

IN FAVOUR OF CURIOUS TALENT

by Danna Lorch

There are some terms that are so casually overused in the art world that they no longer have a clear definition. 'Emerging artist' is one of them. The label is haphazardly slapped in front of artists' names almost like a salutation, yet it is unclear whether its use has anything to do with formal education, age, gallery representation, press, social media following, value of work, or auction history. It's also increasingly rare to find an artist using the term in a statement to describe his or her own status in the competitive art ecosystem.

**” WE ARE ALL A LITTLE WEIRD
AND LIFE’S A LITTLE WEIRD, AND
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AND CALL IT LOVE**

DR SEUSS

Thanks to access to university programmes in the visual arts open to both women and men, speedy internet, a diverse gallery scene, a growing host of patrons and collectors, museums and cultural institutions, and several noteworthy art fairs, there has never been a better time in history to come up as an artist in the Middle East.

We'd like to humbly suggest that 'Curious Talent' be used instead of 'emerging artist'. Curiosity is the antithesis of stagnant boredom, and the very quality that tempted Lewis Carroll's Alice down the rabbit hole leading to Wonderland, where she encountered the unexpected and was forever changed. We've curated a group of artists and galleries with ties to the Middle East who pique our curiosity with their adventurous practices and fresh concepts. Their names pop up everywhere and are impossible to ignore. They are part of a growing tribe. Interestingly, the majority of them are women.

THE CURIOUS TALENT LIST

An almanac listing of artists like this one is by definition never comprehensive enough. To widen our breadth, we asked each of the artists, designers, and gallerists profiled in this section to name another Curious Talent who they are watching or who continues to influence their practice:

Dana Awartani's Curious Talent is Ala Ebtekar | Monther Jawabreh's Curious Talent is Hani Zoarob | Dima Abdul Kader's Curious Talent is Elham Etemadi | Nikki Meftah's Curious Talent is Bouthayna Al Muftah | Hala Al Khalifa's Curious Talent is Aisha Al-Sowaidi | Ammar Al Attar's Curious Talent is Zeinab Al Hashemi | Sanaz Askari's Curious Talent is Bahareh Navabi | Aisha Al-Sowaidi's Curious Talent is Maryam Al-Homaid | Yasmína Nysten's Curious Talent is Hamed Sinno of Mashrou3 Leila | Yazan's Curious Talent is Niels Shoe Meulman | Fatma Bucak's Curious Talent is Nuri Bilge Ceylan | Noor Bhjat Al-Masri's Curious Talent is Elias Ayoob



BEYOND

THE KEFFIYEH

WORDS BY DARRA LORCH
TRANSLATION BY FARAH ADELSAIED

Monther Jawabreh explores life as a Palestinian

As a boy growing up in a refugee camp in his own country, Monther Jawabreh thought of Palestinian resistance fighters as real-life comic book heroes. He often wore a keffiyeh (the traditional scarf) to imitate them, and recalls that, "Their presence reflected hope, security, and belonging." Later as an adult, Jawabreh revisited the archetype of Palestinian masculinity and asked, "Where has the man in the keffiyeh gone? How do Palestinians themselves perceive him today?"

During the first Palestinian Intifada, fighters covered their faces with scarves out of fear that Israeli intelligence would identify, detain, and subsequently arrest them, and consequently the image of a face obscured by the keffiyeh became a common symbol of resistance. Following the breakdown of the Oslo Accord, the appearance of the resistance fighter has often been equated with terrorism in Western media.

These concepts were brought to life when Jawabreh concealed his face with a scarf and brought a performance titled *The Wanted* to the streets of Bethlehem in 2009, obscuring his face with a keffiyeh and distributing 250 stones to the public, while leaving the message behind the gesture up for individual interpretation. The performance was subsequently repeated in 2012 in the German towns of Cologne and Berlin under the title of *Stone*. In the European context, the pebbles handed out originated from the leftover rubble of WWII. The parallels between the West Bank's separation wall and the Berlin Wall were profound and not lost on the audiences.

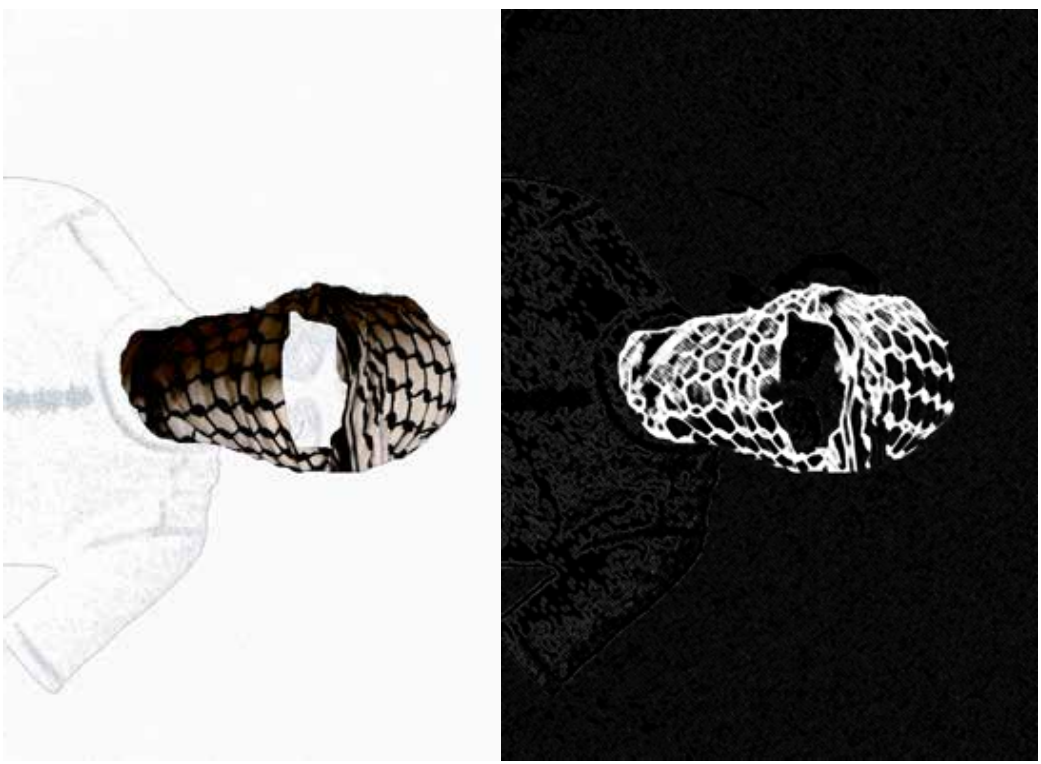
As *Once Was Known*, a 2012 series of paintings, humanised the resistance fighter by portraying him (and on occasion, her) enjoying everyday human activities like reading a book, taking a nap, and playing cards. Beyond pushing an international audience to question stereotypes, Jawabreh intended for the series to reflect the immense disappointment of the first Intifada generation of Palestinians, whom he says, "dreamed of liberation until the Oslo agreement blew it all up, leaving them to play cards."

The series documented a distinct era in the history of resistance. Of his current body of work, which will be shown in June at La Villa Des Arts in Rabat, Morocco, Jawabreh says, "My new paintings visually document the social and political developments, challenges and concerns witnessed by Palestinian citizens."

Although he continues to mentor young artists, Jawabreh acknowledges that "the artistic scene is still very limited in Bethlehem, mainly due to economic factors," which ultimately kept him from getting his own community arts space, Marsam 304, off the ground. He works from a studio based in Bethlehem but thinks of various European cities with their unnamed alleyways and live music venues as his wider studio.

Photo: Lora
Illustration: Lora
from Publisher
project,
4 photos, 2013, print on
canvas, 50cm x 70cm

montherjawabreh.com



THE CONSTRUCTION OF MYTH

In colling powerful narratives back to life, Fatma Bucak reinvents their possible meanings

Where do myths begin and end? Are there even specific points of time in their recurrence? These fundamental constructions, archetypes, foundational narratives, ubiquitous and often interchangeable, laying in wait at the heart of every civilisation, are often constructed less as time structures than as negotiations between ritual and violence, between exclusion and redemption. Turkish artist Fatma Bucak, a skilled mythographer on video and photography, conceives of these strange locales never as dreams or illuminations, but as sites to remake herself and others, to re-invent, so to say, the possibility of history through a genealogy of symbols.

In Bucak's cinematic expeditions, familiar sites become strange and almost calculated, theatrical and pregnant with the allegory of ruins, but these places are not the aesthetic background for abstract signals, but rather a performative stage where myths intervene in historical ruptures, lyrical obscurities and ultimately, political grounds. Returning to places where neutrality is no longer possible – the Kurdish question in Anatolia, the Turkish-Armenian border, the boundary between gender and power, between representation and sacrality, these performances are carefully constructed in the manner of classical and early modern painting: perspective, measure, equilibrium and optic illusion.

Transforming the meaning of bodies, objects and symbols, changing their gender, altering their roles and status, even opposing them, the artist plays with the inside and outside of personal identity, reflecting her condition of alterity in both the national myths of Turkey and the post-colonial landscape of European art. At the centre of Bucak's practice is the desire to let the work stand before her own identity. A curious enigma is, however, embedded in this work nurtured by the ideology of European painting and the complex narrative world of the Mediterranean area, through a cinematic simultaneity between two different kinds of myths.

On the one hand, the monumentality and epic nature of Bucak's visual constructions recall the stage of a tragedy in the Greco-Roman tradition, with their cyclical concept of time, which denies creation and conceives of the world as eternal and permanent. On the other, the narrated myths re-enact the foundational archetypes of monotheism – the absolute, conveying a certain anxiety over arresting time, moving towards dissolution. Eternity and dissolution. Eternity and disillusion. Far beyond solipsism, audiences participate in the work in the manner of ancient theatre, and are turned into both the subject and the object of a work.

For a body of work which operates on the scale of such grand narratives, Fatma Bucak's influences resonate locally. Bucak identifies as curious talents in her practice the writer Yeşar Kemal's portraits of nature which influenced her understanding of Anatolia and the films of Yılmaz Güney. Today she resorts to the Anatolian depictions of filmmaker Nuri Bilge Ceylan. The departure points in the artist's work are multi-sourced but yet hearken back to a common myth: birth, rise, exclusion, extermination and rebirth. At the threshold of an era of violence, these myths become articulate political realities, and often, historical impossibilities. Something at the beginning of time, or maybe, at the end. We could never know.



Fatma Bucak, *And We Got Dressed*
From *Video Slits*



Fatma Bucak,
Suspended Piece
for *You to see it*,
Video Slits

MEASURED MEANING

by Dana Loren

Dana Awartani's minimalist illuminations place her in a rare and illustrious art circle

Dana Awartani regards herself as a contemporary Islamic artist. Her illuminations are distinguishable by their minimalism, and she may very well be the only artist working strictly within the medium in Saudi Arabia today. Ironically, as all university programmes in the visuals arts in her home country focused on Western arts, she had to go to London to study at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts, one of the only institutions in the world that offers training in geometry and illumination.

We met for a conversation on a windy hotel terrace one morning before Art Dubai's opening.

Selections/Dana Loren (DL): Your practice incorporates sacred geometry. How would you explain the underlying theory to a beginner?

Dana Awartani (DA): First of all, geometry is not exclusively Islamic. You see it in Buddhist mandalas and churches' stained glass windows, but because Islamic art is non-figurative, geometry has developed tremendously. I wrote my dissertation on the eight-pointed star. Ibn Arabi relates the number eight to the throne of God. Sufis believe in an eight-fold path towards perfection. These designs weren't originally meant to be decorative.

Dana Awartani, *He Who Created The Heavens and Earth*, 2013. Natural pigments, shell, gold and pen on mount board

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DL: Who is your mentor?

DA: I'm the apprentice to a master illuminator in Turkey. She holds certificates (ijaza), in illumination and calligraphy. It's a very technique-based, old school way of learning. Within one year I anticipate receiving an ijaza myself.

DL: How much room for innovation is there within your medium?

DA: I stick one hundred percent to traditional techniques. With illuminations, you can experiment in terms of concept and design, but when it comes to execution there's a system: transfer the design, add gold and a basecoat, make the outline, next the rendering, and finally the background colour. I don't use a computer at all, just my hands and sometimes a compass or a ruler.

DL: You have your first solo show coming up at Athr Gallery in Jeddah this summer. What will you be introducing?

DA: The work has to do with Abjad (Arabic numerology). Every letter of the alphabet has a value attached to it. Alef is 1, Ba is 2, and so on. Numbers are regarded as a gateway to the truth. I find geometry everywhere in nature. If you cut an apple wisely, there is a perfect star inside.

DL: There is a strong element of progression in everything you create. Perhaps the best example of this was *He Is Who Created The Heavens and Earth*. In *Six Days*, what are the reasons for this?

DA: In that specific piece, I demonstrated each of the steps of the illumination process. Today, the technique behind Islamic art is under-appreciated. I want people to understand the system as well as the beauty.

dahlart.com

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IT'S ALL IN THE EYES

by Danna Loren

Inside the world of artist Yasmína Nysten

It always begins with the eyes for Yasmína Nysten, whom I've never seen without heavy eyeliner. When she fixes her stare on a few textured brushstrokes on an otherwise blank canvas long enough, she suddenly finds a stranger gazing back at her, waiting for a face and a body. Nysten, who is Lebanese and Finnish, describes herself as so cerebral that half the time she paints a body just to support a face. She believes, "If you really look into the iris of the eye, it will show you on a non-verbal level which planet someone is originally from."

Our interview took place as we dug into breakfast manakish early in the morning on the last day of Art Dubai. Nysten had a plane to catch back to the United States where she is mid-residency at the UMass in Amherst. At the moment, it is quite often Native American spirits whose eyes appear in her work. She applied to the residency after reading 1497 by Charles C. Mann, a work of non-fiction that suggests that North America's Native American population was more sophisticated and in greater power over their lands' natural landscape before Columbus "discovered" the Americas, than history has previously acknowledged.



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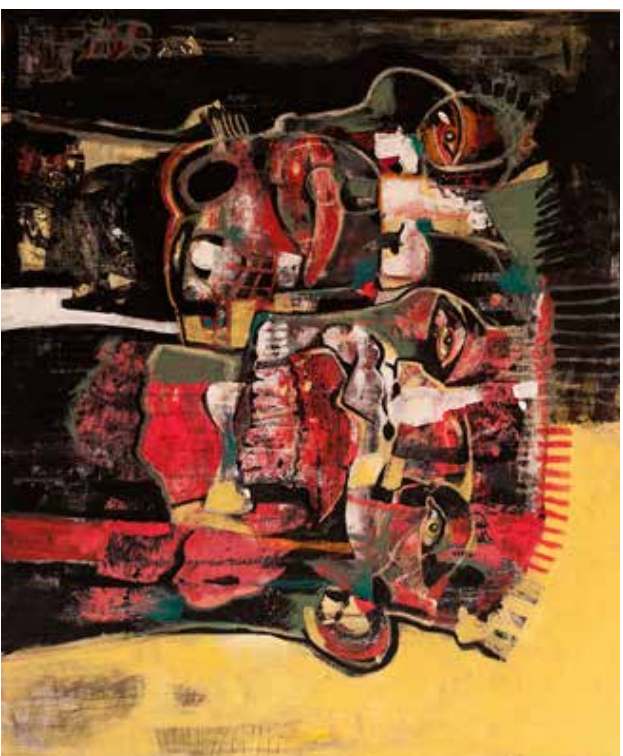
The first chapters of the book (which also narrates the population's subsequent massacre) are set in Massachusetts where Nysten currently lives. She says, "The Native Americans called this countryside Dawn Land or 'land of the first sight'. The nature there is enchanted." She shares an old house with a secret passage leading to a woodshed, which is a studio space for an older artisan named Smokey, who sometimes constructs the frames for her canvases. From bed she can see the Milky Way, although she often pulls all-nighters in the studio and sleeps in the day.

Though she is becoming known as a painter, Nysten secretly prefers drawing, which comes naturally, almost like a mother tongue. She says, "Drawing is the most direct form of expression. Mohamad Crabi compares it to fresh vegetables. That's exactly what it is—I don't feel the same uncomfortable pressure when I'm drawing in my sketchbook as when I paint."

Nysten's work is so busy with words, figures, and textures that it demands a prolonged relationship with any viewer, rather than a hyperactive art fair crowd. She studied at the Pratt Institute, and it's clear that New York's underground culture made an impact—especially the epigram-touting street artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, with whom she shares a special connection. Texts scratch across her paintings and drawings almost as though they had been vandalised. Nysten's work is packed with a wondrous tension. A life-long catfight between painfully well-honed art school technique and the practice of a free spirited soldier has already begun to play out on her canvases.



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SCENTS AND SENSIBILITY

by Danaa Lorch

Aisha Al-Sowaidi coils on the senses to evoke and preserve memories of time past

Aisha Al-Sowaidi lived in the same family home in a historic neighbourhood of Doha for more than 30 years before it was bought back by the government for land development purposes. The urban landscape was expanding so rapidly that at times she didn't recognise her own city. While completing her MFA in Interdisciplinary Design at VCU Qatar, Al-Sowaidi set out to preserve memories of her former home through objects which offered the comfort of the past yet still embraced the future. Her work poetically examines the emotionally charged relationship between scents, memories, and objects.

Now a curator at Doha's newly opened Fire Station, Al-Sowaidi is at the forefront of Qatar's rising design scene. We met during Design Days Dubai to discuss her practice.

Selections/Danaa Lorch (DL): You set out to remember your childhood home through design. Have you succeeded?

Aisha Al-Sowaidi (AS): Through my work, I try to investigate the notion of home, and have realised that it takes time for a place to bring us familiar comfort. We can buy everything else in the world except time. Smell is the closest scent to memory, because it hits you in a certain place in your brain and suddenly you are reliving a moment from your past.

DL: You don't have a choice. When you breathe in a certain scent it automatically triggers the memory, whether you like it or not. Tell me how that relates to your cassette tape.

AA: The memory behind it concerns my late father. When I was six years old, he'd take me in his Land Cruiser to visit the sheep market every day at 4pm. Afterwards he'd stop by a shop to buy raw tobacco for smoking Gidu from a ceramic pipe. The car's velvet upholstery captured the smell. A cassette tape was the only thing I could play with in the car, and I still associate that journey with the smell of tobacco and almond oil, so I poured wax with these scents into a mould shaped like a cassette.

DL: It is surprising that you chose to capture a smell in an object that is by function associated with sound. Your more recent designs also concern scent and heritage.

AS: My last project was titled *Domestic* and dealt with the scent burners we traditionally have in our homes in Qatar. We use personal burners for the room, the hair, and the abaya. I designed functional, sculptural scent burners from Pyrex glass. Sometimes when we use an object every day we stop seeing it, which is why I constructed the burners in an unfamiliar way, with the idea that they could still serve a familiar purpose.

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opposite page top:

Aisha Al-Sowaidi.
Mosaic tile,
embroidered layer of
textiles, and
the installation
37 x 54 x 120 cm, with
wood and wool fabric

opposite page bottom:

Aisha Al-Sowaidi.
Cassette, plastic wax,
almond oil, tobacco,
country of the artist



NO ORDINARY FOCUS

by Dana Lorenz

Photographer Ammar Al Attar finds art in his surroundings

"Are you uncomfortable around blood?" is the first thing Ammar Al Attar asks when we meet for an interview at his cluttered studio. His desk is an archaeological site of old negatives, slides, and retro camera equipment he's collected from recent visits to long-time commercial photographers' studios in an effort to trace the history of photography in the UAE. Al Attar, who is entirely self-taught, is one of the only photographers in the UAE still using a dark room.

Adjusting his thick-rimmed glasses, he opens a plain white envelope and fans out *The Slaughterhouse*, a photo essay documenting the ritual slaughter of goats and sheep on Eid Al Adha in Khorfakkan, a rural town in the Emirate of Sharjah. The photographs follow a crowd of men, many of whom are dressed in the traditional white kandora robe, as they shepherd the stock to their prescribed deaths. The animals' blood carpets white tile, and while the contrast is shocking, there is also an abstract beauty to the way in which Attar has painstakingly documented each second of an ancient ritual.

The images were shown at the Emirates Fine Arts Society's annual photography exhibition and mark a new stage in Al Attar's practice in which he is moving away from documentary photography and towards fine arts photography. Al Attar, who lives in Ajman, recently quit his day job after gaining recognition for two exhibitions of work at Cuadro Art in Dubai—Prayer Rooms, in which he shot prayer spaces in malls, offices, and on roadsides, and Sabeel Water, in which he documented the ornately tiled and simple aluminium water fountains placed for community use outside homes in the UAE as an act of giving.

These earlier projects had an anthropologist's methodical quality to them, but Al Attar's new work is more portrait-focused. You might have observed him hunched eccentrically under a sheet, adjusting the focus on his old-fashioned Linhof 5x5 camera outside an artist's studio in the industrial area of Al Quoz. He explains, "It takes time. The subject has to stand still for five or ten seconds while I load the film or the image blurs." The subjects are the artists, patrons, and gallery directors who have been central to building the UAE art scene from the 80s until the present.

The project, which Al Attar has been quietly working on since 2013, will be shown at Marea Art Centre in May and includes studio shots of the older generation of Emirati artists and patrons including Abdelmonem Aserkai, Hassan Sharif, and Najat Makki, who paved the way for the younger generation that includes Al Attar. It is this appropriation of the very best of the past with an eye to the country's boundless future that best characterises his growing practice.

opposite page top:
Ammar Al Attar, *Sabeel*
2013, 100x100 cm,
Hahnemann Photo
Reg. 2013

opposite page bottom:
Ammar Al Attar, *Sabeel*
2013, 100x100 cm,
Hahnemann Photo
Reg. 2013

cuadroart.com



WORD

ON THE STREETS

by Iain Ackerman

Yazan Halwani is on a mission to replace the ubiquity of politics with culture in public spaces

"There is an alternative voice rising," says Yazan Halwani, the Lebanese street artist. "I'm not going to say that what I do is going to free Lebanon or change the sectarian political system, or fix any regional problem. It's far from that. But it tells people that you don't have to accept what's already there."

Halwani has just finished university for the day when we catch up, his English carrying more than a hint of a French accent. His passion for graffiti, calligraphy and the reclamation of Beirut's streets from the clutches of the city's myriad political parties is clear. For an alternative voice, he is both endearing and charismatic.

Following a brief and highly publicised milk-up in February of this year, the possibility that much of his work — and that of other graffiti artists — would be removed by Beirut Municipality has receded, leaving him free to plan a spring offensive on the city's blank walls. He'll also be free to continue to replace the imagery of political propaganda that plagues Beirut with more inspirational cultural icons.

"This is the main objective behind my work. To try and loosen the political grip," he says. "That is why I paint Faruz or Mahmoud Darwish or Ali Abdullah, the homeless man who used to live on Bliss Street. Because for me these are the true faces of Beirut and with whom Beirutis should identify. The true figures of our society should not be political but rather cultural or artistic."

According to Halwani, graffiti is politically incorrect in the sense that he attempts to beautify the city without first taking permission, whereas everybody else destroys the city without taking permission. It's an interesting concept, and one that relies heavily on the fact that his work is indeed striking.

Originally a traditional tagger, he has embraced calligraphy, a medium that merges Arabic calligraphy with graffiti writing, and has sought to create murals that solidify the link between the people of Beirut, their culture and the Arabic language. His style incorporates Kufi (an angular script that is made up of short square and horizontal strokes), Diwani (a complex, cursive style of Arabic calligraphy) and Thuluth (a cursive script designed with curved and oblique lines). His creative process utilises numerous techniques including stencilling, the use of string and chalk for certain geometric patterns, brushes and acrylic paint for calligraphy, and spray paint for the portraits themselves. He also incorporates calligraphy into faces as a means of shading, with the words relating messages. For example, the Danish mural included the quote "On this Land, there's what's worth living for."

"I'm moving towards an Arabesque, Oriental appropriation of the space," says Halwani, who studies computer and communication engineering at the American University of Beirut. "It's far from the street art feel of going against the system, because we don't really have a strong system. It's more about making graffiti for the people of the city. It could be Beirut, it could be Tunis, it could be any city in the Arab world. It's about, if you want, landmarks or pieces that the people identify with because graffiti is not about the artist, it's more about the people that live around it."



It is easy to detect a sense of responsibility towards public spaces when talking to Halwani. Other Beirut street artists may feel the same way, including Ali Refai or twins Mohamed and Omar Kabban, who go by their shared tag of Ashkman. A street art practice does require funds for materials and Halwani makes his public murals possible by taking on commissions and creating street art-inspired work for galleries. Such work, including a mixed media on canvases of Asmahan for the 2013 Beirut Art Fair, are in essence private snapshots of the graffiti he puts up for the public around the city.

On occasion, too, he has collaborated with other artists, but are there any in the region who have influenced his work? "In Lebanon I do not think so. In the region too," Halwani replies. "But I love the photorealism of the Ma Claim Crew in Germany. I also love the calligraphy of Niels Shoe Meulman. What I like off from traditional graffiti, I think in this sense this is what I'm trying to do. I'm not trying to replicate or just push a bit what graffiti already is, I'm trying to invent a style that's culturally appropriate to the region and is different. It's not just about taking something and slapping it on to the city." ■

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

by DERRA LOREN

Noor Bhiat Al-Masri's life as an Incubated Ayyam Gallery artist

Noor Bhiat Al-Masri was covered from head to toe in paint splatter when we met at her studio in Ayyam Gallery's Al Quoz backroom. Specks of blue dappled her French braid. We couldn't even shake hands. Just that day, she'd completed one painting and had briskly moved along to the next canvas. This happens six days a week, nine hours per day, but oftentimes she paints over the previous day's work, washing it away like a wave reshapes the shore at high tide.

At just 23 and a recent graduate of Damascus Faculty of Arts, Al-Masri is Ayyam's first artist in residence, and although she has yet to exhibit her work, is incubating in a studio sandwiched between established artists' spaces. To the right works Mohammad Orabi, the artist whose take on Syria was so powerful that he was listed among Foreign Policy's '100 Leading Global Thinkers' in 2014. Tammam Azзам works further down the hall. Speaking about their community, she said, "We ask one another's opinions and offer our critiques. I learned a lot technique-wise from Mohamad, especially when it comes to creating texture."

All of Al-Masri's paintings are portraits. Even a still life canvas, nailed hastily to a studio wall, shows evidence of an implied human subject who arranged tulips in a vase and sipped half a glass of water before discarding it on a table. Despite the situation in her home country of Syria, she is not attracted to politics as a theme, explaining, "Sometimes the subject attracts you more than the painting itself. I like the opposite—for the painting to attract you more than the subject."

A dusty full-length mirror leans near an easel to aid with self-portraits. Unlike her demeanor, which is ebullient, Al-Masri paints herself as severe, with the gaunt cheekbones of a much older woman. She wouldn't acknowledge the contrast and only said, "You get everything that you need to know about the person standing in front of you from looking at the face." It makes sense that at this time of artistic discernment self-portraits would play a leading role in her studio practice.

She pointed to an untitled self-portrait depicting two versions of the same woman—one covers her own mouth, while the other leans forward as if in a submissive trance. Al-Masri said this work, which is not for sale, came about by coincidence, and represented a breakthrough in her practice thanks in part to Orabi's mentoring. Although she doesn't like to be too prescriptive in unpacking the messages behind her paintings, she did hint, "I lived in a place where women did not have freedom to speak their minds. Sometimes my words have gotten me in trouble, and this is indirectly what the painting is about."

ayyamgallery.com



Noor Bhiat Al-Masri, Self-portrait, collage and spray on canvas, courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery



Noor Bhiat Al-Masri, The Only/Zone Mixed media on canvas, courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery

REVELATIONS IN CREATIVE CHAOS

by Dana Lorch

The Mine aims to dig deeper in the multi-dimensional, ever-evolving art scene

It was installation day at The Mine. *Mopping Within: An Alternative Guide to Tehran and Beyond* was on its way up. Curator Sohrab Koshani was adjusting Yousha Bashiri's hearts pinned to a blank industrial wall. There was drilling and hammering. Auction house Paddle 8 was in the process of putting all works up as lots for a simultaneous online auction. Saraz Askari, the founder of The Mine and I sat down at a rough wooden table in the centre of it all. The Mine launched in 2013 with the motto 'Creative Chaos'. The space itself sits in a warehouse next to a boxing club in Al Quoz rather than safely within one of Dubai's two established gallery hubs.

Askari, who is Iranian/Canadian, is also hard to label. She has a long bob haircut and a voice like a new-fute, and is so naturally herself that, despite her new-kid-on-the-block status, UAE art sovereigns like Sunny Rahbar (co-founder of The Third Line) and Rami Farook are counted as mentors.

Since opening, The Mine has shown upwards of 40 emerging artists in monthly exhibitions that have cultivated an underground following primarily of 20 – something who are tired of predictable openings with canapés. The legwork involved in curating a group show is overwhelming. Askari says, "When you have six artists participating, it's almost like exhibiting six shows, but that's okay because it stimulates the viewers more. It's like offering them a salad instead of just raw lettuce."

Exactly what kind of salad is The Mine, though? Askari simply laughs in response to the question: "People are always asking, 'Tell us what you really are,' but I resist. We don't want to be one-dimensional and play it safe. Art is not just one thing either. It is constantly evolving, and that is what this space is about."

Yousha Bashiri, Mopping Within
at The Mine's opening
exhibition in 2013

[themine.ae](#)

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NEW BIDS ON THE BLOCK

by Dana Lorch

Emergeast connects young collectors to the Middle East art scene

Best friends turned business partners Dima Abdul Kader and Nikki Melah may still be in start-up mode, but Emergeast, their online gallery bringing emerging Middle Eastern artists' work to young collectors, is already turning heads in the art world.

The two first met in London while studying at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Dima has a solid head for finance coupled with a love of art history, while Nikki previously ran programmes at Magic of Persia, a foundation that introduces Iranian art and culture to a global audience. Emergeast vets emerging artists for background, potential, and technique, then helps them to place original work online, minus the inflated prices that have come to be associated with many regional artists' introductory sales.



Dima is convinced that online art galleries are the way the market is headed: "Before the fashion websites took off, everyone was doubting how clothing could be bought online. Now Net-A-Porter is a multi-billion dollar enterprise. I believe that art will soon follow suit."

The gallery's first auction was held in Dubai's International Financial Centre during Art Week and drew a crowd of 20- and 30-somethings, most of whom had never before bid on art but had blank walls to fill over their couches. Interestingly, for this debut auction, the gallery opted not to charge a buyer's premium, a choice Nikki says was intended "to eliminate any barriers to entering the market and make sure that everyone was given the chance to raise their paddles without worrying about whether there was a catch."

Humaid Mansoor, a Dubai-based abstract painter, looked on as his *Midnight Secrets* sold to the highest bidder, which was quite probably a first auction experience both for artist and collector.

[emergeast.com](#)

Nikki Melah, Emergeast
Courtesy of the artist
and Emergeast

[themine.ae](#)

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