

Thaier Helal: Locating the Infinite

By *Maymanah Farhat*



TH74 Thaier HELAL «Untitled» - 140 X 200 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas 2009

Abstraction in its purest, non-representational form exists as a rigorous set of variables, a formalism that rejects the details of a corporeal reality, that which would otherwise call for the employment of illusion in the depiction of a specific subject matter. What the purist sense of abstraction allows for is the suggestion of something that lies outside of the physically tangible, occupying another realm altogether, be it amidst a state of consciousness or deep within the subconscious. Abstraction in art can be found in virtually every visual culture in various capacities, from the bark cloth of Tonga to Persian miniature painting and everything in between. In the Arab world, much of the basic principles of abstraction have been drawn from the rich tradition

of Islamic art. Yet since the second half of the twentieth century, artists have drawn from a number of international movements while experimenting with their own techniques.

The work of Sharjah-based Syrian artist Thaier Helal exemplifies the current state of Arab abstraction as it remains on the cutting-edge of local trends and is in step with global developments. As one of contemporary Arab art's leading abstract painters, Helal has continued to venture into new territory, challenging the limits of abstraction. Born in Syria in 1967, Helal graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus and has been based in the UAE for over fifteen years. As a senior member of faculty member of the University of Sharjah, Fine Arts College,

he has been heavily involved with the academic development of painting in the UAE. Throughout his time in the Gulf he has exhibited extensively at home and abroad, gaining significant recognition for his contributions to the local art scene.

A consummate artist who has traversed several paintings styles, in recent years he has focused on the repetition of forms, an exploration that has been the driving force behind over a dozen works. Dividing his canvases into grids of nearly identical parts, he emphasizes the existence of a larger whole. As these elements are unified and become one, Helal's compositions take on greater meaning.

For the artist:

The pulse of these visual units, this proliferation, is composed of new relationships. New forms occur through certain rhythmic encounters that offset shapes and suggest the expressive power of the entire work of art. The repetition acts as an important aesthetic component, echoing a specific idea. ¹

In earlier paintings these details were often depicted as small animals such as pigeons or roosters. Appearing as though in motion, Helal captures them in midflight—their flapping wings creating a sense of continuous movement. As the artist outlines their tiny frames, his subjects form the essential features of his composition, their extended bodies acting as the vivacious brushstrokes that would otherwise be used to delineate the energy that is often used to carry a nonrepresentational work. The further the viewer stands from these paintings, the more abstract they appear, as minute images seem to physically merge into a massive body. Although the emphasis is on how these details come together, Helal allows each a certain degree of visual space, as they makeup the intricate patterns of a greater image. This also can be viewed from the inverse position, in which the composition can be reduced from the collective to the individual. In turn the artist communicates the cyclic nature of life. There is no beginning and there is no end yet he simultaneously outlines paths of generation and deconstruction.

To deconstruct is to first acknowledge the process of creation through which an entity manifests. Helal's

1- Interview with the artist, 2009.



TH41 Thayer HELAL «Untitled»- 100 X 100 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas 2009

compositions essentially emphasize this sense of infiniteness, and in more recent work he has moved towards pure abstraction, as this focus on timelessness has come to dominate his canvases. His palette is limited to cool hues and earth tones, as he creates depth with the layering of medium. The texture of these built-up surfaces produces the appearance of dimensional vastness, stressing negative and positive space. The key to his canvases however lies in the use of repetition—initiating a meditative process of concentration that the artist likens to the rituals of Sufism. This can also be found in Islamic art in general, and in fact much of the explorations that are apparent in Helal's work parallel the use of abstraction in this centuries-old aesthetic.

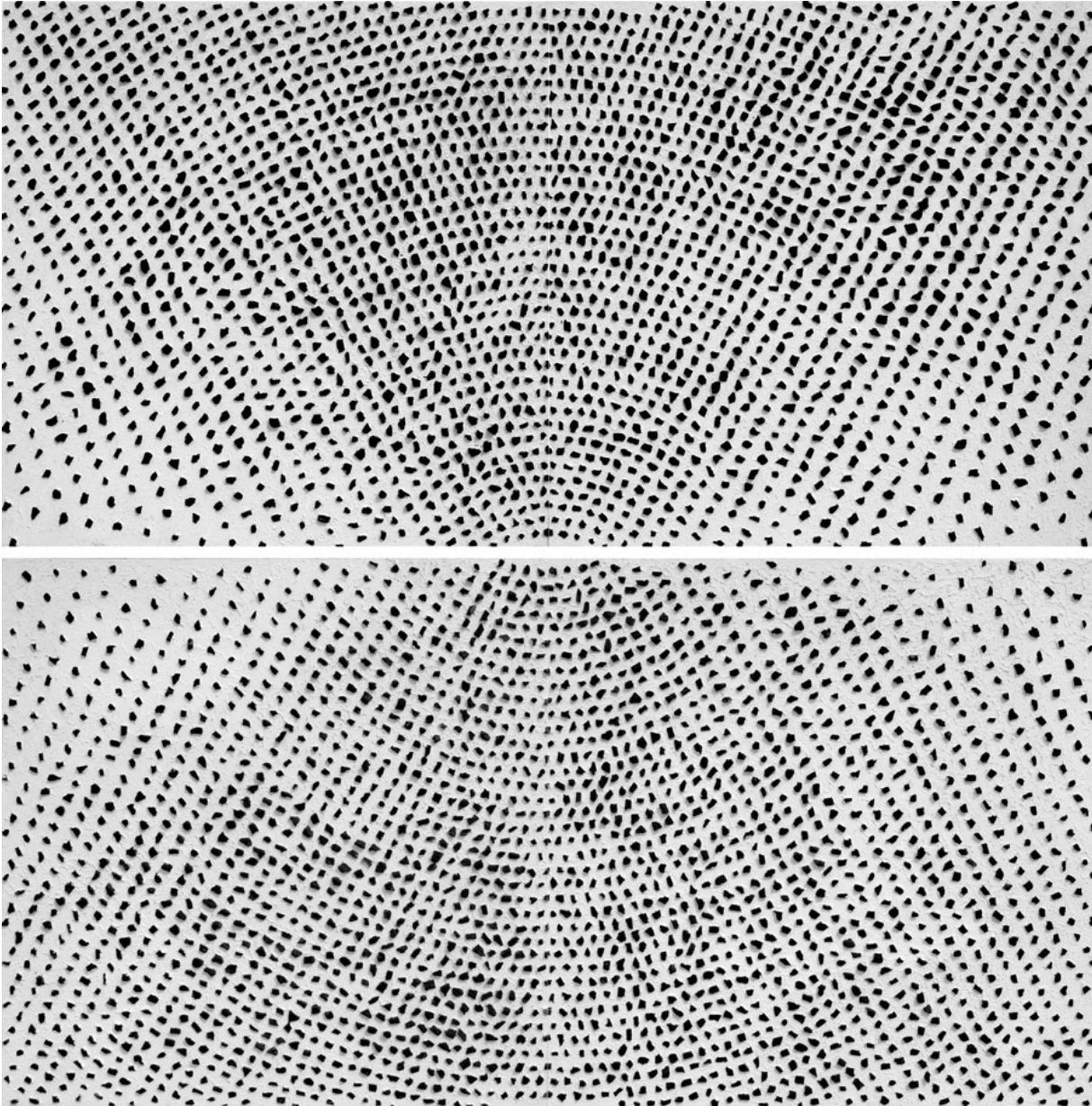
In a recent interview, the artist further explained this influence:

I am working with repetition, using my culture and background, Arabic and Islamic culture... repetition and patterns, while traditional, are perhaps more abstract and more modern. It is inspired by life, but the style at the same time looks contemporary while also reflecting my culture...I am also inspired by Chinese, European—all sorts of cultures really. ²

2-“Syrian Style and Substance” 7 Days, March 13, 2010

While Helal acknowledges the influence of Islamic art, he identifies primarily as a contemporary artist, one who is interested in the currents of international art. Perhaps what he extracts from the tradition then is a particular way of seeing, in which all aspects of the universe are interconnected, beginning and ending at the same point of existence, from the same force

of nature. His concerns however are those of modern times, as he has found inspiration in everything from the rural land of his birthplace in Syria to the assembling of crowds in political rallies or religious gatherings. "I'm not necessarily following Islamic art but it has helped me to make abstract works," the artist explains. "We are a new generation, with



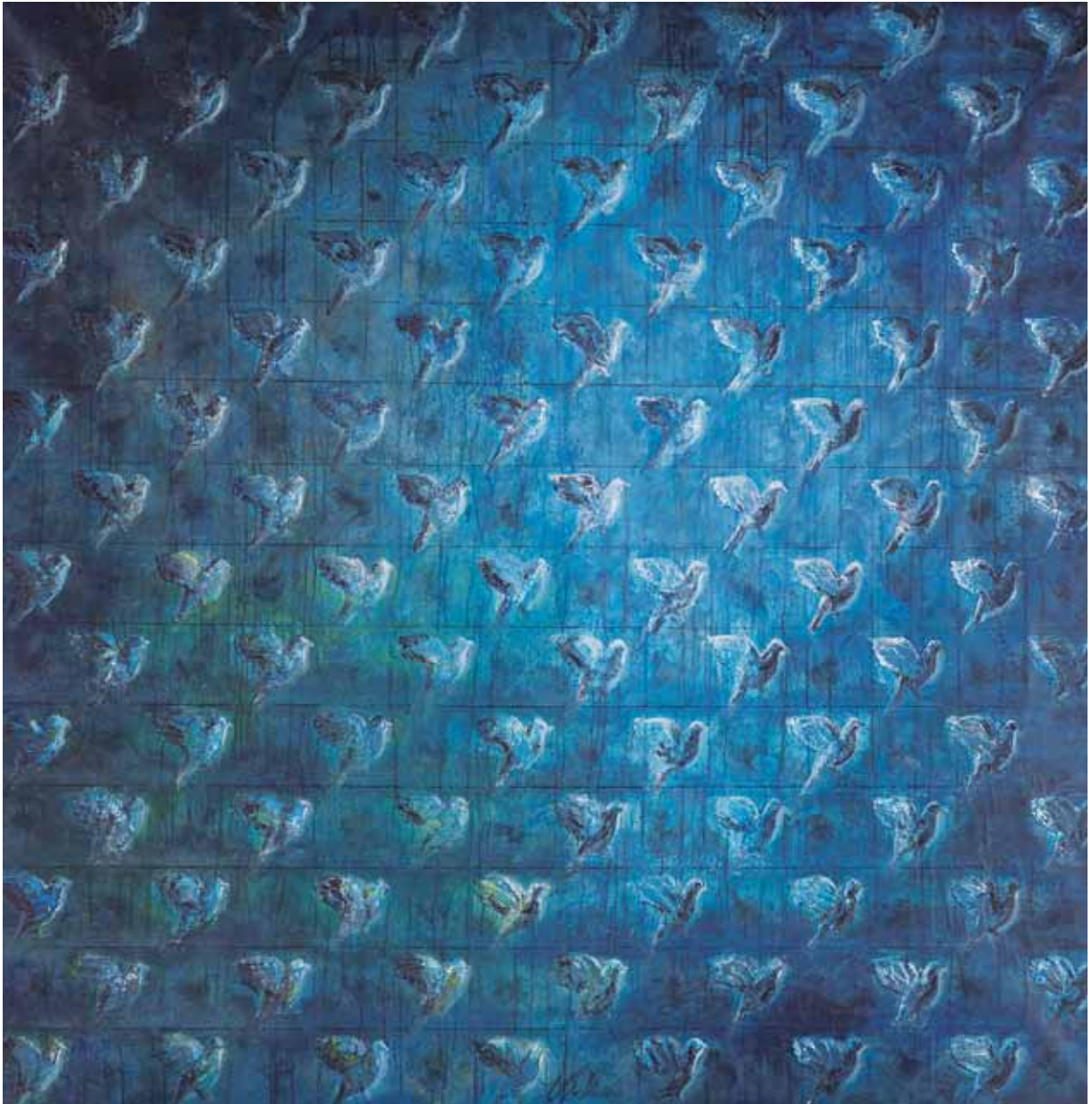
TH58-TH59 Thaier HELAL ◀Semicircle 1390 ◀2- X 390 cm. Coal & Acrylic on Canvas 2010

a different way of thinking. But then you imagine that this has been done for thousands of years. It has helped me to focus and think about my culture.”³ Helal thus locates the infinite in the tangibility of the immediate, as he observes his surroundings with profound scrutiny and intuition. By doing so he allows the viewer to be immersed in a world where

interpretations of the visual are endless.

Thaier Helal is represented by Ayyam Gallery, for more information visit: www.ayyamgallery.com

3- Ibid.



TH1Thaier HELAL «Untitled» 200 X 200 cm. Mixed Media on Canvas 2006