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Haunted by War, Syrian Artists Put Raw Emotions on View

By NINA SIEGAL

Last Friday, a digital image of [Gustav Klimt](#)'s iconic painting "The Kiss" superimposed on a bomb-ravaged wall in [Syria](#) went viral.

The Saatchi Gallery, in London, shared the picture on its Facebook page and within five hours it had received more than 21,000 Facebook "Likes" and was subsequently transmitted across the globe.

The striking image, "Freedom Graffiti," by Tammam Hazzam, a Syrian artist, is part of his recent series, "Syrian Museum," which merges iconic Western masterpieces by such painters as Leonardo da Vinci, Henri Matisse, Goya and Picasso, with recent photos of Syria's devastated cityscapes.

Mr. Hazzam said his intention was to draw a parallel between "the greatest achievements of humanity with the destruction it is also capable of inflicting."

"Each is particularly relevant to what has befallen Syria," he said. "Klimt's 'The Kiss' shows the love and relationship between people, and I have juxtaposed this with the capacity of hate the regime holds for its people."

Mr. Hazzam, who was born in Damascus, has been living in Dubai since he and his family fled Syria with the help of his gallery in September 2011, seven months after the start of the uprising there.

"When I lost my studio in Damascus and needed new ways to express myself and my sadness with the events that were unfolding in Syria, I began working with digital art," he said in an e-mail interview. "It became my form of protest."

Mr. Hazzam is one of about two dozen artists who have escaped Syria with the help of the Ayyam Gallery, a contemporary-art gallery devoted to emerging Middle Eastern talent.

Founded in Damascus in 2006 by two cousins, Khaled Samawi and Hisham Samawi, the gallery became a haven for Syrian artists and has now become a conduit for Syrian artists to express their responses to the devastation of their country.

Opening showrooms in Dubai and Beirut, Ayyam quickly expanded beyond Syria. This year, it opened its first Western location, in London, on Jan. 24, and it plans to inaugurate a fifth space in Jidda — the first contemporary-art gallery in [Saudi Arabia](#) — on Feb. 27.

The London location, on New Bond Street, was designed by Nadim Karam, a Lebanese architect and sculptor who is perhaps best known for his monumental public art works. He is also the subject of the first London exhibition, “Shooting the Cloud,” on show until March 9.

Mr. Karam, who grew up in Beirut, has his own opinions about how artists can respond to violence and war.

“We have to live the best we can, even during wars,” Mr. Karam said in a telephone interview from Beirut. “War is a factor that is there and will sometimes stop you, but as soon as it slows you have to move forward again, and that’s when the creativity arises again. It’s important to show the creative part of this region, an image that is different from what people think of, the terror and death.”

Mr. Karam says Ayyam represents not only his work but also his philosophy.

“When I feel that I have done a lot to push the limits, I feel that Ayyam has done the same,” he said. “That’s why this London project is important. It’s a different expression of what the Middle East can be. It’s a platform for me to be able to show the playful, whimsical aspect of what’s being created.”

Ayyam did not start out with ambitions to become a politically engaged art gallery, however.

Hisham Samawi, who was born in Syria and has an M.B.A. from Columbia University, said he was originally just looking for entrepreneurial opportunities in the booming Middle Eastern art market in 2006. Christie’s had just opened its first salesroom in Dubai, attracting international buyers, and the gallery scene in the United Arab Emirates was becoming a hub for Middle Eastern contemporary art.

Mr. Samawi contacted his older cousin, Khaled, an avid art collector who had worked as a banker in Geneva and had “retired” to Syria, and asked if there might be anything to leverage in the contemporary art scene there.

Seeing no major contemporary galleries in Damascus, but many graduates of the Faculty of Fine Arts at Damascus University, they decided to try and cultivate a scene. They put out a call for entries to an art competition and received 150 submissions; from those,

they selected 15 young artists to represent.

“Our first year was tremendous because Damascus was really starting to open up,” Hisham Samawi recalled. “It was almost having this rebirth and a lot of people were visiting — there were a lot of boutique hotels popping up everywhere. They would hear about the gallery and come see us; they were coming to see the oldest city in the world and were just blown away by the contemporary art there. A lot of people were flying in and collecting our young artists. That was 2006.”

In 2008, they put out another call for talent in Dubai and opened a second gallery there; the next year, they opened their third gallery in Beirut. They were quickly developing a reputation as a go-to source of homegrown Middle Eastern talent. Their formula was a success, with works priced at \$10,000 to \$30,000 selling at a clip.

When the revolution in Syria began in 2011, however, they had to make changes.

“We had seen what happened in Tunisia and in Egypt,” Mr. Samawi said. “My partner was in Syria; the gallery’s inventory and artworks were there, and the artists were there. We thought the chances were high that we’d have to move things out of Damascus. We started with our artists and employees.”

That meant helping about 8 employees and their families, plus about 25 artists and their families arrange visas, raise relocation funds and find new homes and studios in different countries so they could continue to work. They shipped 3,000 paintings from Damascus to Dubai and turned the Damascus gallery into a safe haven for the artists who, for one reason or another, could not leave Syria.

“We converted the gallery into a refuge for the artists to come be together and to continue working — that was about two years ago,” Mr. Samawi said. “At that time, to keep them more connected to the rest of the world, we had Web cams doing live feeds of them working during the days.”

About five are still in Damascus, while the rest are in Dubai, Cairo or Beirut.

“Mentally they’re still there even if they’re living somewhere else,” Mr. Samawi said. “Now that they’re out and their safety isn’t in jeopardy, they feel a bigger need to express their thoughts and to respond to what’s happening in Syria. If there’s one thing that has come out of this terrible situation is the art that’s coming out is extraordinary and the reaction that people all over the world are having to it.”

For his part, Mr. Hazzam, the Syrian artist, has vowed to realize his “Freedom Graffiti” as a real wall painting when he is finally able to go home.

“I have decided to bring this piece to life when I am able return to Syria,” he said. “There are over 10,000 walls now in Damascus with this bullet-ridden quality after the bombings of the regime.”

Mr. Hazzam said he was quite sure that he would be able to find one he could use.