





DREAMS TRANSCENDED

SAFWAN DAHOUL

PROFILE

Tall, thin and soft-spoken, in person Safwan Dahoul possesses the same marked intensity as his paintings. Mirrored in the elongated heroine that has been the focus of his canvases since 1982, the Syrian artist speaks with **Maymanah Farhat** about his *oeuvre*-defining semi-autobiographical *Dream* series.

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Opening spread: *Dream 41*.
2011. Acrylic on canvas.
250 x 560 cm.

Facing page: (Detail) *Rêve*.
2007. Acrylic on canvas.
180 x 180 cm.

oday, Safwan Dahoul is known as one of Syria's leading Contemporary artists despite the fact that his haunting acrylic on canvas works share little resemblance with current trends. Visual culture, in all its expansiveness, has become a point of entry for many Middle Eastern artists as they seek to project their rapidly changing environments and are impacted by a world in which technology and mass communication is redefining every aspect of society. As an artist who has developed his craft through the subtlety of fixed subject matter and a painting style that has gradually evolved over a span of three decades in an almost diary-like form, Dahoul stands out. His is an art that is grounded in history.

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

There are visible traces of ancient art that are found in the angular forms and hallowed, almond-shaped eyes of Dahoul's figures, nods to Assyrian and Pharaonic art that have become a distinct part of his visual language. This is pronounced in a 2007 piece in which his *Dream* subject is shown as a ghostly image of herself. Turned with her back to the viewer, she pulls a mask away from her face that is comprised of a Nefertiti eye and Akhenaton lips. The mask, a recurring theme in many of his paintings, represents "the most human part of our being" says the artist. "I didn't use the mask to convey something positive or negative about our lives," he explains. "Perhaps it gave me a chance to move on, to move on in the sense of creating some balance in our souls in order to withstand a little bit of the cruelty of this life."





PROFILE

Below: *Dream 43*. 2011.
Acrylic on canvas.
250 x 400 cm.

Facing page: *Dream 13*.
2003. Acrylic on canvas.
100 x 100 cm.

When trying to understand Dahoul's *Dream* epic, one must excavate the gravity of his metaphors and their meaning; a look back at the origins of this series is critical. "The initial inspiration was actually a sequence of dreams that I lived with for a year. A group of three children would appear in my dreams, sometimes in a good way, other times not," he begins. "I drew them because I would see them often and by coincidence I [collectively] named them *Dream*." This continued with over a thousand paintings via a small troupe of characters that has now been reduced to a single muse. That critics have frequently commented on the repetitive nature of these works has only motivated him to build upon his subject even more. "[It] pushed me to keep drawing the same subject over and over and gave me a chance to make my point clear while also forcing myself to accept this

challenge, although it sometimes drove me to tears and has made for some sleepless nights," confesses Dahoul. "I have a subject that I started with that I am trying to discover, just like any child trying to create a daily game with very simple tools."

HARSH REALITIES

Born in Hama, Syria in 1961, Dahoul studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus. After graduating at the top of his class in 1983, he went on to receive a scholarship to study abroad. Choosing to travel to Belgium in 1987, he immersed himself in its rich artistic heritage through the works of its masters, particularly 16th-century Flemish painters whom he had studied from afar. There he obtained a doctorate from the Higher Institute in Mons in 1997.



His early work included still-lives and genre scenes that were in much the same vein as the great Syrian school of painting that was revolutionised by modernists, a far cry from the work that he is known for. Then, in 1982, a particular mood sank in, one that reconfigured the psychological space of his compositions. Interior scenes became more populated with self-portraits, in which he cast himself in solitary settings. Although begun in Syria, the *Dream* series evolved while Dahoul was living in Mons, where, although his palette leaned towards either cool or warm hues, the heavy presence of shadows was essential to these early paintings, evoking a state of limbo in which it was unclear if his subjects remained conscious or deep within the subconscious of a dream. He produced several bodies of work that focused heavily on the use of colour, painting them and their environment

in careful gradations of blue, yellow or red. It was a time in both his life and work that he now refers to as his “romantic” period.

Upon returning to Syria in 1997, Dahoul’s art began to be affected by his surroundings. His palette quickly changed; muted in colour, it was reduced to a basic monochrome spectrum that is dominated by slight variations of black and white. “Life itself started to be more realistic. This palette began here, as it is crueller and further from romance..I sympathise with these colours for a simple reason: my life looks a lot like them,” Dahoul reflects.

DRAWING TIME

Five years later, the series took yet another turn when his subject entered a stark world in which architectural details and inanimate objects became



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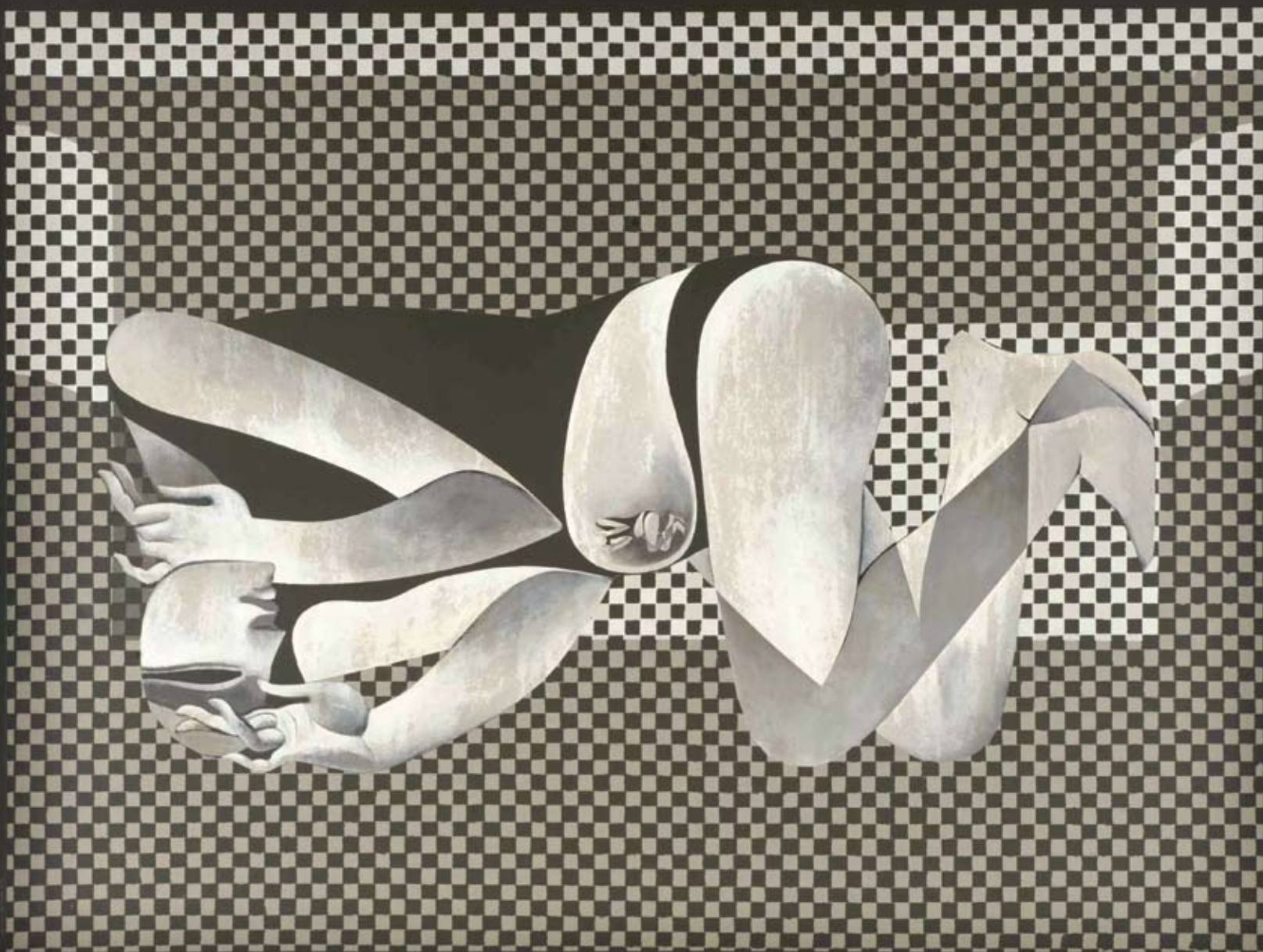
“I will always be looking for new possibilities for this particular subject, it will always be named *Dream* and I will be drawing it until the last day of my life.”



central compositional elements, allegorical placeholders of his figure's entrapment. This non-descript space gained a greater degree of anonymity (and perhaps universality), as solid black backgrounds emerged, creating a visual abyss in which time is undefined and the source of her anguish is unknown. This is demonstrated in a 2003 painting in which the female subject is placed on a large platform that is set into the foreground. Across her near-transparent body is a thin diagonal line which she touches with her fingertips, indicating the heart of the composition. In the upper left-hand corner is a yardstick measurement that ends in the number 50. Indicating the middle of the painting, or where it is divided in two, Dahoul emphasises how she is fastened into her surroundings. And yet while she is seated within this realm, her physicality fades, as part of her body seems to disappear. It is here that Dahoul implies the eventual passing of time, which she utilises to control her own destiny in light of her environment.

The locating of an escape through this slow passage has both immediate and symbolic significance. Although each painting reflects a progression of details that changes with each new canvas, evocations of loss, sorrow and isolation resound. Favouring the process of documentation in lieu of mere illustration, Dahoul explains, "Time is definitely the main reason [for such changes], because I am intent on writing my diaries through drawing, not drawing my diaries." It is this process of sustaining an ongoing narrative that defines this massive body of work drawn from his own life. "There is no doubt that an artist's personal life plays a big role in the way he works into the future," he continues. "The greatest statement an artist can make with his art is for himself, not for anyone else."

This is certainly pronounced in the paintings that have come after 2008, the year that he lost Nawar, his wife and colleague of 20 years, to cancer. Shortly after, amidst a time of mourning, he worked feverishly on a new set of paintings that represented her final months. With these eight canvases he added a new element to the series, subsequently numbering each *Dream* as they were produced. In many of these numerically titled works, such as *Dream 24* (2009), *Dream 31* (2010) and *Dream 43* (2011), his heroine lies asleep on an oversized sofa that encloses the composition. She is no longer held captive, as her form has practically taken over the canvas and is often wearing a small pair of angel wings that suggests a means of exit. Although she has withered from the robust, statuesque outline that was once held in place, she has essentially transcended the dream. With each new painting, Dahoul has slowly (and sequentially) released her from the confines of an insufferable world. Overall, his paintings have since grown in width and length, assuming a monumentality that surpasses the dimensions of his earlier works.



GEOMETRIC CONSIDERATIONS

Recently Dahoul has begun incorporating spherical geometry into his compositions, which investigates the two-dimensional surface of a sphere and was developed as a field of study in 12th-century Moorish Spain. Utilising the geometric properties of right angles to accentuate the contorted posture of his protagonist, such as in *Dream 41* (2011), he transforms the body into a moment of abstraction. Elegant and fluid contours come together with sharp lines and dramatic intersections. It is this break from traditional Figurative painting – as his central character becomes a means through which time and space can be alluded to via shape and colour – that establishes his work within contemporary practice. Although placed within square compartments in *Dream 41*, 'she' is portrayed

as a vanishing image, signalling a profundity of memory and the subconscious that has culminated in nearly three decades of work.

Placing his muse within an undefined setting, in which objects have slowly morphed into psychological signifiers over the years, Dahoul has created a body of work that essentially has a life of its own. "I assume there are a lot of details in my life that are gone forever, therefore there is a clearer picture in my mind. It might be the very reason that one day there will be nothing on the canvas. Yet I will always be looking for new possibilities for this particular subject, it will always be named *Dream* and I will be drawing it until the last day of my life." 📺

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Facing page: *Dream*. 2000. Oil on wood panel with embedded metal nails. 144.5 x 61 cm. Private collection, UAE.

Above: *Dream 31*. 2010. Acrylic on canvas. 180 x 220 cm.

All images courtesy Ayyam Gallery unless otherwise specified.