

# Christie's Pulls Paintings by Lebanese Artist After "Complaints"

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November 10, 2023



Ayman Baalbaki, "Anonymous" (2011–2018), acrylic on card laid on canvas, 27 1/2 x 19 5/8 inches  
(image courtesy Bonhams)

Christie's withdrew two portrait paintings by Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki from its Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art sale in London after receiving "multiple complaints" about the works' subject matter.

Baalbaki's 2012 painting "Al Moulatham" portrays a person wearing a patterned red and white *keffiyeh*, a patterned cotton scarf that serves as a protective headdress against the blaring sun and arid climate of both West Asia and North Africa's desert conditions. Baalbaki's personal portrayal of the keffiyeh, among other cultural references, is primarily associated with experiences of repeated displacement, violence, and strife amid the Lebanese Civil War. The garment has also become a symbol of Palestinian resistance against the British Mandate and subsequent Israeli occupation during the 20th century, increasingly popularized by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat during the 1960s.

The second painting, titled "Anonymous" (2011–2018), portrays a man in a black balaclava with a red headband that reads "we revolt," as translated from Arabic script, also donning a gas mask.

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In an interview with *Hyperallergic*, the consignor of "Al Moulatham," who requested anonymity, shared that Christie's had agreed to include the work in its Middle Eastern Art sale prior to the Hamas attack on Israeli civilians on October 7. But on October 30, a Christie's employee called the consignor and his wife to inform them that the painting would be removed from the catalogue and auction altogether at the request of "someone very highly placed from Christie's New York."

"My wife was contacted by Christie's with an apology explaining that they had received lots of complaints about the work and decided to remove it in our best interest as well as that for the value and exposure of the work," the consignor told *Hyperallergic*.

"I sent a message to the same Christie's employee, telling her that I was saddened by the decision to remove the work," he continued. "Not because we wanted to sell it to the highest bidder, but because we never thought that art could be censored or banned in this manner."

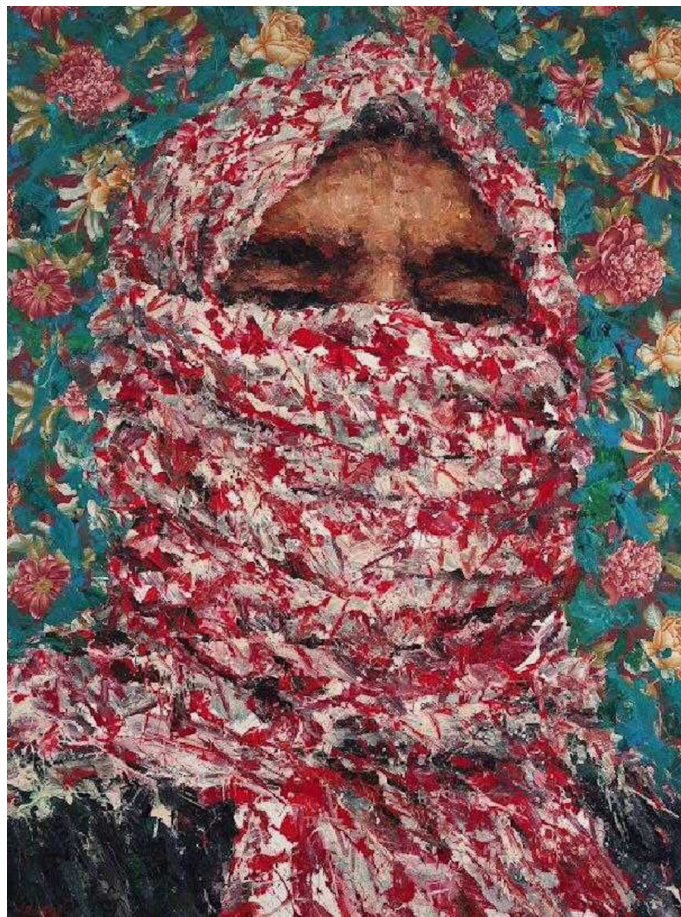
The consignor told *Hyperallergic* that Christie's did not provide any details regarding the alleged complaints, and that he reviewed his consignment contract with the auction house which only mentioned the potential for withdrawal on the grounds of fraud or misattributed ownership, money laundering, or criminal activity — nothing about controversy.

Christie's offered to sell the work privately, but the consignor said he ultimately decided to hold on to the work "for sentimental purposes."

The consignor of the second work, “Anonymous” (2011–2018), who also requested anonymity, corroborated the first seller’s account. He told *Hyperallergic* that Christie’s decision to remove the painting was explained as a way to “preserve the value of the work.”

“No specific details were shared on the nature of the complaints — it was a general complaint Christie’s said they received from the external parties and media,” the consignor of “Anonymous” elaborated. “Christie’s was worried about negative media coverage if they were to keep the work.”

In response to *Hyperallergic*’s request for comment, an auction house spokesperson said that “decisions relating to sales remain confidential between Christie’s and our consignors.”



Ayman Baalbaki, “Al Moulatham” (2012), acrylic and painted fabric on canvas, 78 3/4 x 58 inches (image courtesy the anonymous consignor of “Al Moulatham”)

In an email to *Hyperallergic*, Baalbaki noted that Christie’s didn’t inform him of the withdrawal of the two paintings. “Friends mentioned that I had three works put in the auction at Christie’s, and then two of them were withdrawn from the catalogue,” he explained. The third painting, depicting a burning flag, remained in the sale and fetched £20,160 (~\$24,646) in last night’s auction.

“I did not expect this decision from Christie’s, as they have previously sold similar works of mine,” Baalbaki said. “They also look for this specific theme in my artwork to include in their auctions.”

“To my knowledge, Christie’s has not explained what the complaint was about that pushed them to remove my work,” Baalbaki concluded.

CHRISTIE'S

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58  
**AYMAN BAALBAKI (B. 1975, OSAISSEH)**

*Anonymous*  
signed in Arabic; dated '2011-2018' (on the reverse)  
acrylic on card laid on canvas  
27½ x 19½ in. (70 x 50cm.)  
Executed in 2011-2018

£12,000-18,000 | US\$15,000-22,000 | €14,000-21,000

**PROVENANCE**  
Private Collection, Dubai.  
Anon. sale, Bonhams London, 11 June 2020, lot 64.  
Acquired at the above sale by the present owner.

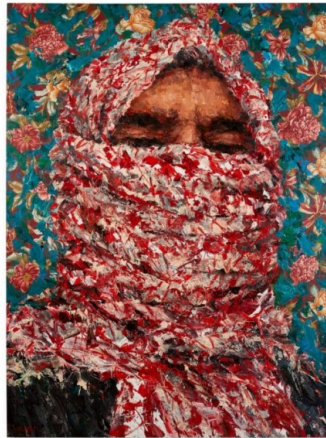
**EXHIBITED**  
Beirut, Saleh Barakat Gallery, *Face Value: Portraiture: A Gallerist's Personal Collection*, 2018.

**LITERATURE**

A. Baalbaki, J. Pradel, P. Ardenne, P. Dagen, T. Savatier, N. Tamraz,  
*Ayman Baalbaki: face au KO / facing KO*, Paris 2022, p. 21 (illustrated  
in colour, p. 20).

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3  
**AYMAN BAALBAKI (B. 1975, ODAISSEH)**

*Al Moulatham*  
signed in Arabic; dated '12' (lower left)  
acrylic and printed fabric on canvas  
78¼ x 59 in. (200 x 150cm.)  
Executed in 2012

£80,000-120,000 | US\$98,000-150,000 | €92,000-140,000

**PROVENANCE**  
Private Collection, Lebanon (acquired directly from the artist).  
Acquired from the above by the present owner.

Ayman Baalbaki's two paintings in the Christie's London auction catalogue prior to their removal (screenshots Rhea Nayyar/*Hyperallergic*, catalogue courtesy the anonymous consignor of "Al Moulatham")