



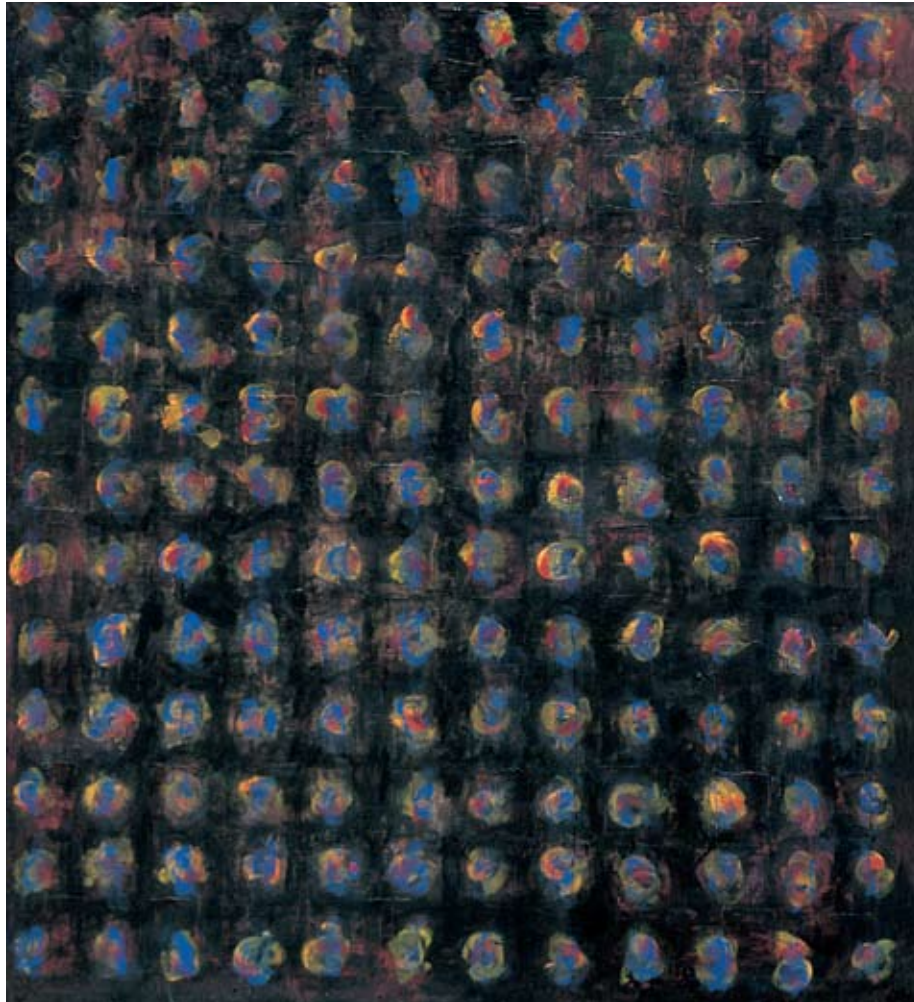
thai
hela

a quest for synergy



profile

Thaier Helal follows his instincts. He has relied upon this unfaltering sixth sense since first realising his destiny as an artist. From humble beginnings in a small village on the outskirts of the Syrian capital to his current home in the United Arab Emirates, Helal has learnt to use his inner voice as the guiding force behind his creative expression.



TEXT BY NADA AL-AWAR
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW LAZARUS AND COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Previous pages
(Detail) Untitled. 1997. Acrylic
on canvas. 200 x 225 cm.
Private collection, Dubai.

Facing page
Untitled. 2005. Mixed media
on board. 200 x 200 cm.



Here is an artist who embraces experimentation, contemplation and repetition within a framework of focussed thought. For Thayer Helal, the whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts.

Helal speaks of his work as an “ongoing project”, a creative endeavour whose beginnings were spent in struggle and whose conclusion is still unknown. However, it is the bit in the middle that now concerns the painter - a period in which he feels he is maturing as an artist, and growing as a man. Perhaps in the near future, he will dare to take flight.

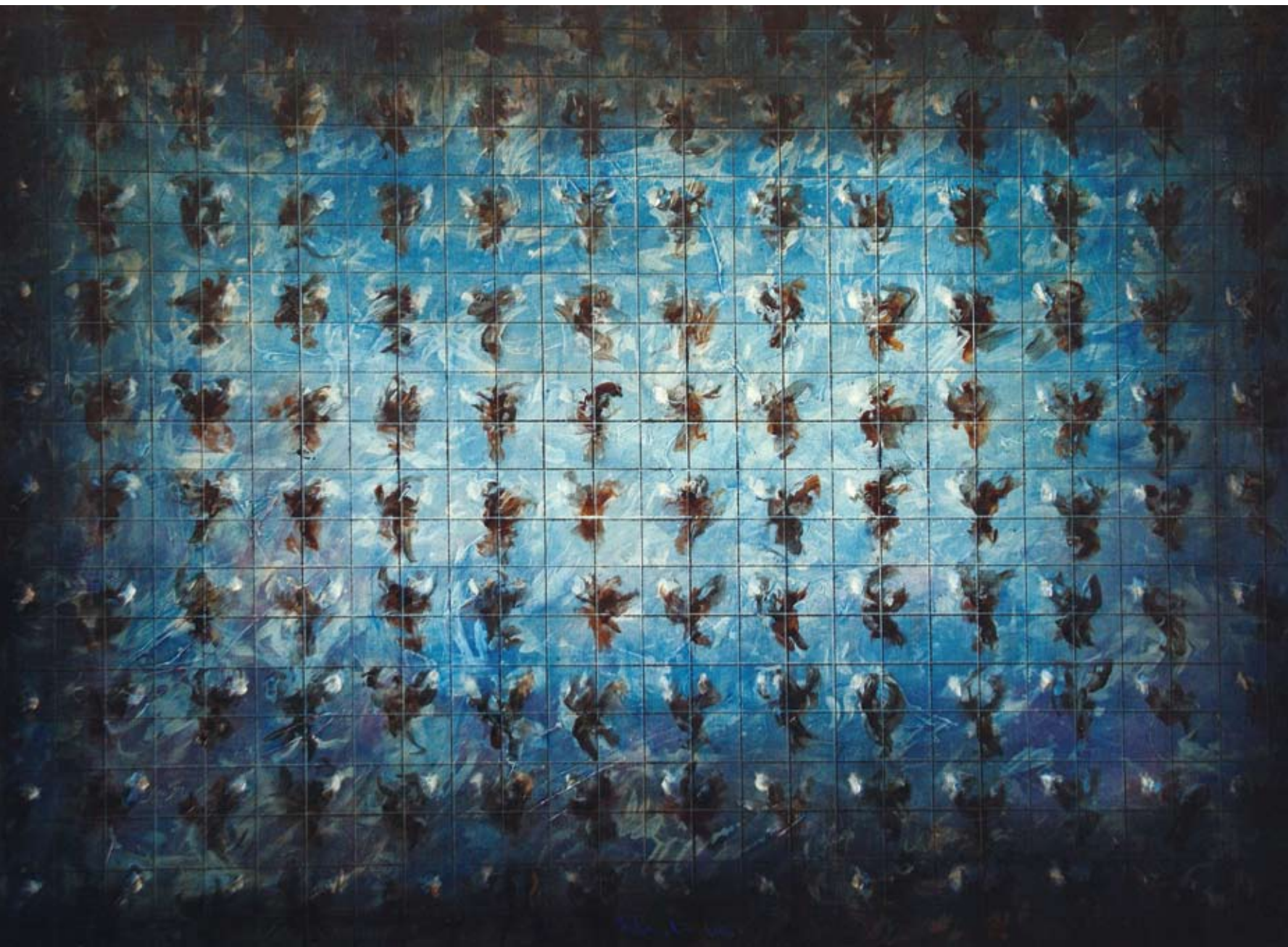
Born in Syria in 1967, Helal has lived in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for the past 13 years. This is where fortune brought him after he graduated from the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Damascus. Despite agreeing to continue his studies at the *Academie des Beaux Arts* in Paris, Helal eventually decided that he would attempt to make it as an artist on his own. “When I first announced to my parents that I wanted to be an artist, they were very sceptical about my ability to make a living,” says Helal. “I didn’t want to burden them with having to support me for another five years while I studied.”

Helal’s plan was to find something in his work that distinguished it from the rest and then proceed with it. “There was a lot of experimentation,” he recalls. “I worked very hard and destroyed many paintings that I didn’t feel were right. I tried to go in the direction of the things that most resembled my inner self. I am naturally a calm and shy person and although I am organised in the way I do things, I also

have within me a measure of rebellion. I like to do things that require me to be courageous without being bold at the same time. I am by nature serious and I believe rebellion needs to have meaning and not just be a means of showing off.”

Helal’s attitude is not unlike his paintings, for in them too is a certain doggedness, a structured spontaneity, and unique patterns that repeat themselves within invisible squares again and again like a meditative mantra. For Helal, the way to artistic fulfilment is clearly marked with contemplation. By stripping away all ornamentation and connecting the disparate parts, one may reach the essence of the whole.

Helal says that the concept behind his work is spiritual rather than physical or material in nature. It is similar to the graceful movements of whirling dervishes who spin endlessly around, following the same circle, moving around the same centre until they feel themselves rising towards heaven. “A Sufi mystic utters a sentence and continues to repeat it and meditate upon it until his spirit is uplifted and he is able to make direct contact with God,” Helal explains. “Although I am not a Sufi, my paintings are reminiscent of Sufi thinking; of the recognition of the power of repetition in different ways in order to convey different meanings. In repeating a sentence or a pattern and meditating upon it, one is confirming it and giving it a new, inner meaning that is beyond the superficial. “My work also has an outer appearance that is manifested in terms of form and colour. Its essence, its inner significance, is in the signs and the symbols that lead you to a particular thought. With these shapes, I express different thoughts which each



viewer sees from his or her own perspective. There are no limitations as to the meaning behind what you see because a painting can mean different things to different people.”

Helal's distinctive motifs are visual rhythms that delineate the significance of the pauses between the notes in a melody. His paintings, which are at least on the surface somewhat mathematical in nature, suggest this. After all, without emptiness and without silence, there can be no perception of the infinite. Helal says that when he compares the patterns that he creates with aspects of his own

personality, he sees that his paintings mimic his own life. The empty spaces within each work remind him of the place where he grew up - vast and bare and steeped in history. Helal comes from a tiny village North of Damascus near the ancient Christian town of Maaloula, a place that is dug into the mountainside and where the residents still speak Aramaic, believed to have been the native language of Jesus. His upbringing made him aware early on in life that Arab culture has many influences, some of them non-Islamic. “I also realised only after I left my village just how much the surrounding environment influenced my work. It is an infinite landscape, a place where one cannot help but have a strong

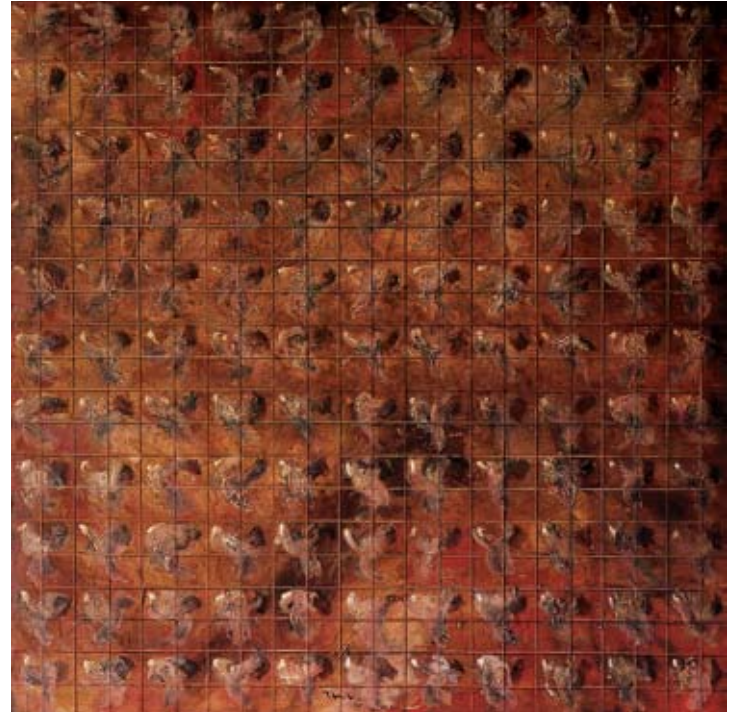
Facing page:
Untitled. 2005. Acrylic
on canvas.
200 x 150 cm.

(Detail) Untitled. 2005.
Acrylic on canvas.
150 x 150 cm.



“ There are no limitations as to the meaning behind what you see because a painting can mean different things to different people. ”

profile



relationship with nature. I try to bring out this aspect of my background in my work, whether in repetitive patterns or in the spaces inbetween. I also choose colours that reflect that environment - black and grey, white and brown, earthy colours - that help bring out the idea that I am trying to convey.”

If Helal is intensely conscious of the impact his birthplace has had on his work, he is also willing to admit that being an Arab artist is a constant struggle. “How do you make a living in the Arab world, whether you’re a painter, a poet, a musician or a dancer? In the West, artists receive help from governments and various organisations as part of an overall strategy to promote creative endeavour. Here, although we have artists who are equal to those in the West, there is no one to support them. Artists live like adventurers, they are risk-takers because there are no institutions to support them and allow them to go on with their work. You’re always on your own so that even if you know what direction you want to go

in, you’re never certain what obstacles you might face in the future.”

Despite the difficulties, Helal has received critical acclaim for his work, both in the Arab world and abroad. He received second prize for painting at the Sharjah Biennial in 1997, and won

the Distinct Art Award from the Emirates Art Society in 1996 as well as the Portrait Award from the Abu Dhabi Cultural Centre in 1995. More recently, Helal was awarded first prize at the 2005 Tehran Biennial where artists from over 30 countries took part. He has also participated, both as a painter and as an installation artist, in numerous exhibitions in the UAE as well as in Egypt, Lebanon, Bangladesh and Belgium. And although he counts himself fortunate for having a full exhibition schedule for the coming year, Helal says he does not allow himself to become too preoccupied with where he will be in the future.

“I’m more concerned about producing work and doing what I need to achieve,” says Helal. “Sometimes I stop and ask myself why I am always struggling and running around for the sake of my art but I soon find myself working again. I don’t worry about becoming a famous painter or about being in a particular place. If one is truly serious about one’s work, then these things come by themselves.” □

Facing page
Left: (Detail) Untitled. 1997.
Acrylic on canvas. 200 x 180 cm.

Right: Untitled. 2005. Acrylic on
canvas. 150 x 150 cm.

Right: (Detail) Untitled. 2005.
Acrylic on canvas. 150 x 150 cm.

See Thaier Helal in Senegal this December as part of ‘Cent Livres - Objets pour Senghor’, a celebration of the life of one of the country’s leading poets.

