

An abstract painting featuring a central, somewhat recognizable face rendered in white and grey tones. The face is surrounded by a dense, chaotic network of dark, expressive brushstrokes in black, grey, and brown. Patches of vibrant red and orange are scattered throughout the composition, particularly around the eyes and mouth. The overall texture is highly tactile, with visible brushwork and a sense of depth. The background is a complex interplay of these colors and textures, creating a rich, layered effect.

Asma Fayoumi
Untitled

ayyam  gallery

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4 June - 12 July, 2015

Ayyam Gallery Beirut

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Untitled

By Maymanah Farhat

Damascus-based artist Asma Fayoumi began her latest series of paintings in 2011 after the start of political unrest in Syria, where she has been a leading member of the local art scene since the 1960s. Fayoumi's new works—all titled *The Witness*—are rendered in her influential expressionist style yet include an additional sense of volume with textured areas of coarsely painted brushstrokes divided by sharp lines, creating tempests of colour.

In a 2015 painting, for example, a large face is depicted in the centre of the canvas. As the frenzied brushwork at its edges establishes abstracted space, areas of fading hues submerge the figure in a white light. Fine lines describe the features of Fayoumi's lone figure. Shown in profile, she bows her head in sorrow. A cloud of layered brushstrokes frames the female protagonist, causing her image to recede into the treated surface of the canvas. This contrast in tactility outlines two competing planes: the circular space occupied by the woman's face, which appears gradually drained of dimensionality; and the realm of violence detailed by aggressive marks, where paint becomes an outside force that rapidly consumes the composition. Amassed black, red, and brown blotches seem to push the figure into the eye of the cyclone while sections of the painting resembling earth and sky are obscured by symbolic water and wind. Disoriented by the woman's disjointed surroundings, the viewer struggles to stay fixed on her image. The act of witnessing thus becomes two fold, as one is brought into the chaotic space of Fayoumi's heroine.



The Witness (2015)—one of the most recent works of the exhibition—encapsulates the general theme of the series, although the artist's previous paintings are rendered with heavier uses of abstraction and stylisation. Fayoumi's characters alternate between women and children and couples. A handful of works show her recurring lead in a partial portrait as she stares directly at the viewer. The woman's dark, hollowed pupils are enlarged, resembling black holes, and one of the few solid areas of the compositions, becoming a focal point. The charcoal coloured cavities articulate the fear and dismay of her characters as they are trapped in an unrecognisable world.

Several paintings include figures with stone-like bodies as though belonging to the land or structures that surround them: mountainous terrain reminiscent of the region just outside Damascus or the sandstone and marble homes of its old city. A 2014 painting depicting a huddled woman uses this motif to situate its subject matter between different realms. Seated on the ground and leaning on what appears to be a boulder, she hides beneath a canopy of riotous brushmarks. Forming an arch of colour and lines that shelter the figure, this portion of the composition also includes a pair of eyes, signaling the presence of an onlooker and the passing of time. In a corner of the foreground, ancient houses and their recent inhabitants are rendered as barely visible images, signaling a separate temporality, flashes of memory that her heroine is unable to escape. The artist outlines overlapping space and time in a single picture by contrasting the dimensionality of each component: the figure is rendered with the greatest degree

of illusionism while the image of the guardian ‘witness’ signifies movement, and the small edifices appear in the distance.

Alongside a shift towards greater realism, volume as a conceptually employed formal component has resurfaced in the works of Syrian painters over the last four years. As artists have responded to Syria’s rapid disintegration, the need to bear witness has led to renewed approaches and a reconsideration of the possible functions of aesthetics.¹ Seeking to communicate with a wide audience as a significant portion of Syria’s population is externally displaced, artists have often remarked that the demands of representing the catastrophic are many and require new modes of figuration, particularly as depicting large-scale violence becomes a balancing act between documenting reality and ongoing aesthetic concerns.

Although this additional dimensionality adheres to the basic properties of illusionism in painting, Syrian artists have long understood that contemporary realism cannot rely on naturalism alone: the dominance of today’s media in everyday life must be negated or subverted in order to venture beyond what is viewed into that which is experienced. Given the fleeting temporality of digitised forms, one might argue that such challenges are universal. In places like the Arab world, however, where the instability and chaos of protracted (inter)national conflicts stunt modern societies, altered realities are not confined to pixelated images.



When Fayoumi began her artistic career in the 1960s, Syrian art was amidst a period of intense experimentation, as introspection and formal invention steered art movements of the time. While training at the University of Damascus' Faculty of Fine Arts, Fayoumi developed an abstract painting style and concentrated on the principles of painting as form. Although the figure never left her canvases, she approached her subject matter with the aim of deconstructing forms, and described scenes as interacting shapes, colours, and lines. With the political setbacks of 1967, she returned to figuration and, like many of her colleagues, argued that art must address reality in a tangible way. Combining abstraction with figuration while emphasising the tactility of the medium, she arrived at her own form of expressionist painting.

Since the mid twentieth century, a notable characteristic of Syrian art has been the emergence of individual styles despite the unifying aesthetic of a specific school. Fayoumi's experience at the Faculty of Fine Arts was shared by a handful of painters who have retained aspects of this initial training in abstraction, including Asaad Arabi and Faek Dahdouh. For the artists who emerged in the Damascus art scene during that time, abstraction became a means to define the material and immaterial dimensions of space, often simultaneously. As form, abstraction serves a crucial spatial function of compositions, allowing the viewer to meditate on content as the artist directs their attention to metaphysical aspects of a scene, details that figuration alone cannot make visible.

Throughout her career, Fayoumi has used abstraction to suggest the experiential details that define a specific moment in time—that which shapes our perception of things through memory. This approach sets her apart from other Syrian artists, including those belonging to the second generation of abstract painters. In the artist's early paintings, her expressionist techniques describe the bond between a mother and her children, a summation of the emotive exchanges that occur as one is nurtured. Later works such as *Qana* (1998) and *Gaza* (2008) render recent massacres as the absence of defined space, or a void that remains empty. Fayoumi's latest works, although addressing the violence and destruction that now plagues Syria, portray this abyss as fragmented and existing across space and time. The artist seems to be asking: What lies ahead now that lives are shattered?

¹ For a detailed discussion of these developments see 'A Creative Upsurge; Syrian Art Today,' *Syria's Apex Generation* (Dubai: Ayyam Gallery, 2014).





Asma Fayoumi

(Jordan, born 1943)

From her early days of depicting Damascene scenes using colourist principles of abstraction to her more recent expressionist works that combine her signature style of layered and laboured figurative compositions, Asma Fayoumi has remained committed to depicting the world around her with fervent imagination.

Born in Amman, Jordan in 1943, Asma Fayoumi's formative artistic years occurred in the 1960s with the emergence of a particular school of Syrian abstraction that was led by the Italian artist and studio art instructor Guido La Regina. At the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Damascus she worked alongside peers who later became recognised as seminal artists, including Asaad Arabi, Faek Dahdouh, and Sakher Farzat. As such, her journey as a professional artist unfolded at one of the most critical periods of the regional art scene—when modernist schools first displayed evidence of a gradual transition into contemporary modes of representation and a charged political climate urged regional culture to address the call for social change.

A well-received solo show in Damascus in 1966 solidified Fayoumi's arrival on the local art scene, as it created a significant buzz. Since then she has been featured in countless solo and group exhibitions both at home and abroad and is acknowledged as a seminal female painter, one whose career has paved the way for subsequent generations of women artists. Today, Fayoumi's paintings are admired for their distinctive approach to depicting a range of subjects—from mythological figures to the stark realities of war, she freely reflects 'an explosion of internal struggle,' giving her work a profound sensitivity and intuition.

Asma Fayoumi's recent solo exhibitions include Ayyam Gallery Damascus (2008;2010) and Beirut (2011).

Works on Paper

























Paintings



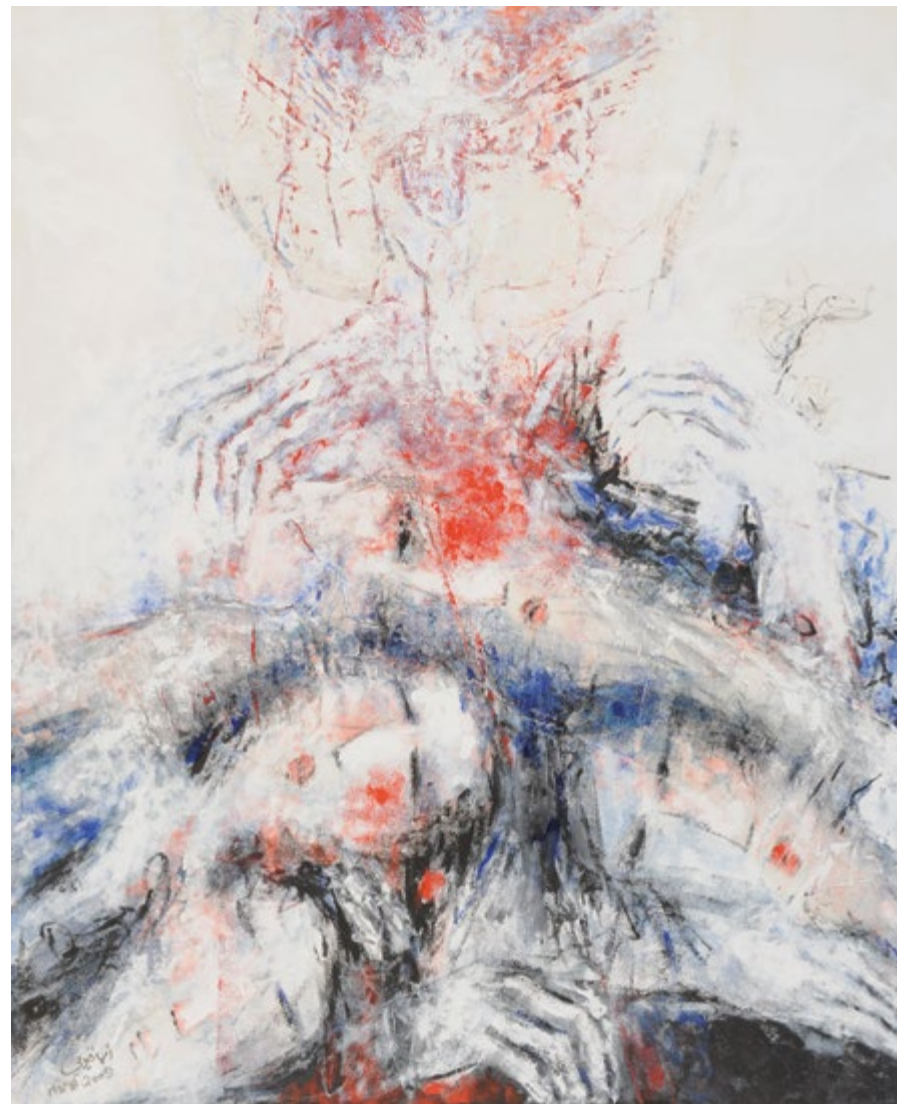
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2008
Acrylic on canvas
180 x 120 cm



Untitled
2009
Acrylic on canvas
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Untitled
2009
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Untitled
2009
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 122 cm



Untitled
2009
Acrylic on canvas
182 x 182 cm



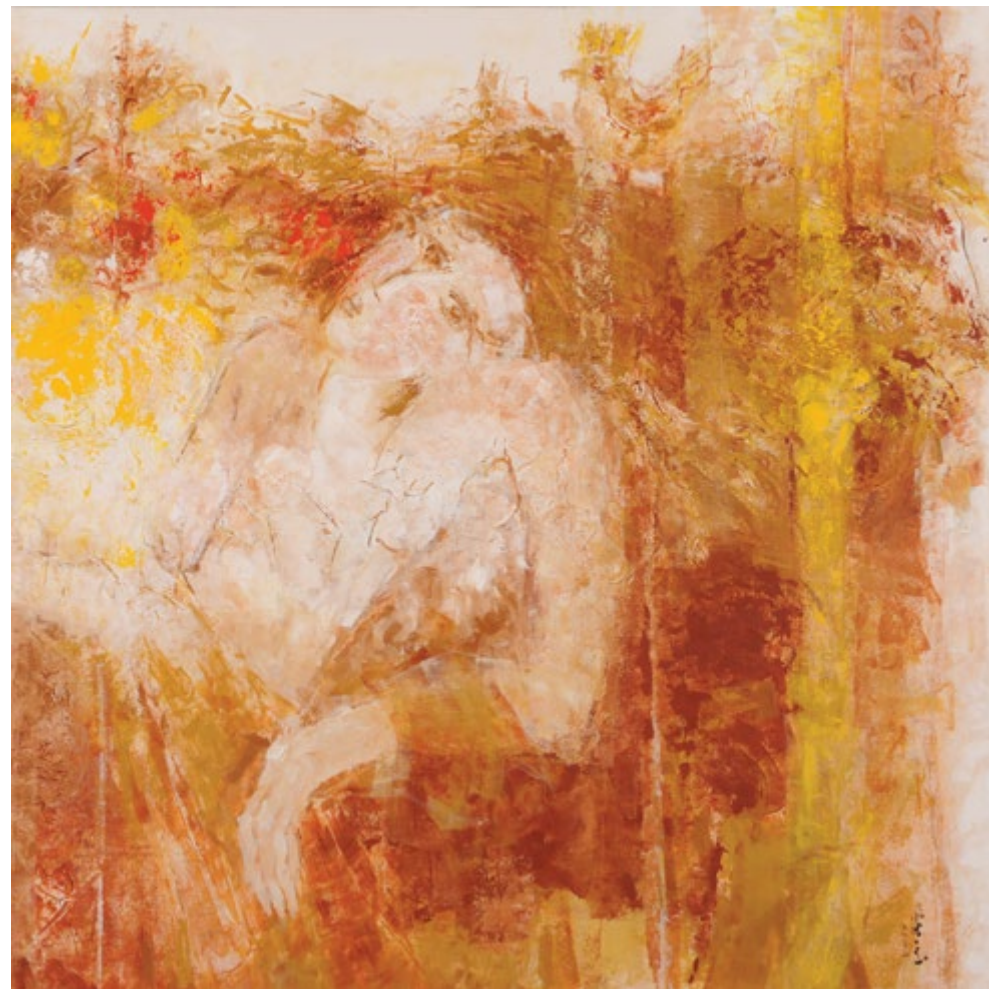
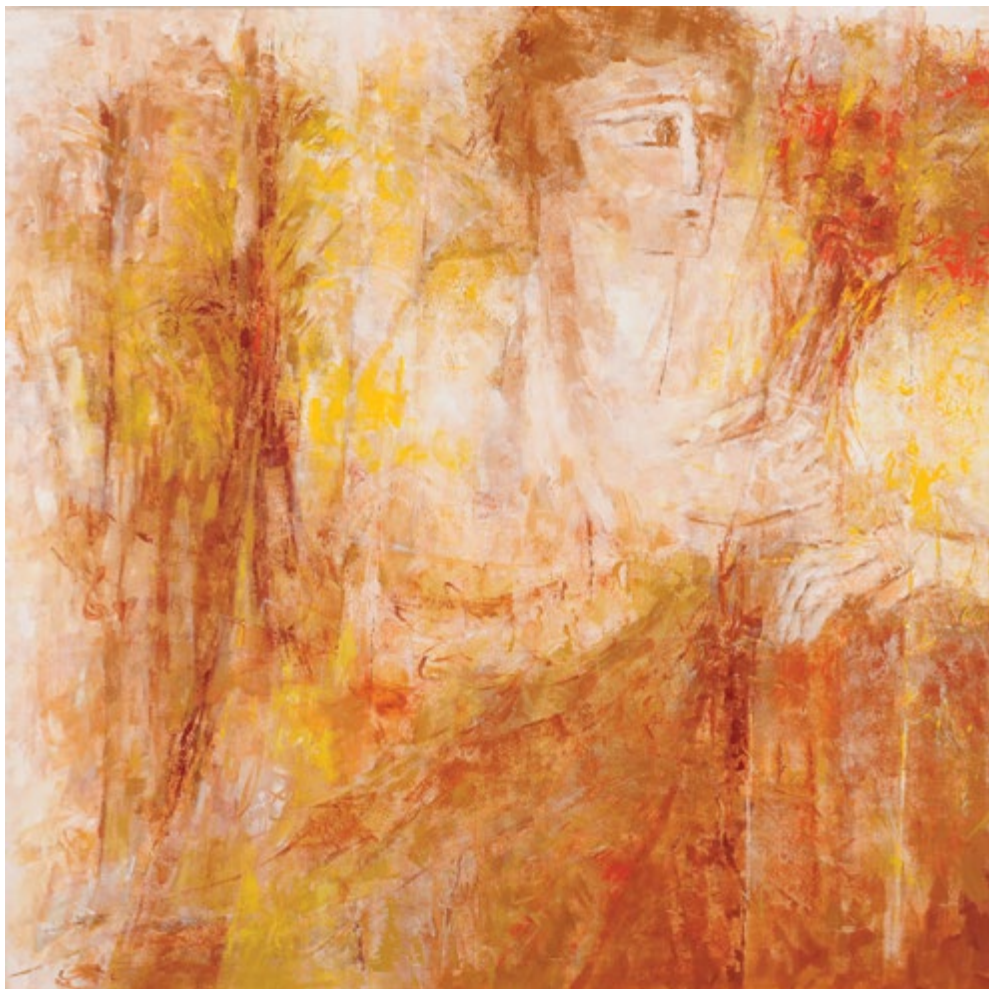
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Untitled
2009
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 122 cm



Untitled
2009
Acrylic on canvas
142 x 142 cm



Untitled
2009
Diptych, Acrylic on canvas
152 x 304 cm



Untitled
2010
Acrylic on canvas
152 x 152 cm



Untitled
2010
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 70 cm



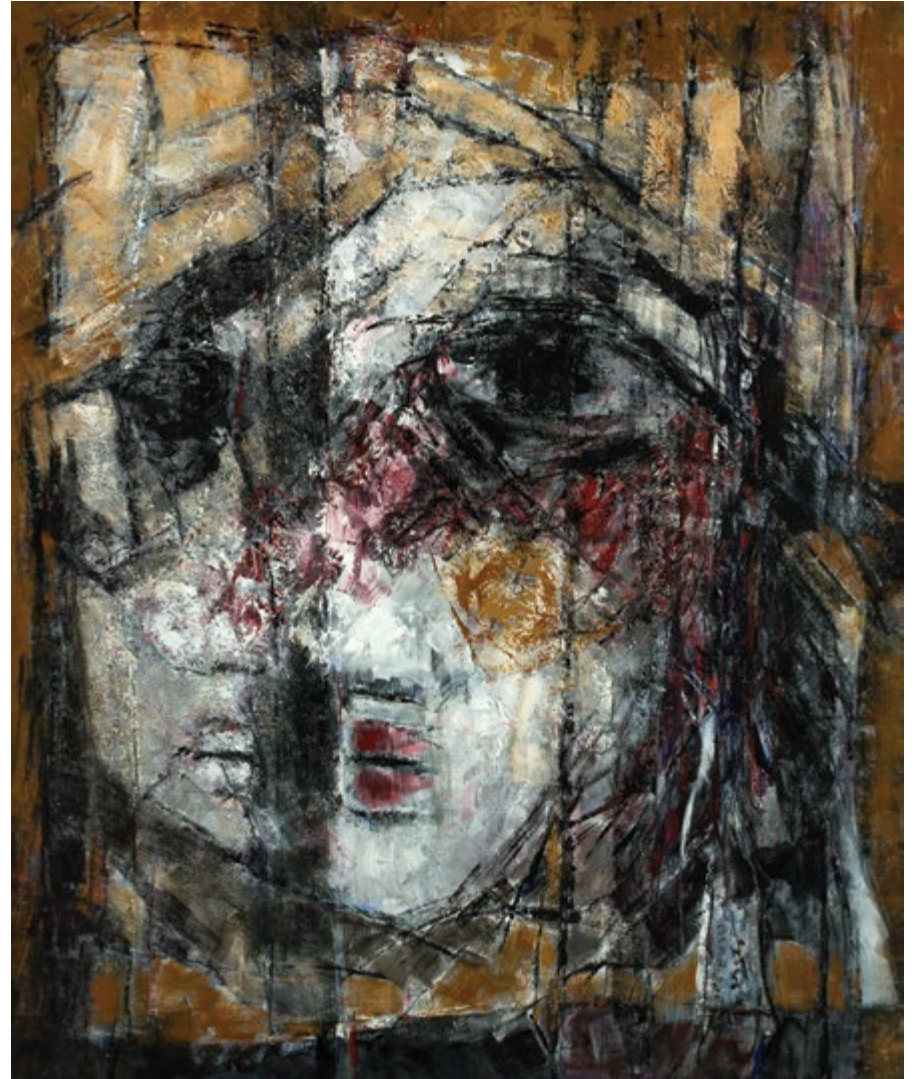
Untitled
2010
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 80 cm



Untitled
2010
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 80 cm



Untitled
2010
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152 x 152 cm



The Witness
2011
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 100 cm



Untitled
2011
Acrylic on canvas
152 x 152 cm



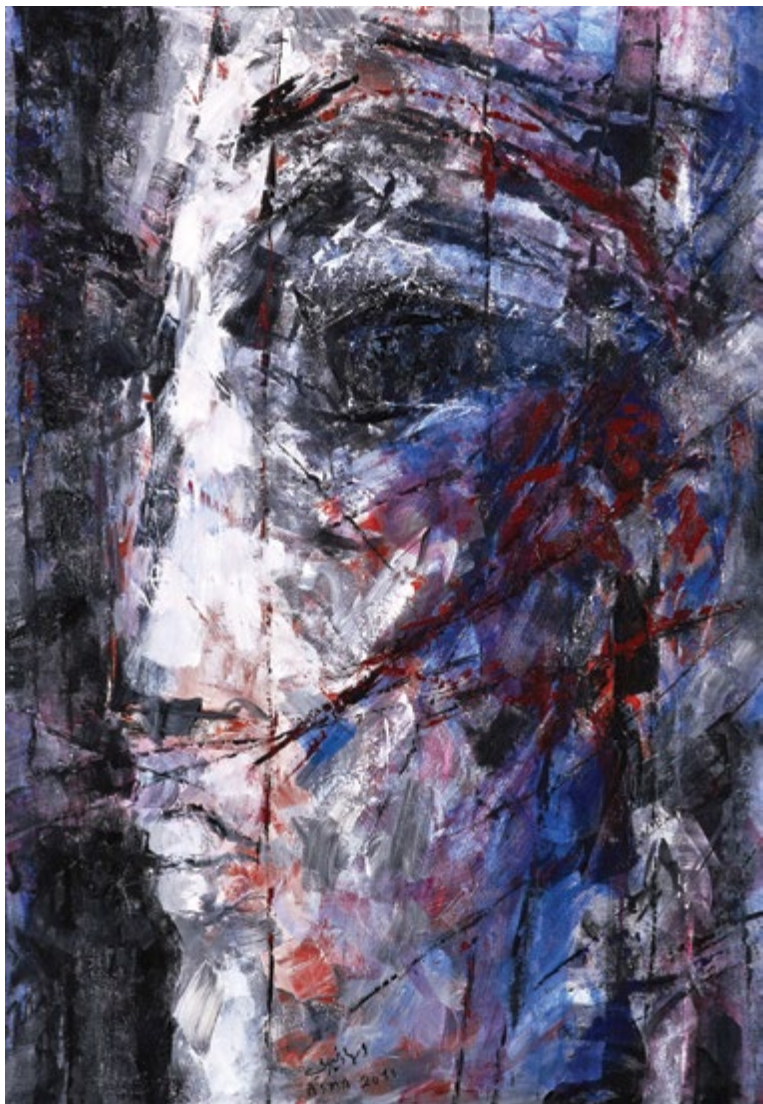
Untitled
2011
Acrylic on canvas
152 x 152 cm



Untitled
2011
Acrylic on canvas
180 x 180 cm



Untitled
2011
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 100 cm



Untitled
2011
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 70 cm



Untitled
2011
Acrylic on canvas
200 x 180 cm



Untitled
2012
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm



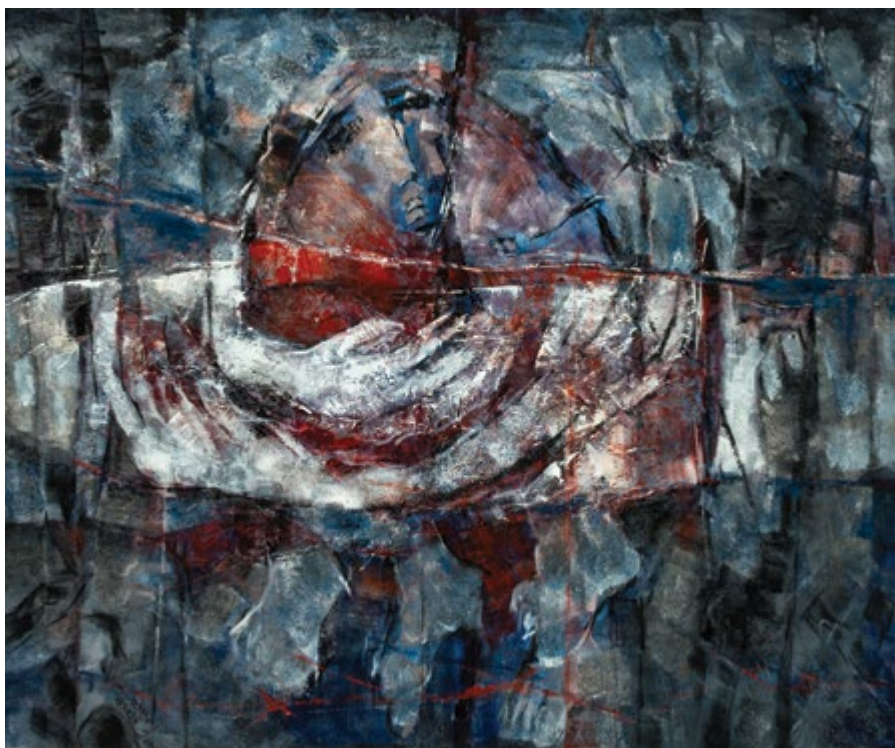
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2012
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm



Untitled
2012
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm



Untitled
2012
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm



The Witness
2013
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 120 cm



The Witness
2013
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 120 cm



The Witness
2014
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 100 cm



The Witness
2014
Acrylic on canvas
100 x 120 cm



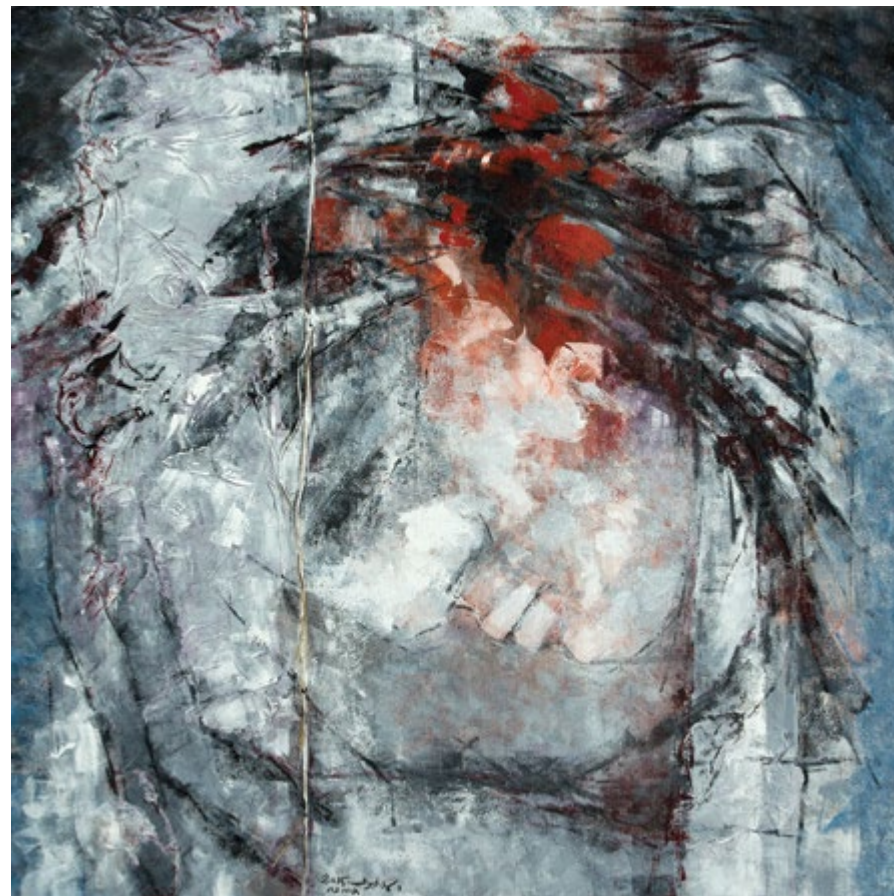
The Witness
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm



The Witness
2014
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 120 cm



The Witness
2014
Acrylic on canvas
150 x 150 cm



The Witness
2015
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 120 cm

Ayyam Gallery

Founded in 2006, Ayyam Gallery is a leading arts organisation, managing the careers of a diverse roster of established and emerging artists from the Middle East. Blue-chip art spaces in Beirut, Dubai, and London, a series of collaborative projects in the United States, Europe, and Asia, and a multinational non-profit arts programme have furthered the gallery's mandate of expanding the parameters of international art by introducing the dynamic art of the region to a global audience. With its widely respected multilingual publishing division and a custodianship programme that manages the estates of pioneering artists, Ayyam Gallery has also spearheaded recent efforts to document the region's art history.

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