FEATURES

***Ali Kaaf*, 2014, one of series of photographs by Jaber Al Azmeh of Syrian artists holding destroyed copies of the ruling Baath Party's newspaper, and below, Kais Salman's wry *World Cup*, 2014, which satirises Islamists' hypocritical dependency on global popular culture and particularly social media**

In exile or amid the horror, Syrian artists carry on working

While civil war tears their country apart, most artists have fled Syria and are achieving success in the Gulf and the West. But some remain in their native country, where art provides a brief escape from the conflict. By **Tim Cornwell**

It was in March 2011, at the Art Dubai fair, that the Ayyam Gallery's managing partner Hisham Samawi remembers the first television newsflash, that things were beginning to be unsettled in Syria. "There were only two ways it could go, fizzling out or becoming what it is today," he says. "The risks were too great for us not to put a plan in motion, to basically start an evacuation strategy."

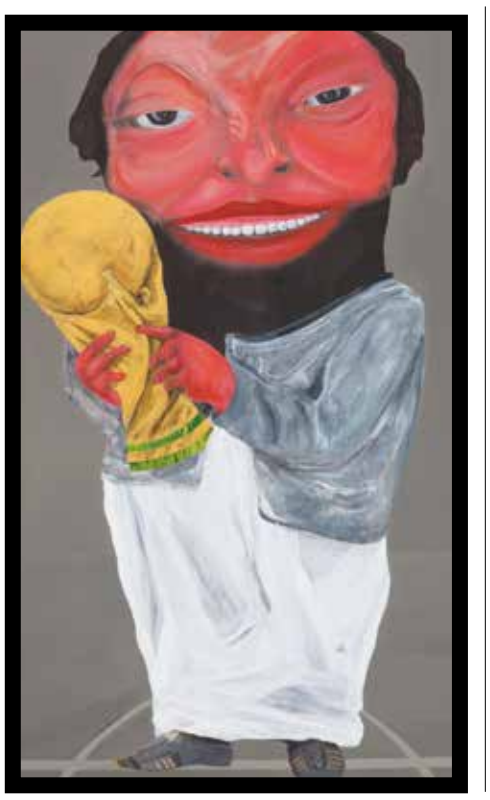
The gallery was founded in Damascus just five years before, by Samawi and his cousin Khaled, a hedge fund manager and art collector. "Syria was kind of opening up," he says. "It was having this renaissance. In our first year of operations, 95% of our sales were from people travelling there. We were selling contemporary Syrian art to people just visiting Syria, and then we started getting a reputation, and then people were flying to Damascus, to buy the art." Two years later, the gallery opened its Dubai branch.

By 2012 Ayyam had brought some 2,000 works out of the country, along with 12 artists, their families, and staff, mostly to Dubai. Among them was Tammam Azzam, whose digital image of Klimt's *The Kiss*, 1907-08, overlaid on the shell of an apartment block went viral in 2013. (The original sold for $30,000; prints for about a tenth of this.)

Escape, for some

Four years after the start of the Syrian war most of the country's notable artists have left, it is said. The diaspora is centred on the Gulf and Lebanon, where the huge refugee influx and free-flowing art scene threw up many galleries and young collectives. Others have moved to Turkey, Cairo or, if they can reach them, the US and Europe.

As the brutal and bloody war drags on, and fear of Islamic State (IS) has changed the West's policy agenda, they seem to be settling in where they can, against tightening immigration rules. Lebanon recently reinstated visa rules under which Syrians can generally only enter for three



WORLD CUP: COURTESY AYYAM GALLERY

days at time. Azzam, and another Ayyam artist, Thaier Helal, a long-time lecturer at the University of Sharjah, struggled to get visas for The Netherlands and Britain for recent exhibitions. Artist Mohannad Orabi was named by *Foreign Policy* magazine as one of its 100 leading global thinkers, but was barred from travelling to the US for the ceremony. Those whose work has openly criticised the Assad regime risk their lives if they return. And jihadist executioners, Helal observes, "are not only against art, they are against life itself".

Unexpected consequences

As a result of the war, Syria's once isolated art has, in a sad way, experienced growing exposure at all levels. This month the Jalanbo Collection, with 700 pieces of Syrian and Middle Eastern art, will join with the Armory Show in New York to stage tours for VIP collectors.

The collection, held in family homes, was started in 1984 by real estate developers Walid and Rona Jalanbo and is now overseen by their son Khaled; with a newly launched website, it is aiming to go more public and develop scholarly research. The tours are tied to the Armory's curated focus section on the Middle East, North Africa and Mediterranean (MENAM), and Khaled hopes to build on the success of the "Here and Elsewhere" show of contemporary art from the Arab world at New York's New Museum last year.

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FEATURES *Artists and civil war*

Pioneers: the Modern Syrian painters at the root of today's scene

Louay Kayyali, *Then What?*, 1965
Though specifically about displaced Palestinian people, Kayyali's painting is an image of universal suffering that resonates powerfully amid today's refugee crisis. Kayyali, who died in 1978, suffered from depression and was drawn to troubling subject matter, often depicting torture and struggle. He was profoundly affected by time spent studying in Rome, and this Italian influence is present in *Then What?*—the figures evoke Masaccio's *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1426-27.

Safwan Dahoul, *Untitled*, 1993
Regarded as the link between Modern and contemporary Syrian art, Dahoul says his works capture "the subconscious sense of enclosure that surfaces during times of crisis, whether in mourning, estrangement, or political conflict". *B.L.*

Syrian artists carry on working

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That show included the work of Marwan Kassab Bachi, rated as one of the greatest living artists of the Syrian and Arab diaspora, who lives in Berlin.

The Jalanbo Collection features the work of other Modern masters like the late artists Louay Kayyali and Fateh Al Moudarres, painters who exhibited in Venice in 1960, as well as contemporary work. It includes at least one piece by the photographer Jaber Al Azmeh, now based in Doha. A former commercial photographer in Damascus, Al Azmeh is represented by the Green Art Gallery, a leading dealer and barometer for Middle Eastern art, and his war work includes powerful photographs of people with upturned copies of the ruling Baath Party's newspaper, overlaid with their own personal and pointed messages.

"You have to live in the moment"

Other leading artists from Syria's older generation include the brilliant Youssef Abdelke, reportedly still in Damascus despite his month-long detention a year ago after signing an anti-government petition. Lebanon's Galerie Tanit has shown works by Abdelke and the Syrian feminist Heba Al Akkad, who now lives in Sweden and whose recent work has focused on women's loss of children and family. Abdelke's work for Tanit included powerful imagery such as a trussed-up, drowning fish.

Another leading name, Safwan Dahoul, a former art teacher at Damascus University who is now in Dubai, helped Ayyam pick a new generation of artists. Interviewed through an interpreter, he insists that before the war, "there was no interference of the government. The only thing that might have been lacking was the sense of travel. There was a lack of exposure. The Syrian artists truly had their own style."

In the latest works from his 25-year-old "Dream" series, inspired by his late wife, Dahoul experiments with uses of white. "This colour white has been perceived as hope, or death. I am trying to find the middle ground, what's in between," he says. It seems to reflect the uncertainty of an unending war. "People would always dream to go back, but right now no one knows what is going to happen. It's got to a point where you have to move on, you have to live in the moment."

The first lots in Ayyam Gallery's "Young Collectors" auction early this year were sold to help victims of the civil war, but Hisham Samawi stresses the gallery is not a charity. With branches in Beirut and New Bond Street, London, and talk of a new space in Los Angeles, the gallery has promoted Syrian artists commercially amid a broad Middle Eastern roster, in the rising regional market fuelled by Gulf collectors. Prices for strong works by leading artists have gone from a few thousand dollars to six figures. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Lacma) is among the Western institutions that have bought Syrian work.

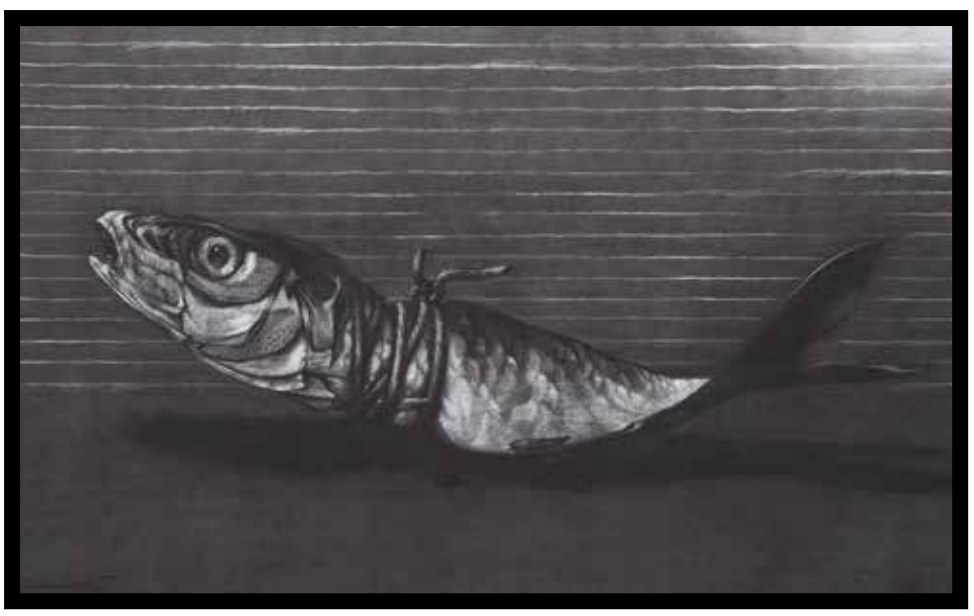
In sharp contrast to these commercial operations, in which both gallerists and artists are often careful to remain outwardly neutral, is the deeply political art of war. Shifting from the traditional strength of Syrian painting, artists have used the anonymity of the internet and the tools of the digital and moving image, pushing the boundaries of conflict art. It is dangerous and emphatically not commercial.

One anonymous art collective "Syrian People Know Their Way" which uses Facebook and Flickr, shot to prominence with an outpouring of work by young Syrian artists, designers, bloggers and activists. Bitter, striking satire aimed at President Assad now includes swipes at "religious fascists"; one image pairs Assad and Osama bin Laden. Meanwhile, Abounaddara (broadly, Arabic for "man with glasses") is a collective of self-taught and volunteer film-makers involved in "emergency cinema".

Both collectives have won awards for their work in the West. Meanwhile, individual social media videos – by a woman who fitted a camera to her handbag and travelled through outwardly calm Damascus to stricken "liberated" areas, and another who hid a camera under her hijab veil and walked the streets of the IS "capital" Raqqa – test the borders of visual art. But it would be wrong to pigeonhole Syrian artists or their work in either establishment or opposition camps, says Delphine Leccas. In 2008 she was the exhibition manager of a four-part retrospective of Syrian art at the National Museum of Damascus, and organised its "younger generation" strand in an abandoned factory refurbished as an art space. The show was part of Damascus' year as Arab Capital of Culture, an idea that has gained a tragic ring to it in the wake of the events of recent years.

Earlier this year, Leccas presented "L'Art en Marche: Artistes Syriens d'Aujourd'hui" at Le Rocher de Palmer, an arts centre in Bordeaux, featuring mostly digital work, photography, drawing and video. When Syrian artists first emerged from years of relative isolation, partly due to the war, it was the strength of painting that stood out. "What has changed a lot is the technique, because they had to change their work," Leccas says. "Some were making etchings, some were making landscape paintings, some of them were making sculptures or installation, but they had to adopt digital work, because they didn't have any way to work except on their computers. We can see a lot of small-sized work, like notebooks, a lot of studio work. It was the only thing they knew to do, but they didn't have the material or space to do it."

> *"Festival lets Aleppians stop in front of international works like any other citizen around the world"*



Struggling to survive: Syrian artist Youssef Abdelke's *Fish*, 2014

About as far from Bond Street as it is possible to be is the Le Pont Gallery in Aleppo. Its director Issa Touma, talking to *The Art Newspaper* by Skype, says war art may not be great art, but it is "necessary art". It is important, he says, to allow people to escape the war in his gallery for even one day; and for the work to express and document civilian life, during a war where the main casualties are not fighters on either side but civilians.

Keeping the faith

In January, Touma staged the 12th Aleppo International Photo Festival in his gallery, the only one surviving in the city. His old festival space, a former church, is occupied by Islamist fighters. So he projected around 100 works by Arab and Western artists on his gallery wall, for a week, including group shows submitted by artists in the former Yugoslavia and The Netherlands. "After losing most of our intellectuals and most of the art society, it's good to have around 500 people in," he says. Art is still taught at the University of Aleppo, he says, but the best teachers have left.

Touma founded his gallery in 1996, pushing the envelope with the authorities from the outset. He was trapped for nine days in his home in 2012 when the front line reached his street. The work of this dogged Syrian-Armenian photographer is in the Victoria & Albert Museum's collection; friends say it is simply a miracle he is alive. "Our festival gives the chance for Aleppians to stop in front of international works of art like any other citizen around the world. To feel normal for one day," he said.

Touma wryly tells of an unnamed Syrian artist who failed to sell a painting during 30 years of living in France, and now suddenly has an audience. The war has opened the eyes of a new generation of artists in Syria, he says, at least those who have stayed in the country, working as best they can. He says Western governments and the media made a "huge wrong" by demanding people take sides in the conflict. "Art for me was defending against this," he says. "Those people deserve someone to protect them. If we exist as civilians, then it will be hard for them to not explain the number of civilians dying every day."