



Dream 116, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 180 x 200 cm

S A F W A N D A H O U L S T I L L D R E A M I N G

14 March – 30 May 2016

Opening reception: Monday, 14 March from 7.00 to 9.00 pm

Ayyam Gallery Dubai (11, Alserkal Avenue) is pleased to present *Still Dreaming*, the solo exhibition of seminal painter Safwan Dahoul. A selection of new works from the artist's ongoing Dream series is highlighted in this large-scale exhibition, including several mural-sized canvases.

About the show

Although he began the influential body of work nearly three decades ago, Dahoul's featured paintings reveal several recent changes in both the narrative of the series and his aesthetic. In 2015, Dahoul began isolating his recurring figure in ambiguous settings, releasing her from darkened cityscapes and barren landscapes that resemble actual sites in Syria. This transition began with scenes of his heroine wading through a fog-covered sea and progressed to images of falling rain that indicate a raging tempest. In these examples and the works that followed, Dahoul depicts his female protagonist against a flat white background, an effect that alludes to radiating light, and renders her face and body with gradations of greys illuminated by soft highlights.

The meaning of the artist's inverted color scheme is left open to interpretation. The heavy usage of white can be understood as an indication of hope, or rebirth, a departure from the blackened sky or dim interiors that once enveloped his figures. Yet at the same time, white is the recognised color of Muslim burial shrouds, signaling death, or mourning. Dahoul intentionally leaves the meaning of this detail to be resolved in the mind of the viewer, and only provides subtle clues that register how this latest chapter unfolds. A small paper boat, for example, is depicted in several works, evoking the war-induced mass exodus and migration that have altered Syria forever.

Time and space are unbroken, continuing from one painting to the next, and in each composition there is a visible sense of melancholy. Dahoul's figure, however, appears to have grown in size, her once slender body now muscular in form. In compositions such as *Dream 116* she appears mechanical, her head, limbs, and torso pieced together as an assemblage of shapes as she leans towards a black circle that contains a glimpse of the Milky Way. As she seems to look down at what she has left behind, her kohl eye—patterned after the ancient Egyptian model—has become hollow again, perhaps an indication, as in earlier works, of receding life.

About the Artist

As one of the foremost painters in the Arab world, Safwan Dahoul has repeatedly demonstrated how contemporary modes of figuration can describe the psychic terrain of a region that is in constant flux.

Born in 1961 in Hama, Syria, Dahoul was initially trained by leading modernists at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Damascus before travelling to Belgium, where he earned a doctorate from the Higher Institute of Plastic Arts in Mons. Upon returning to Syria, he began teaching at the Faculty of Fine Arts and was a prominent member of the Damascus art scene. In the span of a decade, Dahoul nurtured a new generation of artists as an active mentor whose evolving aesthetic often ignited new directions in painting. Given the trajectory and status of his painting style, Dahoul's career is regarded as a crucial link between modern and contemporary Arab art.

Since the late 1980s, Dahoul's ongoing *Dream* series has explored the physical and psychological effects of alienation, solitude, and longing that punctuate the human experience at various stages in life. Partly autobiographical, this seminal body of work uses the formal properties of painting to recreate the subconscious sense of enclosure that surfaces during times of crisis, whether in the event of mourning, estrangement, or political conflict. The artist's recurring female protagonist facilitates this visceral experience through her contorted body, often-vacant eyes, and minimised yet monumental physicality. Depicted in the confinement of ambiguous settings, her presence is defined by the placement of various objects that seem to deepen the state of her disaffection, as even the familiar becomes a trigger of distress.

Recently, Dahoul has participated in solo and group exhibitions at Samsung Blue Square and Busan Museum of Art, South Korea (2014); Ayyam Gallery DIFC, Dubai (2014, 2011); Ayyam Gallery Beirut (2014); Ayyam Gallery London (2013); Edge of Arabia, London (2013); and Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris (2012).

Dahoul's paintings are held in private and public collections, including the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris; National Museum, Damascus; Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah; The Samawi Collection, Dubai; The Farjam Collection, Dubai; and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, Kuwait.

About Ayyam Gallery

Founded in 2006, Ayyam Gallery is a leading arts organisation that manages the careers of diverse established and emerging artists. Blue-chip art spaces in Beirut and Dubai, 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. With its widely respected multilingual publishing division and a custodianship programme that manages the estates of pioneering artists, Ayyam Gallery has also contributed to recent efforts to document underrepresented facets of global art history.

Exhibition Facts

Exhibition Dates: 14 March - 30 May 2016

Opening Reception: Monday, 14 March from 7.00 to 9.00 pm

Regular Hours: Sun-Thu: 10.00am-6.00pm / Sat: 12.00pm-6.00pm

Location: Ayyam Gallery Dubai (11, Alserkal Avenue), Al Quoz 1, Dubai

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