

An Iconic Face, An Empty Chair: The Evolution of Motifs in Safwan Dahoul's Ever Expanding 'Dream' Series

By Lee Ann Biddle



'Dream56', 2012, acrylic on Canvas, 182x202cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery and the artist.

Safwan Dahoul's transcendent canvases touch upon the human experience, revolving around slumber, companionship, solitude and death. A self proclaimed visual memoir, each piece is hauntingly relevant, reflecting those intimate moments we have collectively experienced. Dahoul's canvases compel the viewer to question, prompting self investigation and empathetic responses. They deliver us from the mundane, forcing us to relive past experiences and allowing us to imagine

new ones. Born and raised in Hama, an agricultural and industrial center north of Damascus, Safwan Dahoul attended the Suheil Al Ahdab Center of Plastic Arts and pursued advanced studies in painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus. In 1987, he received a scholarship to study abroad from the Ministry of Higher Education. With a deep admiration for Netherlandish genre painting, developed while completing an undergraduate dissertation on Flemish Masters, Hieronymus Bosch



'Dream 53', 2011, acrylic on canvas, 200x200cm - Private Collection.

and Pieter Brueghel the Elder, Dahoul relocated to Belgium and in 1997 achieved his Doctorate from the Higher Institute of Plastic Arts in Mons. Dahoul imbues each of his paintings with not only his personal experiences, but also his vast art historical knowledge. From the elaborately maquillaged eyes and cavalier perspective of Pharaonic Egypt, the checkerboard patterning common on Insular metalwork, Cezanne's quick hatching, the elongation of form reminiscent of Parmigianino's Madonna, the quality of line found only in a Toulouse-Lautrec or an Attic white ground vase, to gestural fingers that trace their lineage to Roman oration, it is with this wealth of knowledge and

technical mastery that Dahoul is able to successfully simplify and typify his works. Spanning three decades, the vast oeuvre is diverse in media, technique and compositional variety, yet it is his fidelity to his main subject and motifs which present this expansive career as a cohesive, continuous series.

Dahoul's main subject is uniquely distinctive and iconic in appearance. With a strong brow, heavily shadowed lid and boldly rimmed eye, her attributes are undeniably Pharaonic, though her beginnings are found in more fluid, wistfully azure-soaked portraits. Beautifully rendered with long limbs, delicate curves, soft features and benediction gestures, the blue paintings



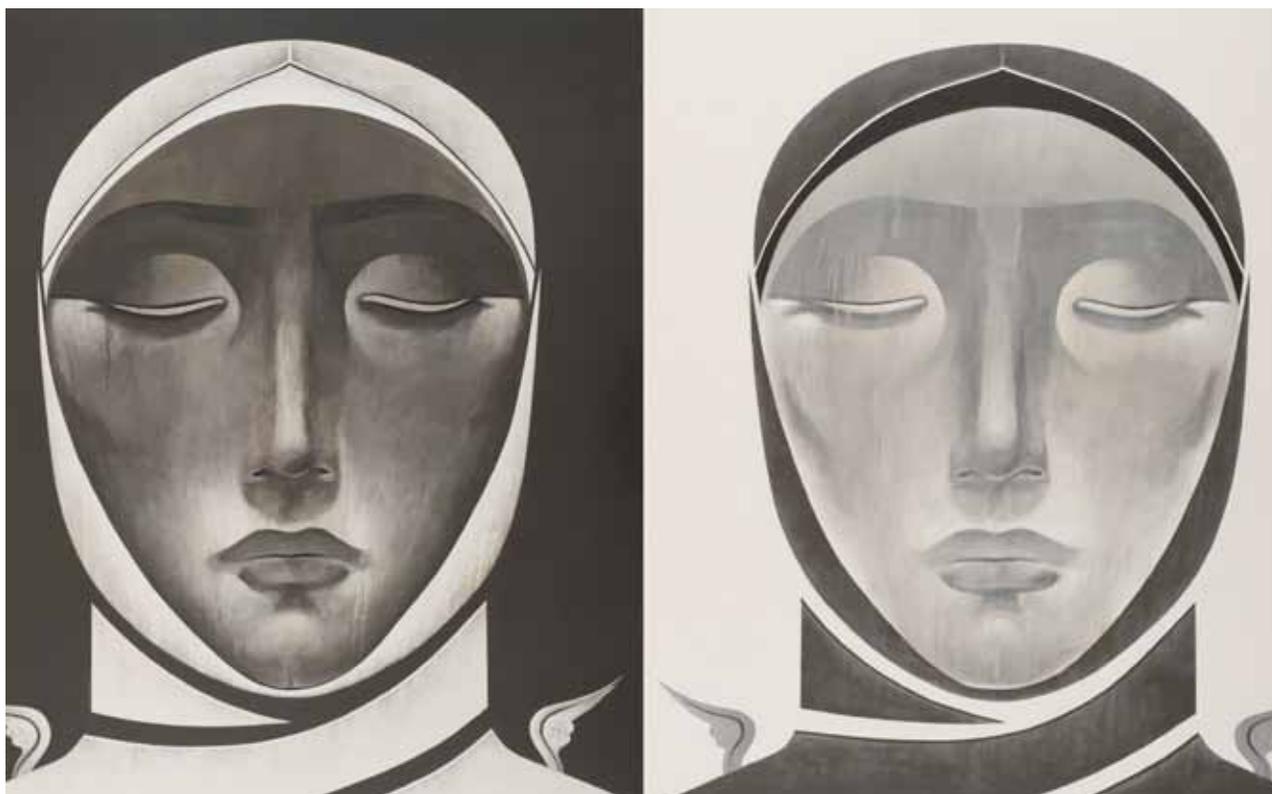
'Dream16', 2009, acrylic on Canvas, 160x250 cm. - Courtesy of The Samawi Collection.

of the 1990s portray his wife, Nawar. Later simplified in both line and color, the portraits in Dahoul's ever evolving 'Dream' series are undoubtedly of the same person as the essence of her elegant curves is retained over time. While the addition of Pharaonic features may frame the subjects in a certain epoch, this period remains for all an exotic dream, a fantastical past world somehow grounded in our collective history, which lends his figures the ability to transcend an immediate moment. With a highly modernized line and vivid graphic quality, Dahoul's portraits have, according to the artist, evolved to represent more than a mere person or gender, but all of humanity, and it is here that his unique depiction rings forth with all its archetypal strength. Decidedly symbolical, the inanimate objects within Safwan Dahoul's paintings provide emotive representations, just as his portraits embody a greater significance than what their form may belie. In his thirty years of painting, the recurrence of the empty chair and table, a deck of playing cards, door frames

and windowsills, and the damier print is paramount. The artist believes in the 'spirituality of things'¹ and though he does not consider 'philosophy and meaning', and merely strives to express himself 'spontaneously and in a visually aesthetic manner', he does acknowledge employing various motifs 'to depict the body, mind and soul as separate elements'.²

The Characteristic Motifs of Safwan Dahoul

Chairs play an integral role in Safwan Dahoul's paintings. A veritable seat of life, they retain a memory of place when empty. He initially explored this theme in 1985 with a cluster of chairs and a small table holding a half drunk bottle and a single empty glass, highlighting that depressing time at the end of the night when a once fully occupied, lively venue dies into a hollow shell of its former self. In 1990, he created a narrative triptych that he revisited in 1999. The story unfolds left to right with the Safwan character and his protagonist seated in a quiet pose of sadness, his arm extended to comfort her.



'Dream 28', 2010, acrylic on Canvas, 202x364cm. - Private Collection of Rami Abboud.

She is then pictured seated alone looking at the viewer, her arms fallen to her thighs, palms upwards with fingers gesturing in a similar manner to those of the saints of Byzantium. The chair that occupied our heroine is turned inwards uninvitingly as this is a path our heroine must travel alone. The final canvas depicts two empty chairs; that which held our heroine now turns its back on the viewer uninvitingly, while Safwan's seat is the only one that remains accessible. Conscious of barriers, Dahoul typically places his figures within interior spaces, confined by the strict lines of the windowsill or doorframe. The juxtaposition of a lowered head and elongated neck line with the angular edges of the surroundings provides a stunning duality of the softness of life with the harshness of reality. As the viewer's perspective changes from interior to exterior, as in an untitled 1993 depiction of our blue heroine dangling a string out an open window, or a 2003 painting of the newly simplified protagonist standing in the rain beneath an umbrella, the human subject remains

contained within the same architectural boundaries. The world that exists beyond the door frame or viewed through the window remains unknown. All that is relevant is this figure, her introspection and life within these walls, and the memories that linger after she has passed on. Even when translucent and spirit-like, the figures' cast shadows are restrained from departing this physical world, giving a weighted presence to the departed.

In the late 1990s, Dahoul explored the empty space outlining shapes, hollowing the eyes in his tightly confined, wooden framed works and later simplifying the features further into the definite form of a mask. An effective vehicle for questioning the self and delineating the body and soul³, the mask has become a staple in his canvases. An early composition of a janiform figure served to illustrate the psyche and preceded his multi-figure compositions that bear distinct visages. Incorporating one masked figure with vacant ovular cavities, one with closed eyes, and our wide-eyed heroine, these paintings



Untitled, 1990, oil on Wood, 40x30cm. (Triptych) - Private Collection.

draft the procession of our heroine's journey from the corporeal to the spiritual world. Three figures stand in a doorway in *Reve* (2007). The Safwan character and Nawar are separated by a masked figure whose hand presses against the frame preventing Nawar's escape. As her mask may be considered a signifier of the spiritual, she is positioned as the inevitable. The double-face was further investigated in 2009 in *Dream 16*. The face is held away, revealing beneath it a stark, colorless mask, as if the subject was devoid of life and character. Drawers act as a repository of life experiences, a trove of memories to sift through, reveal, or conceal. The first open drawer in his oeuvre, completed in 2005, reveals a photograph that replicates the same image ad infinitum. Dahoul is intrigued by repetition and how it can be employed to denote a multitude of emotions. Similar to masks, drawers possess the ability to reveal hidden depths, unlocking secret facets of the psyche. Several masks tucked into an open drawer are depicted in Figure 10. Like the theatrical masks of Comedy and Tragedy, one sad and one happy face are presented alongside a death mask. This tiny drawer thus encompasses the three masks that face each person, culminating in the final mask each is destined to wear. In 2008, Nawar lost a long battle with cancer. The significance of the progression of occupied to vacant chairs, the inclusion of translucence to his figures in 1997, and the ornamental altar-like compositions, haloed icons

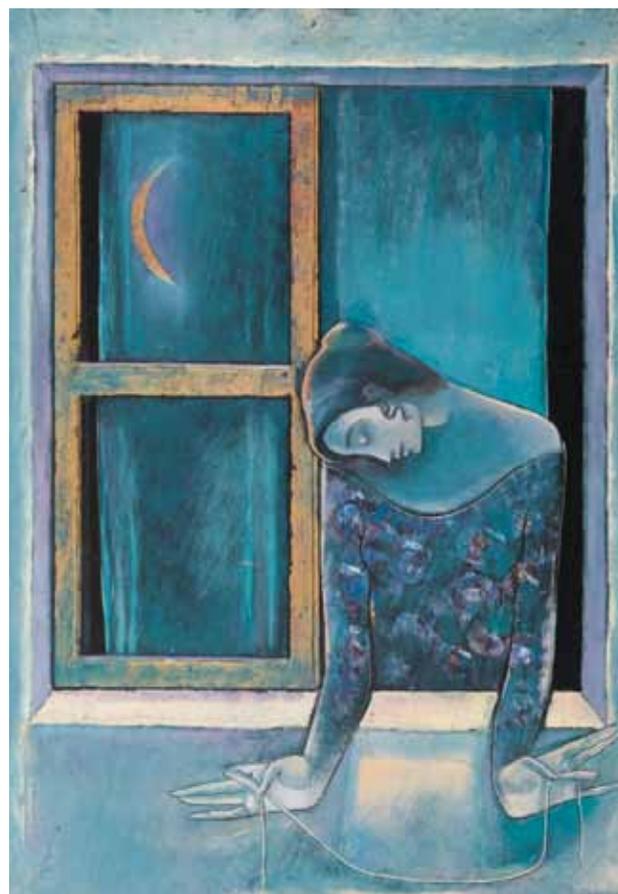
and angel wings in his panel paintings from the 1990s, suggests that the artist was aware of his wife's illness long before she succumbed to the disease. In 2003, Dahoul painted the first of his death mask portraits; a large scale, painstakingly over worked somber depiction of Nawar softly veiled in the Muslim tradition. The most famous of these portraits, *Dream 5*, was created the same year as her death. Exhibited with a bowl of soil set directly below the work, it has been described as one of the most forceful representations of loss and most moving moments in contemporary Middle Eastern art. Continuously revisited, whether as a single portrait or a diptych in which Dahoul includes his own portrait alongside that of his wife's, the death mask composition has evolved into a stylized, idealized portrayal. *Dream 28*, a 2010 diptych with clean lines, angel wings, slim faces and summarized veiling, is less monumental than its predecessors. Dripping paint gives the impression of shedding tears and the white lines of the eyelids render it more affecting. The dichotomy of color, like that of a negative in photography, best illustrates his admiration of the medium and desire to replicate its flatness to reflect a frozen moment from his life.

Playing cards were introduced as a novel motif in a 1995 painting of Nawar seated at a table laying the cards out in a game of Solitaire, and were revisited in 1999 with the addition of the Safwan character. After this date, when playing cards are present, Dahoul's

heroine never directly interacts with the cards, nor is she seated at the table. She is either standing between two tables looking in the opposite direction, curled atop a desk with a drawer containing the sprawled deck, or lying translucently over the grid of cards. A diptych dating 2009 in which the suits jump off the card faces and onto the necks of the Safwan character and Nawar, encircled in her white veil, is the single exception.

Dahoul's paintings incorporating the damier print are executed with an almost mathematical precision. The checkerboard pattern occurs prior to the date it was introduced as a 'motif' on the flooring of a bedroom scene in 1989 and as the carrelage of a basilica in 2000. In 2006, Dahoul peeled the pattern from the floor and repositioned it as the fabric of an oversized armchair. He then utilized this graphic pattern on the socks of his figure curled atop a desk with an open drawer, and as the surface of his paintings in 2008. First featured in muted sepia hues, a monochrome palette heightens the graphic sense of these paintings. When a figure is placed on an oversized armchair or sofa, her form is contorted to fit within the parameters of the furniture. This contortion relates these works to the claustrophobic compositions of a figure lying on a table or enclosed within a door frame. Dahoul's 2011 damier canvases stand out amongst his others due to their addition of heavy shading, the numerical filling of boxes, the application of the damier print directly onto the face of the figure without translucence, and the positioning of two facing armchairs interring a figure. Whether on socks, armchairs, sofas, or translucently covering the entire surface, these works provide an explanation of Dahoul's others. In his own words, the checkerboard pattern "symbolizes time".⁴

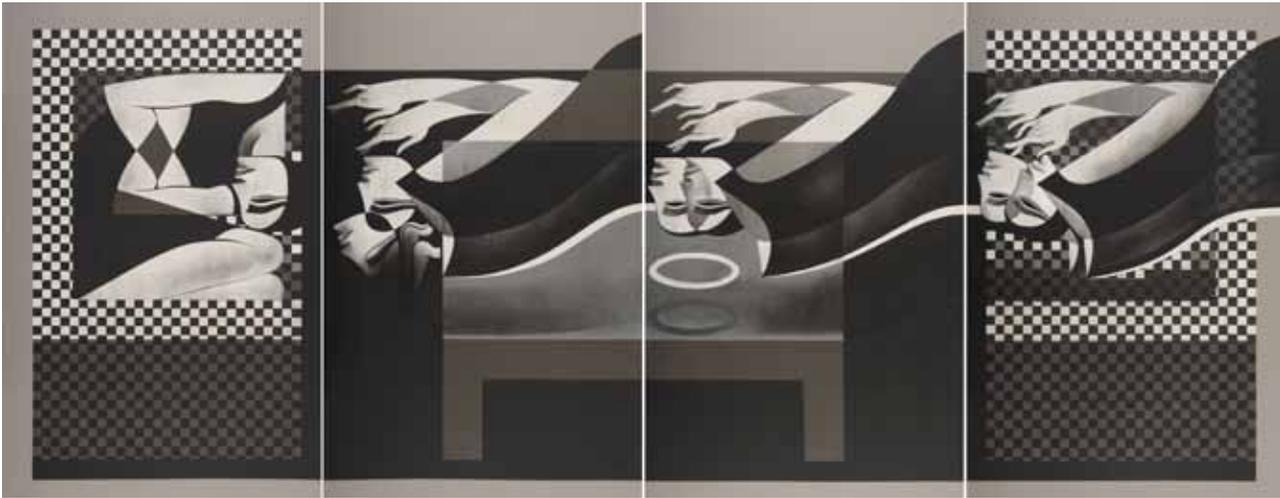
Strikingly powerful narratives are created with the inclusion of multiple motifs in a single composition. First created in 2002 with the arrangement of the table and two empty chairs and a figure lying on a sofa, the perspectives are slightly altered in these compositions. Though a sense of cavalier perspective is retained, these multi-motif, single canvas paintings are often viewed in ladder perspective, that which produces a flat, stacked composition where by objects in the back of a painting are drawn above those in the front without receding. The paintings comprising two, three and four



Untitled, 1993, oil on canvas, 80x57cm. - Courtesy of The Samawi Collection.

canvases, some reaching almost six meters in length, tell a more complex story. Dream 40 presents a four canvas composition balanced on either end by inward facing damier print armchairs, one containing a curled masked figure and centered by a low table, while overhead three sets of masked figures hover translucently across the scene. As they draw near to the masked figure on the chair, each pair gains in attributes. The farthest have none, the middle couple share a halo, and in the closest pair, one has angel wings and the other's eyes are closed. Though translucent, these apparitions cast shadows upon the table, once again giving the intangible a weighted presence.

To achieve a succinctness in his paintings, Dahoul turned to a monochromatic palette and simplification of line in 2001. Though he has always worked in roughly three colors no matter the palette, the exclusive application



Dream 40, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 250x640cm - Courtesy of The Samawi Collection.

of black and white affords his paintings a clarity of depiction. In order to maintain the spatial relations of overlapping figures and objects, this contrasting palette is alternated and gradated. As early as 2003, examples abound of abrupt value changes and their resulting shapes. This interplay of jagged angles and soft curves accentuated by gradations of color, whether found in his characteristic figure or in the juxtaposition of a table edge and the arc of a chair back, is also a distinctive element of Dahoul's hard-edged paintings.

An External Focus in Internal Paintings

In 2011, following the revolts of the Arab Spring across the region, Dahoul's homeland faced new upheavals and turmoils. The Syrian Uprising began as a campaign of peaceful public demonstrations and has since developed into a nationwide civil war. When questioned about his creation Dahoul has stated, "When an artist is affected by what is happening around him, he can produce new works that are always changing, just like he is during times of crisis. An artist is part of his surrounding environment. He cannot but participate and be active in this domain."⁵ The resulting paintings present several clear shifts in Dahoul's symbology.

First, Dahoul removes his usual participant from the scene in *Dream 44*. Subtly referencing the turbulent external world, a disorderly array of playing cards have fallen from the table and scattered onto the floor. No figure is present and they lay discarded, implying that this game is no longer in play. In those works where his

protagonist remains, she is fully present and aware of the atrocities occurring around her. No longer sheltered inside without contact to the outside world, she stands watchfully over the skyline of Damascus or reaches through her window for a cloud. Once dreamlike, the clouds have returned to harken to those lost days when dreaming was something Dahoul considered romantic. But for the artist, the reality is so harsh that he is unable to ignore it even while dreaming⁶, and his angel now witnesses the world with expressions of sadness and desperation, and an overwhelming sense of fear permeates.

Dahoul also expanded his repertoire of symbols to include the yin-yang and wings of Hermes. Featured around her eyes, whether as the iris itself or an extension of the rim, both symbols emphasize the conscious and engaged participation of his subject. Hermes was an Olympian god in the pantheon of Greek mythology. The name Hermes is derived from the Greek *herma*, or boundary, which positions him as the god of boundaries and travelers, and *hermeneus*, or the interpreter, reflecting his function as a divine messenger. Literary references such as Homer's *Iliad* call Hermes a 'guide and guardian'⁷ and his hymns have stated that he was 'a bringer of dreams, a watcher by night'.⁸ Aesop further elaborated by naming him the 'ruler of the gate of prophetic dreams'.⁹ His epithets such as *pylaios*¹⁰, *doorkeeper*, and *stropheus*¹¹, protector of the door that is the boundary, are fitting titles for Safwan

Dahoul's chief character who, when masked, serves as a conductor of souls, signifies traversing the boundaries of life and the afterlife and, at times, reappears solely as a memory or dream. Yin-yang literally means 'shadow and light' and describes dependent opposing forces that flow in a natural cycle, continuously seeking balance. Though they are opposing, they are not in opposition. As complementary forces, they are two aspects of a single reality. Similarly, in Dahoul's canvases where there is light, shadow follows and the two combine to create new forms. Dream 53 (Figure 8) depicts a translucent masked figure standing at an open window reaching to touch a cloud with her fingertips. Her iris is a yin-yang symbol indicating that she views the world objectively, recognizing its cyclical nature and the necessary ebbs and flows of its struggle to remain in a constant state of equilibrium. Just as day turns to night and life naturally results in death, there rests the assurance that the present turmoil facing Syria will eventually subside.

Maintaining an awareness of her surroundings, our heroine imparts to the viewer an internalized sense of pain as her iris reflects a crouched, downtrodden figure. While preserving his trademark subject, Dahoul injects new life and interpretations into his canvases of 2012 with his technique. With a crinkled appearance to the canvas surface, like that of a discarded letter or photograph that is picked up and unraveled, revealing its secrets to another, Dahoul elaborates on the dissolution of memory and expresses a desire to let go. Even if only through the application of paint, the crumpling of his canvases is a cathartic way to release himself from the past. Safwan Dahoul, one of the most sought after arab artist, has recently entered a new chapter in his life. He has relocated his family from the prolonged turbulences facing his country to the United Arab Emirates. As his canvases reflect individual memories, dreams and transitions he has experienced throughout his life, there is no doubt that this next chapter will rouse and influence ensuing entries into this visual memoir. What journeys Dahoul's heroine may face, and whether his canvases will be infiltrated with different motifs from his new environment, will be eagerly anticipated in the continuation of his 'Dream' series.

Safwan Dahoul is represented by Ayyam Gallery. For further information, please visit: www.ayyamgallery.com

Endnotes

1. The Canvas Supplement (p. 25, lines 93-94) http://prod-images.exhibite.com/www_ayyamgallery_com/0f8abf4a.pdf.
2. Gulf News. Jyoti Kalsi. Interview with the Artist. Canvas of Liberation. 11.11.11.
3. The Canvas Supplement (p. 25, lines 45-46) http://prod-images.exhibite.com/www_ayyamgallery_com/0f8abf4a.pdf.
4. Al Mahha: An Infinite Art Circle. Safwan Dahoul: Technique Speaks Out Emotions! Interview with the Artist. 16.11.11.
5. FW: Culture & Art March 2008. K Shukr. Safwan Dahoul: "Narcissism is a must for a successful artist." http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www_ayyamgallery_com/ad6611d4.
6. Gulf News. Jyoti Kalsi. Interview with the Artist. Canvas of Liberation. 11.11.11.
7. Homer. The Iliad. The Project Gutenberg Etext. Trad. Samuel Butler.
8. Homeric Hymn to Hermes. (II. line 9)
9. Aesop. Fable 563 Hermes, the Sculptor and His Dream
10. R Pettazzoni. The All Knowing God. (page 165) Taylor & Francis, 1956. ISBN 0405105592.
11. Ibid.

About the writer

Lee Ann Biddle attended the University of Miami and received her BA in Art History with a double minor in Sociology and Legal Studies. In 2008, she completed her MLitt in the Early European History of Art and Connoisseurship at Christie's Education, London with the dissertation, 'Two Outsiders' Understood From Within, A Study into the Janiform in Classical Greek Art with Observations of Plastic Vases, Jewellery, and Bronzes'. She has since worked in various London commercial art galleries promoting the talents of emerging conceptual artists and, in 2011, relocated to Dubai to work with a private art foundation and collection and has written 'Chants From Paradise, A Selection of Safavid Carpets from The Farjam Collection', and acted as a contributing writer and copy editor to 'Jazz From Paradise, Miri Creation Contemporary Carpet Masterpieces from The Farjam Collection', as well as the exhibition catalogue, 'The Samawi Collection II'. She presently works and resides in the United Arab Emirates.



'Dream 27', 2010, acrylic on canvas, 200x400cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

