

Syrian Artists in War and Exile

Is there still a place for art amid the merciless war the Syrian regime is carrying out against its people? Since most Syrian artists have joined their country's diaspora, what can be said about the country's contemporary art scene and its ability to produce work befitting its current reality, "art through which an era identifies itself"? (1) What has been the impact on contemporary art of the Syrian revolution that began in March 2011, and the international scattering of the country's artists?

Easel painting came to Syria with the opening of a fine arts school in 1923, during the period when the country was ruled under a French mandate (1920-46). (2) It introduced European Orientalism and Impressionism, as the painter Khaled Takreti recalls. He emphasizes the influence of European art and the little contact with the American avant-gardes until the 1990s, when an opening to the international art scene went hand in hand with the regime's program of economic privatization. The photographer and filmmaker Mohamad Al Roumi speaks of the influences of Viennese Expressionism as well as Kandinsky and abstract art starting in the 1960s. Today painting remains the main trend among the country's artists, but figurative art has overtaken abstraction and increasingly artists are turning to photography and other visual arts. The art market, polarized by the influence of Dubai, has played the central role in this internationalization. In Damas the opening of the Ayyam gallery in 2006 and rising valuations spurred the emergence of local artists and a growing interest among collectors and the general public. For the first time, the bourgeoisie enriched under the dictatorship of Assad father (1970-2000) and son (since 2000) began to flaunt its buying power by acquiring Syrian contemporary artworks, before the confiscation of wealth that took place during the years immediately preceding the 2011 popular revolution.

In the context of the military and police repression that met the 2011 insurrection, artists found themselves forced to choose between risking imprisonment for political activism or an engaged artistic practice in exile. In either case, prudent neutrality was

Sabhan Adam. « Sans titre », 2007.

Technique mixte sur toile. 305 x 146 cm. (Court. galerie polad-hardouin, Paris). *Mixed media on canvas*

Sulafa Hijazi. « Naissance », 2012. Impression numérique. « Birth. » Digital print



not an option, except for a few painters who remained in Syria such as Sabhan Adam and Fadi Yazigi. The latter, a sculptor as well as painter, refuses to allow his work to be shown in Damascus and lives on sales elsewhere in the Middle East. The self-taught painter Adam, born in 1972, shows his work all over the Middle East and Europe, including Paris, but also in Damascus, without that signifying a pro-regime political position. Still, the city's main galleries have closed, and artists close to the regime and disposed to support the political repression are the principle beneficiaries of the art scene such as it still exists in the capital. Exile often leads to economic impoverishment. Artists are constrained to modify their practice and take up media that require less

space, such as the digital arts, leading to a formal revitalization. Artists in exile such as Tammam Azzam and Ammar Al-Beik, among others, have adopted a position in favor of the people whose suffering they depict in works meant for both the Syrian diaspora and the non-Syrian public. In appropriating and subverting celebrated artworks like Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*, Azzam seeks to alert regional and world public opinion. His photomontage title *Klimt, Freedom Graffiti* from his *Syrian Museum* series is a projection of the famous painting on a wall in ruins that seems to represent Syria. Similarly, Al-Beik's digital work *Lost Images* combines a critique of Bashar al-Assad and a message of hope for the Syrian people, with their history stretching across millennia.

De haut en bas / from top:

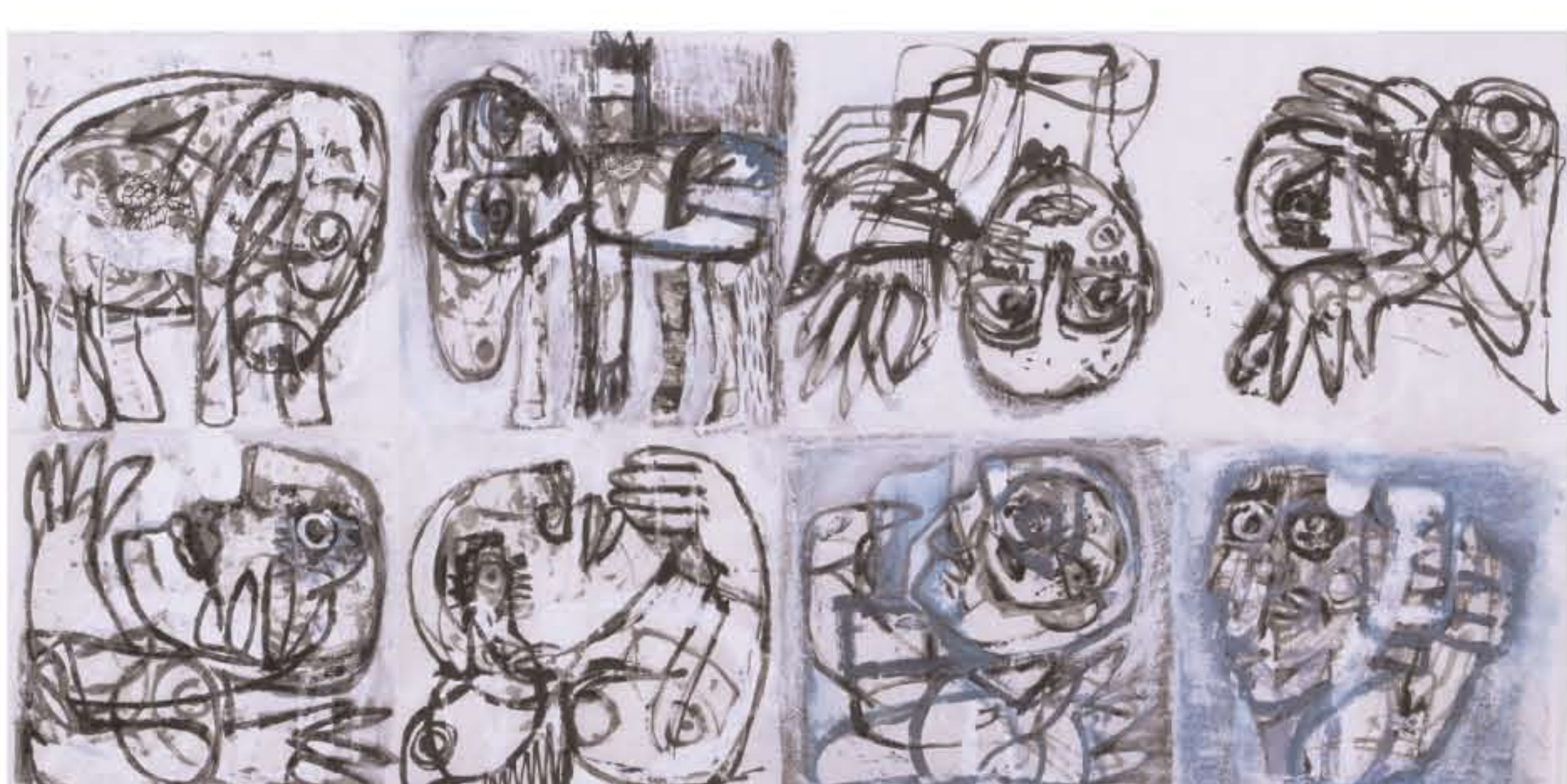
Ammar Al-Beik. « (Edipus Complex) », 2013.

Tammam Azzam. « Série papier 05 », 2016. Collage papier sur toile. 120 x 160 cm. *Collage, paper/canvas*

Both men make a living as artists, the former from sales in Dubai and the latter from the financing of his short films. University research grants and assorted gigs help out. They also receive funding from local sources and non-profits that enable them to show their work and win a wide audience.

IMAGES OF THE WORLD

Referencing modern art, Jacques Rancière emphasizes the role played by popular art in the democratization of subjects. As for Syrian artists, their representation of the people borrows from nineteenth-century European Orientalism. In the context of the country's independence (since 1946) and the rise of nationalism, this representation of the people constituted a compromise with the need to adopt foreign artistic techniques, a borrowing that sometimes led to a quest for authenticity. (3) There emerged a current of socially critical art and political engagement, often in opposition to poverty. In a search for his roots, the photographer and filmmaker Al Roumi has manifested an increasing interest in rural people and Bedouins. This also responds to an international demand for landscapes and images of everyday life on the Syrian steppe. In addition to popular motifs, the democratization Rancière describes in *Le Partage du sensible* involves a wider access to art-making. Thus the conditions for this aesthetic equality are based on "a different circulation of information and images in the contemporary world [...] Many artists today are more concerned with constituting alternate modes of the circulation of information and images of the contemporary world than with presenting artworks that would be an end in themselves." (4)



THE CARAVAN, FOR THE PEOPLE

The Syrian revolution contributed to far more use of the Internet, especially by artists who remained in the country for whom anonymity is a matter of security. The Net is becoming both a mode of circulation for revolutionary art and a source of inspiration. This new artistic dimension of cybernetics is linked to the importance of the new social networks in the circulation of political news and relatively democratized access to them. Hundreds of Facebook friends receive and share digital artworks, photos of street art and news of political actions. The Web is becoming the relay and mainstay of political communication, retransmitting interactive actions and generating a digital public space. (5)

Since 2011, Syria, and in particular its contemporary art as well as its rich patrimony, has captured the interest of international public opinion. In response to this

curiosity, the Syrian Cultural Caravan seeks to support and represent contemporary cultural and artistic production. As its name indicates, this is an itinerant project, traveling around Europe to proclaim that Syrian artists have not given up.

The Caravan's members seek to support the revolutionary Syrian people, victims of both the Assad regime and ISIS. With the slogan "Freedom for the Syrian people," it addresses a broader audience than galleries and museums. Specifically, the Caravan brings together and shows the work of diaspora Syrian artists, about twenty in all, in urban street settings, in order to reach and inform a public that can serve as an interlocutor for the Syrian people in revolution. This non-profit association is run by a handful of artists who organize exhibitions, (6) notably the photographer and filmmaker Mohamad Al Roumi and his life partner, the journalist Amélie Duhamel, and the painters Walaa Dakak and El Masri. The lat-

ter has transmitted a message of hope in his depiction of trees and a cocoon, a symbol of life and optimism, while Dakak, who also makes installations, uses the motif of eyes to represent the political paranoia of state terrorism since 1970. Some Caravan artists support themselves through their art and others work at various jobs in their countries of refuge. Dakak works with therapeutic art, while El Masri is able to sell his works in Middle Eastern countries. He has enjoyed private support in Paris, thanks to which he has been loaned a studio. The Caravan also holds concerts and readings of the work by the poet Khoulood Al Zghayare (a PhD in sociology), who also organizes cultural events for the group. As a platform for exchanges, the Caravan brings together Syrian intellectuals like the authors and journalists Samar Yazbek, Yassin Al Haj Saleh and Hala Kodmani, and the artists Sulafa Hijazi and Iman Asbani, whose work illustrates today's violence and, more personally, explores the question of identity. Both enjoy international careers and Hijazi also works for German radio and television broadcasters. The Caravan seeks to represent the whole of Syrian society and at the same time a revolutionary project that can be an alternative to the dictatorial regime and the Islamic State. In that, it embodies political resistance and, in embryo, the social reconstruction to come. ■

Translation, L-S Torgoff

(1) Catherine Millet, *L'Art contemporain. Histoire et géographie*, Flammarion, Champs, 2006. Also see André Rouillé, *La Mode du contemporain*. www.paris-art.com/art-culture-france/

(2) Renaud Avez, *L'Institut français de Damas au Palais Azem à travers les archives*, Presses de l'IFPO

(3) Silvia Naef, "L'Expression iconographique de l'authenticité (asâla) dans la peinture arabe moderne," http://aan.mmsh.univ-aix.fr/volumes/1993/Pages/AAN-1993-32_30.as

(4) Jacques Rancière, "Le moment esthétique de l'émancipation sociale," in *La Revue des livres*, 1 September 2012.

www.emanantia.com.ar/editorial/libros/detalles.aspx?IDL=769&IDN=79

(5) Cécile Boex, "La grammaire iconographique de la révolte en Syrie : usages techniques et supports," www.academia.edu/6104063.

(6) An exhaustive list of events, participants, exhibition sites and financial partners can be consulted on the Caravan website: <http://caravaneculturellesyrienne.org/category/les-participants/>

Victoria Chenivisse is the author of a thesis entitled, "Art populaire, art contemporain et pratiques politiques au Moyen-Orient : entre orientalisme et Révolution égyptienne, 2000-2014" (EHESS).

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Fadi Yazigi. Untitled. 2016. Technique mixte sur papier de riz. *Mixed media on rice paper*

Walid El Masri. « Cocoon ». 2014. 150 x 200 cm

