

The Bitter over the Sweet

Artist Tammam Azzam's lament

For Syrian artist Tammam Azzam, the outbreak of violence in his country generated a decided change of direction, both in terms of his location and artistic medium. This most unwelcome situation has created much fervent emotion in his soul, which he has harnessed and redirected into avid activity that reaches out to people worldwide. His ability to articulate the uselessness and horror of this outrageous conflict through poignant depictions that borrow imagery from famous artists of the western world, effectively drives his message home. Azzam makes pictures that pointedly tell the story, with the pleading hope that they get in the international face.

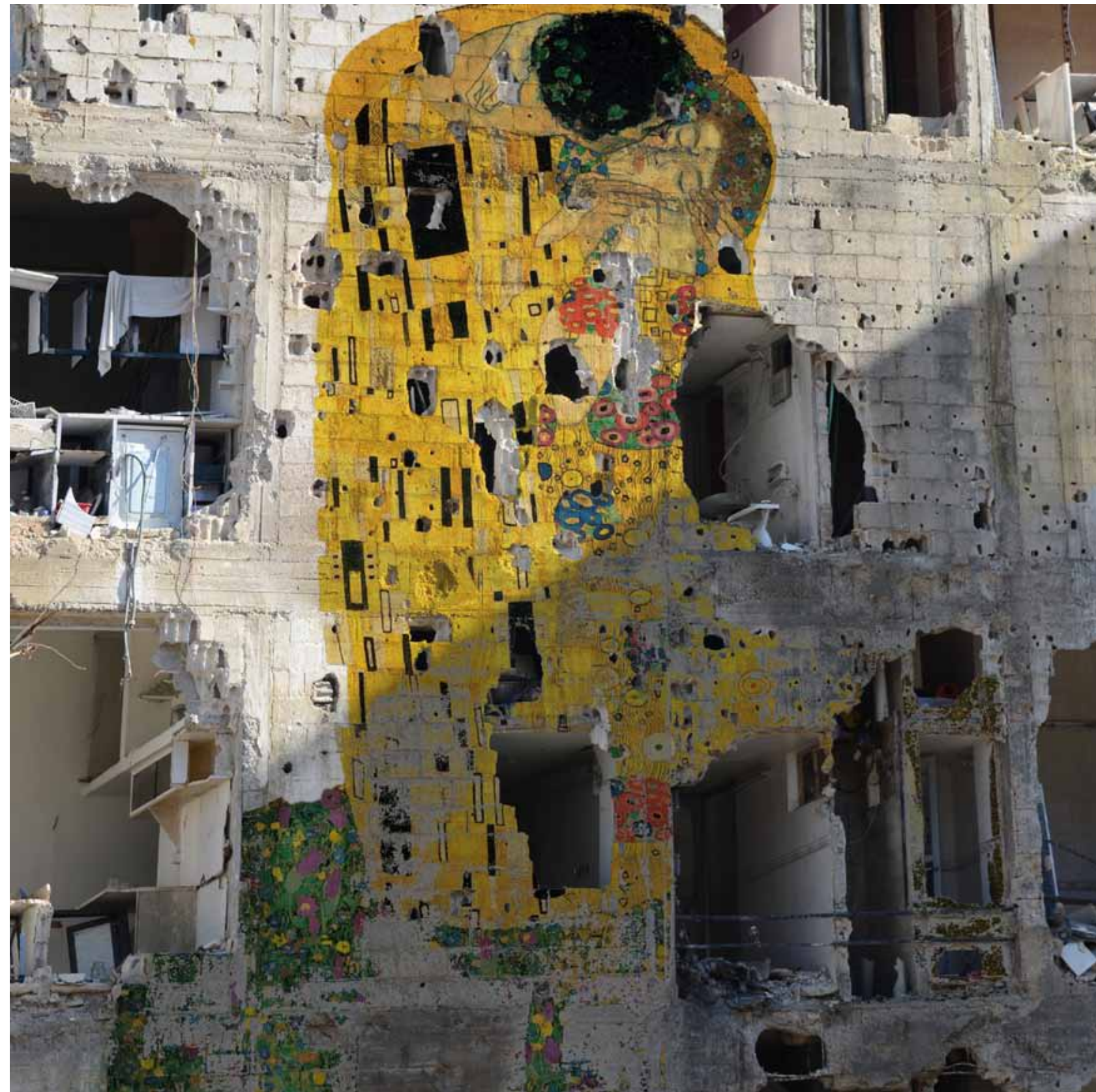
ANNA SANSOM



TAMMAM AZZAM
Photo: Sueraya Shaheen

In the Syrian conflict, Tammam Azzam's work is like a revolutionary expression of despair. His digital image, Freedom Graffiti, showing Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* superimposed on the bullet-ridden façade of an old building in Damascus, symbolised a call for peace when it went viral last year. The title conveys his desire for an end to President Bashar al-Assad's regime. His new exhibition – *I, The Syrian* – at Ayyam Gallery in London and Beirut, features a lightbox presentation of this poignant image as well as other digital works relating to his home country's war.

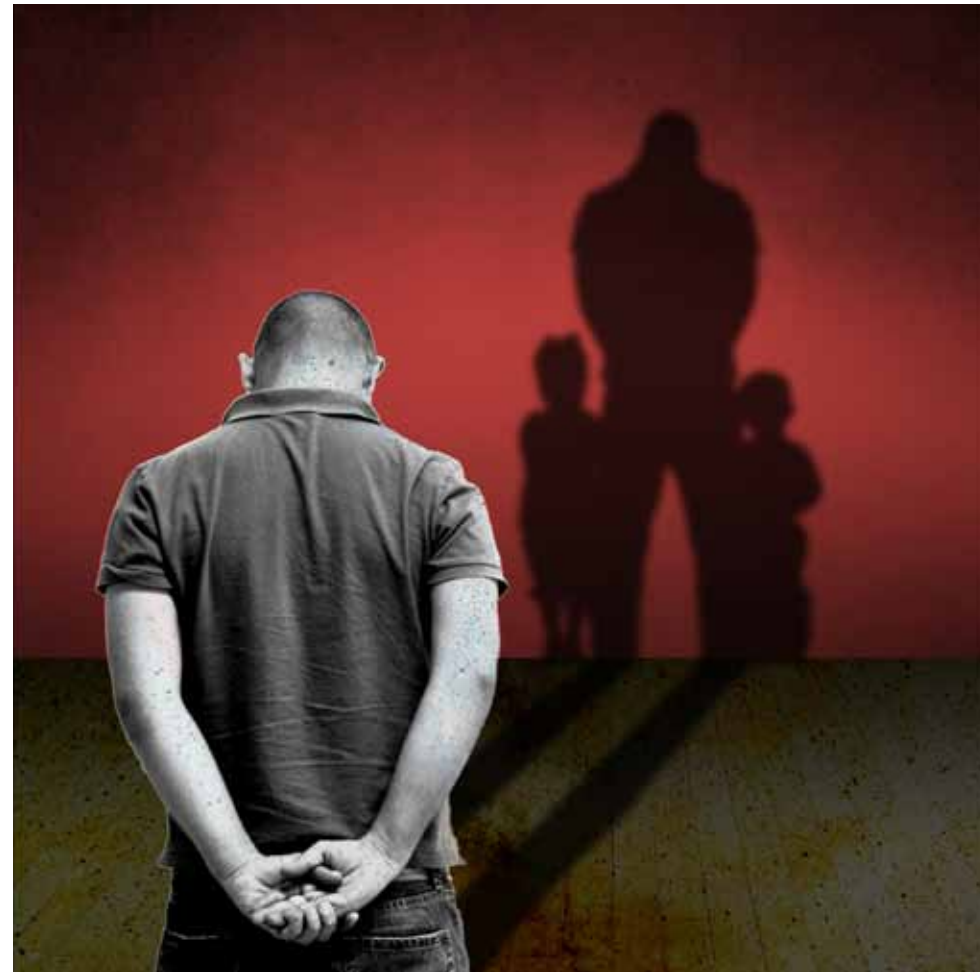
Azzam, 33, lives in exile in Dubai. Seven months after the Syrian crisis began, he moved there from Damascus with his wife and daughter, now 7. Besides wanting to find a safe place to live as the violence started to escalate beyond the country's outskirts, he was afraid of being conscripted into the military. It so happened that Ayyam Gallery, founded by art collectors Khaled and Hisham Samawi in Damascus, was relocating its staff to Dubai at the time, and assisted Azzam and his family in obtaining residency visas for the United Arab Emirates.



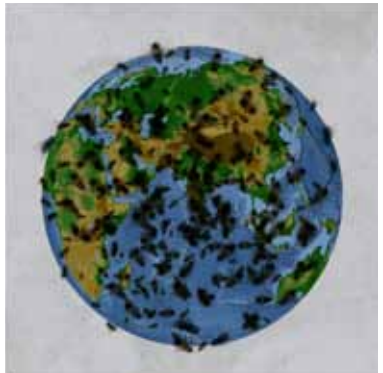
FREEDOM GRAFFITI, 2013
A reference to Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*
Lightbox
Edition of 5
Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery



1



1



2

I, THE SYRIAN, 2013 (1)
112 x 112 cm
Archival print on Cotton paper
Edition of 5
Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery

BEAUTIFUL WORLD, 2012 (2)
112 x 112 cm
Archival Print on Cotton Paper
Edition of 5
Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery

UNITED STATES, 2013 (3)
Lightbox
75 x 105 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery



2



3



3



4

CONSCRIPT, 2012 (4)
112 x 112 cm
Archival Print on Cotton Paper
Edition of 5
Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery

SYRIA NEXT SPRING, 2012 (1)
112 x 112 cm
Archival Print on Cotton Paper
Edition of 5
Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery

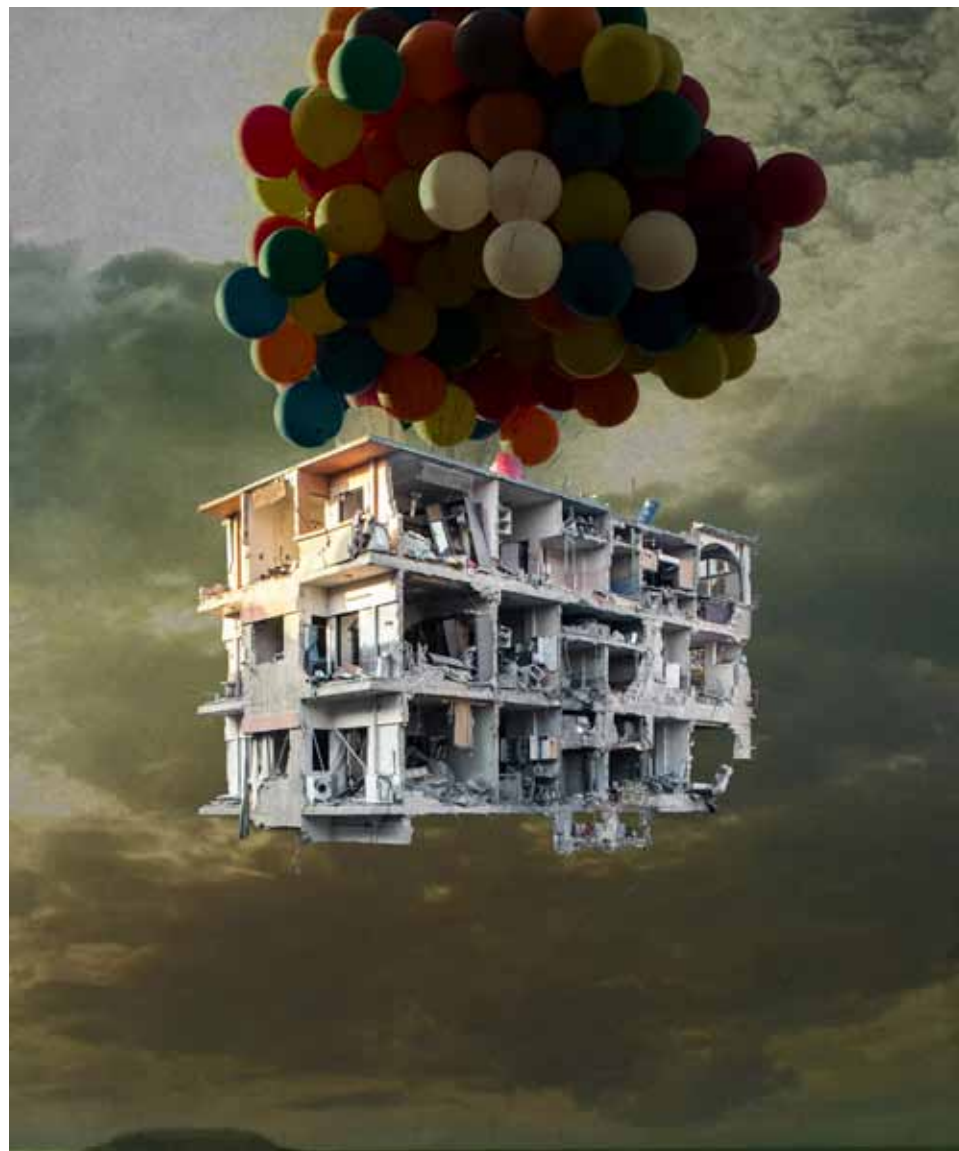
From left to right:
UNITED RUSSIA, UNITED NATIONS,
2013 (2/3)
Lightboxes
Each 75 x 105 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery

In Syria, Azzam had been making paintings of abandoned places, seeking to capture the memories that had pervaded after the former occupants fled into exile. Unable to find a studio in Dubai straightaway, he began making digital imagery instead. He was struck by how it enabled him to communicate a direct, powerful message about the war in which, according to the UN, more than 100,000 people have been killed. "Once an image or a piece of information is uploaded online it's almost impossible to remove all traces of it", says Azzam. "In terms of an image of protest, the digital realm gives people the freedom to speak out against a controlling government through a means that is difficult to suppress."

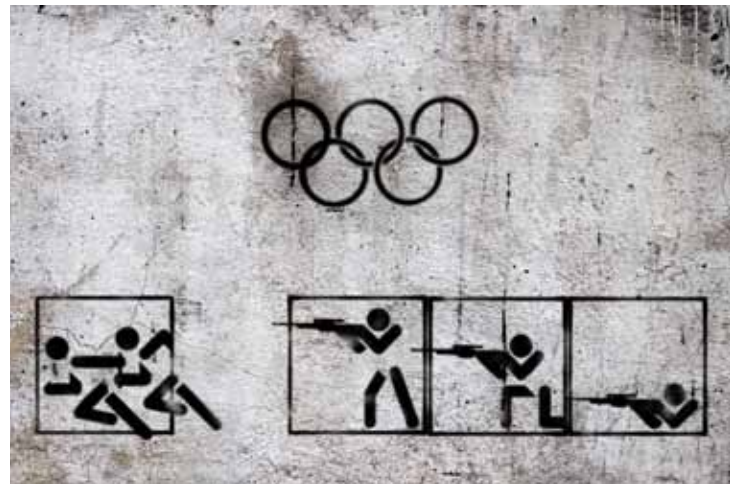
Freedom Graffiti, appropriating Klimt's iconic painting of two lovers embracing, belongs to Azzam's series The Syrian Museum. For this, he incorporated imagery from famous artworks by western artists such as da Vinci, Goya, Matisse, and Warhol that he felt were pertinent to what was occurring in his country. For instance, Paul Gauguin's two Tahitian Women are depicted sitting in front of a package from UNHCR, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in another of these works. Azzam describes the series as "paralleling the greatest achievements of humanity with the destruction it is also capable of inflicting." Referring to the ravaged building in Freedom Graffiti, he says, "Like any building, stories of love and passionate moments

were experienced within it. Yet, in its ruined state, marked by violence, it also tells the stories of all those who died there." In the Freedom Graffiti lightbox, the yellowness of the Klimt is even more striking, the amorous figures seemingly glowing "as if the sunlight is directly shining onto the building", says Azzam. "I think this underlines the hope in the image, and the juxtaposition with destruction becomes even more powerful", he adds.

The notion of hope is a recurring theme throughout the exhibition. A mass of multi-coloured balloons lift a partially destroyed building into the air. A hand grenade blooms with blossoming flowers. In I, The Syrian, after which the show is titled, Azzam



1



2

DAMASCUS (1)
 From the Bon Voyage series, 2013 (1)
 C-Print, Diasec mounting
 120 x 100 cm
 Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery

SYRIAN OLYMPIC, 2013 (2)
 C-Print, Diasec mounting
 133 x 200 cm
 Edition of 8
 Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery

bows his head in mourning; the shadow of his body, flanked by the shadows of two young children, is cast on a wall. Evoked elsewhere is Azzam's frustration with the international community. In Syrian Olympic, interlocking Olympic rings are graffitied onto a wall, above some street art imagery of sprinters and shooters. And in a series of green, red, and black lightboxes entitled United States, United Russia, and United Nations, the Arabic word for united appears above an image of the weapon used by each. Intended to mimic weaponry adverts, the lightboxes are allusions to how "all three entities have been united in their lack of adequate international support for the people of Syria", laments Azzam.

Despite the attention his work has gained, Azzam believes that the situation in Syria remains largely misunderstood. "After two years of making art which expresses the fact that there is a revolution in my country, the majority of the media still refer to it as a 'civil war'," asserts Azzam. "I hope my work has contributed to raising awareness of the destruction taking place in Syria." <

I, The Syrian is at Ayyam Gallery, London and Beirut until 30 January 2014;
ayyamgallery.com

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