

INTERVIEW WITH NASSER AL ASWADI

By: Lisa Pollman



Hob/amour/Love, 2015, oil on canvas with natural pigments, 230x185cm. Courtesy of the artist.

When did you first become interested in art? What did your family think about this interest?

I started from early primary school days. I was passionate about everything related to drawing. I used to draw on the walls and anything that fell into my hands... According to my family, school studies were the most important thing and not talent; having been born and raised in a village, they constantly used to tell me "study and learn something that would benefit you in the future, something you can be employed at and make money from when you grow up, drawing is only a waste of time"...

What Yemeni artistic traditions inspired you? Can you briefly tell us about them?

I have been inspired by the rich variety of Yemeni traditions, such as the architecture found in the country's villages and cities. Of greatest importance is the old city of Sana'a. Sana'a is like a piece of art in itself, with designs and creative decorations on its buildings and mosques and drawings on its walls and old temples. On top of that, the silver and jewelry found in Sana'a's markets are famous and unique. In my opinion, these handmade crafts represent the country's rich history and are the origins of the creative tradition there.

How do these traditions differ from those of other Arab countries?

Each tradition is based upon the individual country's natural environment, its history and most importantly, its spiritual tradition.

You left your village at 16 to pursue a degree in architecture in Sana'a. After completing your studies, you ended up working as an art teacher in a local school. What did you learn about art from working with children?

I learned so much from children, during that period of time I was very enthusiastic and learned from them what I wasn't able to learn when I was their age; truth is, I learned from them more than I taught them.

Please tell us about your association with the artist Yassin Ghalib. Was he also a visual artist? What kind? Would you consider him a mentor? What skills/techniques did you learn from him?

Yassin Ghalib is both an architect and a fine artist, an architect specialised in the public administration of the preservation of historical cities. I consider him as the first artist I ever met in my life in Sana'a. He taught me a lot. He was my first teacher/mentor and taught me so much that, at the end, I was making the exact same work as him (I was an imitation-artist). At that time, I was in the search of

the self, of my personality... I needed to meet and encounter artists where there were no galleries, nor art books and not many artists, so the artist Yassin helped me create an independent personality of my own, pertaining to myself... pure.

You began volunteering with the French non-profit organization DIA in 1999, despite the fact that many local artists felt working with marginalized children was a "waste of time." What types of assistance did DIA provide in Yemen? How did this opportunity have an impact on your life and your artwork?

Yes, it was in Sana'a in 1999, the assistance it provided comprised development projects (caring for the marginalized and helping them merge into society), in addition to encouraging them to pursue studies. Yes, it had a positive impact on my life and work, and also taught me a lot despite the short period of time I worked with them... It taught me altruism and killing free time. I felt inner peace when I did volunteering work and for this reason I stayed in Sana'a for so long, working in a local organization with street kids two days a week, for four years, from 2004 till 2008. Volunteering work in itself strengthens relations and solidarity among community individuals.

In 2004, you traveled to France to study for four months. What did you learn about your artwork during this time?

Being open to experiencing different cultures has given me a clearer perspective, allowing me to produce and create new forms of art. I have also learnt a lot by meeting many talented artists. This has had a positive effect on both my art and my career.

Did your artwork change after you returned from your first journey to France? How?

Yes! Before I travelled to France, I was painting with only basic techniques and without the knowledge of different mediums. My information came specifically from Western art books and I tried to imitate artists without seeing their work firsthand. The beginning of my real journey as an artist started when I was able to attend many shows and visit galleries while abroad. This was very strange because I'd never done this while living in Yemen. It was an amazing and thrilling experience to see international paintings and visit famous museums for the first time in my life. Having this experience certainly changed my life.

I am now even more committed to becoming a good artist and developing my work. I am passionate about my own culture and wish to fit it into my artwork.

Today, what events specifically inspire your work?

Arabic letters or calligraphy played a major role in shaping the Islamic civilization and represents a large part of its history and determined its identity. The inclusion of Arabic calligraphy and local crafts in my work is due to my background. I was raised to observe the lines and inscriptions in mosques. As a result, my tendency is to be more oriented towards the use of letters than drawings. An artist is part of his surroundings and is influenced by the things around him. Everything around me inspires me in one way or another, such as politics, culture and religion and other daily events - even if they can be challenging sometimes. I am an artist not a calligrapher. I am really interested in using the essence of words and writing in my work to express the foundation of the painting through artistic shapes. What really concerns me is the soul and spirituality of the painting and delivering this with a clear sense of expression and perception. I work spontaneously and try to mix both classical and contemporary styles to create a hybrid.

Tell us about your use of calligraphy, religious and musical sources in your artwork.

I depend upon words or letters. Therefore, words are very important in my work. Each word has several images and I use those randomly. I use letters or words to produce a pattern and maintain a rhythm.

Tell us about your interest in engraving. How do you incorporate it in your work?

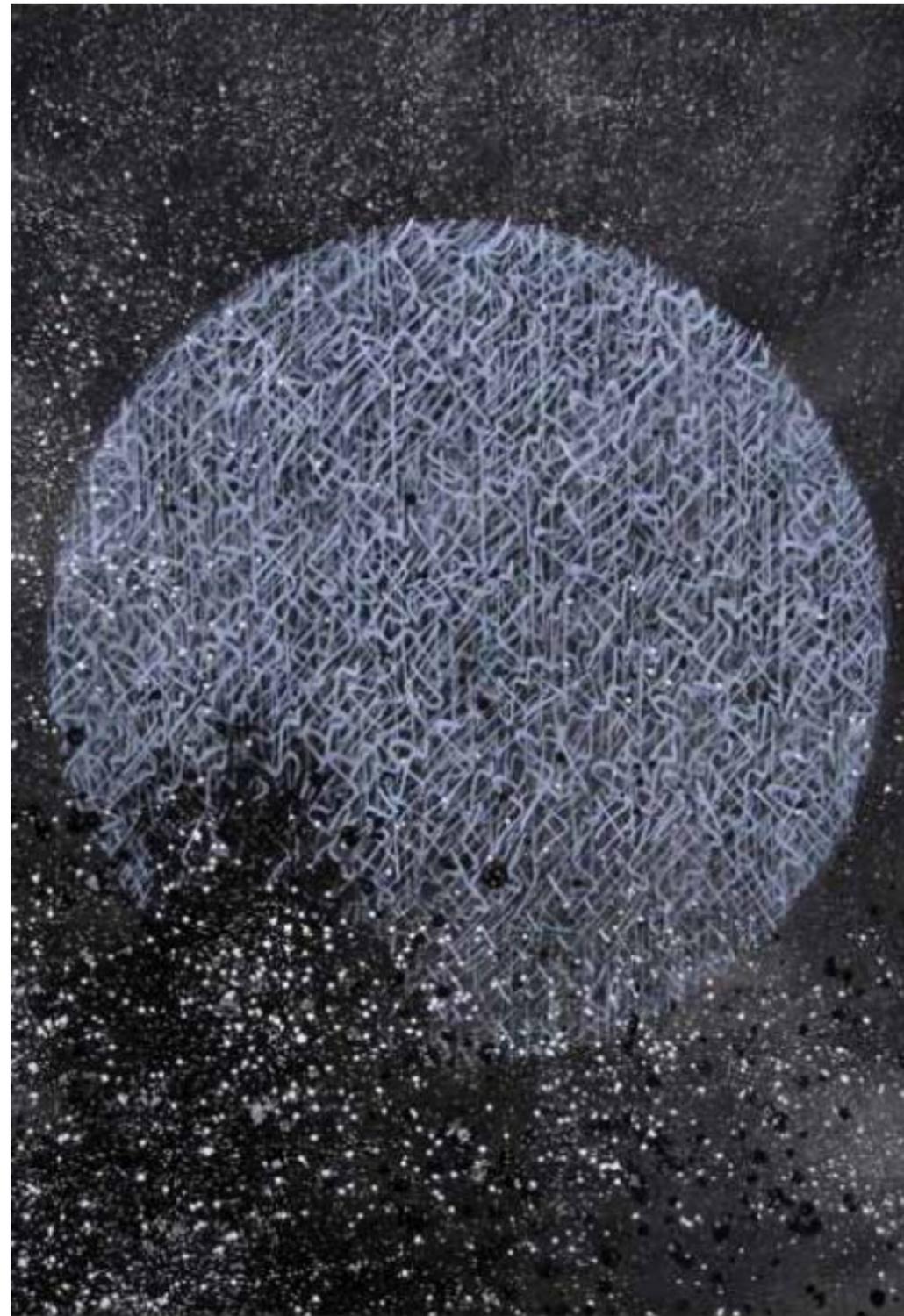
Carving gives me the ability to create layers and despite its simplicity, it can give a sense of perspective. My current work mainly depends upon integrating these layers, but in an indirect way.

What are you working on at the moment?

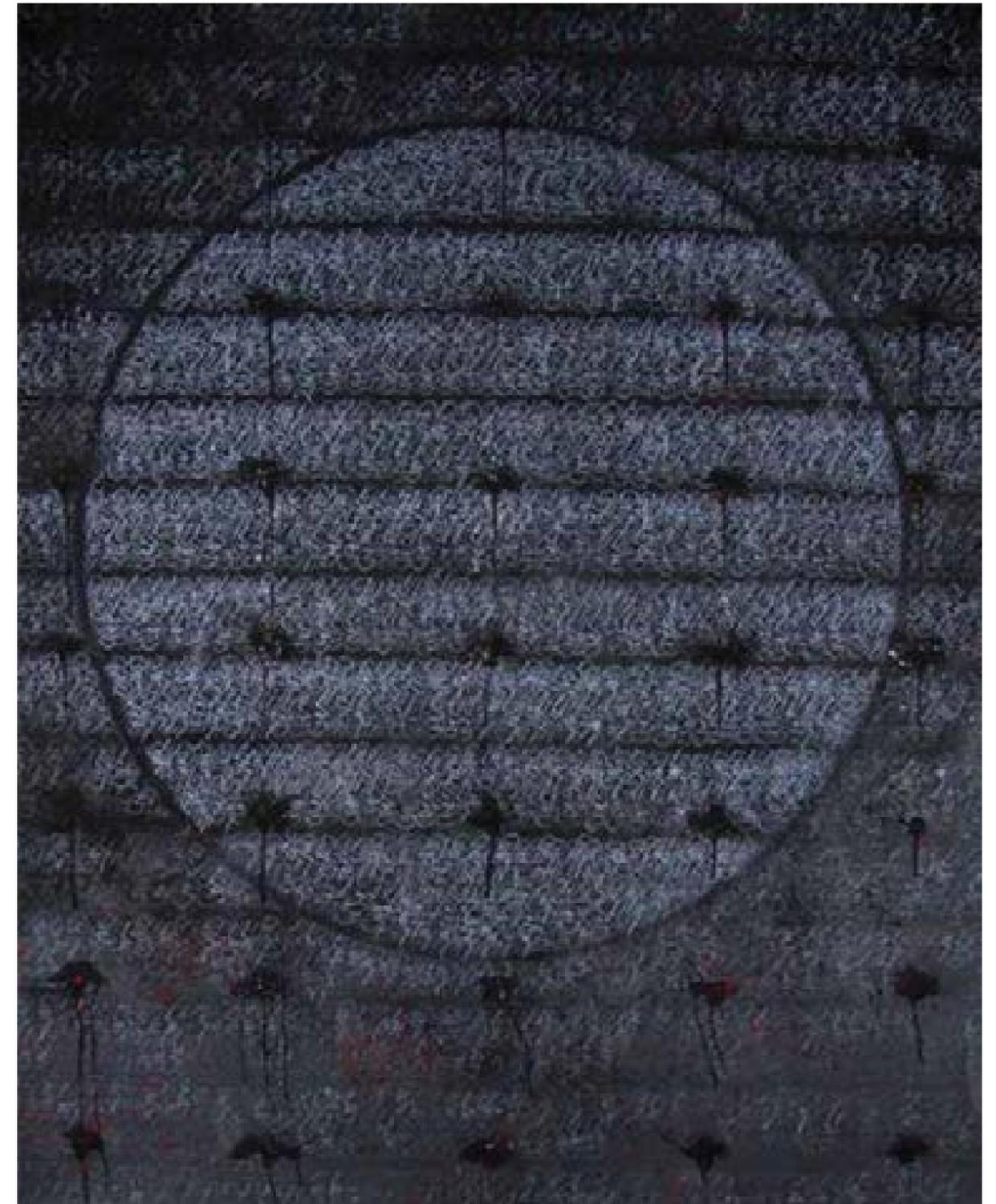
These days, I am always working! Work has become something essential in my life. Regarding upcoming shows, I am preparing for some solo exhibitions in 2016.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Lisa Pollman is a freelance writer who resides in the United States. She has a Bachelor's degree in History and a Master's degree in Asian Studies. Described as a person with eclectic taste, her interests include calligraffiti, contemporary Indian literature, Khmer sculpture and Mughal miniature paintings. Areas of specialization include Asian and Middle Eastern artists who boldly and unapologetically break new ground with subject matter or techniques. She is an enthusiastic supporter to those who may be marginalized or do not have a voice. She is also interested in connecting cultures and peoples through artwork that speaks to the human condition.



Baraka, 2015, oil on canvas with natural pigments, 100x80cm. Courtesy of the artist.



That's Enough, 2015, oil on canvas with natural pigments, 230x185cm. Courtesy of the artist.