

# Abdelke's arrest galvanizes artists

By India Stoughton  
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BEIRUT: Last week's arrest of one of Syria's best-known artists, 62-year-old draftsman and painter Youssef Abdelke, has sparked outrage across the region, causing artists and intellectuals to campaign for the release of the anti-regime icon, who has been making waves with his outspoken opinions and politically sensitive artwork for decades. Abdelke was arrested on July 18 at a checkpoint in Tartous and his location remains unknown. In the week since his arrest more than 1,100 people have signed an online petition calling for his release.

"We, Arab and international artists and intellectuals, call upon the Syrian authorities to free the internationally renowned Syrian artist Youssef Abdelke immediately," reads the statement. "Our eyes remain open watching your attempts to suppress creative souls, until the day comes when you realize that art and creativity is enlightenment."

Along with Adnan al-Dibs and Toufiq Imran – both members of the National Coordination Assembly for Democratic Change, a group calling for political transition – Abdelke was arrested by security sources after having signed a declaration calling for the departure of President Bashar Assad.

Abdelke refused to leave the country or go into hiding after the war erupted, his wife Hala Abdallah told Reuters from France, saying that "if someone sees a fire in his house he will try to extinguish it, not run away."

Since the start of the uprising against the Syrian regime in March 2011 Abdelke, who has actively campaigned for the release of political prisoners in the past, had begun to tackle new subject matter in his artwork, in response to the escalating violence in his homeland.

After 15 years of drawing only still life, producing enormous, painstakingly detailed charcoal pieces, the artist began to incorporate human figures into his work. A 2011 drawing entitled “A Martyr from Daraa” showed a young man in a white shirt and black trousers lying in the street, eyes staring blankly in death, a line of dark blood running from the circular hole in his forehead.

Another drawing showed a dead songbird lying on its back on a table, a lethal-looking carving knife plunged into the wood behind it. Subsequent drawings began employing color. One piece captures a young girl draped over the body of her father, as though trying to shake him awake. Splotches of red paint decorate the canvas over and around the girl’s body, the viscous liquid running down from each point of impact like blood.

In March 2012, a year after the uprising began, the artist told The Daily Star that he wanted his work to show the world “that we stand with our people against violence, against dictatorship, against the regime and for a different future for our country – a future of freedom, democracy and human rights, where the people are in control of their own lives and their own future.”

During the rule of Hafez Assad, Abdelke had spent two years as a political prisoner (1978-80), after which he migrated to France for 24 years. He never sought citizenship, however, and returned to Damascus in 2005.

“I think that the arrest is related to Youssef and what he represents, rather than a particular act or activity he carried out,” says Syrian photographer Jaber Alazmeh, who photographed Abdelke as part of a 2012 series of black-and-white portraits entitled “A Small Group of Syrians.”

“The regime wants to give the Syrian people and the world two options: It’s either Assad or extremists. People like Youssef are symbols of a third option – they are a symbol of the country’s salvation. They are examples for the success of the revolution and freedom.”

The Dubai-based Alazmeh describes his first meeting with Abdelke, when the famous artist asked him “What are you doing?” – an innocuous question that sent him reeling.

He had abandoned art in favor of ad photography at the time, Alazmeh explains, “and it was difficult to explain why. Now, today, it’s even more difficult to explain why we, the younger generation, speak from far away while he is there, thrown in a dungeon.”

Whether or not Abdelke’s arrest was linked to his artwork, it has galvanized, and frightened, other artists in the region.

“I think Youssef was arrested more because of his words and his political views than for his art,” says Ayyam Gallery founder Khaled Samawi, who used to work with the artist.

“In general the security apparatus of the regime does not have the culture or the sophistication to even begin to understand or interpret the visual arts coming out of Syria. Syrian artists will continue to produce and experiment with the same body of work they were working on before Youssef’s arrest, probably with a bit more bite and definitely under more fear.”

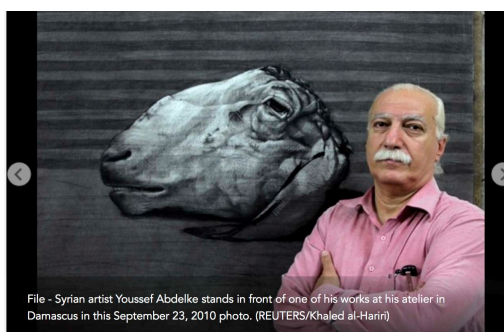
Fadi Yazigi, a well-known Syrian painter and sculptor and close friend of Abdelke’s disagrees. “I think other Syrian artists will be worried,” he says. Samawi “lives out of Syria and he is safe, he and his artists who work politically. ... It’s different when you’re staying in Damascus and the bombs are falling around you. ... If you’re living in Syria the risks and the real sensitivities will be clearer.”

Alazmeh believes that the risks remain the same. “I don’t think the arrest of Youssef will have a big effect on Syrian artists and their production,” he says, “simply because most of the artists have left and are working from other countries. Those [who] remained have to either express their support

for the revolution in indirect way or leave their homes and try to hide somewhere where the Syrian mukhabarat can't find them.”

Alazmeh argues that Abdelke's arrest should not overshadow the thousands of political prisoners that rights groups estimate are languishing in Syria's jails – but instead call attention to the scale of the problem.

“Demanding the release of Youssef Abdelke should not take more importance than the demand to free any other detainee,” he says. “This would be the point of view of Youssef himself ... but the arrest takes [on] an additionally painful aspect because it is the arrest of a symbol of true patriotism, citizenship, freedom and culture. It is the arrest of a form of defiance that the regime wants to get rid of.”



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