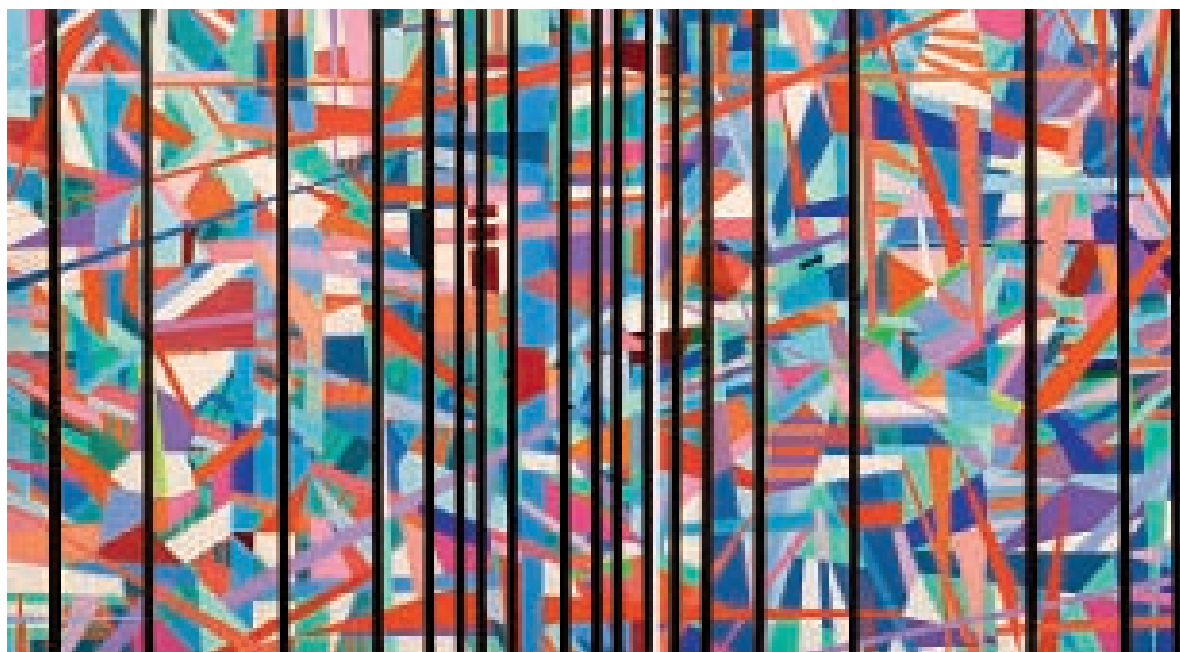


Color, energy and emotion

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Mouteea Murad channels Gauguin, Kandinsky, Klee and Pollock for his singular artworks

Syrian artist Mouteea Murad is desperate to catch up on his sleep. With his next exhibition less than a month away, he has been working flat out for days, jumping from one canvas to the next, adding to each of them in layers, one after another, through the night and into the early morning. His voice is groggy. He sighs heavily while answering this reporter's questions about his works in progress, all of them large-scale acrylics on canvas that strike a meticulous, mathematical and deeply spiritual balance between geometric abstraction and Islamic art. Imagine Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie-Woogie" if the city of inspiration had been Damascus instead of New York, the soundtrack while painting had been Koranic recitations instead of jazz, and the underlying imagery had been based on arabesques instead of the urban grid.

"I work for two days continuously, and on the third day I rest," he says, speaking in his studio in the suburbs just south of the Syrian capital, where he has just woken from a much-needed nap. "Right now I'm working on two very big paintings, very complicated, with geometrical calculations."

Murad's as-yet-untitled exhibition opens at Ayyam Gallery on November 10 and runs until December 31. It is the artist's first solo show in Beirut, following similar debuts in Damascus and Dubai.

While the final selection of paintings had not been made at the time of this writing, and indeed while the paintings themselves had not been completed, the exhibition is set to present the latest stage in Murad's increasingly refined

style, with riotous colors held in check by lines, grids, labyrinths and mazes, all of which are achieved through a labor-intensive process involving the application and removal of masking tape, between accumulating layers of acrylic paint.

"You can go to his studio at different times while he's working," says Ayyam's director Myriam Jakiche, "and you would never know that you are seeing the same 10 paintings at different stages of their development. It's as if you were looking at completely different works each time."

Murad was born in Homs in 1977 and studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus. The start of his career was both audacious and potentially disastrous. For his final

project, he defied his teachers by going ahead with a highly conceptual proposal they had already resoundingly rejected. He wanted to prove himself, and he did. Murad is now one of the rising stars in a young generation of Syrian artists who are moving away from strictly figurative and overtly expressive painting.

For a number of years, Murad has been forging unexpected links between the long history of Islamic art and modernism's so-called international style of abstraction. According to the art historian Maymanah Farhat, one can sense in Murad's work the extent to which Islamic art, as an inherently transnational art form, "laid the groundwork for the breakthroughs that were to come in early 20th-century Europe."

In a way, Murad came to his current style suddenly. Five years ago, his paintings were gestural, anguished and almost entirely black and white. He made portraits of faces twisted in pain. He painted strange, anthropomorphic creatures that conveyed overwhelming angst. Then, in a dramatic turn, he did a single canvas that was lively and vibrant and jostling with color. He took it to Ayyam in Damascus and entered the gallery's

generation-building Shabab competition. Since then, Murad has run through a dizzying array of approaches to line, color and composition, channeling Gauguin, Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Jackson Pollock. Evolving further, he began titling his paintings "trials," with subtitles referring to Damascene nights or paying tribute to modernist masters such as Fateh Moudarres and Moustafa Fathi.

Murad says his paintings come to him in flashes of insight. He sees the image of the finished work in his mind. The trial, and the labor, is to bring the physical work to a point where it matches the vision. But that's not to say the older, darker, rougher and more expressive visions have left him completely.

"For me, the earlier work was about spreading energy and emotion through movement," he says. "But I believe the direction for my art now is about thinking and studying. In the future, I don't know, but for now, this is where I am."

Mouteea Murad's solo exhibit runs from November 10-December 31 at Ayyam Gallery, Beirut Tower, Zeitoune St., Downtown Beirut, tel. 70.535.301, www.ayyamgallery.com

