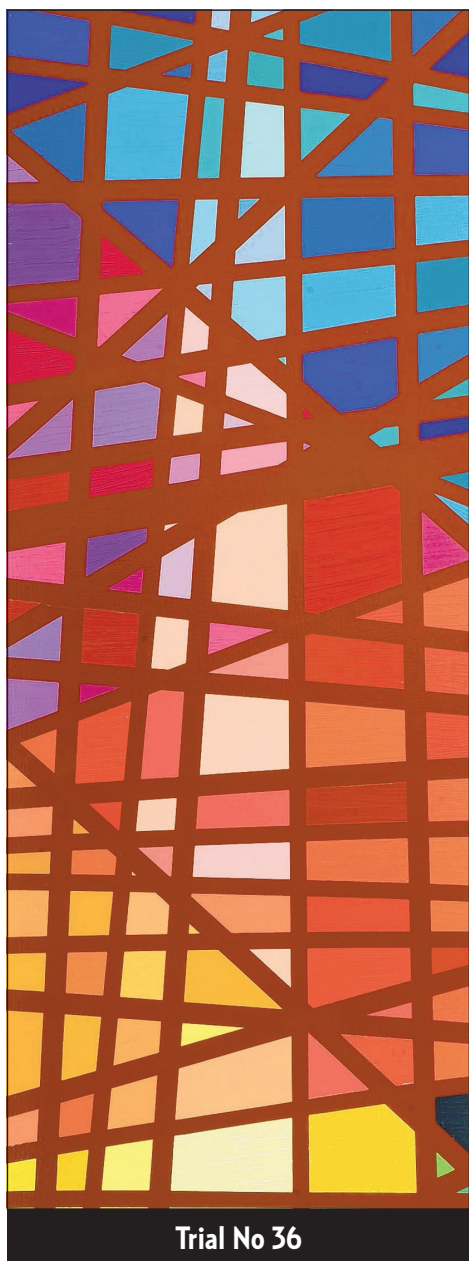


Geometry of positivity

Muteea Murad blends colour, symmetry and a strong faith in tradition to depict life's joys

BY JYOTI KALSI
Special to Weekend Review

Syrian artist Muteea Murad's palette is full of vibrant colours and his paintings exude energy and optimism. But they also have a spiritual and introspective feel. Murad is regarded as one of the leading abstract artists in the region. His work is contemporary and experimental but deeply rooted in the traditions of classical Islamic art and architecture. His latest work, titled *Through the Looking Glass*, is inspired by the beautiful glass mosaics adorning the ancient buildings in Damascus, where he lives. The colourful paintings reflect the many facets of the city and of life itself.



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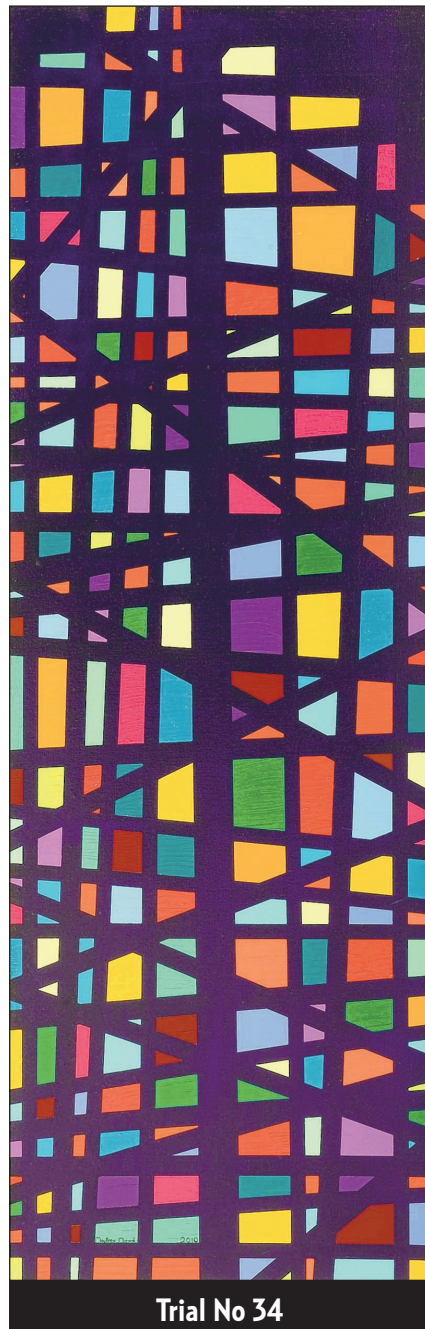
Interestingly, Murad first made his mark in the Arab art world as a figurative artist. The dark, brooding, monotone portraits of his early years spoke of human angst and despair. They touched a chord with viewers and he quickly became a well-known name in the region. But then, four years ago, he boldly changed his artistic direction to experiment with abstract art and especially with colour.

"I started my career with figurative art because that was the mainstream art of the time in Syria. By 2006, I had reached a stage where important art institutions and collectors were buying my work and I had great support from the ministry of culture. I was fortunate to have fame, success and money at a young age but I did not feel fulfilled inside. I felt I had to move on to something that would help me express myself better," Murad says.

The desire for change was also influenced by the changes in his personal life. "I got married, had children and also began teaching art in a school where I enjoyed interacting with the children. My life was filled with happiness and positivity, which I wanted to share with everyone. I wanted to wipe out the sadness and negativity that existed in my earlier work and create paintings that reflected my new state of mind," he says.

Murad began this new journey by changing his palette. "I decided to concentrate mainly on colour — an element I had earlier neglected. Initially, I tried adding colour to my figurative paintings. But I soon realised emotions can be expressed more directly and strongly in the absence of tangible images," he says.

All his paintings during this period were labelled *Trial* to indicate his experimental state of mind. The artist continues to use this title for his paintings to say that he is still in the process of discovering abstract



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art and experimenting with it.

Murad juxtaposes geometric shapes, arabesque patterns, lines, planes and contrasting colours to create complex compositions that have beauty and depth. His work is influenced by Russian Constructivism and Abstract Expressionism, and by contemporary Arab artists such as Mustafa Fat'hi. But the foundation of his work is traditional Islamic art. "I believe that all contemporary abstract art is derived from traditional Islamic art, which was based on logical and scientific thought. In my experiments I have avoided the repetitiveness of traditional Islamic patterns and focused on their intrinsic rhythm and spirituality," he says.

In fact, the artist always listens to recitals of the Quran while painting. "No other music has such an elevated sense of rhythm. Listening to the Quran clears my mind and takes me to a higher level of consciousness that puts me in the right frame of mind to create," he says.

The artist often spends an entire month on one painting. Every line, form and colour is carefully thought out, and before he starts he has a good idea of how the finished work should look. For instance, he wanted to capture a sense of rhythm in the large triptych titled *Trial 42 — Damascus Lines*. "Here I have tried to combine physics and art by using the relationship between speed, distance and time. The vertical lines, colours and shapes are placed so that as the eyes of

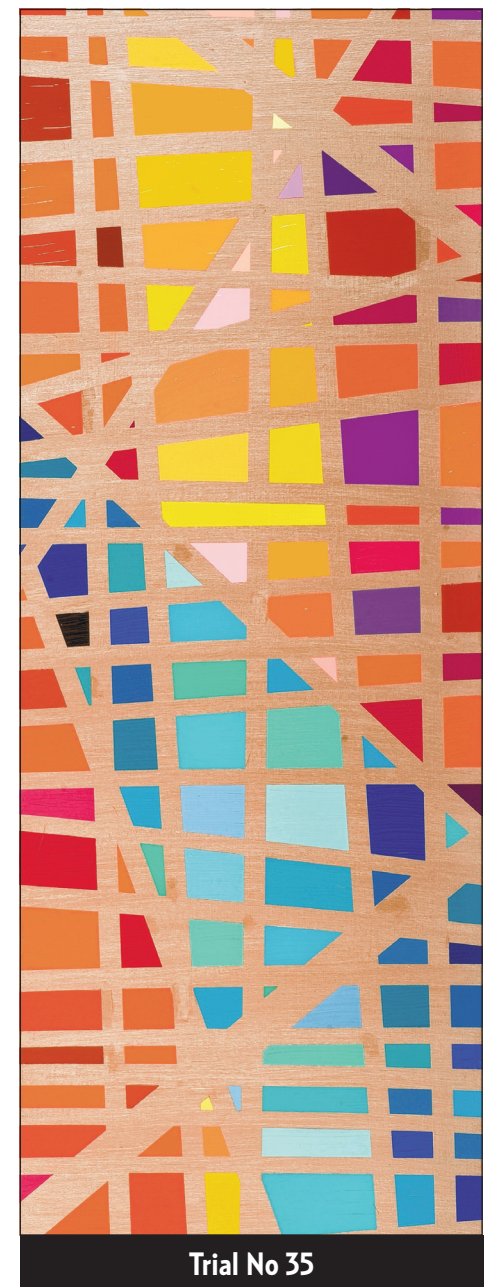
the viewers travel across the canvas, they can feel the rhythm of different notes and musical pieces," he says. Other "trials" use a play of shapes and lines to capture enchanting views of Damascus by night and at sunrise.

But as always, the most striking feature of his paintings is the colours he uses. "I am extremely interested in studying the pri-

mary, secondary and tertiary relationships between different colours. Unlike most artists, who look for harmony between the colours on their canvas, I deliberately use sharply contrasting hues to express myself," he says.

Murad's paintings are a visual treat. But on a deeper level, they reflect the rhythm of our daily lives, the rhythm of the seasons and the many colours and facets of life and nature. They are ultimately about man's relationship with his surroundings and with God. "My creativity stems from a spiritual base and the main message of my work is that of peace," he says.

Through the Looking Glass will run at the Ayyam Gallery, DIFC until June 17.



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