

# Around the paths of Syria

by *Martina Corgnati*



**Buthaina Ali** Noi 2007 3

Something is changing. It seems that a new five stars, hotel de charme, where you can expect to meet George Clooney all of a sudden (he is starring *Syriana*, perhaps, or just relaxing together with his most secret new flame), opened next corner. The old city Damascus is getting full of new luxurious little hotels, ricavati from old houses and sometimes palaces of the lost past. The city inside the walls look more than ever like a tourist park and a open construction site. <<It is all policy>> someone explains to me. They want to show the world they are changed because they are converting the country in a tourist attraction and opened back the doors to some intellectuals. But at the end of the day I

think they are just the same as ever>>. Who is talking to me like that is precisely one of these intellectuals who came back after more than 20 years spent in France – most of which without a passport. Youssef Abdelke is just back for no mere than a few months. They let him in without touching him; just call him and keep him and his wife some hours at the police department but then it was all right. <<Policy is not always black and white especially here and nowadays, when you better keep your pigeons at home, especially the ones who are well-known internationally and respected, instead of pushing them out; or worse. And then they do not need to behave so badly: there is such a mess around in Middle

East, so huge mistakes have been made that they can pretend they've become wise and peaceful and tolerant in comparison to the neighbors>>. Why did he come back instead of remaining in Paris (Paris est toujours Paris), cosmopolite, creative, full of chances and, despite all, always beautiful ? <<I belong to here>> is the straight answer, <<Paris is better, yes, but I do not go for better or worse, nor I go for myself, I go for the country, my country, I want to do what I can to make this place better than it was when I left.>>. Youssef's pieces were shown at Ayyam's gallery in Damascus, which published for him, back already in 2007, a thick catalogue-book devoted to recent works. But he works no longer with the powerful, and frankly commercial-oriented tycoon of Syrian art, whose branches are spreading out from Damascus to Dubai and from Dubai to Beirut, and he is by himself. At the moment.

His exquisite engravings and drawings, sometimes big sized, more often small and intimate, have reached a point of absolute perfection, even through imperfections and stretches ; they are something which is not what it seems. <<People think I am representing fishes, instead they are not fishes>> Abdelke explains, <<they are drawings and, if you want, symbols>>.

In Paris, where he studied engravings, Youssef created in the old times mostly inner spaces of some symbolic taste and vaguely grotesque and, more, expressionist connotations. After that, it appeared the most beautiful Still lives, shoes and fishes, treated with a lenticular precision and a maniacal care for details. The object, any object, appeared extraniated and suspended in an unnatural silence and in a almost metaphysical loneliness that in fact, not by chance, won the

appreciation of an exigent and sophisticated art critic as Alain Jouffroy.<sup>1</sup>

Now, in his generation of the recognized masters of modern Syrian art, Youssef Abdelke is definitely one of the most interesting and worth seeing artists on the damascene scene. Beside him, Elias Zayat has recently stressed his fiabesque and perturbed signs, his mythical and symbolical characters , most of which find their roots in the traditional icon painting of the orthodox tradition, towards a meaningful and dynamic shape, more than ever. Working on his own projects, the artists find time to devote also to restoration, of ancient paintings and decorations of the beautiful palaces and houses that make Old Damascus unique. If you go for modern artists do not lose the chance to get a first hand impression of Khuzayma Elwani's intense and dramatic compositions: he is the most tragic and expressionist through yellow artists of his generation: in his itinerary you cannot number mass-executions, unarmed horses thrown aside, rapes and violence he painted, all derivate by a personal rielaboration of Guernica's and Goya's memories, treated as schematic silhouette on black background.

One indeed could wander why black is so common and spread not only as a formal choice but more significantly as an experience in modern and contemporary Syrian art: not only Elwani uses black as his selected choice, but Marwan Kassin Bashi did sometimes, there, in Berlin where he shared the exciting phase of German neo-expressionism together with Baselitz, Lupertz etc; and where he has taught to two or three generations of young pupils, included a number of expatriated Syrians and Arabs; and Leila Nseir did, also one of the prominent figure of her generation, even more

1- A.Jouffroy, Abdelké, cat. della mostra it, Centre des Arts Zamalek, Cairo, poi Kuwait City e Damascus, Galerie Atassi editions, 2004/2005-. Cfr. inoltre K.Samawi, E.Menhem, Abdelke, cat. Ayyam Gallery, 2007.

being a woman on a background especially poor of women artists as Syria. Influenced by Picasso since the school years in Cairo, she made clear her stature in post-cubistic which dated back in the Sixties, beautiful “bull” drawings (should an homage be more explicit ?), made with a single, powerful ink draw. Of course, everybody knows her portraits, squared off and almost geometric faces created in the eighties but also the expressionistic compositions are worth seeing, and the, sometimes harsh, sometimes feeble; and, of course, do not lose her nudes, masculine or feminine does not matter ‘cause they are statements related to the basic, primary human condition. Also Leila Nasr attracted once the attention of Ayyam Gallery, which published a huge catalogue on her works in 2008. <sup>2</sup> But, like Abdelke, she is out of the current artists’ list of the gallery, whose turnover is, so to say, intense if not more. It seems indeed that, after the first hour passion, several good or established artists find their reasons to keep some distances from Mr Khaled Samawi while the ones who remain show somehow signs of a progressive “commercial oriented production”. I personally have nothing against it but it is a fact that the most experimental, sophisticated, “difficult” or controversial production remains necessarily out of sight of the collectors or, worse, critics and curators who think they can approach and get a general impression of contemporary Syrian art scene without moving a step out of the comfortable and impressive Ayyam showroom in the chic Chile Street, a perfect location in the upper-class, quiet and distinguished neighborhood, where you will not find nor a single displaced tourist or person who is there just by chance. On the other hand, one has to mention the remarkable work that Ayyam Gallery is doing as publisher: the already

existing books (almost thirty) form a valuable and precious database especially in a country where, before Khaled Samawi entered the scene, a English-arabic well-illustrated and well printed book was a kind of rarity.

Ayyam represents also a young and promising painter who used to be one of the finest interpreter of black nowadays: not only a color but a frame of mind, an expressive need and a poetical circumstance: Tammam Azzam. Azzam spent his youth not far from Damascus, in a village of the South where rocks are black and landscape seems capable of turn itself into a vertiginous prison made of shadow crossed by rays of lights. The artists says he relates to this dimension in order to get purely abstract impressions: indeed his works are really “aesthetic”, especially the recent ones: the impressive *Metallica* series (2010) are black and white urban landscape inhabited by shadows as deep and picturesque as ghosts. But it is worth mentioning also his *Laundry Series*, 2007/2008-, where he experimented the use of emptiness, together with real pegs from which black drops and black signs drip. The actual action of cleaning, a purifying one, transforms here in his contrary: cleaning the canvas with painting instead of water, it becomes dirty and contaminated (but somehow pictorial), while empty and untouched is the part that did not suffered any touch, any contact. In such a way the canvas is not only a virtual “window”, merely abstract space at artists’ disposal but it is a physical body, a fragmentary landscape, familiar and almost intimate thanks to the actual presence of common and everyday objects as pegs, that, in some way, become the authors of the painting.

Nonetheless, in spite of the activity of many talented painters in Syria and from Syria abroad (I have to mention at least also Sabhan Adam, best figurative painter of his generation, living

2- Cfr. Y.Nseir, R.Issa, A.Arabbi, Leila Nseir, cat. Ayyam Gallery, Damascus, 2008



**Marwan Bashi** *natura morta* 1982





Tamam Azzam 2004

and producing his astonishing, monumental and obsessive characters in a remote area along the Iraqi border), painting is not the only fashionable medium in the contemporary Syrian art scene.

Sami Aiuri, for instance, is one of the sons of the recent Diaspora of Syrian talents (we should not forget that there is also a old Diaspora due mainly to political reasons: I mention only the prominent director Omar Amiralay, who lived for long years in France, making cinema and winning prizes and international acclamation; or Ahmad Alaa Eddin, painter and talented calligrapher, who lives in Italy). He studied in Vienna and who entered recently Saatchi's stables: his profound and intense works start from bidimensional abstractions, organized around a simple horizontal or vertical

configuration, and approach the problem of space in itself. The relationship between abstract sign – or form – and space is the focus in Sami Aiuri's work, space meant both as empty surface and as tridimensional, real thing (Falling Lines, Falling Spaces).

On the contrary, Ali Kaaf, a student of Marwan Kassar Bashi and later of Rebecca Horn, 2010 winner of the Young Collector Prize of the new-born Roma Art Fair, makes his powerful – black, remarkably black – images out of a dramaturgy of signs and, even more, of occluded spaces. His powerful but sensitive language is founded on the idea of surface made material and tactile through a color which is mainly lack of light: contrast, vertigo and *abbaglio*. It is monochrome or, better, a incerta fight between light and shadow, dazzle and blindness, white



and black: a very traditional dialectic rich of memories of the abstract experience, of the informal and the classic American expressionism (in the number of his relatives I have to mention at least Ad Reinhardt and some series by Robert Motherwell, especially *Elegy for Spanish Republic*) and even more of the “black painting” of many Germans and Italians of the eighties. What I find interesting at most is his practice of occlusion of the look and of construction of an almost solid object, made by charcoal and graphite, which is making the look to return back, towards himself. Ali Kaaf looks forward to a confrontation with experiences and different looks, Arab and European, western and eastern, letting his work always be “open”, as much open to the perception of the “other” as apparently blocked on an archaic and somehow primitive dimension.

But in Syria you won't find Ali Kaaf's work easily; you better look for him in Europe. On the contrary, in Damascus and Aleppo, there are other places which are worth looking: artists' studios, galleries and some, rare, art associations which managed to survive and be active in spite of the severe control of any free cultural activity that the government imposed many years ago. Here, you will find the most courageous and fascinating art which has been made in Syria recently. Let me start with Issa Touma's Le Pont in Aleppo. Nothing new, indeed. Le Pont (bridge in French, meant as bridge of understanding) is the organizer of The International Photography Gathering whose Tenth edition was set and organized in 2009. This annual Aleppo event is an international photography exhibit and festival accompanied by activities such as lectures, workshops, and musical concerts. International and local artists come together to show their work and participate in the activities. Le Pont Since 1999, the organization has also hosted the

International Woman's Art Festival in Syria, an event that features a variety of art from music, dance, and theatre to sculpture, photography, performance, and video art. In addition, the New Line Art Organization was founded in association with Le Pont in 2009. With the goal of encouraging a broader knowledge, appreciation, and practice of all modern art forms in the Middle East, they will introduce the first annual New Line Art Festival in 2009. Issa Touma, founder of all these important meetings and activities, is an excellent photographer and art organizer himself. Of Armenian origin, Issa do not fear at all controversial matters or subjects, experimental attitude and problematic confrontations; these are his everyday bread. In Le Pont gallery you will find the most open-minded attitude and freedom to talk to see and to discuss: remarkable some of the women photographers he proposed during the years, but remarkable at most his own series, such as *Dancing for the Big Father*, which teases the governmental manifestations and feasts organized to strengthen the regime's internal support; the *Sufi dances* series, as well as *Aleppo from above*, which provide the viewer with an unexpected point of view, comprehensive but somehow detailed. His powerful black and white, “classic” shots, which inherited all the Armenian mastership of photographic language, are sometimes astonishingly impressive, sometimes touching, sometimes tender and sometimes as harsh as swords.

You will find nothing of this kind in Damascus but the young and brave Allartnow association is worth visiting. Founded in 2005 by two brave and enterprising sisters, Abir and Nisrine Boukhari, the center is situated in a splendid, although very spoiled and damaged old building in the Jewish quarter of Old Damascus. Since the two occupied the space it became home for

exhibitions, workshop, international encounters, a video festival, previously staged only at the French Cultural Center of Damascus, which, in the previous years, enjoyed a insatiable activity thank to the previous director, Julien Chenivesse, and supporters like the young curator and critic Delphine Leccas and which, being an official French institution, was allowed to all that kind of activities that Syrian people were not allowed to do.

At Allartnow there has been also a graffiti workshop (graffiti are severely prohibited in Syria) which left on the wall in front of the gate and inside two nice murales by the Dutch graffiti artist Joost Eshuis. The center needs support – in order to buy equipment, books, to organize art classes and lectures at all levels and for all students; to invite foreigners, to facilitate network construction...) but its activities are intense, thanks to Abir and Nisrine. The latter is an interesting video artists herself, which devotes part of her time to sculpture (a subject she studied at the University in Damascus) and installation. Some of her projects attracted the attention of Syrian censorship too, some of them for reason which are really difficult to guess: why, for instance a short, poetic project devoted to the memory of a woman who die of a cancer, consisting in a simple, bare glance of her high heel shoes in somehow “holy” context (but where you cannot recognize neither a mosque nor a church) accompanied by a female voice singing softly and sadly in Aramaic should be prohibited as it was (she was let to show it at home but not abroad) ? but, of course, everybody knows how is life there and she insists. Women’s issue are a kind of priority for her since the beginning, when she made, for instance, an impressive life-sized sculpture of a peasant woman totally wrapped in her poor and dirty cloak – something between a mantle

and a blanket – lying down as if beside a road, helpless, homeless.

She is not the only artist in Syria who feels a need to care for this problem: Diana El Jaroudi’s aggressive videos have been tacked discriminations and social hypocrisy against Syrian and Arab women for years. As friend, somehow pupil and collaborator of the master director on e of the father of Syrian cinema Omar Amiralay, whose art has opposing the regime and censorship against all odds, she is used to face contrasts and difficulties. Indeed their works are censored in Syria but praised and welcomed all over the world, included US - a wonderful retrospective on Syrian cinema, *Lens on Syria: A Showcase of Syrian Cinema*, was held at Lincon Center in 2006, curated by Rasha Salti and organized by ArteEast. A pity that Syrian public could not appreciate its wonderful cinema, so far. Luckily enough, they still have the chance to meet interesting, first class artist, as Buthayna Ali, who lives and works in Damascus and represented her country in many biennale and international event. Her project *We*, shown for the first time in Istanbul Biennale, 2006, based on swings, light and words, is intense, powerful and beautiful.

Everyone chooses his own swing  
 We all swing like children  
 Yet someone else is pulling the strings  
 The greatest push is yet to come,  
 Politics, Economy, Religion, Love,  
 War versus peace  
 Love versus hate  
 We are here and there, we are alive.  
 We are Humans.

Writes the artist, quite ecumenically. More controversial her more recent projects, such as *Me My self and I* (2008), where she managed to make as many self portraits as the Arab states are,

putting her face in such a way to cover an Arab president's official portrait on a poster, until she covered all them, hiding, at the same time, her face with the camera. So, she states she is an Arab (me), somehow covered or veiled by her very expressive tool (my self) and, in the same time, she superimposed herself on the image of the big father (I), denying it as source of nationalistic identity . controversial, problematic and extremely intelligent, this project has not gained yet all the success it should. And now I expect impatiently to see what she is announcing for Istanbul Biennale, next October, a project with the extremely attracting title, Don't Listen ! she is only a Woman !  
Looking Forward