

# Oussama Diab

## What Happened Here







## Oussama Diab

*What Happened Here*

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## Oussama Diab: From Fragmentation to Totalisation

By Maymanah Farhat

For nearly ten years, Oussama Diab has worked through various painting styles, often combining different forms and techniques in a single composition. In neo-expressionist paintings that reimagine Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503-06), for example, Diab repaints the sixteenth-century portrait using the appropriation methods of Pop art while allowing tactile brushstrokes to operate on a similar level of signification. The Beirut-based Palestinian artist—who was born in Syria and trained at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Damascus—describes the amalgamated imagery of his work as autobiographical. Evidence of a pervading sense of dislocation is woven among the historical citations, icons, and references to popular culture that fill his paintings. The political subject matter and overlapping themes of Diab's canvases detail his own experiences of revolution, war, and migration but are represented in the guise of fragmented symbolism and contrasting stylistic devices, reflecting a simmering dissonance or, at times, an outbreak of chaos.

More broadly, Diab's postmodern approach reflects the aesthetic crises that led to the development of modern painting and continue in a range of mutations today. In *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor for Modernity* (1994), Linda Nochlin observes how certain artists have sought to represent the social, psychic, and political conditions of modern life through disjointed imagery, whether in the form of broken spaces or fractured bodies.



Untitled  
2015  
Mixed media on paper  
30 x 21 cm

O.D

Oussama Diab

Yet after tracing this thread through two centuries of art (beginning in the late 1700s), Nochlin notes that the inverse is also true, arguing that an impulse toward ‘totalisation embodied in the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total work of art]’ simultaneously characterised modernism. Nochlin ends her brief survey by discussing artists such as Cindy Sherman, whose work blurs the lines between photography, performance, and cinema as she capsizes the semiotics of popular media. Like many postmodern artists, Sherman turns to historical precedents when seeking to disrupt contemporary norms, exaggerating the basic structure of a given image.

Postmodernism in art (and architecture, where the term originated) is often defined as the concurrent sampling of past styles, defying conventions in an attempt to create new forms. Responding to the instability, havoc, and destruction that have engulfed the Arab world in recent years, Diab applies the deconstructed figuration of Cubism to his recurring characters, depicting their splintered bodies amidst the isolation of emptied settings. A couple found in the artist’s previous works resurfaces as the focus of the new paintings. When maimed, the man and woman are rendered as mutilated busts in allegorical still lifes. In other compositions, they are shown restored—situated in the poetics of poised portraits. Diab details the concept of the series in an accompanying artist statement: ‘I tried to collect the dead bodies of the victims, searching for them on the sidewalks or under the debris, hoping to give them new life.’ Both fragmented and whole, the narrative structure of the series and how it is pictorially realised fit Nochlin’s description of art after modernism, specifically among artists who seek to represent the bleakness of reality while offering an alternative.

The popular uprisings that swept across North Africa and parts of the Middle East four years ago are summarised in *A Rose for Peace* (2015), which shows Diab’s protagonists as a soldier and a civilian separated by the barrels of guns. Placed on matching tables at opposite ends of a room, the two figures bookend the composition. In the space between them, a similar pedestal holding a white bird has been knocked over. The large animal is depicted in pieces, her fragile wings painted as attached parts joined to form new appendages. The dove is shown in several paintings of the series and represents peace, or rather a failed attempt to restore calm. Diab’s female figure extends her right arm to offer a red rose as she turns away screaming—yet the soldier remains fixed on his target. The man’s guns have replaced his physical arms and protrude from his body like projectiles. Painted in profile, a dark silhouette with the ill-omened image of an evil eye appears behind his head. Above the scene is a single light bulb that hangs from an industrial lamp, a fixture that recalls the central light source of Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), which historians identify as representing a bomb. Diab’s adaptation of this detail functions in two ways. At first glance the artist seems to argue that the violent standoff should be illuminated. When viewed with *Guernica* in mind, the light can also be read as a symbol of perpetual war. Both readings point to the subtext of the painting, which is further emphasised with the angular forms of the composition.

Diab’s figures are portrayed with intersecting planes that collide as severed bodies, mirroring the surrounding environment. This treatment of mass and spatial depth is similar to how early cubist painters registered several views of a subject by appealing to ‘a complex series of mental

associations between past and present muscular, tactile or olfactory sensations' (Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, *Cubism and Culture*, 2001). Diab's paintings allude to continuous time, as the spaces of his scenes reach beyond the limits of the picture plane. The artist achieves this effect by placing his characters against decorative backgrounds that contain neither beginning nor end, or in rooms where only a portion of the scene is described. Realist depictions—such as the flower and hanging lamp in *A Rose for Peace*—signal objects (or concepts) that remain intact irrespective of how the artist's narrative develops. Diab uses both methods of representation when painting the soldier's arms, meticulously drawing the muzzles of their guns while the barrels are rendered as abstracted masses. The resulting forms suggest that although such violence is executed with the mechanisms of power (the state, the army, or factions) inevitably it is an individual who pulls the trigger.

Perhaps unconsciously, Diab seems to have patterned this section of *A Rose for Peace* after a drawing by Palestinian Liberation artist Abdul Tamam. In the elder painter's ink on paper work *Harvest Them* (1999), three Israeli border police are shown as body fragments that point their guns at a crowd of helpless women. The drawing is based on an event that took place in a Palestinian border town during what was later known as the 1956 Kafr Qasem Massacre. The menacing army is intentionally headless, obscuring the identities of its members, and appears as a phantom force foreign to the village scene, which includes expressionist portraits of the martyred victims. The equipped position of the soldiers and the muzzles of their different guns reappear in Diab's painting, linking politicised aggression across decades. Interestingly, the 1990s drawing resembles Pablo Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* (1951), which was produced in

response to a mass killing during the American military's intervention in North Korea. The distinct scene is divided into equal halves with soldiers shown in profile occupying the right side of the painting while a group of women and children are frozen in front of their drawn weapons. It is widely noted that the inspiration for Picasso's composition is *The Third of May* (1808), the groundbreaking anti-war painting by Francisco Goya that represents the brutality of French forces during Napoleon's occupation of Spain. The lineage that stretches from the nineteenth-century work to *A Rose for Peace* can be summarised as a pictorial approach to social fragmentation. In place of depicting the moments before bloodshed, however, Diab reverses the imbalance of power that is found in the compositions of his predecessors. The civilian woman is placed in the position of the victor (the right side of the painting). Her muscular arm stretches past the muzzle of the first gun, signaling a gesture of hope that overcomes violence. The fallen dove of peace watches the exchange from below.



Abdul Tamam, *Harvest Them*, 1999. Ink on paper, 21 x 30 cm. Image courtesy of Samia Halaby.



Other historical examples are reconfigured as Diab addresses contemporary issues in his latest series. In *Lady with a Dove* (2015), the artist inserts his female protagonist into the composition of Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine* (1489-90), using the classical format and striking imagery of the Renaissance picture to construct a serene setting for his character. Revived as the elegant subject of da Vinci's painting, the woman is shown lost in thought as she turns away from the viewer. The triangular shards of her body, the pieces of her past life, form the modest gown that is found in the classical portrait. Her aloof stare is intensified with a rectangular section containing a pair of asymmetrical eyes, creating the semblance of collage while extending Diab's concept of renewal. The white weasel the Italian adolescent holds (symbolising purity) is replaced with Diab's patchwork dove. The woman carries the bird close to her body as though a pet, informing the viewer of the animal's symbolic importance in *A Rose for Peace*. Two dangling apples frame Diab's figure—an evocation of the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve—yet she remains unmoved by temptation, and stares off into the distance. The disregard she displays for the viewer is manifest, as the artist displaces our ability to fully scrutinise his symbolic muse. Representing the martyred, Diab seeks to provide his characters with 'the right to judge us,' calling attention to the endemic 'silence, carelessness, and neglect' that grew as the Arab world imploded.

Untitled  
2015  
Mixed media on paper  
30 x 21 cm





## Oussama Diab

(Syria, Born 1977)

Palestinian artist Oussama Diab applies a conceptual approach to painting, exploiting the stylistic variants of the medium as emotive prompts in order to explore how form can articulate the urgency of sociopolitical issues. In an age where digital media have taken a dominate role in filtering our daily experiences and the construction of imagery has become integral to the negotiation of modern life, Diab addresses the contradictions and obstacles of political conflict, globalisation, and exile through playful symbolism, references to popular culture, iconic imagery, and narrative structures.

With each new series of work Diab adopts a different painting style, reflecting the impermanent nature of art as it becomes increasingly conceptual and further dematerialised, while also alluding to the sense of disorientation and the state of limbo that characterises the lives of the displaced.

Born in 1977 in Damascus, Syria, Oussama Diab lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon. A graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Damascus in 2002, he has featured in solo and group shows in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, and is the recipient of numerous awards including the Shabab Young Artists exhibition in Syria. Diab has participated in recent exhibitions at Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Italy (2015); Nest Gallery, Geneva, Switzerland (2014); Samsung Blue Square, Seoul and Buson Museum of Art, South Korea (2014); Ayyam Gallery Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (2014); Ayyam Gallery DIFC, Dubai (2012); Ayyam Gallery Beirut, Lebanon (2010, 2011); and Ayyam Gallery Damascus, Syria (2009).





*New Guernica*  
2012  
Mixed media on canvas  
250 x 570 cm



*White Space*  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 120 cm



*Love and Vacuum*  
2013  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 200 cm



*White Pigeon*  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm





*Celebration*  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm





*White Pigeon on a Table (GAZA)*  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



*Sacrifice for Peace*  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 150 cm



*A Lady and Things*  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 200 cm



*Forbidden Things*  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
135 x 120 cm each

Untitled  
2015  
Mixed media on paper  
30 x 21 cm







*Fertility*  
2014  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 135 cm



*Lady with a Dove*  
2015  
Acrylic on canvas  
150 x 160 cm



*Dove and Rose (Beirut)*

2015

Acrylic on canvas

165 x 170 cm



*A Daily Scene*  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 160 cm



*Chess*  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 160 cm





*Debate*  
2015  
Acrylic on canvas  
150 x 160 cm



*Hope*  
2015  
Acrylic on canvas  
150 x 160 cm



*What Happened Here (In the Company of Picasso)*

2015

Acrylic on canvas

185 x 295 cm



*A Rose For Peace*  
2015  
Mixed media on canvas  
150 x 200 cm



*Deliverance of the Dove*

2015

Acrylic on canvas

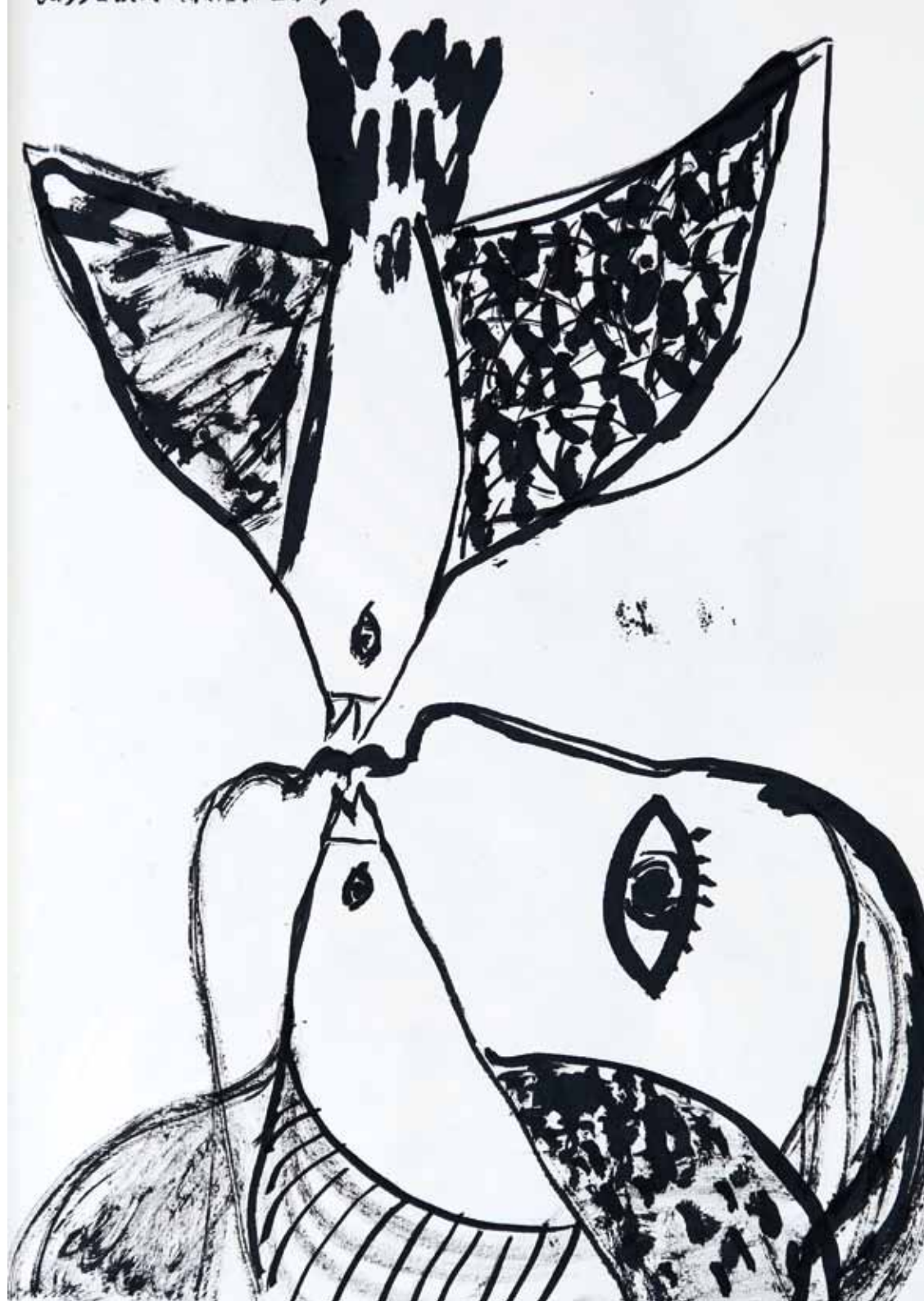
160 x 80 cm each





Untitled  
2015  
Mixed media on paper  
30 x 21 cm

Untitled  
2015  
Ink on paper  
30 x 21 cm





Untitled  
2015  
Pencil on paper  
30 x 21 cm



Untitled  
2015  
Ink on paper  
30 x 21 cm

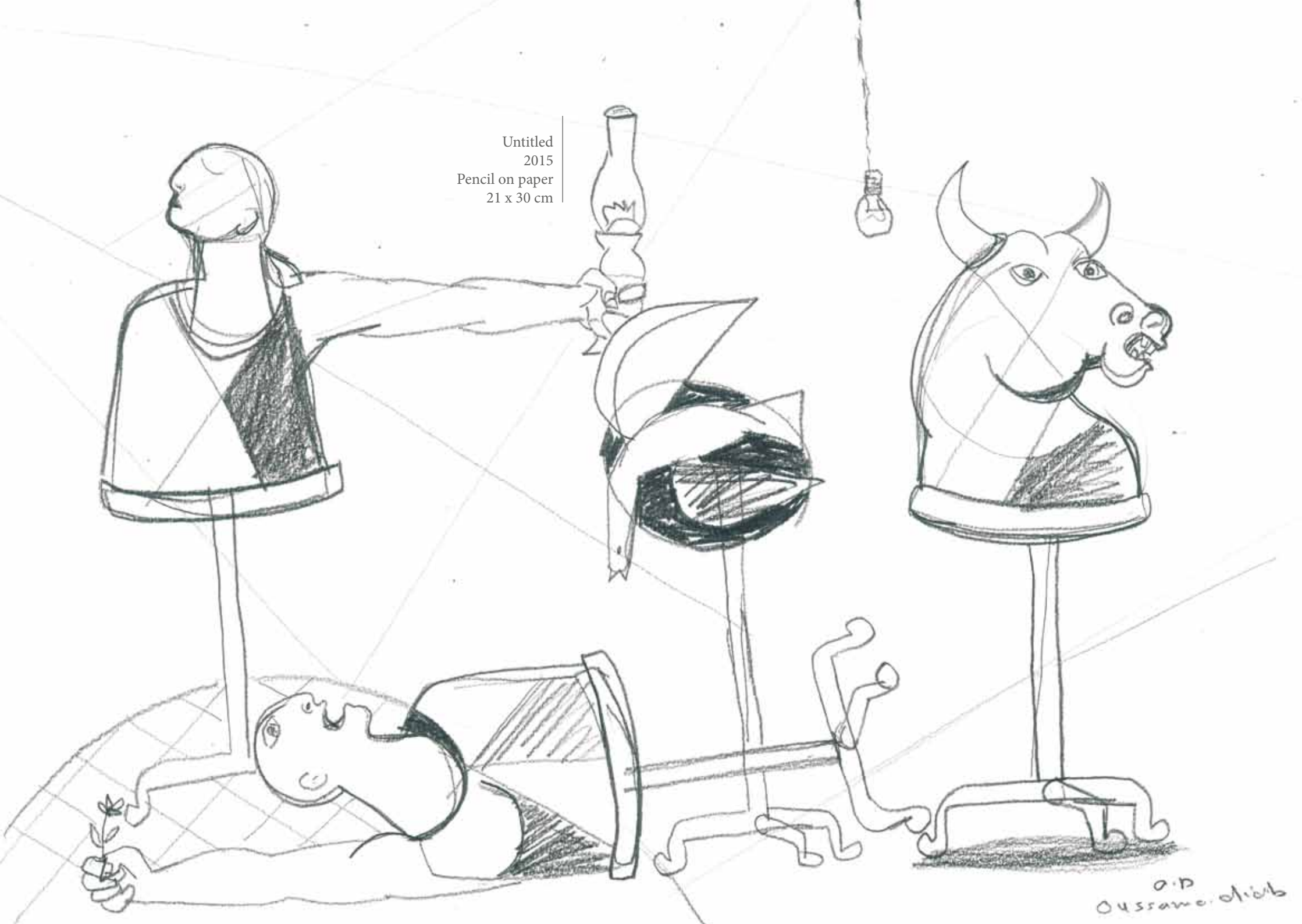




Untitled  
2015  
Ink on paper  
30 x 21 cm



Untitled  
2015  
Pencil on paper  
21 x 30 cm

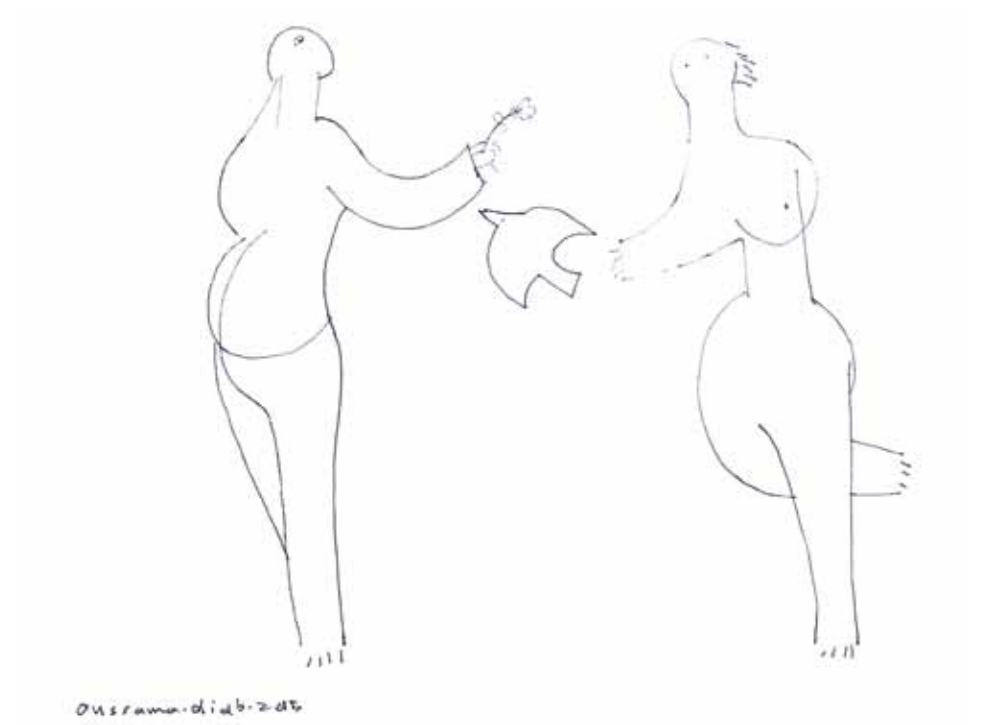




Untitled  
2015  
Pencil on paper  
21 x 30 cm



Untitled  
2015  
Pencil on paper  
30 x 21 cm



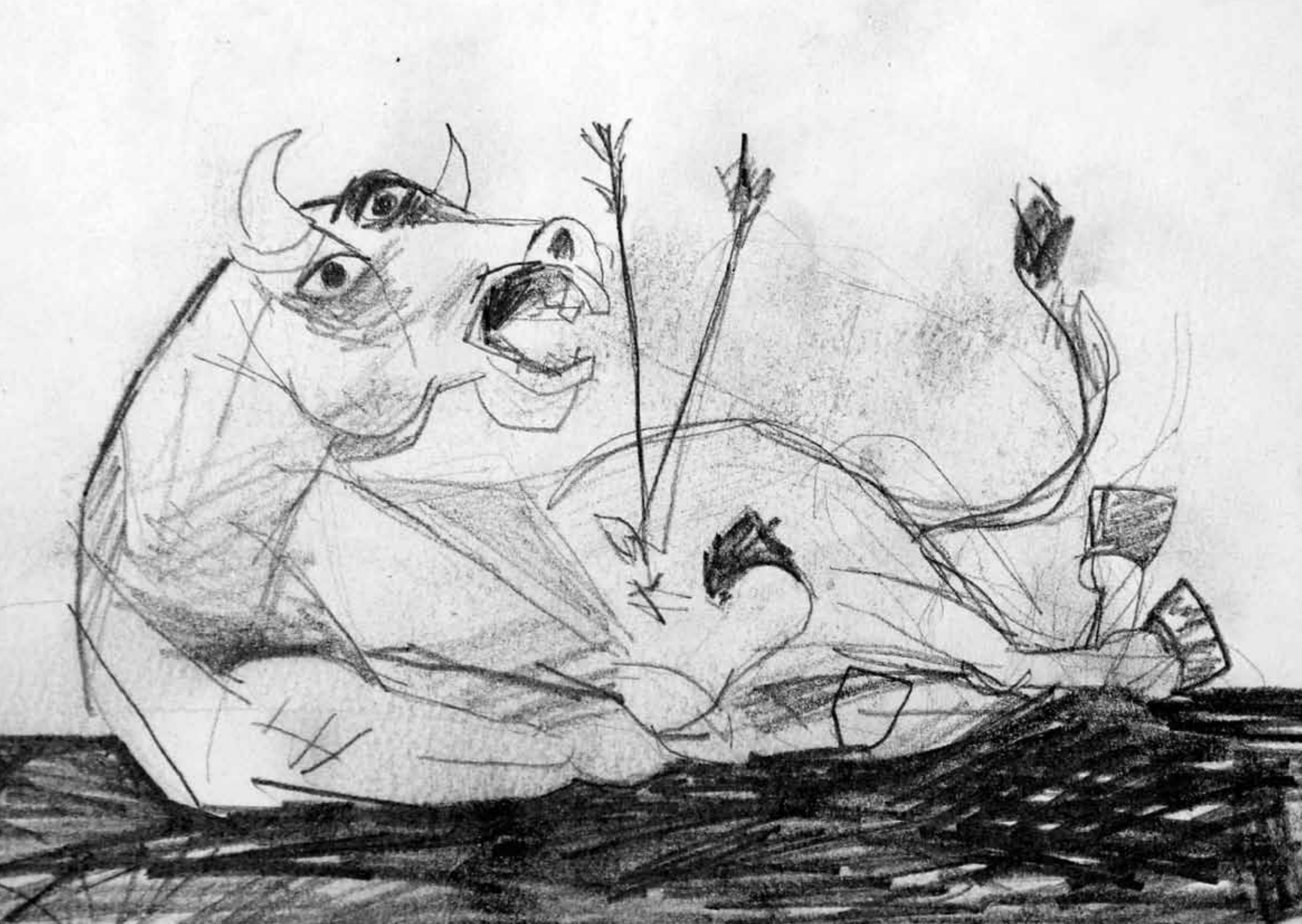
Untitled  
2015  
Ink on paper  
21 x 30 cm



Untitled  
2015  
Pencil on paper  
21 x 30 cm







## 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.



