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Deciphering Elias Zayat

written by **Selections Magazine**



Damascus

Syrian painter Elias Zayat's work is packed with symbolism to be decoded by the viewer

He has over six decades of art practice behind him, but Elias Zayat still flies somewhat under the radar within the canon of Arab masters. Born in 1935 in Damascus, Zayat is one of very few artists in the region who is trained in art restoration, having studied it at the Academy of Fine Arts and Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest. He is also a passionate art historian, as well as a masterful painter.

When Salwa Mikdadi, a specialist in the history of modern and contemporary art of the region and founding board member of the Association of Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab world, Iran and Turkey, met Zayat, she was immediately fascinated.

Like Mikdadi, Zayat is interested in the combined influence of the several civilizations that

have passed through Syria's shores. "When I entered his studio it was like entering a world that combined all these civilizations in one," Mikdadi says.

One of the founders of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, where he taught until his retirement, Zayat is influenced by religious and popular iconography. But what Mikdadi found so interesting in his work was his ability to transcend the normal boundaries of time and space. "He has an encyclopaedic knowledge of art history of the region that he uses as a palette in front of him to dip into and take what he needs for his work," she says. "I find this fascinating."

Having followed his work for decades, Mikdadi began working on a comprehensive monograph of his career, which has so far occupied her for the last three years. She expects it will be ready for publication at some point next year. "Writing about his work has taken me through many elements of history and as such, it is taking me a long time," she says. "It was also important for me to take time with the artist himself and to compile his work and archives, which I have managed thanks to the help of his son Michel."

In September, Zayat was in Dubai for the opening of his new show *After the Deluge* at Green Art Gallery. Mikdadi hosted an open conversation with him about the work, a collection of studies working towards the main piece — the large triptych after which the exhibition is named.

For this body of work, Zayat returns to the ancient city of Palmyra, known in Arabic as Tadmor.

Across the three panels, bathed in deep orange hues, the figures are distorted and chaos reigns. The two men on either side of the tryptic are attempting to fly upwards, striving to escape the chains of gravity, and in the centre, two doves, usually a symbol of peace, circle restlessly, unable to land. "It is plea for peace," says Zayat, except it seems as those peace is suffocated and salvation is not possible."

Though he started work on this painting a year ago, the recent destruction of the temples in Palmyra by ISIS brings the content into the present day with a sickening jolt.

For Mikdadi, the painting brings to mind a recent Adonis poem, in which he asks: "Where

did all the trees migrate to, whose branches used to offer a resting place for the birds?”

That is the beauty of Zayat’s work. “There is so much to say, so much to reference that every brush stroke is carefully considered,” Mikdadi says. “The biblical references in his work are used more like symbolism to allude to topics in the present.”

With such themes in mind, it is difficult to take away any kind of resolution. Even Noah’s Ark, the symbol of hope, is tucked away as a small icon in the corner of the painting.

“I am pessimistic, yes,” admits Zayat, “and I don’t see a bright future, but there is a glimmer of hope in that boat. We will see the light again one day and I think it will come from the East. I hope it comes from the East.” •

by Aya Ibrahim

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