

Ahmed Alsoudani

Language

Undefined



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by Annette Grant

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Ahmed Alsoudani is a wanted man. Dealers and collectors have beaten a well-worn path between New York and the Iraqi-born artist's studio door on Church Street in New Haven ever since he graduated among 21 MFA students at the **Yale University School of Art** last June. Now he is moving to Berlin (the new Williamsburg). Shipping shouldn't cost much: Aside from a few works he has kept for himself, he has sold out his stock in New York shows, the larger paintings commanding up to \$30,000, according to his dealer, **Robert Goff**, of **Goff & Rosenthal** in New York's Chelsea district.

"Now maybe I will be able to just concentrate on painting," Alsoudani tells a visitor to his studio, with whom he has been discussing a work they refer to by its nickname, *The General* or *The Dictator*, because the artist, maddeningly, calls everything *Untitled*. Alsoudani looks scholarly until a smile gives his face a slightly devilish cast. He turned 34 in October and is proud of his success, if a little puzzled by it—"Why me?" But he knows what he wants to become and how to get there: "I believe painting is a marathon. I don't go out a lot. I work and work and work. It's really all I do."

Alsoudani's subject is war. Not, he says, a specific war, although Iraq is a clear reference, but all wars, with their death, destruction, dislocation and despair. His work has been compared to **Goya's** *Disasters of War* and **Picasso's** *Guernica*. Like those two artists, he can convey a kind of awful beauty in horror; he has a talent for the terrible. Other painters he brings to mind are **Francis Bacon**, **Willem de Kooning** and **George Grosz**. Bacon for his grotesque portrayal of anomie in modern life, de Kooning for his gestural fluency and Grosz for the complex iconography and social commentary of his canvases. In contrast with Grosz, however, Alsoudani doesn't trade in open satire.

"It's clear that Ahmed has a remarkable ability to synthesize," says Goff. "Yet he is in no way a copyist. People see immediately that he's authentic. He's making art about a real subject, not generalized angst and not about navel-gazing in the art world."

Alsoudani has little time for any kind of gazing these days, as he prepares for his move abroad. Only one painting in his disheveled New Haven studio is unfinished: a huge—24 by 12 foot—battlescene in acrylics along the lines of **Poussin's** *Rape of the Sabine Women*. Some figures are half completed, and some areas

drawn in, while others are fully painted. Large, vividly colored canvases like this represent an artistic evolution from Alsoudani's earlier, nearly monochromatic drawings on paper.

"I paint differently from the way I draw," he says. "The [Yale] faculty was interested in my color palette, and they liked my line quality [in the drawings], so they started pushing me to put the two together. After my first solo show in New York [in September 2007], I started to do what I had always been doing. After an hour, I took the paper down and began to work on a canvas, putting painting and drawing together for the first time."

Most of Alsoudani's drawings were in charcoal with dabs of pastel or acrylic color. "I was afraid at first to use a lot of color, but then I thought, 'I'm just a student here, I can do whatever I want, and at the end of the day, it's just student work.' That helped me a lot. Now I start with lines and then bury them and let the color be in charge."

Alsoudani moved from oil to acrylic because he can apply it as a wash on his canvases, which he doesn't prime. "It dries quickly," he explains, "and I can correct it with gesso, which I also use as a color. It's the reverse of the way most painters work." He sketches, but the final painting is often entirely different from his first plan for it. "I do start with an idea in my mind but keep building and rebuilding on it. For me it's a joyful experience."

The paintings employ motifs such as eyeballs, railings and amoeba-like patches that resemble spotted fabric, but the images connote different things in different contexts. The spots, for example, may effect a change of tone in a work, or they may represent blood corpuscles exposed by flayed skin. "I really do think a painting needs to have more than one meaning," he says. "I want people to look and find different stories."

People seem to respond to the stories they discover in the pictures, particularly Alsoudani's vivid and immediate depictions of the Iraq war, portrayals of which many think have been greatly sanitized in the West. Not surprisingly, several of his collectors are Middle Eastern: **Charles Saatchi**, who was born in Iraq, has two drawings and three paintings. The Iranian **Ebrahim Melamed**, founder of the **Honart Museum**, which is opening in Tehran this year, owns two paintings, as do **Hala** and **Issam M. Fares**, of Lebanon. And **Sheikha Paula al-Sabah**, a senior member of the Kuwaiti royal family who is one of the biggest and most important collectors of contemporary art in the Middle East, is first in line for the next Alsoudani up for sale.

Closer to home, **Sherri Grace**, a Long Island collector who was an early Alsoudani fan, owns six drawings and one painting—she could have had a second, but she dithered, and Saatchi, who seems to have eyes in all the world's art centers, grabbed the oil, *Untitled*, 2007. It was Grace who put Goff on to Alsoudani. "I told him I had just discovered a young artist who is going to be the next Picasso," she recalls. The dealer quickly did some Web research, liked what he saw and headed to Yale.

Horatio Alger might have written Alsoudani's life story—if Alger had been from Baghdad. Born in that city in 1975 and one of six children, Alsoudani left home in 1995, after the first Gulf War, and took up illegal residence in Damascus, where he joined a community of writers, artists and intellectuals. Having always excelled at drawing in school, he went back to making art while looking for a way to get out of Syria, a process that took four years.

In 1998 he was in a group show at Damascus's Sheraton Hotel, where an American couple saw his work and told him he should study art, suggesting that he apply to the United Nations for asylum. After an intricate dance of applications and interviews, Alsoudani landed in Washington, D.C., with a green card and not a word of English. He studied the language when not working as a dishwasher. At the invitation of an Iraqi family he knew, he moved to Portland, Maine, and had just started at the **Maine College of Art (MECA)** when the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, occurred. As world events developed, he turned to

depictions of war.

After attending the prestigious **Yale School of Music and Art** summer program in Norfolk, Connecticut, in 2004 and graduating from MECA in 2005, Alsoudani showed two drawings at the **Filament Gallery**, in Portland. An interview in the local newspaper, which described the works as “wild, disjointed images that suggest chaos and confusion,” contained this prescient insight: “Ahmed Alsoudani may well be a star in the making.” A few days later, on June 9, 2006, he became a U.S. citizen and went off to spend the summer at the **Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture**, in Maine, heading from there to Yale. At both programs, he joined an elite group of artists.

Alsoudani and Yale fit together like bread and butter. He loved the other students, the faculty, the weekly “pit crits” (critical sessions) and the opportunity to pore over Goya’s *Disasters of War* at the **Yale Art Gallery** library. He also basked in the studio visits by the painter-critics **Peter Halley** and **Robert Storr**, the director of graduate painting and printmaking and the dean of the art school, respectively.

Alsoudani came to the attention of New York talent scouts in 2007 at the open studio held every May at Yale, as at most art schools. Among the impressed observers was **Ron Segev**, the owner and director of **Thierry Goldberg Projects**, on Rivington Street in Manhattan, who regularly visits all the New York-area art schools. At the end of June, Projects put two of Alsoudani’s large (9 by 7 foot) drawings into a group show, “The Atrocity Exhibition,” and in September it mounted a solo display of six of his drawings. Both attracted considerable media attention. “We kind of launched his career,” says Segev.

Also attending the Yale studio show was **Simon Watson**. The adviser, widely known for his passion for and deep knowledge of contemporary art, had heard about Alsoudani even earlier from a Yale alum who collects the school’s artists. “Ahmed’s work has a beautiful cadence between drawing and painting,” Watson says. “It’s a reverie about exile.”

Lital Mehr, of the **Mehr Gallery** in Chelsea, also made the trip to New Haven. “She offered me a group show, then a two-person show in January 2008, and I said OK,” Alsoudani recalls. “She was very persistent.” News of his work soon reached **Dave Hunt**, the independent curator, critic and indefatigable new-art tracker, who says he “looks for people with incredible potential, those who will do great things. Ahmed has the most tremendous potential of all of them.” Hunt visited Alsoudani at Yale with **Sima Familant**, another art adviser, who knew about the artist from the Projects and Mehr shows and bought two paintings for a client.

These early successes created a buzz that has generated more exhibitions, both at home and abroad, including the upcoming group show “Caught in the Middle,” which will travel from the **Asia Contemporary Art Fair** in New York in November to **Art Basel Miami** in December. It has also led to a hardcover monograph, to be published by **Hatje Cantz** next year, and to his current berth at Goff & Rosenthal, which is sponsoring his move to Berlin, where it has a branch.

Walking his visitor out of his studio, Alsoudani says, “I don’t really need much to live on, just a little apartment and a place to work.” Then, following an elaborately polite farewell, he returns and strides briskly away, looking a lot like a young man going places.

“Ahmed Alsoudani” originally appeared in the November 2008 issue of Art+Auction. For a complete list of articles from this issue available on ARTINFO, see Art+Auction’s [November 2008 Table of Contents](#).

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