



City of the Crows, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 195 x 130 cm

ASAAD ARABI *A COLLECTIVE MEMORY: 2007 TO 2017*

15 November 2017 – 6 January 2018

Opening reception: Wednesday, 15 November from 7.00 to 9.00 pm

Ayyam Gallery Beirut is pleased to announce *A Collective Memory: 2007 to 2017*, a solo exhibition by painter, theorist, and critic Asaad Arabi.

About the Show

A Collective Memory: 2007 to 2017 highlights Arabi's seminal works from 2007-2017, including both figurative and abstract works, as well as a selection of his newest paintings.

Throughout his six-decade artistic career, Asaad Arabi has continuously attempted to reach an intuitive equilibrium between what is remembered and what is taken as its symbolic significance as a result of being forgotten. Each artwork moves between two points of attraction, expressionism – with all its sufferings, and abstraction. For both, the artist finds significance of lines and intense colour as they fall into what he describes as a musical rhythm, as he finds that shapes are created as a result of an audio-visual binary that is in perfect harmony with the duality of remembering and forgetting.

Remembering allows the artist to portray the realism of what he is painting, while the process of forgetting – and tapping into his subconscious, childhood memories, dreams, and hallucinations – paves the way into introducing minimalism and abstraction in his works.

In his paintings of the Old City of Damascus and of Sidon – two cities engrossed in magic and legends – Arabi works directly from his memory. Forgetting the 'direct description' of these places, the artist uses a two dimensional method of processing the topography of the old alleys like done in miniatures from Arabic manuscripts.

Between 2010 and 2011, Arabi listened to Oum Kalthoum every day while drawing and painting in an immersive ritual, which then compelled him to study every aspect of her performance and the musicians who played with her. While Nostalgia paid homage to a legend and the intense emotional response she inspired, Oum Kalthoum elevates Arabi's studies to a major survey of this iconic cultural figure. The artist approaches this icon with colourist expressionism and rhythmic lines that seem to sway with the imagined sounds of her powerful voice. Portrayed in mid performance, Oum Kalthoum is backed by a small orchestra, as Arabi toys with positive and negative space with various tones and forms.

In some instances a chair appears where a musician seems to be missing, in other compositions this inanimate object is shown upside down. These off-kilter representations suggest a break in the mood of the painting while pointing to a profound use of symbolism in which the psychological spaces of these historical moments are punctured by unseen forces. With each dramatic gesture of the Egyptian singer, the painter suggests the equally climatic response of her audience. Although implied as a body that lies beyond the picture plane, her fans have a tangible presence. Arabi extracts the emotive buoyancy of her voice through the visual as he searches for the lost hours of a bygone era through nostalgia-ridden compositions.

In these works, Arabi immortalises Oum Kalthoum as a symbol of the Arab renaissance, an era characterised by religious and social tolerance, while simultaneously shedding light on what he believes to be a current cultural decline and a rise in fundamentalism.

Also highlighted in the exhibition are Arabi's paintings of the nude form. Arabi questions an artist's stance, and whether that stance can be neutral. Without ideologising his work, Arabi points out that a painting represents the consciousness of the artist and therefore should never be a false testimony of his beliefs.

In his abstract works, Arabi preserves a vibrant palette, harmonious compositions, and multi-angle method of execution. He draws inspiration from the urban and musical components of cities that impacted his formative years—Sidon in south Lebanon and his native Damascus. Paris, his base since 1975, is another endless source of inspiration for the artist, through its rich architectural and musical heritage. The subject matters peek through the titles of Arabi's works, which he creates after completing each painting with the aim to intimate a graspable narrative for the viewer.

About the Artist

Widely respected as an early innovator of contemporary painting in the Arab world and a prominent art theorist and critic, Asaad Arabi has continuously reinvented his painting style in an attempt to depict the rhythms, sensuality, and concealed narratives of urban environments, particularly in his native Syria. Arabi's fascination with cities and the spaces that define them has included an extensive investigation of how inhabitants influence the formation of culture in such settings—a focus that has led to colourist approaches and abstracted forms in addition to early experiments with modernist figuration.

Arabi's decades-long career dates back to the 1960s, when he trained with Guido La Regina, an Italian painter that encouraged a new school of abstraction among students at the University of Damascus. Emerging from this aesthetic shift, Arabi's insistence on formal experimentation quickly secured his status as a leading painter in Syria. The artist's later usage of geometric abstraction reverberated throughout the region as a

renewed interest in Islamic art and aesthetics took hold in the 1980s. In recent years, Arabi has alternated between pure abstractions that are reliant on tonal variations as affective details to expressionist depictions in which figures appear to merge with their environments.

Born in 1941, Asaad Arabi graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Damascus before moving to Paris, France in 1975, where he received a diploma in painting from the Higher Institute of Fine Arts, and subsequently earned a PhD in Aesthetics from the Sorbonne University. Arabi has exhibited in the Middle East and North Africa for more than sixty years and has been featured in solo and group shows throughout Europe, Asia, and the United States, most recently at Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, USA (2017); Galerie Frederic Moisan, Paris, France (2017); Ayyam Gallery DIFC, Dubai (2015).

Arabi's works are housed in public and private collections such as Institut du Monde Arabe; the Barcelona Contemporary Museum of Art; the National Museum, New Delhi; the National Museum of Korea, Seoul; Los Angeles County Museum; and Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

About Ayyam Gallery

Founded in 2006, Ayyam Gallery is a leading arts organisation that manages the careers of diverse established and emerging artists. Blue-chip art spaces in Beirut and Dubai, a series of collaborative projects in the United States, Europe, and Asia, and a multinational non-profit arts programme have furthered the gallery's mandate of expanding the parameters of international art. With its widely respected multilingual publishing division and a custodianship programme that manages the estates of pioneering artists, Ayyam Gallery has also contributed to recent efforts that document underrepresented facets of global art history.

Exhibition Facts

Exhibition Dates: 15 November 2017 – 6 January 2018

Opening Reception: Wednesday, November 15 from 7.00 to 9.00 pm

Regular Hours: Mon-Fri: 10.00 am to 8.00 pm, Sat: 12.00 to 6.00 pm

Location: Beirut Tower, Ground Floor, Zeitoune Street, Across from Beirut Marina

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For media requests or interviews with the artist, please email the gallery's press office at press@ayyamgallery.com or call +961 1374450/51.