

## Surrender and Control

*Dia Azzawi's four-decade practice sets out in uncharted directions with a new exhibition, reports **Danna Lorch***

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I deliberately did not ask Dia Azzawi to define his attraction to bright colors. The Iraqi artist, who was born in 1939, formed the New Vision Group in 1969, and has logged a four-decade practice, has been interviewed hundreds of times, and without fail, asked to explain the primary palette he has kept since leaving Baghdad for London in 1976. He opened our conversation by politely imploring me not to bore him: "I hope you have something different to ask me." Not coincidentally, Azzawi's solo show at Meem Gallery in Dubai is also titled, *Something Different*, and marks his first formal foray into tapestry, while also presenting sculpture, a mural and other works conceived with techniques that the artist has never before explored.

The tension between computer-generated obelisks and atelier-woven tapestries, with a notable absence of the paintings that Azzawi is most known for was what made the exhibition feel like the first steps in an exciting departure towards unmarked coordinates. The show juxtaposed artisanal tradition with machine-generated perfection, and an established artist's nearly omnipotent control over the creative process with an uncharacteristic surrender to execution by experts.

We forgot the LED lights of the gallery's backroom as we retraced Azzawi's 2013 walk through the woods of Northern Lebanon, where he happened upon Khalil Hawi's grave and rediscovered the late poet's verses on his tongue. After the visit, Azzawi returned home to London and constructed one of his signature *daftars* (translated as 'notebook' from Arabic) as an ode to Hawi, a hand-painted, single edition book that attempts to visually represent the poet's words. Hawi, who wrote in heavy symbolism, transformed his body into the ultimate emblem by taking his own life when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982.

The sculpture, *Homage to Khalil Hawi*, came next and is a surprisingly playful obelisk meant to be circled as a monument to the poet's life, more than his death. Of the sculpture's tone, Azzawi prompted, "You have to remember that with all the suffering, we have to keep some hope that things will get better. You cannot just cry for what you have lost. Khalil Hawi left us with incredible creative work that we have to appreciate." Another piece, *Obelisk for Unknown Poet*, stood silently beside the first, perhaps in deference to everyday workers who recite classical Arabic poetry on the streets as they go about their days, looping images together like threads of lace. **A series of three "Toys" perched on unusually whimsical feet beyond.**

The three tapestries exhibited at *Something Different* are the result of a collaboration with master weavers at Ateliers Pinton in Aubusson France—a city

renowned for textile arts. Azzawi used design software to sketch *My Garden* and *Oriental Window*, which were then hand dyed and painstakingly woven on a loom, bringing to life the hanging gardens of Babylon in abstract form. The richness of the dye and tightness of the weave are so intricate that from a distance the tapestries look like Azzawi's acrylics on canvas.

In the last century, modern masters including Picasso, Chagall, and Calder, all collaborated with ateliers to reproduce their work in tapestry form, however the medium is making a popular comeback with the support of new technology. Although he certainly uses the computer as a tool, Azzawi believes, "When you work by hand, you will make mistakes, which will add a richness to the design that a computer's precision will miss." For an artist who prefers to use his own hands, working in tapestry and sculpture, and surrendering control of the production's process is the ultimate exercise in trust of the medium.

A 2002 painting, *Jenin Jenin* was rendered into tapestry at 300 centimetres in height, with the original triptych leaning against the atelier's workshop wall in order to maintain a precise level of detail for the artisans. In this case, the monochrome work commemorated the Israel Defence Forces' massacre of more than 500 Palestinians that took place in Jenin refugee camp on the West Bank in 2002. Each of the three panels witnesses a young man laid out in unnatural death, attended to by a white dove. While the bird and its accompanying olive branch symbolize peace and promise across the Abrahamic faiths, here the dove seems to be falling, as though it has lost the power to fly, and hope has left humanity.

Does a work of art hold the same meaning when it is translated into another medium? Azzawi believes, "It's completely different", confiding that although he is pleased with the tapestry, the original painting, which came about in 2002 in direct response to the massacre, contains the intensity of his emotion, while the tapestry is more of an echo.

Azzawi, has managed to stay outside of politics, while maintaining a lifelong commitment to documenting and making sense of human suffering. He often accesses mythology or traditional Iraqi aesthetics to make sense of regional events. He is an artist with a conscience. When I asked him if it's possible for an artist to be revolutionary, he adjusted his handlebar moustache and responded affirmatively, "When you defend justice it's a revolution. This is the whole idea. If you try to create work that is more advanced, this is a revolution. A revolution is not only defined by holding arms and fighting, but also if you manage to create the means to [further] develop a society."

Following our interview, Azzawi planned to attend Christie's auction of Modern & Contemporary Arab, Iranian, and Turkish Art, to watch two of his paintings acquired from a private collection sold to the highest bidder. Most artists would cringe at the notion of publicly observing the rise or fall of their works' value, but Azzawi, who is

regarded as a patriarch of Iraqi art by a generation of artists in exile, is stalwart when it comes to the impact of the market on his practice.

He doesn't seem to care if he's regarded as a Modern or a Contemporary artist. "I think these terms are more about the market than the history of art. For example, in the Frieze Modern section you will find work from the Sumerian period and work produced in 1999. For me, it is more about whether the art remains creative and brings visual richness and happiness over time, or not." As an artist whose main fear is stagnation, it is clear from *Something Different* that Azzawi is blossoming all over again like one of his desert roses.