



Khaldoun Chichakli, bridge and hotel Victoria in past time, Courtesy of Green Art Gallery

## Khaldoun Chichakli's city of enchantment

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When he was a boy, Khaldoun Chichakli would run into the fields on the outskirts of Damascus to draw, away from the prying eyes of his mother, teachers and friends.

They all ridiculed his passion and told him he had no future in art. He persevered, however, and studied at the Fine Arts University in Damascus, where he now teaches.

Up until 2011, Chichakli says he was “a prolific artist, drawing 12 hours a day, seven days a week”, but this productivity was halted with the onset of tensions in his beloved Syria. Now, the professor says, he is “unable to draw and instead draws with words”, which has resulted in him writing his autobiography.

The book recounts seven decades of life in Damascus, from the French Mandate and independence, to the Ba’athist regime and today’s dismal state of civil war.

Chichakli’s life has included a stint in Belgium where, while pursuing higher studies, he met and married his wife and learnt the art of diamond carving. It is a craft that has come to inform his work, particularly the intricacies of his woodcuts.

An enchanting body of his work, produced between 2000–07, is on show at Green Art Gallery until the end of June. It is imbued with a heavy dose of nostalgia and, for Dubai audiences, is an anomaly in style – not conceptual, minimalist or abstract. Simply, it is a charming painterly exhibition layered with narratives.

At first glance, the labour-intensive paintings – all using Chinese ink on paper, except for two actual woodcuts – exude a strong sense of architecture and geometry through their overall composition and straight lines.

This is particularly evident in pieces such as *Old Damascus Colors Subtractions on Nofarah Area* (2001) in which the artist has painted over the scene with sheer blocks of colour.

This, Chichakli says, is his way of “seeing the place abstract, like a dream”.

The works also radiate with a meticulous miniaturist feel, which, combined with elements such as star-filled skies, hanging streetlights and festive decorations, lend them a fairytale-like ambiance. It is hard to believe that these paintings are of a French Mandate-free Syria of the late 1940s and of a republic reeling with political instability in the 1950s and 1960s – they could pass as charismatic illustrations inspired by the structured, delightful scenes reminiscent of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. In fact, *Bridge and Hotel Victoria in Past Days* (2009) captures that very spirit.

A quick tour around the gallery confirms Chichakli's fascination with colour: on the left-hand side is a row of black-and-white drawings of a range of places in Damascus, and on the right, the same scenes are rendered in different watercolour variations.

“Sometimes I'd want to remember Damascus at night, then at dawn, then at sunset,” says Chichakli.

He began each work by creating a black-and-white drawing and employed *tahsheer*, the Arabic term for darkening and re-inscribing lines. The architectural feel is thus reinforced in the works' blueprint quality and small scale. He then scanned each one to create other adaptations based on the time of day or night through watercolours. One of the most striking examples are those depicting the capital's famous souk, *Al Hamidiya Bazaar*, which, like all of Chichakli's paintings, has a profound time-travel element, able to transport the viewer to different locations.

Each work in the show took between three to six months to produce and was created from memory. These are images of recollections of bygone decades, etched in the artist's consciousness. And when Chichakli's memory failed him from time to time, he tapped into those of elders. “Was the building two floors or three?” he would ask, or “Was the shop name in navy or burgundy?”. At the heart of these ‘Damascenes’ – a clever and romantic play on words – is one man's love for his country. “I wanted to exhibit these works in Syria first because I feel like I owe it to my country, but I am unable to,” says Chichakli. “I'd love to remind the Syrian people of what their country was.”

• **Damascenes by Khalidoun Chichakli runs at Green Art Gallery until June 27. Open Saturday-Thursday from 10am-7pm, Al Quoz 1, Street 8, Alserkal Avenue, email [info@gagallery.com](mailto:info@gagallery.com) For more information visit [www.gagallery.com](http://www.gagallery.com)**





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