ATHIER: IMPROBABLE POSSIBILITIES

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Ayyam Gallery London 18 September - 31 October 2014



Athier's recent body of work, *Improbable Possibilities* applies theoretical physics as part of its conceptual basis, featuring a series of paintings that offer visual interpretations of parallel dimensions and their access points while exploring the notion of absolutes and the potential of imagined realities. Initially inspired by readings in string theory, Athier creates three distinct but related bodies of work, dividing his aesthetic investigation into a succession of visualised phenomena: Eternal Balance, Push and Pull, and The Cut. Collectively, the artist's new paintings present a point of departure for a broader envisioning of solutions for the present and futuristic passageways to the unknown. The Artist in his studio, London, 2013

'SEE WHAT CANNOT BE SEEN'

Athier Mousawi in conversation with Zarmina Rafi, Ayyam Gallery, 2014



Zarmina Rafi: I'm curious to know about either a connection, or a departure between the two exhibitions, *Man of War* and *Improbable Possibilities*. Particularly I'm looking for your take on it, you as the creator of it, and/or how the progression of thought from animalistic warfare/idea of one organism containing multiplicities moves into an interest in theoretical physics?

Athier Mousawi: I've always been interested in concepts that are indefinable as a way of stimulating the imaginative process. The idea that something exists but cannot be proven against the notion that just because something can be proven does not necessarily mean that it exists. Playing between these two poles is how these works were borne. Concepts like string theory, black holes, white holes, quantum time travel, and the fabric of space- time are widely accepted notions, based on their mathematical accountability, but essentially, they are impossible to visualise. Yet, by playing with forms that confuse the mega with micro, the works create a visual narrative that manages to fuse the two, twisting the viewer to a state of somewhere in between while consistently framing all of this in a rigidity of structure; that which is neither enormous, nor tiny, but restrictively man made.

Man of War as a series was an initial step away from the humanistic element of war towards the biological, natural and guilt free nature of modern, Western, drone-led war. These works are a step even further, focusing on concepts unfathomable. At its core, my direct departure from confronting situations of conflict is a conscious one. Every artist treats their studio as a kind of sanctuary, a place to escape to, to visually explore and to think out loud, boldly and without distractions. Responding to the escalating situation in Iraq through various access points has been the primary focus of my work for the past four years. But now, my sanctuary is a place that cannot take it. At least for the moment the step away from reality to a place on the brink of nonreality is a needed escape.

ZR: 'Route,' 'pockets,' 'the unknown' have been part of your prior work, and are more pronounced in this exhibition. Where you talk about 'the cut' in moving from one dimension to the other, and the 'gate,' you bring up not only physics but the Islamic idea of 'Barzakh.' Did you ever consider this abstract yet spiritual concept in relation to the art works?

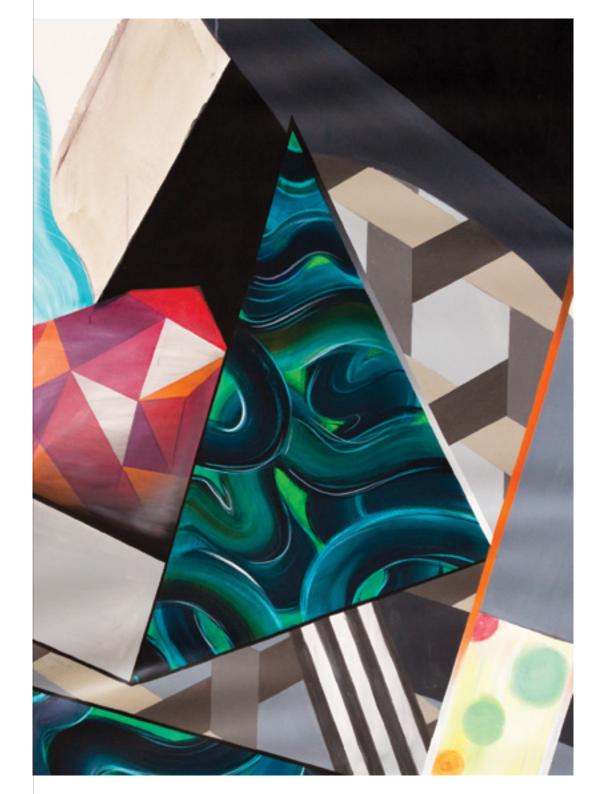
AM: That's a beautiful connection. Yes indeed, the pockets within the work are a step into a more holy place, a meditative place to become lost in. Where many artists create layers and depth by stepping out of their canvases, my windows offer a depth through an access point into the work. The boldness of the forms is broken quite literally by the fluidity of line as well as the intensity of movement within those details. Specifically in 'The Cut' windows used are to a place in between the black and white holes (tenuously known as the Einstein-Rosen bridge) where it's said that even if an object could find an entry and departure point on the multi-dimensional fabric of space-time, their substance would become 'spaghettified.' That description and way of seeing the fabric as becoming spaghettified was the first cell that multiplied into the organism of the artwork.

ZR: How is your latest exhibition relevant to what is now happening in Iraq politically? Or is violence implicit in (as 'chaos' or 'balance') but not necessarily at the forefront for *Improbable Possibilities*?

AM: It is and it isn't. Allow me to explain...My father and brother are the architects designing the new Baghdad Library. When I first heard of this, the historical importance of the Baghdad Library pre-Mongol invasion and destruction in 1258 became extremely relevant and came to the forefront for me. The library was described as a place for eternal thinking, a place where scholars believed they could come and achieve divinity by reading and meditating for hours, weeks, and years on end. Attempting to understand the inexplicable is an essential part of the human story. The pace of eternal thinking is one that Iraq has lost in many ways due to the brutal reality of the present, but for me, as an Iraqi living in the diaspora, that essence is one that I have attempted to channel. Constantly to think and arrive at answers without questions, and explore questions without answers is intrinsic to, and is the root of my work.

ZR: Could you comment upon the use of colour in your work, or in general your relationship to colour?

AM: My relationship to colour is one that defines most aspects of what I do. As artists, we have the freedom to imagine colours according to our own palettes and this liberty is one that I've always taken when approaching my work. I have always seen the energy in colours as an echo of optimism, which silently screams from the hearts of all Iraqis in the diaspora. I have worked extensively in monochrome too, which allows other elements in the mark making process to become more prominent, but as a painter, I will always lean back towards using colour.



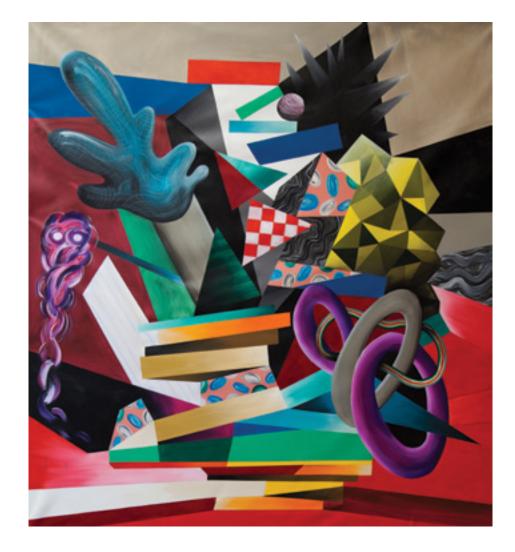
ETERNAL BALANCE

At their core all things and situations are in a state of harmony and balance. Even the most abstract and unimaginable forms maintain some kind of balance as they cancel out one extreme with another. As humans continue to exist, we live in balance. War is balanced with tranquility and hate is balanced with kindness, squares are balanced with circles, and so forth. In Athier's works the concept of balance begins with a grand scale, moving on to the atomic level in which clusters of energy are balanced against each other on a human level, held by the rigidity of structure.

> ETERNAL BALANCE 4, 2014 Acrylic on canvas, 205 x 205







ETERNAL BALANCE 1, 2014 Acrylic on canvas, 225 x 204

ETERNAL BALANCE 3, 2014 Acrylic on canvas, 204 x 219

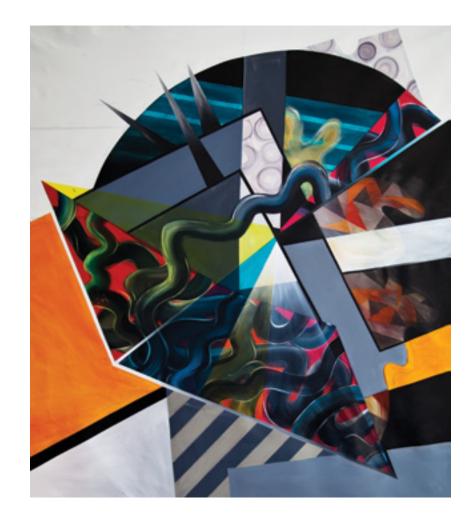


ETERNAL BALANCE 2, 2014 Acrylic on canvas, 204 x 243

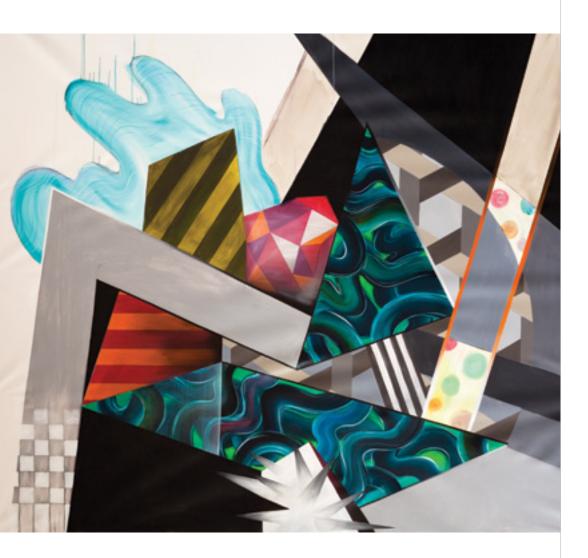
THE CUT 1, 2013 Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 285

THE CUT

There is nothing to suggest that an organic form moving through a black hole to 'the other side' is an impossible scenario, but as an organism crosses from one state into another, it is assumed the entire organism may be pulled apart, turning into a state of the 'spaghettified' before being reassembled on the other side. Works in *The Cut* attempt to visualise the opening of a kind of gate from the other side, they cut through one dimension moving into another.



THE CUT 4, 2014 Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 180



THE CUT 2, 2014 Acrylic on canvas, 205 x 235



THE CUT 3 2013 Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 230

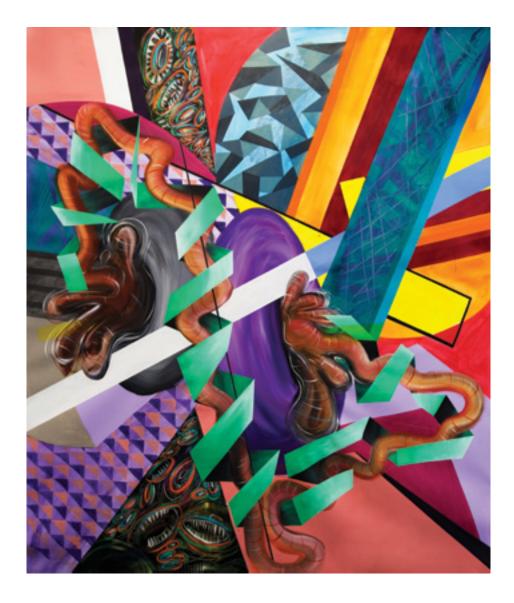
PUSH PULL

These works try to visualise a phenomenon known as the Einstein-Rosen Bridge. The idea is a far fetched one that suggests a tubular vessel linking one wormhole to another, theoretically allowing a person or object to manipulate space-time, moving through it rather than around it. Being a concept that is impossible to test and almost impossible to imagine, it is however a mathematically sound possibility, meaning there should be an aesthetic description of such an occurrence. Works in this section attempt to imagine the unimaginable as pure energy moving from one space through to another. The works are defined by an entry, and an exit point, these provide organisms the ability to move through differing dimensions. A dynamic transfer of energy is constricted by rigid elements that hold it in and follow it to its exit point.

PUSH AND PULL 5, 2013 Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 245







PUSH AND PULL 6, 2013 Acrylic on canvas, 245 x 195 PUSH AND PULL 2, 2013 Acrylic on canvas, 245 x 200



PUSH AND PULL 1, 2013 Acrylic on canvas, 205 x 430





PUSH AND PULL 8, 2013 Acrylic on canvas, 203 x 210 PUSH AND PULL 7, 2013 Acrylic on canvas, 203 x 210

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Athier Mousawi (b. 1982) is a British-Iraqi visual artist whose work over recent years has centered on posing unanswerable questions against indefinable answers, and forming a visual narrative between the two. Since graduating from Central Saint Martins, London in 2007, the subject of much of his work has been Iraq and his diasporic relationship to his native yet foreign homeland, as well as the idea of nostalgic referencing to how one idealises or remembers their past, present, and future.

Of the main constructs used within Athier's painting, the initial response is that of colour and scale, which guide the viewer through the artist's compositions. The various ways of absorbing the artist's works are dependent upon the viewer's positioning and distance from the canvases and interaction with the work. Symbolism in these large-scale paintings is weaved through layers of organic figurative and geometric forms.

Separate to his artistic practice, Athier has worked extensively as an educator within the U.K. and on the field. For three consecutive years from 2007, Athier worked as a British Museum Arab artist-inresidence, working in schools throughout the U.K. He was selected as the Chasing Mirrors artist-in-residence by The National Portrait Gallery in 2011, leading workshops in community centres through London. As well as a major collaborative exhibition, *Chasing Mirrors* was a platform for educational projects with the gallery, which ran parallel to three months of the exhibition. In 2012, Athier worked in a number of refugee camps as a workshop leader in Beirut, Istanbul, Amman, and Jarash. Athier lives and works between Paris, London, and Istanbul.

AYYAM GALLERY

Founded in Damascus in 2006, Ayyam Gallery is recognised as a leading cultural voice in the region, representing a roster of Middle Eastern artists with an international profile and museum presence. Spaces in Beirut, Dubai, Jeddah, and London 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.

