



*ARCHITECTURAL*



# FIGURATIVE

KHALED TAKRETI

The subject – most often women – stands out in a sophisticated sense of design and a vivid palette of colours in Khaled Takreti's paintings. **Damien de Guise** meets the man behind the female protagonists, all of whom are rendered elegantly and with purpose.



Khaled Takreti's studio in Paris has a palpable sense of energy and chaos, which is equally reflected in his artworks. Following a warm welcome, it is clear that the Syrian-born artist is free of pretensions. Facing us in his studio is *Generations*, a huge triptych which engulfs the viewer through its sheer size and which has been commissioned for *Told/Untold/Retold*, part of three opening exhibitions for Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (page 84). The show is perhaps the most ambitious exhibition of Contemporary Middle Eastern art ever presented in the Arab world. What excites Takreti about it is its weaving of nostalgia, journeying and redirection; in other words, a mirror of his artistic life.

He is currently painting his largest pieces, a scale he began working on about five years ago. Needless to say, the energy is evident. "The same effort goes into the canvas, whatever its size," he explains, "but I now feel more comfortable over the canvas; it has come from experience." Executing such enormous works may pose problems of perception for the artist, but Takreti's *modus operandi* involves raising and lowering his canvases against the wall and constantly working on different parts of the surface. His artistic goal is simple: being happy behind the canvas. His moments of intense pleasure occur when he is drawing or painting, and to relax, he works on paper. "What I like about drawing and etching is that it's easier and fun," he admits.

I sense that he is a perfectionist. "Yes," he affirms, "I want everything to be as I imagine it and to be the best." He goes on to discuss his fascination with successful people – those, he says, who do the best they can in their respective fields with passion and patience. Pop star Madonna is one such figure, subsequently coming up in our conversation. As far as his paintings go, Takreti explains that they are finished "when I realise there is nothing more that can be done; there is a conviction." How does he come to this conclusion? Takreti smiles, "the brush rejects the painting. It says to the painting, 'don't touch me anymore.'"

Opening spread: (Detail) *Generations*. 2010. Acrylic and collage on canvas. Six panels, 195 cm x 130 cm each. Image courtesy the artist and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, 2010.

Facing page: *Le Manège*. 2008. Acrylic on canvas. 120 x 120 cm.

**"There comes a time when you stop and ask yourself what you really want to do."**





Above: *Untitled*, 2004. Mixed media on canvas. 110 x 150 cm.

Facing page: *The Reunion*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas. 180 x 180 cm.

## ARCHITECTURE VS ART

The 46 year-old Takreti was born into a traditional Syrian family who encouraged him to pursue architecture, which he did, graduating from Damascus University's Faculty of Architecture in 1992, and going on to work at the General Directorate of Antiquity and Museums in Syria until 2005. Despite two shows in Damascus – at the Ishtar Gallery in 1995 and at Atassi Gallery in 1997 – Takreti sensed that something was missing within him. Perhaps it was the recollection of his recurring childhood dream: of being locked up in a paint shop overnight. "I was fascinated by the colours," he reveals, "and there comes a time when you stop and ask yourself what you really want to do. I knew it was to be an artist." Takreti had been drawing since childhood, using any materials he could lay his hands on. After a brief stint in New York from 1995–97, he returned to Syria and discovered that he didn't have to run away to find himself. "I could find myself in my own country," he says, puffing on a cigarette. What would he have become if he hadn't chosen to be an artist? The question seems redundant, but Takreti discusses creative energy and says that he might have become a chef, as he is struck by the beauty of food. Living in the world's gastronomic capital is "great", he says, adding that the trick is finding good restaurants and avoiding tourist traps.

Takreti moved to Paris in 2006 and has been working there as an artist on a full-time basis. His love for the French capital is twofold – on the one hand, he believes it is the cradle of art: "All the great artists, from da Vinci to Picasso, have come here"; and on the other, he had visited the city with his mother when he was 20, a trip, he adds, which is engrained in his memory. Whilst acknowledging that architectural studies have helped his art, Takreti explains that he is largely self-taught. Looking at some of his paintings, I can see the meticulous composition and beautiful rendering that comes from the discipline of

his architectural training. His drawings and ink works on paper perhaps show a truer side to his calling as an artist.

Takreti's works have been shown in solo and group shows throughout the Middle East, Europe and the USA, and in venues such as the Alexandria Biennale, Art Paris, Art Hong Kong and Art Palm Beach. His works can also be found in a number of private and public collections, including the Syrian National Museum and the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts. For the first 10 years, Takreti painted with watercolours but has since moved

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onto acrylic and oils. The style remains the same, but Takreti maintains that the change in material makes a difference in the artwork's overall energy. "If you draw a line with a felt-tip pen or a pencil, the emotion changes entirely," he explains, "identifying works by artists is made possible when one can detect the rhythm and style because the artist's soul becomes evident through the drawn lines." Between 2004 and 2008, his works were somewhat dreamy and ephemeral, but in 2007 a metamorphosis took place, largely due to the "stress" which Takreti faced. He had painted a series, *Les Grands Enfants*, which was "totally different" from his existing body of work. The series was never exhibited and Takreti is unsure if it ever will be. "It mirrors me, but then again, it doesn't mirror me," he says, "and in 2008, I assumed my style, using the past as a topic." His "style" he admits, "is me" and he goes on to confess that "I really feel as if I've found myself and can now be me." Takreti is a busy artist who often works on several pieces concurrently. Where the early *Mother and Grandmother* series are intimate, family scenes, he later moved to more light-hearted works with, for example, *La Chasse au Dinosaur*. "My work is very biographic," he smiles, "memories are stored, sometimes for long periods of time, and are then retrieved and manifest themselves on canvas."

### MATERNAL AND SPIRITUAL

Takreti misses his friends and family back home – especially his mother and grandmother, both of whom, he adds, were "my inspiration for years". It is therefore no surprise that his solo show in January 2009 at Ayyam Gallery's Damascus branch was titled *My Grandmother and I*. We agree about the unconditional love that grandmothers can give

and Takreti jumps up excitedly to show me images of the acrylic works, all of which are charged with emotion and recollected in tranquillity. "Although I'm physically far from my family, I continue to love them," he says. In October 2010 Ayyam Gallery celebrated the opening of their new Dubai space at DIFC with a solo show of Takreti's new series, *I am a Teenager Again*, which paid homage to the artist's teenage years and is considered a sequel to *My Grandmother and I*, which surveyed Takreti's childhood.

Takreti's art, however, is not just about his family. "Painting is like my diary – it's about the things I like, I want or dream about," he says. His new works however, "talk about people around me". There is more movement, the colours are vivid, the energy is different and a more contemporary edge has surfaced. He lays down a monochrome base in one go, which includes movement, form, expression and, of course, energy; after this come the heightened colours and precision which yield exciting results. You sense that he is someone who really enjoys what he is doing.

"When all the elements are combined – energy, spirit, light, space, time and music – some form of synergy develops right then and there and it becomes almost fateful," he says, "and I want to develop the people as I paint." Takreti believes that art does not always convey the message the artist intends. When I ask him about his life in Paris, he replies that he loves the Louvre. I confess that I sometimes find the world's most-visited museum a wretched maze, but Takreti explains his perspective that the Louvre is like a big school: an eclectic mix of jewellery, sculpture and Modern art to discover. He is a great advocate of the artistic combination of Arab and European cultures and maintains that it is impor-

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*Une Femme dans ma Memoire.* 2008.  
Acrylic on canvas. 195 x 130 cm.  
Courtesy private collection, Dubai.



PROFILE




## “I must admit that when I stand behind that canvas with shapes to create, that’s when I realise architecture helped.”

tant for an artist to work with different types of light, an element he has altered in the way he mixes and applies his palette. He is also fond of mixing the old with the new, leading the conversation to IM Pei’s glass pyramid, which meets with his approval as he feels that the *mélange* has been well-executed and allows visitors to really see the building. Coming from an architect, his comments have some validity.

### LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Takreti eloquently discusses Europe’s Old Masters and his continual dialogue with their works. A regular visitor to the plethora of museums in Paris, he admits to absorbing the techniques and skills when faced with some of history’s great pieces of art. “I love French sculpture. Masterpieces have good technique and everything can be found within them,” he says. We soon return to the idea of pyramids, of how art is a never-ending pyramid and how the Old Masters are akin to the base of this pyramid. Takreti jumps out of his chair again to show me images of works by his other influences: Andy Warhol, Keith Haring and Roy Lichtenstein.

On the subject of the boom in Contemporary Middle Eastern art, Takreti is enthusiastic about the future. “Artists regionally have so much to express,” he says, “and after the limelight that art from other regions enjoyed, it’s now our turn.” He praises Ayyam Gallery for supporting his work, for their commitment and international reach and admits to being particularly proud of the development and recognition of the Syrian art scene. Takreti describes Syrian artists as “brave”, largely due to the fact that “we have a lot of things to express and we like to work a lot”. Art aficionados should perhaps delight in art becoming Takreti’s calling; it is indeed fortunate that he didn’t slip into the role of a dissatisfied architect designing car parks or supermarkets. “Still, thank God I studied architecture,” laughs Takreti, “with art, you learn technique and history, which doesn’t necessarily mean you become an artist. However, I must admit that when I stand behind that canvas with shapes to create, that’s when I realise architecture helped.” 

Facing page: *The Big Day*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 180 x 180 cm.

All images courtesy Ayyam Gallery unless otherwise specified.

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