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Karen Leigh (@leighstream) - December 30, 2013

Arts + Culture: Through Baathist Newspapers, a Snapshot of Syria's War

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DUBAI — In 2010, Jaber al-Azmeh was just another commercial photographer in Damascus, working mostly with local ad agencies. Now the 40-year-old is one of the best known of a group of Syrian artists working to chronicle their country's conflict.

His latest project, a series of 45 photographs called "A Small Group of Syrians," features Syrians posing with a page of Al Baath (the newspaper of the ruling Baath Party), on which each man or woman has written a short personal statement in Arabic.

"Now I know the meaning of nationalism," one reads.

Another: "I want a better life for my children."

It's become the latest of Syria's art project to go viral.

"The purpose was not to do a show," says al-Azmeh. "I was doing them to contribute to the civil activism that was going on, to post them online so everyone would share them."

I started it when I was still living in Syria. I left at the end of 2011. I had to be very careful. If I went to the wrong person and said, 'I'm doing this project,' I'd be in trouble [with government authorities]," he says.



Jaber al-Azmeh / Courtesy Green.Art.Gallery

The work gave Syrians a chance to express themselves in new ways.

"Every time I visited another city in Syria, I'd take the opportunity to see who was there. I'd take my newspapers and my camera and tried to do the shots. There were people who did say no, but not a lot."

Syrian art has undergone a renaissance in the last two years, with photographers, painters and multimedia artists like al-Azmeh becoming microcelebrities, their work passed around on the internet: a break from global art custom that mandates work be constricted to gallery spaces and sold for often exorbitant amounts of money. Most Syrian artists say their work began



"The Dungeons," 2012, printed on cotton rag. / Courtesy Green.Art.Gallery

informally, as a way to draw attention to the crisis.

Ironically, it is the conflict that is finally bringing attention to contemporary Syrian work, long overshadowed by the popularity, among collectors, of Middle East antiquity and flashier, heavily politicized modern-day pieces from Saudi Arabia and Lebanon.

Much of Damascus' vibrant gallery scene has fled to safer climes, with artists re-emerging in spaces and residencies in Beirut and Dubai.

As their work has shifted in tone, often becoming radically political, artists still working in Syria face the threat of harsh punishment from security forces. Like al-Azmeh, they have come up with ways to keep their activities quiet.

"I was doing all this and hiding it," he says. "I had to smuggle it [out] on my laptop in Photoshop. When leaving Syria, I hid the files in Layers on Photoshop. I'd put several layers in the file, [obscuring] the images. So even if they asked me to open a file, they would be hidden."

Al-Azmeh has been luckier than most of his colleagues. Settling in Doha with his family, he quickly found gallery representation with Dubai's Green.Art.Gallery, an airy warehouse space managed by Syrian expat Yasmin Atassi, with a focus on contemporary artists from the Middle East and North Africa.



From the series "A Small Group of Syrians," 2011-2012

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January 1, 2014

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"He's very successful at what he does. He has a very particular way," she says. "Of course if you are Syrian or Arab, you have a better understanding of the work. The new series is nostalgic, but it's also critical, of politicians and of our own naiveté at the start of the revolution."

The series before "A Small Group of Syrians" was created in 2012 and dubbed "Wounds." Atassi calls it "more of an artistic approach to the [conflict]; it's basically black and red silhouettes, shadows of people."

Set against a blood-red backdrop, each piece features shadowy figures, meant to represent Syrians, in different states of play.

In "Haven Haven," a number of marchers are seen dying or going to prison. Another shows a doctor being killed, because medical personnel, he says, have been targeted in the war. "Rising Once Again" depicts a man on his stomach lifting himself up by the elbows.

"Dungeons," one of his earliest pieces, stemmed from "hearing every two or three days about someone we know, or a friend of friend, who's been detained. And everyone knows what being 'detained' means. So I wanted to try to make people see how this guy is feeling at the moment of detention. If you see the work, there are people squeezed in, and you feel you can hardly breathe."

"A Small Group of Syrians" will show at Dubai's [Green.Art.Gallery](#) in 2014.

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December 30, 2013

"Where am I going to die?" That was the first question my grandmother asked me last August in New York City after fleeing her home in Aleppo. I didn't know how to respond. Over the last 16 months, this uncertain question burdened her as she crossed from state to state, from one of her four [...]

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