

Safwan Dahoul: “Narcissism is a must for a successful artist.”

When one meets Safwan Dahoul, you feel that you have known this person for quiet some time. He is very polite, to the extent where you feel embarrassed because you are unable to reciprocate. Down to earth, he is also surprisingly a very shy person; just like his paintings. They evoke their creator’s feelings exactly, whether it is sorrow, joy, pain, or all of the above. This artist became number one in Syria through patience, and, he would say, luck. Dahoul, whose first solo exhibition in two years begins this month in Damascus, was born in the city of Hama in 1961. He studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus University and graduated in 1983. He then went to Brussels to complete his graduate education in 1997 and currently works as an instructor at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus. FW: met with Dahoul in Damascus where he passionately described his career, referring to his art gallery almost as if it were his lover. He gives his audience the chance to reflect on his works, and the characters within them that stare back at the viewer. Smiling, he comments, “Silence is the best of words.”

Kareem Shukr

What encourages you to stand in front of a canvas to draw?

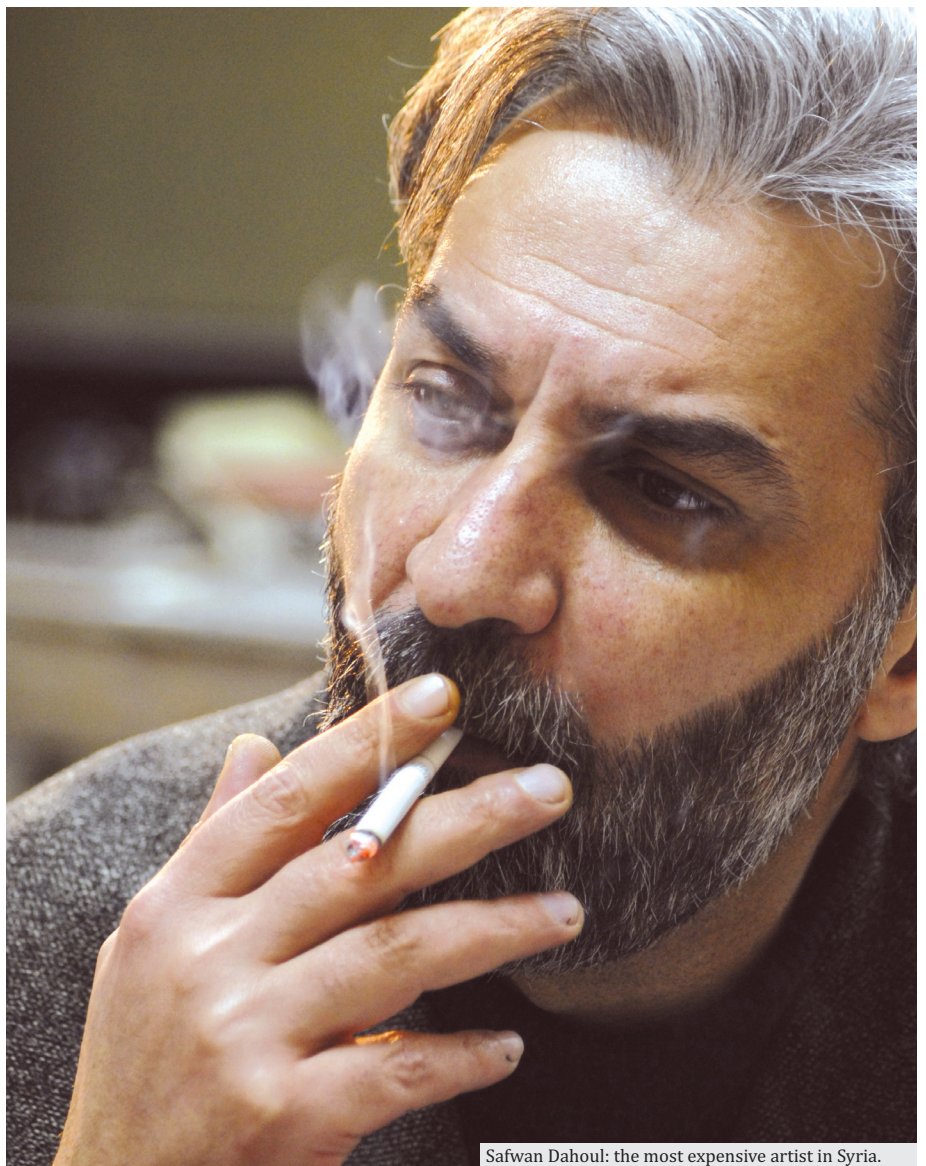
Daily events, which can be related to any matter; an event or even a simple thought. I greatly enjoy, for example, drawing playing cards and ask myself how many paintings I can draw based on a deck?

That is one reoccurring theme in all your works. What does it take to make you change?

Originally, I never wanted to draw just one topic. It was by pure coincidence and started nearly 25 years ago when I drew a painting called “Hulum” (Dream). I found it nice to name the two consecutive paintings “Hulum” as well. And until today I still draw paintings entitled “Hulum.” My only regret is that I did not number the paintings, to remember the chronology of dreams. I never once thought that I would continue to draw the same subject matter but I am satisfied with what I am doing and until the now I still discover new things to paint. I often ask myself, “What is expected from a painter? Do I have to prove my ability to draw different subjects? Or do I carry a burden larger than diverse topics”?

What’s the secret with the Pharaonic eyes? Is it their beauty? Or is it the strong expressionism that they carry?

Generally speaking, I love Pharaonic art. The issue of Pharaonic eyes was also a coincidence. I work on empty space around shapes, and had started to draw a human being’s face in the form of a mask. And in masks, as you



Safwan Dahoul: the most expensive artist in Syria.

know, there is always room for the eyes. I realized that if I work around the eyes a little bit, they will resemble Pharaonic eyes. Since I already like Pharaonic art, I borrowed from it in my paintings.

The eyes in your works are dreamy and shy, despite the strong lines that surround them, which express a strong personality. Why is that?

I feel that eyes express human beings in a very effective manner. Honestly I do not intend to be very precise when it comes to the edges and lines of the eyes in my work. It is this shape, however, which leads to how the hands will look like, and the body itself. A certain body will only fit with certain eyes.

When one observes your paintings, they are close to perfection. Do you plan your works in advance before starting to draw?

I plan around 10% of any painting and don't prefer any further preparation. Usually when I do prepare in advance, I fail.

Why so much emphasis on human beings?

Previously, I said that I was "painting" my biography. I draw myself in the form of a man, woman, or table. Human beings are substance matter. It is the right of every artist, musician, or writer to make use of it. It is very important to do so, as a vehicle to come across with a certain idea. Artists are free to draw human beings in any form that they desire. This has become one of my constant themes, something I must uphold.

Has the increased demand for your work led you to simply produce more paintings?

It is impossible for me to create something that I do not feel or I have not lived. I cannot create things to draw. Either way, however, I go to my gallery on a daily basis. The difficult days are when I am unable to draw. I often say to myself, "I will not wait for inspiration to come to me. I will go to my gallery, not knowing what is in store for me." It's not about supply and demand; it is my duty to paint.

Your work has recently been breaking records at auctions and you have become the most expensive Syrian artist. How does it feel to reach such an honorable rank?

I can give you two answers to this question. One is about the beauty and importance of success and what it provides an artist, both for my morale



Dahoul: "It is my duty to paint!"

and financially. The second answer, which is more important, is that this success has not changed anything inside of me. Not a single thing!

Do you fear narcissism?

Absolutely not. Narcissism is not bad if it strikes a successful person. Love for one's self is needed at any rate, and this reflects itself in a positive manner: one's love for one's work. It results in a passion to produce more work.

In many of your works, you concentrate on women. The women you depict are sad and lonely. During your last exhibition you displayed paintings of women with no hair. Why is that?

As I mentioned I base my work on human beings. Any artist is bound to paint a woman at one point or another. Each artist can choose what he wants to paint.

How is an artist affected during times of crisis? Do the methods of drawing and expression change?

Dealing with crisis is part of continuity, or else, artists start to repeat themselves. When an artist is affected by what is happening around him,

he can produce new works that are always changing, just like he is during times of crisis. An artist is part of his surrounding environment. He cannot but participate and be active in this domain.

Who is your favorite plastic artist?

I like the works of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, and I sometimes envy her. I also like the works of Jerome Boch and Bruegel. I am constantly following up the development of plastic arts.

Do you listen to any music while painting?

Music is good for me, while painting. Currently I am listening to the Italian Opera singer Luciano Bocelli.

Do you have a soul-mate; an artist or musician?

I would say Baganini. I like his life story and the ideas that he fostered. It would be difficult, however, for me to imagine myself instead of him.

You once said, "Syria has no colors."

What exactly did you mean by that?

Due to nature, the East was once known for its colors. Matters changed, however, and we no longer accept color. On the contrary, we now unconsciously fear color. Look at the streets. They are colorless. So are the trees; they are now brown instead of green. People nowadays only wear dark or neutral colors. I have not seen anybody lately wearing a red or yellow shirt. Our souls have been affected to such an extent that we now fear color. Personally I have been affected by this change and I myself feel colorless.

Why is there an abundance of sand tones in your paintings?

I have been asked numerous times about this, to the extent where I began asking myself the same question. I eventually got convinced that this is what makes me unique. I am not at ease with a minimal amount of colors, and through my paintings I always search for the minimal and simplest things. Simplifying things does not mean reduction. On the contrary, one can say very much, by saying very little.

How do you build your relationship with your students?

The new generation is excellent indeed and these young people are presenting work that is finer than what we (my generation) presented at the same age. This makes teaching them all the more important. I am very proud of the relationship I have with my students, who might actually inspire me more than I inspire them.