# ONE-ON-ONE

As conflict and division continue to traumatise Syria, *Canvas* Editor-in-chief Ali Y. Khadra speaks with three leading artists: Jaber Al Azmeh in Doha, Khaled Takreti in Paris, and Fadi Yazigi in Damascus. With thoughts directly from the artists, these candid and intimate interviews reveal their individual relationships with their homeland, the reality of the situation at hand, and in what ways the war has affected their lives and work.

# JABER AL AZMEH

**Born 1973 in Damascus, Syria**
**Lives and works in Doha, Qatar**

Two years after receiving his BFA in Visual Communications from the University of Damascus in 1996, Al Azmeh began pursuing photography professionally. He uses his art as a way to promote unity and freedom for all Syrians, with allegorical images that simultaneously reflect beauty and ugliness. He left Syria in 2011.

*I left eight months into the revolution, before the end of 2011. I had the opportunity to leave many years before, but didn't want to. I was insisting on staying, even when a lot of my friends had already gone. I loved Damascus.*

**Ali Y. Khadra: Perhaps we can start with your departure from Syria. When and why did you leave?**

**Jaber Al Azmeh:** I left eight months into the revolution, before the end of 2011. I had the opportunity to leave many years before, but didn't want to. I was insisting on staying, even when a lot of my friends had already gone. I loved Damascus. I lived outside of the city, with my family in a country home that I built myself. Even my studio was there, it was my little kingdom.

**AYK: How did it feel to leave?**

**JA:** It was a very difficult decision and one that I would not have made were not for my family, especially my children. The situation was such that logic tells you to leave, but emotionally it's so hard. What made it even harder was being far from our home and then having to watch from outside what was going on in our country. There's a lot of worry.

**AYK: Would you have stayed in Damascus if you had not had family responsibilities?**

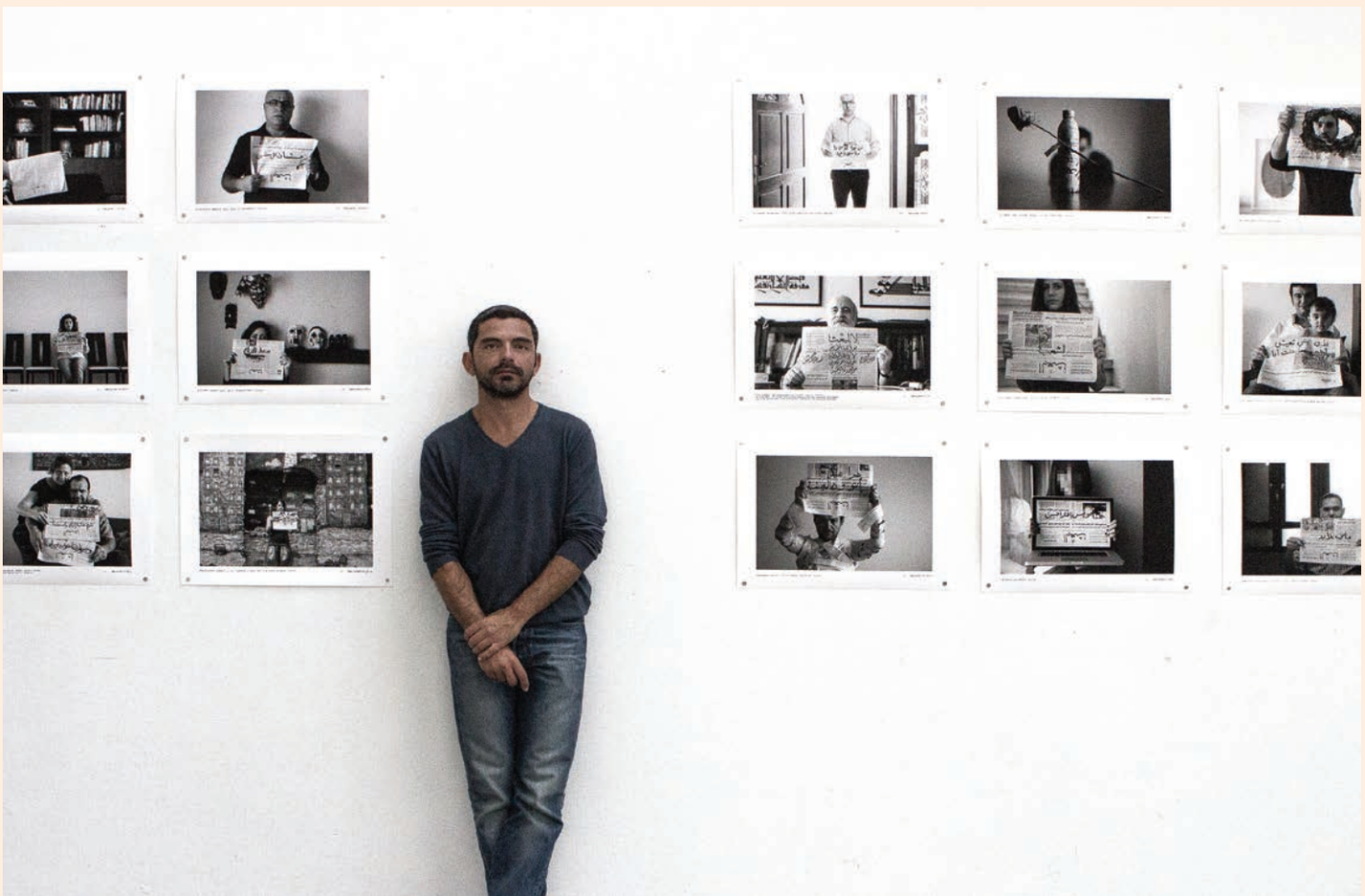
**JA:** Maybe, if I didn't have a family. If I had stayed, I would have surely joined the civilian activism that was going on at the beginning of the revolution. I got involved in it artistically and I was an activist through art, let's say, but it's possible that I would have become involved differently had I stayed. You can't stay on the margins or remain neutral, because what is happening is so ugly that it is impossible to stay silent. That is what has happened to people. No matter how scared they are, they know how criminal this regime can be and so they go out to protest simply because they cannot take it anymore.

**AYK: Why did you decide to relocate to Doha instead of, say, Europe?**

**JA:** Because I have family here. My wife is half-German and our kids have German passports, so it would have been easy to go there. But we prefer living outside of Europe.

**AYK: How have you established yourself here?**

**JA:** I have a commercial photography company with a partner. That's my daily breadwinning job. Our clients are advertising agencies and we run campaigns and organise photoshoots for them. It's a small company, with a studio and three photographers.



**AYK: What about your art photography?**

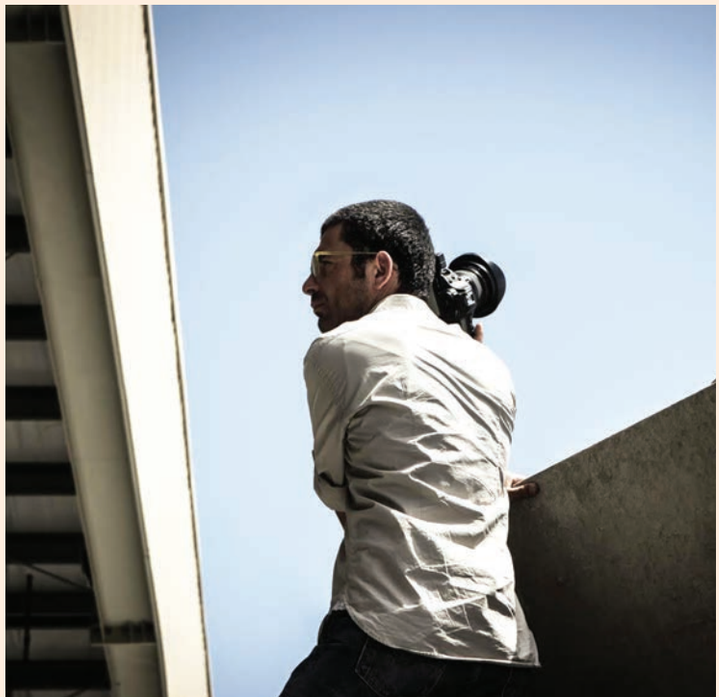
**JA:** I cannot live from that. It's what I love doing, and I wish one could rely on art, but you simply can't. In any case, I took the decision when I was younger that I didn't want art to be my bread and butter because I was afraid that when it becomes your way to make a living, you cannot feel free with your art and create exactly what you want. I don't know if it was the right thing to do, but I do not want to have to sell a painting or make compromises when it comes to my work. It's my passion, and I'm free to do whatever I want. This means that if I have a project, and I know that the work won't sell, I don't care.

**AYK: What kind of art did you work on before the war?**

**JA:** My first passion, at university, was for painting, but the first job I did was actually for a photography company. I took over their studio and that's how I got started with photography. The artistic side of my work slowly moved towards photography, I was experimenting and learning all the time. Photographers such as Mohammad Al Rumi and Tahir Al Jumai'I helped me a lot. They were like mentors to me.

**AYK: What subject matter did you focus on initially?**

**JA:** There was nothing specific as a project early on. I used to take photographs as trials, but then I got a commissioned job from a businessman whose passionate about horses and owned stables. It was the first time that I had photographed horses. It's a very specialised field, but he and I worked closely on achieving what was required. I loved working with abstract parts of the horses' bodies and ended up doing a series of photographic studies called *Metaphors*. At the time I was also working on some photographs of paintings for Mouna Atassi, who saw my horse studies and said, "We should be putting together an exhibition for these."



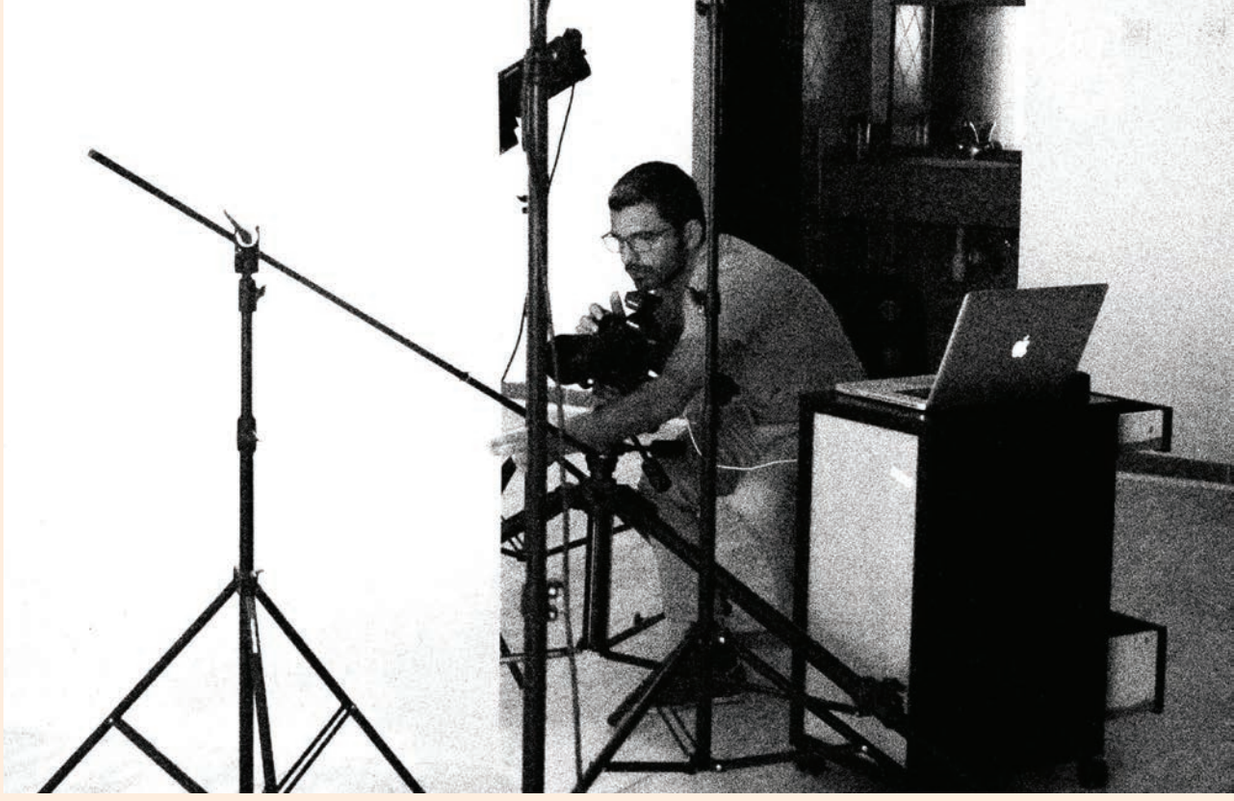
**AYK: So this was your first solo project?**

**JA:** Yes. It wasn't my very first exhibition, as I had exhibited earlier as a student and recent graduate, but this was my first proper solo project. The exhibition opened in Damascus at Mouna's, then we took it to Green Art Gallery in Dubai. It was an important time for me.

**AYK: What did you move on to from that?**

**JA:** I started working on a series of works that I called *Traces*, in which I was taking frames of the traces left by people. People who were living in a space for 10 years and had then left, for example. I was interested in capturing whatever it was that they had left behind. I might find a lot of things, but then something would catch my eye, something interesting that I felt could speak as a metaphor for other things. It might also be purely aesthetic, the result sometimes resembling an unintentional art installation, just thrown together in a particular space.

**AYK: Tell us something about the projects you've undertaken since the war started.**



**JA:** I've done two projects related to the revolution: *Wounds*, the red series, and *Baath*, in which I took portraits of people holding the Baath Party newspaper. For *Baath*, I used to go, secretly of course, to meet activists or anyone supporting the revolution in any way and take their portrait. I'd go along with my camera, a marker pen and the newspaper. They'd use the pen to write a few words or short statement across the paper about their aspirations, how they wanted their country to be. Things like "I want my daughter to live better than I have lived," and then I'd photograph them holding the paper upside down. They were all people involved in the revolution in one way or another, and they are simply expressing their opinion. I wanted to show that these individuals belonged to the people. The Baath newspaper and the state were busy saying that the demonstrators were vandals or paid to demonstrate, so I wanted my work to be a kind of a proof that these were just ordinary people, by saying "Look, this person is saying this." I did half of the work in Syria, and the other half after I'd left.

**AYK: How did you continue the project outside Syria?**

**JA:** I took a bunch of Baath newspapers with me and, when I ran out, I asked people in Damascus to send me some more. Then I'd find people who were involved in the struggle outside Syria and take their portraits.

**AYK: How were these two projects received?**

**JA:** I showed *Wounds* in Dubai and there was an excellent response. The works are more aesthetic and charming than *Baath*, which is more direct and political. *Baath* also came at a time when the revolution was changing from civilian action to a war. People were upset, and everyone started questioning all sorts of things. But the feedback to *Baath* was good, and it was particularly well received in both Berlin and Paris.

**AYK: Tell us about your latest series, *Borderlines*.**

**JA:** It's about when reality slaps you in the face. When the Syrian revolution first started, we were dreaming that, finally, we will get rid of the dictator, have an ideal country, a democracy, and I don't know what else. These were the dreams. Later, one realised that the issue is not only about this regime. It has to do with a lot of other bigger things, and the proof of that can be seen in how the problem has unfolded in Syria.

**AYK: It's like a reality check?**

**JA:** It's a global crisis now, everyone has intervened in it. I started questioning all this, as in why is there something called Syria in the first place? And something called Lebanon, and something called Germany, and Argentina, or wherever? That was the idea. I was questioning borderlines. And when you see people and their families fleeing destruction

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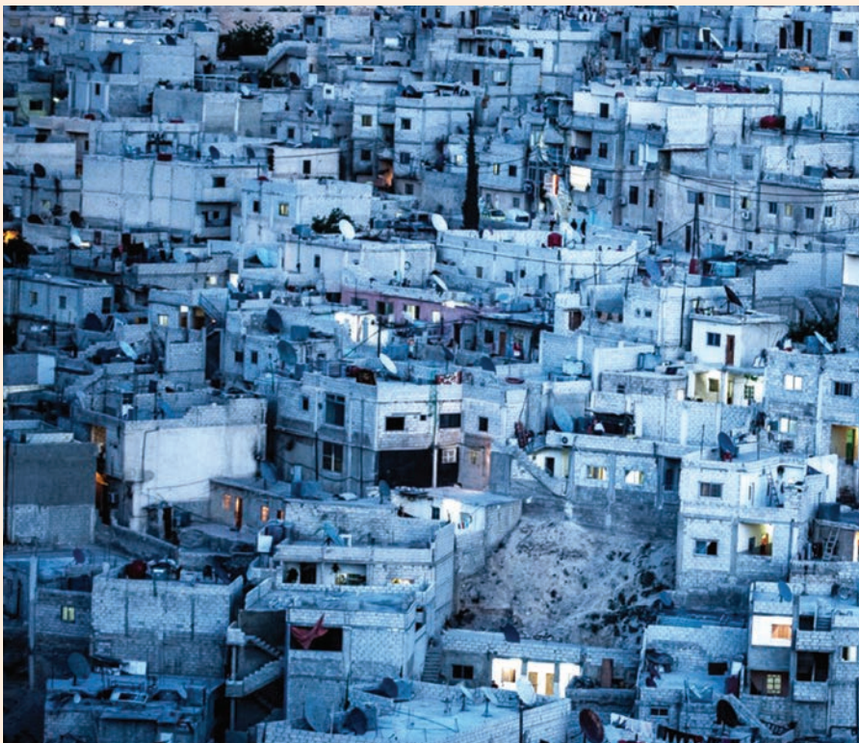

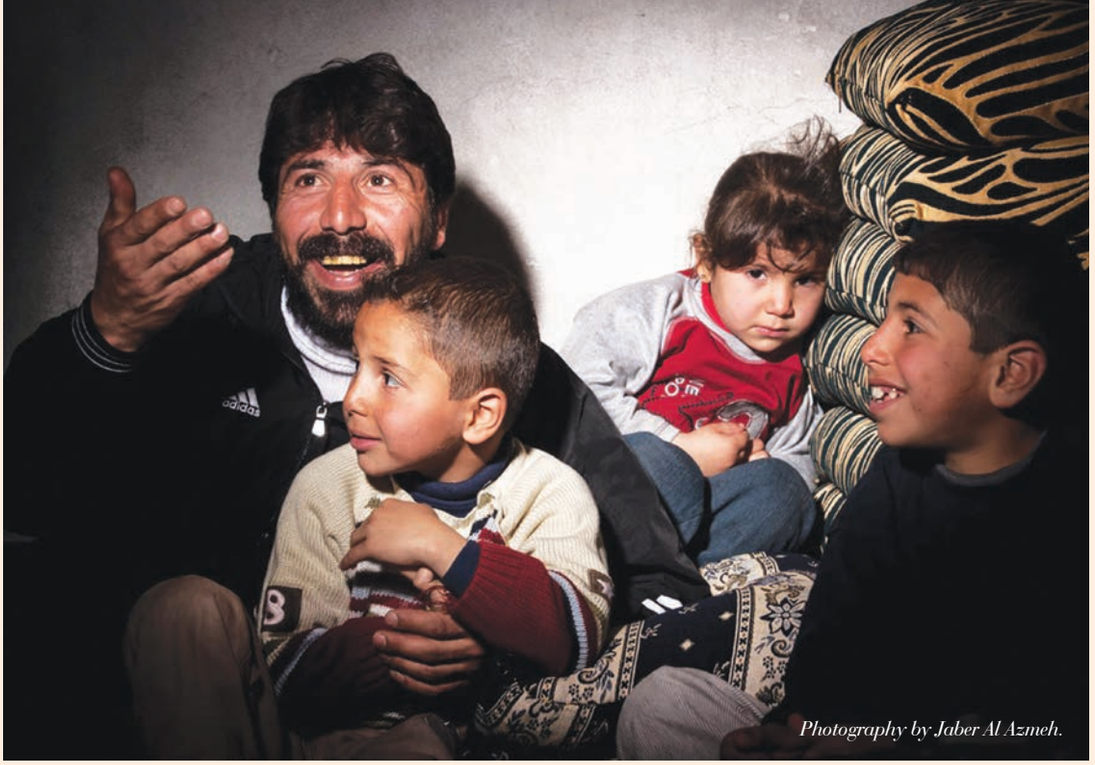

*Photography by Jaber Al Azmeh.*

and death, refugees basically, and running into others who tell them "Because you are of a different nationality, you are not welcome here and must stay beyond our borders." I couldn't understand that position. There's also the extra element of how nationalism and extremism become engrained in people's minds. In the end, everyone is the same. Everybody wants to live in peace and quiet, and raise their children safely and give them the best life possible. People are similar everywhere. It's nationalism that fuels war. *Borderlines* was not a piece of research into nationalism alone, though. It is about my story as a Syrian and how my story might be anyone else's story, anywhere on the planet. Different people are going through very similar experiences, all recurring and all failing in the same manner, unfortunately. In the end, there is a small group of people who control everything on the planet, those who have the money and who control the big corporations and armies. So I'm wanting to raise all of this. Anyone you meet now is upset about the condition the world is in, so in a way what I'm saying through my pictures of the desert is, "Look how beautiful our planet is, why are we doing all of this? Let us go back to something more primitive."

**AYK: Is your objective to create an artistic demonstration to express your feelings about what is happening?**

**JA:** With the first two series, *Wounds* and *Baath*, this is exactly how I felt. I was like an activist, showing the suffering that is going on, telling a story and exploring certain ideas, but in a way that was also artistic. I was making a counterpoint to the media, which only shows you the extremists, the Islamists, as if they were the only ones who rose up against the regime. Sure, there are some of those, but there are also so many very good and civilised people who just want our country to be better. My work is my way of saying that these people exist. Anyone from outside Syria watching the media would think that there are just groups of savages killing each other there and say, "Let them kill each other, they're crazy."

**AYK: How can art help?**

**JA:** In the end, art is a platform for you to freely convey a message. No one tells you to run this news story or that one.

**AYK: How do you view the future right now?**

**JA:** My country's gone, I feel like everything is just futile. I'm very sad about what is happening now. In the beginning, we were happy because we thought that our country was heading towards a better place. Now, whatever comes, I feel that the price we have paid is too high. The price I've paid personally is nothing in comparison to the real suffering. We're the lucky ones. What's happened to the country is unbelievable and some of the things that have taken place are just so ugly.

**AYK: Do you see any hope on the horizon for Syria?**

**JA:** I have hope, but perhaps for 50 years' time. It's not about the destroyed infrastructure, as this can be fixed. It is about society. There is a whole generation that is growing up surrounded by killing and violence. You can't fix that, unfortunately. Meanwhile, so many people have left and families have dispersed. In my case alone, my mother is on one continent, my father on another and I am on a third. It is not easy to get together either, since all our passports are Syrian. We need another passport that says that we are French or American, or something else. It is one of the oddities that I am questioning in *Borderlines*. What is so important about that "notebook" that you are prohibited from travelling if it's of a different colour?

**AYK: What would you say to people to raise awareness of what is happening in Syria?**

**JA:** I'd say that it's not about a particular nationality. No one should be left in such a desolate situation, and the rest of the planet should help if they can. The problem is that those who have the power to stop the war in Syria are not intervening because they are all businessmen, all of them. They say, "Why should I solve the crisis in Syria? How many million dollars am I going to gain from it?" That's how they calculate it. I'm not a politician, so I'm simplifying the situation, but I feel that it's like that. That's what is so depressing.

# KHALED TAKRETI

**Born 1964 in Beirut, Lebanon**
**Lives and works in Paris, France**

Trained as an architect with a degree from the University of Damascus, Takreti turned towards art in the mid-1990s. His practice explores the modern social image, defined by portraiture with a visual diary-style and incorporating personal narratives with Pop Art influences. He has been based in Paris since 2006.


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**Ali Y. Khadra: What are your first memories of art?**

**Khaled Takreti:** I was young, 10 years old perhaps. I was at the Damascus International Fair, and there was a pavilion for artwork. I saw a painting by Nazir Nab'aa and was amazed by how detailed and ornamented it was. These are things that easily affect the inexperienced eye. But actually, there was something important that happened earlier, at my grandmother's house. There was a painting there that I used to paint repeatedly. I didn't know who the artist was, and when I asked my grandmother, she told me that it was by Louay Kayyali. Of course, I was so young back then that I had no idea who Louay Kayyali was. I grew up with this picture around me and am still affected by it. Later, my grandmother had to sell the painting for financial reasons.

**AYK: When was your first exhibition?**

**KT:** In 1996, at a gallery named 'Ashtar, at Issam Darwish's. My second exhibition was at the Atassi Gallery. After that, I started moving from one gallery to another. The concept that every artist has a gallery was not popular back then. It only really started in 2008, when Ayyam Gallery came to Syria and began the practice of a gallery consistently supporting an artist. The way it used to happen before then was rather like, "I'll come and exhibit at your gallery, then when the exhibition is finished, you either make me an offer to exhibit again or I'll to go and look for another gallery."

**AYK: When did you move to France?**

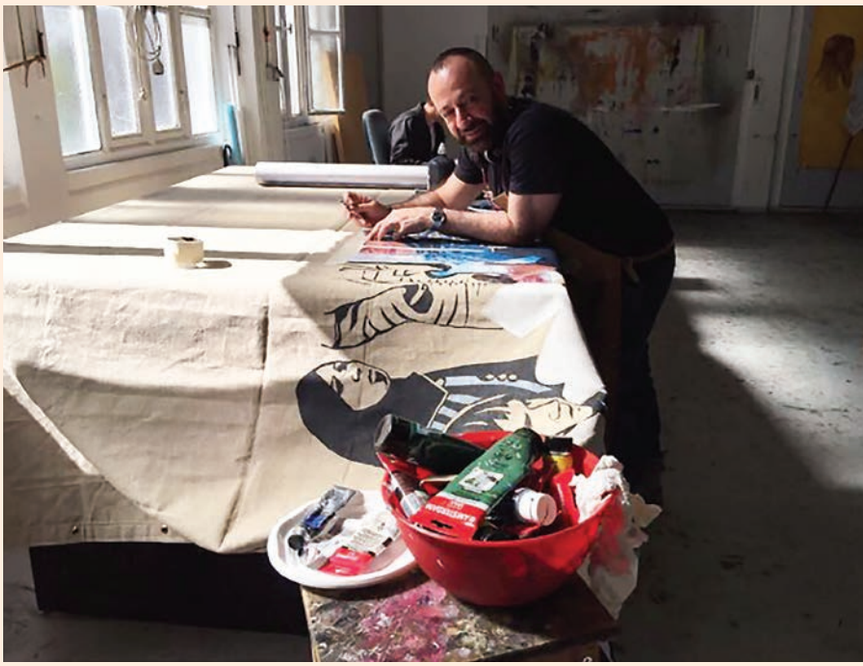
**KT:** I moved there permanently from 2004 onwards, but used to visit Syria every six months. But actually I didn't go to exhibitions or meet with artists during those visits. It was before I left Syria for France, during the period from 1995 until 2006, that I used to go and look at art.

**AYK: What do you consider your most important exhibition from that period?**

**KT:** Towards the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, I put together an exhibition called *LOL*, which took place in Beirut and Dubai. It was Pop art, but a little ahead of its time and too early, I think.

**AYK: How did your career develop after the move to Europe?**

**KT:** I had left Syria by 2006, and started working with Ayyam Gallery two years later. The market for my work was therefore mostly in the Gulf and not in Europe. What is remarkable is that, although I have not so far shown

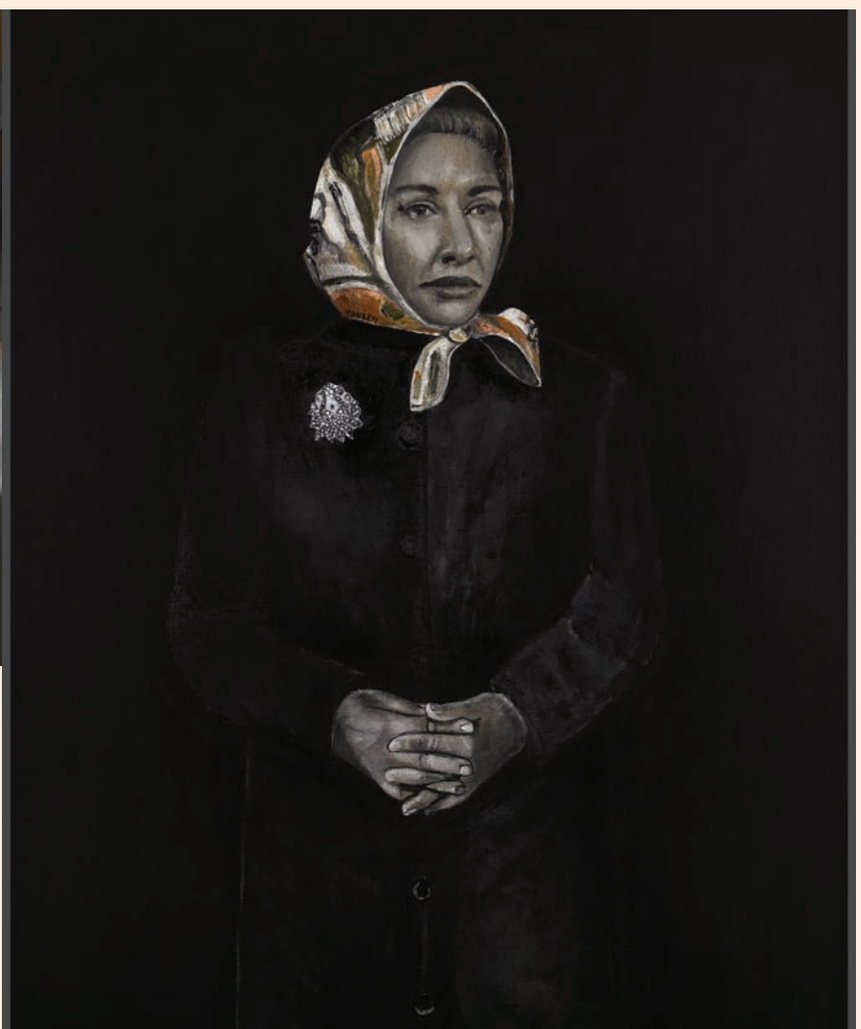


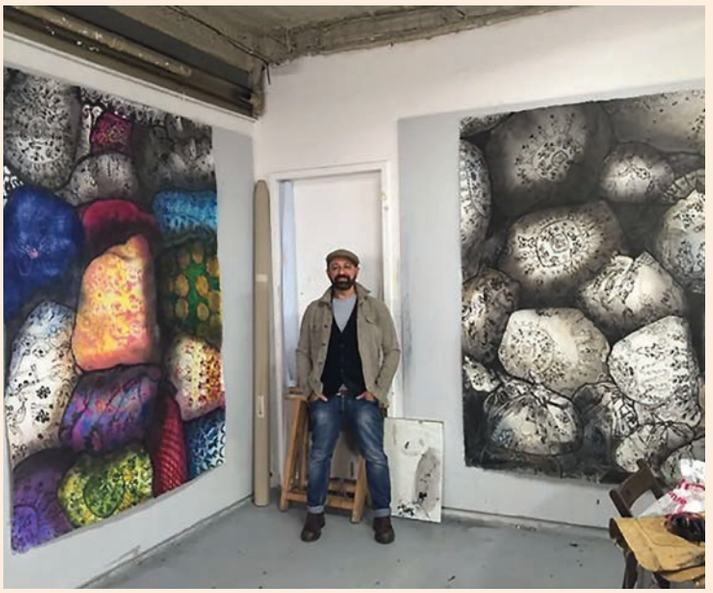
*Suddenly I saw that the powerful events that take place in life, such as a war in one's own country, evoke things that one has been hiding.*

my artwork in a solo exhibition in Europe, I have appeared on several magazine covers, which I find rather astonishing! My work has only been seen on paper, over the internet, in magazines and the like, but people are really appreciating it and this has helped me very much.

**AYK: To what extent has the Syrian crisis affected you as an artist?**

**KT:** It's had an effect on me psychologically and therefore on me as an artist, with immediate consequences for my work. When the crisis first started, I became increasingly ill without realising it. Six months later, I was suffering from a fully fledged depression. It was the first time such a thing had ever happened to me. I am a joyful person and I love life, so I was so surprised and shocked that I could suffer from depression. It was triggered by the war, which provoked things inside me that I'd been ignoring for a long time. Suddenly I saw that the powerful events that take place in life, such as a war in one's own country, evoke things that one has been hiding. In my case, it brought out what had really made Khaled Takreti the artist. When I was 27 years old, my grandmother, whom I loved very much and who appears in many of my paintings, died of cancer. I escaped to America to avoid watching her die. After she had passed away, I acted as though nothing had happened. I carried on painting her in my work, always "looking" for her. In my mind, she wasn't dead. Looking back now, I clearly had an issue with separation and death. The war in Syria brought all this back, and so I went to a doctor and for the first time recognised that my grandmother was dead. I have not painted her portrait since, but she is the one who made an artist of me, because I was an architect before that. It is a very strange story.





**AYK: Were you able to paint during your depression?**

**KT:** I was unable to paint for a year. I couldn't concentrate and so came up with other things that were easier to do, such as stencil work. It was monochromatic and very minimalist. I just had to do something to keep on working.

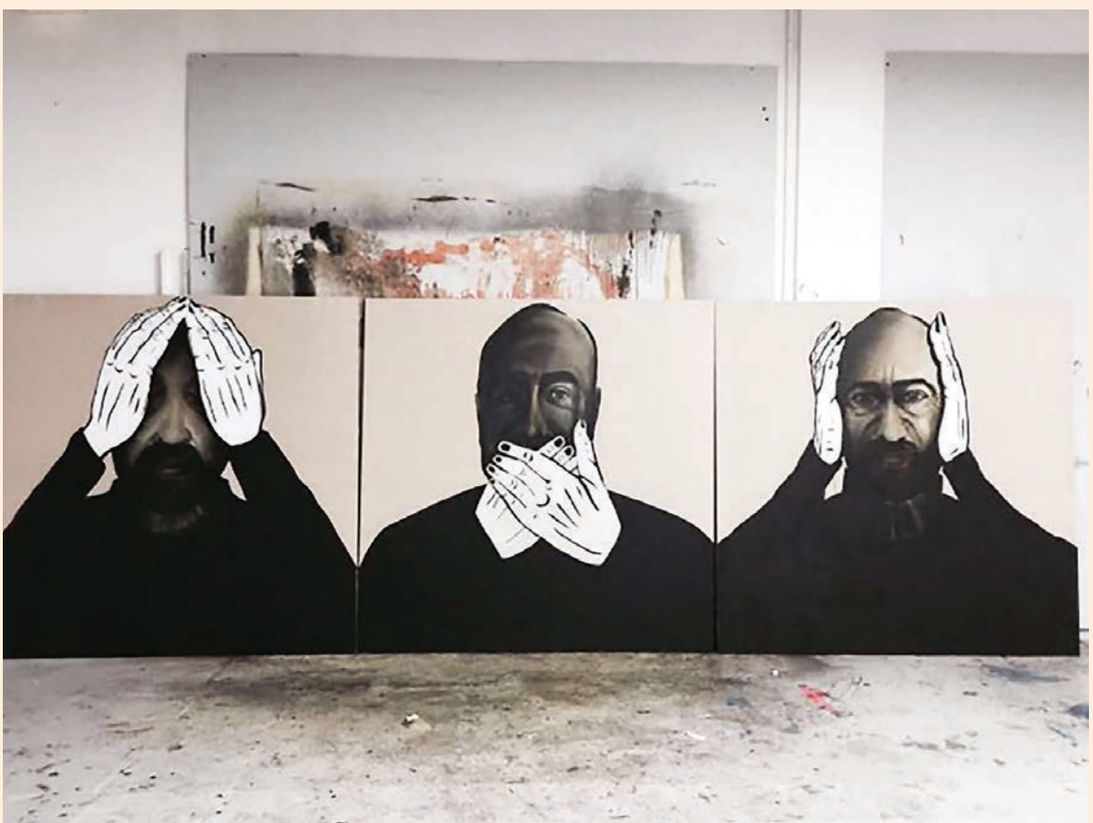
**AYK: How did you start painting again?**

**TK:** I met the gallerist Claude Lemand. He told me that my original art and brushwork were very powerful and said, "Why don't you go back to painting?"

**AYK: So was it Claude that redirected your art, or did the war continue to have an impact?**

TK: That's a very important question. I have been working on a project since the beginning of the war, with two large components already completed. The first of these is called *Mes Condolences,* a 10-metre painting which I showed at a museum in South Korea through Sam [Bardaouil] and Till [Fellrath] in a very important exhibition called *Songs of Loss and*

*Songs of Love* which also featured Shireen Neshat and other important artists. The second element is called *Then What,* and was inspired by the work that Louay Kayyali did around the displacement of the Palestinians. It's another huge painting, four and a half metres by two metres, and took me a year and a half to complete. Currently I'm on a third work, which I am preparing for the exhibition *Les Femmes et la Guerre (Women and War),* which I will be showing at Galerie Claude Lemand in January. It's a topic that touches me deeply. I was born in Beirut and was 11 years old when the civil war started, right under our balcony. We had to leave Lebanon. My mother was such a brave woman, 30 years old and responsible for a 10-year-old child and her 50-year-old mother. She went through so much, and that's where the idea for the exhibition came from. Some of the work I have created for it is composed of bundles of hand-printed fabric from Hama.



This fabric not only symbolises Syria and the exodus of the Syrian people, but also embodies the sense of a new beginning. Every human can say to him- or herself, "I want to start again."

**AYK: Do you believe that the work you are doing will make a difference?**

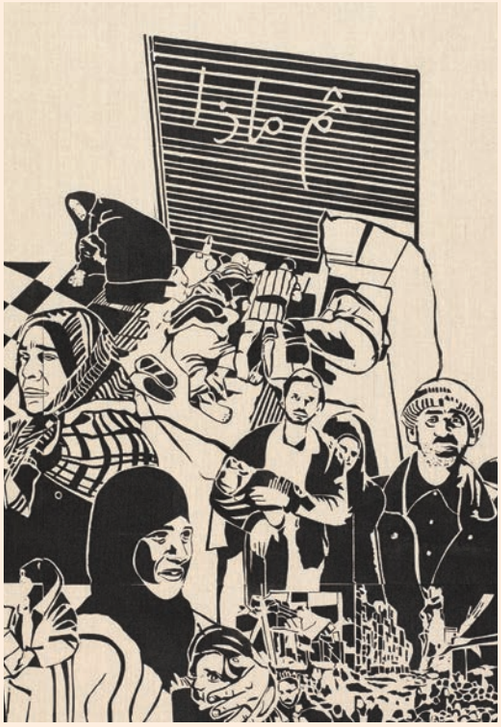
**KT:** Maybe indirectly, if not directly, and maybe tomorrow, if not today. Because what comes from the heart, touches the heart, and artists are highly sensitive. We can sense things in a different way, and we can communicate things differently. This is why those who do not want to listen today, will listen and see tomorrow because we are relentlessly working on opening their minds.

**AYK: Do you have any hope that the war will end?**

**KT:** Everything has an end. There is no war in the world that did not end. The question is when and how.

**AYK: Let's say the war ends today. In which direction do you think your work will go?**

**KT:** All through the war, I've used no colour in my work. It's all black and white, and the topics have changed from being personal to becoming more public. The focus is not about me, my grandmother or my mother anymore. It has become something bigger. So, I think that when the war is over, my work will certainly move into a new phase, but I don't yet know what that might be.



## *This is why those who do not want to listen today, will listen and see tomorrow because we are relentlessly working on opening their minds.*

**AYK: Do you feel a particular responsibility towards the Syrian people?**

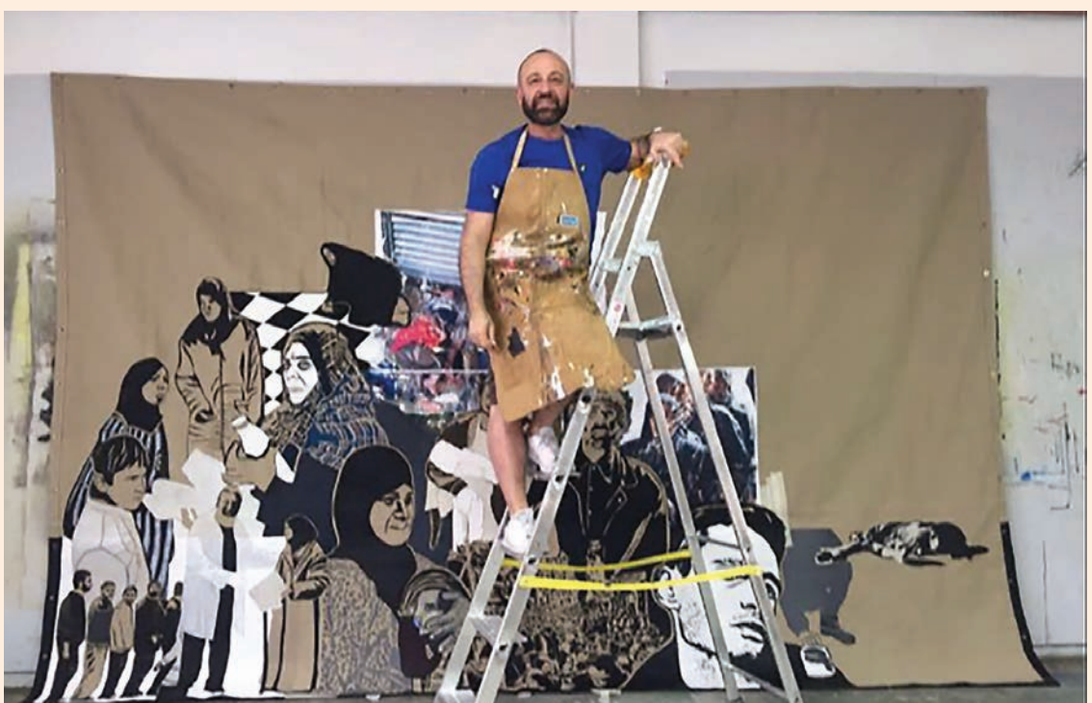
**KT:** Of course. All my work is about my country. I am hyper-engaged, without thinking about the political dimension. That means nothing to me, as there are more important things such as the human issues and the blood of those who are dying in the conflict. A country and a history are burning. Aleppo, one of the oldest places in the world, where a civilisation was built and humans first walked, has barely a stone left standing.

**AYK: Do you have very special memories of Aleppo?**

**KT:** Absolutely. I did the first two years of my architectural studies at the University of Aleppo and got to know the city really well. Among the works I have prepared for the *Les Femmes et la Guerre* exhibition are paintings named after Syrian cities. This wasn't done in a random way. The paintings directed me towards a specific character while I was painting them. For example, there is a painting named *Aleppo* and others called *Damascus, Hama, Homs, Palmyra* etc. The exhibition is about women, but they each represent a city. I want to immortalise this land, because in 10, 20, 30 years from now, people will have forgotten. In the presence of such paintings, they cannot forget.

**AYK: If you had one message to send to the Syrian people, to all those living and suffering through the conflict, what would it be?**

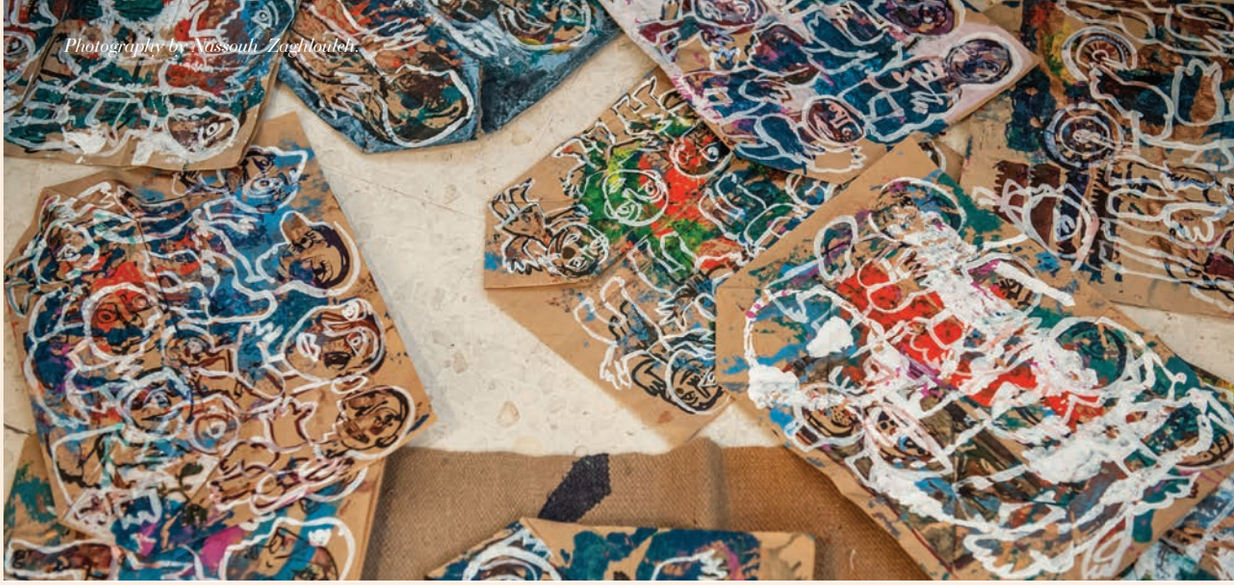
**KT:** Whatever I say can never be enough. I painted a work of a skeleton with one lung, called *We are still breathing*. People asked me, "Why is it so black and so hurtful to the eyes?" I replied by saying that it was nothing compared to the truth. So, what can I tell them? I am abroad, living in my own home, warm, and with food on my table. May God be with them, that's all. Whatever else I say, it will be shameful and small.



# FADI YAZIGI

**Born 1966 in Latakia, Syria**
**Lives and works in Damascus, Syria**

Graduating with a BFA from the University of Damascus, Yazigi specialises in sculpture and has been working as an artist since 1988. His body of work focuses on the human form and faces, often with an anthropomorphic element, and his influences range from Babylonian imagery and daily life to the current conflict.



*Photography by Nassouh Zaghloulah*

**Ali Y. Khadra: As a Syrian artist who is still inside Syria, you are best able to explain how the situation is there right now. What are your memories of the art scene before the war, and how did it compare with what has happened since 2011?**

**Fadi Yazigi:** Around 2004/05, when Contemporary Arab art was really flourishing, things were going increasingly well in Syria, at least in terms of the market. As for me personally, I've been devoted to my work since 1992 and carried on in the same way except there was now an open market and a foundation that was active in Syria. It used to work with young artists, organising exhibitions for them, putting them in contact with international magazines such as *Canvas*, for example. Galleries were opening up, there were Iraqi artists resident in Syria, and people were always exhibiting here. Things were booming, and Syrian art was coming out into the limelight and receiving the attention it deserves. It kept on going this way until 2010. The following year saw the start of the war and the art scene has been very different since then. The country has been fully barricaded these last five years, with hardly any contact with the outside world. The organisations that used to invite artists in the first year or two of the crisis just don't do so now. Even the embassies have stopped, because they won't issue visas any longer.

*The country has been fully barricaded these last five years, with hardly any contact with the outside world. The organisations that used to invite artists in the first year or two of the crisis just don't do so now.*

**AYK: Do you think the problem is because the foundations, galleries and museums have forgotten about Syrian artists or is it down to the visa question?**

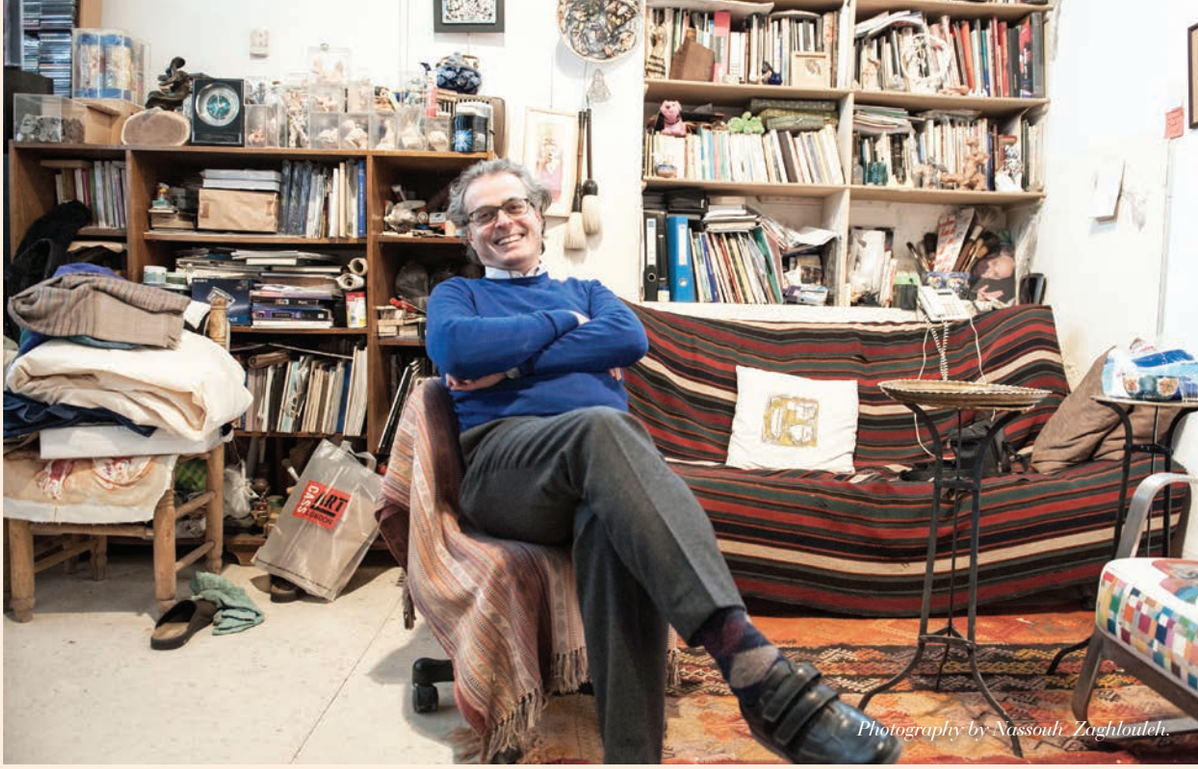
**FY:** The political situation has the greatest impact. For example, I received an invitation from the Delfina Foundation to go and do something in London, but it's impossible for a Syrian to get a UK visa. I've exhibited several times in Britain, but now can't get permission to enter and do my work. That's just one of the issues. If someone buys an artwork from you and wants to transfer the money to you for it, that's an even bigger problem. We can't receive dollars or euros into our accounts now. It is real isolation and has many ramifications. I suffer from it on a monthly basis. A while ago I was invited to a symposium in Amman. Getting into Jordan was a masquerade, as if I were going to the South Pole. There was an interrogation, an investigation, hours spent standing up and waiting. I didn't even want to go, I'd been invited there by a museum. You finally get in, then leave them a $50-60,000 artwork as a gift and they treat you in the same way when you're leaving, interrogating you and making you stand and wait for half an hour to get your passport back. It's a tragedy.

**AYK: Have you considered leaving Syria and going to a Gulf country, Europe or America, as other Syrian artists have done?**

**FY:** No, I have not considered it, and I could not do it. In reality, it's a decision for both me and my wife. We have two children who will be going to university soon. If they want to travel to study, that's not a problem, but it's different for my wife and I. I've been to Europe and America, and have had the opportunities to submit my papers for immigration. But I just do not want to.

**AYK: Why not, if you are suffering in Damascus? Why do you refuse to leave?**

**FY:** Because this is the appropriate place for me to be. My life is here, all my work, my home, all the people I know around me. Despite the difficult situation right now, I could not live in any other

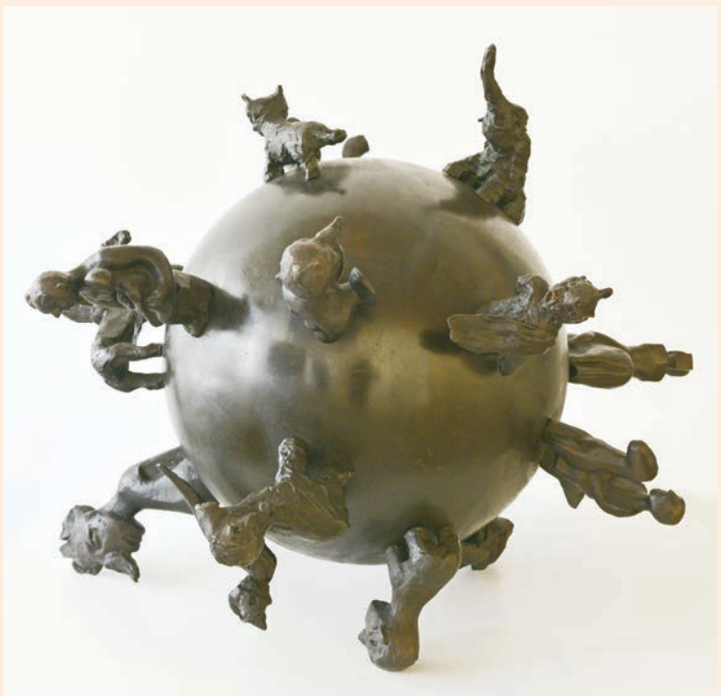


*Photography by Nassouh Zaghlouleh.*

place. I also feel responsibilities towards Syria. When the country's comfortable, I am happy to stay here, so when the country's in trouble should I just not be here anymore? In any case, I create my daily memories here with the people of Damascus. What would I be doing somewhere else?

**AYK: What sort of memories are you creating?**

**FY:** What I paint, a relief that I am making or a sculpture, it's a part of my daily life. I go down to the studio every day and there I paint and I sculpt. Then, maybe six months later when I look back after being away for a while, I feel like this period of six months is in my painting or in my relief. What would I do abroad? Live on the margins because I am scared to die? Fatalism takes over. You might be abroad and die of a stroke, of boredom or of desperation, because you are away from your place, the place that suits you. I could not ever contemplate it, not for a moment. A while ago I received an invitation from the Institut du Monde Arabe to participate in a dialogue about artists living in exile. I remember talking to the director of IMA about how I could never think of living abroad. However beautiful Paris and other places might be, I still feel out of place there. Perhaps these places are beautiful for their own inhabitants, but I just feel that I am better here.



**AYK: Do you consider that your work has changed as a result of the war?**

**FY**: Oh yes, it has changed a lot.

**AYK: Is this totally because of the war or did you want to change or reinvent yourself anyway?**

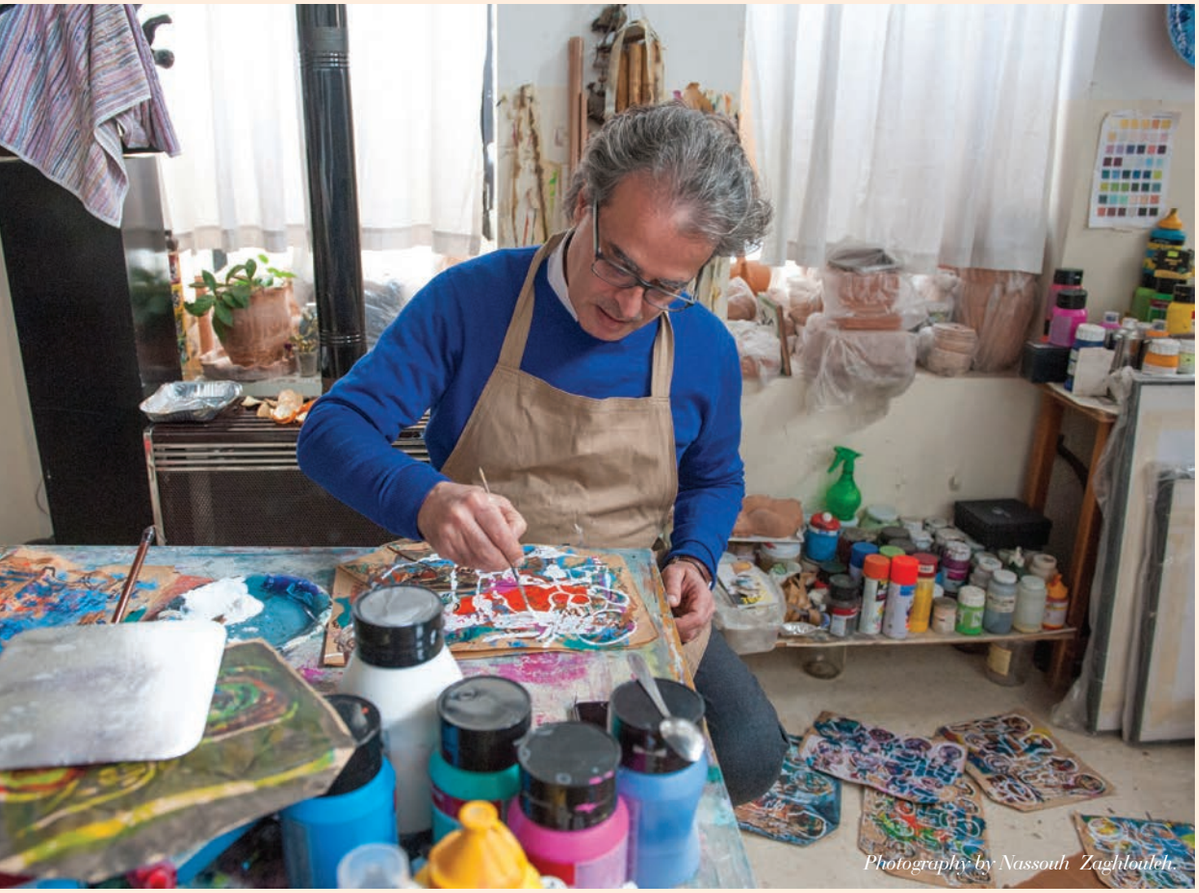
**FY**: I was trying to change a lot of things about my work from 2009, but 2011 and the war had a huge impact on me. It brought me down to earth and made me feel the isolation, the fear, how things have no value. In particular, how humans have no value and how it is a big lie that humanity has evolved. I felt like we were living in a time before the Middle Ages, not just us here in Syria but across the whole world. People going after the idea of religion and killing each other for an idea, plus the notion of colonising whole countries, this made me suffocate and work on entirely different things. Before I used to do rather dreamy works. My work now has more symbolism, but at the same time I don't market the idea of war and that I am suffering. I keep doing art for art's sake. These are works that are coming from my unconscious, from my consciousness, from my memories, from the ambiance that I am experiencing, from the looks in people's eyes on the street.

**AYK: Your work used to have an *art naif* quality to it before, would that description be fair?**

**FY**: It wasn't as much *art naif* as a little childlike, in that my figures had the appearance of a child. There was innocence, for sure. There was always someone smiling, someone with a big head and a smaller body, the idea of people who are beautiful but still not aware, who did not grow up correctly. They did not grow up correctly because circumstances did not allow them to do so.

**AYK: How have those particular characters changed?**

**FY**: They are still more or less the same, but their faces are less defined now and their actual features are no longer present. In my sculptures, the figures were soft before. Now there's a harshness on the surface, the characters are differently built, like

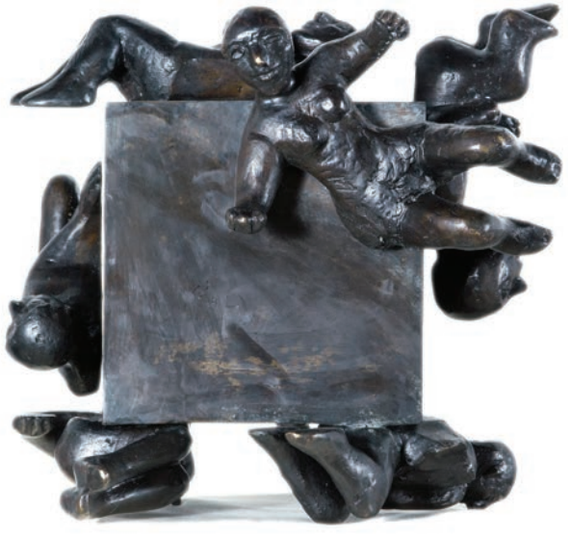


*Photography by Nassouh Zaghlouleh.*

a sphere or a cube that has people all around it: any way you turn it, there are some on top, some on the bottom and some on the side. It's like a dice that you throw, not knowing where it will land. I lived in that state myself, and I started applying it to my work. A sphere with people and animals all over it, no matter how it turns, looks very much like a bomb or a torpedo.

*Every day there would be two or three people coming to ask me to be part of exhibitions abroad. There is no one left today.*

**AYK: How has the war impacted on the practicalities of your work and where you obtain your materials?**
**FY**: I have to buy everything abroad now. There is very little here and it's not of good quality. I only have three or four bags left of the clay I use for my reliefs and I'm afraid to finish them. The clay isn't available anymore at the workshop where I used to get it and so I now have to buy it in Beirut. I used to cast the bronze here in Damascus, but there's no foundry any longer. The workshops and foundry were located in the suburbs of the city and those are now in flames.



**AYK: How do you maintain the spirit to be productive when news of what is happening in Aleppo or in Damascus reaches you?**
**FY**: It's not about having the spirit anymore. It's about existence. You are documenting something you are living with on a daily basis. There's increasingly more to document, and so your responsibility to document it also grows. You are not working solely to exhibit anymore.

**AYK: Do you still go to your studio every day?**
**FY**: Yes, every day.

**AYK: Do people still visit your studio?**
**FY**: Hardly at all. Not even five per cent of those that came before 2011. I used to receive several visitors a day while I worked, of all different nationalities. I'd be making coffee and we'd be having discussions throughout the day and well into the evening. Every day there would be two or three people coming to ask me to be part of exhibitions abroad. There is no one left today. Now I go back home by 2 or 2.30 in the afternoon. Every week or so one of my friends might visit and we sit for a little, or I might go and meet a fellow artist. We try to keep in touch with each other, but it's not at all like before.

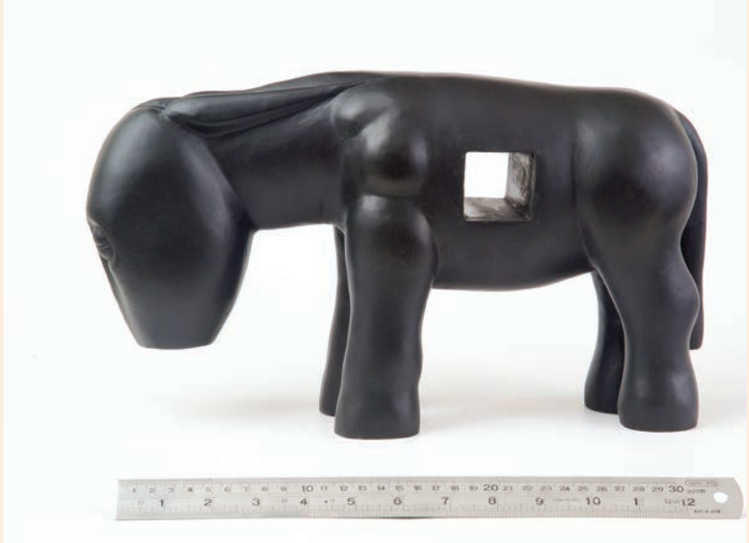
**AYK: Do you feel that painting makes you calmer and helps you forget the suffering that is going on?**
**FY**: The suffering is too close to me. I can never forget it, and not forgetting is the least I can do. But art has always been a mental therapy to me. It is always a matter of balance, now even more so. If

you used to feel like you had five kilos on your shoulders before, now it feels like 50. It really feels like that. When you work now, it is tiring, it is hard, it feels heavy, the brushstrokes, the movement of the pen… It's all different from before. There is pain and harshness now.

**AYK: Do you feel a sense of abandonment?**

**FY**: Personally, I keep trying to go to places and participate, and although I pay a hefty price to be able do so, I do not feel that the crisis has killed me or excluded me. Others do not have the same opportunity and they really feel isolated. There are no galleries to approach, no foundations supporting artists, and the exhibitions about Syrian art that take place now are very quiet events. It's impossible for me to exhibit even in Amman now, the borders are too complicated to cross and transportation is not easy. It's like we are living in isolation on an island and we have the plague. Very fine people have been marginalised or have left the country.

*All my work resembles the crisis. It resembles this whole period. I am automatically affected, unconsciously, because I am in it. That's why I tell you that I cannot leave.*



**AYK: What plans do you have for your art for when the war ends?**

**FY**: I have many small pieces that I want to enlarge, especially sculptures, because they deserve to be reproduced in a larger size. Now is not the right time to do so, obviously. I have 170x45 centimetre bronze pieces in Beirut that have already been cast at the foundry but which I cannot bring here. I've asked the guy there to take photos so I can see them, because your eye looks at things differently after time. The most important thing is that the war ends, and I have to be optimistic about that.

**AYK: Are you considering producing a work around a specific city or event from the war?**

**FY**: All my work resembles the crisis. It resembles this whole period. I am automatically affected, unconsciously, because I am in it. That's why I tell you that I cannot leave. If I lived abroad and produced artworks about what I heard in the news, I would be lying.

**AYK: Do you have a message to send to people outside, to the lovers of Syrian art, to museums and galleries?**

**FY**: I'm not good at sending messages. Nobody can carry the weight of the worries of somebody else, and it is true that pain makes you not want to look, but I would invite them to consider what is happening here and not close their eyes. From my own point of view I'd say that my commitment to creating genuine art has not changed. On the contrary, my concern and sense of responsibility are greater, as is my love for the place and my sense of attachment to it. I'm not being nostalgic or patriotic, it's simply the feeling that I am living. I can escape from here, but I don't want to. It is my place.