

Safwan Dahoul's show on strife-torn Syria

The artist fled his homeland but still holds it close to his heart and dreams

“The angel is ashamed.” This is the reaction of a Syrian woman to a painting, “Dream P50”, now being shown in London as part of an exhibition by the Syrian artist Safwan Dahoul.

She is looking at an angel that stands with head averted from the view of the city of Damascus which is spread below. The mountain on which the angel stands is a real mountain — Mount Qasioun, which overlooks the city. The painting was done shortly before the artist left his stricken homeland — now ensnared by war and violence.

The image is one of several striking works by Safwan Dahoul shown at an event held in South London on May 8 at the Edge of Arabia's new Gallery and Event space situated in an old ice storage warehouse next to the Royal College of Art.

Edge of Arabia Director and Founder Stephen Stapleton welcomed the artist alongside Khaled Samawi, founder of the Ayyam Gallery, which is hosting an exhibition entitled “Repetitive Dreams”, showcasing the artist's latest work at its Bond Street gallery.

Samawi, a close friend of the artist, acted as interpreter for Dahoul in a conversation about his art which included a Q&A with the audience.

Samawi explained that his friendship with Dahoul dates back just seven years but within that short frame there has been a lot of sadness, trauma and upheaval. Five years ago Dahoul's wife passed away and eight months ago, with Syria embroiled in violence, the artist moved to Dubai.

“Out of all of that tragedy there are moments like this where we really celebrate life — we celebrate art and where we come from,” said Samawi. He added: “He's helped me by being my psychiatrist, helping me to calm down from being a banker to a human being — he's made me more humane — and I've helped to raise him from being an artist to also being a human being!”

Asked how he was coping with leaving his country, Dahoul drew laughter when he said: “What I did when I moved was to find a home and studio in Dubai that looks very similar to my home and studio in Damascus. So in a way I cheated and moved Damascus with me to Dubai.”

Samawi, who with his cousin Hisham opened Ayyam Art Gallery in Damascus in 2006, explained that what he terms “a family” of Ayyam staff and artists have managed to move 3,000 artworks out of Damascus into safe havens in Dubai, Beirut, Cairo and Paris.

His team has also assisted 15 artists with logistical and financial assistance to relocate to countries away from the conflict. “It took us two years of hard work to secure the safety of the artists and the art,” he said.

Dahoul was asked about the key influences on his development as an artist. “Probably the most important influence in my life was a young, very modest artist who lived in Hama, very close to my house. The moment I walked into his studio for the first time, smelt the oil paint and saw what he was doing — I think that was probably the biggest influence in my life to become an artist. After that I don’t think art is about studying or about the history — it’s in your genes — either you have it or you don’t,” he said.

All of Dahoul’s works are entitled “Dream” and when Samawi first met Dahoul he urged him to number the works so that they could be catalogued and identified. At first Dahoul was dismissive of this suggestion but after the death of his wife he did start to number his works.

He was asked about the ideas behind his work, “Dream 42”, acrylic on canvas, painted in 2011. This shows a shape resembling a seat incorporating tiny squares inscribed with dates. The last date is 2011. The squares after this date remain to be numbered. In relation to this work Dahoul spoke of his love for Ayat Al Kursi, Verse 255 of the second chapter (surah) of the Quran. This verse can be translated as “The Verse of the Chair” which, he explained, speaks about the galaxy and existence. When he finished the painting with all the dates representing the passage of time, he saw how, when compared to the galaxy, who we are and our whole history is insignificant.

On the subject of religion he said: “I believe that in our religion and all religions there are some things that make us more human and more spiritual.”

Speaking of the use of symbols in his art he said that he liked to keep these to a minimum, believing that less is more. “You need to have a certain set of symbols that support you — that keep your feet on the ground,” he said.

Dahoul seemed uncomfortable trying to answer questions about the meaning of his art. Samawi explained that he does not like talking about his work; he believes that a painting is what the viewer interprets it to be and doesn’t like to impose his ideas. He believes that the work can speak for itself and that the artist has no place after the work has been created.

He resists being coerced by others; as a young artist he was told not to paint in black-and-white or use straight lines — strictures he has delighted in rejecting.

As a teacher of art for more than 20 years he believes that it is important for the new generation of artists to find their own voice and not to be moulded by the styles or traditions of established artists. He spoke of the great young talents in Syria and his love for the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, where he himself studied. He stopped teaching three years ago. “I used to love teaching. I gave all I could for 20 years but now it is time for somebody younger to take over the torch,” he said.

As the guests mingled after the talk, many stopped to look at the painting of the angel overlooking Damascus. Some shared their thoughts. Sara Naim from Damascus said she knew the famous view over the city well and to her the painting was full of “melancholy” and “disappointment”.

Mustafa Al Sharifi from Iraq, who has a masters in photography from Goldsmiths, University of London, said that to him the painting was full of pessimism. “The angel is affected and injured by the war,” he said, pointing out that the head of the figure appeared to be shrouded in smoke and that the angel was looking downwards in a sign of despair. He too had been to the mountain depicted in the work.

Graphic designer Alim Karmali said: “We want to think the angel can help us but the angel has no physical powers to create the change we are looking for.”

Dahoul was asked how long he would continue to produce work representing dreams. He replied: "When I don't exist anymore my dreams will stop. I would love somebody to take over my dreams after I am gone."

–Denise Marray is a writer based in London.

Safwan Dahoul, Repetitive Dreams is on at Edge of Arabia London until June 2 and at Ayyam Gallery London until June 15