

Wandering inward

Chris Lord heads to Damascus to meet **Mouteea Mourad**, one of Ayyam's rising talents

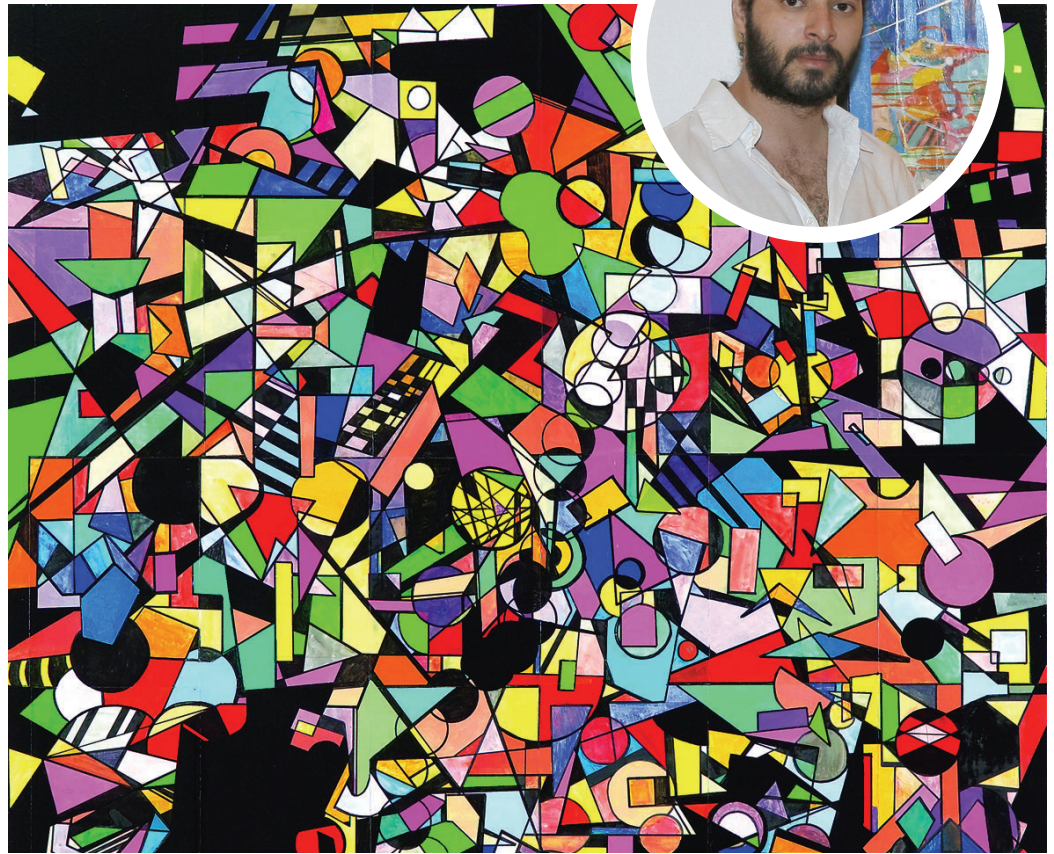
Driving to meet Mouteea Mourad in a peaceful, dusty suburb high above Damascus, we had imagined a quite different artist to the one who opened the door. We had been expecting a hipster, someone far more urbane than the monk-like figure in a black vest and boots that greeted us.

But Mourad is quite unique in Ayyam Gallery's roster. His works are pure abstraction and stand in contrast to many of Syria's other young artists, with their obsessions of texture, figuration and age.

Beginning with three harmonious swathes of colour, Mourad lays tape across his canvas. He forms squared segments, which are then individually painted. Hoping to balance these segments of differing colour, the tape forms planes and dimensions within the canvas. When the tape is removed, the harmony of colour should remain. At their most successful, his artworks have the rising and falling contours of a landscape within them. They appear like a stained glass window, about to explode, captured at the very second that its shards of colour disperse in a flurry.

Stepping into Mourad's studio, lit by a searing striplight, the Syrian artist shows us around some of the new pieces he's working on for his first solo show in Dubai next year. 'A part of the exhibition will be dedicated to artists that I like. One of them is Mostafa Fathi,' he explains and points to a collage of his own pieces overlaid with enigmatic marks and symbols reminiscent of Fathi's style. Another of Ayyam's artists, Fathi, who died earlier this year, painted organic motifs inspired by the seven years he wandered through the Syrian countryside, where he explored the soil, the mountains and the movements of the Bedouin. 'Fathi's paintings touched me, as did Paul Klee's works.' Behind him, a large work hints at the abstracted brilliance of Klee's 'Castle and Sun'.

Mourad pulls out a stack of printouts, works by Klee and a couple by Kandinsky. 'I try to meet these two artists in one piece, in how the colours, lines and shapes play on the



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canvas.' The influence of Klee and Kandinsky has seeped far into Mourad's work but, grabbing his laptop, he surprises us. Clicking through a selection of debauched figures, we see out of proportion caricatures cast in a dismal grey wash of cynicism. 'I was not balanced in this early period of painting, I lived my life in total extremes,' he tells us. 'I was looking at shapes and portraiture I suppose, but I was not happy.'

When Mourad approached Ayyam for its Shabbab competition of new Syrian talent, he showed the gallery these figurative works. But in the seven months between registering and eventually submitting his piece he returned with a completely different style, akin to the abstracted works that now line the walls of his studio.

We ask what happened in those

seven months and why, despite some commercial success in the old style, he took a risk on this new motion. 'This new collection was about happiness,' he says. 'I started teaching art to children and got married. I found a new happiness and the colours reflect this. That's not to say this old period was not good, it was a part of what I'm working towards right now.'

The talk returns to Mostafa Fathi who, after his journeys around Syria, witnessed his own work change drastically. 'Mostafa Fathi went outside and did his research in nature. But I went inside, really, and explored.' Almost on cue, the distant wail of a Muezzin floats in through the window: 'The rhythm of the Muezzin singing to God is a walking rhythm,' Mourad says, tapping one-two on his knee. 'My work has become

a search for a completeness like that rhythm, for perfection. I try to transfer this perfection to the viewer.'

When Fathi's works changed, he said that his objective in art had also become more resolute. He described his art as a means to harmonise himself with the nature that fascinated him.

Mourad's unexplained admiration for Fathi has some links with this. It's as if, in that seven-month revelatory period, Mourad glimpsed some perfect, internal landscape. Perhaps these works, so abstract and caustic on first glance, reflect his search for a means to harmonise himself with that. It's a concentrated process, and it's what has given his studio its hermetic atmosphere. But in the contours and harmony of colour that, if a work is a success, remain when the tape comes off, maybe Mourad is once again walking a one-two rhythm through his own perfected, internal landscape.

Works by Mouteea Mourad at Ayyam Gallery (04 3236242). Until August 15