

PRESS RELEASE

Ayyam Gallery
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Syria's Apex Generation

7 August - 12 September 2014

Opening reception: Thursday, 7 August from 6:00 to 8:00PM

Ayyam Gallery is pleased to announce the United Kingdom debut of *Syria's Apex Generation*, an exhibition featuring recent works by artists Nihad Al Turk, Abdul Karim Majdal Al-Beik, Othman Moussa, Mohannad Orabi, and Kais Salman. Curated by art historian and Ayyam Gallery Artistic Director Maymanah Farhat, the exhibition will spotlight a new school of Syrian painting in the midst of expansion despite the disintegration of the Damascus art scene, its original centre. This multi-venue group show will be held at Ayyam Gallery's London location from 7 August until 12 September. *Syria's Apex Generation* first opened at Ayyam Gallery's Dubai and Beirut locations in June, where it received critical acclaim, and will travel to London with a new selection of works.

Syria's Apex Generation explores the myriad ways artists are responding to the current conflict in Syria through multifaceted works that reflect a new phase of the country's contemporary art. Focusing on painters who launched their careers in the 2000s when the Damascus art scene experienced significant growth, the exhibition will demonstrate how these artists have contributed to the catapulting of Syrian art over the past decade, which reached a high point just before the onset of the war.

Building on the aesthetic currents set in motion by Syria's modernists in the late 1950s, the featured artists navigate the magnitude of the Syrian conflict with allegory, satire, and realism in works that hint at the influence of preceding artists such as modernists Louay Kayyali and Fateh Moudarres and contemporary painters Moustafa Fathi, Saad Yagan, and Safwan Dahoul. Informed by rich histories of expressionism, symbolism, and abstraction, this burgeoning group has forged ahead with the creative objectives of their predecessors, who advocated the social relevance of art.

Nihad Al Turk's allegorical self-portraits employ symbolist and expressionist forms to offer reflective insights on larger philosophical themes. In Al Turk's previous works disfiguration, a dark palette, and laboured compositional details such as textured surfaces signal the ongoing narratives of imperfect creatures that are caught between the power struggles of various forces. A notable sense of optimism entered his work after he relocated to Beirut in 2013, softening the contours of his figures as vibrant, solid colour fields accentuate increasingly robust shapes. No longer alienated amidst the dichotomy of good and evil, his protagonists approach transcendence.

Abdul Karim Majdal Al-Beik's "combine paintings" reproduce the patina of imbued surfaces such as the walls of public spaces in order to trace the ebb and flow of society with the passage of time. With the outbreak of the war in Syria, Majdal Al-Beik has explored the inherent tension between his weathered planes and the added dimensionality of found objects that speak of acts of violence, making the devastating reality of destruction a dominant feature of his visual records.

Othman Moussa's early paintings follow the centuries-old tradition of still-life painting through which the poetics of the mundane possess weighty inferences. Recently, the impact of the situation in Syria has transformed his everyday objects into subjects of war, as the details of daily life in the country are now dictated by uncertainty. In these latest works, what once offered sustenance or delight such as an apple is now capable of creating havoc. Other works utilise satire as a biting form of social commentary as the thrones of monarchs are stripped of their aura with the subtlety of simple signifiers.

Mohannad Orabi's paintings reflect his interest in the spontaneity of process and the liberation of form that emerges when art is created intuitively without fixed directives. This formal pursuit simultaneously reflects investigations into the human psyche, specifically the formation of consciousness beginning in childhood and the social institutions that might shape one's development. With the start of the Syrian uprising and the conflict that followed, Orabi has employed an increasingly realist approach to portraiture as he seeks to traverse the various forms of media that have steered the war, revealing instead the psychological states of his young subjects.

Kais Salman's intentionally hyperbolised imagery utilises satire to subvert the normalisation of greed, vanity, and ideological extremism that is rapidly defining our era. Terrorism, consumerism, religious fanaticism, imperialism, and the voyeurism of the digital age all serve as topics of his carnivalesque compositions. Through grotesque figures outfitted with monstrous features accentuated by hubris, he presents a world of anarchy where sensual bodies become sites of violence and pleasure gives way to maiming implosions.

The included painters were first brought together through the Shabab Ayyam incubator programme for young artists in 2007 and quickly formed a tight-knit intellectual circle that proved crucial to their development. Today, although scattered between Damascus, Beirut, and Dubai, Al Turk, Majdal Al-Beik, Moussa, Orabi, and Salman continue to create works linked by artistic threads that emerged during the early stage of their grouping. Leading their generation, they are currently extending the boundaries of representation and perceived functions of art that have shaped Syrian visual culture for over sixty years.

Syria's Apex Generation will be accompanied by an eponymous publication authored by Maymanah Farhat.

Notes to Editors

About Ayyam Gallery

Founded in Damascus in 2006, Ayyam Gallery is recognised as a leading cultural voice in the region, representing a roster of Middle Eastern artists with an international profile and museum presence. Spaces in Beirut, Dubai, Jeddah, and London have further succeeded in showcasing the work of Middle Eastern artists with the aim of educating a wider audience about the art of this significant region.

Exhibition Facts

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