

Khaled Al-Saa'i
Memory of a City

30 January – 14 April 2015
Private View 29 January, 2015, 6-9pm



Memory of a City I, 2014, mixed media and collage on paper, 35 x 50 cm

For Syrian artist Khaled Al-Saa'i, Arabic calligraphy is a medium for expressing feelings, thoughts, and sensations without becoming tied to the language. It is this approach that has led to his iconic, expressive works, in which calligraphic forms and letters come together to create entire landscapes, rolling, moving vistas of colour and emotion. In *Memory of a City* (30 January – 14 April 2015) he reflects on the recent events that have ravaged his homeland, presenting a new direction in his work with the inclusion of collage. Images of protestors from Syria and events from the Arab Spring are embedded within his intricate letter shapes, sweeping flourishes of script, a poignant reminder of the tragic events steadily destroying his native land.

Al-Saa'i's newest work sees a sharp new trajectory in the form and content of his practice, with the inclusion of mixed media collage and layering, alongside non-Arabic script, such as Chinese characters and English letters. He has also forayed into the world of calligraffiti, a combination of calligraphy with graffiti that has been gaining attention recently within the Middle East as a fresh, new way to work with traditional forms. Al-Saa'i layers cut outs from newspapers and magazines beneath complex swathes of calligraphy, seemingly innocuous media clippings until closer inspection reveals many of them to be people. They are, in fact, crowds of protestors, reflecting the dissent and revolution that has been sweeping across the Middle East, and, most poignantly of all, tearing apart the artist's native country. For Al-Saa'i, *Memory of a City* encompasses all cities in Syria, but most predominantly that of its capital, Damascus, where he spent his formative years. These protestors become letters in themselves, a united voice crying out for dignity and freedom, as well as the ultimate destiny of Syria, which hangs in the balance.

Born in Homs, Syria in 1970, Al-Saa'i grew up in a household surrounded by painting, music and calligraphy. By the age of 18 he had already established a reputation as a calligrapher, going on to graduate from the University of Damascus in 1998 with his MA in Fine Art. Today, he is an internationally recognised master of Arabic calligraphy, and he works in an astonishing range of styles, from decorous classical modes (which he often uses for quotations from poetry) to radically inventive compositions, in which lettering is fragmented into fantastical, almost pictorial compositions. It is this breath-taking beauty of his work that makes it so immediately accessible to all.

Al-Saa'i deals with Arabic letter shapes, and their symbolic, religious and musical origins. It is this variety of meaning, as well as the formal possibilities of the various writing styles, that influence the artist's creative processes. On his numerous trips through Arab countries, Europe, and the United States, he has been inspired by cities and the countryside, by landscapes and architecture, by the bustle of people in the street, by the changing of the seasons, and the myriad atmospheric occurrences that take place within both the urban and the national environment. It is these that inspire him to realise his impressions in calligraphic creations, in each case choosing a writing style that provides the best sensorial and emotional fit to his impressions. Letters and words are not arranged on a straight or horizontal line but rather written densely or detached, superimposed or one below the other, interlaced or labyrinthine in the imaginary space of the canvas. Letters interwoven in this way follow their own peculiar rhythm. Highly individualistic landscapes emerge as well as pictures that depict personal feelings and sensations.

Al-Saa'i's work has always been less about the specific phrases he embeds in his work than the visual atmosphere. Here, his skilful melding of media unites these tiny voices in protest, raised and uplifted by the sweeping arcs of his own painterly mastery. *Memory of a City* harkens to the memory of city walls, of the memory of its streets, people and places. It brings together both good and bad memories, blending them all together like a tornado, spinning ever faster until they are melded into one new vision – that of a city that never dies, but rather, is dormant until one day it can rise again.

Notes to Editors:

Khaled Al-Saa'i

Born in Homs, Syria in 1970, Khaled Al-Saa'i received his BA in Fine Arts (Painting) and MA from the University of Damascus in 1995 and 1997 respectively. Receiving his Certificate in Calligraphy from IRCICA, the research centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture in Istanbul in 1998, Al-Saa'i quickly established a name for himself as a master calligrapher and painter within the Middle Eastern art scene. Significant exhibitions include *Caligrafía Pictórica*, Morelia, State of Michoacán, Mexico (2011), Dar Al-Fenoon, Kuwait (2007), Cultural Foundation, Abu Dhabi (2006), Pellouailles-les-Vignes Mantes, France and the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris (2001), among others. He has been the recipient of numerous international calligraphy awards, and his works can be found in the collections of the British Museum, UK; San Pedro Museum of Arts, Mexico; Denver Museum of Arts, Colorado, USA and the Museum of Calligraphy, Sharjah, UAE. Al-Saa'i is currently based in Sharjah, where he lives and works.

Kashya Hildebrand

Founded in 2001, the gallery's artists challenge pre-conceived notions of nationality and cultural identity, creating an environment in which established norms become blurred and characterisations from seemingly contrasting cultures occupy the same visual space. This juxtaposition leads to a simultaneous renunciation and acceptance of the traditional and the contemporary, creating an environment that is in constant flux. Religion, politics, nationality and culture are treated as the foundation of identity, depicted and disseminated to varying degrees. Through painting, collage, sculpture, photography and installation work the artists convey the contestations of the contemporary political landscape.

MORE INFORMATION

Exhibition: *Memory of a City*

Artist: Khaled Al Saai

Location: Kashya Hildebrand, 22 Eastcastle Street, W1W 8DE, London, UK

Telephone: +44 (0)20 3588 1195

Dates: 30 January – 14 April 2015

Private Preview: Private View 29 January, 2015, 6 – 9pm

Hours: Monday – Friday 11am – 6pm, Saturday 12 – 6pm

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