

Celebrates One Year Anniversary with Asaad Arabi



“It was a good coincidence,” admits Khaled Samawi when just a year ago he established what has now become one of the leading art galleries not only in Syria but in all of the Middle East. “I felt there was going to be a strong movement in the Middle Eastern art market. I had the location. I was collecting art. The artists who are sculpting are my friends, and we said let’s do it,” explains Samawi.

Ayyam Gallery certainly boasts an impressive résumé. In addition to hosting numerous exhibitions by Syrian and international artists including Youssef Abdelke, Safwan Dahoul, Arman, and Etienne, the gallery has started the Shabab Ayyam Project and held the First Ayyam Prize for Emerging Syrian Artists to encourage young, aspiring artists to pursue their dreams. “We are very proud of the project. It ignites the younger artists in their 20s. They see the light at the end of the tunnel, and they are not leaving their canvases behind to be taxi drivers or office employees,” says Samawi.

Ayyam Gallery celebrated its one year milestone with a special tribute to a successful and rewarding year, an exhibition and book signing by the great Syrian artist Asaad Arabi entitled Shameyat. The exhibition started on November 11 and lasted until November 29.

Anna Jozwik sat down with the world-renowned artist to get the inside scoop on his homecoming and latest project.

Can you tell us about your new collection? What is the theme and what inspired it?

Shameyat is a dedication to the Damascus Capital of Arab Culture 2008 celebration. I have been painting images of Damascus for the last 50 years; even my graduation project was about Damascus. In my opinion, the current collection is about coming back to the city I lived in for a while, and then it lived in me. I was in Paris for 35 years, and when I returned, I was filled with nostalgia for Old Damascus. I met Khaled Samawi who suggested I dedicate my paintings to next year’s celebration.

How long did you work on all the pieces?

Sometimes I work on a painting for four hours, but I spend four weeks preparing for it. Often I feel that there is something wrong with a painting so I work on it again and again.

What makes this collection special to you?

The conditions I worked in. I used to tour the Old City every night to recall my memories, so it was as if I was watching live paintings. I think this is what makes these paintings special.

Who are the people in your paintings?

In general they are Damascene personalities from my memories and what comes from your memory is what is important to remember whenever you are away from something you love. I remember many types of people from Damascus, for example those who were simple and liked to gossip and stay close to home. Even they had their own culture and traditions. The animals are another story. Humans and animals have a special relationship. I was really affected by the story of Kalila and Dumnah where animals exhibit human characteristics. Here the animals are the other, and we must deal with them as humans. Also, I respect nature and feel bad for extinct animals.

Can you please tell us about your style and technique as well as the bright colors you used in this collection?

When I was in Paris, I studied Islamic art for nine years and earned a Ph.D. I worked very hard as an artist for 50 years in Europe until I became a professional, visual laboratory. I studied the technique of turning musical tunes into lines on a painting, not an easy technique. What inspired this collection was traditional, Oriental music which had a stronger impact on me than the visual appearance of the Old City, which was somewhat damaged and lacked color. Damascene music is deeper and more unique than Parisian music, and I feel nostalgia for it. In general, as an artist I am concerned about showing modernity in a visual way more than turning my painting into a musical story. However, I try to express musical tunes as images by relating them to the colors I feel. Once someone asked a smart question, 'In such a dirty city how can you imagine all these colors?' I answered that this is how I picture my beloved city from my childhood; as a result it is an expression of how you imagine what's around you.

Can you comment a little bit on your artistic process in general? What inspires you?

My ideas come from the inside, from my intuition. I have Sufi beliefs, which are based on insight and live in my heart. I believe that what comes from the inside gives more meaning to a painting than just focusing on its exterior. Even when I was young, I used to see an object's inner beauty. So whenever I am ready to work on the inside, I start playing my Sufi music and keep working for four days, nonstop. At this point, I know where to use the right colors.

Tell us about the new book.

The book includes my biography as well as information about my paintings and how my art has developed over the years. The book also defends the unity of my style, since it has gone through many contradictory stages from the outside, but not from the inside.

Why did you decide to come to Damascus at this time and are you planning to stay permanently?

Now I live in Paris and have been a French citizen for the past forty years. There are things in Paris that keep me busy. I had an agreement with the Ayyam Gallery to hold the Shameyat exhibition and it would have been impossible for me to paint Damascus while being away from it. Therefore, my stay in Damascus was only to paint. Besides, I have a workshop in Damascus and visit twice a year for a month or two.

What are you working on now? Are you working on a new collection?

I don't work this way, I paint every day. It's like breathing. Whenever I'm not painting, I prepare to paint. year has definitely been the close knit family we have here...everybody caring for each other. This gives me the most joy," admits Samawi. "We have also brought professionalism and seriousness to the art scene, drastically raising the level of art in Syria," he says. "Externally, Syrian art is now part of the global art scene, and I think this trend is going to continue." Ayyam Gallery will continue making an impact on the Syrian and international cultural landscape with its rich exhibition program scheduled for next year to help celebrate Damascus as the capital of Arab culture.