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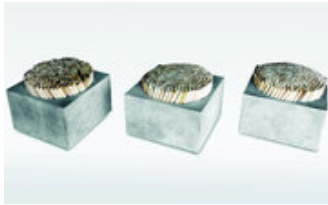
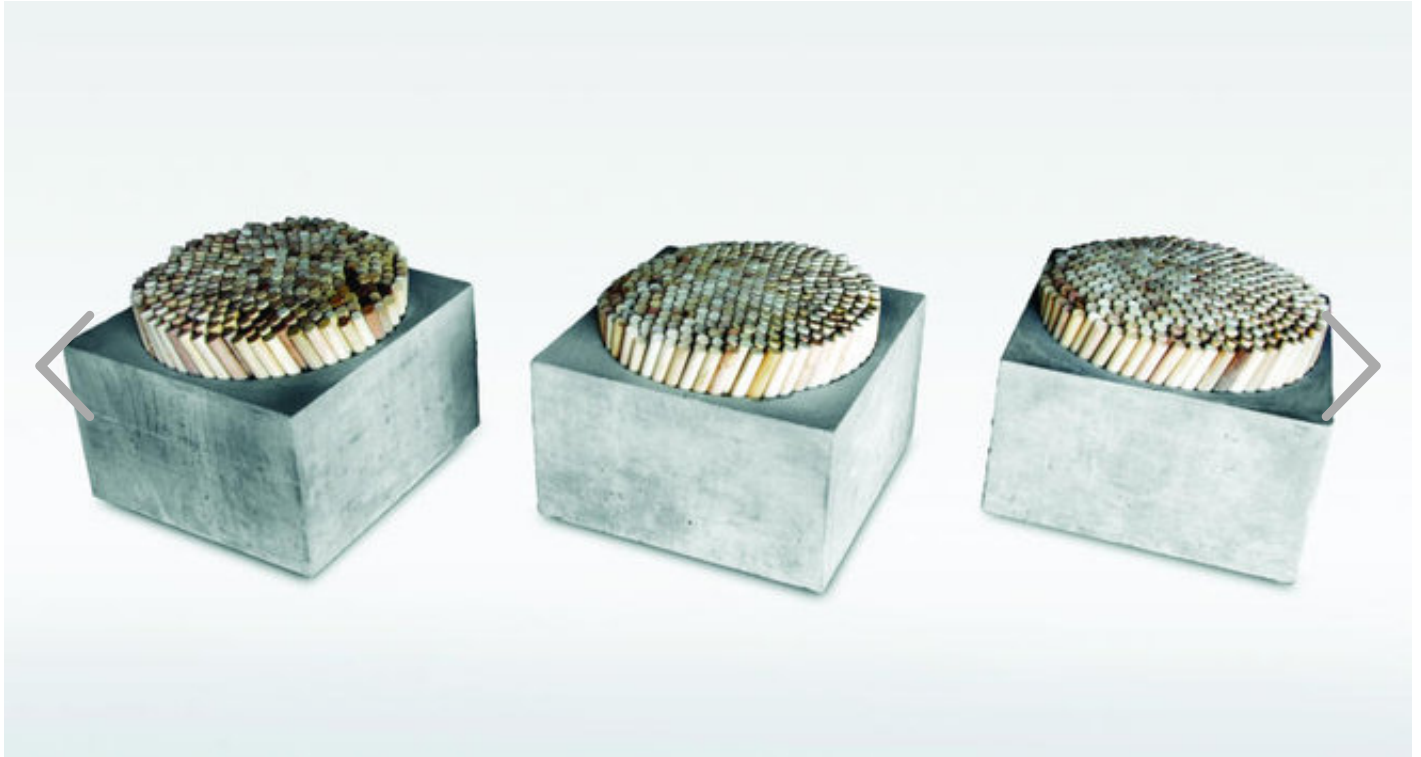
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From Syria With Love: Letters Bearing Art In War

## ART & CULTURE

# From Syria with Love: letters bearing art in war

Afra Naushad | **Published** — Wednesday 2 January 2013



13 photos



A neatly stacked bundle of letters, all addressed "From Syria With Love," wait to be picked, peeled and opened by anticipating viewers who enter the premises of Athr Gallery, which is currently running an exhibition of Syrian artists.

The group of prominent artists, which includes Abdullah Murad, Asad Arabi, Fadi Yazigi, Farouk Kondakji, Ismail El Helou, Malva Omar Hamda, Mohammed Tlemat and Mustafa Ali, all arranged for their artworks to be sent for the exhibition in Jeddah while under the trying circumstances in their home country. Facilitators at Athr Gallery struggled to pull through having faced difficulties from the displacement of one of the artists in the war, alleged to have gone missing.

While my mind tries to process the dismaying news I have heard, with images of a city torn asunder reeling at the back of my mind's eye, I tear open the letter that also serves as the exhibition catalogue. Just as I flip open the cover, a strange looking installation placed discreetly at the corner of the gallery space seizes my gaze.

I move naturally toward this peculiar looking assortment – a set of three, square-shaped gray concrete seats stuffed with wooden sticks jutting out from their middles – entitled “Trees under Custody” by Jeddah-based Syrian artist Farouk Kondakji.

The temptation to connect and interact intimately with this piece of art is so great that I find myself seated eagerly onto it, despite its harsh, unwelcoming and threatening exterior. Contrary to my expectation, what surprises me is the welcoming, soothing and resilient response it provides me with. The feeling of comfort is so strangely overwhelming that all I wanted was to savor in the moment of acceptance, of peaceful respite.

The message of the experience the artist perhaps wanted to deliver is poignantly resonant with the spirit of the Syrian struggle – of its people and their eagerness to return to a land that was beautiful, and could be beautiful by the persistent hope and demand for peace, despite the noxiousness and offensive state of war.

As I begrudgingly rise up (more so from the need to avoid seeming rude), I am visually invited into a deep dark space. So dark, intense and lonely, that tears almost begin to spill from the corners of my eyes.

Kondakji, it seems, is a man fascinated by the intricate details of nature and space. Four large-scale paintings of a tree are explored in its finest details – shaft, trunk, and roots – in the three-piece series “Nuns I, II, III,” and in another large solitary untitled painting placed intelligently at the back of the gallery wall, which opens into the soul of the tree itself.

To observe it is at once to be lost in its mystery – in the misery of darkness. But a darkness that is rewarding, because once you are lost traveling into the bottomless void of the unknown, light emerges slowly but surely, as suggested by the innocence of the painting.

The purpose of my visit, to witness the tragedy of art, felt sufficed by this experience alone. But for the sake of good sense and self-obligation, I force myself to peel away from Kondakji’s simply grandiose displays of expression.

In a strange twist of foreboding cognizance, the remaining works of art by seven other artists that range from paintings to sculptures – although produced before the war – each unique in its style and approach, together resonate in their theme with the state of events currently prevalent in Syria.

Asaad El Arabi’s “Migrating away from Damascus,” “Sacrifices,” and “Mother and Children,” works that were produced in 2006, are unsettling expressions of presentiment that must have left him with a palpating sense of *déjà vu*, fast-forwarding to 2012.

If Abdullah Murad's untitled works lend a sense of disillusion akin to the tumultuous situation in Syria, then Ismail El Helou's "Common fate," "Love and Peace," and "Engagement Days" define a sense of return and hope for the normality of life once again, reiterated in his use of definitive strokes and as is evidenced in the expression of his subjects.

While Mohammed Tlemat's works are reminiscent of the collective ache suffered and growing courage exhibited by the Syrians in their predicament, Malva Omar Hamdi's "Renewal" provides a gestation of rebirth with the raw, earthly tonality of his painting – the will of flowing water, forbearance of the earth, and resistance of the wind – bringing with it a sense of pervading calm and serenity.

Mustafa Ali's prowess exhibited in his bespoke works of sculpted wood reflects the need of hard work required to rebuild their country to function, as Fadi Yazigi's range of untitled works sets the tone for reformation.

"When the spirit to survive prevails, one life lost is another gained. With Love," I sign off addressing the postage.

The exhibition is open for public viewing between 7:30 pm and 9:30 p.m. until Jan. 10 at Athr Gallery.

Location: 5th floor Business Center-Wing B, Serafi Mall, Tahlia Street, Jeddah.

For more information, visit: [www.arthrrart.com](http://www.arthrrart.com)

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