

The Dialectic of Art and Politics in Youssef Abdelke's Work

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Bassel Al Saadi

The Syrian artist Bassel Al Saadi is international guest artist 2017 at Villa Romana.

This article was written in 2009, during the great political and social shutdown in Syria.

In memory of Omar Aziz, who died under torture in the prisons of [Bashar] Assad

One of the most baffling aspects of writing about Syrian artist Youssef Abdelke is whether he is a political artist. Is he an artist without boundaries? Did he paint paintings or rather transmit political and social messages by means of his imposing artistic skill? Did he find this talent only for political aims, and would it later transform into a tool for expressing matters greater than him, existential matters par excellence? How does he determine his artistic options? And how does he answer complicated questions such as: does art or politics come first? And if political work is non-existent, is it possible to make political art? What does Youssef Abdelke want to offer us? I am asking these questions because I think he is an artist who makes his choices with extreme attention, and we must therefore try to read his work on various levels.

I encountered his works at the end of the eighties, through the covers of books by Syrian poets and writers. During that period, we were still feeling our way through our encounter with art, and we asked ourselves: what is art? Why do artists paint and make sculptures? We were arranging our alphabet, in order to untie the secrets of the works that we were seeing. We were exhausted by our interpretations, and were confused a great deal by the criteria we were using.

Art, among other creative fields, appeared significantly supernatural, but when we saw a painting or a book cover by Youssef Abdelke, we would halt in front of two things: the clarity and honesty of thought, and the sublime technique of his work. And here we would find all that appeared haughty and inscrutable in the works of other artists offered modestly before the spectator. He was a precursor of extremely high level. At the time we believed in the leftist dream, and asked ourselves what political art was, and whether art must be political in order to serve the people, or whether it is enough to create art and enough is enough, since everything is political in the end; time passes and great changes pass, locally and globally, well-established concepts shudder, and others remain and become clearer.

I believe that visual arts in Syria relied on literary and nationalist themes since their outset, and actually this was the only option for artists to approach this newcomer art. However, when we try to interpret the career of Youssef Abdelke, we get confused by this question: is the political message or the aesthetic one his priority? I believe that this question accompanied Abdelke's career since its beginnings, but in the sense that the urgency of political work determined the answer at the start, at least in terms of his desire to have a political impact. The matter appears licit and does not create any doubts thus far, but in which direction can artistic work evolve when the paths of political work are cut off? This is what happened when Abdelke came out of prison at the beginning of the eighties

and travelled to France to continue his studies.

Abdelke continued to create ways to unite art and politics, and during the eighties and the early nineties the covers of tens of Syrian novels and poetry books were drawn by Abdelke. We can describe this phase as symbolic politics, and we will find that his drawings are full of segregated persons facing strange monsters. If we pay attention to the dates of publication of these books we will clearly notice the artist's technical and artistic progress throughout the period. Abdelke was also painting his trilogy during this period – with arrogant, distorted people, spiritually and materially corrupt. Here the progress of Abdelke's work lies in the precise balance in between painting and caricature, as he used and developed refined techniques borrowed from graphics.

Abdelke says about this period: "Direct political aspects appeared in most of this series, it was a way of unloading all that had accumulated inside me during my time in prison. It linked to my earliest works, in which there appeared people who examine their power, on the level of meaning. But on the artistic level, if the expression holds good, there was a great deal of wrath and fierceness in this series, arrogance and its irony, a play on all this in a possibly vengeful way. By the end of the series I felt that I had cleared my account with my time in prison."

There is not much left to say about this period, except for the fact that I think it was an intermediate phase in which Abdelke's conceptual maturity was not yet complete, when it came to answering questions such as what is the difference in between a painting and a political poster – an old question which perhaps began with Picasso's Guernica. The answer is simply that time determines everything, and that political posters are related to transient and daily events whereas the artistic value of paintings cuts across every epoch... This was the case in the middle of the nineties, a period which witnessed great developments and which compelled many

artists to reconsider the concepts they had believed in for a long time.

It is difficult to assess Abdelke's intellectual and psychological progress at that time, but I will describe the artistic developments that took place in his work. A transition from daily political concerns to historical political worries took place: he answered the question of the effectiveness of art by going into the depths of the artistic condition. Namely, true effectiveness does not seek immediate reactions; it coincides instead with artistic and visual effectiveness, and in my view, this is what widened Abdelke's public.

In that phase, which began in 1995 and is not yet over, Abdelke painted subjects which he chose paying attention to extreme realism, such as used shoes, dried plants, fish heads, animal, skulls, glass ... Although Abdelke may have painted these subjects with extreme realism, the space he sets them in is absent, mysterious, ambiguous, and if you pay great attention you realize it is a non-space, and this brings us back to the absence of space in Syrian painting, which with convincing inferences we can call the space of the womb, the space of desire, which we do not live in, but which we withdraw into, far from the shocks of life. However, in the paintings of Abdelke the matter is entirely different. We can describe the space as the space of the womb full of shocking realities, full of death, and therefore full of the time that has passed, and here is the paradox. The space tells us about the non-existence of time, and the things that fill it out shock us with their sensory presence.

I will suggest a few approaches that will help us understand the matter better. I will give two examples that may seem dissonant, but which really serve the same method of presenting reality from an artistic perspective. The first is socialist realism, that was a widespread style in ex-communist countries. The second is the visual or television publicity. Both present space as it will appear once the dream is fulfilled, the dream of a revolution

that will set forth an utopian time and space, a heaven that will inevitably come into existence, but we must not be greedy and request it now, it is a pledge that future generations may encounter. This is why we are suffering now.

The dream of consumption that sells us bliss, that we will encounter with the product which is marketed to that scope, has used the future in two ways: like a drug that exploits people's constant will through their hopes, and also through the hope of the improvement of life, collectively (socialist realism) or individually (publicity). It is very rare to find an artist that deals with space that far subjective. Perhaps one of the few to enter this domain courageously was the English artist Lucian Freud, when he painted naked people with no beautification, and with great sensitivity. He painted them in their own poor ashen spaces, and their features do not indicate anything. They are there without any hope, no expression appears on their faces, time itself is there (this very second). We see this clearly, because it takes our eyes what we flee from ... looking at the reality. In these paintings, people free themselves from hope, or at least free themselves from feeding their imagination in order to grasp the instant, however severe it is.

Returning to Abdelke, we will find that he shows shocking subjects such as shoes, skulls, dried flowers, which tell us about a real time that has passed over them. He presents them as icons separated from their space, and elevates them to a sacred status. From another point of view, we can say that he excludes space intentionally, thereby excludes time and only offering us that which still exists (old shoes, skulls...). In this sense, Abdelke's art cannot be entirely political. Political work attempts to secure deals with the present and the future, it attempts to be effective, and perhaps it tries to return to the past only in order to use it for its present and future aims.

By comparison with Lucian Freud's artistic concepts, we can say that

Youssef Abdelke shows things that shock and quarrel with us. Lucian Freud's works are more harsh, telling us that this is reality, and that it is an everyday matter, and that life is simply this, nothing more and nothing less... we enliven our monotone behind walls in this way, and hope here seems a boring joke, while Abdelke's skulls, shoes and fish heads tell us that he revenges hope, that perhaps tried to seduce him for a day, the social utopia that let him down, and also avenges his return to the place he was fleeing from, a personal isolated space that has no political effectiveness. Here art becomes revelation again, and its social-prophetic duty retreats. I think that Abdelke's combined artistic choices over the last fifteen years, restored to his art all it had missed at the start of his career: the confrontation with the existence on one's own. Is this not the fatalism of every artist?

I will finish the article with a supplement, necessary for a number of reasons:

1) A great variable took place, that would radically affect the life of Syrians: the Syrian revolution

2) Youssef Abdelke is one of the very few Syrian artists to remain in Damascus up to the present day. He has seen the huge changes that took place in Syrian society both as an artist and as a political person (arrests, massacres, mass displacement ...)

The Syrian revolution started on 15th March 2011, over forty years after the Assad family took power. It took shape as a series of peaceful demonstrations that the regime met with brutal military violence...no scope for a political solution appears in sight.

Throughout this period, many Syrian political artistic works appeared in support of the revolution, since there had been a short period of great

collective psychological freedom...

But day after day, with the absence of any kind of hope for a political solution, intellectuals and artists started leaving Syria due to daily intimidations (murders, arrests, kidnapping, massacres , barrel bombs).

A very small number of dissident artists remained in Damascus... The question we confronted was, what can we as artists do in a city occupied by the regime, in the absence of a great amount of people and freedom of expression and of income resources...

I used to visit Youssef Abdelke's studio continuously and was keeping watch on how he would answer artistically the loss of the political compass after the Islamists had taken control of the revolutionary groups (with Assad's support).

Assad was playing with time, cooking up a blurry situation that would draw him out of the stalemate and remove him from the responsibility of the massacres, of barrel bombs that were chucked down from planes on residential areas. He succeeded by transforming the revolution into a regional and international conflict and into a civil war...

Youssef was not as optimistic as to fill his paintings of images of the martyrs of the revolution or to ridicule Assad. Day after day, Youssef returned to his old subjects (dead sparrows, dead fish, wilted flowers...)

He had returned to his style of existential protest, which asked the universe about the absurdity of death. But this time he did so in a situation of war intertwined with revolution, with civil war, with at least 500,000 martyrs and with eleven millions of displaced persons.

I certainly wished to see what would have become of Youssef Abdelke's

work in front of the choice of truly political work – if the revolution had succeeded with a peaceful transition from the rule of Assad...

But the situation went further than any sane person could have imagined with the appearance of Isis, and the world pausing to look at Assad's massacres as a mere spectator... And in Damascus, day after day, over the last six years, we began to feel isolated from all other Syrian cities and severed from the cultural atmosphere of Syria, now dispersed around the world...

On the 17th of January 2017 Youssef Abdelke's first exhibition since the revolution opened in Damascus. Most of the paintings on display were paintings of naked girls. This exhibition had a great deal of repercussions for two reasons: because it took place in a Damascus occupied by the regime, and also because it did not contain any revolutionary subjects. On the contrary, it was the first time that Youssef Abdelke painted nudes.

Many accused him of repudiating the revolution and of lacking concern for the pain of Syrians, and of the fact that by having an exhibition in Damascus he was recognizing the power of Assad.... They had however forgotten that artists have a personal need for expression and that confronting the scene of death in one's subjects is not necessarily political... They wanted Youssef Abdelke to make art which expresses the tragedy of Syria.

The end of the revolution and personal grief:

Abdelke had answered logically... He said that we had started searching for fragments of life in Damascus and that the people of Damascus had celebrated the exhibition due to the scarcity of cultural activities, and that those who had attacked the exhibition live outside Syria, and do not

experience the drastic psychological situation of Damascus...

And that attacking the exhibition does not attempt any artistic critique of the artworks.

During my visits to Youssef's studio, I saw that he did not stop trying to paint political subjects, or to protest with great patience... The patience that coached Youssef during these last seven years. He sees his people and his country being annihilated, his dearest friends being killed and imprisoned, and he knows that he is being personally threatened by the regime every single second.

Translation from Arabic into English by Iante Roach.