extension' 155 X 310 cm. Acrylic on Canvas 2010

Mohannad ORABI ►
'Self Portrait'
300 X 300 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas 2009

Mohannad Orabi's "Self Portrait" (2009) shows the artist as a childlike, animated figure in four parts. His colorful, androgynous-looking representation is shown playing with a bird in various lighthearted scenarios, until he himself grows a pair of wings and begins to levitate off the ground.

Against four different colored backgrounds the artist's symbolic self is depicted in moments of discovery. Orabi's signature palette of mostly primary colors works to simplify his composition so that the elaborate patterns that adorn his body are allowed to function as both decorative attributes and mood-defining details. When his character is pensive or content he is adorned with alternating lines of color, whereas when he is in motion or excited these stripes curve, suggesting energy and movement.

As he plays with the small red bird, he nurtures it, coddling its fragile body, encouraging it to take flight, then eventually blasting off into the heavens himself. He is depicted during moments of tranquility, selflessness and discovery. The narrative is sweet natured and poetic, suggesting the magnificence of love.

The Syrian artist has adopted this character, with its large circular head, rounded body and darkened eyes, as the ultimate embodiment of himself in a series of effervescent paintings. At times he appears jubilant. In other instances he occupies a melancholy space. Nonetheless, his youthful exuberance is always consistent, so is his boldly stated optimism.



Advancing his painting style with each new series, Palestinian painter Oussama Diab has created a number of critically acclaimed works in recent years, traversing a number of subjects and techniques.

His three “Untitled” panels from 2009 were painted during a period when the artist explored themes of “masks” and “mirrors.” Executing large paintings that are divided into several squares containing disfigured portraits, Diab used brushwork, surface and color to render solemn, faceless creatures. When placed side by side, these three portraits can be viewed as an extension of such experiments, revealing the insights of a painter who (although clearly introspective) is largely concerned with our current state of existence and the future of global society.

While only pairs of eyes and ears can be detected behind layers of sporadic markings that produce monster-like qualities, the artist insists that they are human. Even more startling is that they are intended as self-portraits.

Various colors makeup the nearly solid backgrounds that trigger his figure to standout with billowing silhouettes. Diab has painted his face and body as one solid form, presenting only wrecked composites. In fact, he has taken his own image to the stage of such ruin that it appears to be on the brink of explosion. Splattered lines and paint suggest movement as though the process of destruction is shown as it is happening. The turbulence that is depicted amidst his grey mass implies a force that is ravaging him from within. He can hear and see but he cannot speak. Placing thin vertical lines against the edge of the composition, Diab details an environment that closes in on him-an inescapable decline without exit.



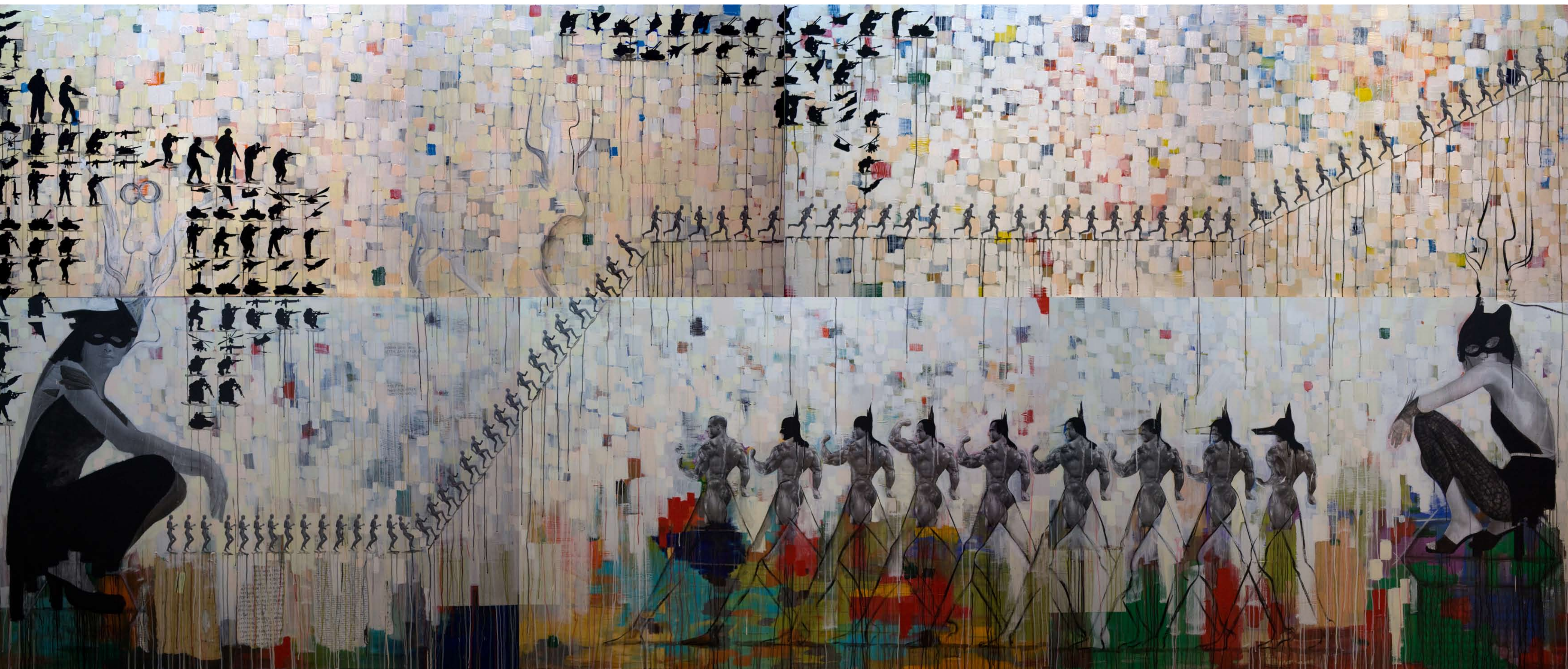
Oussama DIAB *'Untitled'* 150 X 390 cm - Triptych. Mixed Media on Canvas 2009

Egyptian painter Khaled Hafez's fascination with superheroes stems from an intricate investigation of the power of visual culture as it pertains to notions of representation over thousands of years and across cultures. Finding evidence in the links between ancient and contemporary forms of communication, he has compared the aesthetics and functionality of modern day comic strips and Pharaonic painting. Reading horizontally with vivid imagery that is reiterated with accompany text so that the narrative is clear, comic strips, according to Hafez, are a lot like ancient Egyptian two-dimensional works, which were intended solely for the purpose of relaying information.

Using a painting style that incorporates elements of collage, he has placed cutouts of posing muscle men and seductive women within a large composition that is constructed of five canvases, as though functioning as a public mural. The grandness of the work is not only in size but also in the epic nature of his depiction of man in motion. Crowning his figures with the heads of ancient Egyptian gods and the masks of Batman, works to emphasize their uncanny resemblance as human forms exhibit strength and endurance. There is an overlying dichotomy between the physical will of man as he runs up a central axis of the painting and the gangs of soldiers that threaten to stop him in his tracks. The presence of women who flank this ostentatious scene of male posturing grounds the work in a discussion of the projecting of gender roles throughout history.



Khaled HAFEZ. 'Book of Flight' 250 x 600 cm, 5 canvases. Mixed Media on Canvas, 2010



Pierre KOUKJIAN ►
'Impressive People'
180 X 180 cm. Oil on Canvas 2009

Pierre Koukjian's series "Impressive People" examines twenty-first century celebrity culture and the superstar status that is sometimes given to political figures in our media-driven society. His large, vivacious portraits capture the essence of pop cultural icons, ranging from Lebanese diva Fairouz to the Dali Lama, alongside takes on the magnetism of such political leaders as Walid Jumblatt. His selection is vast and indiscriminate, focusing purely on the lure of their image. Bubbly pop stars occupy the same space as polarizing figures and peaceniks.

His 2009 portrait of Nancy Ajram shows the songstress' face as she looks on with a smile. Her features are rendered with areas of bold color-grey lips, purple eyes and white flesh, a stylized capturing of a subject who is forever in the limelight. Although possessing an uncanny likeness, the artist's portrait is unconcerned with realism. The palette used on her face, for example, has more to do with communicating certain emotive impressions as her image is constructed for the public-the sultriness of her skin, a statement of confidence that is made with her dark hair and brows, and the seductive but playful poise of her overstated lips. What Ajram represents for many is the revamping of sexual identity in the Arab world, the pushing of social boundaries within a culture whose more conservative facets have stood on shaky ground since the 1950s.

Essentially an outline of her physicality, Koukjian extracts the essence of her public image, the making of a calculated appearance. By doing so he taps into a realm where levels of extraordinariness are now measured in doses of visual eye candy.



Khaled TAKRETI ►
'Full Make Up'
180 X 180 cm. Acrylic on Canvas 2008

A close examination of Khaled Takreti's "Full Makeup" (2008) reveals how, although his subject matter is lighthearted and campy, the artist uses a confident sense of design, an audacious palette and an accomplished understanding of the principles of painting to present deeper investigations. Exploring notions of love, memory, and time while also toying with social constructs (i.e. the meanings of various relationships, our sense of individualism in modern times and our relative interconnectedness), the Paris-based Syrian painter mixes the personal with the collective.

When painted as single portraits, his figures are frequently self-assured and enigmatic, although the title of a painting might allude to a greater narrative, one that lies outside of the picture plane. In larger compositions, he often unifies his subjects with inanimate objects, depicting them at seminal points in their lives or amidst an endless adventure down a symbolic path.

In "Full Makeup" Takreti meticulously uses shadows and highlights to give his subject a glowing appearance. The florescent hues that make up her face and hair are used to draw the viewer's focus to her piercing stare as she is shown against an eggplant-colored background. Using a thin white line to delineate her form, Takreti further emphasizes her poise. She is at once graceful and aloof.



Khaled TAKRETI ►
'The Kiss'
180 X 180 cm. Acrylic on Canvas 2009

Khaled Takreti's "The Kiss" (2009) further exemplifies his daring style of portraiture with an even greater attention to the affecting power of his subject and a remarkable engagement of design. This is most true of his unconventional yet clever choice of palette.

Contrasting a bright orange background with the slight variations of rich green that color his figure's face, he creates a general sense of warmth. This is offset by the white and grey stripes of his shirt, a contrast between negative and positive space that anchors the portrait in the foreground of the composition. With a triangular neckline and a pattern of thick vertical lines, the seemingly inconspicuous article of clothing is in fact crucial to Takreti's overall formalistic approach, as it is enlisted to further elongate the subject's face while accentuating the focal point of the painting.

The man's eyes remain in shadow, as the artist has intentionally made them recede behind a pair of oval-shaped glasses. This is so as not to distract from the key element of the composition, a sensual pair of candy-colored lips. Although playful and quietly provocative as he seems to juxtapose supposed notions of masculinity with those of femininity, the main function (and allure) of this vivid feature is to communicate a sense of passion despite the otherwise poised energy that defines his figure, as the title of the work implies, a moment of intimacy.



In Nihad Al Turk's "Secret Dinner" (2009), biblical references and aspects of early Christian iconography are used to enunciate his own views on life and politics. A firm believer that mankind is naturally flawed and that only through an existence filled with love can we transcend our original state, his paintings reflect humanity's imperfections (and subsequent sins) through highly symbolic worlds that contain disfigured forms and anthropomorphic representations.

Although it is perhaps his most recognizable reference to hallowed themes, his highly stylized take on the "Last Supper" shows Jesus Christ (who is identified by a single halo) and the twelve apostles as faceless, shadowy figures. In some ways this defies the original biblical account, which relies on the physical reactions of the disciples when Jesus announces that one of them will betray him. Al Turk resolves this detail in his own way, adding a necklace with seven beads (perhaps suggesting the seven deadly sins) around the neck of Judas while also crowning him with a tiny pair of devil horns.

The mood of the piece is dark and brooding, as each human form appears as a silhouetted mass of color. The emphasis of the piece seems to be on the meeting itself, not on the actual figures, as they become secondary.

The expansive table that hosts them is flattened so that it appears to be from an aerial view, a bold abandonment of Leonardo da Vinci's one point perspective, which centralized the focus on Jesus. This vast space before them communicates a certain degree of disconnection.



Nihad AL-TURK *'The Secret Dinner'* 190 X 340 cm. -2 canvases- Mixed Media on Canvas 2009

A Tribute to Samia Halaby

From Fire to City Blocks: A Tribute to Samia Halaby

Abstraction in contemporary Arab art has had few pioneers. Although aesthetic breakthroughs in nonrepresentational approaches have been discernable (and plentiful) over the last fifty years, only a handful of artists can be credited with developing styles that have changed the face of local art. Palestinian artist Samia Halaby holds court as one of the most prominent painters of the Arab world, having intensified the degree to which contemporary abstraction returned to the highly analytical vision of Islamic art, which combined science, mathematics and aesthetic formalism to interpret and project the magnificence of nature.

Halaby, who also found inspiration in the initial schools of international abstraction that emerged in twentieth-century Europe (such as Russian Constructivism), has identified with the richness of this broad and diverse visual culture through the many examples that she has located in Islamic architecture of the Arab world. The congruencies that she discovered between this regional aesthetic and her own views on art were early on, as she searched for ways to deconstruct phenomena that appear in our everyday surroundings.

Although immigrating to the US in the 1950s, Halaby’s early childhood was spent in her birthplace of Palestine, and later in Lebanon, where her family sought refuge after the onset of the Nakba. Returning to the Arab world after a long absence in the 1960s, she became reacquainted with the patterns and designs of Islamic art that had intrigued her as a child. Upon completing her academic training in the Midwest, she went through several trials that attempted to locate her aims in art, yet it was not until the beginning of the 1970s, when she abandoned most hints of perspective that she reached a point of pure abstraction.

The seven paintings that appear in The Samawi Collection’s “A Tribute to Palestinian Artist Samia Halaby” are taken from several series, comprising nearly a decade of work. The advances that were made during this brief time are vast despite occupying such a short period of production within the context of her expansive career. Four distinct bodies of work are represented in these canvases with at least one example from each, the bulk of which belong to what Halaby refers to as the “Diagonal Flight” period of her oeuvre.

Throughout her progression as an artist she has faced brief moments of impasse following exciting stretches of proliferation. Often times, as she refines a particular approach and reaches peaks of discovery, she concludes experiments by searching for new ground. This frequently has meant that the appearance of her paintings changes dramatically.

In 1970 this occurred once the artist determined that she had been “focusing on the single individual human self and his or her world of thought and understanding” in a series of still lifes that were based on geometric objects that she built as three-dimensional structures. What Halaby realized was that in order to further develop her rendering of nature and reality through abstraction she must redirect her focus on the picture from the internal to the external.

“Fire” (1975) is part of “Helixes and Cycloids,” the series that followed this realization. While studying the geometry of shapes that could be joined or intersected so that shaded volumes seemed to exist on a single plane, she was able to direct the visual motion of her compositions so that it expanded towards the outside of the picture.

The metallic red canvas teems with energy and movement, as these dissected forms appear to ascend into the upper right hand corner of the canvas. The artist has painted each section with thin diagonal lines that vary in color, creating brilliant areas where light seems to bounce off the surface. Dozens of red, blue, purple and grey lines are painted in sequence as they define the curvature of helixes. “Fire,” which was completed in her New Haven studio while she held a position at the Yale School of Art, would be one of her last paintings of this artistic inquiry.

The narrow lines that make up these shaded volumes play a central role in her subsequent series “Diagonal Flight” as the angled position of the horizontal axis could be used to suggest infinite movement, a transcendence of the peripheries of the picture plane. Her focus on these lines led to the complete reduction of space (and forms) so that the intense volume of her helixes and cycloids was replaced with variations in light, creating the sensation of flight. Halaby began this examination by asking, “Do we have sufficient knowledge yet to understand what our eyes tell us when we look at the boundary, the invisible line, between a curved surface and the distance behind it?”

These questions resonate in “Blue Trap in a Railroad Station” (1997), which reflects the artist’s experience of speed while traveling by train between New Haven and Manhattan (where she is based). Amidst the deep hues of various cylinders, the artist depicts two smaller forms that stop before reaching the edge of the painting, where they would otherwise continue to travel out of sight. These lesser strips of color are suspended in the composition so that they appear to be moving into (or away from) the surface of the canvas “like a trap door,” despite running parallel to other cylinders. They are in a stationary position with limited mobility that is surrounded by movement. This correlates with another predominant aspect of the series, which sought to provide insight into the three-dimensionality of these geometric shapes with the use of directional illumination as their circular ends lied beyond the painting.

“Copper” (1976) exhibits a simultaneous exploration, as the artist resumed her investigations into the physical properties of metals that are visible in her “Helixes and Cycloids.” As the artist bent and positioned actual pieces of copper to examine how light hits its surface, Halaby was delighted to find that it is the only metal to produce a reflection that is made up of several colors. The painting is thus defined by variations of white, blue, red and yellow strips that glow from the canvas.

Positioning a central cylindrical axis that ran diagonally along the canvas, Halaby then began intersecting these lines with large geometric shapes that formed the background of her composition. As the bases of triangles ran along the side of these diagonals and the edges of squares met them perpendicularly, the artist added a layered consistency to the surface, a technique that she had not utilized since the first stages of her painting. She also considered the discoveries that she had made while looking at the exterior of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem in 1966. Allowing the rectangle of the painting to induce the emergence of shapes, she then filled them with the shaded cylinders of the “Diagonal Flight” paintings or with a material consistency that imitated inlaid tile. The artist recently described such techniques as they were applied to the 1981 painting “Sailing,” explaining the nuances of what she observed in Islamic architecture:

Contemplating the geometry and the texture of the inlaid black and white marble, I started a set of paintings in which the geometric structures was evolved from the rectangle of the canvas and from two diagonal squared corners that aligned with the outside

edge of the composition. The marble inspired the various subtle textures within each shape as though they were inlaid materials. The sweep of the yellow gave me a sense of joy like a sail filled with a gust of wind...In ‘Sailing,’ colored brush marks fan and tumble, defining between them large areas of plain color while giving those spaces attributes of immeasurable depth. The pleasure of mentally gliding in certain parts of the painting inspired its title. (Correspondence with the artist 2010)

Although belonging to a separate series of paintings, “City Nights” (1983) demonstrates how this emphasis on geometry ultimately led to studies on the process of growth in the natural world, an inherent “motion in reality.” For the artist, growth is the development of humanity, reproducing this process with rectangles that open at a corner into new shapes.

Observing this direction in the urban landscape of Manhattan, she is moved by the technological advances of mankind. “City Nights” is one of the first paintings that the artist created with the metropolis as a sort of muse, one that has since become prevalent in her work.

For the artist, abstraction is composed of “the general principles” that we extract from our environment, often governing more than one set of specifics. Thus while it is important for viewers to be informed of the details of what brought about such paintings, it is equally imperative that they recognize “the structures of things [that] they themselves have seen and loved.”

“Fire” (1975) is an example of Samia Halaby’s “Helixes and Cycloids” series, during which she first began to explore the possibilities of how lines could infer that shapes and space continued outside of the picture if they were placed diagonally in the composition. The expansiveness of the plane that was created was thus felt across the canvas, acting as a central axis. This was inline with a new focus that Halaby sought to initiate in her work at the time, which shifted the direction of her investigations from an internal focus to an external one.

The artist first drafted helixes and cycloids on graph paper, allowing for the creation of abstractions without the formal concerns that were demanded of a picture plane. She would then extract a rectangular section from these sketches that would be placed on the canvas. The edges of these shapes created a sequence of diagonals that defined her composition.

“Fire” demonstrates how the artist was liberated from the need to create her composition according to an illusionist approach that would accommodate a two-dimensional surface. By graphing these shapes, she found no need to define negative and positive space (depth) according to a background. The metallic forms that appear in “Fire” are shaded so that not one recedes, creating the sense of “continuum between volume and surface” that is found in Islamic art, as it is reiterated with contemporary methods of painting. They also give her painting a particular vividness, evoking the reflection of light as it bounces off of a piece of metal. As she became more and more interested in these visual effects, she emphasized the various colors of shaded areas so that they were pronounced. This not only produced a sense of movement, it allowed for the diagonal sweeps to be distributed throughout each form so that all aspects of the painting seemed to be proceeding outside of canvas.

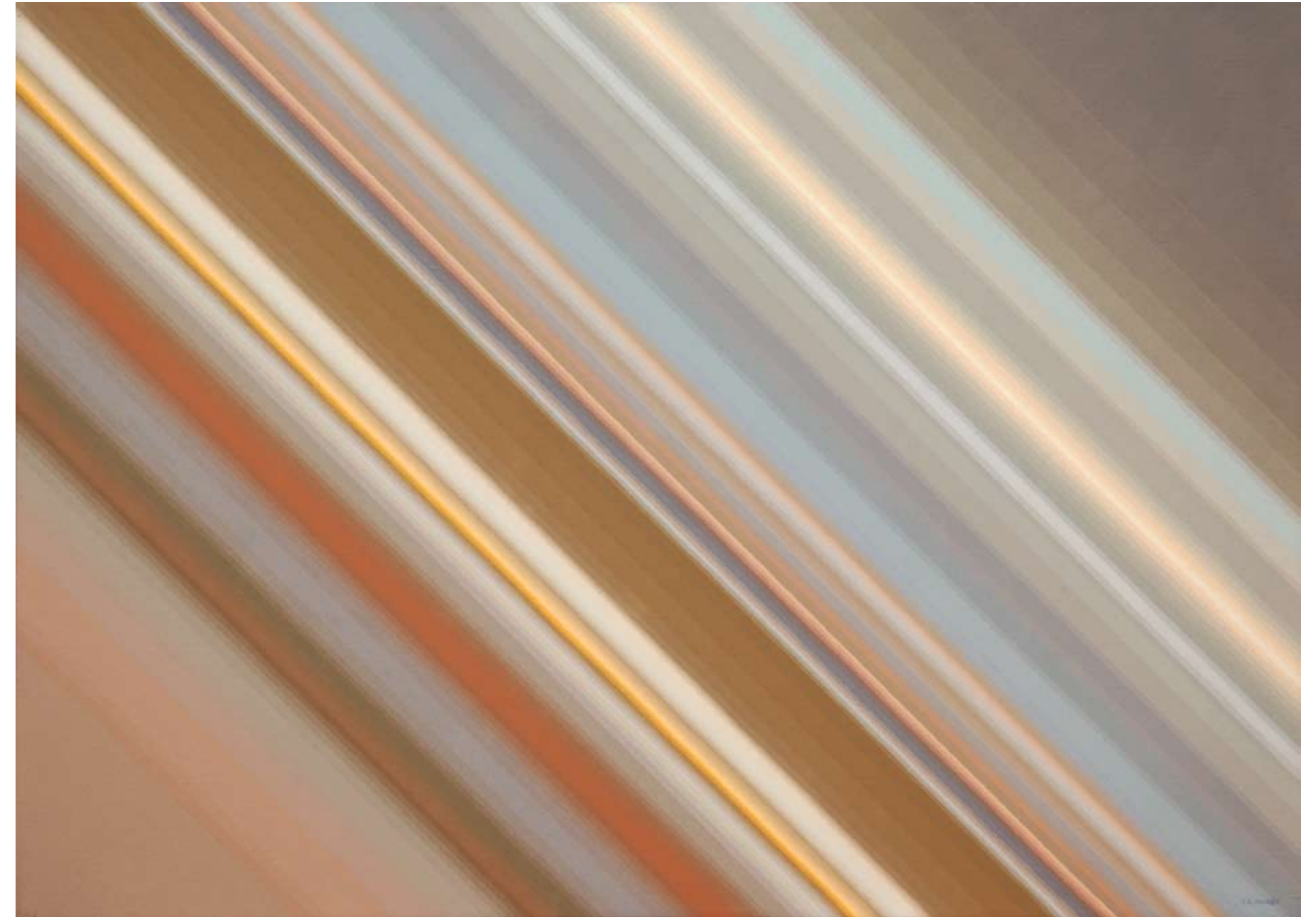


Samia HALABY *'Fire'* 76 X 107 cm. Oil on Canvas 1975

“Copper” (1976) demonstrates Samia Halaby’s colorist techniques as they relate to her investigations in depth, space and movement. While closely examining a piece of copper in her studio one day, bending it so that light hit its surface at different angles, the artist was drawn to the ways in which it reflected color.

Beginning from the lower left hand corner of the composition and extending diagonally across the canvas, Halaby depicts the spectrum of these tones with sheer precision. Using the soft shadowing of lines that dominates previous paintings from the “Diagonal Flight” series, and which made for an illusionist depiction of volume, she gradually illustrates the appearance of a sequence of colors as the metal interacts with light. Areas of its surface are made evident as they are interspersed with reflections that shine as red, yellow, blue and white lines that fade into each other yet radiate from the canvas. These reflections continue on the same path as the metal’s surface, which Halaby has depicted as transcending the physical boundaries of the painting, perhaps suggesting the infinite hues that can be discovered when experimenting with this particular material—the different sights and sensations that can be extracted from this seemingly simple element.

Although cylinders (the main form of this body of work) are subtly discernable throughout, they seem to be morphing into the distinct lines and pronounced areas of color (solid forms) that will soon take hold in a subsequent series in which the focus is on the growth of geometric shapes. These diagonal bands of color would later be used a means of dividing the canvas.



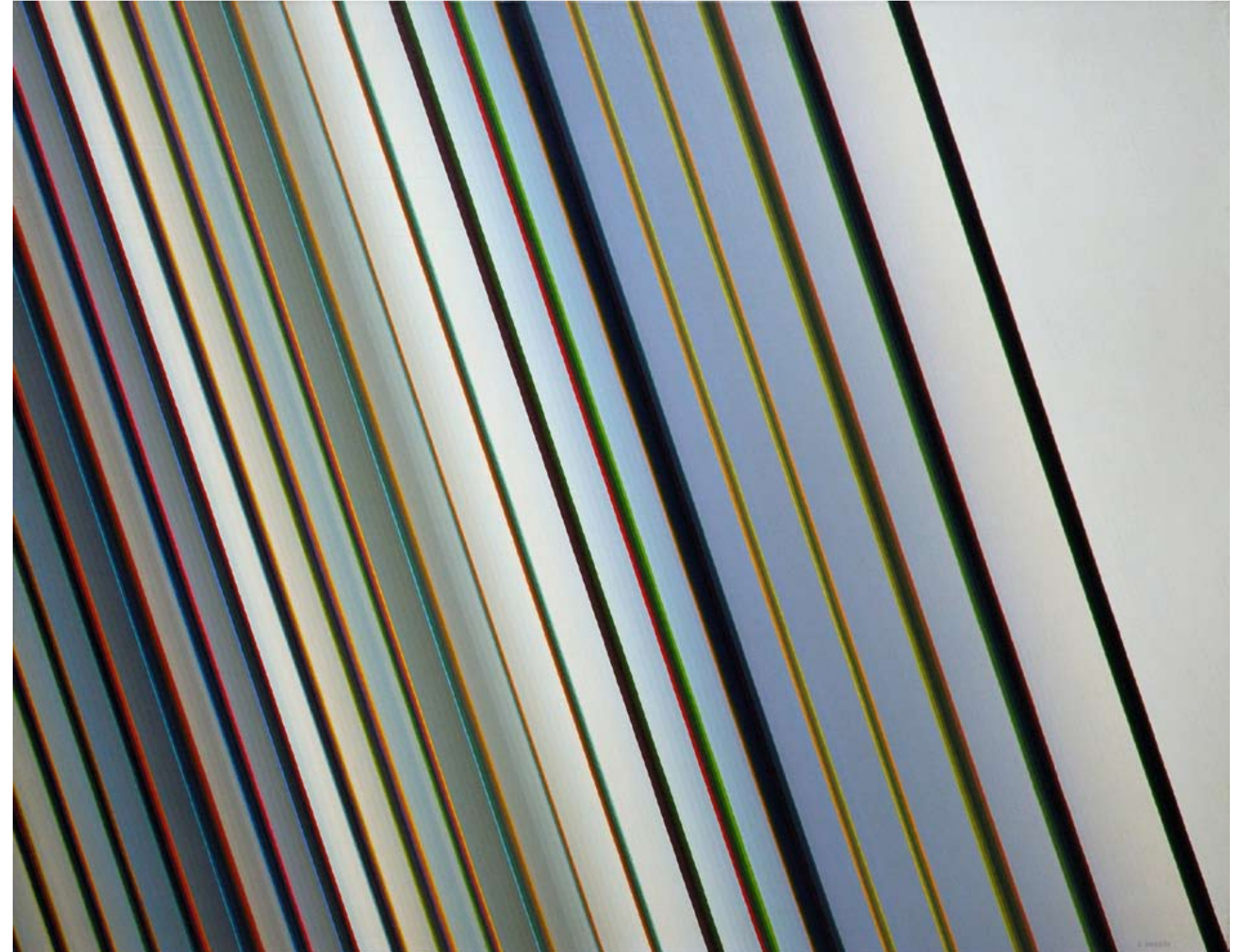
Samia HALABY '*Copper*' 76 X 107 cm. Oil on Canvas 1976

An early example of Samia Halaby's "Diagonal Flight" series "Fern" (1975) demonstrates the highly analytical approach that has driven her breakthroughs in abstraction. As she observed evolving forms in nature, she sought to create an aesthetic that replicated this organic state. Halaby methodically plotted various diagonals as the edges of cylinders according to the actual measurements of variation she discovered in a large fern leaf. These diagonals were then slightly expanded so that they appeared as thin strips of color.

The gradually decreasing distances in the painting and the inherent disproportion of such progressions are copied directly from the fern. Each narrow cylinder of the composition is as wide as the space between the thin arteries that shoot out from the stem of a leaf. This area reduces in size as the pairs of opposite shoots approach the top.

As the colors alternated from yellow to red throughout the sequence, they expanded to different widths with a subtle change in hues. The space in between (representing cylinders) also altered in tone, suggesting a constant state of transformation. Although subtle, the technique behind this effect stemmed from Halaby's fascination with the illusions of distant horizons that are produced by striated shading at the boundaries between shapes. She first began to examine this process of creating volume in her "Helixes and Cycloids" series.

The slant of the diagonals is based on the paths of children who, with their arms stretched out as they pretended to fly, had the tendency to lean to the left as they ran in circles, imitating the movement of an airplane.

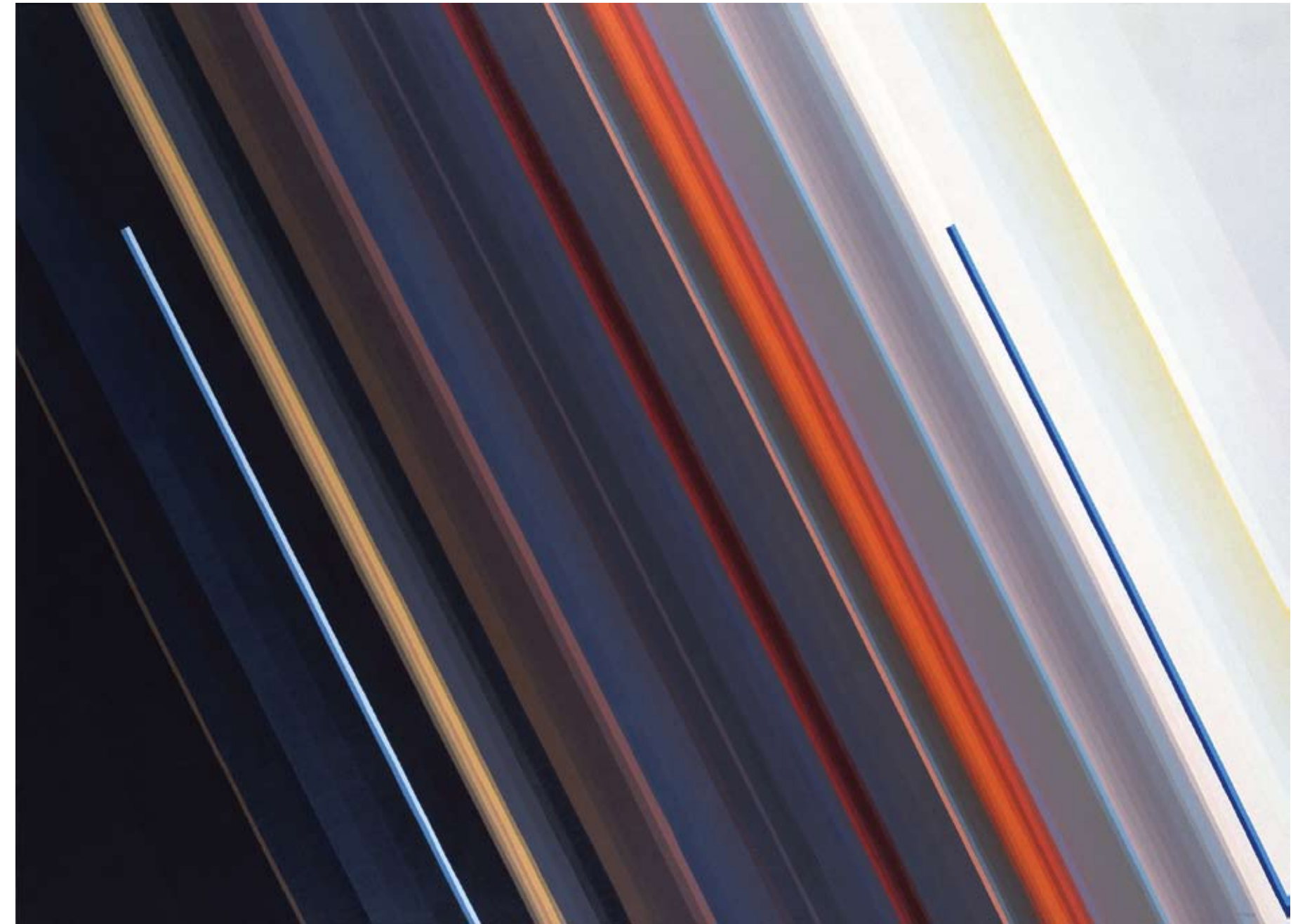


Samia HALABY 'Fern' 168 X 214 cm. Oil on Canvas 1976.

“Blue Trap in a Railroad Station” (1977) illustrates how Samia Halaby’s paintings often involve the visual translation of things and experiences that she has encountered throughout her life. Although highly formalistic and based on both aesthetic and scientific principles (namely the study of optics), her work also reveals how she navigates and understands the world. For the artist, her paintings are “illusions of the space and time and motion we are able to understand” in the modern world, as technology has transformed “our sense of space” and “our strategies of looking.” Thus she hopes that viewers will recognize certain details of things that they too have seen or loved in her paintings.

While traveling from New Haven, Connecticut (where she taught at the Yale School of Art) to New York City (where she was based), Halaby was impacted by the speed with which the visual sensations of landscapes and cities flew past her as she viewed them from inside of a train.

Composed of cylinders that vary in width and color, a recognizable formalistic trait of the “Diagonal Flight” series to which it belongs, “Blue Trap in a Railroad Station” differs from the artist’s earlier works in that it juxtaposes forms that are in motion with those that are stationary. Two thin lines that shoot out from the lower part of the canvas are cut as they approach the upper edge of the picture. This opposes the feel of cylinders that seem to reach beyond the boundaries of the composition as they continue to move forward. Since these blue lines are cut, they give the impression of being partially detached from the surface, so that they lean back or fall into the canvas instead of progressing upwards like a trap door.



Samia HALABY 'Blue Trap in a Rail Road Station' 122 X 167.5 cm. Oil on Canvas 1977

Samia HALABY ►
'War Women; for Dalal Mughrabi'
183 X 183 cm. Oil on canvas 1978

Although part of her “Diagonal Flight” series, Samia Halaby’s “War Women for Dalal Mughrabi” (1978) possesses a noticeably different division of space and a less pronounced use of shading. This is driven by the subject matter that she evokes, one that demands the use of abstraction as an allegorical representation for human subjects.

Dedicated to the late Dalal Mughrabi, a Palestinian resistance fighter who was with the PLO during the late 1970s, the painting suggests a profound state of mourning. Created the year that Mughrabi was killed by Israeli forces during a military operation, its areas of near solid color and vertical lines diverge from the diagonal divisions and apparent use of shading that dominate other works from the series.

Large areas of black that recede into grey stand as shadowy forces. Although their presence is visually arresting, setting the overall mood of the painting, lesser areas of color breakthrough as though coming to the foreground. Slight diagonals lines (that are practically undetectable) create the appearance of movement as these bright areas proceed forward. This contrast between light and dark suggests the transcending of the blackened environment, an offering of light amidst the darkness, reflecting the artist’s relentless sense of optimism that she holds as part of her personal political beliefs. In the past Halaby has explained:

As a Palestinian woman artist, I feel solidarity with all disinherited people of whatever nationality. And I feel optimistic and that’s important, though I don’t share that optimism with too many other people. Most people are pessimistic about the future, but when you understand human social development, you are optimistic. You have hope.



Samia HALABY ►
'Sailing'
122 X 107 cm. Oil on Canvas 1981

Inspired by the inlaid tiles that adorn the Dome of the Rock in her native Jerusalem, in “Sailing” (1981) Samia Halaby uses bold geometric shapes to create collisions of dynamic forces. Situating several triangles so that they intersect or run parallel to a diagonal axis that divides the composition, she contrasts their forms with vivid color.

Emphasizing positive and negative space, solid areas of color are used to delineate the foreground of the composition while those that are textured with visible brushstrokes establish the background. Light thus reflects in the bright yellow planes that dominate its center. The title of her painting references the sensations of “sailing” that can be felt by the suggestion of motion in the foreground.

This suggestion of light and dimension is not unlike the manner in which geometry and color are used on the façade of the Dome of the Rock in order to create the appearance of depth, suggesting infinite growth and space. These details were essential to the use of geometry in Islamic art, as patterns displayed intricate combinations that were never to appear stagnant. This persistent movement is reiterated in Halaby’s painting as the edges of triangles lie beyond, a technique that is seen in her previous paintings.

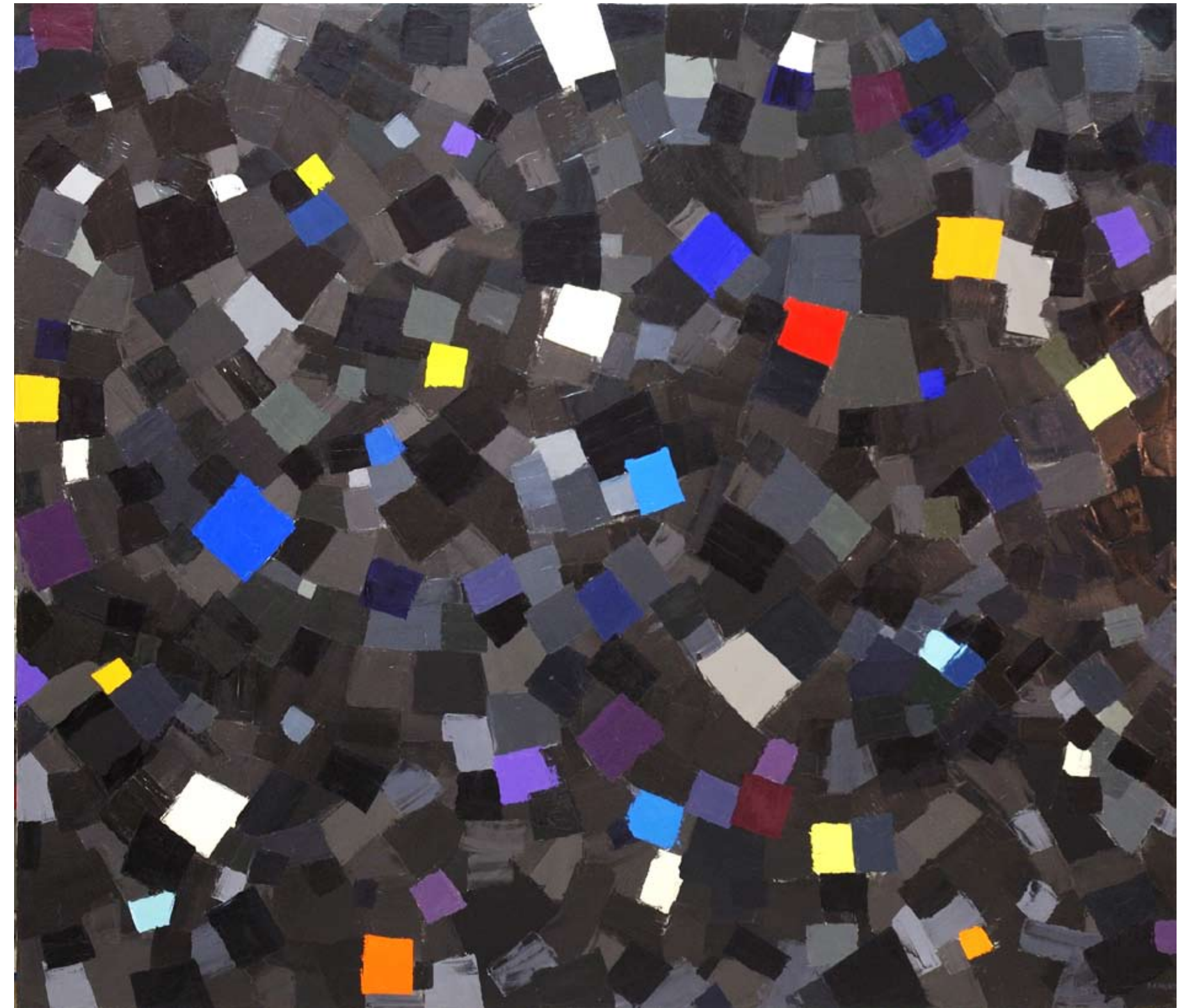
A consummate colorist, her palette is also similar to that of the seventh century structure, making it the most visible iteration of its influence on her work. In essence, the artist has further reduced its ornamental design according to developments in contemporary abstraction.



Samia Halaby's "City Nights" (1983) was created during a period of her work when she sought to investigate the process of growth as it is found in nature and is reflected in the developments of mankind. Beginning with a close study of autumn leaves that she dissected and cut into rectangles, observing their natural growth cycle, she was taken by the challenge of "imitating their growth and decay" rather than simply rendering their beauty or immediate appearance. This led to applying these observations while she navigated the streets of Manhattan with a particular way of seeing.

Continuing with the merging of texture and infinite space that she had begun in her "Dome of the Rock" series, she sought to capture the essence of cityscapes through abstraction, the sensations of man's growth through innovation and technology.

"City Nights" is dominated by black and grey rectangles that completely cover the surface and open at the edge of the canvas. Overlaid so that they appear to emerge sporadically, Halaby was interested in creating a system of moving shapes that was based on the truncated rectangles and uneven pentagons of city grids as an indication of "man's simple geometry" on the landscape. Walking through her Tribeca neighborhood, she saw the colors of streetlights and shop signs as colorful moments that were surrounded by the darkness of night. Deconstructing this sight according to her experiments at the time, she used a layering of shapes with punctuations of blue, red, yellow and orange to create a sense of spatiality and depth without having to employ techniques such as perspective and shading that would otherwise make for a betrayal of complete abstraction.



Samia HALABY 'City Nights' 165 X 190.5 cm. Oil on canvas 1983

Biographies

Ammar AL-BEIK (1972 -)

Born in Damascus, Syria in 1972, Ammar Al Beik's artistic career stems from unconventional roots. Although graduating from the University of Damascus with a degree in business administration, his love for photography intensified while working at a camera repair shop for ten years. It is there that he received his formal training in the medium, exploring various methods and approaches while becoming an expert in photographic equipment. He has been exhibiting his photographs since the mid 1990s, at a time when he simultaneously began an impressive career in filmmaking. Taking his cinematic works to the international stage, he has earned critical acclaim from audiences and juries across the global and has been honored with a number of awards. Having participated in screenings worldwide since 1999, his films have been featured in such prestigious events as the Venice and San Paulo International Film Festivals. His invitation to the 63rd Annual Venice Film Festival was a first in the history of Syrian cinema. In just a little over a decade he has become one of country's leading filmmakers.

Never abandoning his original interest, he has continued to work in photography despite the great success he has found in cinema. Equally accomplished in both genres, his photographs have been shown in venues throughout the Middle East, Europe and the US. Since joining Ayyam gallery in 2007, Al Beik has been impressing viewers and critics alike through such notable exhibitions as "Shabab Uprising," "Black vs. Color" and the "SCOPE Art Fair (Basel)".

As a result of his great artistic range and background, Al Beik's photographs possess a cinematic quality that can only be found amidst the portfolio of a seasoned image maker. Forever embracing experimentation, he works with an assortment of techniques. Often materializing in the form of large ultra chrome prints on canvas, his photographs toy with the manipulation of light and contrast and delve into the art of visual storytelling, holding the narrative of his subjects up with careful scrutiny and heightened sensitivity.

Nihad AL-TURK (1972 -)

Born in Aleppo, Syria in 1972 amidst abject poverty, Nihad al Turk has developed a mature painting style against all odds. With no academic training but several years of practice and experimentation behind him, he has established himself within the contemporary Syrian art scene as one of the most sought after painters. With participation in a number of group exhibitions at venues such as Ayyam Gallery Dubai, Beirut's UNESCO palace, and the Park Avenue Armory in New York, his profile has quickly risen over the last decade. Accordingly, he has held solo exhibitions in leading art spaces in Syria and Turkey and has been featured in a number of events abroad such as Art Palm beach and Miami International Art Fair.

Al Turk's haunting mixed media canvases are highly influenced by his outlook on life and political convictions. Believing that man is innately flawed and that only through an existence filled with love can there be human progress, he drafts compositions that hint at the injustices of the world around us. He does so with a sophisticated technique of flattening space and utilizing color fields and patterns to give illusions of depth and dimension. Creating an aesthetic that is based on the tradition of still life painting yet is dominated by symbolic representation, his works employ a detailed system of signs that allude to profound philosophical conclusions. This is not unlike the religious works created during the High Renaissance in Flanders, in which images of Christ and the Virgin Mary were surrounded by objects that expanded the narrative of a painting by implying greater meaning.

In al-Turk's work an image of a vase takes on inferences that point to a deformed character, as its distorted form seems to teeter on the edge of a surface. Floral arrangements appear weathered as they are depicted under the darkness of a heavy shadow, while human figures are rendered as alien beings and animals are mutated nearly beyond recognition. The only items that retain their original form are bowls of fruit, perhaps suggesting the sustenance of life. Biblical references are abound, not only with a large painting that seems to depict the ubiquitous "last supper," a subject matter that also points to a larger tradition in art, but also with the reappearance of things in increments of seven. While manifested in reoccurring anthropomorphic figures such as a mouse or devil-like figure, this reference might possess greater meaning than just the artist's number of siblings, as the seven deadly sins seem appropriate in al Turk's tragic yet highly spiritual universe.

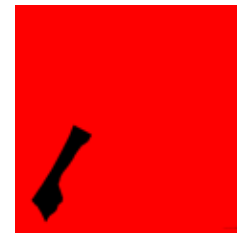
Mustafa ALI (1956 -)

Mustafa Ali, one of the Arab world's foremost sculptors, was born in Lattakia, Syria in 1956. Known for elegant, monumental sculptures that pierce our consciousness and underscore the fragility of mankind, he has been a favorite among regional collectors for nearly three decades.

After studying sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Art in Damascus, Ali continued his studies at the Fine Arts Academy in Carrara, Italy and graduated in 1996. He has exhibited extensively, both in his native Syria and internationally, since 1979 and has participated in a number of high-profile events such as Lattakia Sculpture Biennial (where he was awarded the Golden Prize) (1997), the Biennial of Alexandria, Egypt (1994), the Sharjah Biennial (1995), and the International Symposium for Sculptors in Valencia, Spain (2001).

Widely recognized, his work is housed in private and public collections throughout the Middle East, including a number of official institutions in Syria such as the National Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Damascus, in addition to the Jordan National Gallery in Amman, the Sharjah Museum of Art and the Arab World Institute in Paris. Many of his bronze and wood sculptures can also be found in public spaces, such as "The Gate of Syria," which is on display in the Mediterranean Olympiad in Pari, Italy, and "The Tower of Memory," which stands in the Damascus International Fairground.

Ali is also the director of the renowned Damascus art center The Mustafa Ali Art Foundation, which presents exhibitions, workshops, lectures and cultural events throughout the year to local artists and the public. Through his work and his nonprofit, Ali has fostered generations of Syrian artists.



Asaad ARABI (1941 -)

Born in Damascus in 1941, Asaad Arabi is one of Syria's most established artists. Recognized as a leading contemporary Arab painter since the 1980s, his works have been featured in countless venues throughout the region and abroad and are housed in several prestigious collections such as the Arab World Institute in Paris, the Barcelona Contemporary Museum of Art and South Korea's Museum in Seoul. His most recent exhibitions include a handful of well-received solo and group shows with Ayyam to which he has contributed a variety of canvases and has demonstrated an impressive range of painting.

A graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, Arabi went on to receive a diploma in painting from the Higher Institute of Fine Arts in Paris in 1983 and later earned a PhD in aesthetics from the distinguished Sorbonne University in 1987. He has been residing in France since 1975 where he has undertaken extensive art research and has penned a significant collection of art writings in both French and Arabic. As such, he is also widely revered as a prominent aesthetic theorist.

Beginning his career at the end of Syria's modernist period, his paintings span decades of art and include numerous styles. Although he began depicting the old streets of Damascus with an acute sense of realism, this quickly gave way to figurative portrayals that relied heavily on elements of Cubism and abstraction. From a method of painting that delved into the realm of geometric abstraction to the vibrant form of Expressionism that characterizes his canvases today, Arabi's work has successfully traversed multiple international developments in art.

Tammam AZZAM (1980 -)

Born in Damascus in 1980, Tammam Azzam is one of Syria's rising young talents. A graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts with a concentration in oil painting, he has exhibited with some of the country's leading art spaces, including Atassi gallery and the French Culture Centre. Striving to further his artistic practice, Azzam obtained a Fine Arts Certificate from Darat al Funun's esteemed artist workshop program Al Kharif Academy under Syrian master Marwan Kassab Bashi in 2001. Since being selected for "Shabab Ayyam" project in 2008, he has been featured in several significant events including the group show "Stories from the Levant," Scope Art Fair (Basel) 2009 and Art Miami 2010. As such, he has established an impressive fan base that includes collectors from all over the world.

Azzam's style of painting is one that focuses on the tactical application of media-how a variety of components can be employed to create depth, texture and space, achieving a striking balance between the ordinary objects that he portrays and the grand terrain that he evokes. Often times a chair or clothes line with actual pins is depicted with quick brushwork so that his compositions are infused with a playful yet enigmatic narrative. Yet in the same regard these inanimate items work to emphasize the vigor of the space around them, as the remainder of the composition is usually rendered with vivacious strokes and bold markings that imply a sense of movement and energy.

As though suspended in time, his subjects compliment the abstract expressionist details that form them. Recalling the blunt lines, spectacular peaks and vivid sensations found in nature, the artist's imposing canvases are partly inspired by the rugged volcanic landscape of his native Suweida in southern Syria, as though contrasting manmade elements with those that form organically.

Oussama BAALBAKI (1978 -)

Rising talent Oussama Baalbaki was born in Lebanon in 1978 and graduated with an honors degree from the Lebanese University's School of Fine Arts in 2002. He has participated in several collective exhibitions such as "Art Studio" under the supervision of the artist Nasser El-Soumi at Goethe Institute in Beirut in 1999, and the Lebanese Plastic Arts Exhibition in Algeria in 2007. His works were exhibited in the "Autumn Salon" of Sursock Museum in Beirut consecutively from the year 2003 till 2008. Recently he has been featured in such high profile art fairs as Art Dubai and Art Abu Dhabi and a handful of acclaimed group shows including "Convergence, New Art Lebanon," which was held at the American University's Katzen Art Museum in Washington DC.

With a growing fan base, he has recently been given solo exhibitions at some of Beirut's most prominent art spaces such as Agial Gallery. Representing Lebanon in the painting category of the 2009 international "Jeux de la Francophonie" he received a silver medal for one of his canvases.

With a labored approach to painting, Baalbaki does not shy away from difficult subject matters. And yet he is also drawn to the aesthetically beautiful or the stillness that exists amidst the quiet moments in life. His more politically slanted canvases are at once striking and introspective, while his images of the objects that makeup our daily realities seem to possess concealed narratives. In the past the artist has explained these elements of his work by stating:

The first appearance that inspired me artistically is the visual image of the world, with all the condensed material that it includes, and that hides in it condensed virtual spiritual meanings. The visual reality, with the visual memory that produces the mental images, is the domain of my artistic research. This background is my starting point when I paint, trying, as much as I can, to keep a certain distance from the influence of the additional images and thoughts. This approach requires an adequate amount of concentration and nervousness that allow the artistic operation to happen. This approach requires also a certain level of isolation that allows summing up this huge quantity of consecutive images and thoughts. This way, the new ideas become the result of interval contemplation breaks that include poetry readings and condensed flash-backs of close visual events, or older ones, from an older or an imaginary time.

Flavia CODSI (1961 -)

Born in 1961, Flavia Codsí is a self-taught artist who has recently gained the attention of the regional art scene with hyperrealist portraits that range from whimsical depictions of exuberant men and women to grave psychological explorations of alienated figures.

Trained in interior design, she first entered the world of Fine Arts by winning the Dorothy Salhab Kazemi Prize at the 1994 Salon d'Automne of the Sursouk Museum, one of Lebanon's leading cultural events. Following this early success, Codsí quickly secured several more honors, most notably the top award at the 1996 edition of the competition. Creating a significant buzz in the local art scene, this led to her inclusion in Ashkal Alwan's (the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts) groundbreaking multimedia installation the "Sanayeh Project," which came to define a pivotal moment in contemporary Lebanese art after the end of the Civil War by bringing together a number of artists who challenged notions of public space and the place (and function) of art in the nation's post-war society.

Since then she has frequently exhibited in Lebanon's leading art galleries, becoming one of its most sought-after contemporary painters.



Safwan DAHOUL (1961 -)

Born in Hama, Syria in 1961, Safwan Dahoul has recently become one of the Arab world's most prominent painters. Among the highest grossing Middle Eastern artists to date, his outstanding auction sales and blockbuster shows with Ayyam Gallery have made him widely popular with regional and international collectors alike. That he has perfected a unique approach to painting, one incorporating a variety of influences, speaks volumes about his success, as he impacts the local art scene and leads a new generation of contemporary Syrian art.

After graduating from the Faculty of Fines Arts in Damascus at the top of his class in 1983, Dahoul went on to receive a scholarship to study abroad from the Ministry of Higher Education in 1987. Choosing to travel to Belgium due to its rich artistic heritage, particularly its 16th century Flemish school of painting, he obtained a doctorate from the Higher Institute of Plastic Arts in Mons in 1997. Since then he has participated in international art fairs and solo and group exhibitions throughout the Middle East, Europe and the US.

As such, Dahoul's art is undeterred by national borders. His style of painting has been inspired by a vast range of art history, including ancient Assyrian and Pharaonic art and European masters such as Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegal the Elder. Elements of international Modernism and Post-war painting such as the Cubist inspired monumentality of Picasso and the sociopolitical foreboding of Francis Bacon can also be detected. Yet the Syrian artist's canvases demonstrate a profound originality, namely the formation of his aesthetic through the detailed exploration of a haunting female subject and the continuous awakening of the subconscious.

Oussama DIAB (1977 -)

Born in 1977, Palestinian artist Oussama Diab is one of the Middle East's most dynamic new talents. Since graduating from the Faculty of Fines Arts in Damascus in 2002, he has been featured in solo and group exhibitions throughout the region and has been honored for his work with several awards (including first prize) from the distinguished Young Artists exhibition. His debut show with Ayyam Gallery Damascus in 2009 marked the beginning of an exciting new partnership and was well-received within the local art scene. With successful sales at the gallery's Young Collectors auction, he has quickly garnered great recognition among regional art lovers.

Known for large colorful canvases that employ symbolist interpretations of current events, his recent series of paintings reflects a profound investigation into global political concerns while hinting at the artist's passion for international art. Inspired in part by American painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, Diab's work presents an exciting new take on graffiti-inspired Neo-Expressionism. Updating this painting style while injecting it with his own references, he presents a fresh look at the world. His markings appear quick and spontaneous with an overwhelming urgency, while his subjects exist in a nondescript setting, a technique that creates a sense of universality.

At once pop-infused and marked with a childlike innocence, his canvases are also discernible by their serious subject matter, a juxtaposition that reflects the striking duality of his work. Diab belongs to a contemporary movement of Arab painting that is characterized by its great experimentation and range.

Asma FAYOUMI (1943 -)

Born in Amman, Jordan in 1943, Asma Fayoumi is one of Syria's leading female artists. A graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, her formative years as a painter occurred in the 1960s with the emergence of a particular school of abstraction that was lead by the Italian artist and instructor Guido La Regina.

Working alongside her fellow students Assad Arabi, Faek Dahdouh and Sakher Farzat, who later became recognized as seminal artists, her artistic career began at one of the most crucial periods of the regional art scene-when modernist schools first displayed evidence of a gradual transition into contemporary modes of representation and a charged political climate urged regional culture to take up the call for social change.

Amidst this creative upheaval, Fayoumi's paintings are widely admired for their unique approach to depicting a range of subjects-from mythological figures to the stark realities of war, she freely reflects "an explosion of internal struggle," giving her work a profound sensitivity and intuition.

A well-received solo show in Damascus in 1966 solidified her arrival on the local art scene, as it created a significant buzz. Since then she has been featured in countless solo and group exhibitions both at home and abroad. From her early days of depicting Damascene scenes using colorist principles of abstraction to her more recent expressionist works that combine her signature style of layered and labored figurative compositions, Fayoumi has remained committed to depicting the world around her with fervent imagination, making her a favorite among artists and the public alike.

Hakim GHAZALI (1963 -)

Born in Casablanca, Morocco in 1963, Hakim Ghazali is internationally known for large, textured paintings that blend abstraction and calligraphy using additional techniques such as collage, printmaking and graphic design. By creating such varied compositions, he provides a new take on the centuries-old tradition of text-based representation in Islamic art. Interested in the endless visual and philosophical interpretations that can be extracted from the fluidity of Arabic letters, he finds inspiration in their forms.

Although trained in the art of calligraphy in Morocco, Ghazali studied Fine Art at the Haute School of Art and Design in France. Since 1985 he has held numerous solo exhibitions in North Africa, the Middle East and Europe, while participating in group shows throughout the world. As such his work is housed in private collections at home and abroad. Having received countless awards for his art, he has finished at the top of several competitions, most notably the 2007 Al Burda Prize of the Abu Dhabi Ministry of Culture, the first-ever Linotype Arabic Type Design commission and the 2006 Sharjah Biennial of Calligraphy. In 2009, he completed an artist residency at the Cite Internationale des Arts in Paris. Living and working between Casablanca and Paris, he is a member of the Moroccan Art Association, the International Association of Art, UNESCO and the Institute of Contemporary African Visual Arts (ICAVA) in New York.

Khaled HAFEZ (1963 -)

Born in Cairo, Egypt in 1963, Khaled Hafez initially studied medicine while shadowing the evening classes of the city's Faculty of Fine Arts for nearly ten years. After obtaining a medical degree in the late 1980s, he gave up his position as a specialist to pursue a career in art. Since then he has become a leading figure in the contemporary Egyptian art scene, working in painting, video, installation and photography.

Throughout his career, Hafez has been concerned with the dichotomies of social constructions that arise when comparing the culture of his native Egypt with those of the US and Europe, the leaders of mass consumption in our globalized world, where he has also spent a significant amount of



time. This often emerges through explorations of popular imagery as he identifies then deconstructs the visual signifiers that make them so potent along sociopolitical lines. Several mediums often overlap in a single piece-such as the mixing of painting and collage-as a result of such investigations. Recently, Hafez has been spotlighted in solo exhibitions in Egypt and Europe. In 2005 he received a Fulbright Fellowship as a visiting artist at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and later received an MFA in new media and digital art from Transart Institute/Danube University Krems (New York/Austria) in 2009. His work has been featured as part of group shows in a number of prominent international museums and art spaces including the Tate Modern, the Kunstmuseum Bonn, the New Museum, the Centre George Pompidou and the Saatchi Gallery. A regular on the global art circuit, he has participated in such events as the Cairo Biennale, Manifesta in Murcia, Spain, the Dakar Biennale and the Singapore Biennale.

Samia HALABY (1936 -)

Born in Jerusalem in 1936, Samia Halaby is a leading Palestinian painter and scholar. After immigrating to the US via Lebanon in 1951, she obtained a Bachelor of Science in Design from the University of Cincinnati in 1959 and a Master of Fine Arts from Indiana University in 1963. Shortly after, she began an extensive career of teaching art at universities throughout the US, which culminated in a ten-year position as the first fulltime female associate professor at the world-renowned Yale School of Art in New Haven, Connecticut. Although based in New York, Halaby has also worked in the Arab world, teaching at such foremost institutions as Birzeit University in the West Bank and Darat al-Funun in Amman, Jordan. Since 1970, she has held countless solo exhibitions, both in the US and abroad and has been featured in a number of groundbreaking exhibitions of Arab art, such as “Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World” at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C. (1994) and “Made in Palestine” at the Station Museum of Art in Houston, Texas (2003). Her large abstract canvases have had successful sales at auctions throughout the Middle East. Halaby’s work is housed in several museum collections worldwide, most notably the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, The British Museum, the Guggenheim Museum, The Art Institute of Chicago, and The Detroit Institute of Art. As an art historian, she has been instrumental in curating several exhibitions in the US, while her many years of researching and writing led to the publishing of Liberation Art of Palestine (2002), one of the few English-language books on contemporary Palestinian art available today. Although her exceptional style of painting has changed dramatically over the years-from large canvases exploring the color planes of geometric and helix formations to colorist assemblages that speak of movement and nature-she has continued to push the boundaries of art for over forty years. As a result, she is recognized as a major contributor to the school of abstraction in Arab art. Halaby’s vivid canvases have been praised in a number of leading American publications including The New York Times and Art in America, while her exhibitions in the Arab world have been reviewed by Al Nahar and The Daily Star. In 1983, she created a computer program for kinetic paintings, an aspect of her oeuvre that resulted in several audio-visual presentations, including a tour of Syria, Palestine and Jordan and a performance accompanied by live musicians at New York’s Lincoln Center (1998).

Omar “MALVA” HAMDİ (1951 -)

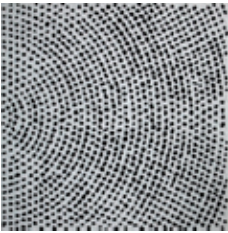
Born in Al-Hasaka, Syria in 1951, Syrian Kurdish artist Omar “Malva” Hamdi first began with a figurative expressionist approach to painting when launching his artistic career in Damascus in the 1970s and later moved towards abstraction. In addition to having taught painting since the start of his life as a professional artist, he also worked as a graphic artist for the Syrian Press, where he occasionally published his art criticism. In 1978 he left for Vienna, Austria, where he continues to reside. His work has been exhibited throughout the world and is housed in private and public collections in Syria, Europe, Asia and the US. He holds memberships to the General Federation of Austrian Artists, UNESCO and the Kunsterhaus-Wien and is representative exclusively in the US by New York’s Arnot Gallery. In addition to having several of his works reproduced and distributed widely, he has been the subject of a number of articles and publications in Europe. An accomplished artist in multiple styles of painting, over the years he has experimented regularly in both representational and non-representational art and has done so with great confidence. Reflecting acute draftsmanship, his figurative works are executed with striking attention to detail and vivacious painterly techniques, while his abstract canvases are equally expressive and possess the same warm palette and complexity in tonality which he is known for.

Thaier HELAL (1967 -)

Born in Syria in 1967, distinguished artist Thaier Helal has become a significant member of the Arab and Gulf Art scene since moving to the United Arab Emirates in the 1990s. A senior faculty member of the University of Sharjah, Fine Arts College, he has participated in prominent exhibitions and events throughout the region, including the Sharjah, Alexandria and Tehran Biennials and Christie’s and Bonhams auctions. A graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, Helal has emerged as a well-known figure of contemporary Syrian art with a unique approach to painting that remains at the cutting-edge of Arab visual culture. This has been confirmed by the countless honors bestowed upon him, such as the Al Burda International Award from the Emirati Ministry of Culture, Youth and Community Development (2008), the Grand Gold Award at the Tehran International Biennial (2005), the Award for Painting at the Sharjah International Biennial (1997) and the Distinguished Works Award at the 15th General Exhibition of the UAE Fine Arts Association (1996). Yet Helal’s long exhibition history is not limited to the Middle East, as he has been featured in international art fairs, biennials and exhibitions throughout Asia and Europe. Helal’s large mixed media canvases demonstrate the evolution of an artistic style that is amidst a perpetual state of evolution. Inspired by the world around him, including the physical and psychic aspects of society and culture, his abstract paintings utilize experiments in palette, texture, and medium to draw in the viewer and to trigger the senses. Communicating movement and energy through explosions of color, the meticulous division of space and the layering of surface, his compositions are marked by a profound expressionism and spontaneity that alludes to the internal and the sublime.

Adham ISMAIL (1922 - 1963)

Born in Antioch 1922, at the age of sixteen Adham Ismail was already an accomplished artist. Migrating into greater Syria after the annexation of the country’s northwestern cities left his birthplace under Turkish rule, Ismail later studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome from 1952-1956 as part of a cultural exchange program that was initiated between the Italian and Syrian governments. After working for a brief time as an art instructor in Syria upon his return, he moved to Cairo where he was a consultant to the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and subsequently taught fresco painting



at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus when he resettled in Syria. Although a pioneer in the expressing of Arab heritage in regional modern art, he was also one of the first artists to break free from the tradition of overt realism in painting, utilizing areas of flat color to detail fluid forms. Despite the astonishing fact that his professional artistic career only lasted a decade before his abrupt death at the age of forty, Ismail’s influence lived on in the work of his colleagues, who recognized his great contributions to local aesthetics. His work can be found in the National Museum of Damascus and the Syrian Ministry of Culture.

Naim ISMAIL (1930 – 1979)

Although the younger brother of Syrian artist Adham Ismail, Naim was a prominent painter in his own right, reconfiguring the traditional aesthetic of Arab decorative arts with a modernist sensibility, a painting style that became highly influential. His incorporation of the patterns, geometry and visual rhythms of local textiles, for example, are joined in harmonious colorist compositions that suggest depth and space with sharp lines and multiple planes, giving an illusionist feel in which everyday visual culture is highlighted for its complexity and brought into the realm of fine art. This approach pays homage to the region’s rich heritage while seeking to expand its borders. Born in Antioch, Syria in 1930, Ismail studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Istanbul, graduating in 1953. Eventually, he returned to Damascus in the late 1950s, where he held a number of significant positions, including the artistic supervisor of the national Army Magazine and the director of Fine Arts in the Ministry of Culture, a post he held from 1970-79. Ismail’s work is housed in a number of notable collections, including the National Museum of Damascus and the Syrian Ministry of Culture.

Louay KAYYALI (1934-1978)

Born in Aleppo, Louay Kayyali began painting at the age of eleven. Although the bulk of his artistic career spanned only a short period of time (from 1961-1976), he was one of the Arab world’s most important modernists with contributions to the advancement of Syrian art that were vast. After returning from studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, he worked as an art instructor at secondary schools in the Syrian capital and later as a professor of interior design in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Damascus. With his place in the local art scene already cemented-he had represented Syria in the 1960 Venice Biennale alongside Fateh Moudarres-he utilized his art to depict popular subjects in compositions that possessed sociopolitical themes, commenting on class struggle and the development of Arab society in the early stages of the post-colonial era. Reminiscent of the approaches found in Italian Neo-Realist Cinema, which had been well established at the time of his academic training in Rome, Kayyali employed “objective realism” with a quiet fortitude. The influence of Italian art is also noticeable with nods to the father of Symbolism, Giorgio De Chirico whose flattening of space and acute use of lines and shadows can be seen as a significant influence on his work. In the case of Kayyali’s “Boat Series” of the 1970s, for example, the artist also employed the warm palette of De Chirico’s Metaphysical paintings, including a fading blue sky that is rendered in washes and a golden earth that works to illuminate his figures. There is also the usage of a curved horizontal line and the blunt edges of vertical divisions of space with furniture and the sides of edifices, which in the case of De Chirico is achieved with architectural details. This worked to construct the stage of an epic narrative as though each painting of the series functions as a grand vignette, which can be viewed in the spirit of playwright Bertolt Brecht or filmmaker Vittorio De Sica. And yet Kayyali developed a painting style that boldly addressed the Syrian experience. His often-brooding portraits were frequently executed from a vantage point that situated the artist (and the viewer) slightly below the subject or at eye level, so that the figure was at all times either equal to or above the position of an outside gaze, an element that elevated the status of the ordinary people that he portrayed. This subtle yet powerful (and groundbreaking) method of portraiture was accentuated with images of his protagonists in their everyday settings, selling lottery tickets, fixing the nets of fishing boats or carrying their shoe shining equipment-a combination that spoke to a wide spectrum of the Syrian public. His delicate still-lifes and landscapes, with their understated weighty inferences, are equally compelling and monumental in feel. Although the artist sold most of his work while he was alive (those that he did not otherwise destroy during bouts of depression), Kayyali was virtually unknown outside of Syria for decades. After a resurgence of interest in his work over the last ten years, today his paintings fetch some of the highest prices that have ever been recorded for a regional artist.

Pierre KOUKJIAN (1962 -)

Born in Beirut in 1962, Pierre Koukjian is an award winning designer and painter. Having fled Lebanon with the outbreak of civil war in the mid 1970s, he spent many years living as a nomad of sorts in Germany, France and later the Far East. With little opportunity to finish a formal education, Koukjian jumped into the field of jewelry making as a young man. As an apprentice in workshops throughout Europe, he perfected the art of jewelry making and used painting in the planning stages of his designs. He worked vigorously in the medium, while also turning to sculpture as a form of creative expression. Often impressed by the aptitude of his canvases, clients would ask to keep these visual works, framing them and placing them in their homes. His early paintings are thus owned by numerous international celebrities. After long runs as a designer for some of the world’s most recognized brands, the artist launched his deLaCour atelier in 2002, gaining an immense amount of artistic freedom. Although the decorative, fine and applied arts are often seen as separate entities, for Koukjian they are all interconnected, as he paints his designs and designs his paintings. This gives his work an invigorated feel with limitless creative bounds. His latest series, “Impressive People,” is a campy Pop-inspired collection of oil paintings that iconifies artists, politicians and public figures into bold oil on canvas works. With a slight nod to Andy Warhol, Koukjian has sought to immortalize not only the personas of his subjects but the saturation of their images in the regional and international media. While many of the paintings make reference to Lebanese politics and music, others capture those who have made international headlines such as the Dali Lama and Indira Ghandi. A minimalist portrait of Egyptian songstress Om Kalthoum speaks of the certain cool that once dominated Arab stardom, while a striking painting of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah extracts the physicality of what makes certain individuals have such an overwhelming presence, tapping into the makeup of celebrity status and blurring the lines between popular culture and politics.

Abdul-Karim MAJDAL AL-BEIK (1973 -)

Born in a small village on the outskirts of Al-Hasakah, Syria in 1973, Abdul Karim Majdal Al-Beik received a graduate degree with honors from the Faculty of Fine Arts Damascus in 2001. Since then he has participated in numerous exhibitions in cultural centers and galleries throughout the Middle East. Acknowledged for his accomplished painting style, he has received several awards, including second prize at the Lattakia Biennale



and second place in Ayyam's Shabab competition for emerging artists. Audiences have been further exposed to his dramatic canvases with a solo exhibition at Ayyam Damascus and in critically acclaimed shows, most notably the gallery's "Buried in Tradition/My World/Walls Speak." His works are housed in public and private collections in the Middle East and Europe and have been featured in such noteworthy events as Art Palm Beach and Art Miami in the US.

Although his earlier works were inspired by recollections of his rural upbringing, summoning the scenes and sensations of his childhood, Al-Beik's current series has turned to the solemn walls of Damascus' Old City. Searching with astute investigation, he seeks to excavate their untold stories through the markings and cracks that have appeared on the city's exteriors over time. Recognizing this patina as the key to understanding its history, Al-Beik carefully replicates the textures, colors and shapes that emerge, employing the exact materials that are used in the construction of these ancient Damascene edifices. With a limited palette of white, black and grey, he reconfigures these two dimensional surfaces with a meticulous attention to detail using charcoal, plaster, starch and ash. Fissures in texture appear when these materials collide, creating a startling effect that speaks of a weighty exploration into the bearing of witness and the unearthing of memories.

Othman MOUSSA (1974 -)

Born in Zabadani, Syria, a rural town on the outskirts of Damascus, in 1974, Othman Moussa has emerged as one of the Middle East's most talented young Hyperrealists despite economic hardship. Although nurturing his love for art with alternative formal training due to the demands of a grueling schedule that included 12 hour days at a family business, Moussa's unwavering resolve and artistic prowess led him to a successful partnership with Ayyam shortly after entering its "Shabab competition" for emerging artists in 2007.

A graduate of the Adham Ismail Centre for Plastic Arts and the Walid Izzat Institute for Sculpture in 2000, he began his artistic career by entering group exhibitions in Syria, including three consecutive years of the annual Youth Salon in Damascus. Holding his own among some of the region's greats, he made his official debut with Ayyam alongside distinguished painter and art critic Assad Arabi in "Visual Dialogue," a two-person exhibit in 2009. The creative exchange that occurred between Moussa and Arabi not only had the local art scene abuzz, it demonstrated the range and mastery of half a century of Syrian art. It is with this impressive start that Moussa is delving into the regional art scene.

An accomplished draftsman, he creates still life compositions in the tradition of 17th century Dutch painting, which used a meticulously executed realism to extract the poetic essence of everyday objects. Although matching their artistic aptitude, Moussa's technique is thoroughly contemporary. The artist's choice of subject matter- a lit cigarette, a Syrian clay pot or evil-eye ornaments-are in-line with the hybrid approaches that have been employed by artists in the post-colonial era who seek to assert their identity while traversing international styles. His are the quite moments of Syrian society that often are overlooked, the subtle yet profound beauty that exists away from the busy existence of modern day life.

Mouteea MURAD (1977 -)

Born in Homs, Syria in 1977, Mouteea Murad is a rising young artist whose recent explorations into abstraction have set him apart within the contemporary Syrian art scene. A graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts, his earlier works were monotone portraits that spoke of human angst. Despite exhibitions throughout the Arab world and successful sales from such compositions, Murad dramatically changed his artistic direction shortly before entering the "Shabab Ayyam" competition in 2007. Since then he has been building upon a foundation that engages influential modernist movements such as the Russian Constructivists, Abstract Expressionism and Geometric Abstraction. He has also sought to interact with aesthetics that have held immense significance to Arab art, as he is an admirer of the late Syrian painter Mustapha Fathi.

Carving out a significant place for himself amongst these regional greats, Murad is becoming a favorite among international art lovers with his paintings housed in collections in Lebanon, Jordan, France, Switzerland, the US, China and "the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts".

The artist's vibrant canvases are informed by the linear and horizontal division of spatial planes, as various geometric shapes emerge from elaborate partitions. Pulsating with vivid cubist forms, each line is vastly different from the next. Yet Murad is confident in his bold sense of design and clever manipulation of color. The result is a geometric mosaic in which squares, triangles and circles intersect, overlap and collapse upon each other, recalling the abstract ingenuity of American painter Stuart Davis with the youthful spirit and vitality of Swiss painter Paul Klee.

Nazir NABAA (1938 -)

Born in Damascus in 1938, Nazir Nabaa studied oil painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo between 1959-1965 before traveling to Paris to continue his academic training several years later. Upon returning to Damascus he worked as an instructor at the Faculty of Fine Arts, where he was part of a significant group of artists that influenced a generation of contemporary painters. An accomplished artist in his own right, he received many honors at the start of his career, most notably from the Alexandria Biennale and the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris, as he participated in exhibitions at home and abroad. Today, his paintings are housed in the National Museum of Damascus, the Syrian Presidential Palace and Ministry of Culture and countless private collections.

Although a highly skilled draftsman, Nabaa quickly became attracted to modernist techniques that utilized cubism and other forms of semi-abstraction to depict both realistic and metaphoric subjects. This led to an expressionist style that utilized symbolism as he became interested in mythology, regional folklore, in addition to the challenges that were specific to modern Arab life. In many instances these interests were combined in a single composition, creating powerful representations that could speak to all cultures.

Leila NSEIR (1941 -)

Born in Lattakia, Syria in 1941, Leila Nseir graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1963. Beginning her career during the height of Syrian modernism, she developed a focus in her painting that is akin to the work of the late Louay Kayyali, whose subject matter explored issues of life and death and the experiences of the working class. Finding artistic inspiration in the region's ancient civilizations, she often explored mythology as allegories for reality, delving into realism, expressionism then surrealism (and later utilized abstraction), all while experimenting with various mediums and techniques. Today her paintings have traces of these different periods of her oeuvre, indicating the path of a seasoned artist who has dared to frequently embark on new artistic journeys.

Having had an extensive exhibition history, she has participated in countless artistic events throughout the world. A leading painter of her generation, she was honored by the Ministry of Culture for her contributions to local art in both 1968 and 1999. Nseir's work can be found in the National Museum of Damascus and numerous private collections throughout the Middle East, Asia, Europe and North America. She has spent most of her life in her native Syria.



Mohannad ORABI (1977 -)

Mohannad Orabi's whimsical self portraits exemplify what has made Syrian art so successful over the last sixty years. Born in Damascus in 1977, Orabi graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in 2000. Noteworthy among a dynamic generation of talented Syrian artists, he has exhibited frequently at home and abroad in venues across the region, and has participated in collective shows and festivals in North America, Europe and Asia, including Art Palm Beach, Miami International Art Fair, SCOPE Art Fair (Basel). In China, solo shows at both The International Gallery Expo (CiGE) and Art Hong Kong in 2009, wowed international spectators.

Recently his canvases were highlighted in solo exhibitions at Ayyam Damascus and Dubai and were part of the gallery's popular exhibition "Shabab Uprising," which offered a groundbreaking showcase of Syria's new wave of contemporary painting. His work is housed in private collections across the globe.

The emerging artist is as much an individual as he is a continuation of global art trends, capturing the underlining dichotomy of Arab society while striving to reach new frontiers in aesthetic representation. With highly stylized characters that emanate with a particular carefree innocence, his portraits are at once reflective of his fascination with one's childhood experiences as they are investigations into the human spirit. Reproducing variations on robust male and female figures, Orabi's compositions present his subjects in different scenarios, each one displaying variations on human emotions and interactions. Whether adorned in traditional Syrian garb or in contemporary clothing, his protagonists reflect the continued sense of joie de vivre that has defined modern Arab culture. Despite what underlining tension might exist between his subjects and the stark background of his compositions-often executed in flat color fields that stand as glaring contradictions to his lighthearted figures, which are rendered with bold patterns and sporadic lines- the artist strives to create a harmonious balance between their oversized bodies and their surroundings. In essence, the exaggerated proportions of their features (bulky heads, hollowed almond-shaped eyes and full figures) accentuate their larger-than-life presence, one that seems to float above the weighty concerns of the world.

Rima SALAMOUN (1963 -)

The recent monochromatic paintings of Rima Salamoun are deeply psychological, as dark figures are cramped into shallow spaces and their penetrating gazes awake one's consciousness. Her acrylic and mixed media canvases are dramatically stark, as sorrow-filled subjects console each other amidst a dim world. Frequently featuring female protagonists, her works belong to a profound strand of Syrian art that has utilized women as powerful representations of the plight of humanity. Maintaining the anonymity of her subjects, she creates universal narratives from which viewers can grasp the weight of global concerns. She does so with an accomplished command of medium and an apparent talent for drawing. Born in Damascus, Syria in 1963, Salamoun graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts at Damascus University in 1987. A member of the Syrian Syndicate of Fine Arts, she has participated in several collective exhibitions in the Arab world and Europe such as the acclaimed "Syrian Contemporary Art" at the Waqif Art Center in Qatar and has held a number of solo shows at home and abroad, most notably at Gallery Espace Europaia in France. In March 2010 she was featured in "Syrian Fine Art Painters" a group exhibition held at the UNESCO Palace in Beirut as part of the city's "World Book Capital" proceedings, where her work was received with an overwhelming response from Lebanese viewers and international art lovers.

Kais SALMAN (1976 -)

Born in Tartous, Syria in 1976, Kais Salman has proven to be an exciting new talent, with the contemporary Arab art world continuing to take notice of his large expressionist works. A graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts Damascus in 2002, he is a prominent member of a young generation of Syrian artists that is currently transforming regional painting. With experiments in depicting the human form, an interest that took hold during his student days, and daring explorations into various mediums and techniques, he has remained at the cutting-edge of art.

Featured in countless group exhibitions in Syria and the Arab world, including the 4th Annual Youth exhibition in Damascus where he took first prize and the inaugural exhibition of the Damascus Museum of Modern Art, Salman has been a regular fixture of high profile shows. Recently he has become essential to Ayyam's lineup participating in such standout events as its "Shabab Uprising," "Young Collectors Auction (I and II)" and "Damascus Calling," an exhibition held at The Park Avenue Armory in New York City in 2008. A favorite among collectors, his work is housed throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Europe.

His 2010 solo exhibition with Ayyam marks an important highlight of the artist's career, confirming his rapid emergence as one of Syria's most revered contemporary painters with his critically acclaimed body of work the "Fashion Series." This new collection of mixed media paintings combines striking (if not controversial) content with an assured and unrestrained approach to painting, demonstrating the ways in which Salman is currently redefining Arab visual culture.

With international art lovers showing increased interest in his work, he was recently profiled in the Wall Street Journal Europe's Weekend Edition as a standout member of the contemporary Middle Eastern art scene. One of Salman's large, arresting canvases graced the cover of the magazine in May 2010, a first for an Arab artist.

Ghassan SEBAI (1939 -)

Born in Homs, Syria in 1939, Ghassan Sebai studied oil painting at the University of Alexandria, Egypt and continued to train in the visual arts with a specialization in engraving at the Higher Institute of Fine Arts in Paris, from which he graduated in 1970. In 1974 he returned to Syria where he taught engraving in at the University of Damascus until 2002 and was an active member of the art scene.

A seminal modernist, his early works depict nature and the Al-Assi River that lay near his childhood home in Homs. His artistic style was heavily influenced by metaphysical interpretations in art, which lead to further experiments and developed into an impressionist language that contained elements of symbolism. As such Sebai's paintings treated his frequently political and social subjects with a modern approach that was influenced by both local and international schools of art. Hints of cubism grace his figures, as he belongs to a movement in Arab art that sought to depict the struggles of man in a universal language, one that was widely understood and admired thanks to the breakthroughs of Picasso and Braque and later the Mexican Muralists.



He participated in countless exhibitions inside and outside Syria, and his works are preserved in the National Museum of Damascus, the Beiteddine Museum in Lebanon, The Royal Museum in Jordan and in addition to a number of other local and international private collections.

Edward SHAHDA (1952 -)

Born in Damascus in 1952, Edward Shahda first began his academic training as a painter at the Suheil Ahdab center in Hama. In 1971 he entered the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, from which he later obtained a degree. Shortly after graduation he went on to establish himself in the capital's local art scene. Since 1975 he has participated in local and international exhibitions, has been given a number of solo shows at some of the Arab world's most prominent art spaces, including Atassi Gallery in Damascus and Foresight Gallery in Amman, and has participated in such prestigious art fairs as the Alexandria Biennial. As a prominent contemporary Syrian artist he has received a number of official commissions, most notably the execution of paintings in the Aeneas Opera House and the National Theater. Shahda is also part of an influential group of artists, that is led by sculptor Mustapha Ali, who have opened their ateliers in Damascus' Old City to emerging artists, an act that has been paramount to the development of Syrian art in the recent years.

Recognized for his vibrant palette and sensual mythological subject matter, he has a strong collector base in Syria and has been a longtime favorite of the commercial gallery scene. His airy compositions depict detailed narratives in which female protagonists often lie at the center of tangled love or unrequited affection. Shahda's boundless scope of color and free-spirited sense of space have been enthralling viewers for decades.

Sara SHAMMA (1975 -)

Born in 1975 to a Syrian father and a Lebanese mother, Sara Shamma is a young Damascus-based artist whose hyperrealist portraits have been exhibited around the world. A graduate of the Adham Ismail Institute of Fine Art and the University of Damascus' Faculty of Fine Arts, she has been a professional artist since 1994.

An award winning painter, Shamma has been honored with prizes from the Lattakia Biennial and the National Portrait Gallery in London. Representing Syria in a number of international exhibitions, competitions and art fairs such as the Mediterranean Biennial in Tunisia, she has been increasingly identified as a new leader among the country's female artists. Her work is housed both regionally and abroad.

Gaining significant attention for her daring compositions in recent years, Shamma has sought to encourage viewers to delve wholeheartedly into her subject matter, extracting with deep introspection the highly psychological and spiritual nature of her figures while connecting to the work on a personal level.

Khaled TAKRETI (1964 -)

Born in Beirut in 1964, Syrian artist Khaled Takreti studied architecture and design in Damascus and worked for the General Directorate of Antiquity and Museums in Syria prior to earning a reputation as one of the Middle East's most exciting contemporary painters. Developing a love for drawing at an early age, he later harnessed his talent through years of formal training. In 1995 he moved to New York City where he absorbed international trends and expanded his knowledge of art over the course of two years. This continued when he relocated to Paris, where he has been working as a full time artist since 2006. His paintings have been shown in solo and group exhibitions throughout the Middle East, Europe and the US and in international expositions such as the Alexandria Biennale, Art Paris, Art Hong Kong and Art Palm Beach. His works are housed in such prominent Middle Eastern institutions as the Syrian National Museum and Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts.

A standout artist whose acrylic canvases hint at an array of creative influences, he has developed a style of painting that incorporates original subject matter with a refined sense of design, a daring use of color and a vivid imagination. His large scale compositions often revolve around portraits of women-a subject matter that the artist feels brings a sense of stability and strength while generating tranquility and balance in his work. Takreti's elegant and demure heroines are often elongated figures that although occupying only a small portion of the canvas, have a staggering presence. Positioned against a loud background of solid color fields, his subjects exist within a delicate setting that is executed with meticulous planning, an element that is the direct result of the artist's architectural training. Thin lines dissect the composition into horizontal and vertical planes, as his fashionable protagonists stare aloofly at the viewer. The artist's earlier works, which were often portraits of mature women of a particular social background, emanated with a subtle force. His more recent canvases have become increasingly campy and outlandish, with a refreshing sense of freedom that is rare among painters today.



وبيير كولاجيان، ومهند عرابي، وأسامة دياب، ومطيع مراد، وعثمان موسى، وخالد حافظ، وثائر هلال، ممن يطرحون السؤال عبر نظرتهم الاختبارية للفنون المعاصرة، وصلة أعمالهم بالتوترات الإنسانية على المستوى المعرفي. للوقوف على النموذج المرحلي في تجاربهم، والاستجابات الممكنة للأحلام كمادة لسبر المستقبل، واختبار المشروع التصويري العربي، ورصد الاضطراب الجمالي والمتغير في الجوانب الجوهرية في الحياة، سواء بالدعوة لمزيد من التبسيط. أو بإعادة إنتاج المدارس السابقة بحلة معاصرة لها حقيقتها التجريبية النهاضة والدفع لمزيد من الاكتشافات الجزئية التي تفعل لغة الإبصار وتخرج بها عن قوالبها المعهودة، وكما فعل زملاؤهم في تحليلهم لقباحات الموت والحروب والكوارث والمجازر بالتطرق لجوانب العنف والإرهاب والتحرر. فإنهم يبرزون في أعمالهم قيمة توجه الفن لإيضاح صورته، كوجه جديد قادر على استيعاب المغزى العظيم للإبداع الفني، باعتباره مقترحاً قابلاً للتجدد، والمستمر فعلاً عبر ذات السؤال.. ثم ماذا؟ لا يتأتى إذن طرح السؤال من فراغ، وإنما من الخبرة الثقافية والإبداعية، والتأسيس على معارف وذاكرة لبناء الحالة الجديدة التي تدعو للتمايز في المختبرات البصرية الجديدة، التي تحاول بدورها تكريس حضورها التجديدي من خلال تداول الموضوعات الأكثر التصاقاً بتشريع الحالة الجديدة، وخارج صياغات التخليد الذي اعتدناه في المحترفات العربية. وكأن حالة رمزية باتت تُتظَم من خلال إنتاجها المعالم البصرية المعاصرة في المجتمع الفني، لهذا يكون الحديث عنهم مبسراً دائماً، بل ناقصاً، فالأمر مرتبط باستمرار التجريب، والارتداد وفق علاقات لها مستجداتها، على مستوى عجائبية اللعب، وتقلب الخطابات البصرية، بكل ما يبدو فيها من تحد وعنف تجاه الأحكام المسبقة للتأريخ النقدي والكتابات التنظيرية التقليدية، وكل ما يجري من أحاديث عن تواطؤات جديدة بين هؤلاء الفنانين والمؤسسات الراعية لهم.. أي الحديث عن تبدل القيم المطروحة في أساسيات العلاقة بين المبدع والمؤسسة الحاضنة أو الداعمة المعنية بإدارة الشأن البصري في المجتمع بطريقة مختلفة عما كان معهوداً عن هذه العلاقة بين الصالة التقليدية والفنان. وبعيداً عن موضوع الفن نفسه في نزواته المعاصرة، والتي لا يمكن إدراجها حتى الآن في معادلة الأدلجة التي يتم من خلالها تنشيط الأهداف المتصلة بالعملة التي تسعى بعض المؤسسات عبرها لنشر أفكارها، وبسط نفوذها التغييري لأحوال العمل الفني، وفضاءاته وتوجهاته وتقنياته. يحضرني ما كتبه الناقد اللبناني شربل داغر في مقال له عن العنف بين العملة والفن، إذ يقول عن تتبع المشهد التشكيلي العربي الذي يحار فيه الدارس " بين رحيل فنانين ومجيء غيرهم، وبين تعاقب الأحوال الفنية نفسها، حيث أنها تفتقد إلى التغيير في التتابع، وإلى التجدد في الاستمرارية، فتحن نشهد تغيرات تصيب أحوال اللوحة العربية من دون أن نتعرف فوق سطحها على ما يدل على سابقتها، فهي لوحات متتالية زمنًا لا أسلوباً، والفنانون آباء بهذا المعنى من دون أبناء ولا أحفاد، وهي حال غريبة إذا قارناها بما يحدث في الغرب، فتحن نتعرف على لوحاتهم مثلما نقرأ كتاب له صفحات مختلفة ولكن متتابعة، والعودة إلى سير فتانيهم تشهد كذلك دخولهم في علاقات بين اتباع وانفصال، حيث على المدرسة الفنية أن تعلن جديدها قياساً وتأسيساً واختلافاً مع ما سبقها وهو ما يفتح التشكيلي، وما يجعله مشهداً تاريخياً متجذراً ومتجدداً في آن".^٥

هذا القول يعيد التساؤل إلى أبعد من الحدث وزمانه، أي إلى تساؤل بيكاسو: "ما هو الفنان فيما نظن؟ أهو معتوه له عينان فقط إن كان رساماً، أو أذنان إن كان موسيقياً، أو لديه مفاتيح المشاعر إذا كان شاعراً أو حتى إذا كان ملاكماً، أهي مجرد عضلات، على العكس تماماً، فالفنان في نفس الوقت كائن سياسي، متيقظ للأحداث من حوله في العالم، دامية أو مبهجة، يتجاوب معها بكل جوارحه ووجوده.. كيف يمكن أن نتجاهل إخواننا البشر، وأن

نعزل أنفسنا ببرودة العاج اليابس عن حياتهم.. إن اللوحة تخلق كأداة للمقاومة والحرب ضد أعداء البشر". إذن التساؤل الذي يطرحه غاليري أيام مرة أخرى هو ذات السؤال المطروح في التاريخ من قبل الفنانين في الحضارات المختلفة، على الفرات أو النيل أو السند أو الإغريق، واختيار المشاركة لفنانين متميزين ومعاصرين إنما يؤكد الإصرار على استمرار التساؤل عن الحق.. وعن مهمة الإبداع أصلاً.. والفن في هذه الحالة إنما يمثل حالة تمجيدية لانتصار الإنسان وحضوره كجانب إيجابي مقاوم للتعبيرات السلبية، أوما ندعوه القوى الشريرة المعيقة للتقدم والتطور.. ويتحقق ذلك على الأخص في التصاوير والمنحوتات التي تناولت أشكال العنف عبر آثارها، وهو ما نصفه بقوة التعبير المأساوي، وحضوره كمظهر أول يدفع باتجاه نقضه لتحقيق السلام والأمن الداخلي والخارجي للإنسان. وكيفما كانت الصلة بين هذه الخطابات التراجمية، فإن الحضور الإنساني يلفت النظر بشكل مباشر إلى الحساسية البشرية ضد العنف، أياً كان العدو، وضد كل أدوات التدمير التي يتفنون بضاعتها وترويجها.. هنا يبرز بفعالية دور (الفن التوصيلي) كحافظ للذاكرة ومنعش لتفاصيلها، ومؤكّد على تأثيرها من خلال الرسائل البصرية المتواترة للمبدعين.

ليس هذا وحسب، بل إن التساؤل (عما بعد أو ثم ماذا؟) يضمّر في جوانبه رفض التكيف، والاستسلام لكل ما هوراسخ. فالسؤال يبحث باستمرار عن أعراف جديدة، ومناظير مختلفة لبراءة الإبداع، بعيداً عن أحوال الحزن والطموح بإيقاف الآلام والتهديدات.. العنف يتأتى أيضاً في المواجهة بين إرادة الخلق وإرادة المادة، إنه ما يدعى ب (العنف الرمزي)، أو ما يحب الباحث العراقي شاكر لعبيبي أن يسميه (العنف الطاهر)، المضاء " بيقين داخلي لا يمت إلى العداء بصلة، عنف من هذا القبيل يقود إلى الجمال مثلما عنف المباشعة يقود إلى اللذة.. هذا الصراع وهذا العنف هو سمة عامة للممارسة الفنية برمتها".^٦

وبكل الأحوال فإن الحديث عن فكرة العدالة في العمل الفني هي على ارتباط تفاعلي مع مايدعى بالعنف الطاهر (سواء في الأشكال الصارخة المستندة على وقائع وأحداث ومسميات، أو تلك التي تعيد تصعيد سبل تحطيم الأسس التقليدية للمحترفات والمحافل الفنية في الإبداعات المتوارثة)، ويمكن الحديث في هذ الجانب عن الحالة الإقصائية المتولدة من لحم ودم المحترف ذاته، ولا يكفي امتناع الفنانين المعاصرين عن تحديد أهدافهم القصوى في مجالات التغيير، وإنما لابد من استقصاء رغبتهم المتيقظة عبر وسائط العرض التي تحتاج هي الأخرى إلى أساليب إدارة معاصرة، يتجاسر أفرادها وإداريوها لبناء مختلف التصورات حول منظومة تتميز بالدراية الفنية والقانونية، لدمج مايحاول أن ينهض في المحترف إلى مستوى التداول العالمي، ومن ثم دمج الصورة المحلية بما هو أوسع وأشمل. مما يقرب الفهم المقصود من التقارب بين العادل والعنيف في المتغير، وكل ماينبثق عنه لاحقاً.. وسيكون متاحاً للنقاش مدى تبصر مختلف الأطراف وقدراتهم على تجاوز القسوة والشدة المفرطة التي تعيشها المحترفات المحلية العالمية، مع توالي الصدمات الفكرية المترابطة على المستوى النظري، وتطور آليات المنافسة في الأسواق الفنية الدولية، وعبر السؤال ذاته.. ثم ماذا؟.

طلال معاد

فنان وباحث في الجماليات المعاصرة

^[1] ٥ - (الفن والعنف – طلال معلا – منشورات دائرة الثقافة والإعلام ٢٠٠٣ – الشارقة)

^[2] ٦ - (المرجع السابق – ص ٤٥)

الخطوات المستقبلية للتكهن بهذه الوظيفة، والتي عليها تتوقف الكيفية التي يمكن أن يعالج الفن من خلالها قضايا كثيرة يأتي العنف في مقدمتها.. العنف الذي يطال الحروب والموت والتاريخ، ماضياً ومستقبلاً.

لا شك أننا نفث على مشاعر سلبية ونحن نمضي النظر في حركات ووجوه لؤي كيالي المتشحة بالسواد، فهي تقف في مقدمة الصورة وبكامل مساحتها لتعلن عن حالة ضرورية لإدراك العالم، مبرزة تحديها وحقدها ومشاعرها المضطربة جراء الاعتداء عليها، نرى ذلك في هلع العيون، وتقاطيع الوجوه التي تعكس حالات فقدان الأمن والتوازن الروحي والنفسي، وفي إطار من الخوف الوجودي، وخشية التهديدات التي تجعل الغد غامضاً وملتبساً، في الوقت الذي يمكن من خلاله إدراك النهاية الوشيكة للمعاني الإنسانية، والحلم المعين بالانتصار على الدمار والموت والبشاعة والقسوة والغطرسة بمزيد من التخيل.

في السؤال إذن نشم رائحة الموت بالدرجة الأولى.. إنه السؤال الأزلي الذي قاد المصريين لتصوير الموت ونحته. ومن قبلهم ما تركه السؤال ذاته على جدران الكهوف الأولى، ومن بعد على جدران الضمير الإنساني، هكذا يكون الموت المبني على صراعات الحقد مادة لحياة الفن اللامتوقعة. وفي هذا الإطار نقرأ الكثير من أعمال المبدعين المتسائلين، والذين يقبلون بسؤالهم العالم رأساً على عقب لاستحضار وظيفة الفن المعاصرة لهم، وتطويرها في مختلف مجالات تحقيقها المجتمعي. في جانب آخر للسؤال، يمضي بعض الفنانين نحو تساؤلات خارج الأبعاد المصرية في جوانبها السياسية ليرصدوا المتغيرات الإجتماعية، أو المتغيرات النظرية في الفنون، كممارسة الاتجاهات الفنية لحالات عنفية في الانتقال من صيغة إلى أخرى، هذا ما فعلته الحداثة بسابقتها، وما تفعله اليوم ما بعد الحداثة بكل ما قبلها، إنه نوع من نزع الطبيعة من التوجه لتأسيس توجه آخر، الطبيعة الذاتية لسبل اتصال الفنون بمحيطها وبيئتها بناء على تعليمات أو استفادات أو قناعات تجعل طارحي السؤال يقبلون على توتير الاحتكاك بما يحيط بهم، دافعين المشاهد المتفاعل إلى عوالم تعيد صياغة القيم في العمل الفني، حيث يكون السؤال اختصار لوعي الفنان بالعالم، ويكون في نفس الوقت الدافع لمعرفة فضاء العمل الفني من خلال وعي زمنه الإبداعي، وبالتالي الانتقال بالوعي الفني من حال إلى حال.

إطلاق السؤال (ثم ماذا؟) دعوة للتفاعل مع الوعي، وليس لتحقيق اللذة الجمالية المعهودة.. وبهذه الدعوة فإن طلباً صريحاً للمشاركة يظهر جلياً في قدرة المشاهد على التذكر، واستحضار المادة المعرفية المتصلة بجوانب المشهد، لبناء فضاء جديد يعتمد على تأويل يقود لتجاوز الزمن الواقعي للعمل المنجز، بولوح زمن افتراضي له القدرة القصوى على التكتيف الوجودي في إطار الزمن الإبداعي.. إنه ماندعوه (الزمن البصري) الذي يكون دائماً أكثر قدرة على الإجابة عن الأسئلة الملحة، وفي مقدمها السؤال المتصل برؤى الفنان المبدع عما سيأتي، وبكل ما يحيط بهذا الآتي العنيف. وما بين الزمنين، البصري والواقعي يتفعل خطاب الحدث، أي حدث، ليتحول إلى قيمة تحليلية بحثية في العموم.

النكسة حدث، والهجرة حدث، وتكسر أجنحة الخيال حدث، وفي هذا المضمار يمكن أن نعتبر الغربة والقسوة والخوف والحقد والكره أحداثاً عنفية تمتلك إرثاً إنسانياً شريراً كالقتل، لا تتطابق صورته مع ما يطمح إليه التساؤل عادة، وإلا كيف سنفسر رحلة الفنانة سامية حليبي من المدن الأمريكية بتعقيداتها وتداخلاتها الفكرية والنظرية إلى حقول الزيتون الفلسطينية، وما الذي يدفعها – على سبيل المثال – لتوثيق مذبحة كفر قاسم، إنه الوجود في الزمان حقاً وإن مضى، فذاكرة الواقع هي ذاكرة أحداثه وأشيائه وتفاصيله .. ذاكرة العنف الذي تم ممارسته على شعبها.

ولكون الفن معيار الحقيقة فقد لجأت الفنانة للتخلي في تلك اللحظات عن كل أبحاثها البصرية لتتوجه بالسؤال الأهم: ثم ماذا ؟ وهي في ذلك تقارب وتقابل بين اشتغالاتها السابقة واشتغالها الخصوصي المتصل بكرامة وجودها.. وبمقدار ما يترك عملها من تأثير في المجتمع عبر ما تقدمه دراساتها هذه من وعي مباشر لدى الناس. وكأنها تحاول بمعاصرة

بالغة أن تحيل الفن إلى خارجه، مكثفية بما قدمته من إحالات للفن إلى ذاته.. إنها محاولة جادة ومدروسة من قبل سامية لتلمس الأمان في محطة فريدة من محطاتها الإبداعية. وكأن السؤال هو كل الإجابات عما يريد أن ينزعها من جسد قضيتها، ومن هواء هويتها ورحم انتمائها، هكذا يكون السؤال هو الثمن الباهظ الذي عليها أن تدفعه للخلود من خلال من تم قتلهم بقسوة ووحشية لا يمكن أن تنسى.

فما رسمته سامية في وثائقياتها البصرية هو صورة الحياة النابضة، وليس الموت كما يتبادر للعين للوهلة الأولى، إنها محاولة لالتقاط الدم وتحويله إلى مادة بصرية فاعلة وخالدة.. إنها مبالغات الحياة التي تقود الناس لممارسة العنف على بعضهم البعض. ولعل أي مشاهد لحالات الموت ومقاومته لا بد أن يستشعر حرارة الحياة وضرورتها ومدى أهمية فهمها، وإلا ما الذي يجعلنا ونحن نعبر زمن المجزرة الفعلي ما قبل منتصف القرن الماضي، ما الذي يدفعنا فعلاً للاحتجاج على الموت والقتل، أليس لاننا نؤمن أن هؤلاء القتولين كانوا ليستمتعوا بحياة بدية أطول، ألا يدفعنا الشعور بأهمية مقاومة هؤلاء الشهداء للموت، بالإصرار على الحياة، وأهمية ما تعكسه المادة البصرية من عنف إنما تقود إلى التأريخ للمستقبل بدلاً من الماضي. ألا يبرز السؤال: كم يفقد العقل من طاقته الحية وهو يفنى جراء الحقد والاجرام والقسوة التي نراها في أعمال الفنانين ما بين العامين ١٩٦٥ و٢٠٠٠.. أدهم اسماعيل (المهاجرون)، لؤي كيالي (ماذا بعد؟)، نذير نبعة (نابالم)، ليلي نصير (بورترية)، سامية حليبي (الحرب والمرأة) إدوار شهدا (قانا)، غسان سباعي (الخوف)، صفوان داحول (حلم)، وسواء في هذه الفترة، أو ما تلاها (٢٠٠١–٢٠١٠) فإن أغلب الأعمال على صلة بالحضور العنفي للتساؤل المطروح، وبما يعيد تجديد العواطف المتصلة بالمضامين المطروحة لتجديد الأفكار. ومرة بعد مرة، وكأنه يعيد تجديد مخبره المعاصر فيما يتصل بكل ما يزعزع القيم ويذهب بالسلوك البشري إلى حدود لا إنسانية، وكأن الأعمال تتقصى السلوكات البشرية بإبراز الجوانب السلبية فيها، حيث يتبدى القلق والخوف على المستقبل من الوحشية التي لا تقود إلا إلى مزيد من العنف والجراح والآهات والخسائر والأوجاع والحروب.. هكذا سيتكرر لاحقاً تصوير غزة لدى عمار البيك ومصطفى علي وأسماء فيومي وسامية حليبي، وهكذا ترسم ريماء سلمون ثلاثية الشهيد، ويرسم أسعد عرابي الحرب السادسة، وعبد الكريم مجدل بيك يرسم أطفال جهنم، فيما يرسم أسامة بعلبكي السيارة المفجرة، وقيس سليمان السيارة المفخخة، وأسامة دياب الموناليزا الجديدة.. أعمال بإجمالها مازالت تعد الجسد بحضوره الفاعل مركزاً للوعي، ومركزاً للثقل في فراغ العمل الفني، ومركزاً للمفاهيم التي يحملها المعنى خصوبة التفكير والتساؤل المستمر.

لا شيء إذن يشير إلى ضياع المبدع كما يحلو للبعض وصفهم به، ولا أثر كما أشرت لاغتيال الدور الذي يلعبه الجسد الإنساني بالرغم من اختراق التشريح ومقاييسه للتعبير عن إنكساراته الشكلية والمعنوية. وهم بهذا يؤكدون على المنحى الذي يطبع أغلبية المحترف السوري المتسم بالتعصب للأحاسيس والمشاعر والانفعالات، تلك التي تضفي حالة التميز التي هي أساس الهوية، إن لم تكن كلها.. يشارك هذا المحترف اشتغالات الكثير من الفنانين العرب في مختلف مواقعهم لتكامل الأمزجة روحياً وشعبياً وموقفياً.. بل لعل الاشتراك بالصدمة المتولدة عن حالات العنف والتصادم مع المحتل رسخت موقع الجسر الرابط والداعي لمزيد من تطوير آليات وتقنيات التعبير عن هول الصدمة، ففي الفنون يعيد المشاهد اكتشاف ذاته، وفي برازخ الأفكار البصرية المطروحة من خلال الالتزام بقضايا الناس واشغالاتهم يتم تمثl المعاني، وإحياء حرارتها وتنويرها. وهي دعوة لبقاء القضية مطروحة، وتذكير مستمر بضرورة عدم موت الموضوع المعبر عنه بالتساؤل المستمر.. ثم ماذا ؟

هذا ما نلمسه أيضاً في الوجه الآخر لرسوم خالد التكريتي، وتمام عزام، ونهاد الترك، وسارة شما، وفلافيا قدسي،



إدوار شهدا "قانا"



غسان سباعي "الخوف"

صفوان داحول "حلم"



سامية حليبي "غزة"



التكوينات الثقافية المولدة، والمناظير النفسية لأجيال من المبدعين الذين توجههم رموز وشفرات تختلف على مستوى المعنى والهدف عما حملته الأجيال السابقة، بخاصة ما يروونه من مكنون حي في التقنيات التي تسهم في تصنيف الفنون المعاصرة، وتقدم الذهنية الجمالية على وحشية الواقع.

ثم ماذا؟..

هل المطلوب من السؤال الانطلاق بعد وقوف؟ سنتحقق من ذلك من خلال الأعمال والفنانين المشكلين لهذه العينة الإشارية.

عبر وميض العام ١٩٦٥ تسللت إلى مخيلتي بشكل عشوائي وشاحب صور الأعمال الفنية التي كنت أراها بالأسود والأبيض في جرائدنا، وكنت آنذاك أقص هذه الصور وأحتفظ بها كونها بمنزلة المتحف الدائم لي، كان ذلك مع بداية تمركز وعيي حول أهمية أن أعرف ما يجري بالفعل في العاصمة التي تبعد عن مدينة الرقة مسافة طويلة جداً.. وقد كان أدهم اسماعيل(١٩٢٢–١٩٦٣) يرصد المواضيع السياسية والاجتماعية (المهاجرون ١٩٦٠) ، ويؤسس لمنهج فني ستتضح ملامحه مع تجارب أخيه نعيم (١٩٣٠–١٩٧٩) باختيارهما المبكر لتصدعات المحترف فيما يشار إليه بالتبعية المضنية، فقد حاولا الالتفات إلى البصريات الإسلامية بتصديع بنيتها، والوصول إلى استنتاجات ذاتية تتوافق وتطلعهما القومي، تلك التي طبعت أسلوبهما ولكنه زخرفية يمكن الإشارة إلى فصاحتها، وذلك لكونها حققت نجاحات ملحوظة في التأثير على بعض توجهات الحداثة في المحترف السوري، وإثارة النقاش حول قضية التراث، وإمكانية إحيائة في اللوحة دون أن تمتلك سلفية المفهوم جماليات المنتج التصويري...

في تلك الفترة، وفي العام ١٩٦٠ مثل سورية في بينالي فينيسيا كل من لؤي الكيالي وفاتح المدرس(١٩٢٢–١٩٩٩) فيما كانت ليلى نصير (١٩٤١) موفدة للدراسة في القاهرة، وقد حملت كل عذاباتها المبكرة لتختصرها في الإنسان الذي احتل بقره كل اشتغالاتها اللاحقة (بورتريه ١٩٦٣) ، وكانت الفلسطينية سامية حلي تجز اللون التجريدي في ترحالها من القدس إلى نيويورك وعبر إنهاء تدريبها الأكاديمي، متأثرة بالتكبيبية، ومنفتحة فيما بعد منتصف الستينيات على الطبيعة الصامته الهندسية حتى نهاية سبعينيات القرن الماضي، عملية من شأن السؤال عن كل ماسيأتي فيما بعد هذه الاختبارات لخصائص الضوء، وفهم العين لحقيقة الحواف، وما يرتبط بعلاقة الظلال بتحديد الأشكال والإيهام بالأحجام.. إنها الستينيات التي بدأت في مطلعها إرهاصات مابعد الحداثة في الغرب، لتتقدم الواقعية الجديدة وتأخذ مداها في الفن التشكيلي، وكذلك الفنون الأدائية وفنون الفلوكسوز والمفاهيمية والجغرافيتي التي حققت وجودها بالتزامن مع انتهاء الفن الطليعي الروسي.

صحيح أن ماعانته المحترفات العربية فيما بعد منتصف القرن الماضي قد أدى إلى مجموعة كبيرة من الهجرات الإبداعية باتجاه المركز الأوروبي.. كان ذلك لتجاوز عنف الأزمات الداخلية المتصلة بالوعي بدور الفن وموقعه الاجتماعي، حين كان ميؤوساً من التحول أو الانقلاب على مايستلب طريق الفن، فكان (المخرج – المطب) بابتداع سلطة أكاديمية ستكون مهمتها توزيع الاعترافات النقدية، وترسيخ أسماء سيكون من الصعب زحزحتها في إطار دعم المؤسسة الثقافية الرسمية. مما أتاح لها إعادة صياغة وتركيب الواقع التشكيلي والبصري العربي بصورة ملفتة، وبناء حيز له شروط عرضه المتوافقة مع طروحات كانت تحتاج لوعي أكبر لكل الانقلابات العلمية في حقائق العصر، وبخاصة مايتصل بكونية التطلعات التي باتت تتجاوز مفهوم العالمية.. بمعنى أن الأسئلة المستجدة في الاهتمامات الفنية العربية أضحت أدنى من العتبة التي ينطلق منها الاشتغال المباشر في لغة التعبير البصرية تجديداً وانفعالاً وإيحاء. وهذا ماحقق تبعثراً في التطلعات الاحترافية



أدهم اسماعيل "المهاجرون"



نعيم اسماعيل

ليلى نصير



القطرية وتشتتاً للنواة الحضارية للشخصية الإبداعية، والافتقاد لقيم بصرية حقيقية تمهد لمفاهيم تنظم علاقة الإبداع بالعالم بعيداً عن الشعارات التي نشأت تحت الأجنحة السياسية المختلفة التي لم تهتم بأكثر من تداول الفنون وفق مفاهيمها الاستخدامية كدعاية لممارساتها بدلاً من دعم المؤسسات الخاصة والعامة التي توثق وتدرس وتؤرخ وتحلل وتدعو لمفاهيم التحضر عبر الفنون المختلفة وفلسفة الاشتغالات البصرية والمعرفية. وفيما كان الفنانون السوريون – على سبيل المثال – مندفعون في التعبير عن الطموحات القومية والانكسارات السياسية والاجتماعية (نذير نبعة، أسعد عرابي واشتغالاتهما في سبعينيات القرن الماضي مقارنة بإنجازاتها اليوم، ومقارنة بإنجازات عبد الله مراد الذي رصد تجربته للتفكير والتجريب منذ بدايته وحتى اليوم لتوقه لعدالة تجريبية من نوع مختلف عن طموحات الآخرين للعدالة انطلاقا من التفكير بالمستقبل.)٢ وقد لعبت تأثيرات الوعي الغربي بمفاهيم التحديث والحداثة دوراً كبيراً لإيجاد المحرضات المتناقضة لسلوك الكثير من الفنانين على مستوى إبداعاتهم، وكذلك في بناء وعي التركيبة الثقافية المتطلعة للتحديث، وذلك لتوفر الأرضية الفكرية والفلسفية لدى التجربة الغربية.

كما شكلت ردود الفعل المتباينة على هذا الوعي جانباً متقدماً من وعي الفرق التحديثي الغربي وواقع حاله في السبعينيات حين باتت القيم الإنسانية محط أنظار النقاد الذين رأوا فيها تداعياً للأفكار الإنسانية وانقلاباً على القيم.. أي أن الأزمة الحضارية التي ولجها الغرب والتي جعلته يبدأ تفكيك حدائته الأولى ليعيد بناءها فيما بعد، قد فتحت إمكانات التغيير الأولى نهاية السبعينيات في التشكيل السوري، ويمكن أن نعمم لنقول أنه قد شمل التشكيل العربي، حين بدأ السؤال في أعمال الفنانين عن مستقبل الحركات الإبداعية الفنية التشكيلية والقضايا البصرية وإمكانات التحليل النقدي والتغيير اللازم للمفاهيم ولو بشكل محدود. ٣

إعادة اكتشاف الذات عبر ثقافة الآخر تعين في بعض الأحيان لرسم صيغ جديدة وتقاليد فنية مختلفة بحثاً عن المعاصرة الإنسانية العالمية عبر حركية الصراع ؤ الذي لايمكن اعتباره إلا إحساساً أكثر من أن يكون شكلاً وهذا مايساعد في بناء العلاقات المحلية مرة أخرى بصورة مختلفة.. بل قد يمهّد للتساؤل: ماذا بعد؟ استمراراً لرحلة الانتقال من مجهول إلى آخر في رحلة الحياة اللامحدودة.

في معرض (في سبيل القضية) الذي أقيم في المركز الثقافي العربي في دمشق وتنقل في محافظات حمص وحماة وحلب واللاذقية ماتزال اللوحة الموسومة (ماذا بعد؟) للفنان لؤي كيالي (١٩٣٤–١٩٧٨) حاضرة بقوة كمرادف لأهم حدث شكل مفصلاً في تاريخ الثقافة والفن السوري، وينصب اشتغال الفنان فيها على قضية عنفية كأساس لاختراق الجماليات بمقاييسها المعهودة في التعبيرية السورية، ويصل عمق الانفعال إلى حدود قانونية على صلة بالحدود الفاصلة بين الفنان ومنتجه، أي قتاعاته عن النزاعات الأساسية في قضية هامة كالموقف من المحتل والمعتدي والمؤسسات الدولية. وهي قناعات جيل، أو أجيال ستري ذاتها في معالجاته الفاعلة التي تتجاوز حالة الشهادة والانطباع لخلق النموذج المحتج، وهو جانب تفكيلي في مضمونه، نلمس فيه انقلاباً على حالات الاستكانة بالحضور الجسدي وإبراز أهمية الصراع، ليس السياسي وحسب، وإنما المفاهيمي الذي يقود الإبداع للتساؤل حول هدف ووظيفة الفن الفعلية التي يمكنها قراءة



نذير نبعة "تابالم"

^[1] "لوحتي دائماً دعوة للانعتاق والفرح في عالم يكتنفه القلق والعنف والفضوض وانعدام العدالة" عبد الله مراد – غاليري أيام – شتاء ٢٠٠٨

^[2] " أثناء فترة دراستي في المدرسة الوطنية العليا للفنون في باريس في فترة السبعينيات كانت باريس رمز الثقافة الجديدة بمثابة حلم وردي وحاجة ضرورية للشباب الذين يستهويهم مفهوم الوجودية والشعارات الوطنية والثورات الطلابية". نذير نبعة– من لقاء في جريدة الاتحاد – أبو ظبي.

^[3] – يشكل صراع الفنان مع عمله الفني بادئة تحريرية لعلاقته بالعالم من حوله، وللعالم الأشمل في داخله ، إلا أن النقد بعمقه الفلسفي وارتباطه ببيئة وهوية العمل الفني يبقى وفيّاً للمقولات الأساسية التي تعقد صلته بالمعرفة المشكلة للقوة الدافعة لبناء المعارف.

والتعليق على أحداث ومصائر، وحكايات أجيال من المهتمين على المستوى البصري والجمالي، وما بين ١٩٦٠ و٢٠١٠ تحضر هذه الوثيقة البصرية التي تقدمها غاليري أيام كأثر يوضح ويشرح القضايا التي تتصدى لها مجموعة من الأعمال الفنية المنتخبة من تاريخ الحركة الفنية التشكيلية العربية وخاصة المحترف السوري، بكل ما تتضمنه من سرد وفق التغيير الذي طال العقود الخمسة المختارة.

في تلك الفترة التي صبغت الإبداع العربي بالاهتمام بالقضايا المصرية الكبرى يتأكد اختيار الحقبة الأولى التي تمثلها الأعمال المؤرخة ما بين ١٩٦٠–٢٠٠٠، والتي تُبرز عمق الاهتمام بالذات المستلبة وهي تعاني أهوال الحروب والدمار والضعف في المواجهة، إلى حدود التنبؤ بالنكسة الشهيرة العام ١٩٦٧ والتي أودت بمصير الفنان لؤي كيالي، أو عبر ما جرته الحرب الأهلية اللبنانية من ويلات على المنطقة. وعلى الإبداع بشكل عام. وكل ما ختم القرن برائحة الموت والضعف والتصدع، وإن كانت حرب ١٩٧٢ قد عوضت جزءاً من المفاهيم الانكسارية، وأفسحت المجال مرة أخرى للحلم والبحث والوقوف بجذ تجاه الموروث والانتساب للحياة.

في الأثر الإبداعي المنتخب لما بعد العام ٢٠٠٠ يظهر الجهد الحثيث في اختيار الأعمال التي أتت بعمومها سورية تقريباً، ماعدا بعض الأعمال التي تنتسب إلى المغرب ومصر ولبنان وفلسطين. ما يجعل العينة امتيازاً في نسبتها إلى مكان محدد، لتتيح بذلك اختيار مُشترَكَات تصل أحياناً إلى حدود المنظومة التجريبية، التي يمكن من خلالها تلمس التقاطعات والافتراضات في التوجه البصري، رغم أن ما أشرنا إليه من سطوة القضايا الكبرى كان على الأغلب ينأى بالاهتمامات المعنية بالمجازفة والمغامرة، وتجاوز الروابط والمسلمات، والانسحاب باتجاه التجريب الذي سيتأخر حضوره إلى ما بعد السنوات الخمس الأولى من هذا القرن رغم الإرهاصات الأولى التي لم تلق تجاوباً مطلع التسعينيات من القرن الماضي، والتي بمجملها مثلت رداً ممنهجاً على حالة السكون والركود التي عاشها المحترف السوري لفترة طويلة في إطار الكثير من العوامل المعيقة للتجربة. وبغض النظر عن الدوافع الجديدة، والظروف المتشكلة، فإنه لا بد من الإشارة إلى أن المجاهرة بالسؤال دافع أكيد لإعادة التشييد، وتجسيد القدرات الكامنة في الإبداع، بالحضور التام والمكثف في الفعاليات العربية والدولية، وبانطلاقة تشرح الطاقة المهدورة التي لو لم يُلتفت إليها في الوقت المناسب بإزالة الحجب عن مرارة المبدعين، والانخراط في ظاهرة المعاصرة الدولية، لتخطانا جنون المغامرة، وسرعة البحث عن إجابة حقيقية للسؤال الأساسي.. الظاهرة التي تُظهر الحدود الفاصلة في شرح الأفكار، ووجهات النظر المنبثقة من الظروف الجديدة المحيقة بالفن الإنساني.^١

وفي معرض الإجابة الافتراضية على التساؤل، فإن ما يمكن التكهّن به أن يكون الفن ذاته هو مادة الإجابة، عبر لغة تعيد صياغة المشهد البصري، وبهذا التوضيح يمكن قراءة الواقع الإبداعي البصري بدقة، وبعيداً عن ظواهر التكريس لانتقادات هامشية تنبش في معنى الانتساب البصري، والتركيز المتواصل على المستقر والمعيق الذي لم يعد لديه ما يدفع المحترف باتجاه التجديد، والخروج من الزوائد والتداعيات المجانية إلى بؤرة الحال الحاضر، المفعم بهموم استقبال الآتي، كون هذا الآتي ليس زمناً محضاً، بل يمتد إلى ما هو انتقادي وإنساني وتفكيكي...

وبالنتيجة، فإن صراحة المواجهة التي بات يعيشها المحترف إنما تشكل جزءاً لا يتجزأ من أبعاد السؤال عن الغد، ومن

أغوار التفكير بكل ما يمكن أن يشكل صدمة في سياق قراءة اللحظة المعاشة، والأسلوب الذي يتم التخطيط من خلاله لعرض الحاضر، أو التاريخ القريب. باكتشاف القيمة الموازية للإبداع، وطريقة تخطي الحماس الزائد لضيق الصدر الذين يريجهم ويكفيهم الرهان على الأسلوب المنجز وتعميمه، معتقدين أن هذه هي الخصوصية المميزة للمحترف، متناسين أن الأسلوب عادة يحمل في تضاعيفه جرعة السم الخائفة التي تقضي عليه. ولكي لا نكون مجحفين، فإن تجاوز الزمن للاختيارات البصرية يؤكد عادة أن تجاوز الحالة إنما يعتمد على الفكر المتحرك خارج الهوية الثابتة، والتي إن لم تدعم بالحركة والانقلاب والتجدد فإنها ستدخل في حالة من الانطواء تخرجها عن رهاناتها الأساسية في التعبير عن العصر.

هنا والآن، وفي قلب السؤال: ثم ماذا ؟ فإن التلميح الذي يفترض إنه سياسي بامتياز في المرحلة الأولى، فإنه سيغدو أبعد من حدود السياسي في المرحلة الثانية. وخارج حدود الصراع على الوجود، لينشر الدعوة للتحرر من المفارقات التي ولدتها الحالة الأولى – على نيل هدفها وضروته – وهو ماتردد في اشتغالات فنانين طليعيين في ثمانينيات القرن الماضي، وما يتردد في كثير من الاشتغالات البصرية لفنانين يعاصروننا ومنهم الفنانة سامية حلبي على سبيل المثال، وفي كفاح باقي الفنانين المنشغلين بالتساؤل، لجعل تجربتهم مركزاً لاشتقاق المواقف من القضايا الإنسانية المعاصرة خارج حدود المباشرة المفهومية، وصراحة التلقين والتعميم، سعياً إلى توازنات تخالف وتبني في الوقت ذاته.. تخالف ما يحاول النقد أن يكرسه كمقدس في التجربة بحيث لايمكن المساس بها، وتبني شرعية وحيوية التجارب الجديدة بمسؤولياتها المستحدثة التي تستقطبها الفعاليات والصالات والمزادات الفنية في مختلف أنحاء العالم. بصورة عامة، فإن السؤال يمثل دعوة للحوار والنقاش والتحالف في مجال إبداعي شديد التعقيد لا يدعي – حتى الآن على الأقل – بأنه يمتلك الإجابة القاطعة عن جادة الصواب فيما يحققه من انقلاب أو تغيير، فالفن مازال مجال تلاعب فكري شديد الحساسية، إلا أن النزوع لتجاوز المحافظة، بل وتقويضها أحياناً يكون مجالاً لتصلبات مقابلة تعيق الحركة إلى حد ما.

من الخطر النظر إلى السؤال (ثم ماذا) على أنه مصطلح، وأنه بعيد عن خطائية التساؤل وسلبية الإجابة، كون المصطلح في هذه الحالة ينفي التوتر عن معناه، بل قد يبدو الاستحسان هو الواجهة التي يتم عرض التساؤل فيها دون أن تظهر التشنجات المتوقعة من عرضه، وقد يبدو المصطلح حالة عمية في حين يسعى السؤال أن يكون لساناً فعلاً لقضية إشكالية مؤداها التخيل الفعال للحادثة المعروضة، والتي من أولى مهامها تصحيح الحالة وتقويمها وتطهيرها. فمن الواجب اعتبار السؤال تعبئة مستمرة لمزيد من الإنتاج في المستوى الثاني – ومزيد من المقاومة في المستوى الأول، وتجاوز الحادثة التحريضية المتأتية من الضجيج النمطي الناشئ من التعارضات المهنية بين أصحاب الكفاءة ومن يفقدونها. وسيكون للاشتباه في ملف الإجابة قيمة تذكيرية بضرورة قذف الأخطار والآثار السلبية المتأتية من المواجهات الجيلية، التي تفسر غالباً في إطار الإقصاء وإنكار الدور والتسديد على مايحصل من تهميش على أنه متعمد كآلية لتفعيل الأحداث المرتقبة، وإعادة صياغة المحترف من خلال الفهم الدقيق للمعاصرة.

هل يقتضي السؤال إذن الزحزحة؟ من جهتي، فأنا على يقين بأن المرجح هو الإيجاب، وهي رغبة طبيعية للتخلي عن أمر والبدء بآخر، وإن بشكل رمزي، وبمجرد تحقيق هذه الزحزحة سيكون المحترف إزاء موقفين، وكما في كل المواجهات يؤدي الصراع إلى تفوق منظومة على أخرى، أي تفكيك الطرف المضطرب وبقاء الطرف المنتصر ليواجه المجهول والمتشابك، بسبب تعقد التوليفات الاتصالية والميديائية، ومواجهة المعاني الاستساخية للعمل الفني بكثير من الأسئلة المتضمنة

^[1] – سعى الفن عبر مسيرته كي يؤسس المتحف والقاعة والصالة، حتى إذا حقق ذلك انفجر متمرداً عليها مجتمعة، ليؤسس اتجاهات أخرى كفن الأرض والعروض الجسدية والاستعراضية والفنون الذهنية والظاهرانية والتصغيرية والمفاهيمية وغيرها من الفنون التي شكلت فيما بعد مواجهة مباشرة لها مع التركيبات الفنية والأدائية لاستخدامات الفيديو والكمبيوتر ووسائل الاتصال الحديثة وتلك التي تبني مجتمع المعلوماتية الذي بات يقبل المفاهيم والتقنيات ومفاهيم التفكير في سياق التحولات الكبرى التي باتت تعم كافة جوانب الإبداع بما فيها التوجهات التشكيلية في أنحاء العالم منذ ثمانينيات القرن المنصرم وبدء تطبيق مفهوم "العاصمة متعددة الجنسيات".

ثم ماذا..؟

يختصر التفكير باللحظة (الزمن) الكثير من الاهتمامات، وفي مقدمها التفكير بالمستقبل، وماذا يمكن أن نتوقع فيه من تفاصيل، فالراهن مقدمة مبتورة دائماً عما يمكن أن تنشده حركة السؤال التي يندرج في إطارها قيمة زوال الحدود بين المفاصل الزمنية. أي الحقيقة الجزئية التي تطمح إليها مركبات الخيال، والنماذج التفكيرية والفروقات التي تقصح عن قيمة الاختلاف في المواقع والأزمات، وحيث يحتشد الحلم بالصعوبات والتحديات، وكل ما يجعل المسافات أطول باتجاه النتائج التي يتردد صداها في كل عمل إبداعي دون أن تتحقق أو يتم استجلاء مظاهرها.. إنه السؤال: ثم ماذا؟ الطريق الذي يفتح العيون والأفتدة على العالم من خلال الراهن، أو الحاضر. أو أنه الأثقال التي نحس بوزنها المتزايد كلما أوغلنا في الانتقال من حال إلى حال، أو من نهاية إلى أخرى.

قد يبدو السؤال قديماً إذا اعتمدنا على رواية الفلسفة، إلا أن الأهم هو: مقدار الغموض الذي يجلل الإجابة، التي يمكن أن تصل في مأساويتها إلى حدود الفاجعة من طرف، وفي هزليتها إلى حدود السخرية من طرف آخر. خاصة إذا أشرنا إلى أن السؤال مرتبط بأقدار الإنسان.. الحكاية التي تتكرر فصولها وبمختلف الأبعاد والرؤى والنماذج. وكأن السؤال إشارة تأملية تفصل بين حقلين: حقل الماضي، وحقل ما سيأتي.. أي المتحقق بعد أن بلغ منتهى الجمود، والأمل بمشروع يحمل في تضاعيفه أمران، الأول: أطياف ما بعد اللحظة المعاشة، والثاني: حقيقة الصيغة التي يمكن أن تتجلى من خلالها هذه الأطياف، وفي كلتا الحالتين فإننا نتحدث عن غرابة المشروع بما يحمله من تحديث ورفض لكثير من النظريات المتشرنقة بسبب الركود التنويري الذي أضحى صفتها، وليلة وصولها إلى زيف معرّف تمارسه كنموذج يدل على وجودها، دون أن تحقق أي خطاب يتقاطع مع الواقع الذي تعيشه الأفكار الحاضرة.. أي أنها فاقدة للتوترات والقلق الذي عليه أن يكون صفة الحوار المستقبلي بعد أن استفذت الإمكانات المدفوعة بلهجة مترددة، وأحياناً عقيمة.

ثم ماذا..؟

مَن يطرح السؤال..؟ وعلى مَن؟

مَن يقبله؟.. ومن يرفض الإجابة عليه؟

هل فعلاً بات السؤال ذاته إراثاً نتبادلُه ونتناوله من عصر إلى عصر لنتمرد على حاضر بتنا نمل توريثه، أو أن مجرد الإفصاح عن السؤال يشير إلى استنهاض يتجاوز ما نتعايش معه، بل يقترح حجة أكثر معاصرة من كل المُشترك الذي جهدت فنون الإبداع الإنساني في توليده.

في الرجوع إلى الماضي، أو في تقصي الحاضر، وانطلاقاً من تجارب تولد الآن، يستقي السؤال قيمته من التطلع والتوقع



لوي كيالي "ثم ماذا"

