



Andy Warhol's Elvis in a piece from the Syrian Museum series by Tammam Azzam.  
Courtesy Tammam Azzam / Ayyam Gallery

## The power of love with Tammam Azzam in Dubai

Ben East

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As Valentine's Day approached, one of the most romantic scenes in all of art, Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*, was superimposed on the pockmarked wall of a Syrian building ruined by war. The message seemed clear: such beauty amid carnage was not only a plea for an end to violence but a very public reminder that those who love this kind of art cannot ignore the hundreds of deaths that occur every day in Syria. Almost immediately, *Freedom Graffiti* went viral; in five hours it had been liked by 20,000 people on Facebook, and shared 14,000 times.

Its creator is the Dubai-based Syrian artist Tammam Azzam. Living and working in Damascus at the beginning of the Syrian revolution - he's very keen to give it that description rather than "civil war" - Azzam left for Dubai in September 2011 with his wife and daughter when the army began calling people up.

"I didn't want to fight," he says simply. "But the destruction and sadness I witnessed and experienced as a result of the regime inspired me."

In fact, *Freedom Graffiti* is the culmination of a long series curated under The Syrian Museum umbrella. Shown at the Ayyam Gallery in Dubai late last year, Azzam references some of the most iconic artists in western art history such as da Vinci, Goya and Gauguin and places their imagery against Syrian scenes.

"It was about featuring some of humanity's greatest achievements against a backdrop of the devastation it is also capable of inflicting," he explains. "The inclusion of western masterpieces also highlights the lack of world-class museums in Syria and, even more worryingly, the current demolition of my country's cultural heritage."

And while the use of women from a Gauguin painting to comment on Syrian women in refugee camps was fascinating, it didn't have the impact of *Freedom Graffiti*.

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"It's because *The Kiss* is internationally recognised for its symbolic depiction of love and human connection," Azzam says. "Also, the coverage of the revolution on international news channels meant the work could have a clear and powerful visual impact, easily translatable across the world's borders."

Of course, Azzam is now based in Dubai, so there is some sleight of hand at play. The iconic image can't actually be seen on a building in Syria; Azzam has photoshopped it on to a stock photograph. This has disappointed some observers but Azzam is unrepentant. Any critic should stop to consider that to create such a piece "for real" is virtually impossible in Syria right now, then appreciate the craft evident in Freedom Graffiti, such as in the way the crater curves around the woman's back.

"Look, I lost my studio in Damascus," Azzam says. "And after losing my physical base I needed to explore new ways to express myself and started working with digital art. And for me it became a powerful protest tool. When I am able to return to Syria I have vowed to paint Klimt's *The Kiss* on buildings that have been impacted by the bombings from the regime."

When he will return remains unclear, even though his parents are in a relatively safe part of Syria. "I worry for them because, like an Syrian living there, they are in constant danger. One day, maybe, I will be able to return, but in the meantime I hope that my work has contributed to raising awareness of the destruction taking place and has some impact on increasing global pressure to find a solution to the revolution."

Azzam says Dubai is an exciting place to work: "There are so many galleries and artists based here. It feels vibrant. There's a rich cultural exchange."

But, naturally, he will always have one mournful eye on the homeland he's been forced to leave behind. "The building represents one of thousands that have been impacted by the bombing from the regime," he says. "Some people ask me whether I will one day try to find the exact same wall and paint *The Kiss* onto it. The truth is, I cannot say because I don't know if it will even be standing."

• Tammam Azzam is represented by Ayyam Gallery [www.ayyamgallery.com](http://www.ayyamgallery.com)

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