

SYRIAN ARAB JOURNAL

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Racked by turmoil, death and displacement, the artistic heart of Syria is bleeding no more or less than the rest of the country. **Maymanah Farhat** looks at how Syrian artists are responding to the crisis.

This page: Youssef Abdelke in his studio. Photography by Nassouh Zaghloleh.

Facing page: Tammmam Azzam in his studio. Image courtesy Ayyam Gallery, Dubai.



Shortly before the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011, the Damascus art scene was blossoming. At that time the country was emerging from nearly two decades of political isolation, prompting renewed interest in its cultural scene. Commercial galleries and non-profit art spaces were working to reinstate its status as a destination for art in the Arab world, and although a repressive political environment limited creativity to a certain extent, the country was home to some of the region's leading artists, filmmakers, poets and writers. Censorship was often circumvented with artful allegory, symbolism or stand-in imagery.

Today, the Syrian art scene is fragmented and unrecognisable, torn to pieces by a vicious war that has displaced the majority of its artists. In the years immediately following the onset of the conflict there was a flicker of hope that the pre-war dynamism of Damascus could be replicated in exile through a tight network of artists and cultural workers who were determined to see it survive. Fast-forward to 2017, and nearly all their resources have been exhausted. The idea that Beirut and Istanbul

could serve as surrogates has dissipated into widespread cynicism as precarious political situations in both places make the efforts of cultural practitioners feel futile. The creative circles that, until recently, convened in the theatres, cafés and galleries of these cities have dwindled since a number of Syrian artists began seeking greater stability in Europe. As they have been forced to move further away from Damascus, the sense of connectivity that was essential to maintaining the art scene outside of Syria has been lost.

“I don’t know if there was a Syrian ‘heyday’ before, nowadays, or if there will be one in the future. Who can judge? There is war throughout this place all the time, we are born into war. War is nothing new, but it’s becoming more personal now.”

Tammam Azzam



of the conflict, artists who sought to support civil protests worked clandestinely in fear of a backlash from the government. Those who openly claimed authorship eventually fled the country. One exception is leading artist Youssef Abdelke, who responded to the escalation of violence in 2012 by depicting slain protesters in black-and-white paintings and charcoal drawings. Abdelke was arrested in Syria the following year after signing a declaration that called for Syrian president Bashar Al Assad to step down, but was released after several weeks

HOLDING FAST

Those who remain in the country, despite bombings and fierce fighting between factions, struggle to create a semblance of normalcy. Frequent reports from artists recount kidnappings, disappearances, the ransacking of studios, internal displacement and other nightmares. In the early part of the war, Syrian artists, gallerists and curators frequently shuttled between Damascus and Beirut for events. As Islamic State militants occupied more of the country, few were

willing to take the dangerous road to and from Damascus. Artists wanting to leave the country this far into the conflict are finding it difficult, as countries like Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon have tightened visa requirements. Despite these obstacles and setbacks, Syrian artists at home and now in exile continue to find new ways to represent and record the devastation of the war.

The start of the 2011 uprising ushered in a new chapter in Syrian art with an outpouring of images. In the initial stage

in detention. A number of artists based elsewhere chose to remain anonymous, used *noms de guerre*, or signed works knowing that they would be unable to return to Syria.

Digital art proved to be the most popular medium during this time, as it allowed artists to produce anonymous images and could be circulated across a variety of platforms such as activist blogs or Facebook. After relocating to Dubai in late 2011, artist Tammam Azzam was forced to

give up painting for several years due to a lack of studio space. In exile Azzam has relied on his background as a graphic designer to produce digital prints and photographs that use appropriated images to comment on the conflict. In 2013 he superimposed Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* onto a photograph of a building destroyed by bombs as a representation of love in the time of war. Within hours of posting *Freedom Graffiti* (2013) on Facebook, the image went viral and was later picked up by international news

outlets, including *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*.

LIFE OUTSIDE

Artist and filmmaker Ammar Al Beik also lives in exile due to the political content of his work. In 2011, Al Beik permanently left

Damascus after travelling to the Venice Film Festival to screen *The Sun's Incubator* (2011). Al Beik's 11-minute autobiographical film was mostly shot in Beirut, and includes footage of his daughter's birth. The film chronicles Al Beik's time in the Lebanese capital with his wife and child as they watch the Arab

uprisings unfold, first with the Egyptian revolution. As *The Sun's Incubator* progresses, scenes that document their solidarity with Egyptian protesters lead to graphic news reports of Hamza Ali Al Khateeb, a boy who was tortured to death while in custody after attending a demonstration in Daraa, Syria.



Below Sara Shamma in her studio. Image courtesy the artist.

Right: Othman Moussa in his studio. Image courtesy the artist.



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FEATURE

This page: (Right) Safwan Dahoul in his studio. Image courtesy Ayyam Gallery, Dubai; (Below) Elias Zayyat in his studio. Photography by Nassouh Zaghlouleh.

Facing page: Mouteea Murad in his studio. Image courtesy Ayyam Gallery, Dubai.



Following a brief stay in Dubai, Al Beik received political asylum in Germany, where he premiered his latest work *La Dolce Siria* (2014) at the 2015 Berlin Film Festival. The 26-minute film intersperses scenes of Aleppo and Damascus during the war with grainy video images of a circus lion that attacks its keepers as a sardonic response to Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*.

The protagonists of Al Beik's film are two small boys who live amid the sounds of bombs and missiles in Aleppo and travel to Damascus to attend an Italian circus. In Germany, Al Beik lived in a refugee housing facility for several months, where he documented the daily lives of other asylum seekers, many of whom were there with their young children.

Similarly, much of Jaber Al Azmeh's recent work has been produced in response to the Syrian war. The photographer began documenting the physical and psychological effects of the conflict with performative images that show him silhouetted against a blood-red background. Al Azmeh's body is contorted and seemingly agonised as he recreates the experiences of Syrians

“The Syrian art scene was a birthplace of talents that could have had a great effect on an international level, but hit several internal political barriers that deflected its effectiveness. Art can’t go head-to-head with the controlling war machine and I don’t think beauty can stop the monstrosity, destruction and killing.”

Mouteea Murad



who confided in him during the start of the revolution. In the beginning of the *Wounds* series (2012), he worked in secret but eventually completed and showed the photographs once he had left Syria. Al Azmeh's subsequent series *The Resurrection* (2014) is composed of portraits of Arab artists, cultural workers and intellectuals who have altered the front page of a Baathist newspaper with dissenting messages to the Syrian government. Included in the series alongside Youssef Abdelke are Syrian calligrapher Mouneer Al Shaarani, Dubai-based gallerist Yasmin Atassi and exiled media activist Caroline Ayoub, who co-founded SourLi ('Syria is Mine') Radio. In contrast, Al Azmeh's 2016 *Border-Lines* photographs (see page 58) allude to the connections between global capitalism and war. Tracing migration routes that pass through a desolate desert landscape, his sparse images are devoid of figures yet draw attention to the human cost of the conflict.

STAYING TRUE

Among the many artists who have sought to represent the war and its catastrophic consequences, painters are perhaps

“The war is a catastrophic and devastating situation, destroying human legacy and culture. It constitutes a terrifying decline and setback of the artistic and intellectual efforts of a society to gain all the moral values that any living being should enjoy.”

Thaier Helal



This page: Mohannad Orabi in his studio. Photography by Nairy Shahinian. Image courtesy Ayyam Gallery, Dubai.

Facing page: Thaier Helal in his studio. Image courtesy Ayyam Gallery, Dubai.



individual painting styles while capturing the different sides of the war. Zayyat's 2014–15 Palmyra-themed works use vibrant hues to emphasise the flight of ancient characters that attempt to leave behind a ravaged landscape. With painstaking detail, Dahoul records the mounting devastation of the conflict in compositions that transport his recurring female figure from cramped domestic settings describing an abject sense of isolation to barren landscapes and open seas where she appears lost beneath a blanket of fog.

Building on the use of symbolism and allegory in figurative painting, Salman and Shamma have redefined

most burdened as they work within an artistic tradition that thrived in Syria for over a century. In the late 1950s, Syrian painters returned from studying abroad and immediately found inspiration in the country's visual culture, imposing terrain and diverse communities. Seeking to revolutionise regional art while expanding the content and formalism of international Modernism, pioneering painters Adham Ismail, Mahmoud Hammad, Fateh Al Moudarres and Louay Kayyali chronicled the political undercurrents of Syrian society through a variety of aesthetic strategies. Ismail and Hammad applied the principles of geometry that are found in Islamic art, Al Moudarres reconfigured the motifs of

ancient art, and Kayyali created new forms of local iconography. From their experiments, schools of abstraction, expressionism and symbolism were born. A number of leading painters working today were trained at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Damascus, where influential artists like Hammad and Al Moudarres taught until the 1980s and 90s respectively.

Ensuring that Syria's rich tradition of painting continues to develop is no easy task, given the circumstances, yet the responsibility has been shouldered by a handful of painters. Although belonging to different generations, Elias Zayyat, Safwan Dahoul, Kais Salman and Sara Shamma have introduced new elements in their

the use of social commentary in Syrian art. Mixing expressionism with realism, Salman paints grotesque figures that serve as archetypes of corruption. In 2014, Salman created a series of satirical works that highlight how different factions manipulate international media with the aim of advancing insidious political agendas in Syria. Shamma moves between hyperrealism and expressionism in symbolic portraits that describe the psychological toll of living in a constant state of despair. As the history of Syrian art advances at lightning speed, the greatest lesson that today's artists have taken from the Modernists is to never shy away from the subject of Syria, no matter how dim, controversial or painful. 🇸🇾