

Muhanna Durra: I Don't Remember a Day I Wasn't Painting

By Ahmad Abu Khalil. Translated by Maru Pabón

May 22, 2019

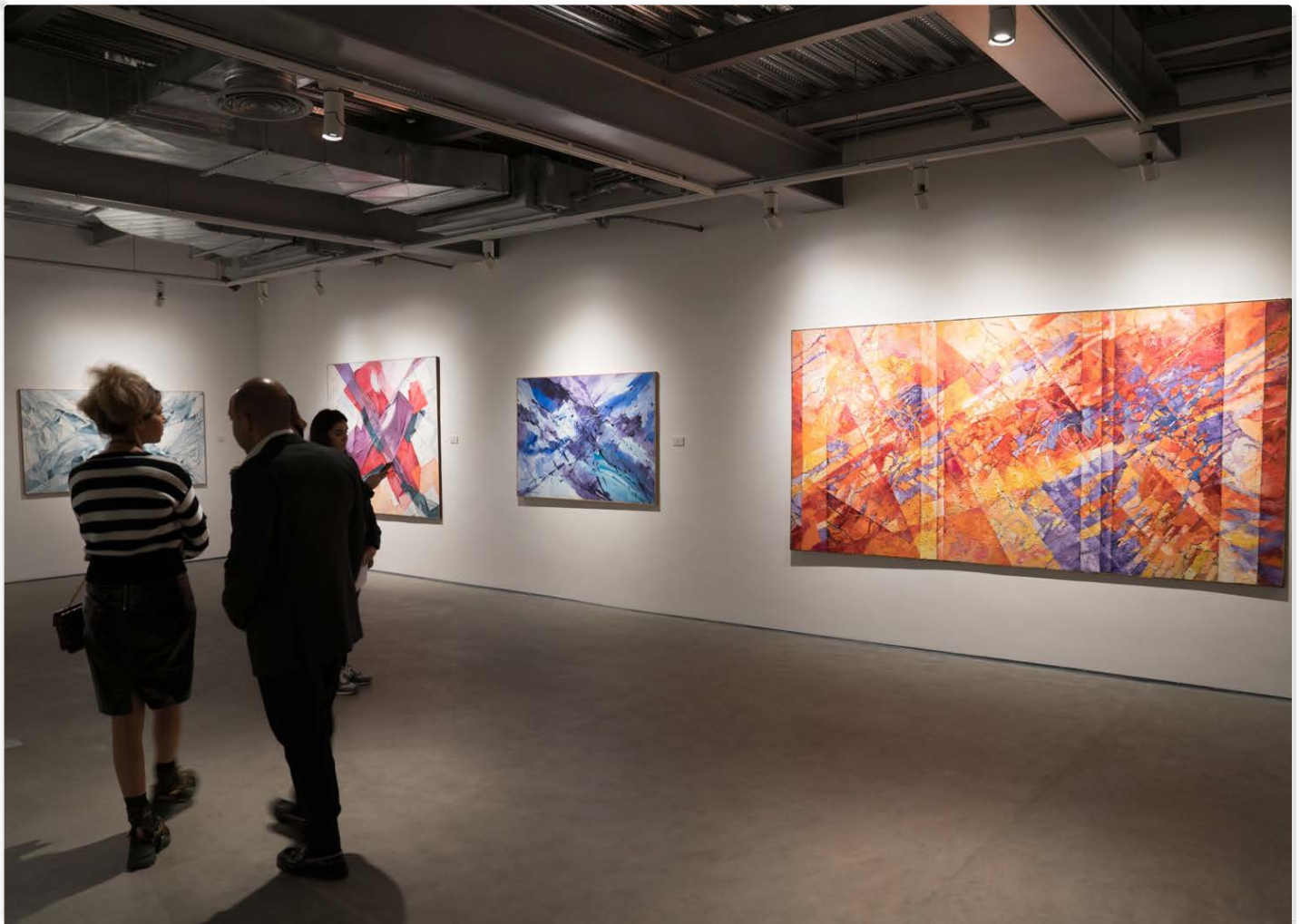


اقرأها بالعربية

The end of March brought to a close the retrospective of Muhanna Durra's paintings at the National Fine Arts Museum in Jabal al-Weibdeh, which dedicated the entirety of its halls, spread across four floors, to exhibiting more than 200 paintings that showcase Durra's artistic trajectory from 1948, when he was ten years old, to 2018.

The sight of three paintings done by Durra as a child, which do not at all resemble children's drawings, proves that Durra isn't exaggerating when he tells us he doesn't remember a day he wasn't painting.

This essay is not about art criticism or creative painting techniques as much as it is an attempt to trace Durra's social and artistic career, which, as we will see, represents a long and significant segment of the course of art history and culture in Jordan. Of Mohammed Durra's 80 years of life, about 70 have been spent as a professional painter.



From Durra's last exhibition at the [Jordanian National Gallery of Fine Arts](#).

Mr. Yasar Durra, the artist's brother, recalls that as a child Muhanna had such a sharp and scrutinizing gaze that the milkman who visited their home every morning used to scream at him: "Don't look at me!" From an early age Muhanna began to look at his surroundings as ideas for paintings.

Muhanna belonged to an educated family. His late father Saeed Durra was known in Jordan as a distinguished educator who later became an inspector in the Ministry of Education (a position equivalent nowadays to the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education.) But Muhanna was invested in vexing and confusing his father. His drawing skills allowed him to master forging his father's signature and handwriting, and he started carrying letters signed by his "father" requesting permission to leave school because of important matters. (These important matters were actually nothing more than going to the cinema.) He remembers that one day he brought with him a signed letter requesting that he and his brother be transferred to another school, and it just so happened that his father the superintendent was visiting the school and discovered his deception. The consequence was a doubled physical punishment for the two brothers.

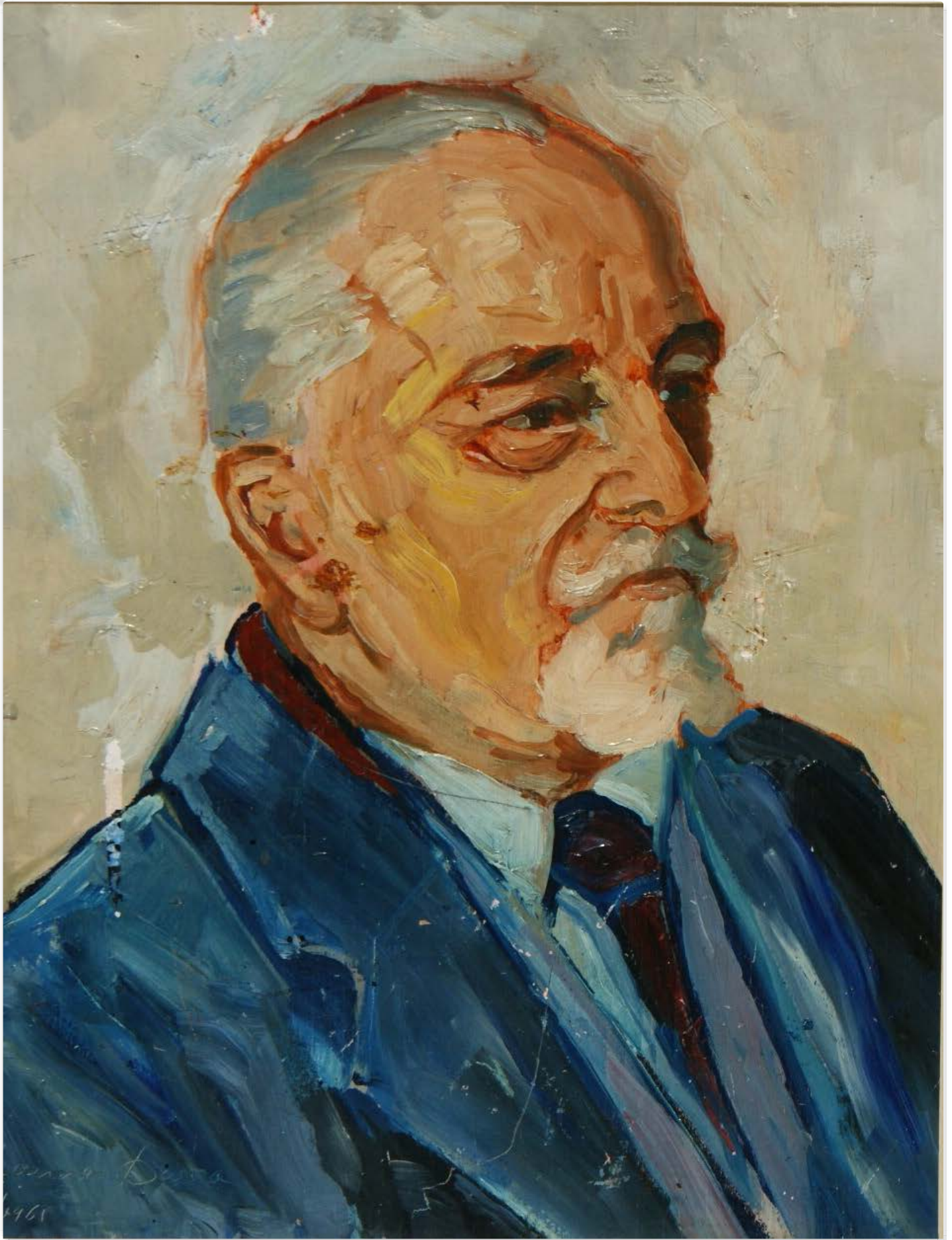
Muhanna recalls the strangeness of his father's position. He would rage against his son's mischief and then surprise him by buying him paints and art books that he would quickly revert to prohibiting him from using. He was an educator who wanted a "dignified" future for all of his children, so he was not thrilled about his son becoming a "house painter," which is how he described Muhanna even after he became the first Jordanian to graduate from a College of Fine Arts.

Muhanna remembers that his father brought a private tutor to the house to help him complete his studies, but Muhanna the pupil could only pay attention to the light traversing the pretty teacher's head and its reflection. The scene was transformed into a painting project.

The children in Muhanna's school were invested in their peer's talent. They used to gather around him while he drew the teacher they didn't like in a comical style. Reactions ranged from admiration to anger. The religion teacher (originally from Abkhazia) used to scare Dura by saying that, on the Day of Judgement, Muhanna would be asked to return the souls to the characters he drew.

In the 1940s, Amman was a small town whose population did not exceed 40,000 by the middle of the decade, according to estimates. A Russian artist and former army general named George Aliyev happened to be one of its inhabitants. Muhanna made his acquaintance and the artist became his first teacher, as evidenced by a painting Muhanna made of him later in 1960. Muhanna learned from this artist the fundamentals of watercolor and oil painting. He was

accompanied in those lessons by the late Abu Hamid Sharaf, who Muhanna says was good at painting horses, and he was jealous of him for that reason. Muhanna did not know that they would meet about two decades later, nor that his friend, the horse painter, would have the gallant and loyal position of his old friend.



George Aliyev, Durra's first teacher. 1960.

Muhanna's resistance to his studies persisted. He continued painting secretly and openly, until the late Kadri Toukan, Dean of Al-Najah National University in Nables, began supporting him. Toukan loved Muhanna and his paintings. He also understood the artist's motives, so he confronted his father and said: "Let one of your children become civilized!" Muhanna had five brothers and sisters spread across different universities in several countries.

Kadri Toukan accompanied the young Muhanna to the Italian embassy, and they agreed that he would travel to Rome. Muhanna began to equip himself. A Dutch artist living in Amman because his father worked in the United Nations advised him to master how to draw half-naked bodies, since the exam in Italy would require this of him. So Muhanna hurried to the shopfronts of specific retail stores that displayed clothes on mannequins, and acquired some magazines with "appropriate" images.

Muhanna then traveled to the city that still symbolized the aspirations and goals of painters throughout the world. Muhanna says: "In Jordan there were no ideas about modern painting. At best, people hung up their pictures in frames. Colorful pictures of Muslim or Christian subjects, or pictures of Antarah and Abla, were popular among some people. But there were others who'd frame a picture of a packet of chocolate and hang it on the wall of their house!"

Muhanna remembers that during one of his summer vacations as a university student in Italy, the Jordanian army invited an Italian artist to paint large murals on the walls of the Officers' Club in Zarqa. Muhanna was asked to accompany the Italian artist and serve as the interpreter between him and the responsible Jordanian officers. However, Muhanna saw that the Italian artist was not working seriously, so he proceeded to produce similar sketches by himself, which soon proved to be more skillful. He then continued the work under the officers' praise, especially that of the late Hafez al-Majali, who was interested in paintings that depicted the battles of the Great Arab Revolutions, and the faces of soldiers and knights.

The relationship between the military commander and the young artist was consolidated, and al-Majali started providing Durra with the models he required for painting characters and faces. Both the commander and the artist soon grew fond of the soldiers' faces, especially those of the Bedouins, which many of Muhanna Durra's paintings made famous.











A number of Durra's paintings from different phases of his life. Courtesy of the artist's brother, Yasar Durra.

Painting as a profession wasn't something understood in Jordanian society. On that topic, Muhanna says: "I figured out a way to make people "feel" the meaning of painting. I began by painting Bedouin faces struck by rays of sun and characterized by harsh, sharp features and glances towards the painter. Then many people began to contemplate these paintings, which belonged to them, and started to defend them." That was an important change, Muhanna says. People's admiration of those paintings reached such a degree that King Hussein, on one of his visits to Germany, gifted one of the Bedouin paintings to the mayor of Bonn, the capital of West Germany at the time.

Al-Dorra recalls that Hafez al-Majali used to call him "the devil," especially when he saw his masterful rendition of the details of knights and camel jockeys' attire. Al-Majali then proposed that Durra join the army as a lieutenant colonel and work as a painter, but Durra did not think that this offer suited his character as an artist.

After graduating in 1958, Muhanna worked in Amman Airport (Marka), since at that moment in time, painting and art were not considered professions. However, his old colleague Abdul Hamid Sharaf soon returned home from his exile, and was assigned to work in a department that oversaw media, and culture (until then there was no Ministry of Information or Culture.) Muhanna went to work in the department, thus initiating the "official" stage of his career.

But Muhanna the artist was not responsive to any "official" requirements. The 60s were a period of building and establishing many relatively grand projects and ideas in various fields. Muhanna remembers how they worked day and night; there was no difference between working hours and recreational hours, no suggestion of the notion of "overtime." All time was worktime.



Durra painting a mural at the Professional Associations Complex in Shmeisani, Amman. The mural was later removed due to neglect.

Muhanna Durra says that he has been lucky in life. He has been given the opportunity to travel to different world capitals as part of several official diplomatic missions. And he lived in Rome, Paris, Moscow, and Cairo before settling down in Amman in 2002.

While working in these capitals, his art occasionally played an important and sensitive diplomatic

role. In 1964 (according to Muhanna's memory), he contributed a painting to an international exhibit in New York. The painting's content was political; it pertained to Palestine and the Israeli occupation. The Zionist lobby in Congress consequently protested against its presence and asked to remove it, but King Hussein refused to remove the painting and said that we (Jordan) would pull out of the exhibition entirely. The organizers in New York did not want this, so the painting remained.

For Jordan's participation in the (1988) Venice Biennale, our embassy provided several invaluable objects. Muhanna took on the pavilion's design and worked for several days on a large mural representing many elements of Jordan's social and cultural life. This idea was unique among the Biennale's participants, leading the Jordanian pavilion to win the festival's award.

To prepare this article, I sat with Muhanna for hours, two of which were spent in front of a computer screen displaying hundreds of paintings. He was eager to remember, to pause at and explain his most famous paintings in an informal manner: the painting of the Sulti lady, whose pictures were widespread both within Jordan and abroad, but who he painted more cleverly. Muhanna says: "A friend of the Ayed family in Salt gave me a picture of his mother, but the quality of picture was poor, so I painted it in my own way, focusing on her smile, head, and veil. After the picture became well-known, many people started claiming that she was their mother or relative!"



The Sulti lady, one of Durra's most popular paintings.

Muhanna realized that it was up to him to bring painting close to the public and make it

understandable. The public then began to advocate for his paintings, a step that was necessary for him and his colleagues to be able to establish the art of painting and color photography in the whole of cultural life.

The words of Muhanna al-Durra combine art, intelligence, warmth, culture, lightheartedness, and poetic language to surprise you with popular vocabulary. You realize then that you still have a troublemaking child inside you.

شروط الاستخدام

محتوى حبر مرخص برخصة المشاع الإبداعي. يسمح بإعادة نشر المواد بشرط الإشارة إلى المصدر بواسطة رابط وعدم إجراء تغييرات على النص، وعدم (hyperlink)، استخدامه لأغراض تجارية.

عن حبر

About 7iber

7iber Blog زاوية حبر | 7

اتصل بنا

Contact Us