

ASAAD ARABI



OM KALTHOUM

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Ayyam Gallery Jeddah
24 April - 30 May 2013



One of the generation of Syrian artists who came of age during the Arab Renaissance - or Nahda - of the 1960's, Asaad Arabi continues to explore the region's social taboos through his Expressionist works. Alive with colour and movement, Arabi's canvases are concerned with the hidden world and with contrasts and duality, such as those that exist between the veiled and unveiled, sometimes nude women, and the exterior and interior of Damascene houses.

Born in Damascus in 1941, Asaad Arabi lives and works in Paris. He holds a PhD in Aesthetics from the Sorbonne University and his work on aesthetic theory has been widely published in both French and Arabic. Selected solo exhibitions include Ayyam Gallery DIFC, Dubai (2011); Ayyam Gallery Beirut (2010); Ayyam Gallery Damascus (2009); Cairo Biennial (2004); Sircov Gallery, Brest, France (2003); Kuwait Museum (2003). His works are housed in museum collections including Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris; Barcelona Contemporary Museum of Art, The National Museum, New Dehli; South Korea's Museum in Seoul; and LACMA, Los Angeles.

After nine years of intensive research at La Sorbonne towards a PhD thesis on 'The Relationship Between Music and Painting in Islamic Art' and three exhibitions of his own paintings relating to the topic, the link of music and art is clearly one that is dear to Asaad Arabi.

Beginning with the 2009 exhibition 'Masked Bodies', which was a tribute to the choreographer Maurice Bejart, a close friend of Om Kalthoum's, whose spiritual dimension to dance choreography inspired Arabi to borrow elements of "his style to depict limbs and bodies freed from terrestrial gravity and allow them to move lightly in the emptiness of a surreal world", he then exhibited his first exhibition dedicated to Om Kalthoum, 'Nostalgia', in 2011.

Continuing his study into the relationship between the visual arts and music, and chiefly the exploration into the transcendental affects of Om Kalthoum's hypnotic voice as translated into colour and line, Asaad Arabi embarks on his second exhibition of paintings revolving around the Egyptian songstress.

Om Kalthoum (Umm Kulthoum) was, and remains today, one of the best loved Arabic singers. A cultural symbol of the liberal Nahda and a woman before her time, it was Om Kalthoum's magical voice and sincere spirituality which captivated generations of loyal fans, and it is this spirit and height of cultural achievement that Arabi wishes to remind the present Arab generation of.

Of his Kalthoum-inspired canvases Arabi has stated, "I wanted to recreate the environment that helped Kalthoum to grow and evolve and create music that continues to enchant the world even today. These people are enduring symbols of an Arab cultural renaissance. I chose to paint them because I believe that it is very important to remind today's Westernized generation of Arabs about the beauty and depth of our culture and to inspire them to take it to even greater heights. This series is a tribute not only to Umm Kalthoum but to an entire era of great cultural achievement."¹

Arabi's new works maintain his aim of translating Kalthoum's songs into paintings, transporting the viewer to a member of Kalthoum's Belle Epoque audience, allowing them to listen to her music with their eyes and feel her spirituality.

Om Kalthoum has become a veritable muse for Arabi, her work inspiring his work, her oeuvre shaping his. Arabi's painting style, much like that of Kalthoum's singing style, is a movement of passion.

In an effort to understand her, to capture her radiant spirituality, to indulge in the ecstasy and trance she experienced while singing, Arabi listened, lived, and painted every note. In each painting, the quivering brushstrokes that delineate his forms are imbued with the sounds of the oud, the inflection and intonation of Om Kalthoum's magical voice, and the rich cords bowed by the cellists. Each canvas relates to an individual song or set of songs from an individual composer and therefore has its own characteristics and harmony of colour palette. Less deliberated upon, many figures appear as gestural drawings quickly sketched to the rapidly plucked strings of the oud.

Om Kalthoum's essence was such that a perfect portrayal would be a disservice. It was not her outwardly appearance but her internal voice and strength of spirit and faith that rang forth and changed the musical world. Though unconcerned with details, Arabi paints several of the singer's accoutrements; a white comb embellishing her ebony hair, a turquoise dress, large white earrings which danced with each movement of her head, and the white handkerchief that she toiled with in her moments of ecstasy mid-song. Arabi's expressionist portrayal of tangled lines of colour that vibrate and sway with the melody vividly capture Om Kalthoum's stage presence.

Retained from his previous works is the symbolic inversion of chairs and characters. After the passing of Mohammad Al Qasabji, the composer and famous oud player in Kalthoum's ensemble, an empty chair was kept on stage for him during her performances. With respect to this great musician and to represent all musicians who must not be forgotten, the empty, often inverted chair also symbolizes the that which is lacking in today's musical culture. Not only do Arabi's chairs acknowledge the achievements and loss of

¹ Interview with Jyoti Kalsi 'Music for the Eyes', Published in Gulf News on 23 September 2011



a great composer, but they also anticipate the future generations upholding and adding to this beautiful musical legacy.

In these new works, Om Kalthoum, in addition to other musicians, is inverted. Inverting his heroine, Arabi extends a commentary on the loss of cultural heritage through the Westernization of contemporary Arabic music as well as the recent turmoils that have engulfed the region. Though his work is never political, Arabi stated that after the uprisings, he had “become convinced of the need to remind people of what has been achieved in the past and what needs to be done today to preserve our culture.”²

Through the art of melody and the transcendent power of lyrics, Arabi seeks to regain that which has been lost to his culture. He utilizes the songs of Om Kalhtoum for inspiration and creative direction, further enforcing the indivisible and reciprocal link between the visual arts and music. Spirituality and the arts, whether lyrical or visual, are also heavily intertwined, with each cyclically propelling inspiration to the other. The link between the arts could not be more evident than in the paintings of Asaad Arabi and his muse, for her spirituality awakened his sensations and her song indelibly marked his artwork.

² Interview with Jyoti Kalsi ‘Music for the Eyes’, Published in Gulf News on 23 September 2011



The Moment of Ecstasy
2012
Acrylic on Canvas
88 x 292 cm



The State of Paratrance
2012
Acrylic on Canvas
150 x 150 cm



And the Flute Sang on the Nile
2012
Acrylic on Canvas
97 x 195 cm



Then, The Mirage
2013
Acrylic on Canvas
130 x 195 cm



Upside Down Diva Along the Path of Ecstasy

2012

Acrylic on Canvas

97 x 195 cm



Seat of the Forgiven

2012

Acrylic on Canvas

60 x 360 cm



Passions of the Silk Handkerchief
2013
Acrylic on Canvas
150 x 150 cm



'The Fourth Pyramid of Singing'
2013
Acrylic on Canvas
196 x 194 cm



Quarantaines of The Khayyam
2012
Acrylic on Canvas
89 x 146 cm



Passions of the Silk Handkerchief
2012
Acrylic on Canvas
89 x 146 cm



The AHs
2012
Acrylic on Canvas
89 x 146 cm



The Ascent of Cello
2012
Acrylic on Canvas
97 x 146 cm



The Passion of Om Kalhtoum
2012
Acrylic on Canvas
115 x 195 cm



Seat of Time
2012
Acrylic on Canvas
97 x 146 cm



The Night, and the Beat of Time
2011
Acrylic on Canvas
162 x 130 cm



Triple Ecstatic
2011
Acrylic on Canvas
162 x 130 cm



Two Chairs for Death
2011
Acrylic on Canvas
162 x 130 cm



The Turquoise Note
2011
Acrylic on Canvas
150 x 150 cm

Ayyam Gallery

Founded by collectors and cousins Khaled and Hisham Samawi in Damascus in 2006, Ayyam Gallery sought to nurture Syria's burgeoning and dynamic contemporary art scene through landmark non-profit initiatives such as the Shabab Ayyam Project, an incubator for emerging artists. Expansion into Beirut and Dubai enabled Ayyam Gallery to broaden its scope from the promotion of work by Syrian artists to those from the wider Middle East region. In doing so, Ayyam Gallery has established itself as one of the foremost exponents of Middle Eastern contemporary art to the international community.

Today, Ayyam Gallery is recognized as a leading cultural voice in the region, representing a roster of Arab and Iranian artists with an international profile and museum presence. A number of non-commercial exhibitions, as well as the launch of Ayyam Publishing, Ayyam Editions, and The Young Collectors Auction, have further succeeded in showcasing the work of Middle Eastern artists with the aim of educating a wider audience about the art of this significant region. Ayyam Gallery Damascus currently functions as a studio and creative haven for artists who remain in the war-torn city. In early 2013, Ayyam Gallery launched new spaces in London and Jeddah.

