

PRESS RELEASE

Ayyam Gallery

143 New Bond Street

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Gallery Hours:

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Mon-Sat: 10:00am-6:00pm



EXTENDED: On view until 20 March 2015

Thaier Helal: Landmarks

Opening reception and book launch: Thursday, 22 January at 6.00 - 8.00 pm

Ayyam Gallery London is pleased to announce *Landmarks*, the solo show of leading Syrian painter Thaier Helal. In addition to serving as the artist's first exhibition in the United Kingdom, the event will coincide with the European launch of a new monograph on the artist.

Landmarks presents two new series by Helal, and indicates a return to abstract painting after several years of chronicling the Syrian conflict through appropriated media images that are reworked as immovable apparitions of the war. Departing from the imagery that first transmitted Syria's descent into chaos, Helal figuratively reenters the country through neo-expressionist compositions that explore its varied landscape. With the Mountain and River series, Helal alternates between distinctive facets of Syria's topography, reproducing the monumentality of its natural environment as a metaphor for its past, present, and future. Although a sense of melancholy permeates his impastoed surfaces through a somber palette, cliffs appear to shift across the canvas in several works while riverbeds swell in others, signaling a terrain that is capable of regeneration despite visible devastation.

By combining various media such as acrylic paint, sand, found objects (leaves, rocks, and coal pieces), and powered paper, Helal seeks to recreate the experiences of encountering specific sites firsthand. Formal elements are utilised to communicate such properties as volume, temperature, and light in order to stimulate sensory perception and the process of visual association in the viewer. In an untitled 2014 work, for example, coarsely applied areas of mixed media are partially covered by gestural brushwork, emulating the force of water washing over rough sediments as a brilliant blue undercurrent is revealed. Several of the artist's new works are inspired by the Asi River, a waterway known for its south to north path—an unusual course that is emblematic of the unpredictability of nature, or a resistant force that is beyond the material world built and governed by man.

Many of Helal's Mountain series paintings are rendered from memory, particularly compositions depicting the imposing rock formations near the historic town of Maaloula in central Syria, a few kilometers from his birthplace. Numerous Syrian artists have painted the town since the modern period, especially the tiered homes that are built into its mountainside, yet

few have captured its significance as a place of cultural pluralism given the survival of Western Aramaic among its residents, who belong to various sects. In Helal's recent works, the mountainous region symbolises Syria's rich history, above all the survival of its culture through the many civilizations that have flourished across its diverse landscapes.

About the Artist

A leading figure in contemporary Syrian art, Thayer Helal's large mixed media works are considered at the forefront of contemporary abstraction in the Middle East. Drawing inspiration from the physical and sensory aspects of the world around him, Helal explores the dynamism of space as it is reshaped by the fluctuation of society and culture. His canvases communicate movement and energy through explosions of colour, the meticulous division of the picture plane, and the repetitive layering of the surface. Although utilising the leitmotifs of contemporary painting, the artist's deliberate approach is reminiscent of the formalism of Islamic art, which relies on units as part of a larger whole to communicate a sense of wonder when alluding to the sublime.

Recently, Helal has employed images of the Syrian Army taken from various media in haunting compositions that isolate the mechanisms of warfare. Isolating such stark imagery against a black background, Helal confronts the abject reality that currently besieges Syrians while pointing to the increased militarisation of global society.

Born in Syria in 1967, Thayer Helal graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Damascus before relocating to Sharjah in the 1990s, where he currently lives and works. He is the recipient of numerous awards including the Grand Gold Award at the Contemporary Painting Biennial, Tehran (2005); and the Award for Painting at the Sharjah International Biennial (1997). Helal has also contributed to the development of regional art as a longtime faculty member of the University of Sharjah, Fine Arts College.

Selected solo exhibitions for the artist include Ayyam Gallery Dubai, DIFC (2014, 2012); Ayyam Gallery Cairo (2011); Ayyam Gallery Beirut (2010); Ayyam Gallery Damascus (2010); Green Art Gallery, Dubai (2006, 2003); Cultural Foundation, Abu Dhabi (2002); and Sharjah Art Museum (2000). Helal's works have been featured in group exhibitions and events such as *Fluid Forms II*, Samsung Blue Square and Busan Museum of Art, South Korea (2014); Art Abu Dhabi (2013-2009), Art Dubai (2013-2010); Alexandria Biennale (2009); Contemporary Painting Biennial, Tehran (2005); Imagining the Book International Biennale Alexandria (2005); Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh (2002, 1997, 1995); and the Sharjah Biennial (1999, 1997, 1995).

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 show-

casing 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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Location: 143 New Bond Street

1st Floor

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T: +44(0)2074093568

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For press information and artwork images, please contact press@ayyamgallery.com or +44 (0) 207 409 3568.