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▼ Arab News Friday . August 12, 2022

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# From Syria with Love: letters bearing art

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# art in war



Updated 04  
January 2013

AFRA NAUSHAD

January 02, 2013  
03:00

586



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

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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



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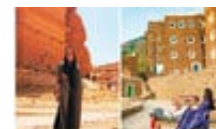


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artworks  
to be sent  
for the  
exhibition  
in Jeddah  
while  
under the  
trying  
circumstances  
in their  
home  
country.  
Facilitators  
at Athr  
Gallery  
struggled  
to pull  
through  
having  
faced  
difficulties  
from the  
displacement  
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,  
١٢ / ٨ / ٢٠٢٢

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  
remaininø

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  
nervadino



prevailing  
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.

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