

Living in The Space Between. A conversation with Athier

By Alaa Al-Shroogi



The Circle I, 2011, Acrylic on canvas, 200x430cm - Courtesy of the artist and Cuadro Gallery.

Alaa Al-Shroogi: No profile on you would be complete without a dialogue. You are an eloquent raconteur, both verbally and visually. Which came first, the artist or the storyteller?

Athier: For me, these two have always been completely intertwined. My mother, artist Maysaloun Faraj, always encouraged me to explore every thought with narratives, and never take any concept at face value. My earliest memory of drawing is from Baghdad in 1987. I stepped out of the airport taxi and couldn't understand what this place was with stars carpeting the sky and palm trees everywhere. My mother gave me a sketchbook at that point, which I remember as being half lined and half blank. This made the process of writing and drawing inseparable in my mind.

AS: Your style is instantly recognizable and viewers, when interacting with your work, often begin with scale, then shift to colors or shapes, then finally move to narratives. Does this macro to micro progression mirror your process?

Athier: Absolutely. I had always been an illustrator, exploring ideas in small, intimate drawings with meticulous care over tiny details. My early paintings in 2010 were a complete departure from this. I began these in Paris. The "spiritual home of modernism" offered me ways of using scale and color that I hadn't thought possible, with integrity to form whilst maintaining narrative. Proximity to the works of Delaunay, Kandinsky, Leger and Picasso allowed me to understand the limits of abstraction, and how these limits could

be pushed or retained. With each work, new layers of different scale, paint texture and style were introduced, each bringing with it a new way of challenging viewer interaction. To me, they feel like large tapestries of different ways of working, which mélange together cohesively. The “windows” offer a glimpse into a more intimate side of my visual narratives. Iraqi mothers, the two rivers, book sellers, dead fish, skewered heads, idealized cityscapes, terrified civilians and terrified soldiers all creep into the works in an uncontrived way through these pockets from my subconscious collection of imagery taken from books, footage, and idealized fragments of memory.

AS: The use of sketches in your process is intriguing, sometimes they precede the work on canvas and sometimes they follow it, as though your thoughts on the subject needed to continue their evolution.

Athier: Sketches are part of the process of obsession. Like any long journey, you stock up on supplies before you begin, so when you tire there is enough momentum to continue. Obsession is the momentum in my work and this is always borne out of sketches and writings. The drawings that come after a painting are a matter of refinement and less about visual thinking. In this case I know what the punch line is, and I tell it through a drawing in a much more concise way.

AS: Segments that are executed in a primitive/tribal style are executed rapidly with a dry brush, almost in a stream of consciousness. Is this the case or are they also meticulously planned?

Athier: Working within the limits of your medium is an important thing to understand. Acrylic is used in these windows in a way where there is literally not enough time to think. When I begin these elements, I am surrounded by old books, such as N. Ramzi, Iraq (1987), the geometry books of Ayse Parman and Issam El-Said, as well as magazines and news articles. In a process, I keep absorbing and when ready I release. The making of these unplanned sections is the most exciting part for me, and I always stand back for a while to work out what the figures are trying to do. As soon as they are on canvas, they have life, defined by the borders I give them. They are no longer part of me.



Wow Meem Noon, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 200x240cm - Courtesy of the artist and Cuadro Gallery.

AS: And when do you opt for mark making versus figurative representations?

Athier: The two are never mutually exclusive. Mark making is an anatomical extension of me. The faces and the body proportions in the works are all mine. The marks, however abstracted, are figurative in the sense that I have curved and moved around the canvas to create them.

AS: You constantly challenge your visual vernacular by introducing new elements - Arabic text, Islamic patterns, negative space, and most recently and most surprising to me, working solely in monochrome. What drives these stylistic shifts?

Athier: “The Birth and Destruction of An Eagle” is the cathartic amalgamation of a subject for which I’ve been producing work over the past two years. The screen prints go through four to five processes of drawing, then blowing up, changing scale at each stage, bringing new intimacies and marks to the work. Although for the “Birth” series, I produced paintings in conjunction with the prints, I felt like the exploration of these themes didn’t need color.



Our Wounded King, 2011, Acrylic on canvas, 257x200cm - Courtesy of the artist and Cuadro Gallery.

AS: You create your own mythologies, some building on established symbols, while others are entirely of your own creation. When does an image enter into your visual vocabulary and when, if ever, is it retired?

Athier: The way we choose to absorb information is interesting. You can be in the midst of a three-hour discussion, and overhear in the background a fraction of sentence that can change your life. An Iraqi friend once told me that after a night of heavy bombing, he would see exploded limbs on the street of his neighborhood. However gruesome this scene was, he said it was always softened by the fact that the feet were wearing socks. This stuck in my mind; security and warmth, completely contrasted with brutality. Step by step, you build up

your visual vocabulary with new elements until every sentence has a number of these parts juxtaposed on each other. The skewered head of Hussain (as a symbol of the Shiites) and the Eagle of Saladin are two symbols I have used for a number of years which have fused in recent works, where the skewered head has become the eagle. These elements can only happen naturally and over time.

AS: You frequently depict Iraq through stylized architecture or references to Babylonian legends. These images bear so little resemblance to the reality we are inundated with through the media, that you starkly remind us of the atrocity of now by evoking past glories.



Together We Fall, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 167x230 cm - Courtesy of the artist and Cuadro Gallery.

As an artist living in exile, are these depictions an attempt to fabricate memories of a place you never knew, or efforts to reconstruct an ideal of Iraq's illustrious past?

Athier: A memory is like a seed. You nurture it not with the event when it was created, but the way in which you choose to make it grow. My memories of Baghdad are few and far between, but to make this memory grow into something tangible, a tree with real fruit that I can touch and taste, I have watered it with stories, old sepia-toned photographs, artifacts from the Babylonian sections of the Louvre and The British Museum, emails, news articles, chats with relatives, and a love of what I wish it was. Living outside of the land, which defines you and the color of your blood, is living in the space

between: bordered by an idealized past and the idealized future.

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