

Syrian artists portray year of bloodshed and turmoil

By Jon Leyne BBC Middle East correspondent, Cairo

19/03/2012

Severed heads lie on platters, like fruit on the table. A woman protects her baby as monsters move in. Angels with no heads still manage to fly. There is a queue of grey figures, maybe standing guard over their country, maybe lined up for execution.



In one painting, pro-regime thugs are disguised as monstrous animals

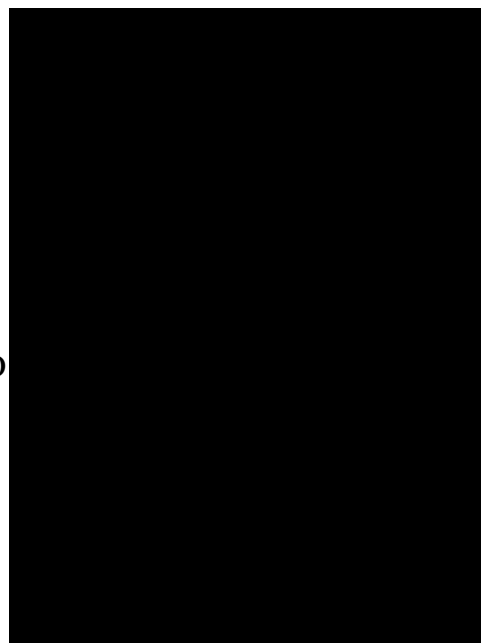
All are pictures from inside Syria, painted during the last year of bloodshed and turmoil.

All of the artists except the organiser, Mouneer al-Shaarani, are still inside Syria right now.

He will return there as soon as the exhibition finishes, despite supervising this artistic outpouring against the government.

"I must be there," he says with a shake of the head. "I have to be back. I have to be with the people for what is going on."

'Yes to freedom'



Yes to freedom: Shaarani has used his training as a

The overstretched security forces have ^{calligrapher to express his message} more important priorities than rounding up artists, Mr Shaarani believes and hopes.

"The prisons are already full so art is at the bottom of the regime's priorities," he suggests.

Nevertheless, he and several of the artists whose work is on show have spent time in the prisons of the Assad dynasty, and spent many years in exile.

Mr Shaarani has used his training as a calligrapher - a skill much valued in the Arab world - to portray his message.

"Yes to freedom," says the intricate pattern in one piece, "no to killing, prison, intimidation, humiliation, siege, hypocrisy, suppression, violence, fear, falsehood, terrorism, corruption."

If we look at the history of art, art always has a role in politics

Another of his pictures repeatedly weaves the name of Syria with the tribes, religions, and ethnic groups that belong there.

Indivisible and united, is the message. But that is about as hopeful as it gets in this bleak collection.

'Silent people'

In one dark picture a man lies dead, a bullet clean through his forehead. In another by the same artist, Youssef Abdelke, there is a knife, and a heart.

In one of Edwar Shahda's pictures, pro-regime thugs are thinly and horribly disguised as monstrous animals. One of them wields a bloodied knife, while a woman holding her baby screams in terror.

A picture by Yaser Safi is called The Dictator. A crazed man is on a chair, a

gun pointed to his own head. Read what you like into it.

Mr Shaarani will not explain how they got the pictures out of Syria. Not openly, it is clear.

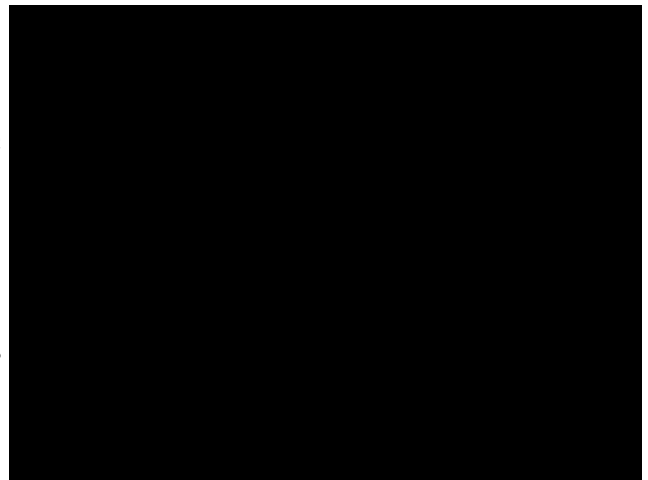


The artists had already formed a couple of groups on Facebook, including a page called Art and Freedom.

The artists are considering whether to mount a private exhibition inside Syria

Galleries are not open in Damascus at the moment, though they are considering whether to mount a private exhibition inside their country.

"If we look at the history of art, art always has a role in politics," argues Mr Shaarani.



However, he concedes that these paintings are unlikely to influence any of those who are now ruling Syria.

In Yaser Safi's The Dictator, a crazed man is on a chair, a gun pointed to his own head

"People at the moment are desperate," he says, because they have given up any hope of change from within the government.

Nevertheless, he believes the key to change lies in peaceful opposition inside Syria itself.

One of the aims of this art is to mobilise what he calls the "silent people", who sympathise with the opposition but have not yet actively taken part.

"The situation is in the hands of the Syrian people."

Copyright © 2019 BBC.