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ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD



**YEAR IN
REVIEW**

'12

Published out of the Dubai Technology and Media Free Zone Authority.

AED 45 | QAR 65 | BD/QR 7 | SR 90 | LBP 32,000 | US\$25 | £15.00 | €16



SYRIA: THE ART OF WAR

Almost two years have passed since a piece of graffiti – an anti-regime slogan scrawled on a school wall – led to the arrest of 15 children in Dara’a, igniting the first protests of the Syrian revolution.

India Stoughton reports on how the country’s artists have reacted to the ongoing violence.

Given that the immediate cause of the upheaval in Syria can be traced to a piece of street art, the importance played by artistic expression in Syria’s uprising is self-evident. Those artists within the country struggle to continue working amid the escalating chaos, often with no access to studio space and limited materials, while those who have fled join the ranks of Arab artists forced to work in exile, cut off from their cultural milieu. Among the internationally renowned artists remaining in Syria are Youssef Abdelke, Sabhan Adam, Ahmad Moualla, Kais Salman and Fadi Yazigi. Others, such as Jaber Al-Azmeh, Houmam Al-Sayed and Abdalla Omari, have been forced to flee. Key facilitators of Syria’s cultural scene have also had to relocate, among them Mouna Atassi, the owner of Damascus’s Atassi Gallery, who has moved temporarily to Dubai.

ENDURANCE OR EXILE

The effects of the violent protests that have swept through the country can be clearly seen in the work of many of the artists remaining in Syria. Abdelke, who habitually draws only still-lives, has dramatically changed his subject matter – for the first time in over 15 years, he is drawing human figures. Yazigi has also introduced new motifs into his recent work, notably a bird, which appears in almost all of his new pieces, flying freely in and out of his canvases. “Creating art is hard these days,” he

admits, “especially when you see the horror on peoples’ faces. I am upset with what I am doing in art. I spend half of my day looking at what I did the day before – it takes me days to finish it.” Salman, meanwhile, has employed more overt references to violence in his recent paintings. Like Abdelke, his latest pieces are consistent stylistically with his earlier work, but differ thematically. The women he draws now carry weapons in their hands and fear on their faces. Moualla also addresses warfare in his recent work; *The Power and the People* – a stunning piece measuring 12 metres – was exhibited by Atassi last year at Abu Dhabi Art. The painting, showing two shadowy armies that clash in the centre in a whirl of movement, was dubbed *The Arab Guernica* by critics.

There are numerous practical concerns for artists currently working in Syria, besides the obvious physical risks. Abdelke wants to exhibit his work at home, but with Syria’s cultural infrastructure in fragments, it is currently impossible. Yazigi struggles to find a functioning foundry to cast his bronze sculptures. Moualla has not painted in over a year, and while this is not unusual for the artist, he is unable to say when he will. “Our eyes are filled with blood, so we are unable to see,” he says. “And to paint without seeing is not the path of a painter.”

Among the artists who have left Syria, there is a conflicting sense of freedom and of isolation. Some have begun to

Below, left to right: Jaber Al-Azmeh. Untitled from the *Wounds* series. 2012. Printed on cotton rag fine art archival paper. 50 x 75 cm. Edition of five; Jaber Al-Azmeh. *Yousef Abdelke* from the series *A Small Group of Syrians*. 2011–12. C-Print. 50 x 70 cm. Edition of three. Images courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai.

Facing page: Mouna Atassi in the Atassi Gallery booth during Abu Dhabi Art 2012 with a work by Ahmed Moualla. *The Power and the People*. 2011. Oil on canvas. 300 x 1200 cm. Photography by Myrna Ayad. © Canvas Archives; Houmam Al-Sayed. *Hunchback of Notre Sham*. 2011. Bronze. 30 x 27 x 27 cm. Image courtesy the artist.



create openly political work, almost impossible pre-uprising. Al-Azmeh, now based in the Gulf, created *A Small Group of Syrians*, which he hasn't exhibited yet. This brave and moving series captures key anti-regime figures, each holding a copy of the *Baath* newspaper, graffitied with a revolutionary message. "It's one of the Syrian government's most prominent symbols," he explains. "The paper is turned upside down in the photographs – toppled – and used as a surface of new and free thoughts, thus overturning the daily chronicle of government lies." Meanwhile, painter and sculptor Al-Sayed relocated to Beirut in September and showcased a collection of his haunting sketches, produced in Damascus over the past year. While some are clearly scenes from the uprising, he steers clear of explicitly depicting violence in his work, instead subtly alluding to it. Men cower in the street, hiding their faces, while an old man sits with brush and polish, an enormous pile of military boots at his feet.

A NEW MOVEMENT?

The work coming out of Syria – as well as that being produced elsewhere – spans an enormous range of genres, styles and subject matter, but some artists believe that the revolution has provided the catalyst for a new Syrian art movement. While the upheaval has clearly had a profound effect, it is hard to say at this stage whether this heralds the beginning of a united movement. "Whilst Syrian art has always been expressive and has often revealed a deep concern with social ills, new works are more overtly political than ever before," says

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Khaled Samawi, owner of Ayyam Gallery. "However, I do not think it represents a huge break from what came before – the willingness to confront difficult situations has always been a feature of Syrian art."

Mark Hachem, owner of his eponymous spaces in Beirut, Paris and New York, believes that work coming out of Syria is becoming "more and more political because there's this sense of freedom, especially for the artists outside Syria." He feels that the necessity of exhibiting outside Syria will expose artists to a wider range of influences and attention. "You don't see many ultra-Contemporary artists in Syria. [Now] they're moving more towards conceptual work," he says. Atassi is perhaps the most optimistic about the changes taking place. "All the great events in history are the subjects of great artistic creation, and I believe that this is the case in Syria," she says. "From this point, there will be a dramatic change in the history of Syrian art."

