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Safwan Dahoul's Dream 61, like all his paintings, has "a lot of sadness," the artist says, "but at the same time I'm always seeking joy in my life". Courtesy Safwan Dahoul and Ayyam Gallery

Safwan Dahoul on how dreams influence his career

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The popular Syrian painter Safwan Dahoul presents his first exhibition since leaving Damascus for Dubai last year. Entitled *Repetitive Dreams*, it's also his first solo show in the UK. He explains why he's happy to have made Dubai his home.

Dreams are intriguing narratives to try to express through art. Where did it all start for you?

When I was 10, I saw a neighbour painting in his workshop. He didn't become famous or anything, but to me it was a fascinating world. And maybe this is how my interest started. I could see the gap between the reality of what this guy was painting and what I was dreaming. But then, I always say I'm not an artist. I just draw what I dream. These paintings can be considered my daily memoirs, in a way.

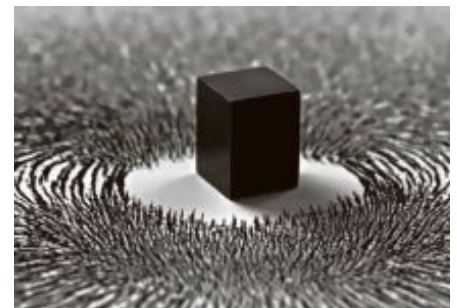
So do you go to bed hoping for a good dream?

Actually, my daily dream is to be able to sleep easily. I have a real problem with insomnia. It means I'm never really sure that what I paint is actually a representation of what I saw when I was asleep - the paintings can capture anything that happens during my daily life.

What were you trying to capture with these works?

As the title suggests, I've looked at repetitive dreams. But what I was really trying to explore is that everyday waking life is very repetitive, too. Nothing changes. Even though

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I moved to Dubai a year ago, the news you read everyday from Syria remains the same. No one is standing up for these people who are getting killed every day. The paintings have a lot of sadness in them because of that, but at the same time I'm always seeking joy in my life.

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Why did you feel you had to leave Syria and what has the past year been like in Dubai?

Quite simply because it's not viable to live there anymore. I have a child. It's far too dangerous and there's no sign that much will change. At least there is stability in Dubai. I don't have to worry about my safety every day.

But I don't know if it's changed my work, living here rather than in Damascus. I carry my ideas, my dreams, my feelings to whichever country I'm in. It's like a wearing a backpack. Living in Dubai has helped me to fulfil my potential and maybe become a little more internationally visible as an artist.

So what do you hope people will get from the exhibition?

Well, people can get their own messages and ideas from it. I prefer to be on the periphery - I don't want to have to explain it. It should speak for itself. And maybe what they get from the work will be something completely different from the thoughts I was having when I made it, which is fine.

There must be a work in the exhibition that most obviously reflects your concerns, though?

Probably Dream 59, which is eight separate panels depicting a female figure. She's repeated exactly but slowly becomes more indistinct as the light gradually changes. I could have done 100 to be honest, but by the eighth I think people can understand what I'm saying about repetition.

The work of yours we've seen has echoes of Picasso and Matisse. Are they important artists for you?

Actually, Frida Kahlo is the main influence for me. Maybe not the style so much, but the way in which she explores her life through her art, how she could be true to herself and her daily existence despite the pain she suffered. And I am the same. I'm just trying to be truthful to my life.

Safwan Dahoul: Repetitive Dreams is at Edge of Arabia, London, until June 2

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