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HUFFPOST CULTURE

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Still Dreaming of Damascus: Syrian Artist Exhibits in London

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Safwan Dahoul one of the Arab world's leading painters is in London showcasing his work at the Ayyam Gallery and working with the arts organisation *Edge of Arabia*. The Damascus based artist whose work is owned by institutes and private collections all over the world, now lives in Dubai due to the ongoing conflict.

What strikes you most about Dahoul is the painter's shyness. I had expected the professor of Damascus University's Faculty of Art to be sure of his own abilities. After all, he has taught many of Syria's famous artists. Yet the man seemed uneasy in his surroundings as if he wished to leave the über modernity of Dubai and London for Damascus. Yet how can an artist return to a country where the sphere of culture is controlled by the authorities?

Dahoul though has never been a government artist and rejects any political movement that tries to use his art for its own agendas. The trick to remaining free, according Dahoul is to carve out a world for oneself where the reaches of the police state cannot get you. Dreams then, has been his refuge for the last twenty five years and he has been putting those abstract visions onto canvas ever since. In any case, one suspects the Syrian authorities with its penchant for revolutionary statues of Hafez Assad, wouldn't get paintings with Pharaonic and Assyrian motifs, eerie surrealism and hints of Kahlo and Picasso.

Admittedly at first neither did I, it seemed like post-modernist art that rejected meaning. On closer inspection, his art entitled 'Repetitive Dreams' is full of meaning. He paints in shades of grey as if railing against socialist architecture that has obliterated any vestiges of colour so common in the Near East hundred years ago. Dahoul has remarked that even the trees in Damascus have lost their lustre due to the lead fumes spewed out by rickety Russian Ladass.

His women too contain a multitude of meanings; Mankind, representing the Arab world, his country, the wife he lost to cancer and his personal experiences. His women seem at times confident, sometimes subdued, and sometimes despairing. One could interpret them simply as interaction between shapes and space or the death of Syrian hopes and dreams by a regime that doesn't allow for any nuance in perspective. No wonder it's so hard for the censors to pin Dahoul down.

The Syrian uprising has torn Syrian artists and no less Dahoul. He is clearly tortured by events back home. Yet he does not wholly support the uprising either. As he says "the uprising was inevitable due to the countless mistakes of the government but I would have preferred gradual reform as opposed to an armed insurrection".

Yet Dahoul, originally from Hama one of the cradles of the Syrian revolution, is adamant that his art cannot impact the revolution because according to him "the impact of art is felt much later". Moreover, his soul is repulsed by the very idea. "The world has abandoned Syria", he says "and I am loath to use these victims as my subject matter- its simply shameful". Yet his torture comes across vividly in his latest collection of dreams; Dahoul's women lie in various poses seemingly disappearing into nothingness; as if his subject was Syria herself vanishing into an uncertain nightmare. Dahoul yearns for the day when art becomes the tool for dialogue and reconciliation.

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