



KHALED AL-SAA'I

KASHYA HILDEBRAND

MEMORY OF A CITY | 30 JANUARY - 14 APRIL, 2015

COVER IMAGE

Inner Journey (detail), 2014 | mixed media on paper | 50 x 70 cm

KHALED AL-SAA'I

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* 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 become 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.



Memory of a City 2, 2014 | mixed media and collage on paper | 35 x 50 cm



Elevated Spring, 2014 | collage and mixed media on canvas | 220 x 100 cm



A Little Bit of Heaven, 2014 | mixed media on canvas | 220 x 100 cm



Joy and the City, 2014 | collage and mixed media on canvas | 120 x 100 cm



Ecstasy of the City, 2015 | collage and mixed media on canvas | 120 x 100 cm



Inner Journey, 2014 | mixed media on paper | 50 x 70 cm



Untitled 8, 2014
collage and mixed media on paper | 70 x 50 cm



Untitled 9, 2014
collage and mixed media on paper | 70 x 50 cm



City from Heaven, 2014
collage, ink and acrylic on paper | 45 x 70 cm



Remains of the City I, 2014 | collage and ink on paper | 40 x 64 cm



Mayadeen, 2014 | collage, ink and acrylic on paper | 70 x 50 cm



Untitled 1, 2014 | collage and mixed media on paper | 35 x 50 cm



Something Deserves to Live for a Poem by Palestinian Poet Mahmoud Darwish, 2014 | mixed media on canvas | 120 x 80 cm



HappyTalk, 2014 | mixed media on canvas | 90 x 75 cm

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Homs, Syria in 1970
Works and lives in Dubai, UAE

EDUCATION

- 1998 Certificate in Calligraphy from IRCICA, the research centre for Islamic History Arts and Culture, Istanbul, Turkey
- 1997 MA in Fine Arts (honorary degree), University of Damascus, Syria
- 1995 BA in Fine Arts, Painting, University of Damascus, Syria



SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2015 *Memory of a City*, Kashya Hildebrand, London, UK
- 2011 *Caligrafía Pictórica*, Morelia, State of Michoacán, Mexico
Wellesley College, Boston, USA
National Museum of Water Color "Alfredo Guati Rojo", Mexico
- 2007 Dar Al Fenoan, Kuwait
Majlis Gallery, Dubai, UAE
- 2006 Cultural Foundation, Abu Dhabi, UAE
- 2005 Pellouailles-les-Vignes Mantes, France
Poems in Calligraphy, Majlis Gallery, Dubai, UAE
- 2004 Green Art Gallery, Dubai, UAE
- 2001 Institut du Monde Arab, Paris, France
- 1999 IFEAD, Damascus, Syria
- 1996 Spanish Institute, Damascus, Syria

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

- British Museum, London, UK
San Pedro Museum of Arts, Mexico
Denver Museum of Arts, Colorado, USA
Museum of Calligraphy, Sharjah, UAE

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *International Gathering of the Art of Calligraphy*,
Dolmabahce Art Gallery, Istanbul, Turkey
- 2013 *Rencontres d'Art, Afrique Moyen Orient*, Ancienne
Église du Sacré, Casablanca, Morocco
- 2011 *Art of Writing*, Wiesbaden, Germany
- 2010 *Freedom and Innovation*, Casa Arabe, Madrid, Spain
- 2009 *Signs: Contemporary Arab Art. Seven renowned
artists from the Middle East*, Sundaram
Tagore Gallery, New York, USA
- 2008 *Beyond Words: Contemporary Calligraphy from the
Middle East*, curated by Karin Adrian von Roques,
Galerie Kashya Hildebrand, Zurich, Switzerland
- 2007 *Espejesmo?*, Arab Art, San Pedro Museum of Art,
Mexico
Audio Visual Art Exhibition, Sharjah Museum of Art, UAE
San Pedro Museum of Art, Mexico
Al Bareh Art Gallery, Bahrain
- 2005 Institute de Monde Arab, Paris, France
Languages of Desert, Bonn Museum of Art, Germany
The Art of the Written Word in the Middle East, U of
M Museum of Art
- 2003 Visual and Audible 6th session, Sharjah, UAE
Salter International house, Wallesley College, Boston
- 2002 Sharjah Museum of Art, UAE
- 2001 *Art and Sufism*, exhibition organized by the
Cervantes Institute (2001-2004):
National Museum of Damascus, Syria; Royal Museum
of Amman, Jordan; Bilad Al Sham Gallery Aleppo,
Syria; Unesco Palace Beirut, Lebanon; Granada, Seville
Spain
- 1997 Collective Exhibition of Syrian artist organized by the
Ministry of Culture, National Museum of Art,
Damascus, Syria
Biennial Almahaba Arts Festival Latakia, Syria
- 1991 Collective Exhibition of Syrian artists organized by the
Ministry of Culture, National Museum of Syria
- 1987 Al Mayadin City Hall, Syria
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