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Smuggled out of Syria to show London, the art of war

Syrian artists' works reflecting the horror of civil war will be shown in exhibition to support those suffering in the uprising



🖼 Detail from Azza Abou Rabieh's *Our Revolution is on the Boot of Our Government*, from the series *Syrian Book* (2011). Photograph: Azza Abou Rabieh

Ian Black, *Middle East editor*

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Nour Wali nearly despaired when the pictures started to arrive. As a Syrian living in Britain, the curator had decided to hold an exhibition to support ordinary people suffering during the uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime. But she had not expected it to be so difficult.

Canvases had to be smuggled out of the country and arrived creased and rolled up. Paintings by Azza Abo Rabieh from Hama had to be rescued under fire as fighting raged nearby. Other works were donated by Syrian artists who have had to flee abroad and have no idea when they will be able to return.

Several have lost loved ones among the estimated 35,000 dead over the past 20 months.

"From a curator's point of view it has been very hard to organise," said Wali. "Some artists have disappeared or you can't contact them because there's no phone or internet and you don't even know whether they are alive or dead."

In a week which has seen the war in Syria overshadowed by the more familiar conflict between Palestinians and Israelis over Gaza, the Shattered Beauty exhibition in London, which opens on Saturday, provides a vivid and poignant glimpse of artistic representations of the bloodiest chapter of the Arab spring.

Abo Rabieh's images portray defiant protesters, veiled women, a detainee forced to kneel in a stress position and captors taunting their prisoners with a macabre dance of death - all drawn from everyday experience.

"I needed to do something to express my feelings about people's suffering," she said in a phone interview from Syria. "I do that through art and I was influenced by Goya, but ordinary art was not enough so eventually I started to help deliver humanitarian aid to people in neighbourhoods that were under siege."

Her works were smuggled out by female friends who managed to get through army roadblocks and eventually moved them from Damascus to Beirut by road. One painting is dedicated to her friend Basel Shehadeh, a renowned citizen journalist and film-maker who was killed by a government sniper in Homs in May.

Abo Rabieh is part of a renaissance of the Syrian art scene in recent years, with a steady stream of works appearing in chic galleries in Paris, London and Dubai. But the Rafia Gallery, one of the best in Damascus, has been forced to close down. Britain's Royal Academy was planning an exhibition of Syrian art in 2013 but that has been shelved as it is no longer feasible.

Images of the uprising dominate the work of Hamid Sulaiman from Zabadani, a pretty resort town in the hills near the Lebanese border. His canvas entitled Daraa, 18 03 11, marks the day the uprising began in the eponymous southern town after schoolchildren who daubed anti-Assad graffiti were detained and tortured by the mukhabarat secret police - the kind of routine abuse Syrians were no longer prepared to tolerate.

Everywhere he shows crowds surging and protest banners held aloft against a backdrop of stones and mosques. The Crying Door evokes the beauty of an elaborate wood carving among the ruins.

Other works that record the human sacrifices of the uprising include Sulaiman's portraits of Hamza al-Khatib, a teenage boy who was tortured and killed by regime thugs, and of Marie Colvin, the Sunday Times journalist

who was killed in February while covering the fighting in Homs. Sulaiman, who was arrested several times before fleeing, is now in Paris.

Ahmad Salma, a Syrian of Palestinian origin, used the sinuous swirls of different styles of Arabic calligraphy to spell out the names of the provinces of Syria - to emphasise unity in the face of violence and rising sectarianism. He explained how one of the works expressed "the message that Syria needs peace - but it also reflects the differences between places and ethnic and religious groups", speaking to the Guardian from his exile in Germany. "We don't want our country to be divided."

Portraying the pain and suffering of the revolution was "really not a matter of choice", Salma explained. "I took my works out with me when I left on a smugglers' route via Turkey with the help of activists. It wasn't easy."

Amjad Wardeh's haunting Refugees, part of his expressionist Face to Face series, evokes the price paid by tens of thousands of Syrians who have been forced to flee their homes. Wardeh, who still lives in Damascus, has posted pictures on Facebook but this is the first time he will be able to show his work freely. "How could it be safe to paint images of the revolution when it is dangerous even to speak the word 'freedom' out loud in Umayyad Square [in the centre of Damascus]?" he asked.

Other artists living abroad have found their work transformed by the traumatic events back home. New-York-based Kevork Mourad moved from colour to black and white etchings to convey the sense of melancholy he now feels.

Wali is keen to stress that the Syria Relief exhibition is non-political and non-sectarian, showing works by Christians and Muslims, Armenians, Palestinians and Kurds. Half the proceeds will go to the artists and half to the charity to buy food, medicines and prosthetic limbs. "There were some reservations from artists about getting involved but we emphasised that this is not political," she added. "None of them want anything to do with guns. They just want people to survive."

Syria Relief presents Shattered Beauty, a contemporary Syrian art fundraising exhibition curated by Nour Wali at Gallery 8, 8 Duke Street, St James's, London SW1Y 6BN. Open daily 10am to 6pm, 24-29 November 2012

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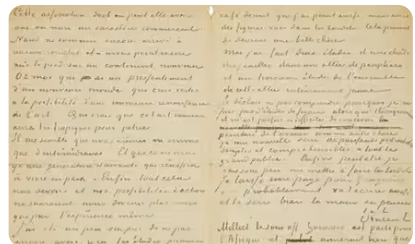
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