

**MOHANNAD ORABI**

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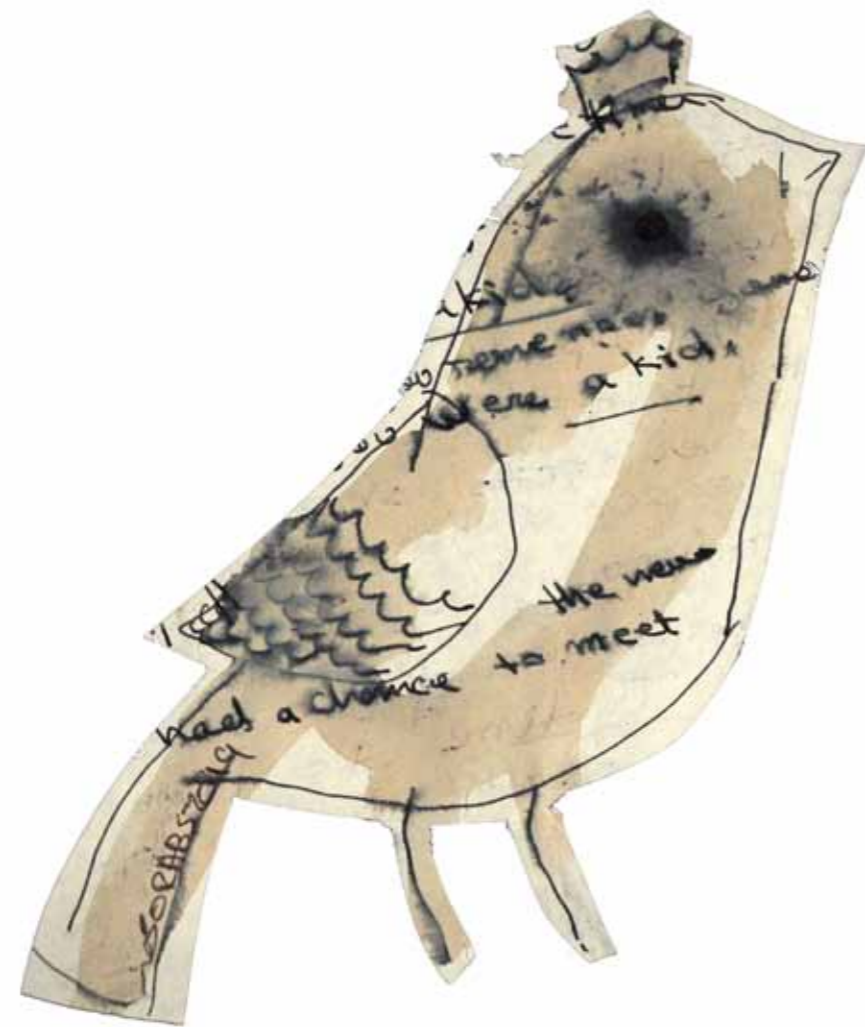
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**MOHANNAD ORABI**

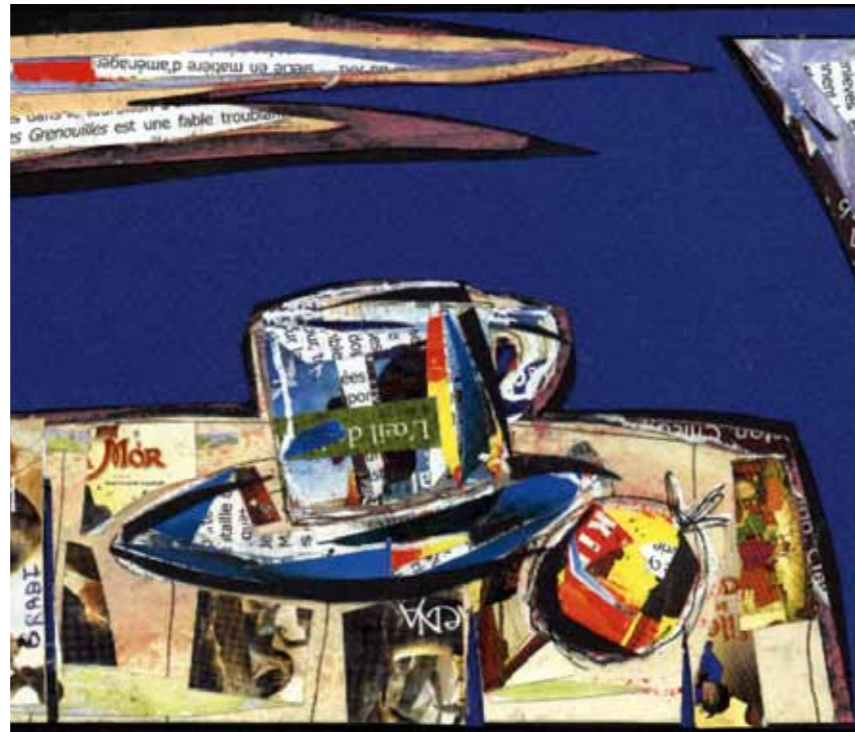




## Contents

In Conversation with Mohannad Orabi	12
Syrian Childhood Unmasked	34
The Self-Portraits of Mohannad Orabi	48
Artist Biography	187
About the Writers	188
About Ayyam Gallery	190





Early paintings and collages (2003 - 2006)





Untitled  
2013  
Ink on paper







The artist's Damascus studio, 2011



## In Conversation with Mohannad Orabi

By Marina Jordan

*The colour blue constitutes an indispensable memory that lingers after each visit to Mohannad Orabi's studio. Not so much for its subtle hints in many of Orabi's paintings, as for its omnipresence throughout the white cube space that the artist turned into an intimate atelier propitious to creation. The colour blue extends to Mohannad Orabi himself. His turquoise glasses hybridise with the velvet chair he leans back in, while straightening his indissociable navy blue nautical shirt. Coffee is poured, cigarettes are lit, and we are ready to talk.*

**Marina Jordan: The sight of babies in an incubator while you were visiting a friend at a hospital inspires the childlike characters constantly appearing on your canvases. Can you tell me more about what happened there, and what about your encounter moved you to portray them?**

Mohannad Orabi: Before this experience, I was already working on portraits and human characters. Oftentimes in an artist's practice, a life experience represents a creative turning point, and this was mine. When I visited this hospital and watched the babies lying in incubators, many questions came to my mind about the reason these babies are coming to life and why they are leaving it. I started making sketches, in which I included movement and a lot of feelings, to recount the newborns' struggles to stay alive. Suddenly, I realised that I was drawing myself, or rather my memories, whether good or bad. For instance, some of my characters, seen riding a bicycle, are reminiscent of my first, rather unpleasant experience riding one, as I fell off and got injured.

**MI: By portraying innocence and fragility, do you seek as an adult to return to a carefree life?**

MO: When I started drawing the babies, without gender distinction, I sought to set them free. When we grow up, the traditions and culture surrounding us make our childish, playful, and happy side disappear. So my practice resides in encouraging people to liberate their carefree self. This shows through the very bright colours and simple shapes I use to construct each character—circles, triangles, and squares, all coming together to form a person.



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2007  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 170 cm





*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2007  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 120 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2009  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 120 cm



**MI:** This idea of movement that you inject into your canvases through shadows suggests that you are narrating each character's life story, not just a particular moment. In a sense, you create continuity between one scene and another, assembling the portraits into a family album. Tell me about the autobiographical extent of your practice.

**MO:** I don't just draw portraits. I tell my story, or rather, I whisper it subtly. If you want to hear it, you definitely will. The movement I hint at in my paintings reinforces the idea that there is a whole story behind each painting. Below a sitting infant, a simple horizontal line signifies a mid-air suspension, and translates the thoughts I had while watching the newborns: suspended between life and death, they will either rise to their future or fall down.



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2011  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 130 cm

**MI:** Your colours, shapes, body postures are not premeditated. At which point of your creative process do you have a clear vision of what each self-portrait will look like?

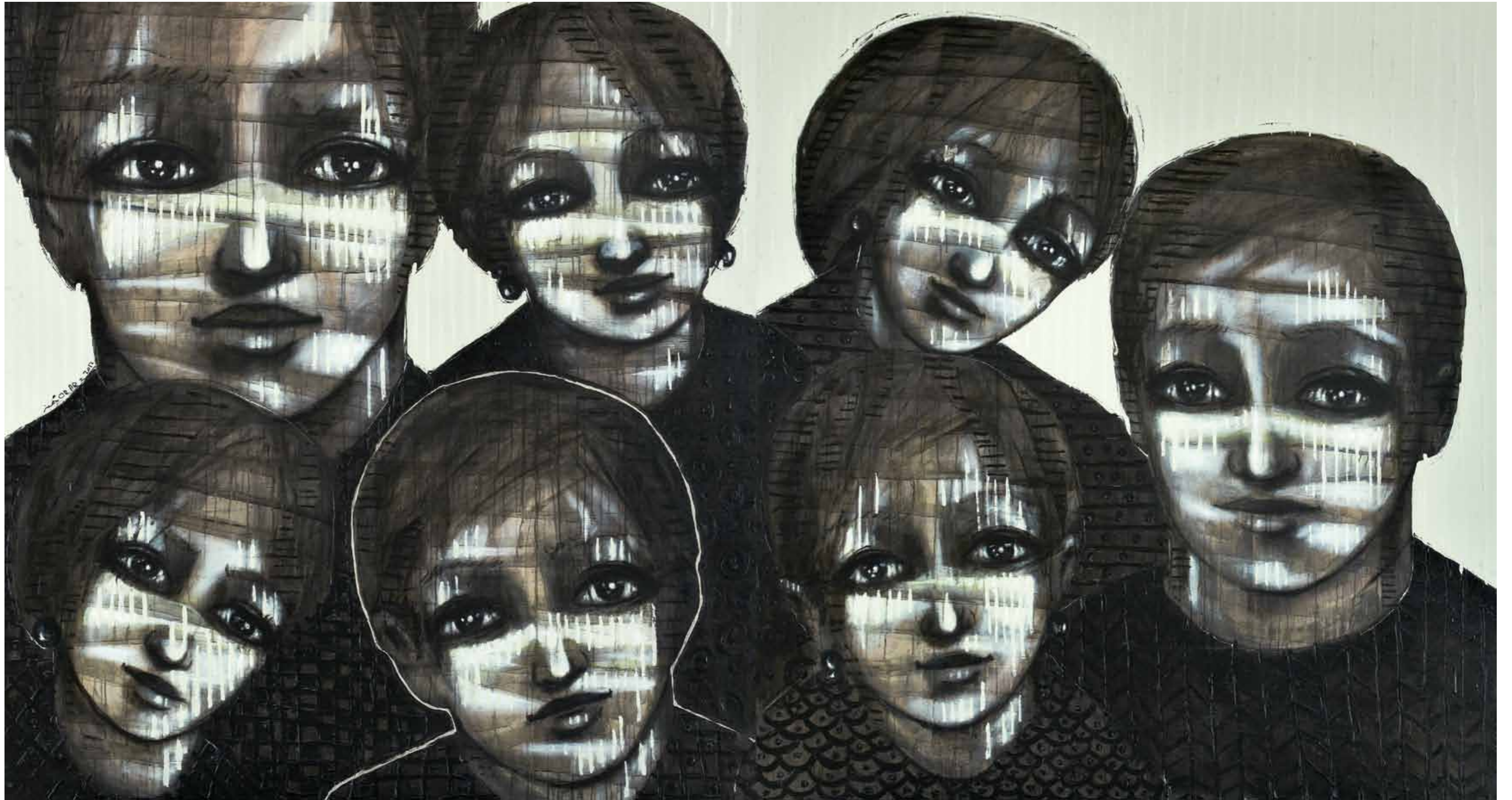
**MO:** As an artist, I can't decide what to draw, although I try sometimes. Emotions always take over the creative process and often result into unpredictable creations. In sum, all my paintings are results of my inner feelings, my country, and its people. They are portraits of people that surround me and touch me in a way; their traits are shaped by the emotions they instigate in me and my memories thereof, rather than a physical resemblance. Some of them I would paint in yellow, because that's how I see them in my memories. I don't pay attention at all to colour symbology in my work.

Each time I complete a painting, I ask myself: 'How and why did I choose this colour, the posture of the character, its face...?' Sometimes, I found the answers, but they are mostly related to the aesthetic and technical aspect of the work. What I do remember is the emotional state I was in when I started the piece, and for me that's enough.



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2011  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm





*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
200 x 370 cm - Diptych



**MI: Whether resolutely female or male characters, adults or children, their eyes are always the largest, most notable feature. Windows to the soul, they open the path to discover their emotional state, their subconscious. Are you in a way tracing, through them, a path for the viewer to discover you, as an artist, or as a human being? Or are you attempting to launch a self-discovery process for the viewer, by using your characters as portals to an introspective journey?**

MO: The eye contact is very important for me. It's how I can tell who people are and what they are trying to express. Before, my characters' eyes were holes that wouldn't divulge emotions. With the uprising in Syria, I was led to open their eyes in order to tell their reality, the reality of the situation in my country. Now you can see light inside their eyes too, as if it was reflecting from something positioned in front of them; a kind of hope. Of course there is hope, despite the fact that there is a lot of sadness in my paintings.



*Untitled*  
Profile Portrait series  
2012  
Mixed media on paper  
80 x 60 cm



**MI: The monochromatic uniformity of your backgrounds provokes a state of solitude. At the same time, it elevates the subject to a universal level. The characters could be you or me. Why do you often remove characters from particular contexts?**

MO: I try to do something very close to my story but at the same time render it in a universal way, so that each person can relate to it and recreate, through my paintings, their own story. Everyone has a story, everyone has secrets.

**MI: Tell me about the progressive shift from these uniformly coloured backgrounds, voids, to the appearance of surroundings that set the characters in a particular space, time, and situation. Why did you feel the need to contextualise them?**

MO: In these pieces, I started drawing the background before working on the characters, just like children draw on the walls and ground. The scenes I portrayed also remind me of the news coming from Syria, showing the destruction of the city. They stuck in my memory and led me to mix grey acrylic with ashes, glue, and sand to render the texture and feeling of Damascene walls. The relationship between the characters and the background reflects my efforts to portray reality.



*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
140 x 170 cm

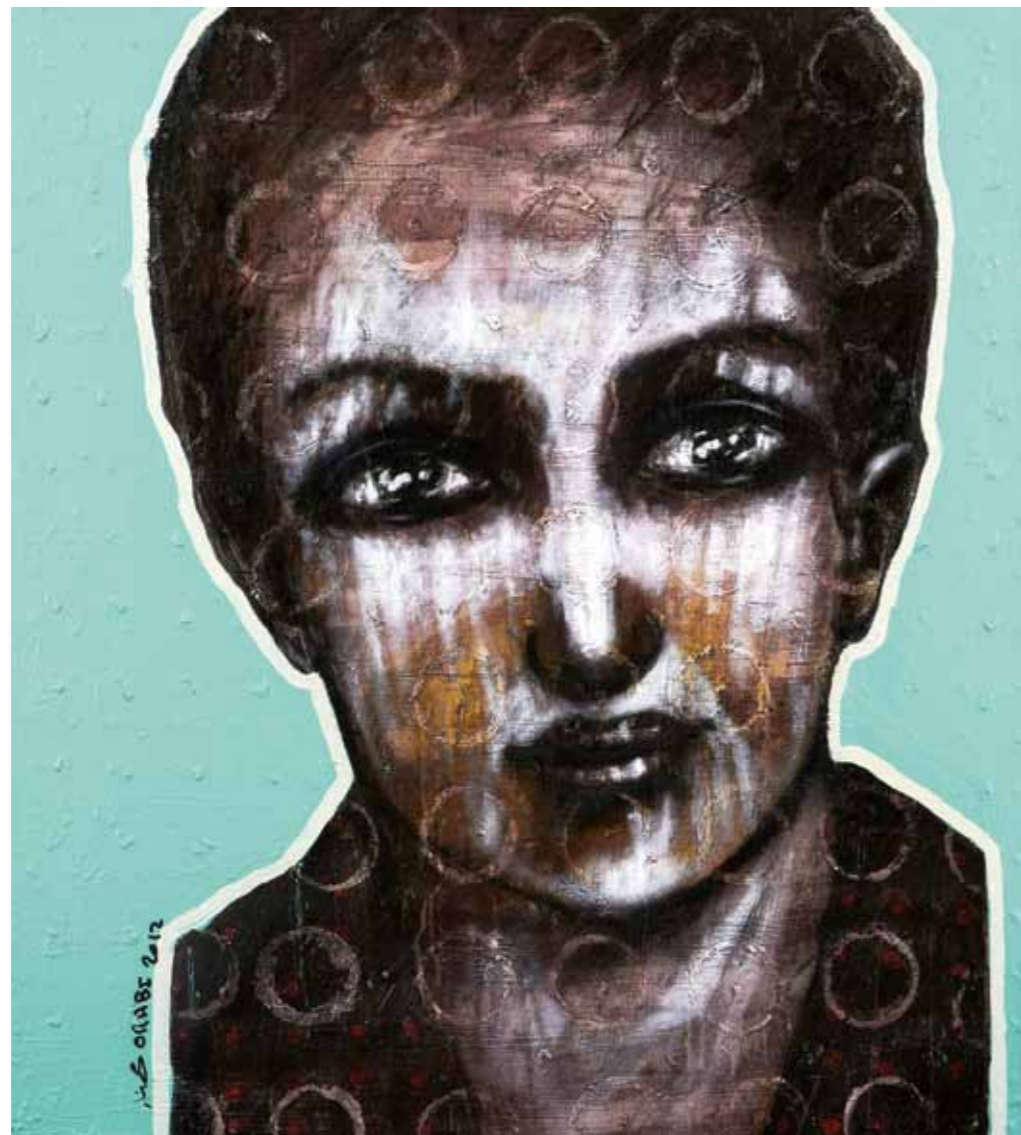


*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
135 x 125 cm



MI: From 2007, your practice shifted to mirror a variety of feelings, whether resulting from your own experiences or impacts of global events. In parallel to this, your protagonists also evolved, adopting different poses, brandishing different accessories. This shift is similar to the narration of a transforming experience, as if you were a parent raising a child to grasp the world we live in. You are in control of the characters and able to provide them with a certain sense of safety. In that sense, does your practice constitute a cathartic release for you?

MO: This series, Self Portrait, is not just about me, the characters could be anyone and do not resemble me physically. What does link them to me is that they always appear alone, as was I, when I lost my parents and lived alone for about six years. Then, after I got married and my daughter Sama was born, I instinctively created a body of work that later became a series titled It's All About Sama. At the time, my paintings were very fresh, very colourful. Now, it's fewer colours and more technique, more texture. The faces are sadder, too. I am trying to make some of the faces happy but I remain trapped in my memories. All of the portraits tell a story that I choose to paint rather than narrate, because I can't explain all of it with words. Either way, I relate painting to therapy. As if I could climb atop a mountain or scream deep inside the sea, the practice makes me very balanced.



Untitled  
Profile Portrait series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 90 cm



Untitled  
Profile Portrait series  
2012  
Mixed media on paper  
80 x 60 cm



MI: Up until 2012, the characters' eyes are dark, impenetrable holes that eventually open to face the viewer, revealing tears, in *It's No Longer About Me* series. This stylistic transition took place following the Syrian uprising and shifted the focus from personal grievances to a more global outlook on the conflict. At the same time, your figures started appearing with weapons. How would you define your role and the role of your practice, in this case: storyteller, activist, documentarist, reporter, healer?



Untitled  
Profile Portrait series  
2012  
Mixed media on paper  
80 x 60 cm

MO: Images have always had a documentary dimension for me. They capture a particular moment in a very honest way. Following my move to Cairo, I felt disconcerted after reading about children fighting and killing other children and adults in the Syrian conflict, and created portraits of adolescents holding guns. Although I hate drawing guns, my characters progressively started appearing holding weapons, to signify the unbelievable atrocities occurring in my homeland.

MI: In the early years of the uprising, you relocated to Egypt, where Internet became your only means of communication with your friends and relatives. From this dependence on technology and social media, most notably Facebook, you created a series called *Profile Picture*. How did this shift in your everyday communications impact your life and practice?

MO: After thirty-five years spent in Syria, I moved to Cairo for a period of eighteen months following the start of the uprising. The relocation had an obvious effect on my practice. First of all, the faces of my characters changed slightly, adapting to the traits of Cairo's inhabitants and colours present in the city's environment. At the time, I didn't have a studio. I stayed in an apartment, for what I thought would be a couple of months. I ended up living there for over a year and as I didn't know anyone, I spent a lot of time on social media, communicating with my friends and relatives. Progressively, I begun sensing mood twists with each change of profile picture on my friends' Facebook pages. This is how *Profile Picture* was born—I tried to render, with the same portrait, the array of moods I had witnessed online through a series of drawings on cardboard. The white circles covering most of the portraits allude to the bullet crippled walls and at the same time embody machine gun sounds, both of which I remember seeing and hearing in Damascus.

MI: Because of the rapidity of the conflict's evolution, many artists like Tammam Azzam turned to photography and digital art as appropriate media to render the events almost simultaneously. Is it something you have ever considered? What made you stick to painting?

MO: I am very strict with the traditional direction of my practice. I like to paint on canvas and start without any prior decisions or expectations of a particular result. I do like photography and take over two hundred images a day, to document the time and my surroundings. But when it comes to my practice, I do not draw directly from them, and focus on the exteriorisation of my memories instead. I believe it makes the works more personal and at the same time sets me free creatively.

MI: You are obviously very sensitive to your surroundings, which always end up translating, whether consciously or unconsciously, into your works. After a year in Cairo, you moved to Dubai and discovered a whole new environment in terms of architecture and culture. How did it affect your work?

MO: In Dubai, you find many clean lines, systematically neat, whether in the shape trees are cut into or in the way structures are built, quite opposite to the urban chaos found in Egypt. The strictness translated into my paintings, which became very sharp and more structured. The characters, until then casting side-glances or looking indirectly out of the canvas, started boldly facing the viewer. The people I met in Dubai inspire them, who are strong characters working hard for what they want to achieve.



MI: Your latest series, titled Family Portraits, takes your characters out of their loneliness and depicts them standing next to siblings, parents, or friends, with the particularity that each character's contours are highlighted in white. An almost menacing ashen background contradicts the positive energy emanating from the depiction of a protective family cocoon. What led you to this shift in your composition, choice of characters, and colour?

MO: I might have started painting family portraits because I am worried of how I can protect my family, in today's tumultuous world. Although the paintings seem dark on the surface, the multiple layers composing them progressively reveal colours. You can discover these paintings like you discover a stone in the water: at first, you see your own reflection on the surface. Then, you spot a stone lying at the bottom, its colour, its size; you see the fish swimming around it. This is how I visualise the new works: the complexity of the texture progressively reveals oriental patterns, effects, relationships between colours, all of them contributing to narrating the characters' story.



*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 250 cm



*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm





*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm

**MI: Recurring figures in your canvases and companions to your characters, the birds symbolise freedom, purity of soul, intellectual development. Can you tell me more about their significance?**

MO: Sometimes, this bird is me. Other times, it represents the future. I like the relationship between the bird and my characters—sometimes they hold it close to their heart and other times they set it free. Either way, I always set the bird within free environments—it's never sitting on a line or inside a cage. The most important thing, however, is that the bird leads to associations for the viewers, who then use their imagination to interpret the paintings. This tripartite relationship—artist, painting, and viewer—is very precious to me.

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*Extracted from an interview with the artist conducted in June 2015 by the author.*







## Syrian Childhood Unmasked

By Danna Lorch

Back in the 1950s, the Romanian artist and forerunner of modern sculpture Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) once famously told a journalist, ‘When we are no longer children we are already dead.’<sup>1</sup> Damien Hirst later quoted Brancusi in relation to his own experimental practice. Art comes instinctively to young children, who use whatever materials are available to create work simply for the exhilaration of creation itself, while rarely worrying about the quality of the final results or how they will be judged. Developmental psychologists have determined that by the age of three children can identify their own reflections in the mirror and go on to develop a growing sense of self-consciousness. Yet, with this knowledge of self comes a fear of embarrassment and a desire for pride in relation to others, which grows increasingly more urgent through adolescence, and is nearly debilitating to most people’s decision-making processes and ability to take risks in adulthood. To artists including Brancusi, Hirst, and Mohannad Orabi, silencing self-consciousness and returning to the natural childlike state of creativity in the studio is equated with the most unpolluted, most aspirational form of art.

Orabi, who was influenced by the tradition of Syrian painting in the vein of Safwan Dahoul and Fateh Moudarres, graduated from the Faculty of Fine Art in Damascus in 2000 and then took first place in the Syrian Young National Artists exhibition in 2006. The following year, Ayyam Gallery recognised him as a member of the prestigious Shabab Ayyam group—a close-knit cohort of ten rapidly emerging, highly intellectual painters selected to receive incubation, support, and mentoring from the gallery. Ironically, Orabi’s first solo show with Ayyam in 2008 was titled *Artist of Freedom* and centred around a series of self portraits presenting both male and female characters with round features and narrow almond eyes, painted in an anarchy of colour and texture. The show was a metered ode to an unrestrained yet serious studio practice.



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 145 cm



In 2012 Orabi left his Damascus studio with unfinished portraits still nailed crookedly to its centuries-old walls and scooped up several jars of dirt from the floor to keep as a memory. He then travelled to Cairo, originally planning to stay for only a few months time, but ultimately remaining for well over a year due to steadily worsening conditions in Syria. A prodigious studio practice culminated in a 2012 solo show *It's No Longer About Me*, followed by *Profile Portraits* in 2013. During his time in Egypt, Orabi's paintings became more realistic, less whimsical, and directly connected to stories coming out of Syria. Suddenly, the innocent, childlike faces became gaunt from hunger and tear-streaked from sadness. Boys held guns and it was often disturbingly unclear if the weapons were toys or not. Girls were posed eerily immobile with eyes that projected a despair typically reserved for aging widows.



Untitled  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 160 cm



Untitled  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 160 cm





*Untitled*  
Profile Portrait series  
2013  
Mixed media on paper  
80 x 60 cm



*Untitled*  
Profile Portrait series  
2013  
Mixed media on paper  
80 x 60 cm



Last year, *Syria's Apex Generation*, a group exhibition curated by Maymanah Farhat, travelled between Ayyam Gallery's spaces in London, Beirut, and Dubai, bringing together work from five Shabab Ayyam artists who are now displaced and scattered between cities. Mohannad Orabi, Kais Salman, Abdul Karim Majdal Al-Beik, Nihad Al-Turk, and Othman Moussa, were presented as a single bloc from a new school of Syrian painting activated in response to the uprising. The international media response was tremendous, due not only to the innate strength of the work presented, but also stemming from a wide Western curiosity (bordering on voyeurism in certain cases) towards understanding the realities of life inside Syria and its expanding diaspora communities. Orabi was soon after named one of *Foreign Policy's* '100 Leading Global Thinkers' for 2014 for his part in bringing awareness to the plight of Syrian children.

Orabi, his wife, and young daughter then relocated to Dubai in 2014, where he set up a studio at the rear of Ayyam Gallery's flagship space in the gritty heart of the industrial district of Al Quoz, and began preparing for his next solo show. During the last year, he has completed more than twenty new portraits, while the situation for Syrian children has continued to deteriorate.

The facts concerning the youngest generation transcend political allegiances, ethnic identities, and religious beliefs. UNICEF reported in March 2015 that as a result of the protracted conflict 7.5 million Syrian children are in need of immediate humanitarian assistance, while 2 million currently hold refugee status in other countries, and an overwhelming 2.6 million are unable to attend school.<sup>2</sup> Orabi's Family Portrait series was conceived with these overwhelming statistics in mind, but with the idea of honouring and shedding light on the stories of ordinary Syrian families. In his studio, rocking in his madras-draped glider while sketching in a notebook with a stub of charcoal, Orabi explained, 'I set out to make something that would make people from every nationality around the world feel that our [Syrian] struggle is like their struggle, like the story in the paintings is also their story. I don't want them to feel pity, but to realise that this could happen to them too.'

Completed canvases for the show spill out of the boxy studio and lean against the surrounding hallway walls, staring out with a mixture of pride, grief, and expectation. The hallway is a gauntlet—the heavy reproach of the children's eyes is nearly unbearable. Each of their pupils' reflect light—which Orabi uses to symbolise a kind of stubborn hope, particularly in the faces of children who have witnessed and survived the worst side of human behaviour. One cannot help but wonder cynically if that light will be extinguished by future events. Orabi says that while he paints he has conversations with each character and they guide him towards what to add to the scenes next. As their creator, he knows their narratives, but wants viewers to form their own connections, attachments, and stories.

Although mascara is running down her cheeks, a mother holds her posture rigid, one arm encircling her young daughter, while her other three children pose for an unseen camera with solemn, controlled expressions. Their father is notably absent. Has he been killed fighting, been arrested or disappeared? Given that everyone is posed in coordinating outfits, the family portrait resembles the glossy 10 x 12 images staged and printed in an affordable neighbourhood photography studio.



Untitled  
Family Portrait series  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
140 x 200 cm



With her moon-shaped face, the mother resembles the Madonna, and each character's form is outlined in a thick band of white, which references the traditional Christian iconography that can be found in Damascene churches and are often printed onto wooden frames and baseball card-sized stock and sold in local *souks*. While he may have mindlessly thumbed past similar photographs on his Facebook newsfeed in the past, since leaving Syria Orabi has paused to study images such as these with new emotion, scrambling to take a pulse check and also keep a virtual connection with friends and family who are not physically accessible.

It is significant to note that none of the characters in the Family Portrait series are presented behind masks. In *It's No Longer About Me*, many of the characters wore satirical clown-like guises, as if to hide their true states of pain or vulnerability from the outside world. By way of explanation Orabi elected not to enter into a political discussion and would only say, 'When I was younger and more naïve, I was shocked to meet people who appeared beautiful, but underneath were actually quite ugly.' It is easy to presume this corresponds to mounting disillusionment with the situation in Syria.



Untitled  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm

Orabi has collected polished wooden African masks for years, some of which are nailed to the walls of his new studio. In Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and many other Sub-Saharan African countries, masks are traditionally believed to contain powerful spirits waiting to be summoned when someone is weak with sickness, in danger, or in need of divine intervention. In the early twentieth century, African masks found their way into the paintings of Picasso and Braque. The fathers of Cubism each owned a number of carvings, and there is an unsettled debate about whether their interest was purely Colonial in nature or based on a studied appreciation for African art and tribal customs.

In Orabi's case, the mask (or its pointed absence) is less associated with depicting the volume of the human form onto a two-dimensional surface than it is with conjuring an archetype of the Syrian individual coming into his or her full power and revealing that presence to the outside world out of a desire to be seen and heard. This is in line with the theories of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, who reasoned that each individual has a persona, or the outer mask that she or he projects to the external world in order to protect and conceal a true inner nature. He wrote:

Whoever looks into the mirror of the water will see first of all his own face. Whoever goes to himself risks a confrontation with himself. The mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the persona, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face.<sup>3</sup>

Like Jung, Orabi connected the mask to the experience of encountering one's own reflection in water. Once years ago, while walking in the woods he came upon a shallow river. He paused at the edge looking down through the clear water, arrested by a pair of eyes, which he recognised after a moment to be his own. As his vision adjusted he saw that the rock bed below, which initially appeared a dull grey, was actually composed of a wonderfully nuanced palette of moss, mud, and mineral.

As Orabi stands at the easel in his Dubai studio, he tries to conjure that moment at the river and makes his characters' eyes the focus of his portraits. From a distance or when photographed, his paintings appear sternly monochrome and deceptively simple, but when viewed more closely the fabric of a girl's blouse mimics rolling hills, while a boy's neck contains ragged fields of pink. Each painting is composed of a minimum of four layers of acrylic paint that have often been mixed with found materials from wherever Orabi is based at the time—dirt from the floor of his Damascus studio, ash from *shisha* coals taken from cafes in Cairo, and recently, desert sand collected from the streets of Dubai.

At times he returns to that childlike place of uninhibited creation, discards his paintbrush completely and experiments with his hands and objects laying around the studio—coffee grinds, the rim of a teacup, dirt, or the fraying edges of a scarf. If the experiment does not succeed, he simply paints over it, and counts the scars as part of the piece's history. Dubai's straight, orderly streets and overgrown garden of skyscrapers has quietly seeped into the Family Portrait series, particularly in the flat grey of the paintings' backdrops, which mimics the city's dusty concrete. Navigating the main boulevard downtown, he sometimes squints so that the buildings take on human forms with eyes, mouths, and even masculine or feminine attributes.

His most recent painting depicts a young boy of eight or ten who holds a bouquet of red roses under one arm. Orabi made the piece in memory of a well-known street child who once sold flowers for coins in Beirut before giving up and going back to his native



Untitled  
Family Portrait series  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
123 x 123 cm



Syria, then dying in crossfire. Petals drift towards the ground around the child as though he could be walking in a wedding procession. In reality he is headed towards his own funeral and the flowers are the same pigment as the blood he will soon shed.

Orabi spontaneously swirled a finger across each wet flower and manually opened the buds, as if progressing time prematurely—the life cycle from seed to rot. Red roses, which are a cross-cultural symbol of passion or loss, have turned up in his paintings from the beginning—tucked into the button-hole of a lapel or bundled into a young girl's arms. While the use of an iconic flower would seem like an art school cliché in most paintings, in Orabi's work it has a cinematic effect of breaking up a black and white still with a surprise that pulls the viewer into a narrative, perhaps even a private scene from the past that has been sealed in an envelope and set aside in a corner of the mind.

Who does not have a strong memory concerning a red rose hidden somewhere behind the mask that they wear out into the world? It is through this realisation that viewers come to understand that there is only geographical distance between Damascus and the gallery wall. Mohannad Orabi does not title or number his individual paintings for a reason—the unmasked reality is that the experience of a Syrian child and the circumstances of the characters in the Family Portrait series could happen to anyone. The Syrian situation is in fact a global situation, and all people have a part to play in ensuring that the youngest generations have a shared future.

<sup>1</sup> Carola Giedion-Welcker, *Constantin Brancusi*, translated by Maria Jolas and Anne Leroy (New York: George Braziller, 1959). Originally published in German (Basel: Benno Schwabe and Co., 1958, p. 219).

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF Online Report, March 2015: <http://www.unicefusa.org/mission/emergencies/conflict/syria>

<sup>3</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, 'Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious' (1935). In CW 9, Part I: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, p. 43.



Untitled  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Acrylic on canvas  
150 x 150 cm







## The Self-Portraits of Mohannad Orabi

By Maymanah Farhat

It is widely noted that Mohannad Orabi's approach to figuration has become increasingly realistic in recent years. Although stylised and comprising mixed media such as acrylic and sand, Orabi's latest paintings simulate the immediacy of black and white photography in which the contrasting subtleties of a monochrome scale reveal details that might otherwise be hidden. A basic comparison between his early expressionist work—executed with automatic brushstrokes—and these meticulously rendered compositions indicates a gradual shift towards measured formalism. Yet throughout his artistic career, Orabi has maintained an interest in reflective methods of painting and the psychological material that can be disinterred through different forms of self-portraiture.

In the beginning—shortly after graduating from the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Damascus in 2002—Orabi created a series of works on paper that depict solitary figures with a fauvist palette and angular lines. A portrait of a young man in a red shirt, for example, demonstrates the artist's initial experiments with expressionist painting as he articulates the temperament of his character through pictorial devices. Asymmetrical features and exaggerated shadows describe a trapped man paralysed by anxiety. Orabi also achieves this unsettling effect by flattening space. The figure is depicted in the foreground of the painting yet seems to extend past its upper edge, occupying most of the composition. Dividing the portrait into four distinct areas of colour, the artist limits the viewer's perception of depth by rendering the background as an abstracted green field with slight tonal variations and a hint of fading blue sky. Only the man's face and shoulders are portrayed, intensifying the intimate space of the portrait. His features are described with roughly painted black lines, a formal element often found in the works of Syrian artists from the late 1950s onward. The drawn, rather than built, sense of volume creates an evident tension in portraits when combined with painterly techniques, as figures appear weighed down by immovable bodies.



*Untitled*  
2002  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 70 cm



Other examples from this period of Orabi's work focus on the articulation of movement or an instance of collapsed space and time in order to describe the overall mood of a scene. Using found media, Orabi constructed small rectangular collages with compositions that use the text and graphics of shredded magazines and newspapers as signifying details. A 2002 work depicts four women standing side-by-side. Each figure is painted with light brown washes, their scowling expressions sketched with thinly drawn lines. Small magazine shreds are placed beneath their eyes, signaling the markings that form with age. The overlapping folds of their *abayas* are cut from a different magazine. Torn in various shapes and sizes, the black and white strips appear to bend and sway, as though the women are walking. If closely examined, areas of text refer to Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, a musical about a tribe of urban felines who assemble at night to compete for a chance to be reborn in another realm. The elaborate costumes used in the theatre production, including wigs, painted masks, and bodysuits, transform the performers into otherworldly creatures. Although a secondary detail in the composition, the literal content of the collaged pieces invokes an act of transformation. Orabi's figures congregate in an ambiguous setting. The cream coloured background of the collage, the unpainted surface of cardboard, gives no indication of the place or time of their meeting. The women appear to move in unison towards the same direction while displaying signs of fatigue.



Untitled  
2002  
Mixed media on paper  
21 x 29 cm

The process of layering various media as a way to create dimension, or tactile surfaces that provide additional meaning, equipped Orabi with a new approach to image making—one that would prove useful in the years to come. While producing his series of collages and small paintings, Orabi worked as a cartoonist and art director at an animation studio in Damascus. In 2003 he returned to the Faculty of Fine Arts but left before receiving a graduate degree, as he felt the curriculum was too focused on theory. Working fulltime during the day to support his artistic practice, at night he painted in his Muhajireen district studio. It was there that Issam Darwish—a leading Syrian painter and prominent gallery owner—saw his work and offered to organise Orabi's first solo exhibition.

The 2004 debut event was a success and quickly led to subsequent shows. That same year, the artist launched a popular television program for children. Young viewers were invited to submit their artworks, questions, or messages via post. As host, Orabi responded to the children's letters and analysed their drawings on-air. After several years of collecting and studying children's drawings, he began to search for painting techniques that would achieve the same demonstrated degree of intuitiveness. He was particularly fascinated by how children build narrative structures with simple gestures and figures, and determine a work is finished once key elements of a story are represented. While hosting the television show he developed a system of reading their drawings, and began to notice patterns and symbols that revealed the nuances of Syrian society. This discovery altered the course of Orabi's work.

In *Childhood and Concealing Memories*, Sigmund Freud argues that adults retain childhood memories through a process of association, as numerous 'psychic' forces shape 'the memory capacity of infantile experiences.' Childhood memories are 'plastic and visual,' analogous to stage settings. Adults recall infantile events from a removed vantage point as though watching a scene unfold around their childlike personas. According to Freud, memories of early experiences are constructed from various sources of imagery, including the details of actual events and symbolic representations of formative moments. These memories are partially concealed and 'form a noteworthy analogy to the childhood reminiscences as laid down in the legends and myths of nations.'<sup>1</sup>

Orabi's painting style changed when the sight of babies in incubators at a local hospital triggered recollections of his own infancy. Immediately after, he began to depict whimsical characters with the physical proportions of infants: large heads, small bodies, and developing facial features. The artist executed the Self Portrait series (2006-2011) using painting techniques that he adapted from his work with children, and sought to revisit the sensations of his childhood. As he continued to relearn the process of intuitive creation, he recalled the psychological undertones of his young viewer's drawings and began to formulate an aesthetic based on their pictorial methods of storytelling. With a limited palette and unrestrained brushwork, Orabi recounts the wonder and joy of consciousness at a young age without the intervention of the 'psychic forces' that are inescapable in adulthood. Outlining this process in a 2009 interview conducted by Zeina Takieddine, Orabi insists: 'The best thing to do is to forget everything that you've learnt; forget theory, forget colour wheels and just do it—paint.'

A 2007 work from the Self Portrait series shows a stylised figure resembling a small child. A yellow canary is perched on the boy's arm; as he waves his hand, the bird seems to flutter. The artist depicts the movement of the pet by drawing the animal in a stationary position then copying the image several times, a technique derived from animation. Although the child is rendered with similar descriptions of rapid motion,



Orabi represents his actions as a series of thin brush marks that are repeated to form the loose outline of his frame. Illusions to volume are created as the child's body is layered with brushwork and scratches, in addition to subtle highlights and shadows in the form of faint areas of colour. The boy's pose suggests a delicate balancing act between physical exertion and keeping the bird in place, a game motivated by curiosity. The eyes of Orabi's central protagonist are painted as black saucers, hollow masses that do not reflect light and cannot be easily read. In a way, this shields the artist's young protagonists from the stark reality of the outside world. Orabi's scene of childhood innocence remains restricted to imaginative spaces and the symbolism of memory.



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2007  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 100 cm

As the series progresses, Orabi's self-portraits begin to display solemn attributes alongside recognisable physical features such as a globe-shaped head, darkened eyes, and feathered hands. While the character's playful disposition continues to be his distinguishing trait, a separate conceptual thread is visible as Orabi alternates between the carefree sentiments of a child and the burdens of adulthood, sometimes within a single composition. In a 2008 diptych, Orabi's alter ego is trapped in a long rectangular box that nearly spans the length of the painting. The bars of the container are crimson red, mirroring the combined background and foreground of the scene. The striking image suggests that the character's confinement is connected to his surroundings. In an attempt to break free, he squeezes his head through the bars of the box and stretches out his right arm, asking for assistance. Shown as vertical rows of bleeding lines that extend to the ends of the container, the youth's body is stretched beyond the limits of its physical capacity. The textured sections of colour include flesh tones and the black hue that often situates Orabi's figures in space. The solemn stare of the artist's protagonist is directed towards the viewer while the darkened cavities of his eyes seem to grow in real time.



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 240 cm



Whereas the artist's early paintings often feature a lone figure—an allusion to losing his parents in the late 1990s—in the final phase of the Self Portrait series, Orabi incorporated references to personal milestones, such as marriage, and transitioned into a new body of work. The later works of the series include different and/or older characters. Orabi's self-image is sometimes rendered as an androgynous figure or a young girl in compositions that articulate the intricacies of human temperaments through colour schemes, textures, and transparent patterns.



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2009  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 200 cm - Diptych

A demure heroine is portrayed against a solid black background in a 2010 painting, her image shrouded in delicate white lines and circles. The adolescent figure sits with her legs crossed over the front of a box, coyly dangling her red and white high-heels. The pointy shoes resemble the footwear worn by the female anti-heroines of Syrian painter Kais Salman, Orabi's colleague and friend. Orabi and Salman met at the Faculty of Fine Arts and became close after entering the Shabab Ayyam incubator program for young artists in 2007. During the initial period of their careers, Salman regularly visited Orabi's second studio in the Old City of Damascus, a crumbling Ottoman-era house with high ceilings and remnants of an ornately tiled floor. Over the last five years, the painters have formed a significant bond, and regularly discuss the forms and concepts of their individual works, particularly as new series are underway. Salman's stylised portraits of grotesque, ill-mannered archetypes symbolise the corrupt facets of society. Portraiture serves as a means of identifying social conditions while the formalism of painting traces the spatial and temporal dynamics that shape a given context. Despite their distinctive styles and contrasting subject matter, Orabi and Salman share this conceptual treatment of painting.



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2010  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 130 cm



The concluding paintings of Orabi's Self Portrait series led to a relatively small but significant body of work. With the birth of his child in 2011, Orabi amended the underlying concept of his paintings to include the subject of families. Titled in honour of his daughter, Orabi's It's All About Sama series introduced viewers to a growing subtheme of his work. This narrative shift altered the structure of the artist's compositions, as he based his new paintings on the format of traditional portraits.

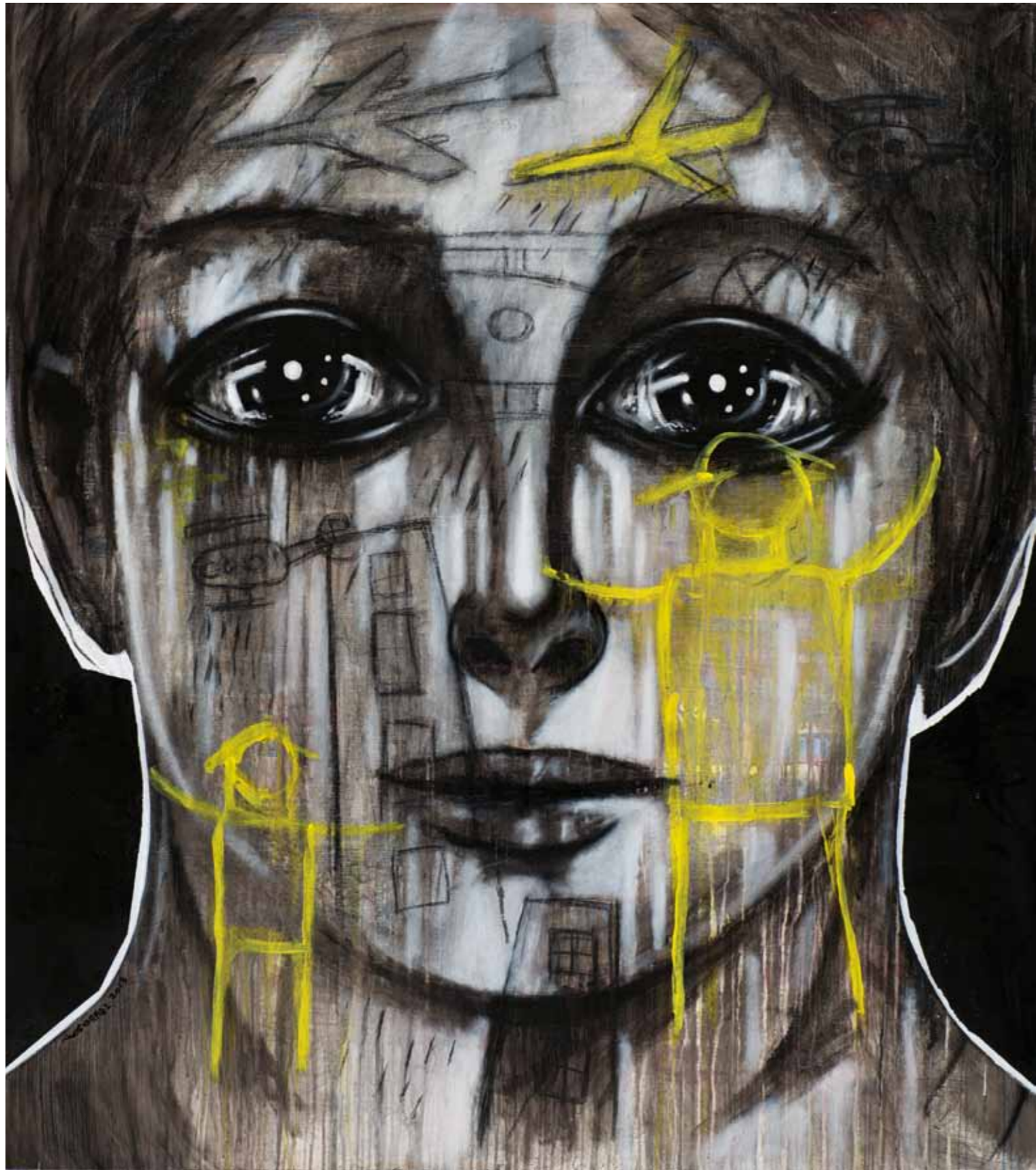
Whether painted, photographed, or sculpted, portraits capture frozen moments, requiring a different level of psychological intensity than other forms of representation. As he suspended his subjects in space and time, Orabi modified his painting style. His expanded cast of characters is pictured in compositions that evoke studio portraiture and the subconscious reinforcement of social hierarchies that appear when families formally pose for a photographer. An elegantly dressed girl stands at the centre of a family portrait in a 2011 painting from the It's All About Sama series. The child's dotting parents lean in, sheltering her small frame. White arched lines that crown the circular heads of the figures are repeated in order to highlight their faces. The facial expressions of the characters reveal their individual roles within the family: the father is reserved but protective; the mother is warm and outwardly thoughtful; the child seems content as the object of her parent's affection. The patterns that adorn their clothes similarly reflect their personalities. The child has taken after both parents in appearance. The girl's large eyes are almond shaped, mirroring her mother, while two half circles form her tiny mouth, a feature inherited from her father. All three figures contain hints of the lonely child of the artist's previous series.

It's All About Sama prepared Orabi for a dramatic turn in his work—one that occurred within a few months time. With the start of the Syrian uprising and the rapid escalation of the conflict that followed, the artist sensed Syria's future disintegration as violence crept towards Damascus. His response to the worsening situation was a body of work that addresses the civilian experience of the unfolding war. Portraits of shell-shocked men, women, and children describe unintended witnesses and allude to a vicious reality with no end in sight. One of the first works of the artist's It's No Longer About Me series (2011-2012) shows a bald woman against a bright yellow background. The colour scheme illuminates her semitransparent body, which is rendered with light washes. Streaks of diluted black paint are visible beneath a pattern of falling leaves. The meticulous ornamentation depicts changing seasons or the initial stage of death for a plant, an analogy for war that completely covers the character. Wearing a crimson eye mask, she stares at the viewer through a crudely cut hole. Stripped bare except for pearl earrings and a matching necklace, she is no longer identifiable as the person she once was.



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2011  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm





*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 160 cm



*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



The distinguishing feature of the series—aside from its intensified approach to portraiture through realist forms—is the artist’s conscious attempt to paint the eyes of his characters with affecting detail. In later works created after Orabi left Syria with his family, young faces are depicted with large, fish-shaped eyes that shine despite gray flesh signaling decay, as virtually all evidence of life has disappeared. Several portraits are of martyred children. A boy proudly poses in front of the Old City of Damascus; a pair of wings has sprouted from his shoulders while an accompanying halo hovers above. Other paintings adapt the imagery of martyr posters, what Zeina Maasri identifies as ‘public obituaries,’ that often include ‘complex representations of martyrdom combined with rich visual and textual rhetoric specific to the party [or armed faction].’<sup>2</sup> Orabi transforms the standard format of these posters with painterly brushwork and other pictorial devices unique to the medium. The consuming violence that led to their deaths is recorded with a simple image of a gun, their portraits adorned with red roses. The child soldiers are shown with blank stares although their eyes glow. This arresting physical detail also serves as a key element of Orabi’s later portraits. In subsequent series that register the plight of the war’s



*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 120 cm



*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 120 cm

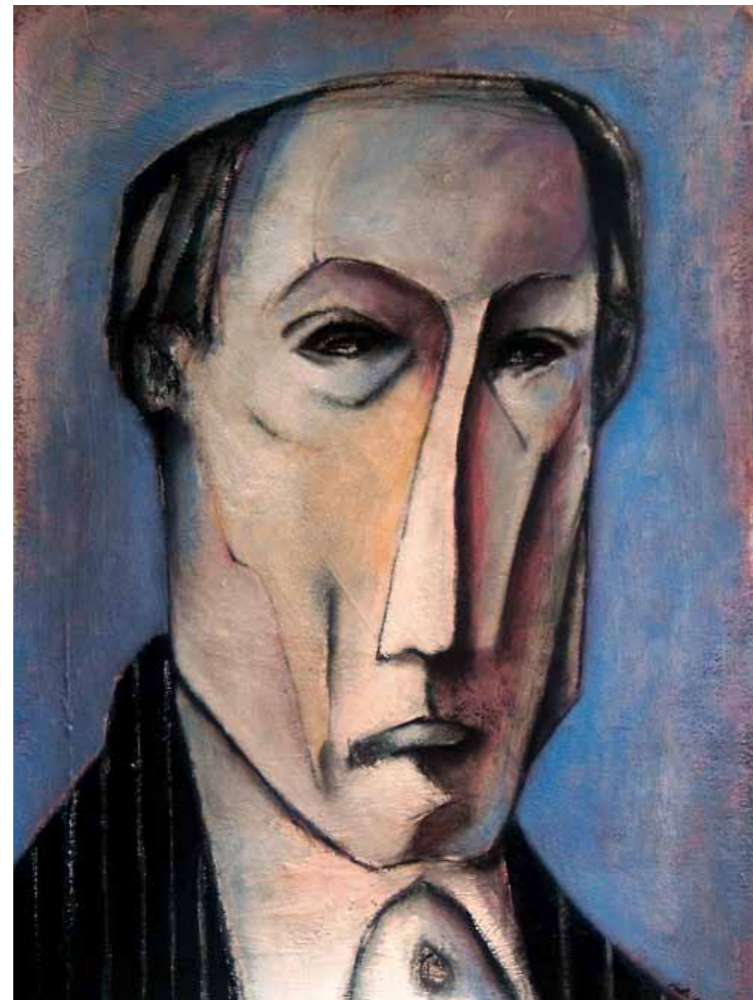
witnesses alongside the stories of the displaced (families precariously scattered across continents), his figures are depicted with dark irides that encircle illuminated pupils.

Since emigrating from Syria, Orabi has examined the alternative media that are registering the effects of the conflict on civilians, particularly social media where user-controlled content and self-conscious pictures are not only building awareness but also shaping consciousness in profound ways. The artist’s most recent paintings locate this perception of self and the power of constructed imagery in the classical format of vintage studio photography, a method of recording time that was once widely popular in the Arab world and often captured social variables.

<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited, Dr. A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1938).

<sup>2</sup> Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).





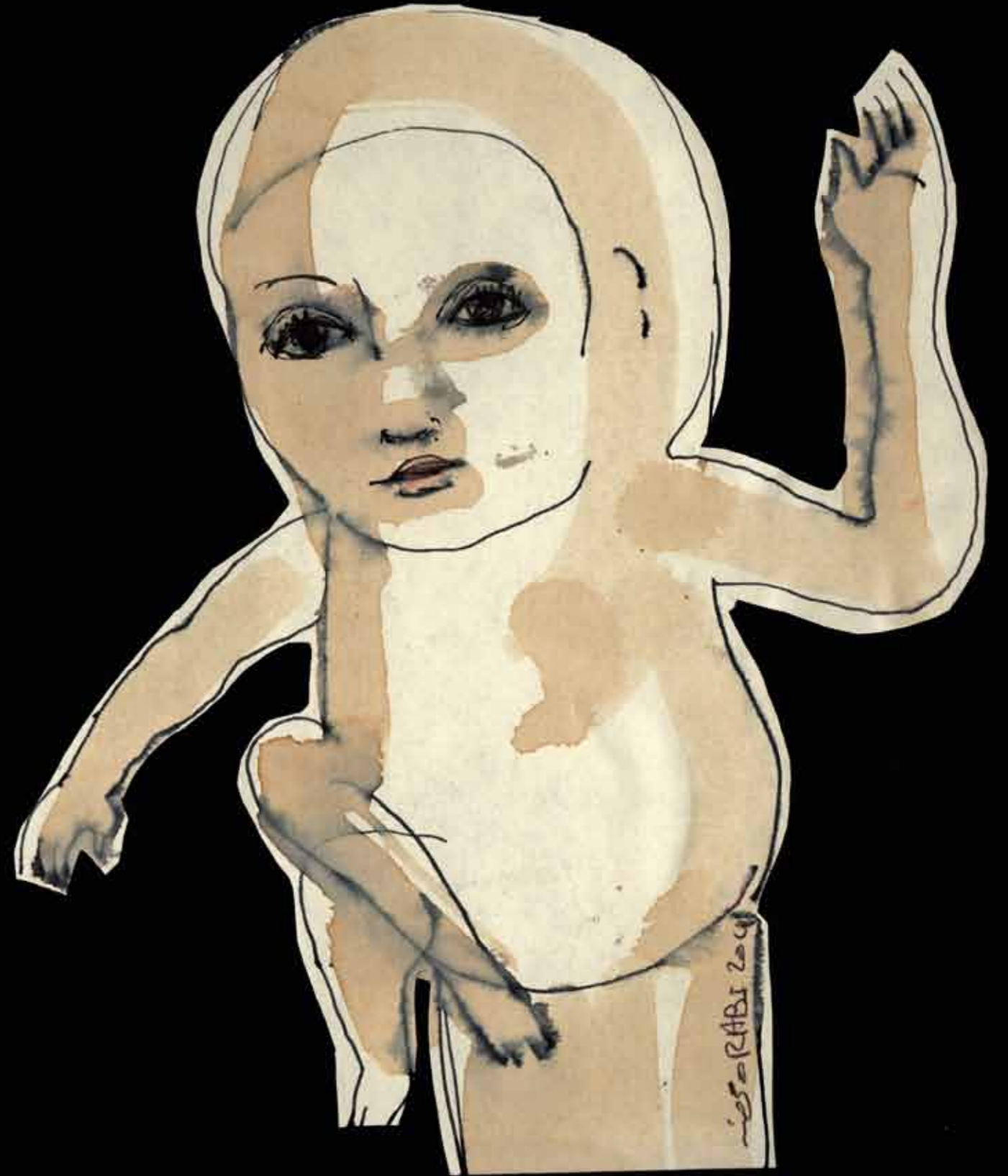
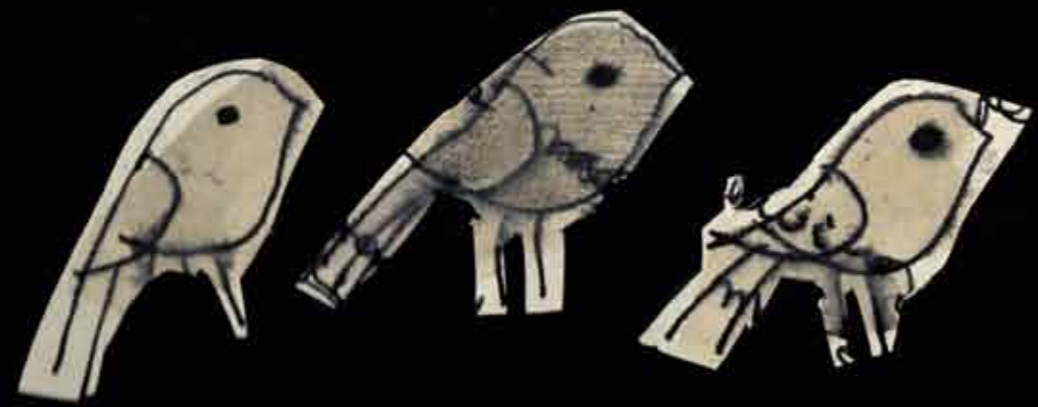
Early paintings and collages (2003 - 2006)





Photo credit: Mustapha Azab



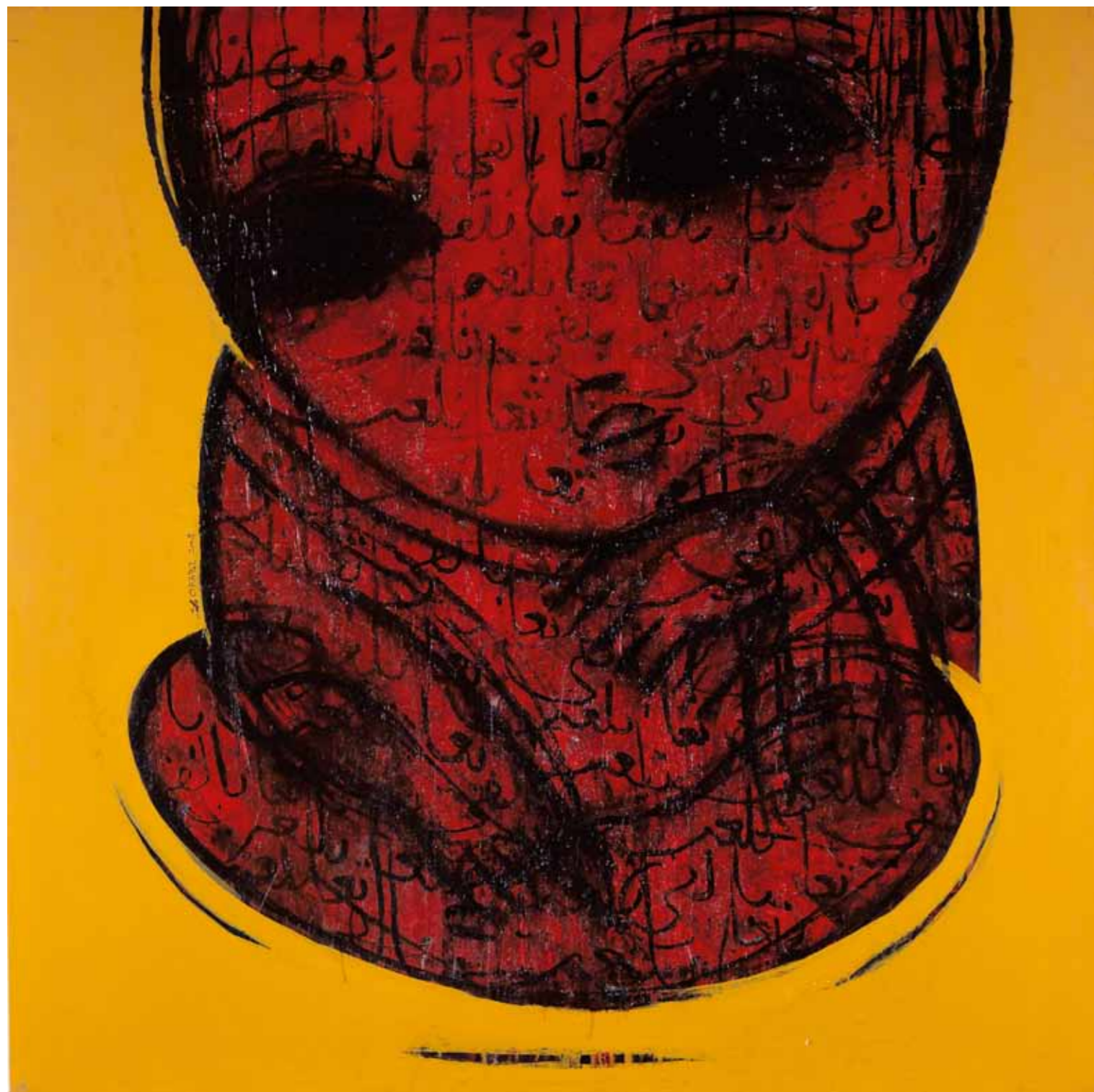




*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2007  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 100 cm





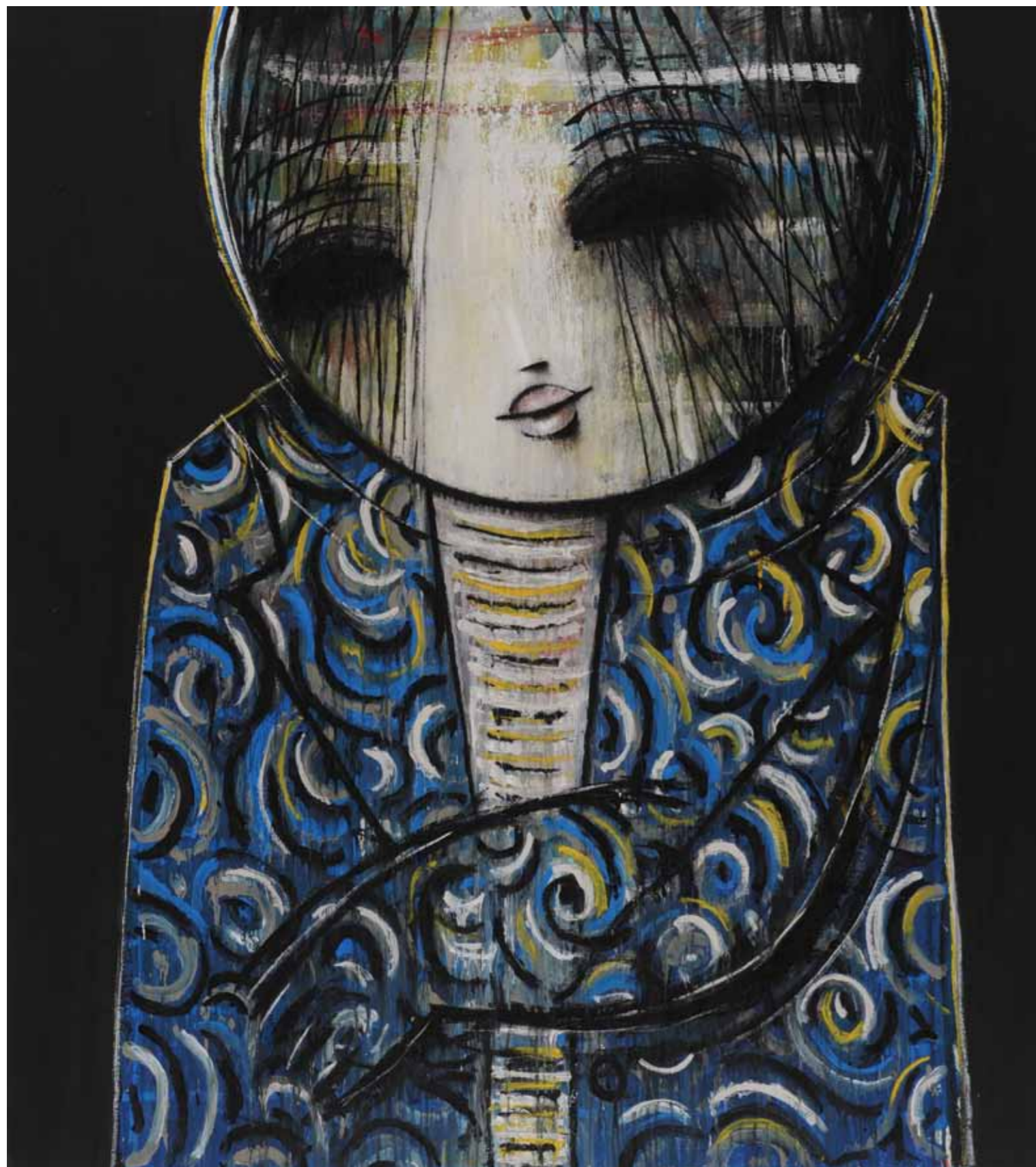


*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
190 x 190 cm





*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2009  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 160 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2009  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 160 cm





*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2007  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 100 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2009  
Mixed media on canvas  
160 x 160 cm



Untitled  
Self Portrait series  
2010  
Mixed media on canvas  
140 x 200 cm







*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2010  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 120 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2010  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm





*Four Girls and a Boy*  
Self Portrait series  
2010  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 360 cm





*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2007  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 100 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2007  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 120 cm







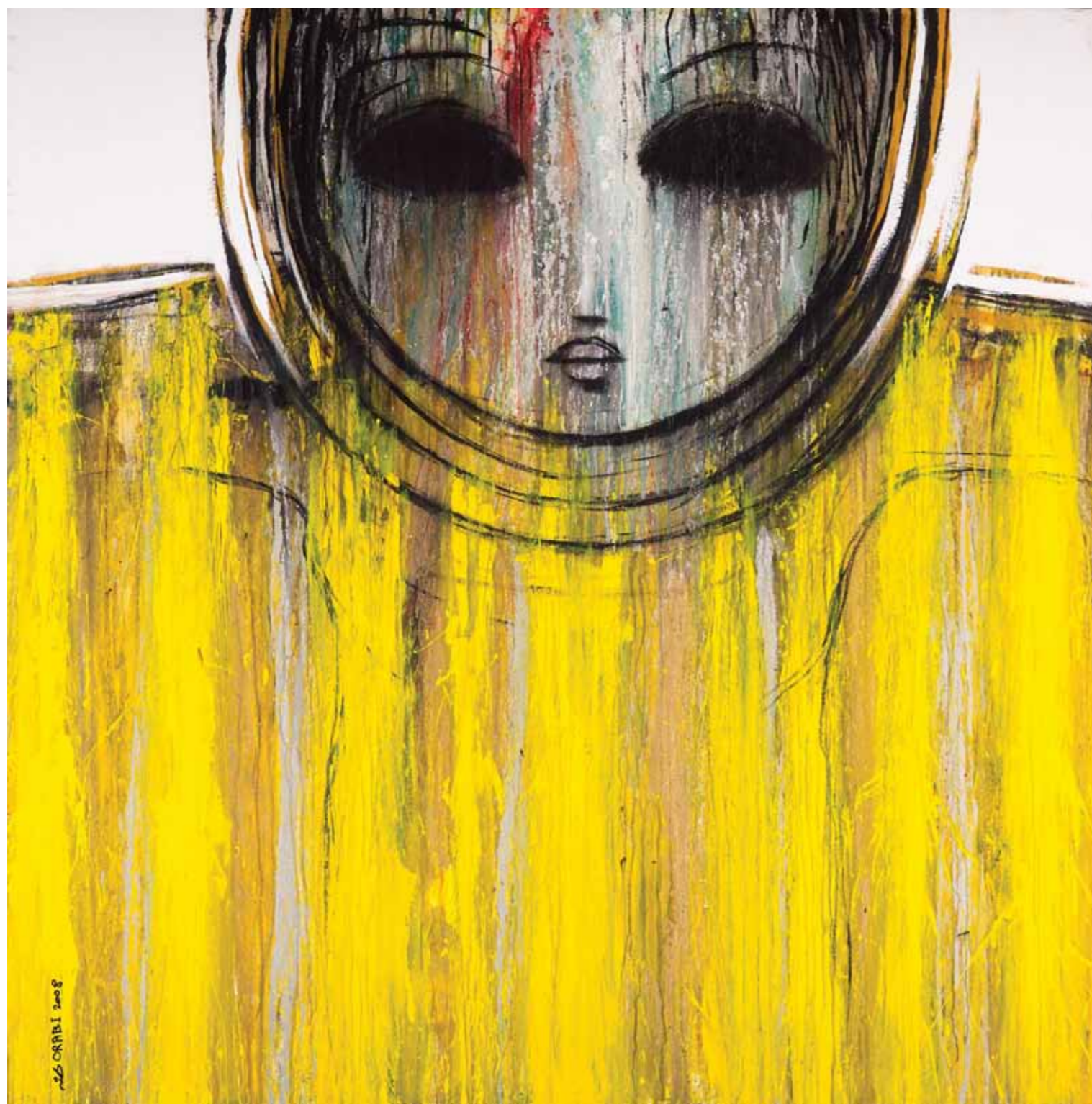


*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2009  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 100 cm

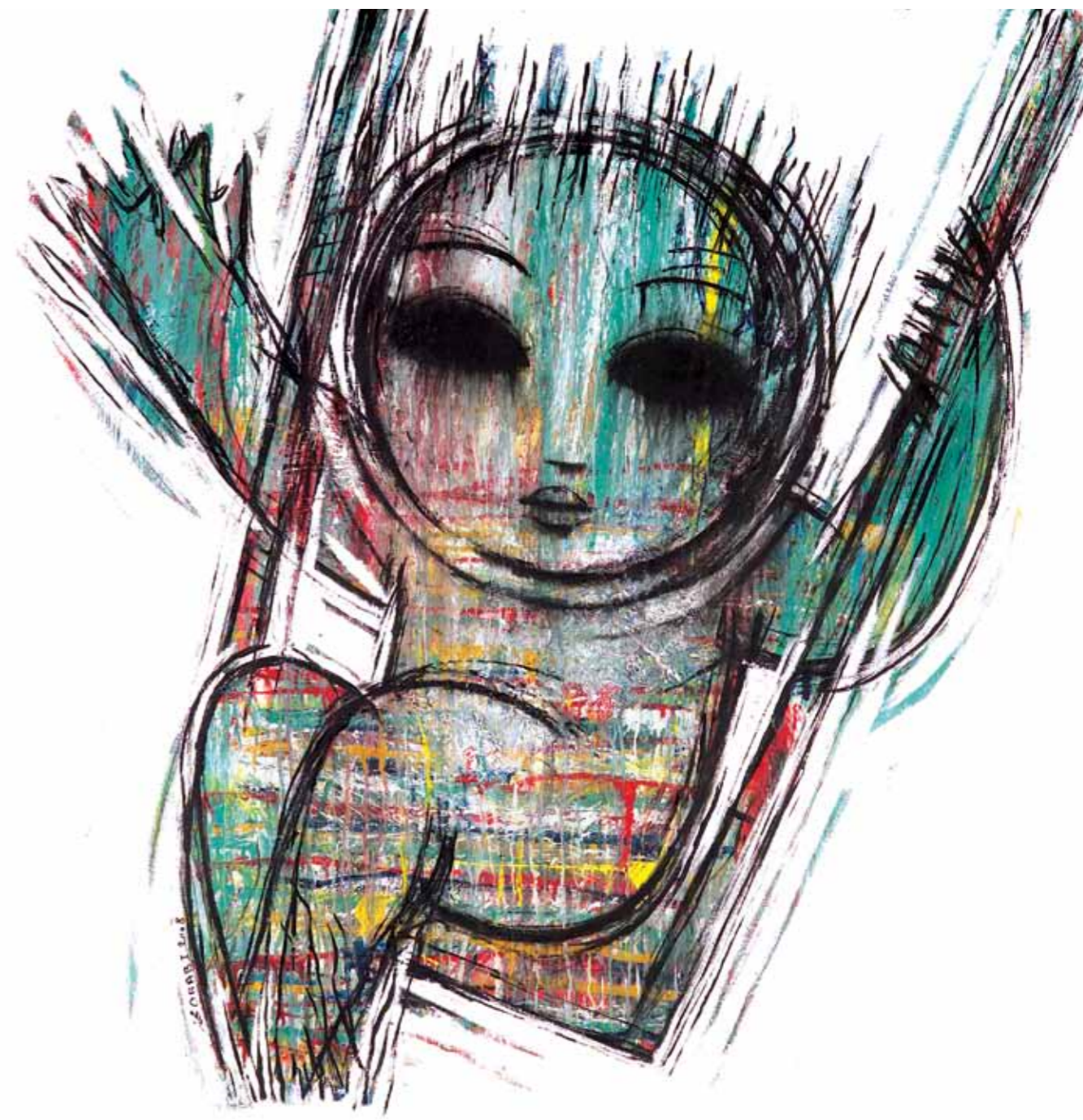


*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2007  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm





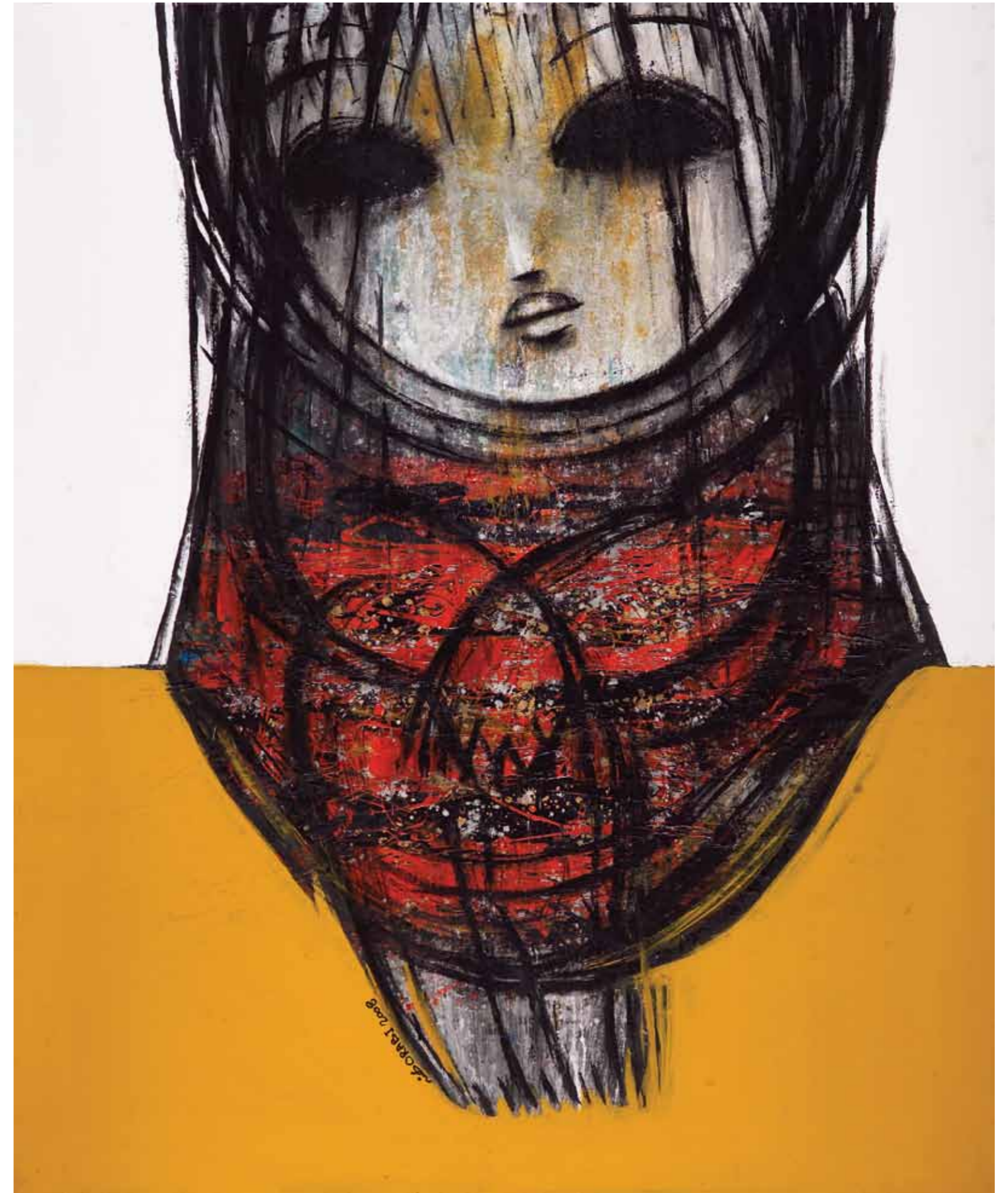
*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
162 x 162 cm



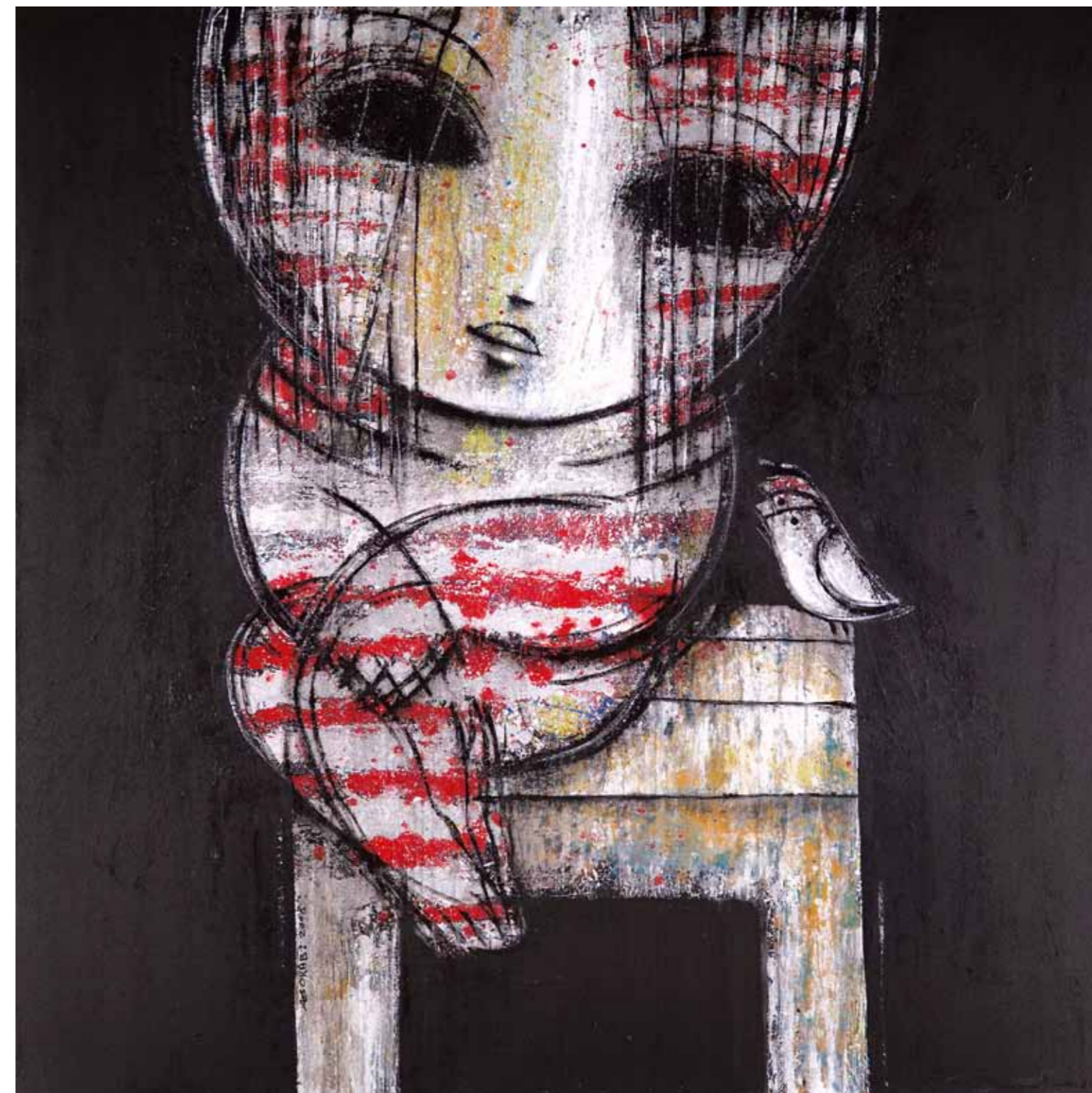
*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
145 x 120 cm







*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm

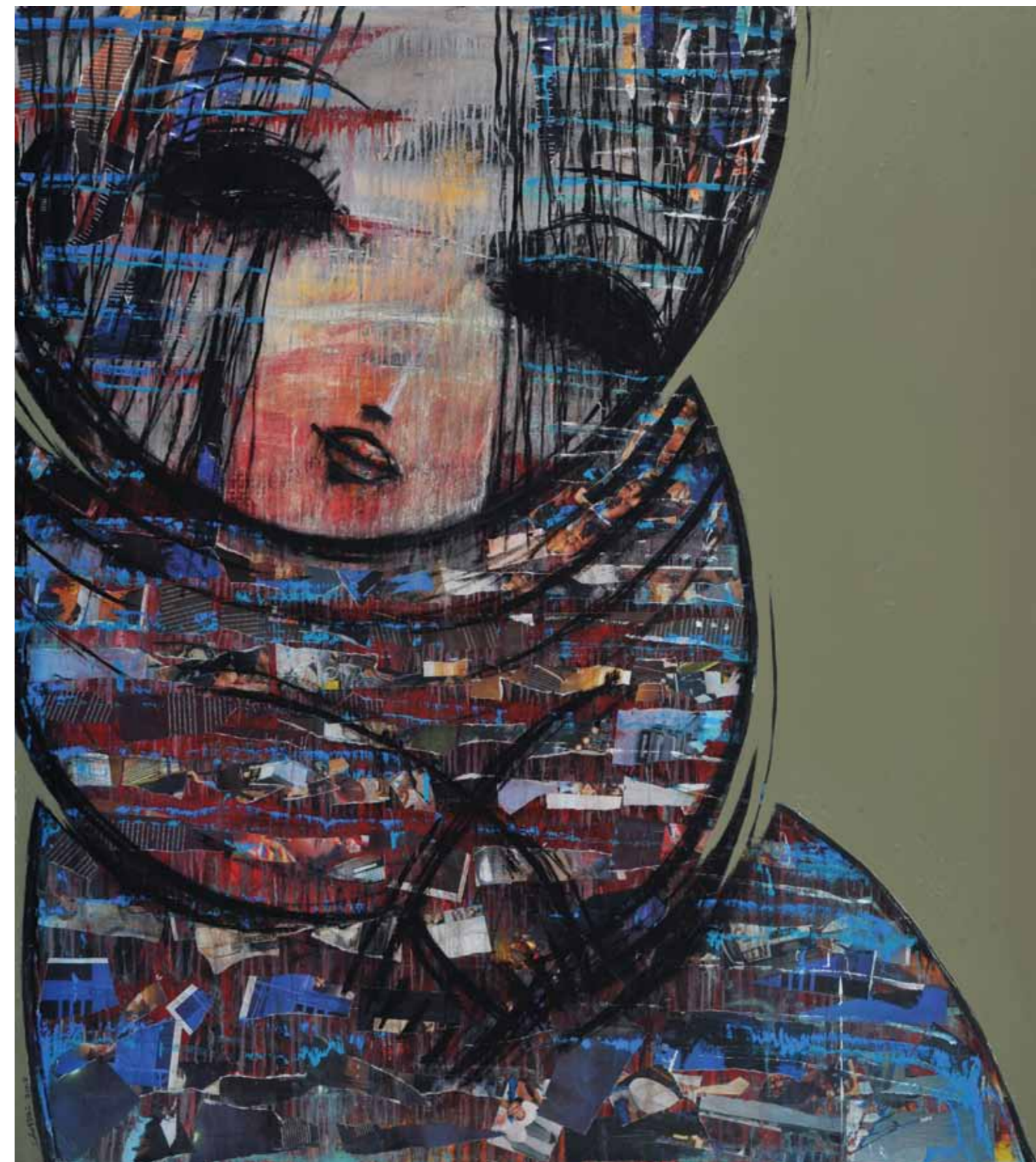


*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
182 x 182 cm





*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2009  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 160 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 160 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Mixed media on canvas  
145 x 120 cm







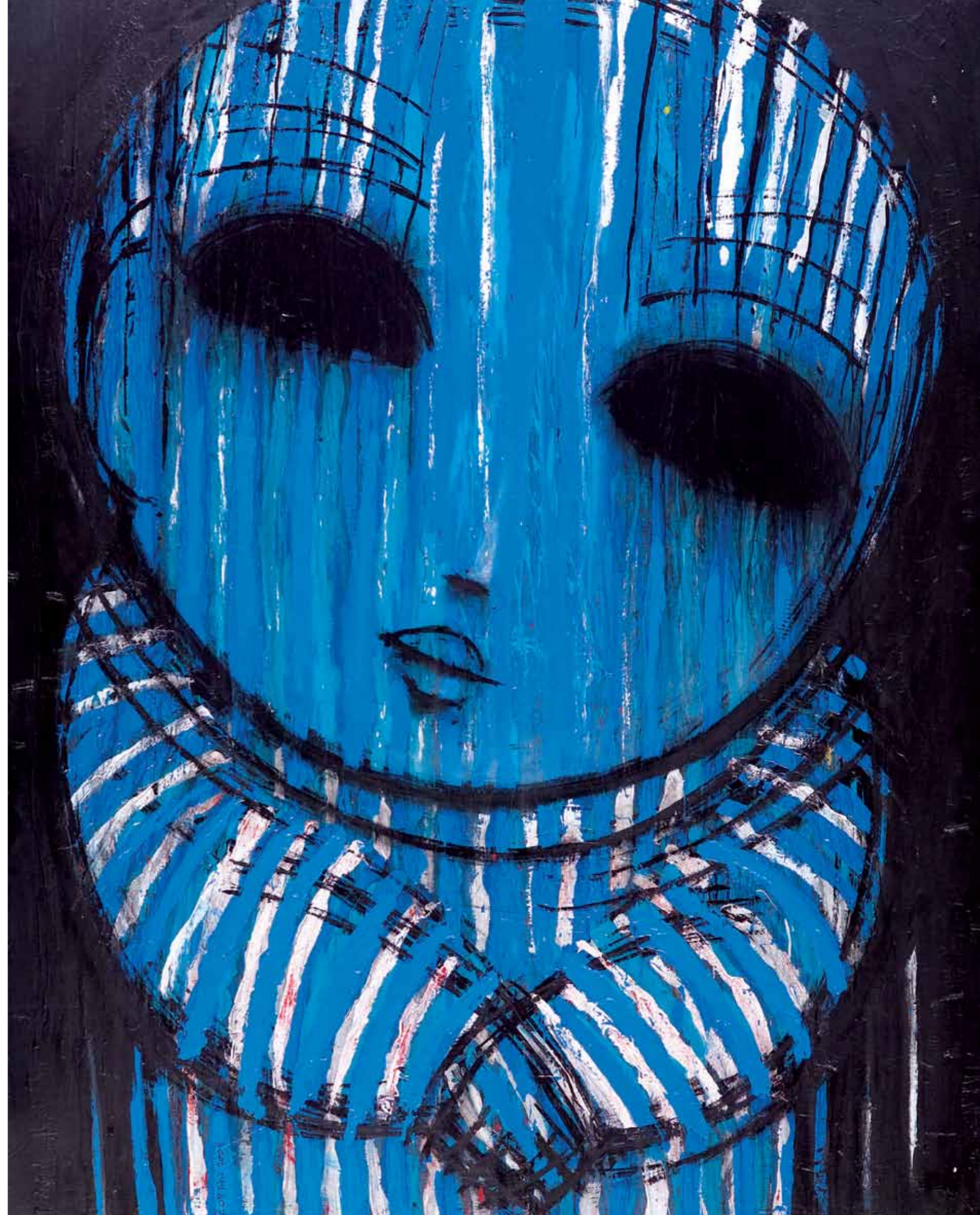
*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2009  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2009  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 120 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2008  
Acrylic on wood  
190 x 150 cm











*Untitled*  
It's All About Sama series  
2010  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 130 cm



*Untitled*  
It's All About Sama series  
2010  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 130 cm



*Untitled*  
Self Portrait series  
2010  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 100 cm







*Untitled*  
It's All About Sama series  
2010  
Mixed media on canvas  
160 x 150 cm



*Untitled*  
It's All About Sama series  
2011  
Mixed media on canvas  
160 x 150 cm



*Untitled*  
It's All About Sama series  
2011  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 200 cm







*Untitled*  
It's All About Sama series  
2011  
Mixed media on canvas  
200 x 150 cm



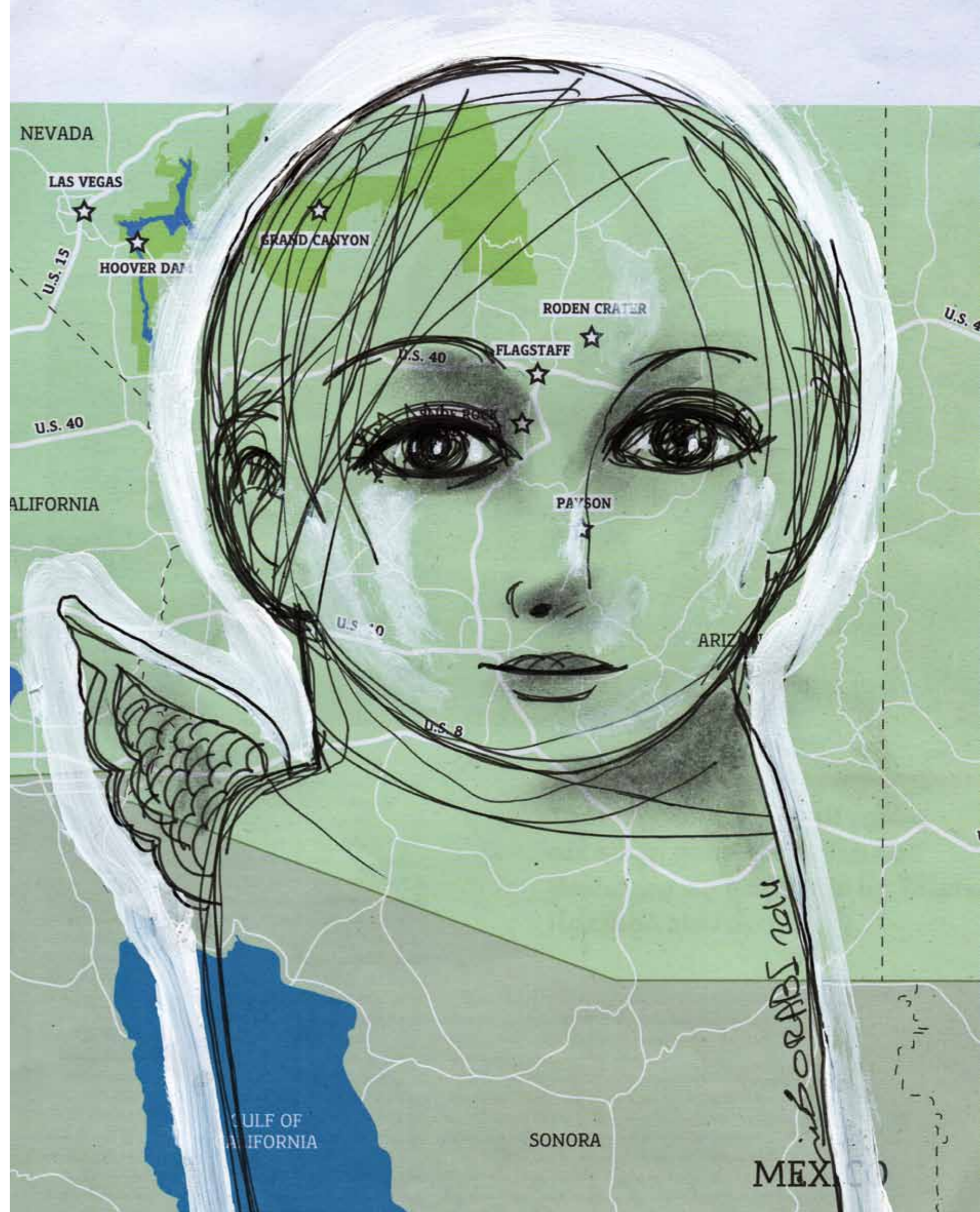
*Untitled*  
It's All About Sama series  
2011  
Mixed media on canvas  
200 x 150 cm



*Untitled*  
It's All About Sama series  
2010  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 130 cm











*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2011  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 360 cm - Diptych





*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
200 x 100 cm



*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
200 x 100 cm



*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
200 x 150 cm - Triptych

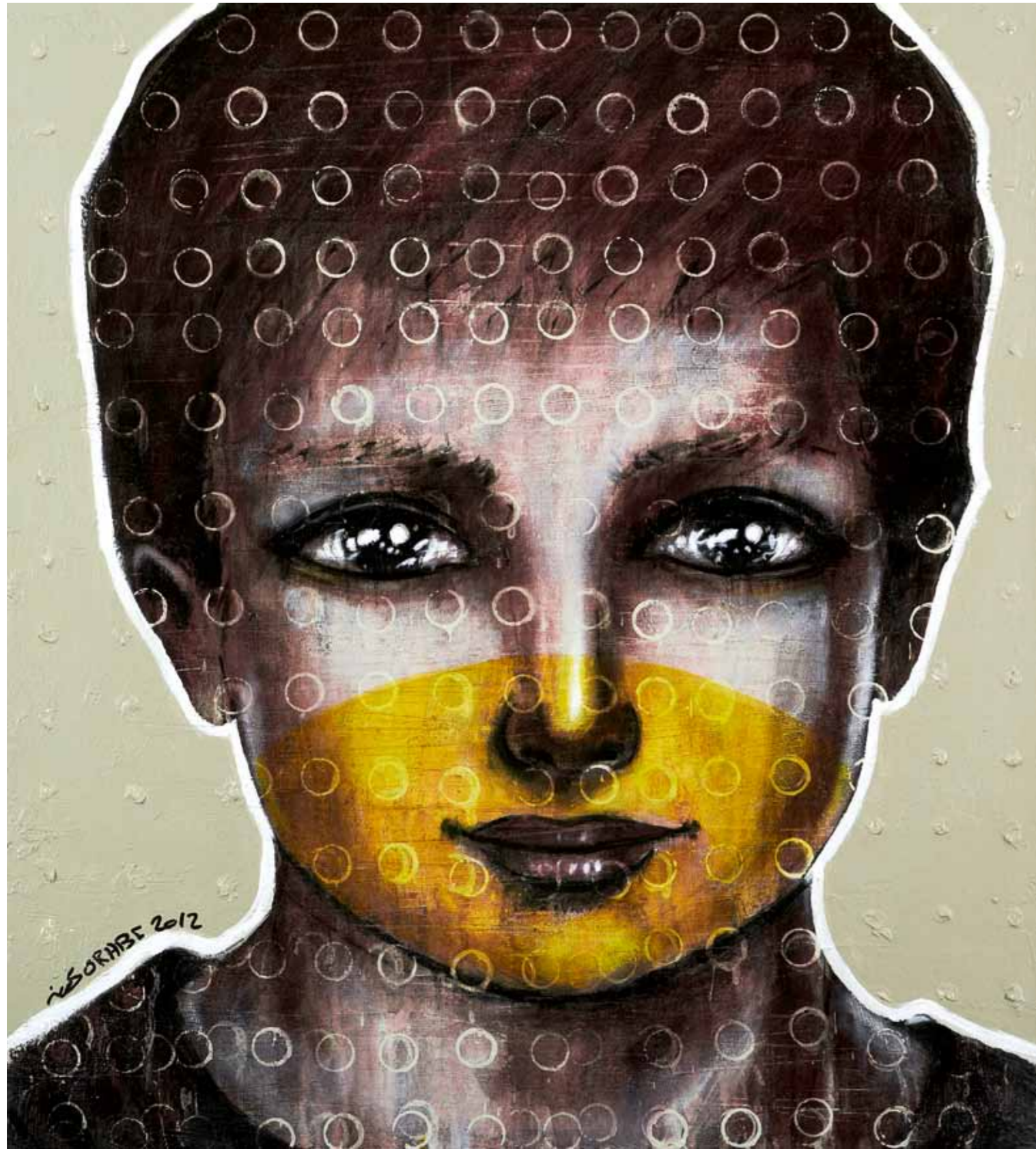




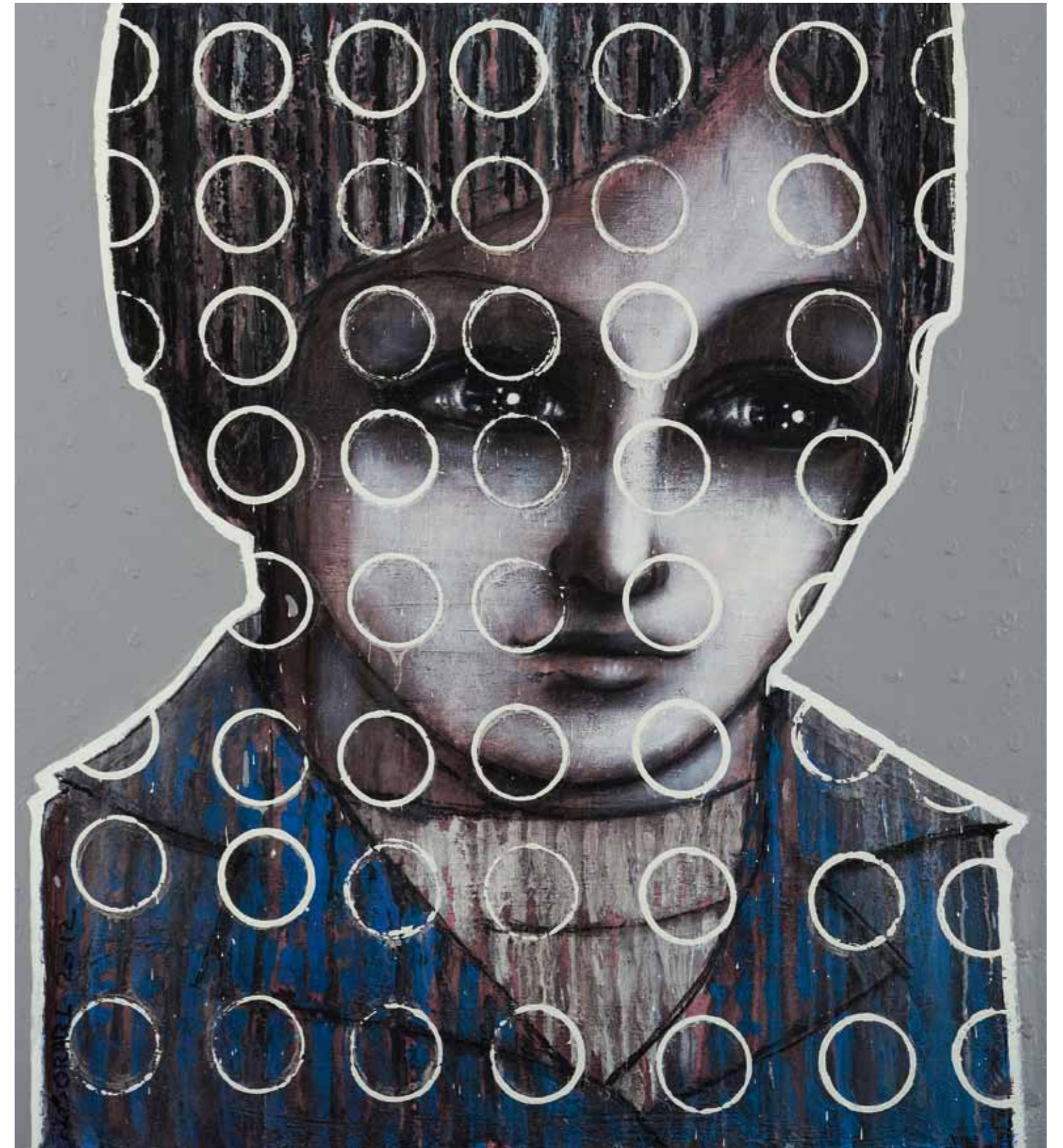
*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 250 cm







*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 90 cm



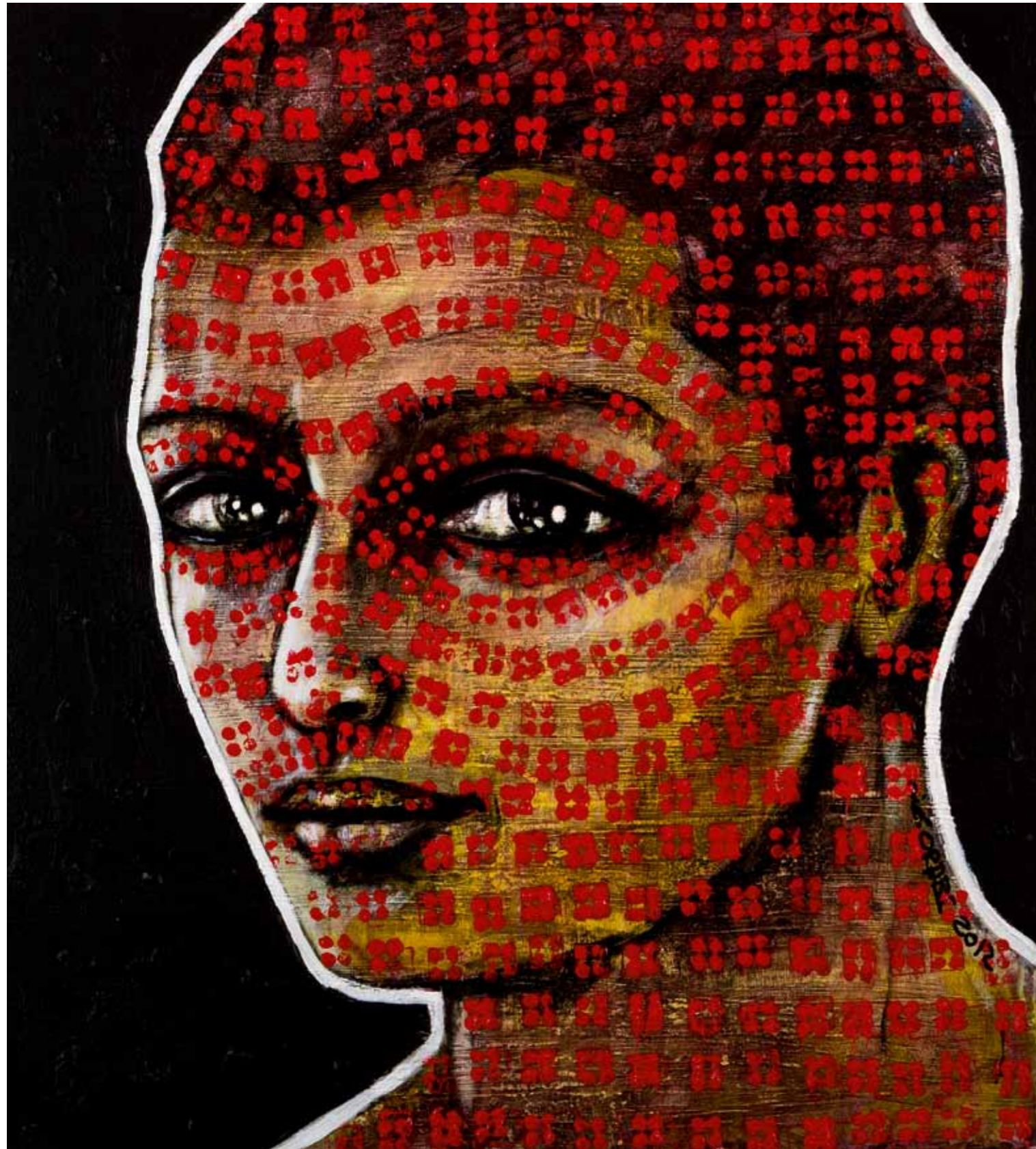
*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 90 cm



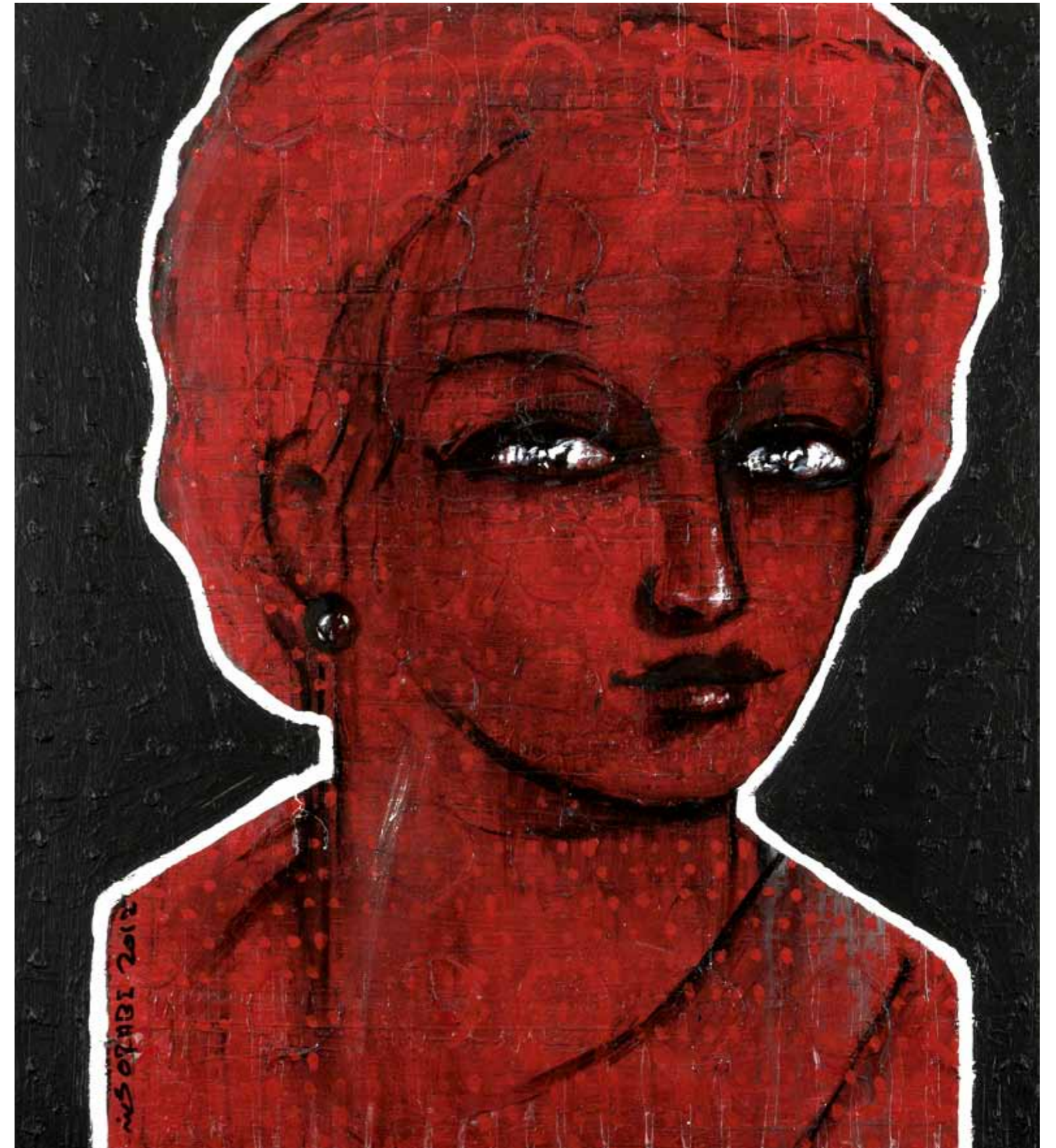
*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
175 x 145 cm







*Untitled*  
Profile Portrait series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 90 cm

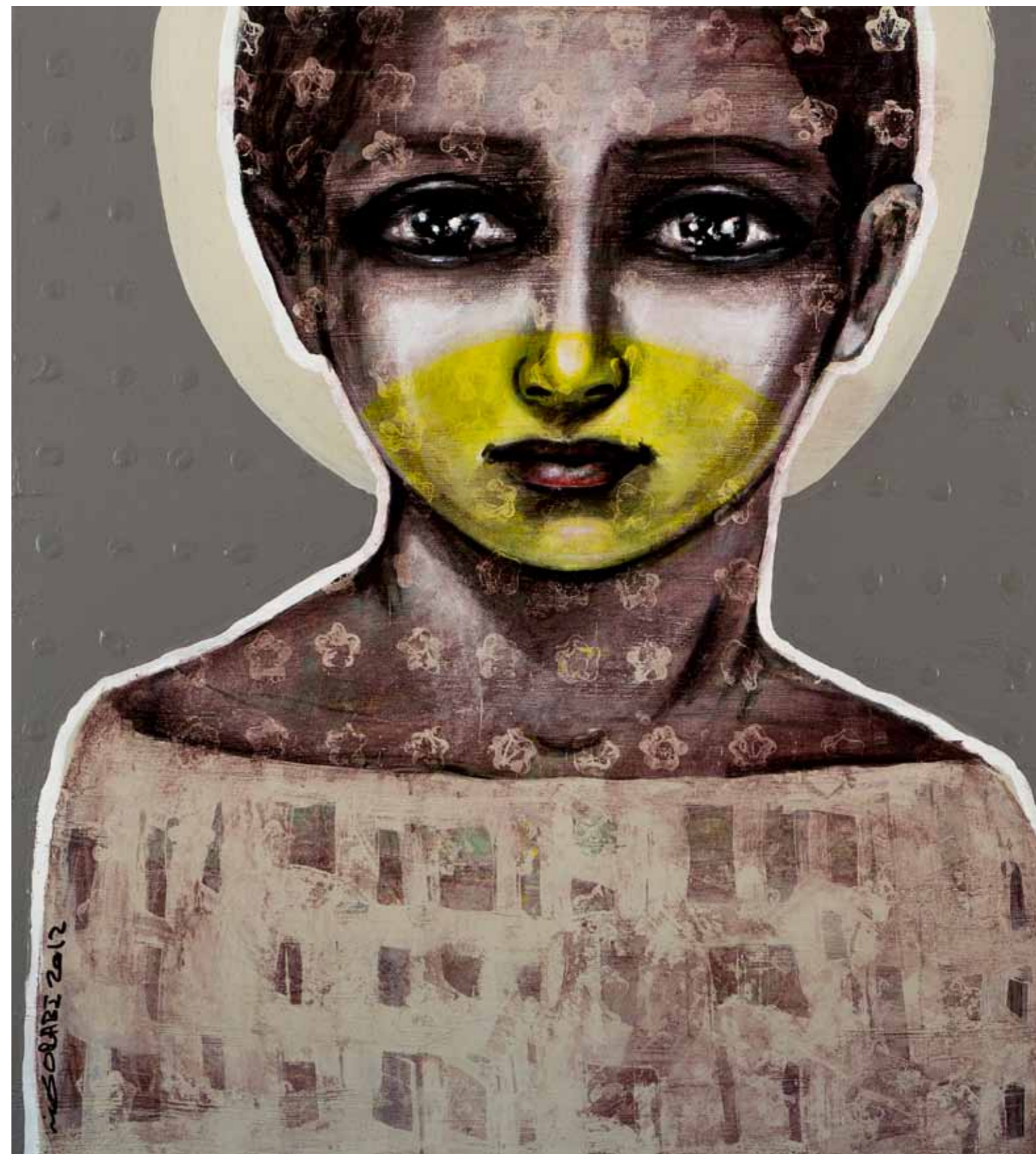


*Untitled*  
Profile Portrait series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 90 cm





*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 90 cm



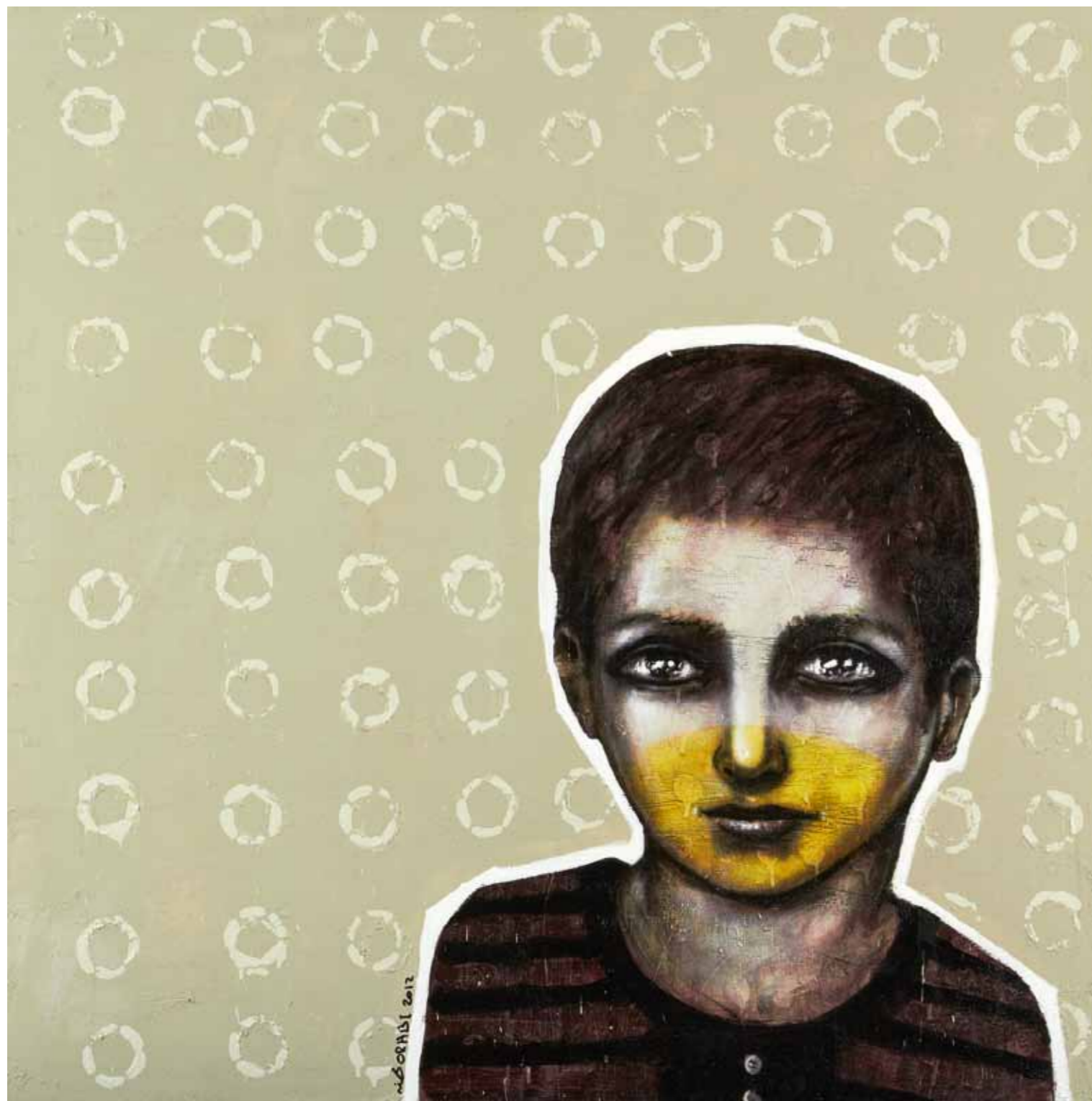
*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
100 x 90 cm



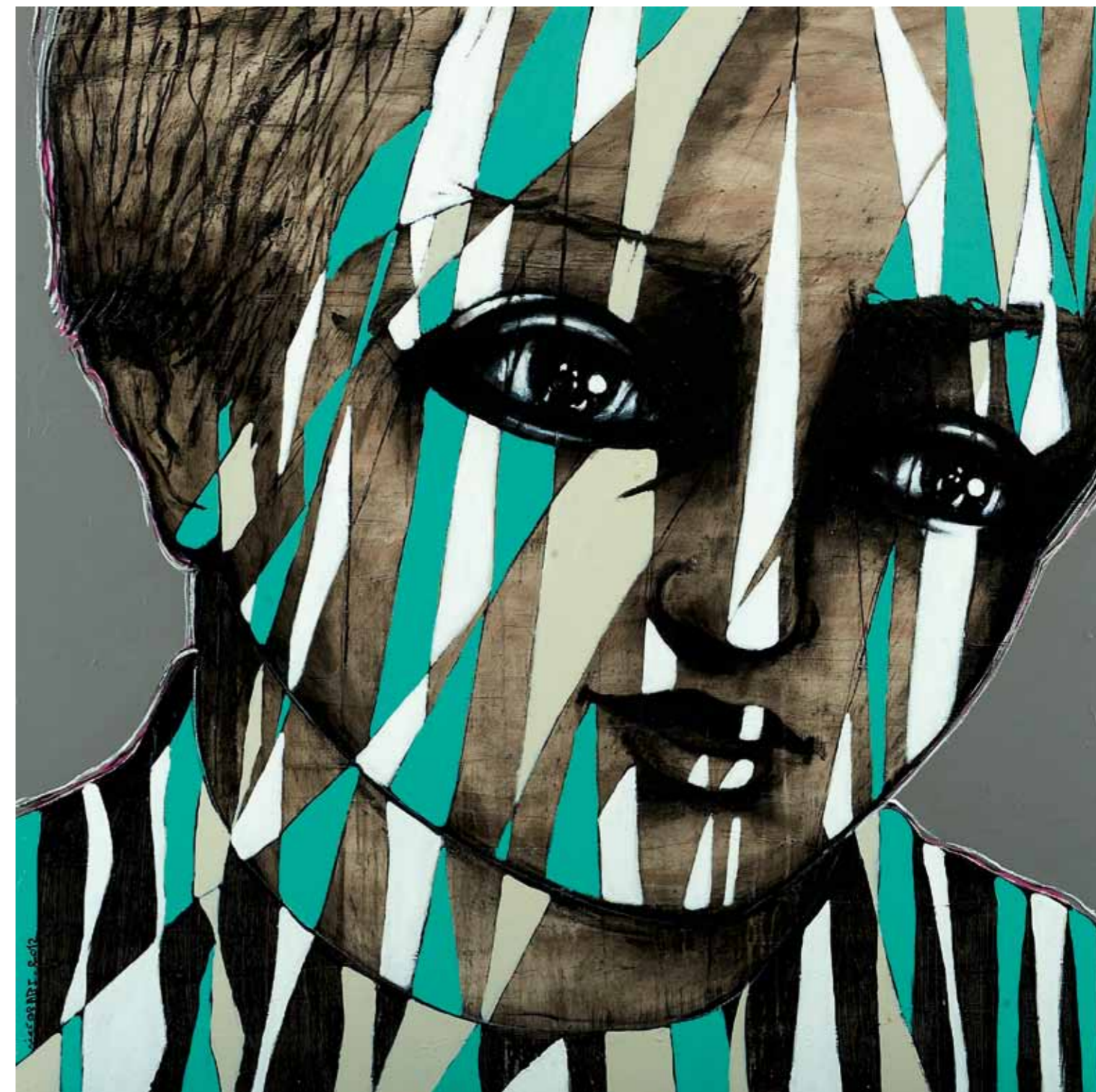
*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
175 x 145 cm







*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm









*Untitled*  
 Profile Portrait series  
 2013  
 Mixed media on paper  
 80 x 60 cm



*Untitled*  
 Profile Portrait series  
 2012  
 Mixed media on paper  
 80 x 60 cm



*Untitled*  
 Profile Portrait series  
 2012  
 Mixed media on paper  
 80 x 60 cm

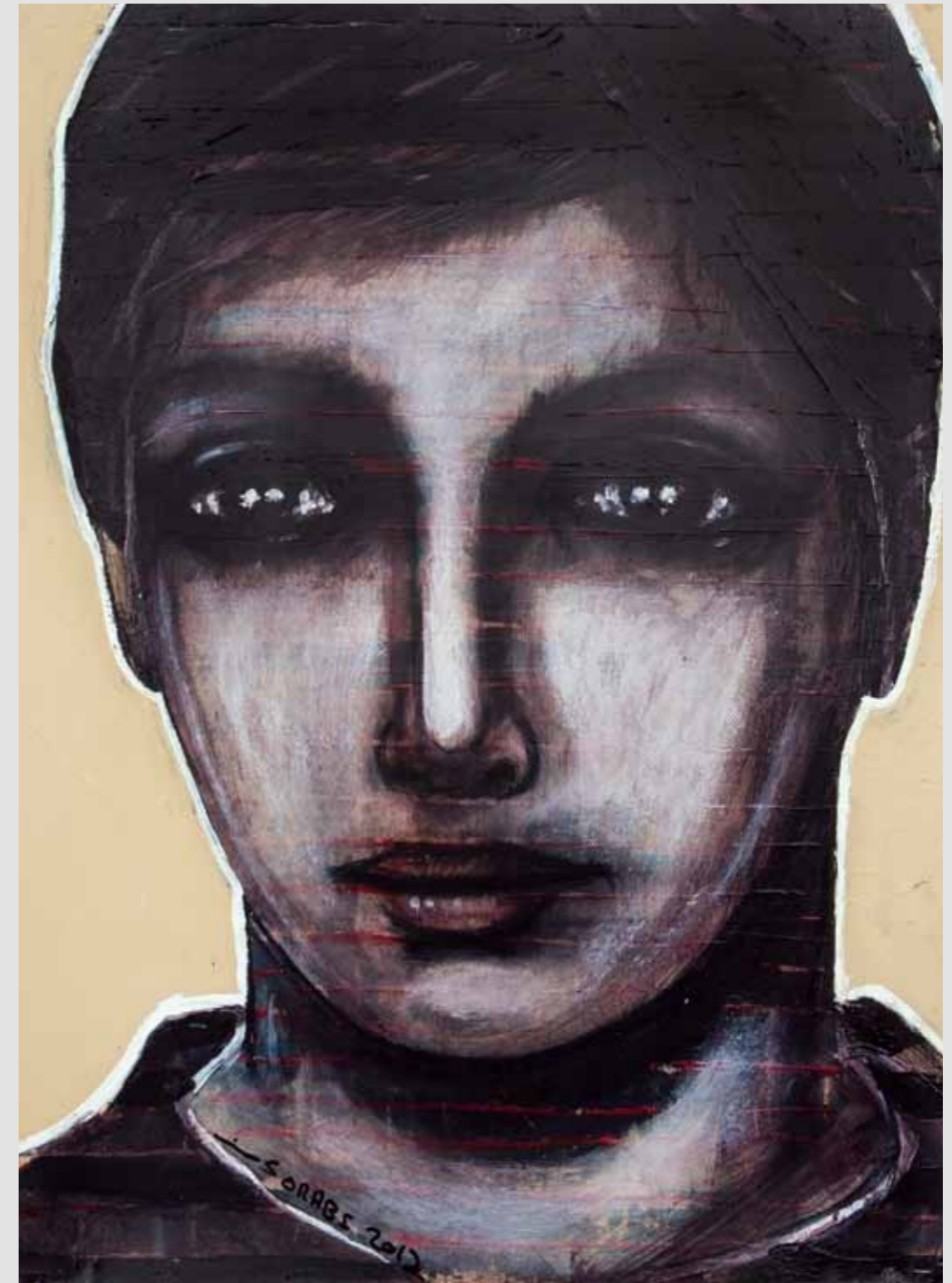




*Untitled*  
Profile Portrait series  
2013  
Mixed media on paper  
80 x 60 cm

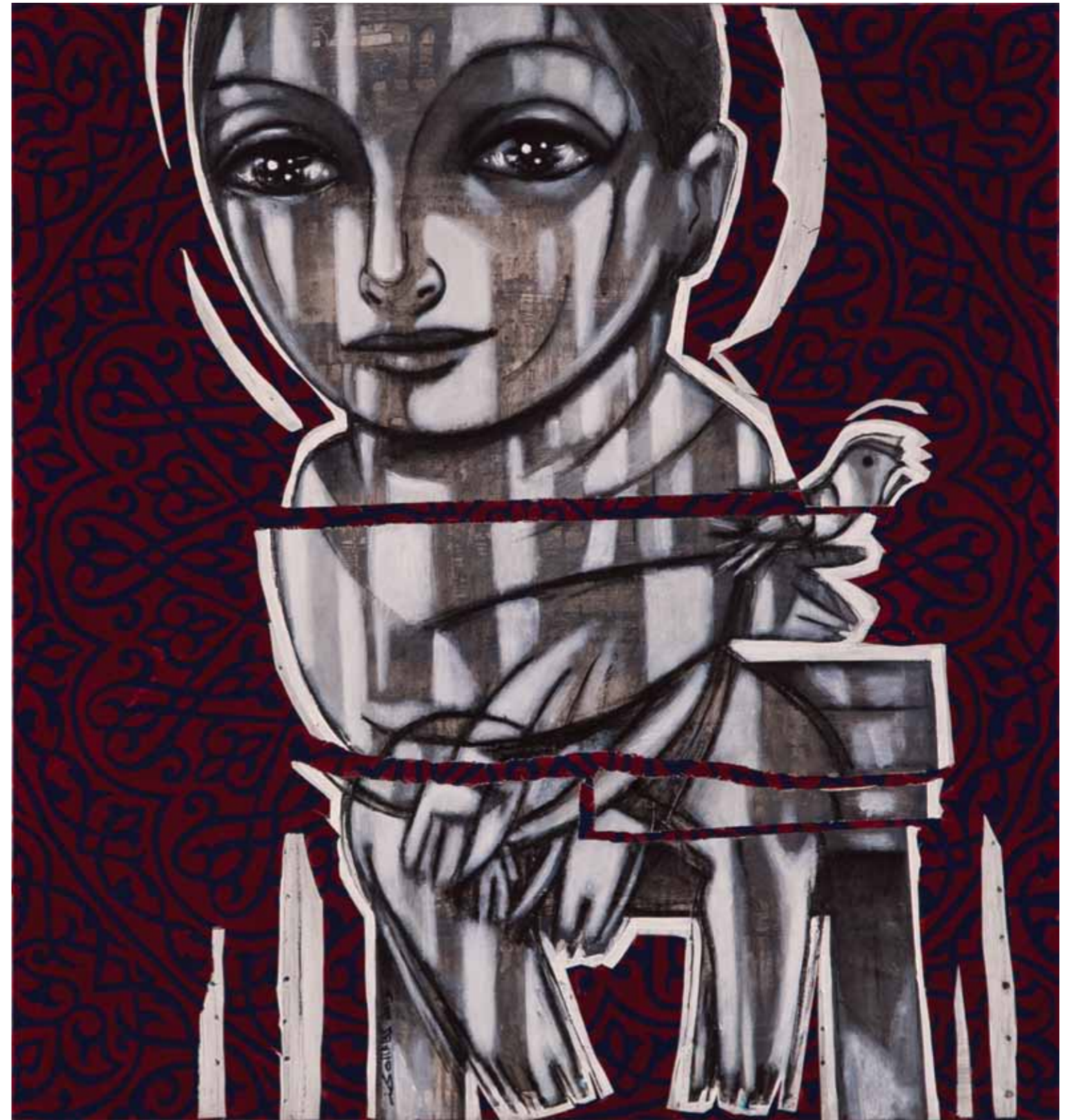


*Untitled*  
Profile Portrait series  
2012  
Mixed media on paper  
80 x 60 cm



*Untitled*  
Profile Portrait series  
2012  
Mixed media on paper  
80 x 60 cm



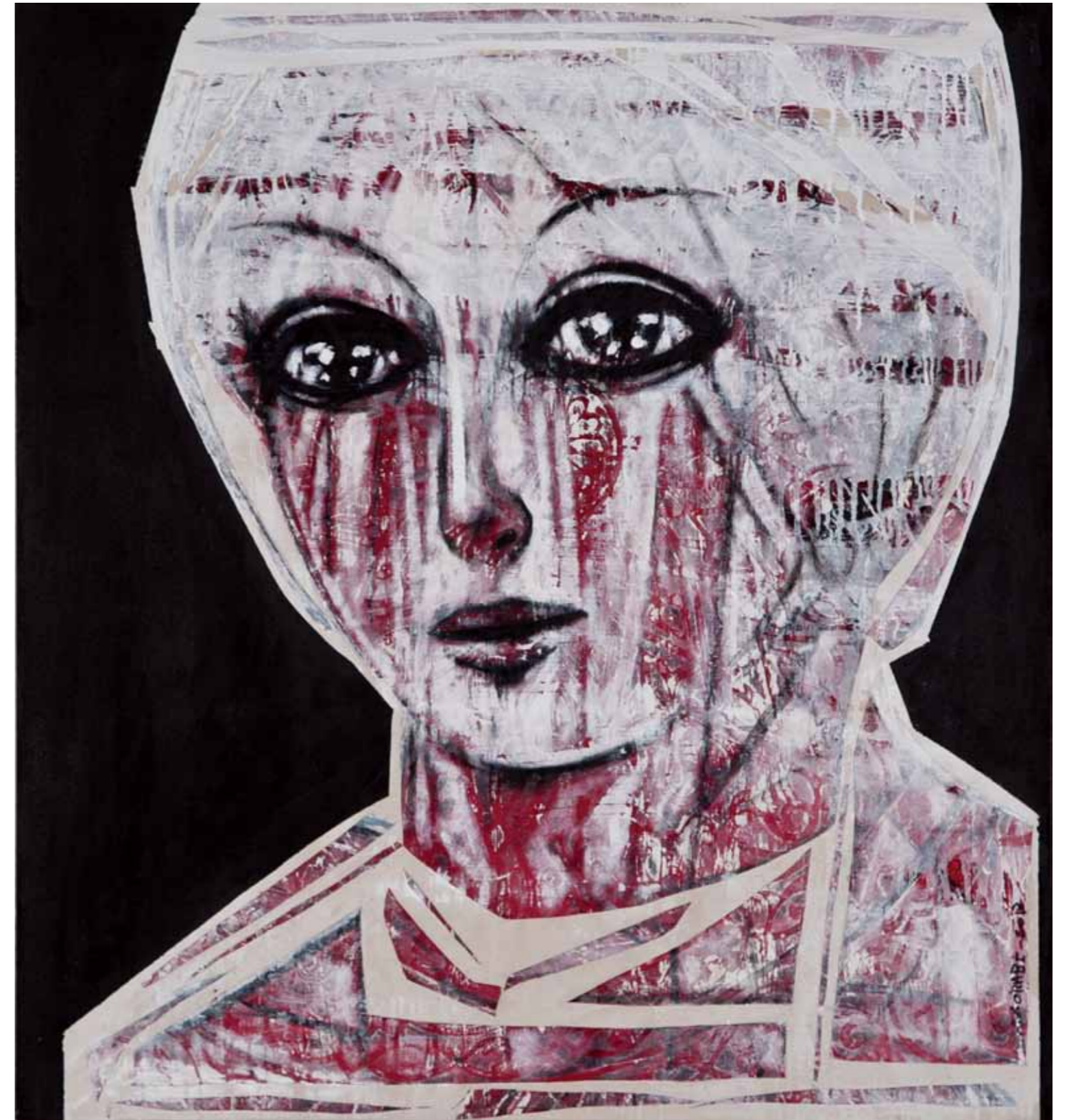


*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
135 x 125 cm





*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
135 x 125 cm



*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
135 x 125 cm





*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 160 cm



*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 160 cm





*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 160 cm

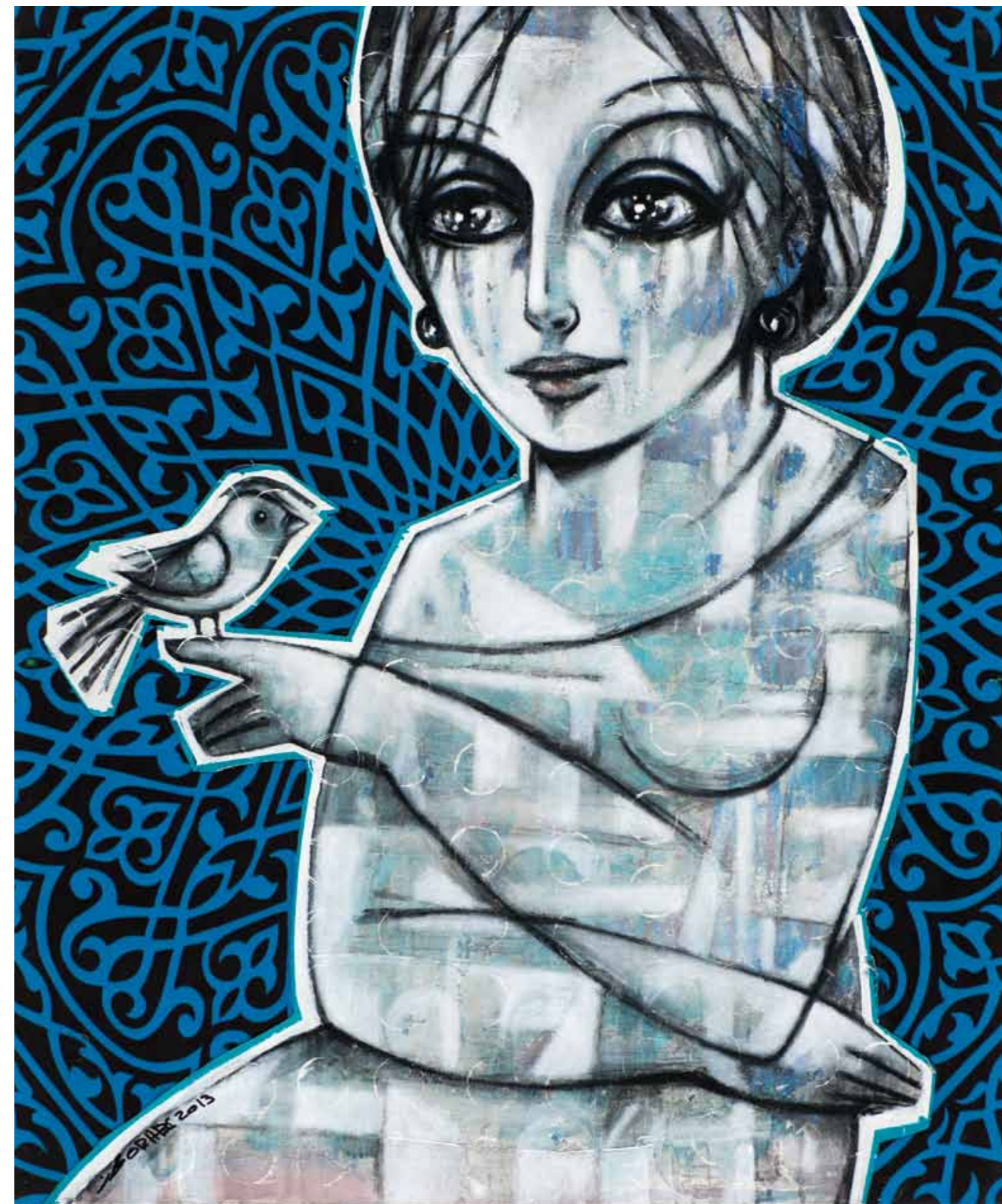


*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 160 cm





*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
115 x 95 cm



*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
115 x 95 cm





*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
115 x 95 cm



*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
115 x 95 cm









*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
ø 118 cm





Untitled  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Acrylic on canvas  
150 x 200 cm





*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm





*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



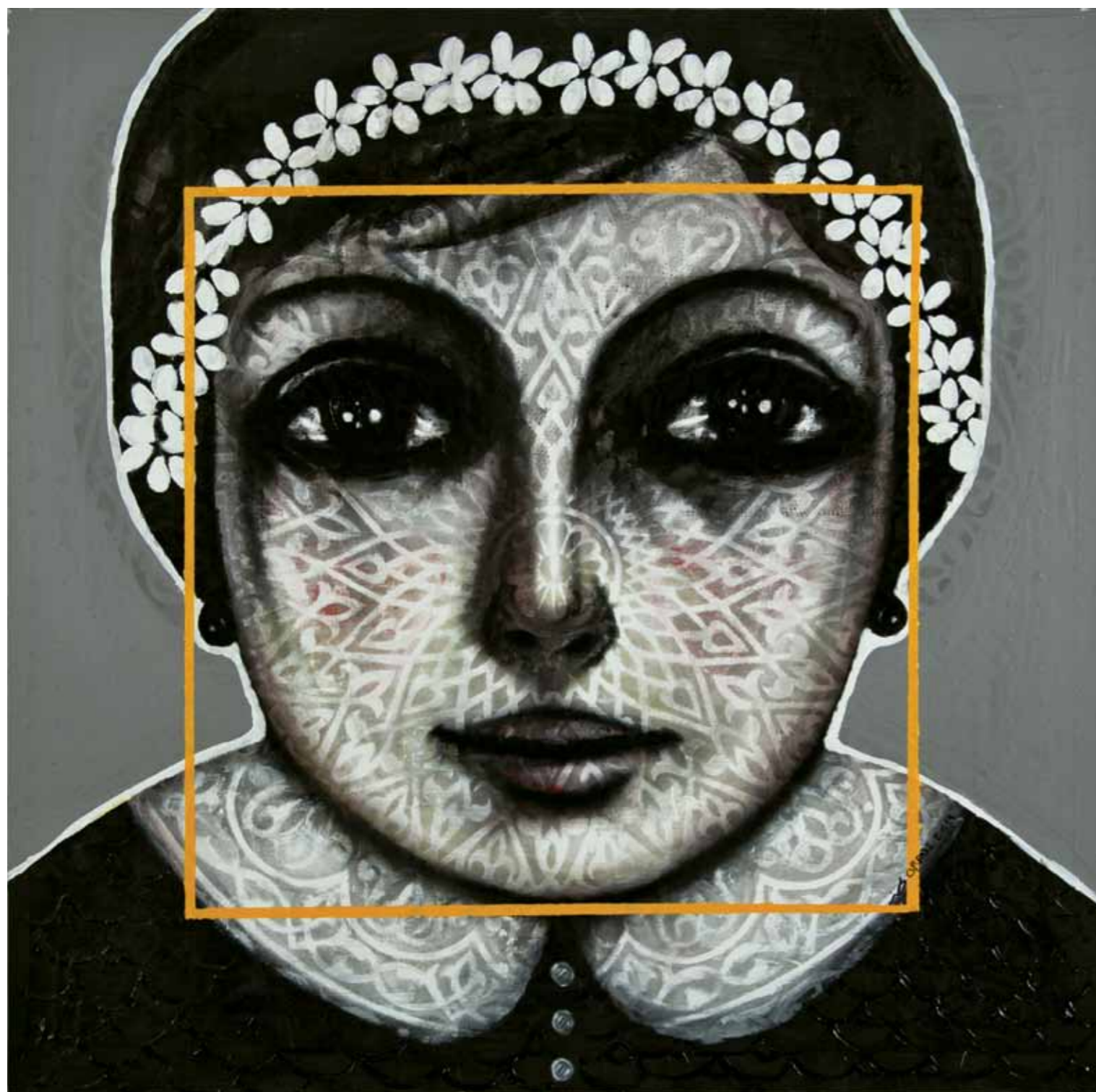


*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 120 cm



*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 120 cm





*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



*Untitled*  
It's No Longer About Me series  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
123 x 123 cm





*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
180 x 360 cm - Diptych



*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 120 cm





*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
200 x 140 cm





*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
194 x 164 cm

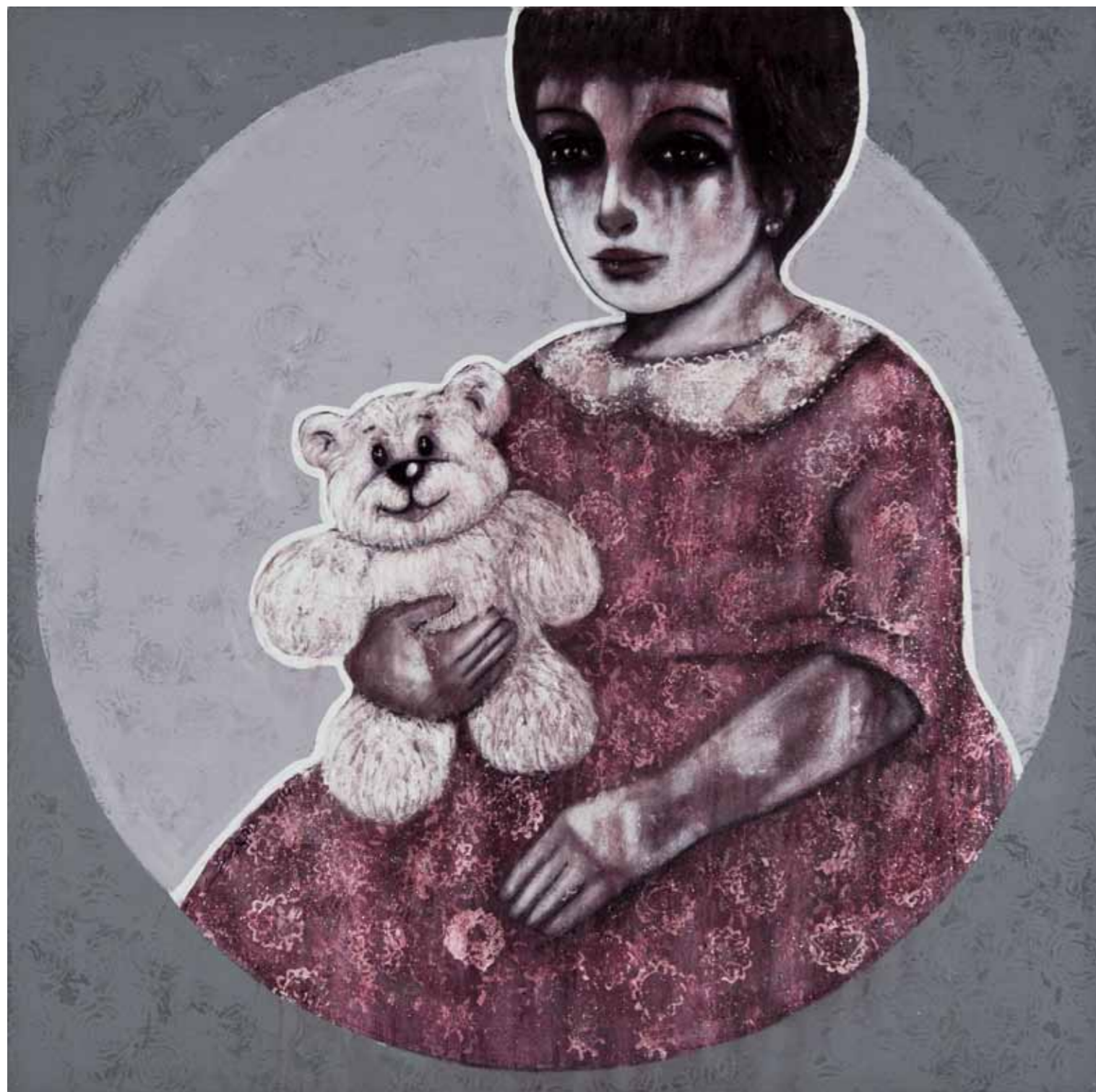




*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 200 cm







*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
123 x 123 cm



*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 120 cm





*Untitled*  
Family Portrait series  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 210 cm









## Mohannad Orabi

(Syria, b. 1977)

Dominated by vivacious childlike figures in various scenarios, Mohannad Orabi's previous paintings reflect his interest in the spontaneity of process and the liberation of form that emerges when art is created intuitively without fixed directives. Many of these mixed media canvases were painted as self-portraits, revealing the artist's fascination with the evolution of consciousness in childhood and the wonder and whimsy of the formative years that first shape our comprehension of the world.

With the start of the Syrian uprising and the conflict that followed, Orabi adopted an increasingly realist approach to portraiture, drawing inspiration from the various media that are currently forging a visual repository of the war. Martyr posters, Facebook profile pictures, and other types of filtered or composed imagery serve as source material for portraits of Syrians under siege, displaced, and in exile, recording a side of the conflict that lies beyond its ideological divisions and political talking points. While the artist retains an interest in the socialisation processes of childhood, his own experiences of now living outside the country have led him to consider the ways in which visual culture, social media, and digital communication have become substitutes for what was once tangible.

Born in Damascus in 1977, Mohannad Orabi currently lives and works in Dubai. Orabi graduated from the Faculty of Fine Art in Damascus in 2000 and won the first prize in The Syrian National Young Artists Exhibition in 2006. Solo and group exhibitions include Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice (2015); Ayyam Gallery London (2014); Ayyam Gallery Jeddah (2013); Ayyam Gallery DIFC, Dubai (2015, 2014, 2012); Ayyam Gallery Al Quoz, Dubai (2014, 2009); Ayyam Gallery Beirut (2014); Ayyam Gallery Damascus (2008), Zara Gallery, Amman (2007); and Ishtar Gallery, Damascus (2006, 2004). In 2014, Orabi was listed among *Foreign Policy's* '100 Leading Global Thinkers'.



## Maymanah Farhat

is an art historian and curator specializing in modern and contemporary Arab art. Farhat is the artistic director and editor of publications of Ayyam Gallery, co-editor of *Jadaliyya* Culture, and a curatorial advisor to the Arab American National Museum. She has organised exhibitions at international art spaces and institutions including the Virginia Commonwealth University Gallery, Qatar; the Arab American National Museum, USA; and the Beirut Exhibition Center, Lebanon. Her writings have appeared in *Callaloo Journal*, *Art Journal*, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *Apollo* magazine, and *Art + Auction* magazine, among other periodicals, in addition to artist monographs, exhibition catalogues, and edited volumes. In 2014, she was listed among *Foreign Policy's* '100 Leading Global Thinkers'.

## Danna Lorch

is an American writer and editor based in Dubai, focusing on contemporary art and culture from the Middle East. With a graduate degree in Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University and a background directing international NGOs in the region, she is particularly interested in the intersection between art and politics, gender, and human rights. Lorch is a staff writer for ArtSlant and has recently had work appear in *Jadaliyya*, *VOGUE (India)*, *Bitch*, *Harper's Bazaar Art*, *Canvas*, *Selections*, *The National*, *Contemporary Practices*, and in various gallery publications.

## Marina Jordan

is a contemporary art consultant and writer based in the United Arab Emirates. Jordan regularly contributes to a number of publications, which all have Middle Eastern culture as a common thread. Her most recent articles appear in *Selections Magazine*, *Contemporary Practices*, *Harper's Bazaar Art Arabia*, and *Aesthetica Magazine*. Through her blog, *My Velvet Instant*, she explores the art scene in and out of Dubai, focusing on contemporary art from the Middle East and Arab world more broadly.



## Ayyam Gallery

Founded in 2006, Ayyam Gallery is a leading arts organisation that manages the careers of diverse established and emerging artists from the Middle East. Blue-chip art spaces in Beirut, Dubai, and London, 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 by introducing the dynamic art of the region to a global audience. With its widely respected multilingual publishing division and a custodianship programme that manages the estates of pioneering artists, Ayyam Gallery has also spearheaded recent efforts to document the region's art history.



[www.ayyamgallery.com](http://www.ayyamgallery.com)



