

PAINTING POLITICS

On the streets of Damascus, a rising refugee art movement is mixing politics with paint oil

BY MIKE MACEACHERAN

While Baghdad burns, Beirut rebuilds and Dubai discusses debt, Damascus is undergoing an artistic renaissance. Following an influx of refugees from neighbouring Palestine, Iraq – and in previous years Lebanon – the Syrian capital has flourished on canvas and in clay and is now awash with incoming painters and rust red paint pots.

During the first four years of the Iraq war, Syria kept its borders open to displaced migrants. In a bid to show solidarity with its Arabian allies, a country with a population of just nineteen million absorbed two million fleeing Iraqis. Add a constant ebb and flow from Palestine to this diaspora, and Syria has spent an eventful few years facing pressure from the West and political dilemmas from within.

Despite the resulting ideological shrapnel, a cosmopolitan art scene has blossomed.

Artists from all backgrounds now find refuge in galleries and inner city studios; for once, modern art is thriving in perhaps the most unlikely of places. The Ayam Gallery nurtures incoming talent; the sculptor Mustafa Ali, based at the Gallery Art Foundation, brings young artists together from across the region; and a newfound thirst for Levantine art is palpable. Born out of politics, Damascus has chosen a very different aesthetic.

“Some say I am influenced by Palestine but I say it has been influenced by me,” explains expatriate Mahmoud Shahin, who is regarded as the original refugee artist. Though born in Jerusalem in 1946, he has made a living from his inner city workshop for as long as he can remember. “Yet this is not Damascus art; this is my art,” he proudly claims. “My art is not political – I don’t think about other art and what is going on around me. This is the rule.”

“There are so many problems in the Middle East, but art is flourishing because of this,” sighs Lebanese artist Salwa Zeidan, now based in Abu Dhabi but with close ties to the Damascus art scene. “After the invasion of Iraq and the turmoil in Lebanon, buyers started looking at Syria in more depth.” And the government’s liberal border policies – and relatively liberal cultural strategies – have allowed those artistic talents to blossom.



“Scarred by war and political upheaval, Syria has become the perfect breeding ground for artists seeking a new home”

One of the city’s recent poster boys Ahmad Al Karkhi worked in Baghdad until 2006, before violence forced him to relaunch his career in Syria. Since then, he has made and sold some 240 paintings – most of them to American buyers. Yet there are other street artists like Omar Odeh and Alaa Ismael, also from Iraq, who have had to compete for gallery space with their new found Syrian counterparts, like Amar Matebe.

Resident artist of 31 Art, a boutique gallery hidden behind the shadows of Damascus’s Umyaad Mosque, Matebe is an advocate of the new Syrian aesthetic. With trimmed goatee and dressed in a Van Gogh collarless shirt, he is perhaps more suited to the cafes and galleries of the Parisian Left Bank. Painting purple skies and lopsided buildings, his art is Dali-esque by design, making his home city look more like Gotham City.

“This is how I see Damascus today,” he insists. Influenced by the new art community engulfing him, his paintings are a cultural exchange of integrity. “Most traditional painters paint the Old Damascus,” he purrs. “But this is not high art – today we like the modern style.” For now at least, as the ceasefire continues to ring true along Syria’s disputed borders, Damascus is safe in the hands of a new garrison of painters, armed only with an artillery of paintbrushes and splattered palettes. And long may it continue. ©

SOLDIERS OF (ART) FORTUNE

Dia Azzawi:

The most famous Iraqi painter of modern times, the London-based exile is the best selling Iraqi sculptor at auction. For a shot in the arm of modern Iraqi art, check out his Blue Man Group pastiche “Morning Light”.

Parviz Tanavoli:

Responsible for Christie’s record sale for Middle Eastern art – the US\$2.8 million “The Wall (Oh Persepolis)”, left. The Iranian currently holds the world record price for any work by a regional artist.

Abdul Qader Al-Rais:

Al-Rais might be the Emirates’ most hard working man with a brush. “Bishra”, his large and powerful calligraphic triptych painting, far outperformed its pre-sale estimate and sold for US\$385,000.



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