

Safwan Dahoul lends his muse wings in his latest series of works — freeing her from isolated spaces and imbuing in her a keen awareness

BY JYOTI KALSI
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Safwan Dahoul began his *Dream* series in 1982 and is still “dreaming”. Over the past three decades, the Syrian artist has chronicled his experiences, his feelings and his personal and artistic evolution through a series of haunting black-and-white-paintings — all titled *Dream*. The central character in these paintings is a woman. Pensive, isolated and confined in a small space, she dwells in an inner universe far from the real world.

But his latest work and the title of his first show in Dubai, *A Real Dream*, suggest a different frame of mind. Dahoul’s canvases are now very large. And his heroine has emerged from the suffocation and isolation of her cramped existence to soar in the sky and view the world with wide open eyes.

The sheer size of the paintings, his black, white and grey palette and the aesthetic composition of every piece make a dramatic impact. The frail, inward-looking woman from his earlier paintings now appears as a strong, larger-than-life presence.

In many of the canvases she is depicted as an angel with wings and a halo, soaring in the sky, looking down at the twinkling lights of Damascus below. The emphasis on her wide open eyes in *Dream 48*, the wings attached to her eyes in *Dream 51* and the yin and yang symbol in her eye in *Dream 53* indicate her keen awareness of the reality



Two works from Safwan Dahoul’s ‘A Real Dream’ series. “Every viewer is free to interpret my work in their way,” Dahoul says

Canvas of liberation

around her.

“To me, painting this series is like writing my memoirs, and my characters and compositions have changed with the times just as I have. Earlier I thought of dreams as something romantic. But in present times, the reality surrounding us is so harsh and hurtful that you cannot ignore it even while dreaming. So this series is about dreaming while being aware of reality,” the artist says.

Being a memoir, Dahoul’s work is deeply personal. In 2008, he lost his wife, who was also an accomplished artist. Since then he has paid tribute to her memory by numbering his *Dream* paintings. The early paint-

ings from that period portray the pain and suffering the couple went through as she succumbed to cancer. In that context, the latest series could be interpreted as an acceptance of her death and a sign of healing with the passage of time. Perhaps he now sees her happy and liberated from the suffering and limitations of human existence and as an angel watching over him.

“Every viewer is free to interpret my work in their own way. But I never think about philosophy and meaning when I am painting. I just want to express myself spontaneously and in a visually aesthetic manner. The woman in my paintings represents me

and she is changing because I have changed with time. My emotions are so strong that I needed a huge space to express them and when I started using bigger canvases I felt a great sense of freedom, which you can see in my latest work. In my earlier paintings, the solitary figure depicted every aspect of a being.

“But in these paintings I have the space to use the angel wings and the halo to depict the body, mind and soul as separate elements,” Dahoul says.

A *Real Dream* will run at Ayyam Art Centre, Al Quoz, until November 30.

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