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After searching for days down every back-alley of the winding old city of Damascus, I eventually found myself in a little makeshift slaughterhouse surrounded by cages of fowl

- New cook in town, Mark Dougherty



We asked Ayyam Gallery's Oussama Diab...

Why is Da Vinci's Mona Lisa wearing a gas mask?

By Ruba Saqr
Photography by Nabil Nijem

Oussama Diab is sitting on a cloud and watching the world's drama go by. He observes the repercussions of politics on humanity at large, and not only on countries or leaders. Concerned with the big picture, the latter is telling him the Mona Lisa will soon (hopefully not) be wearing a gas mask like the rest of us. He sees a looming nuclear war, an Armageddon. As an artist, he prophesizes destruction, yet leaves a spot for hope in most of his artworks.



A few days ahead of his solo exhibition at Ayyam Gallery Dubai (January 25 to February 27), Oussama Diab was getting ready to enter the skyscrapers of the Gulf city. “I don’t know what to expect,” he told *Forward Magazine*. With a worry-free smile, he continued, “but the good thing is I don’t have to worry about anything except arriving there ahead of the opening; everything related to logistics, PR and set-up, is being taken care of by Ayyam Gallery.”

Almost three years have passed since Diab signed a contract with Ayyam. From jumping from “tent to tent,” the Damascus-based Palestinian artist is now hopping from “cloud to cloud,” thanks to the fact he can enjoy his life’s passion (painting) in a fulltime career path; secure and profitable.

But this personal-level sense of security is far from being the case when it comes to Diab’s insistent worries about humanity.

“If the US and Iran continue escalating the nuclear file, we will soon have a large-scale nuclear war. Who will be the looser in a scenario like that? Humanity at large, of course,” Diab mused. “I am not with one country against the other. It’s a lose-lose situation either way; whether this camp wins or the other.”

In Diab’s mind “everyone will suffer, including art pieces like the Mona Lisa.”

Born in Syria to Palestinian parents in 1977, Diab went into different painting phases, until he arrived to the point where he started marrying two schools of art; expressionism with fauvism, the latter being an art movement launched

in 1905 characterized by bright colors and simple forms.

In his thought-provoking painting, “The New Mona Lisa,” Diab proposes a gloomy outlook for humanity’s future, yet leaves a space for hope by using light pastel hues, and a considerable white space, with a bit of “naïve” child-like strokes, that characterize the school of fauvism.

“Art is a change wagon, it can influence industries; it can influence the course of humanity. I paint so maybe someone will see what I am seeing and try to stop the nonsense. I am not with-

out hope; it is what keeps everyone going. As famous Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous once said, ‘We are all governed by hope.’”

Diab graduated from the Faculty of Fines Arts in Damascus in 2002. Today he is happy to be experiencing “this kind of luxury; a dream-come-true for many young artists who had no idea Damascus would host a professional gallery house, like Ayyam Gallery.” ■



Ayyam Gallery’s first Beirut auction

On January 28, Ayyam Gallery presented “The 1st Beirut Sale,” an in-house auction comprising of around 50 lots that were held at its *Solidaire* outpost in downtown Beirut, the gallery said in a press release.

Honoring the country’s longstanding tradition of art collecting and connoisseurship, this groundbreaking event helped in establishing an exciting facet of the local art scene by carving out a new network through which Arab art can be appreciated and valued in the Levant. In recent years, Beirut has witnessed the founding of a number of landmark initiatives in the arts, an indication that it remains a dynamic hub for culture that continues to grow. The 1st Beirut Sale will build upon and further this momentum.

Of equal significance, it will also

reveal the benefits of organizing these types of sales domestically, emphasizing that the key to developing the region as an international art market place lies in the hands of its home-grown art spaces and institutions. The 1st Beirut Sale is part of Ayyam’s long-term strategy of facilitating the international recognition of Arab art. Confirming its commitment to the region’s vibrant art scene, the gallery continues its mission of promoting some of the most talented artists working in the region today.

The collection of art that was showcased featured Ayyam’s roster of leading contemporary artists such as Safwan Dahoul, Samia Halabay, and Nadim Karam. Moreover, it has sought out works by other seminal figures including Paul Guiragossian, Samir Rafi, Mustafa Fathi and Nazem Al Jaafari.