

Celebrating the beauty of classical masterpieces by Syrian artists

Atassi Foundation presents six unique pieces produced by five well-known Syrian artists

By Jyoti Kalsi, Special to Weekend Review Published: November 29, 2018 10:12



Kevork Mourad with his installation Time Immortal, acrylic on muslin fabric Image Credit:

The Atassi Foundation's latest exhibition in Dubai is titled, In the Age of the New Media. So visitors might be surprised to find that the show features paintings and a sculpture by well-known Syrian artists Elias Zayat, Ziad Dalloul, Youssef Abdelke, Layla Muraywid and Kevork Mourad. In our digital age, when artists are experimenting with various new media, this

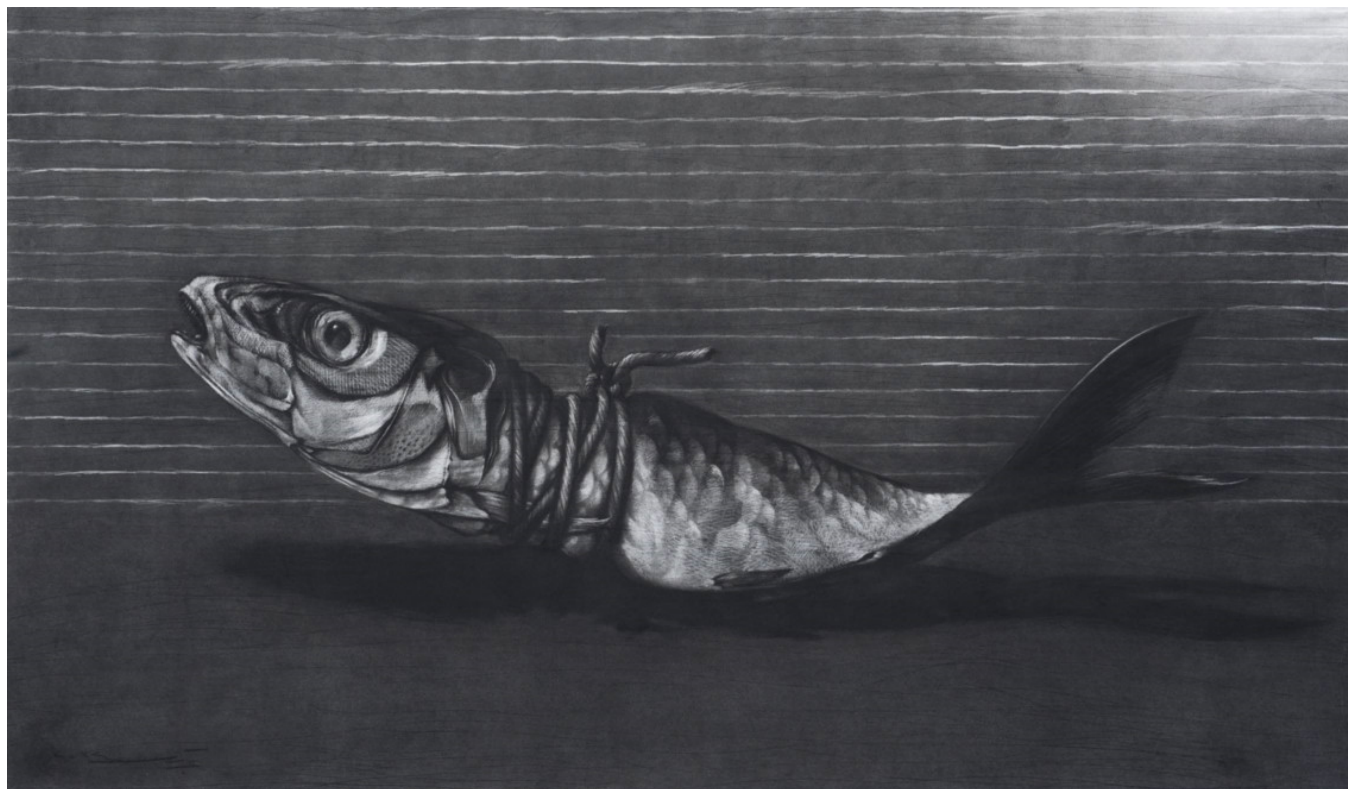
show celebrates the traditional art of painting and the power and beauty of classical masterpieces that are timeless.

Shireen Atassi, the foundation's director says, "We have put a lot of thought into selecting the artworks for this show because our aim is to stress the importance and value of a painting, both in its historic, classical sense as well as its contemporary dimension. With their artistic strength and significance, and their spiritual and human depth, these works are not limited to their art historical periods, but rather become timeless for their ability to communicate with the human conscience. These masterpieces represent Syrian art and its Syrian-ness, yet they have universal resonance."

The Atassi Foundation was established in 2015 by Sadek and Mouna Atassi. It is a not-for-profit initiative dedicated to the promotion and support of Syria's creative legacy and emerging talent in arts and culture. Building on the Atassi Gallery's three decades of experience of working with established and emerging artists in Damascus, the Foundation holds a unique collection of Syrian art — ranging from early 20th century modern art to present day contemporary works. It collaborates with museums and art organisations across the globe to promote wider awareness, understanding and research of Syrian art through exhibitions, seminars, publications, and grants to Syrian artists, art critics and historians.

Atassi Foundation hopes to create a sustainable and informative platform for Syrian artistic expression and knowledge

Youssef Abdelke, Fish, charcoal on paper



This show is their second collaboration with Alserkal Avenue. It is curated by Mouna Atassi and features four works from the foundation's own collection as well as two works loaned by the artists. The five powerful and profound paintings on display include acrylic, oil and charcoal works on canvas, muslin and paper illustrating how different artists use the traditional medium of painting in distinct ways.

Syrian master Zayat's monumental acrylic painting, *The Deluge – The Gods Abandon Palmyra* was painted in 2012 at the beginning of the Syrian conflict and continues to be relevant in the context of contemporary events. The work is based on the story of the flood as told in Mesopotamian legends such as the Epic of Gilgamesh and later in the Old Testament and the Quran through the story of Noah. The artist's retelling of this ancient tale is set in the city of Palmyra and alludes to the history of the region. His colourful, chaotic composition, stretching across five panels is filled with figures of deities from Mesopotamian and early Arabian cultures, including Baalchmin, the Palmyrian deity of fertility, rain and storm.

“The essence and significance of this story is that the deluge was inevitable

and necessary so that the universe could be reorganised and honourably rebuilt after it was flooded with evil and darkened by injustice and dishonesty. It is important to understand that every deluge is followed by a new birth,” Zayat says.

Mourad’s work, *Time Immortal*, is also inspired by the history of his country. The New York based artist, whose work is being exhibited in Dubai for the first time, has used acrylic on white muslin fabric to paint historic structures and scenes that represent the long and complex cultural history of Syria since Mesopotamian times. The structures include churches, synagogues, the Tower of Babel, The Hanging Gardens of Babylon and ancient Roman pillars. The artist has cut out the paintings and arranged them into three layers to create an impressive installation that represents the multiple layers of history and the many faiths and cultures that have mingled for centuries in the region and shaped the Syrian identity.

With their artistic strength and significance, and their spiritual and human depth, these works are not limited to their art historical periods, but rather become timeless for their ability to communicate with the human conscience.

- Shireen Atassi

“A place has as many histories as there are voices to tell it and I am always interested in the history of a place because to discover the many layers that make up a society it is necessary to travel into its past. Syria has been a melting pot of various cultures and religions since the Mesopotamian civilisation and through this piece I want to explore the complexity of living with such diversity and the challenge of maintaining one’s cultural identity in a multicultural environment,” Mourad says.

Dalloul's four-metre-wide oil on canvas triptych offers his interpretation of The Last Supper in his unique visual language. He has depicted a banquet set in a forest. The table is covered with a red tablecloth and surrounded by trees and flowing water, but there are no people. The beautiful scene beckons viewers to step into a world that is perhaps an imaginary sanctuary where the artist seeks refuge from the real world and can become one with nature. The painting from 2017 is part of the artist's ongoing philosophical investigation of nature, of our inner and outer worlds and our lived life and memory as well as an exploration of the history of painting itself.

Abdelke's inspiration comes from mundane objects, but with his amazing attention to detail and skilful depiction of light and shadows, he transforms them into powerful symbols of the pain, loneliness, injustices and inequalities of contemporary society. The artist — like many of his contemporaries — had a classical European training, which is reflected in his two charcoal on paper works titled Shoe and Fish.

Shoe, painted in 2005, depicts a woman's shoe that was once elegant but now looks worn, overused and discarded, evoking memories of a better time and a sense of loss and sadness. Fish, painted in 2015 is a stark portrait of suffering, oppression and death. It depicts a dead fish tied up with a rope, frozen in a moment of agony and helplessness.

“Abedelke moved to Damascus in 2010 and refused to leave the city during the conflict. His paintings depict his own feelings and the suffering of Syrians, but they also speak about all human beings because we are all prisoners of our own demons and restricted by the society we live in,” Atassi says.

Ziad Dalloul, The Last Supper, 2017. Oil on canvas, triptych



العشاء الأخير، ٢٠١٧
زيت على قماش
ثلاثية، ١٩٥ × ٣٩٠ سم

The Last Supper, 2017
Oil on canvas
Triptych, 195 x 390 cm

Placed in the centre of the gallery is Muraywid’s emotionally charged sculptural installation, *The Waiting*. It features a form that looks like a woman’s dress or perhaps a woman’s body, which has been adorned with rhinestones, jewellery and other trinkets. The work and its title evoke questions about what this feminine form is waiting for, how long it has been in this state of anticipation, and what memories, wounds and suppressed feelings lie concealed beneath its glittering exterior.

“Ultimately nothing defines time except genuine work that stems from true feelings. No matter how much the techniques differ, concepts change and generations evolve, that which is authentic and true is always beautiful and lasting,” Mouna Atassi says.

In the Age of the New Media will run at the Atassi Foundation’s pop-op space in Warehouse 59, Alserkal Avenue, until December 16.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

© Al Nisr Publishing LLC 2019. All rights reserved.