

SPECIAL REPORT

# Syria's art in exile is roaring

Henriette Johansen

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MEMO aims to influence policy and the public agenda from the perspective of social justice, human rights and international law. This is essential to obtain equality, security and social justice across the region, especially in Palestine.

Title: *Syria's art in exile is roaring*  
Cover: *Rabee Kiwan; Child sleeping under tree*

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A Scream, a child in his eternal sleep, chains, passports with countless stamps, car wrecks, bombed-out buildings and numerous small models of corpses glued on to an empty canvas. Many Syrian artists are affected profoundly by the evils of their war-stricken homeland. MEMO met up with a range of them to study their ways of trying to humanise a war that is so inhuman that new-born babies are perceived as culpable. We discussed their feelings and thoughts about their situation, and the artists' quest to project a human face onto the empty but vast numbers of displaced people, to which Syrians feel they have been reduced. Their works manifest themselves as a fight for humanity strung out between an identity and personal experience and belief in the Syrian people to provide some hope in the hardest of times.

Fifteen kilometres from Beirut lies the tranquil Lebanese mountain town of Aley, where these young and passionate voices have been embraced by a local NGO, Art Residency of Aley (ARA). In May 2012, Rakhad Mardini took on the challenge of renovating an old Ottoman stable into a safe haven where Syrian artists would get much-needed peace and resources to paint-out their human experiences for an increasingly global audience.



Mardini explained to me how art has a therapeutic and healing capacity which Syrian artists themselves are in need of, as they flee from the turmoil in what was once their amiable homeland. Art reflects the conflict and is a tool to spread ideas and thoughts

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about peace-building and reconciliation. The cracks forming between the ethnic and religious groups in Syria is something new to the country; Mardini calls it “a sickness”.

“I grew up in Syria, the sectarianism is new,” she told me. “Art is a powerful tool because it reaches out quickly, in the same language, and can really touch your heart and soul and make you think.” She believes that there is a need for the experience of the war to transcend the media and have a human face, reaching wider audiences, and engaging people’s own minds. This is why ARA hosted performance artist Hamdi Jouini recently, performing “Free Me”, a thought-provoking piece where a chained, Guantanamo-outfitted man is pained and strained by the oppressive system which is choking him; he is finally freed when the audience members throw paint on him. The performance tells the story of art releasing the constraints that society imposes on human beings. At the end, he walks away, having been given the power through art to release himself from his imprisonment,



*“Free Me” performance at the ARA by Hamdi Jouini, January 2014*

Mardini detected the need for a space which allows the artists to reflect and discharge all the anger, pain and fear that they experienced in Syria and, in return, they leave one of their works to decorate and contribute to the rich collection in the studio. She calls it “the responsibility of the artist” to make us think about society and reflect, project ourselves on to a canvas, giving us inspiration.

Because they still have a future career ahead of them, Mardini has high hopes of the younger artists. Their work is more dynamic, adapting and reacting in different impulses to what is happening in the crisis.

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*Al-Haddad works are mainly paintings of screams*



image source: Art Residence Aley

Immobilised by the war, the young artist Remy Al-Haddad spent a whole year in her studio in Syria, afraid to go out and witness the atrocities happening around her. Mardini explained how Al-Haddad's paintings resemble the screams of frustration and sadness she felt for the injustices committed in Syria. Her first time out of the studio was when ARA invited her to go to Lebanon.

### **Rabee Kiwan**



image source: Art Residence Aley

Nurtured by the sanctuary and hospitality of ARA, Rabee Kiwan has now filled galleries in Lebanon and abroad, developing the themes of humanity and identity. MEMO met with Kiwan in his studio in Ashrafiyeh in Beirut to discuss his current works. He is exploring the feeling of being reduced to a number, a passport, a

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stamp, in line for the next permit to reside in a new country. He is deciphering this by using objects of identification and old stamps. He uses items that have become an everyday necessity of life for the Syrian. "A lot of Syrians didn't even need to have passports before the war," Kiwan explains.

"My art now is more about life after the move[from Syria]; about identity, stamps making us nothing but stamp, number – go – move from place to place." He told me that he gets a lot of recognition from his compatriots, since it is exactly these frustrations occupying their minds; their everyday duties as a displaced people.

The media coverage of Syrian art has focused mainly on the artists' stories behind their struggle as refugees, and neglected their art and how it transcends this restraint on canvas. It is clear how these works are affected by the war and politics, but not as clear-cut how the reverse is achieved. There is a link between art and politics, perhaps through its effect on people, but only if time and space is allowed for it to manifest itself.

"When I hear about someone who is killed, I care about the person being killed before I care about who committed the crime," said Kiwan as he explained how humanity goes way beyond the broadcast-focus on the political aspects of the war, and, thus, why art is needed to describe the human experience of the conflict.



*Rabee Kiwan working in his Studio in Ashrafieh, Beirut*

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## Fadi Al-Hamwi



image source: Art Residence Aley

My paintings are like a call for dialogue with others; in a world that witnesses an unprecedented extremism in adopting opinions and defending them. It sheds the light on many of these themes, protests publically on retro values in third world countries and refuses its control on freedom of choices in one's life.

During the events experienced by Syria, these themes moved to be within a larger and more complex circle. So my works became revolving around the concept of war, which widens the rift between these contradictions and this extremism, particularly in the period of money obsession and its control on the speech of the media in the Arab countries.

## Hasko Hasko

According to the Syrian artist Hasko Hasko, the situation in his country resembles an inverse Trojan Horse: it is mayhem and disaster on the outside, but inside it is filled with great people who, like the real warriors inside the Trojan Horse, are ready to re-build their country. His paintings are filled with nature and animals, symbolising that the natural beauty in the Syrian people can re-claim their country.



image source: Art Residence Aley

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### **Khalid Al Boushi**

My awareness that I'm a temporary being, limited and finite, and that my existence is incidental and pointless sometimes, creates in me a need to communicate with whom is eternal and absolute.

Every work of art I do is a try to communicate with immensity, through manifesting the vision I live moving between types of art.

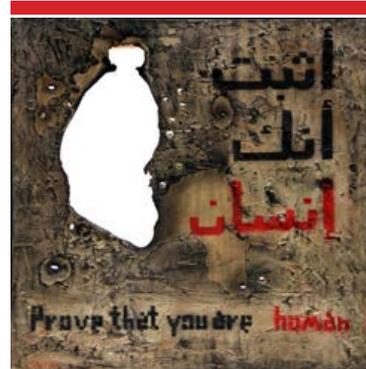


image source: Art Residence Aley

### **Youssef Abdelke**

Youssef Abdelke occupies a leading role in the current renaissance of Arab art and stands out as one of the most famous Syrian painters, drawing an increasingly international audience to the galleries. Over the past twenty years, Abdelke has created still-life paintings using the same technique of charcoal on paper; his work, at the same time methodical and precise, also carries with it a melancholic sentiment emerging in his choice of objects over the past five years of his work.

I met with Mr Abdelke in connection with his new exhibition in Beirut. He explained how knives and skulls, dead fish, a hook are all objects that do not usually conform to the typical decorative features in the scope of still life; these elements were introduced into his work as a reaction to the lead-up to and start of the crisis in Syria. Elements like human beings, points, writing and the colour red did not exist before in his art. The human beings are either the martyrs or the mothers of martyrs; the writings are poems that he felt needed to add spontaneity to his work; and the red is to represent the agony of the people in the war.

His work is related to the revolution. "Regardless of where this revolution got to, the meaning of what is happening in Syria right now is deep and its consequences will affect everyone," he explained. The revolution is no longer a revolution but a huge event, a regional war on Syrian soil, a proxy war, from which huge

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repercussions will follow. This is why he tries to bookend the old work with the new; for him Syria is going to stay Syria, but in a new way.

Reflecting on the power of art on people and, potentially, society and politics as well, he does not believe art can have such leverage directly. "If we say that we would put art on a different level where it does not belong; art affects the soul, thoughts at a later stage; politics is concerned with today but art is tomorrow." On the other hand, he insisted, politics, in exceptional periods like in times of war, would definitely affect art, because people will find a way to change the situation with their art.



*"Pere et enfant assassines"*  
From Youssef Abdelke's *New Works* exhibition

Image courtesy of Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

Syria lived 40 years under a regime which censored anything published; whether it was journalism, strokes on a canvas, writings on a wall, a book or poetry, voices or compositions, the government's repression of creativity has created an endless list of victims. For Abdelke, this dictatorship can create a generation that is afraid to speak up. However, he stresses that there are always people who defy such a system, and become even more powerful and gain more leverage. "They become rebellious to the system and create even more."

He is active politically and, as a member of the Communist Labour Party, he spent the best part of 1978 to 1980 imprisoned, and felt compelled to spend the following years in artistic exile in Paris, until his homecoming in 2005. He told me how he has signed hundreds of petitions against the regime but was held at a check point in Tartous recently, as he was crossing with two friends; both had different religious backgrounds and the authorities suspected them of "preparing something". The bizarre episode

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led to a couple of months in detention before they were freed; the authorities could not find evidence that a crime had been committed. Abdelke emphasised that, despite what most articles claim, the petitions alone did not get him into trouble. Thousands of petitions are run against the regime, he said, it is used to them. It was merely the crossing of a check point which revealed the casual and systematic repression of the regime. He explained how he knew that they were going to take him: "Because with a system like the one in Syria, everyone is at risk, even if he is with the system. To me it is no big deal; the system is so corrupt that I had to endure this at some point."

The Arab spring demands a modernised society. "Dictatorships and military systems are not sufficient any more, and they are blocking us from moving forward." He believes that the extremist groups in the region and which we are seeing in Syria will pass. "Society will reject these systems. The groups felt that they had a chance to regain lost ground, but these generations are rejecting these kinds of systems, and just want to move forward."

Abdelke laughs at the question about the future for Syria. "I am usually optimistic, but..." Regardless of what is happening in Syria now, he believes in the future for his country. "Syria 50 years ago was better than the Syria of 100 years ago." The start of the war was a demand to move to a better future, a revolution to get ahead. For him, this is important. "It is true my paintings are violent," said Abdelke, "but, deep inside, I feel hope for Syria."

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