



**فؤاد إغبارية**  
فرائط الذاكرة

**Fouad Agbaria**  
Maps of Memory



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Al-Sabar Association

**Umm el-Fahem Art Gallery**

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## **Fouad Agbaria: Maps of Memory**

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Curator: **Varda Steinlauf**

Mounting: **Ahmad Muhammad Mahajnah**

### **Catalog**

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Hebrew copy edit: **Ronit Rosenthal**

Arabic translation: **Atheer Safa**

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Hebrew translation: **As'ad Odeh**

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# Mahmoud Darwish | ID Card



Write it down!

I'm an Arab

My card number is 50000

My children number eight

And after this summer, a ninth on his way.

Does this make you rage?

I am an Arab.

With my quarry comrades I labor hard

My children number eight

I tug their bread, their clothes

And their notebooks

From within the rock

I don't beg at your door

I don't cower on your threshold

So does this make you rage?

Write it down!

I am an Arab.

I am a name with no honorific.

Patient in a land

Where everything lives in bursting rage

My roots were planted before time was born

Before history began

Before the cypress and the olive trees

Before grass sprouted

My father is from the plough clan

Not from the noble class

My grandfather was a peasant farmer

Had no pedigree

Taught me the pride of the sun

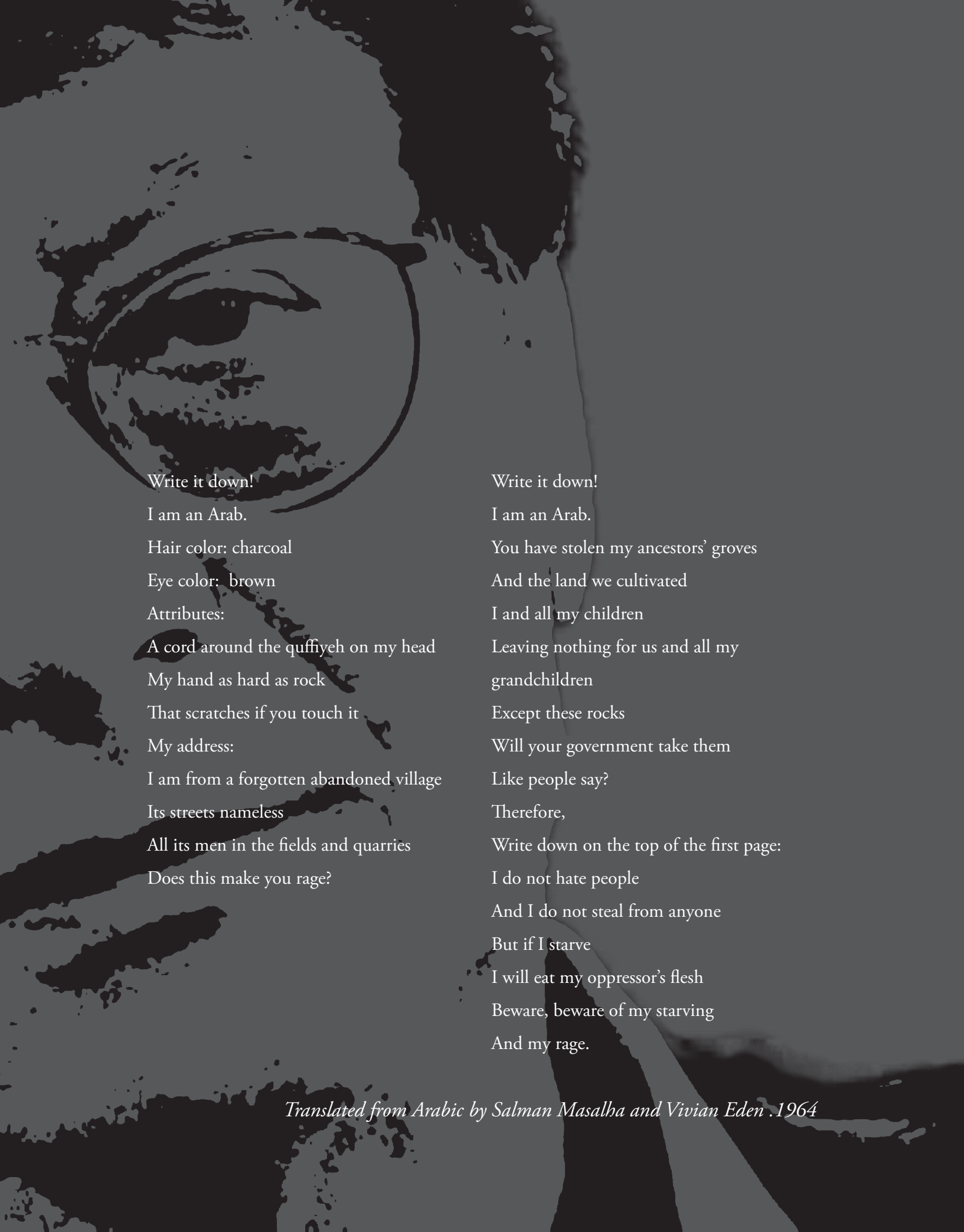
Before teaching me to read

A shack to guard groves is my home,

Made of branches and reeds

Are you pleased with my status?

I am a name with no honorific.



Write it down!

I am an Arab.

Hair color: charcoal

Eye color: brown

Attributes:

A cord around the quffiyeh on my head

My hand as hard as rock

That scratches if you touch it

My address:

I am from a forgotten abandoned village

Its streets nameless

All its men in the fields and quarries

Does this make you rage?

Write it down!

I am an Arab.

You have stolen my ancestors' groves

And the land we cultivated

I and all my children

Leaving nothing for us and all my  
grandchildren

Except these rocks

Will your government take them

Like people say?

Therefore,

Write down on the top of the first page:

I do not hate people

And I do not steal from anyone

But if I starve

I will eat my oppressor's flesh

Beware, beware of my starving

And my rage.

*Translated from Arabic by Salman Masalha and Vivian Eden .1964*

# Sound, Scent, and Light

Strands of present and memory are continually drawn to points of light within the bond that has formed between me and my family.

My first family comprises my grandfather Fouad; my grandmother Bahja; my father Muhammad, my mother Afifa; and my brothers Fadi, Mahmoud, Fedaa, and Moaad.

I hover in my imagination as a boy, gathering from an infinite void photographs of experiences that surface and ascend like the screening of a movie that's broken off in the middle, set in a landscape that stretches into a borderless space between power and disaster, between the pleasant and the traumatic. Stride after stride after stride that cross the boundaries of the acceptable and the unacceptable, driven by curiosity and sundry attempts to decode a wealth of secrets.



And my second family, comprised of my wife, Manar, and my children, Celine, Muhammad, and Adam.

I hover in my imagination as an adult man who maintains a forward-looking perspective, trying to glean past and present and to anticipate the future, as a strand that links points of light from the distant past into a corona of holy luminescence that flickers in front of me with every glimpse. In the middle is the reality of the present, fascinating and replete with love, couplehood, and fatherhood, but sometimes assaulted by the illusions of existence between the personal and the political spheres and relegated to a distant extreme seemingly enveloped in heavy mist.

I wish to devote words of respect, appreciation, and love to both of my families:

To my parents and siblings for supporting me since my childhood, for their embraces and their ardent wish to encourage and strengthen me in all stages of my life;

To my wife Manar and to my children for their unconditional support and love even though my artistic and occupational worlds sometimes bar me from their personal world.

Gratitude and love to everyone who has supported me—friends, associates, and artists.



## Maps of Memory

At the entrance to Fouad Agbaria's house stand several planters that hold cacti and prickly pears. The entrance opens onto a tiled courtyard lined with verdant ornamental and fruit trees and more prickly pears of different kinds. In the middle of the tiled path looms a towering aviary, some of its birds stationary most of the day and others flying about inside. As a boy, Fouad raised pigeons in the shed of his family home and acquired his love of fauna and flora by helping his grandfather graze sheep on his land near the lands of Al-Lajoun.

Fouad Agbaria, an alumnus of Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem and holder of a Master of Fine Arts degree the University of Haifa, was born in Musmus village, whence he derived the inspiration of his childhood world. Perennially he loved to head into nature, smell the moist land after a rainfall, lie on the ground in the spring, and gaze upward at clouds sailing across the blue sky. He says: "Everything was

open, memories of being a boy in Musmus.” He often speaks about scents in his surroundings that remind him of his childhood. They reverberate in the descriptions of the French author Marcel Proust (1871–1922), who gave madeleine cakes eternal life. In lengthy passages of his masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust describes the psychological effects of his nibbling at the madeleines, which remind him of his family and above all his grandmother, who often baked these pastries:

I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate, a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it?<sup>1</sup>

Engraved in Agbaria’s childhood landscape are fields of wheat and herbs—hyssop or gundelia—of a beauty and of aromas that have accompanied him all his life. “The hilly area between Musmus and Umm el-Fahem is full of stone niches,” he

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, also published as *Remembrance of Things Past*, Penguin/Viking.

relates. “When I was a kid I’d head out with Grandfather’s sheep or pick some hyssop or gundelia with my friends from the village, and while hiking in the hills I’d bake a potato in a niche that I’d found on the way.” In our conversation, he repeatedly used the phrase “scent of childhood” in reference to the aroma of the soil, especially after rainfall, or of an herb, or of the sheep.

### **Map paintings**

Agbaria is firmly planted in the pattern of his homeland’s scenery. Dr. Galia Bar-Or explains what this means: “A person’s surroundings have a shaping effect on him or her. Individuals, in turn, affect and shape the landscape when they impose their patterns on it.”<sup>2</sup> The landscape that surrounds Agbaria is the main theme of his works and the background of all other themes, as may be seen in his paintings of the yellow fields that surrounded the village of his birth [see paintings on pp. 139-155,158]. In another work [p. 113], the city of Umm el-Fahem in the modern era comes into view. “I took the outer contours of the city where I live,” Agbaria explains, “and unpacked them from the true colorful universe.” The painting looks like a map that has been cut off. Agbaria plants shapes on the map that converge to form a landscape. He adds: “Hidden in the recesses of the sound of the brushstrokes or the forms are various statements, both social and political.”

A map is above all a painting; even a map as the theme of a painting knows precedents in art history. Maps appear in several of Jan Vermeer’s works (e.g., “The Artist in His Studio” [1665–1670]). In twentieth-century art, too, one encounters Jesper Johns’ familiar painting *Map* (1961): a political map of the United States, painstakingly copied true to scale but laid out with a coarseness and liquidity that make it abstract.

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<sup>2</sup> Galia Bar-Or, *Michael Drucks: Travels in Drucksland* (Hebrew) (Ein Harod: Art Museum, 2007), p. 59.

In this work, Johns unifies the image of the flat geographic map and the surface of the painting and probes the boundary between these two and the two-dimensional depiction of a three-dimensional world. Unlike these works, however, Agbaria's "maps" are painted from his memory. They are maps of memory, based on photographs of the village as it once looked and as it appears today with its stone houses, its courtyards, and everything around them.

Against the backdrop of the agricultural terraces of the sleepy village, we encounter details from Picasso's "Guernica": a horse's head, the face of a woman who clutches a burning torch, and a head and hands raised high. Agbaria produces them in bold shades of green and red, the colors of the Palestinian flag. His brushwork is segmented, like stammered sentences in which words are truncated. Agbaria expresses himself cautiously, lest his words be too extreme or reactionary. Just as the map is drawn in two dimensions, as if to advise us that the painting is also two-dimensional, so are the paintings of the tiled floor, reflecting the white-yellowish-brown hues of the stone houses in Agbaria's surroundings. The stone/tile floor is neither complete nor perfect; it is constructed so that the bits of marble embedded in it do not touch each other; instead, they are separate fragments, like a cut-off conversation in which one neither hears nor says everything that one has to say.

### **Nostalgia of light**

Fouad Agbaria weaves his biography into his art. His works feature Islamic, Palestinian, and Oriental cultural, architectural, and aesthetic motifs—like a discourse of identities that overlaps the reality of his intimate surroundings and of the wide world. The phenomenon of intercultural spillover underlies his works. His oeuvre in the past three years is typified by ornamental forms reminiscent of Arabic writing—paintings that transcend their format and fill the entire space with

colorful, sensual drawing replete with motion, something like a dance of letters. The paintings are based on a grid, a pattern that recurs in different iterations and echoes the form of the arabesque, which is disassembled and reassembled dozens of times. This linear pattern repeats and spreads infinitely, like a form of writing that strikes roots within itself. Agbaria inserts passages from the works of the Palestinian poet Darwish into his paintings, along with thoughts and utterances of his own. Many of the letters become lovely shapes of color and light that give them emphasis. He gives the paintings titles such as “Summer Breeze,” “Across the Border,” “To Break the Silence,” “Passport,” and “In the Presence of Absence.”

Agbaria takes his viewers a step ahead and deceives us as he shatters the standard form of the arabesque and violates its harmony. The endless cyclical pattern is disrupted now and then, breaking up the existing order. This fracturing of pattern upsets the balance, the density, the repetitiveness, and the bold colorfulness of the work. It has neither beginning nor end nor; neither right nor left, neither up nor down, neither center nor margins, nor any other hierarchy. When the pattern is scaled to the height and width of the work, it evokes an infinite array in which one quick breaststroke disturbs and undermines the order that was entrusted to it.

### **Rug paintings**

Agbaria’s paintings of illuminated letters led to paintings of rugs replete with architectural and ornamental elements, such as those that were laid atop the floor of his parents’ home. These works echo childhood memories in the sense of nostalgia for home. Both the rug, an implement in the Muslim religious rite that is thought to play a quintessentially spiritual role, and the arabesque metaphor, expressing the wondrous and complex structure of the world and its harmonic perfection, are used by Agbaria in his account of the inanimate place

where he lives.

The lovely colorful rug paintings tempt viewers to approach and observe the painted details. Concurrently, however, they raise viewers' flesh by transporting them from one memory of time and place to a different memory of a different time and place. On one rug appears a bulldozer shovel, an instrument of destruction; on another we see an airplane with a swift red flourish of the brush; and at the bottom of yet another rug a warship materializes.

In these works, Agbaria creates a threatening inner domestic space that corresponds to Freud's concept of desire or "a concept without a home." In his conceptualization of desires, a paradoxical situation arises: the strange and the delusional, the dangerous and the cruel, are the opposites of the comfort and familiarity of home. In this dialectical encounter, the beautiful meets the threatening, and when the strange emerges from the domestic setting it is frightening. The separation of subject and object is disrupted when the representation of freedom and liberation (the drawing and movement of the brush) encounters its opposite (the wall, the border), which stops its forward motion.

### **Landscapes**

In his panoramic landscapes, Agbaria takes us into the mountains, valleys, and particularly the faraway fields where he used to hike until they swallowed him up. In these works, yellow dominates and overshadows all other colors. The artist uses free brushstrokes and an etching technique that amplifies the experience of contemplating the works.

With equal power and evocativeness he paints the fresh green prickly pear [p. 99], which has not yet blossomed, standing against the background of a red sky and growing from a huge gray marble planter. The protruding veins of the marble are



not uniform—some are light and others black—and they look like shoots of a grapevine snaking across the marble-stone monument.

Fouad Agbaria's works burst into life by means of the shapes and the colors used. They portray worlds that used to be and no longer are, shadows and images that take on living flesh, and memories that reverberate within the artist's psyche like a remote inner voice. Recently, Agbaria has begun to paint the toys that accompanied him in his boyhood—the ones that he would disassemble and reassemble, not necessarily in the same way. These paintings derive their powerful allure from the very fact that they are produced with such care, from the emphasis on details, and from their childish colorfulness. One who observes them keenly notices instruments of war such as a rocket, a missile, and a rifle barrel. The paintings are produced with a flattening technique and in pastel colors that evoke childhood: light pink, azure, and greenish and yellowish hues. Fouad Agbaria's recent work probes concepts of identity and belonging and deals with aspects of place. It treats segments of time and their position in space by invoking a rich array of sensations, colors, and scents. His art exposes us to worlds now extinct, events gone by, and characters no longer extant. Agbaria fills the void that they left behind with fragments of thought, bumpy segments of the whole, and widening echoes that revive forgotten experiences for a certain period of time—the time it takes each and every observer to view it, making those experiences, although forgotten, not obliterated.



## An Art Project for Infinite Being

When I was a kid, I got lots of presents and toys. The toys never stayed the way they were. I experimented with them over and over with screwdrivers, pliers, and screws, and then I'd take them apart and make something new out of them. I remember a moving train that I made out of a matchbox and a cigarette packet. I took new toys apart and reassembled them to use their parts for my train. What made me so happy about this kind of activity, to love it all the more, is that my family took the initiative to present my paintings to the public. It never bothered them that I always changed everything and left nothing in my paintings in its original form.<sup>1</sup>

According to Miranda Bruce-Mitford, certain topics, such as the fertility of humankind, of soil, birth, life, death, and so on,

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<sup>1</sup> Fouad Agbaria, e-mail communication with the author, 2014.

occupy people continually to some extent.<sup>2</sup> She is right in that these topics always recur. The question, however, is: How does an author or an artist relate to the same topic in terms of style? It's an interesting question in researching the works of Fouad Agbaria.

A visitor to Agbaria's studio cannot but experience sensory overload in view of the huge number of themes and techniques in his paintings. For example, the prickly pear is prominent in his works, first in a Realistic manner but steadily distancing itself from its original form and becoming abstract. A similar process overtakes images of harvest and everything associated with it, as well as nature in its diverse manifestations: abstract nature and Realistic nature, including trees and fields, linear graphic paintings and ornamented tablets, and an additional broad range of styles and paintings that the viewer can hardly sort out.

These themes are neither created nor arranged in fixed chronological order. Agbaria addresses himself to a given theme by invoking a style particular to the theme, moving on to a different theme, and then returning slowly to the main theme but in a new and unique style. His so-called "yellow phase," for example, is a process that describes the artist's yearnings for his childhood and includes description of what he saw in his grandfather's fields and those of the peasants in his village. The artist repeatedly uses a blinding yellow because this color is common at harvest time and is unique to it. "The sights include men and women designed in the paintings in a style specific to the place. Thus, the unity of person and place is expressed in the paintings."<sup>3</sup> In the course of 2018, yellow has returned and is reflected in the paintings, like other themes that I touch upon below in a much abridged way.

How can one understand Agbaria's paintings in view of the

2 Miranda Bruce-Mitford, *Signes and Symboles: origines et interprétations* (Paris: Larousse Universel Press, 2009), p. 7.

3 Aida Nasrallah, "Yearnings," *Back to the Scattered Voids* (Fouad Agbaria catalogue) (Hebrew, 2014), pp. 7–11.

overload and the surfeit of themes and styles that they present? It's hard to offer one and only one answer. Therefore, I use semiotics and semiotic theory as principal sources for this article, which bases itself on remarks by Al-Jabouri:

Anything that occupies a certain place—paintings, in this context—is in fact a sign or a signifier. This is because the eye is considered the first and main source for the visitor or the reader. The term “interpretation” was first coined in response to the wish to offer commentaries on religious texts that flow from the covert meaning, not the overt meaning, of the text.<sup>4</sup>

If so, there is a material difference between interpretation and hermeneutics: whereas interpretation puts forward a verbal commentary, hermeneutics presents many meanings that are not revealed at first glance. Given the complexity of Agbaria's portraiture, I tend to adopt a hermeneutic approach based mainly in semiotic theory,<sup>5</sup> one that relates mainly to signifier-signified and to meaning, in reference to his works.<sup>6</sup> However, I do not feel bound to the rule that forces any signifier always to create the same signified because any critic's perception of entities may be different from that of another critic. What is more, I do not believe at all in turning theories into legends and myths. Applying critical hermeneutics to a given work of art transforms the critic into a creative person who writes about a visual text from a cultural approach. This is the root of the critic's contribution! After all, a broad range of interpretation leads

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4 Abdel Rahman Muhammad Mahmoud Al-Jabouri, “Interpretation, Institutionalization, Term, and Meaning,” *University of Kirkuk Journal of the Humanities*, 2:5 (2010), p. 18 (in Arabic).

5 According to Bal and Bryson, psychoanalysis affirms the presence of signs and symbols, i.e., sees the world as a group of symbols. Every object that occupies space in the world is a sign; even a portrait represents a sign on the wall. The West embraces semiotic theory very happily but overlooks terms such as signs, orthography, and properties of verses. These terms are nothing but sets of signs and meanings that are already evidenced in the Quran in a manner that resembles modern semiotics. See Mieke Bal & Norman Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” *The Art Bulletin* 73:2 (June 1991), pp. 174–208.

6 Sa'id Bin Karrad, “Possibilities of Text and Limitations of the Theoretical Model,” *Thought and Criticism* 56 (2004), pp. 51–60 (in Arabic).

the work in mutual symmetry, in the integration of examples and proofs, into changing contexts. The result is a situation of multiple interpretations that attempt to convince the critic of their relevance by seeking to uncover the covert text that every work possesses. Therefore, even if the same motif or signifier is found to recur in several portraits, these symbols (“motifs” or “signifiers”) carry different meanings commensurate with the procedural field unique to them. The term “procedural field” is a general one that most sciences use to denote contextualized use.<sup>7</sup>

As stated, it is hard to define Agbaria’s works, categorize them, and impose a constant interpretation on them. Therefore, critics of such works find them hard to relate to. They present the critic with a labyrinth of colors and styles that transform the artist in a researcher of colors. Since I do wish to propose a quintessential and characteristic marker in Agbaria’s works, allow me to claim that Motionism is one of the typical properties of his work, even when his paintings vary in their colors and styles. Criticism of these works rules out the word “rational” because art always aspires to the absurd or the irrational within a world where identity is equal to infinity.

My remarks below on Agbaria’s body of work are divided into three themes: nature, portraiture, and political paintings. Agbaria’s occupation with nature is so broad that I will divide it into several sub-themes.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

## (1) Nature

### Settled landscapes

In a previous article,<sup>8</sup> I related to landscapes by Agbaria that focus on the harvest and the harmony of man and soil, expressed in the use of yellow and several black spots. In these paintings, we see the peasants and women who harvest and gather the grain. Yellow is also central in works by Agbaria that are drenched in light and blend the tapestries of nature and of human and animal life. In these works, Agbaria continues to follow the Impressionist tradition in the main, a choice originating in the difficulty people have in seeing and clearly discerning the sight of humans or nature, forcing them to focus their gaze.

Agbaria repeatedly paints the same theme. In his “Reaper-Watchman” (2018) [see p. no. 154], he produces a man gathering up the harvest. In “Grandfather” [p. no. 141], we see the grandfather engrossed in his work in the field, studying an undefined plant. Knowing the semantic context that stands out in other works on the same theme, we realize through intent observation that the plant is a wheat stalk. When this painting is displayed separately from other works, however, viewers may see something else—whatever they want to see—in the mass of color that envelops the old man.

In a third painting titled “Woman in Harvest” (2016) [p. no. 153], we see a woman whose facial features are vague. At first glance, we do not know why there’s a black spot on the right-hand side of her face and why she is gaping in amazement. Returning to the heritage, however, we see that women used to cover their faces with a cloth to protect them as they went about the *dayish*, the separation of wheat from chaff. Therefore, I claim that critics expose their cultural codes when they have to produce a culture-bound interpretation in which the culture is that of the artist himself.

“Present/Absent” (2015) [p. no. 158] is an Impressionist work that tends to the abstract as the eye struggles to discern an

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8 Nasrallah, 2014.

empty chair with an animal—a sheep or a goat— next to it. In such a case, the human being is noted in the title and in the presence of the empty chair, which carries multiple meanings as a signifier of presence and absence.<sup>9</sup> In this case, however, we cannot interpret the signifier, the chair, as signifying presence or absence because the human may be a peasant who has gone somewhere and is about to return. Evident in this painting and in other works of Agbaria's is a special interest in the colorfulness of the chair as well as that of the animals and the settling. To invoke the system of presence in the painting, the contrasting characteristics, i.e., the addition of absence, are needed. In fact, though, reference to presence is considered one of the markers of absence and difference.

In most paintings that blend yellow and black, the integration of symmetry of color with symmetry of theme is examined. In Agbaria's works from 2015–2018, when he reverted to the integrated use of yellow and black, a proliferation of black brushstrokes is evident. Thus black becomes a focal element that emphasizes another color, a tactic that lends the paintings a dynamism that calms the passion that bursts forth and draws out the mist that blankets the hidden details, as reflected in "Grandfather."

### **The prickly pear**

In the prickly-pear paintings, first produced in 2010, the plants alternate between Realist and Impressionist styles. Over time, Agbaria has tended to deconstruct and challenge composition, as he makes explicit in the title of his work "Coming Apart" (2015) [p. no. 235]. Another painting shows two cuts that are connected by a black line until they merge by means of a scattering of green prickly-pear plants. Other paintings are produced in black, in addition to the dispersion of the orange fruit combined with shades of yellow. Also described is a

9 Aida Nasrallah, "The Language of Objects: from Theory to Practice—Learning from Experience," *Al-Hasad* 5 (2015), pp. 171–198 (in Arabic).



flowerpot that seems disconnected from the prickly-pear leaves, like the plants that are severed from their roots and strewn across the canvas. The painting is typified by a harmony of color that creates unity but contrasts with the slicing. In terms of style, the slicing denotes the deconstruction of the parts and their extrication from their place. This extrication, however, is symbolic and not real because the prickly pear sinks new roots and regenerates itself wherever it is.

Agbaria's first prickly-pear paintings verge on truth in both color and form, as seen in "Remnants of Al-Lajoun Prickly Pear" (2010) [p. no. 102]. Agbaria continues to paint this plant in both Impressionist and symbolic Expressionist styles, as manifested in "Spicy" (2017) [p. no. 245], which is typified by randomly scattered shades of red, pink, and black. The artist creates a state of unity between the background and the potted prickly pear; by doing so, he establishes unity between the plant and its limited place and the broader space around it. A real prickly-pear plant is not particularly colorful; Agbaria's use of color here distances it from its conventional symbolism. If the prickly pear were not mentioned in the title, one might mistake the potted plant for a rose, possibly making room for different interpretations.

In his prickly-pear paintings, Agbaria engages his colleague Assam Abu Shakra and his friend Karim Abu Shakra in an artistic dialogue, each of the three artists sticking to his own special style.

In his wall paintings, Agbaria deconstructs, challenges, and hides the prickly pear in its initial form. In terms of color and form, these paintings distance the plant from reality. The artist returns to the wall paintings over and over, expressing something novel and different each time. Amina Ghassan believes that "Every reversion is in fact acceptance and every acceptance is more dissimilarity than similarity. The restored meaning cannot be repeated but it fits into a cumulative group of interpretations."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Amina Ghassan, *Guided Readings in Interpretation and Acceptance* (Beirut: Dar

This reasoning resembles the remarks of Jacques Derrida and other devotees of deconstruction theory. According to Derrida, any object that is removed creates different meaning. In all these manifestations, the principle of difference returns. In Derrida's thinking, difference is the common property of all conceptual contrasts that help to elucidate the language (the language in this context being art) and break through its system.<sup>11</sup>

Although Derrida applied his deconstruction theory to the linguistic field, the theory is eminently suited to art as well. The artist leans toward removal and language to create change. Particularly in Agbaria's wall paintings, the act of repetition and change deprives the prickly pear of any standard meaning. In his "Prickly Pear in the Background of Memory" (2015) [p. no. 210-211], for example, he creates a dark background that he punctuates with several colorful spots in red and yellow. He draws triangles at random, deconstructing, as it were, the decorative painting, and the plant rests on them in the form of black lines that constitute hollow leaves. The space of the leaves is itself the background of the painting. The change and the distancing from the original lend the work a new interpretation. The question is whether this prickly pear is a prickly pear at all. Would an interpreter of the painting call it one if the title didn't give it away?

In one of his wall paintings, "Coming Apart" (2014) [p. no. 114-115], Agbaria deconstructs the original form by stripping the plant of its "prickly-pear-ness," i.e., of its real form. The viewer may see the work as an abstract painting in green, yellow, and white, and may even attribute other symbols and interpretations to it. In yet another wall painting, "Untitled" (2016) [p. no. 268-269], the prickly pear looks like triangles drawn in grey and defined in black, as the forerunners of Expressionism would have painted it. The painting has several

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al-A'adab, 1999), p.1 (in Arabic).

<sup>11</sup> See John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997).

small embellishments in red, mostly on the right-hand side, and in light green and blue, that seem about to be swallowed up and dissolved into the black that dominates the entire work. These paintings, however, conform to the operational definition based on the concept of “the artistic text as a state of bridging between the worlds embedded in it and the real world, [...] predicated on the context of relevance to its use.”<sup>12</sup>

Another painting replete with symbols and styles— “Untitled” (2012) [p. no. 221]—is composed of four parts. The land, shown in dark green, light green, and yellow, looks as land would look in the spring; on it stands a black man whose facial features are blurred, hoisting a prickly-pear planter and symbolizing the boundary between the area of the feet and that of the pasture. The puzzling thing about this painting is the use of orange and pink, warm colors, to produce the prickly pear. The flock is painted in black but the soil that symbolizes the grass is made of scattered blotches of colorful dots. The animals are painted in an expressive Realist style, as is the black man. Viewing the painting, one asks: Which is the safest place? Do the animals turn into monsters? And why does the black man take the prickly-pear flowers with him?

If so, we see that deconstruction and challenge are among the traits of the inquisitive, investigative artist who remains continually in his searching and inspection stage. We do not discern full harmony in the prickly-pear paintings; in most of them we notice several types of difference. One of the most important elements of Modernism, Adorno believed, is the principle of contradiction or difference, which gives the work of art an aspect of social estrangement. Harmony for Adorno is but an illusion and a disruption of the underlying reality. According to Adorno, difference evokes pleasure and is more comfortable than harmony, and this is reflected in the prickly-pear paintings generally and in the wall paintings particularly.

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12 Mustafa Nassef, *Language, Interpretation, and Communication* (Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts, and Literature, 1995), p. 77 (in Arabic).

### **Abstract nature**

Agbaria's abstract landscapes feature are colorful surfaces that make it seem as though someone is peering into the landscape from overhead, from an airplane, onto a nature devoid of houses and people and populated with nothing but swathes of color. "Horizon" (2011) [p. no. 124], for example, is composed of two bodies of color: (1) green and brown, dark green and dark brown, all of which symbolize fields, desert, and mountains; and (2) light blue and dark blue, symbolizing the sky that is visible on the horizon. The contrast the difference between these hues and the proximity of the bright colors amplifies the sense of depth in the painting and, particularly, stresses the difference between the dark brown in the foreground and the blue sky. Thus, the viewer turns his gaze migrates to the distant horizon. Three paintings produced in 2016 [nos. 125, 126, 127], titled "Land Migration," are typified by various shades of purple, yellow, brown, and green. They also features bright colors that separate the horizontal and the vertical elements and embedded forms that resemble colorful shards that spread across the painting, symbolizing the separation of nature from human characteristics. In my judgment, it is the title of the three works that influences the way they are spiritually perceived; from my standpoint, they should be interpreted as colorful worlds that can migrate across other conceptual worlds.

Agbaria's abstract landscapes are complicated. Their colorful parts blend into ornamented geometrical forms but the ornamentation itself has no clear form. All we see are colorful spots that move randomly in the depths of the painting alongside unbounded lines. This is because these paintings aspire to the infinite and to the promise of departure. The painting has nothing but scattered colors with no aesthetic background. These colors are not meant to be ornaments, as we saw in the wall paintings. Do these colorful elements deprive a painting of its identity and become extraneous objects that

draw the viewer's gaze to more calculated parts?

These paintings reflect a philosophical direction: they instruct the viewer to be attentive to and interested in the metaphorical meeting of the spots of light, as though the spots were beats in a rhythm. Might the colors echo the sound of a bell, summoning the viewer to a spiritual place that cannot be seen because the palpable world denies us the ability to see? According to Umberto Eco, the secret of a text lies in its absence. This statement captures the intention of separating nature from its source because the painting is based not on an image but on an opinion—of the artist or of the interpreter of the painting. Abstraction is a way to “spiritualize” art. Therefore, when Kandinsky calls for artistic abstraction, what he means is disengagement from the material. Only now, he says, has there been an awakening from the dominance of materialism, which sowed despair and frustration due to lack of spirituality and, in turn, created a dearth of goals and objectives. When science and tradition are undermined, he continues, the external world is susceptible to deterioration, and when one changes one's focus from form to inner contemplation, literature and music become highly meaningful domains in a spiritual revolution.<sup>13</sup> If so, the disengagement of things from their material form is one type of appeal to the spiritual.

Where the spiritualization of art is concerned, however, Islamic art preceded Kandinsky. In Islamic art, one finds abstract paintings on paper and geometrical forms of the utmost abstractness, all invested with a spiritual dimension. For Agbaria, the spiritual dimension appears clearly in “Untitled” (2018) [p. no. 112], in which a green spiral line traverses a light yellow background that outlines the city of Umm el-Fahem. The painting neither reflects anything of reality nor reminds the viewer of any landscape. At first glance, the viewer is perplexed due to the blurring that Agbaria manifests in his

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<sup>13</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947), pp. 24–33.

color paintings. The spiral lines of the work seem to flee to an unknown depth as if something is hidden from us. The painting symbolizes Sufi thinking, and when I asked the artist whether he has Sufi leanings or is influenced by Sufism, he nodded. I do not know why, but it reminded me of a religious expression in the Quran: “He is first and last, revealed and hidden.”

“Untitled” (2018) accommodates light—bright color—in a combination with black that yields a yellow and blue color. Pleasurably the viewer is invited to a voyage of study and contemplation. Black is scattered like letters or decorations. The eye imagines abstract houses even though it fails to notice a thin black line that looks like a border at first. The artist’s unconscious sense and the motion that reflects his inner voyages and reflections is reminiscent of al-Ghazali’s remarks on aesthetics. Al-Ghazali makes the astute observation that not everyone is able to discern the aesthetic value of what he or she sees. Accordingly, he distinguishes between two types of aesthetics:

beauty that becomes visible through the sense of vision, i.e., the physiological eye—an observable and overt beauty, a beauty that children and animals alike can see. But there is another kind of beauty: the beauty that we internalize in the heart, a beauty limited to people of insight.<sup>14</sup>

Al-Ghazali draws no separating line between the visible and the concealed beauty. When he wishes to emphasize the importance of the senses in internalizing visible beauty, he stresses that it is this kind of beauty that leads to the insight through which people may understand the concealed beauty.

### **Tall trees**

The tree is an overarching model of human thinking. Throughout history, in most cultures the tree appears

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<sup>14</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Exalted Intent in Interpreting the Meanings of the Names of Allah*, Fadla Shehadeh, ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq), p. 126 (in Arabic).

overtly in ancient religions, myths, religious rituals, and divine rites. Today the tree is considered part of people's daily lives as a source of food that serves as an object of research in agriculture and science. In terms of religious culture and the development of myths, almost all areas of life include the symbol of the tree.<sup>15</sup>

Many Agbaria paintings that describe harvest seasons feature trees as part of the landscape. Below I focus on several works in which the tree crosses the boundary of visual aesthetics and becomes a symbolic object.

In world cultures, the tree symbolizes reproduction and birth and migrates between death and restoration to life. The tall trees in Agbaria's paintings are based on roots, seeds, branches, and leaves, thereby expressing various facets of the tapestry of life. Agbaria's tree is crafted in a Realist style against an abstract natural background. In "Olive Tree" (2016) [p. no. 138], spots of yellow and pink that tend to an orderly anarchy are embedded in the floor, over which are six horizontal levels that begin with one in dark green, followed by light green, and then a wall that is black and finally blue. Placed against this abstract background, which tends toward brightness of color, is a gigantic tree next to short brush strokes in green and brown. The contradiction between the orderly background and the ornamental dark green tree in the forefront is reminiscent of a verse from the Quran: "Have you not considered how Allah presents an example, [making] a good word like a good tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches [high] in the sky?"<sup>16</sup> In "Olive Grove" (2014) [p. no. 229], there are two trees in shades of pink, yellow, blue, and green. Harmony prevails between these surreal Impressionist trees and the floor, which is painted in the same colors, exuding a spirit of optimism and a musical colorful rhythm. Overhead is the sky in blue and

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15 Maha Abdel Khadr Mubaideen and Jamal Muhammad Maqableh, "The Tree: Its Indications and Symbols in Ibn Arabi's Writings," *Journal of the University of Damascus* 28:2 (2012), p. 79 (in Arabic).

16 Quran, Surah Ibrahim, 24.

green, adorned with birds. The spectacle of the two trees is actually a scene replete with pink Impressionist and harmonic dreams. Although Agbaria focuses on the olive tree, one could not identify it as such were it not for the title.

From 2012 onward, in Agbaria's "yellow" period, one notices the recurrent motif of a tree decorated with light black and brush strokes against a clean yellow background. In another work from 2014, featuring complex ornamentation, a tree in black and gray migrates among three spots in the upper portion of the painting that direct the gaze downward. Another painting from 2014, "Olive Tree in the Heart of a Storm" (2014) [p. no. 252] is typified by various shades of brown. Random, absurd, and tempestuous spots emerge from the tree, fixed in place, and do not cause any branch to move.

Agbaria resorted to the tree again—one that is visible only in its trunk—in "Olive Tree" (2018) [p. no. 160]. The land and the tree in this painting are produced in the same color and texture, and the ornamentation of the tree is rendered in an Impressionist style against a clean yellow background.

Since 2011, the olive-tree paintings have included a diverse range of free brush strokes, some horizontal and others vertical, as in "Olive Trees" (2011) [p. no. 228]. Here the tree, its upper branches, and its leaves are all decorated in a style similar to that of the decoration and one of the themes of "Tree of Hearts" (2014) [p. no. 213]. Below I elaborate on this tree.

At first glance, "Tree of Hearts" reminds us of kitsch art on Web sites that aspires mainly to express friendship and love in a consumeristic or symbolic way. I believe, however, that this tree aims a Sufi message at the heart in its role as the center of consciousness and knowledge. The tree is planted in a floor rendered in a style that evokes an Arab tile or rug. The design of these artifacts actually originates in the geometric arabesque and is based on parallelism and symmetry. In the center of the tile or the rug is a red star motif; the remaining symmetrical forms are produced in green and blue. The colors are transferred to the



walls but appear to be deconstructed. On the wall to the right are the same red, green, and yellow colors that appear on the floor. They shift the deconstruction from calculated painting to free painting in which the red, green, yellow, and blue intermingle. To the left, or on the left-hand wall of the painting, the artist settles for a combination of colorful ornamental spots of yellow within a mass of blue. The background and the floor of the painting express the contradiction between the calculated and the free. This contradiction and the design of the floor create the illusion of change in the size of the room. A tree in white lies on the floor. It is ornamented with a small amount of black that reflects the colors of the background of the painting in an interesting contrast. This is done in order to emphasize the tree, a foreign object that gives off hearts as its fruit, resembling in this sense the tree of desire. The hearts are painted white, expressing the artist's hope that trees, growing and giving off their fruit of hearts, will remain clean and pure even as wars steadily spread. This tree reminds us of the trees of legend, such as the tree of life in the Assyrian culture or other sanctified trees that nestle in the collective memory.

Agbaria's tree leads us to the conclusion that the artist refrains from obeying the laws of the original artistic style and prepares alternative innovative paths in every way possible. The tree here is symbolic. Chadwick comments: A tree accommodates multiple and diverse meanings related to the creation of art, means that enrich the elements of the art and add new dimensions that lead to timeless horizons. Thus it is found that the creation of art signifies things not directly but indirectly, through a mediating third party that may be called a symbol. A symbol is a slender thing that accommodates accumulated pictures and images that create a theme unequalled by anything other than the work of art itself.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, even if we knew the special meanings and intentions that the artist planted in his trees—the tall ones and the prickly pear

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Chadwick, *Symbolism* (London: Methuen Young, 1971).

alike—the tree, with all of its semantic elements, being a symbol of life, of birth, and of creation, is unequaled by anything other than the creation of the work of art itself.

### **Abstract nature and language**

Paintings are visual objects by and large. In terms of its linguistic meaning, the syllable *scape* relates to a point of view, a place where something is seen, and an object seen. A linguistic “scape” or meaning underlies most studies that investigate social and political relations in minorities’ languages vis-à-vis their respective hegemonic languages.

The etymology of the word *landscape*, translated into Arabic as *mareh*, a “scape,” actually relates to scenery. It was borrowed from the domain of art and transferred to a background or a linguistic scene, even though every written language is a visual painting. In many of Agbaria’s works, written language appears in his own handwriting. In “Write it down! I’m an Arab” (2015) [p. no. 192], for example, script and colors form a unity that transcends the meaning of the language because they distribute the language among objects in nature (that is, in the landscape). This admits the natural landscape into a fraternity of identity and lifts it out of its abstractness, a state that does not denote identity, in order to provide the viewer with an indicator of personal and collective identity.

Every visual picture, Shohamy claims with no further commentary,<sup>18</sup> is sorted into a linguistic-scene “drawer” if we indeed treat art as a language of expression.

Art criticism is based chiefly on linguistic reference of a painting by a critic. The critic interprets the painting; the painting itself serves as the language. Namely, the letters themselves constitute a visual painting even if no other effect such as color is added. Arabic script is typified by flow and motion. Agbaria uses various techniques to insert this script into his works. The words cling

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18 Elana Shohamy, *Language Policy: Hidden Agenda and New Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 110–133.

to each other closely; they fit well. Sometimes they all face the same way and at other times they slant in different directions, amplifying the sense of motion in the painting. There is no need to deconstruct the letters; when one steps back from the painting a little, the words look like decorations or the kind of embroidery that embellishes line drawings. In this context, consider Al-Khatibi's remarks on the calligraphic artist:

[... He] digs into the place and incessantly schemes against the void because it is a home within something that is absolute. The interior of this absolute object allows [the calligrapher] to write more-or-less clearly and abets other semantic systems that separated by the inscription.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Khatibi's study on inscription and language also relates to Arabic script as an element that embellishes a painting and transcends any spoken tongue. In Agbaria's works, language serves as more than a means of identity. The artistic resources themselves undertake the task of thickening by replacing color in the painting (technically speaking) and, by so doing, appropriating color's place. Color is responsible for creating congestion and emptiness in a painting. Just the same, the artist strikes a balance between it and the script. Thus writing becomes a topographical medium and attains a higher stature than it had as a linguistic communication medium, i.e., a technical medium.

In Agbaria's paintings, the topographical medium is a metaphorical semantic instrument that sketches symbols while tending toward clarity. By relating to the meaning of the writing and its role as a symbolic medium of identity, language assumes the task of crossing boundaries of identity and urging the reader to approach the paintings, as if forcing him or her to read the words or the letters, decode them, and deconstruct them. This makes the viewer an active participant in decoding the symbols of the written language, which, in turn, copes with

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<sup>19</sup> Abd al-Kabir Al-Khatibi, *The Injured Arab Name*, trans. Muhammad Bennis, (Beirut: Al-Jamal publications, 2009), 26.

color that is put there in order to make the language stand out—either hovering over the painting or the opposite, sunken into it. In both cases, the artistic medium injects language with courage and strength, granting it life within the yawning void that separates the impressive “scape” from covert integration into the painting.

The presence of Agbaria’s handwriting in the painting matters because it cannot be imitated. The language that it speaks is the artist’s own. Even if one cannot fathom its meaning, one may easily discern its scattered lines (e.g., “Across the Borderline” (2015) [p. no. 201]). Sometimes these lines are actually plain words that are strewn across the painting in correspondence to the color harmony of the work. In this context, I will focus on two models, one composed of complete words and the other of separate letters.

In “Break of Dawn” (2015) [p. no. 196], if we delete the letters from the work, we are left with an abstract painting with random spots of green, purple, and yellow. The letters embellish the painting with a light shade of blue that invests the work with power channeled in various directions. The letters, both voweled and not, parallel the movements of the man’s body due to the ability of Arabic letters to sway and cling together. If one takes the letter *alif* and keeps it in its upright form, for example, it looks quiet and lifeless. Once it is set in motion and adapted to motion, however, it becomes a “movement letter.” The researcher Zaki Ba Hussein wrote an important and edifying book on the symmetry of Arabic writing and the human body. The letter *‘ayn*, for example, resembles the shape of the human eye, *zā’* the forehead, *nūn* and *bā’* the abdomen and the navel, and so on.<sup>20</sup>

Assuming that the title of a work is a gateway to the text that parallels the entire text—at both of its levels, written and visual—this painting needs no title because it tells the story

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 20 Zaki Ba Hussein, *Body as Metaphor* (Al-Quneitra: Al-Brikali Printing and Publishing, 2000) (in Arabic).

unassisted.

When the shapes of the letters are stripped of accompanying baggage such as semantic elements, vowels, crowns, and other embellishments, such as marks that are not considered a part of the essential value of the letter, what remains is the letter in its familiar general form, a shape that has nothing to do with the forms constructed by the abstract geometric movement of the writing in a certain direction.

In “Nostalgia” (2015) [p. no. 195], Agbaria positioned the words against an integrated harmonic background of brown and yellow that would be suitable for any other motif. Against this backdrop he scattered the words harmoniously in black paint that stands out so powerfully as to be a theme per se. We can read the words but those who are ignorant of their origin cannot connect them to each other. As in “Break of Dawn” and in all works adorned with lines that are letters or words, the words here lean in different directions, filling the space and creating the appearance of a rug, in which the line becomes, instead of a main motif, a decoration inseparable from the floor. The colorful brush strokes that approach the lines recall a similar rhythm in music.

In another work, we see a circle in the middle, filled with ostensibly random brush strokes in yellow, blue, and green. A song of Jerusalem borders the circle, allowing the script to form a spiral line. This painting is typified by a Sufi rhythm that evokes the Sufi circle-dance, which is meant to liberate man from his body. Agbaria articulated this rhythm in an earlier work, “Disappearance” (2014) [p. no. 161], which portrays a dancing Sufi dressed in yellow and crowned with a halo of light. This work, although not featuring letters, embodies the circles that the Sufi draws for enjoyment. This pleasure is unquestionably dependent on the letters that move with circular rhythmicity in “Al-Quds” (2018) [p. no. 209] and “Haifa” (2015) [p. no. 189], in the occult philosophy of the infinite and the circle that emanates from the point and returns to it. The researcher Ali

Abdallah emphasis rhythm in the context of the content and the colorfulness of the letters:

Rhythm is a splendid intersection of the arts and the commonality that creates unity of texture. Rhythm usually derives its aesthetic structure from the elements of the work of art by means of symmetry, simile, repetition, diversity, correspondence—and also contradiction. Rhythm in visual art focuses on uncovering the deep inner aspects of the sublime truth and its texture; that is, it descends to the depth of meaning in its entirety. On this basis, rhythm carries several meanings of form and content in the work of art, echoes the meaning or the content, or emphasizes the meaning and offers interpretations and a range of meanings. Rhythm may be used to underscore an inner conflict. It does not merely wait, emphasize, or add; it also tackles the meaning and reveals the struggle that exists within the set of creative accomplishments.<sup>21</sup>

In this context, Agbaria remarks: “Sometimes I begin the painting in a calculated way but rather quickly I venture into the realm of color. There the intellect plays no role whatsoever; it is emotions that lure me into excitation and pleasure.”<sup>22</sup> Thus the artist circumvents and fractures reality. In contrast to the classic theories, which aim to make everything look pleasant, the Postmodern artist brings reality into the picture and then fractures it in favor of complicated interpretations, in a manner similar to the complexity of our era.<sup>23</sup>

The need to express stress is almost compulsive in Agbaria, who uses letters and words as motifs to fill and flood his works—a practice particularly evident in his prickly-pear wall paintings.

21 Ali Abdallah, *Rhythm Aesthetics in Islamic Art* (Amman: Dar Amana Publishing, 2013), pp.190–191 (in Arabic. Abstract in English: *Al-Balqa Journal*, 16:1 [2013], pp. 169–214).

22 Fouad Agbaria, personal communication, May 5, 2018.

23 Adorno, paraphrased above; Adnan Mubarak, *The Meaning of Modernism in Theodor Adorno*, “Contradiction instead of Harmony,” *Al-Zaman*, London, no. 1402 (2003), p. 171 (in Arabic).

“Yellow Painting with Spiral Line” is the title of one of his works, but what has the title got to do with Sufism? Can Sufism be imported into the world of art and made into a dimension of art? Assuming that the traditional Sufi experiences are linked to Sufi poetry and, particularly, Sufi dance, may paintings, too, be associated with Sufism?

By means of Henri Bergson, art made its way to the pinnacle of Sufism: In philosophical terms, Bergson says, art is a “metaphysical eye.” Artists are able, by dint of their direct understanding, to penetrate the inner essence of life. The artist’s eye has an immense Sufi capacity to unite with the theme.<sup>24</sup> For Bergson, art is an intuition that overtakes the knowing ego and brings the ego into nearly total compliance with intuitive knowledge.

Every painting has a scattered song. It abounds with details and has no emptiness; it breathes, as it were, by means of the viewer’s gaze.

We find time and again that Agbaria is engaging in an ongoing process of diversification, as if wishing that we mount him on a wave that is about to break over a stone in order to experience rebirth in the womb of the horizon.

## (2) **Portraiture**

Agbaria’s portraiture includes family members (children, wife, pictures of grandparents) and professional colleagues and well-known artists. I focus here on his self-portraits, which look like special diaries that express his reflections. Sometimes his portraiture is Expressive; at other times it resembles reality, as in “Self-Portrait” (2012) [p. no. 163], laid on the floor in the form of a yellow and black rag, its threads bundled with a needle. In “Untitled” (2012) [p. no. 165], produced in yellow and black, symbolic shapes of aircraft appear in the foreground on the right as black brush strokes resembling smoke or signs

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<sup>24</sup> William Barnard, *Living Consciousness: The Metaphysical Vision of Henri Bergson* (Albany: New York University, SUNY Press, 2011), p. 17.

of bombardment sit on the bottom. On the left, against a background composed of the same colors, the artist sits on an imaginary chair and reflects against a backdrop of symbolic roses. It is as though he lives in two worlds: the war experiences that he beholds and his dreams of life in a new and rosy world or his hope of attaining a rosy life. The portrait combines two levels: Impressionist and symbolic-Expressive.

In the same year, Agbaria produced a yellow portrait masked with short black brush strokes that embellish or disrupt the depiction in total contrast to the pure yellow background. Notwithstanding the placid-looking setting, the person portrayed has dimensions that reflect clarity and unclarity at once.

In 2013, 2015, and 2017, Agbaria adopted several styles—some typified by harmony and mingling of background and portrait—that manifest in the use of the same colors and techniques, e.g., identical strokes and colors in painting the face. Thus, the artist plays the role of an Expressivist who oscillates between placing clear lines in the painting and inserting random strokes that take control of the work.

In one of these portrayals, the artist is seen with deer's antlers. This representation of an animal that is typified by rapidity of motion may originate in Agbaria's personality, which accommodates psychological elements that represent the wish to run and become free. In other portraits, a state of meditation is dominant; in still others, the artist is seen as a mukhtar, a village mayor. An example of the latter is *King for a Day* (2014) [p. no. 167], in which he wears a sky-blue shirt against the background of two cross sections, one in gold and the other in black. This is considered one of Agbaria's dream-paintings, which express his reveries and boyhood.

These works strongly resemble Agbaria's landscapes. Their forms and nature vary with context, as one would expect of an artist who continually aspires to learn and derive more from his experiments. Harmony and difference in Agbaria's portraits are



stylistic neighbors in their variegation.

### (3) **Political paintings**

Agbaria is not divorced from the reality around him. When he paints his country's villages, hills, or flora, he memorializes a place in his memory.<sup>25</sup> Nearly all of these works are political in their intent. However, living in a reality where death is an active and extant player, particularly in the Arab world, the artist expresses his angst over this reality and paints the wars, the siege, and the occupation. In "Dirty War" (2013) [p. no. 227], he reproduces a village in an abstract Expressive style, in white, red, and orange. Red smoke billows on the horizon. The village is rendered in a similar color, attesting to intensive bomb blasts there. The irony of the title makes us ask, "Is there a 'clean' war?"

In "Shout" (2014) [p. no. 116], we see faces in brown, white, and black, all shouting. This work is packed with detail and evokes the large prickly-pear wall paintings in its appearance.

In 2016, Agbaria produced two paintings that relate to the siege. If we remove the black from "Quarantine in an Open Landscape," 2016–2017, which shows the outlines of people massing at a checkpoint, we are left with an abstract painting that depicts a lovely sprawling landscape [p. no. 133].

Agbaria uses random brush strokes in black to mark a barbed-wire fence or to symbolize a siege that, instead of contenting itself with quarantining individuals and homes, does the same to the vastness of the heavens—a situation that the work protests. From here Agbaria transitions to several works that present machines that sow utter devastation. This is reflected in "Untitled" (2018) [p. no. 118]; in another work, the olives are produced in a realist style [p. no. 122]. In both, machines assault the bucolic scene and destroy the fruit.

The last paintings comprise three rugs that Agbaria painted with a feather instead of needle and thread, underscoring his

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25 Nasrallah, 2013.

decorative talent. On the bottom of one of these paintings, atop a red rug, we see a warship—sailing without touching the red or the blue rug—and a red aircraft in the sky. Another rug creates a frame and is surrounded by a bulldozer. Just the same, the decorations on the rug remain unchanged. The rug symbolizes the Middle East, the Muslim Arab. The paintings signify the current situation in the Middle East, where killing and devastation occur for no reason except to steal from the Arab peoples and appropriate Arab culture from the Arab countries

The question is: Will the Arab culture and heritage in this place endure despite all these wars? The reader retains the right to propose “moot” as the answer.

### **Conclusion**

It is rare for an artist to be able to interpret his or work because art is considered a poetic or Sufi experience. Likening art to Sufism, Jung wrote, is not a pointless exercise. Just as no one can describe the Sufist stream, Jung says that to ask an artist to attach an explanation or a quintessential interpretation to his or her work is absurd and irrational because such works should be covert and vague.<sup>26</sup>

Fouad Agbaria’s body of work, I argue, resembles a rhizome—a word that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari chose for the title of the introduction to their 1993 book *A Thousand Plateaus*. I fully realize that such a similarity may be considered needless hyperbole on my part, since Deleuze and Guattari use this word in a book that deals with identity and noncompliance with Western schizophrenia. They consider their book a disorganized product that mimics a rhizome—a thick horizontal stem that burrows under the ground or lays atop it, sending leaves or stalks up and roots down, its parts resembling and influencing each other but different nevertheless.

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26 Zakaria Ibrahim, *The Problem of Art: A Series of Philosophical Problems 3* (Cairo: Egypt Library, 1979), p. 184 (in Arabic).

Thus, too, to my best understanding, Fouad Agbaria's body of work is a fragmented and divided project, ranging from Impressionist nature to Abstract and thence to calligraphy, all predicated on the artist's license to distribute, disrupt, construct, and deconstruct. Agbaria is an Abstract artist in the full sense of the word, one who migrates among styles. His artistic project amalgamates diverse elements, some constant and others variable. He expresses rhythm in his works by relying on and anticipating repetition that he realizes by means of continuity, order, disorder, harmony, and disharmony.

It is evident, too, that Agbaria is strongly influenced by Sufism, as manifested in circular movement, letters in motion, and mixing and matching of light and darkness.

Agbaria is also graced with metaphysical vision that he expresses in his portraits. Here two factors are central: imagination and intuition. This is why we can see what the artist cannot, and vice versa: why he can see something that lies beyond our field of vision.

The artist Fouad Agbaria is the boy who played with his toys, took them apart, and made of them images and objects that had nothing in common with the original. He's a developed boy who evolved a philosophical outlook of his own, based on asking many questions about psyche, nature, and freedom—questions that his work expresses and mirrors through the media of attentiveness, dance, and interplay of colors.



## Between the Microscope and the Telescope

When Aristotle heard someone brag about his clothing in order to attract the attention of those present, he turned to the man and reprimanded him, saying, “Speak so I can see you!” In his wake came Michelangelo, who commanded a sculpture that he had created to “Speak, stone!”

Nothing influences the human conscience and suffering more than the human language or voice at all of their expressive levels. Fouad Agbaria, in his works that cling to word and letter, unpacks the verbal theme and rebels against it. The viewer, however, is not asked to examine the development of language and words in Agbaria because his works enchant us and deliver a surprise in a process that resembles abduction or hypnosis.

Agbaria’s visual propensities and the sources of his thinking allow him to erupt in a typical burst of color that is manifested particularly in his deconstruction-based paintings. In this manner he challenges the exclusive centrality of classical art and

probes artistic endeavor from within (at the micro level) and from without (macro). Agbaria's deconstructionist approach verges on the Challenge and Reconstruct model, one that insists on reordering the priorities of the theme, the thought, and even the ideology.

Furthermore, Agbaria sometimes tilts toward symbolic / expressive Realism. In works inspired by the poet Mahmoud Darwish, he paints words and expressions from Darwish that influenced him. The very insertion of Darwish's poetic text into the paintings lends the text a new interpretation.

Agbaria's works incorporate a secondary language that spreads among them like an incessant mumbling whisper. This language molds the artist's identity and makes it unique, distinguishing it from others as in the distinction between Al-Muthanabbi's poetry and Darwish's, between Dali's paintings and Picasso's, between Farid al-Atrash's music and that of the al-Rahbani brothers.

Is the artistic act a flight from reality or is it an attempt to reinterpret reality from the source of the artist's inner world? Or might it be an offering of patronage, to which we resort in order to cope with the bitter reality so that this reality will not destroy us or force us into a cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction?

[46]

The paintings appear to have meanings additional to those I have expressed here, particularly because Agbaria, applying his genius, produced them while verging on madness and schizophrenia. The tortuous maze of local and universal existential hardships tends to draw on the beauty reflected in his paintings, allowing everyone, even those of different views and clashing interpretations, to enjoy them. The beauty of the works allows you to interpret them differently each time you see them.

The greatest challenge for any artist who wishes to excel is to create works that transcend his or her emotions and personal territory and give the artist a typical marker akin to a patent in her or his name. Palestinian artists find it difficult to attain this

goal in the plastic arts because Arab society is not knowledgeable in visual art—unlike poetry, which has flowed continuously for generations due to its deep and millennia-old roots in the Arab consciousness.

Al-Nafari, in a harsh response to Modernism, said, “You can see me via my name, and if you call my name you’ll miss me.” I experience something similar in Fouad Agbaria; when I write his name, what I really mean is the brush, the intelligence, the conscience, and the labyrinthine sensation reflected in the dozens of paintings that I stewarded as they were created—including “Umm el-Fahem,” “Shout,” “Woman at Harvest,” “Harvest Field,” “Horizon,” “Passport,” “Along the Border,” “In the Presence of Absence,” “Summer Breeze,” “Nostalgia,” and many others.

I conclude by presenting a poem that I posted to my Facebook page, written under the inspiration of Agbaria’s oeuvre:

May I only understand; is it you who fled  
Or may it be that things flee to you?  
Is it you who contemplates the stars like a sculpture  
Or is it the stars that illuminate you  
With the luminescence of their invasive eyes?  
Do the voices of the celestial bodies cry and shout  
Or do they echo your bitter weeping  
From the piercings of the rack that crushes you  
Is it you who’s strewn along the roads, fragment after  
fragment  
Or is it the roads that are crushing you?  
One and only, you excel in this world  
So would the world remain, would it still be present  
If I were absent from it...?!

Fouad Agbaria, you’re just a wretched madman. How immensely do you enjoy yourself, and how immensely do we enjoy you....!





# My World of Painting: an Emotional and Cognitive Refuge

In my creative art, I document the memory of a place—Musmus, the village where I was born and raised, the place from which I derive my inspiration: a boyhood world between prickly-pear fences, the old house, the fragrance of hyssop, the fields of bequia, fleeting memories of my grandparents, the herd of cattle and the flock of sheep in the grain harvest season, and the olive groves.

Born to a modest family in Musmus in 1981, I was raised and schooled by my father, a Hebrew teacher, and my mother, a well-educated homemaker. The upbringing I received from my parents was typified by a combination of tenderness and rigidity. My family is unique in its strong human connection among all members, showering me with compassion and giving that made me continually crave and love our family reunions—encounters where I enjoyed in particular in the serenity of my grandparents' stories on cold nights, basking

me in warmth and awakening yearning and desire in me.

Many of my works draw their inspiration from the reality of that village; they document the love that tethers me to my inspirational environment. A panoramic landscape painting transports us to mountains and valleys bisected by a road or a dry riverbed—an impressionistic work produced by my imagination, engraved in my memory. The landscape may be the Al-Roha hills, the Al-Lajoun valleys, or the faraway fields that I as an adventurous boy and teenager explored by following their curves and bends.

In my boyhood, I used to wander about on my own—just me and the hills, imbibing the sounds of nature and the universe that I detected from one direction and then from another. Whenever something frightened me, as happened at times, I trembled, but something stronger overtook me and pushed me on. A gust of wind near my home or in Al-Lajoun, a morning outing to the fruit harvest, drops of dew, piercing thistles that made my whole body ache, the mulberries and the vineyards, the figs, pomegranates, and sabras—all of them created an integrated picture of the substantiality that this place had possessed and made me wonder at length about what had happened there.

The contours and colors of those hills and valleys merged inseparably into my memories of the past and motivated me to produce a “**Self-Portrait**” in the same colors. This work sends a message of overstatement in an attempt to meld the person and his place into an integral unit. At first glance, the portrait seems deracinated and unconnected to the other works on display. Instead of settling for this outer appearance, however, it plunges into thoughts composed of several ideas and drawn from several sources of inspiration. The visual language in which I express myself is, in fact, the language in which I write my memoirs. Thus the self-portrait is created in the present as a witness to time that has passed.

During my academic studies at Bezalel, my works concerned themselves with tearing down and rebuilding, making a mess and cleaning it up, just as in my childhood I dismantled my toys only to put them back together again. I wanted to wipe off the soot from the ugly surface and expose, in a dialectic act, the unbridgeable opposites of ugliness and beauty, of black and pure white.

I also made attempts to revive decorative-mold art in practice works using charcoal, graffiti, and lithographic printing. I tried to position symbols of the culture that I had inherited within the jumble of schools and styles that had little to do with me, to describe the dualism of innocent beauty, and to propose ways of resolving their contradictions.

When I finished my studies, I chose to return to the area of my birth—to Umm el-Fahem—and make a living there as a driving teacher. Thus my life proceeded in two parallel systems: “real” life and artist-life. Indeed, I engaged at this time with the gulf that separated my dour quotidian routine from my life as an artist. I tried to point viewers in the direction of the scenery of my childhood in Musmus as I reexamined the boundaries of the location as a sober and socially and politically aware adult.

I see the prickly pear as a symbol of survival. Even in abandoned places and destroyed villages, it remains in the landscape like a signpost, affirming its existence and standing over the village like a sentry.

The prickly pear appears in large works that are typified by optimistic bold multicolor embroidery and finds expression in various ways that extol its cyclical and indomitable nature. It is painted in the form of a wall or a rampart, bristling but also yielding rich nutritious fruit in which sweet memory is imbued. Sometimes it represents a perfect world; here the cactus is complete, leaves and fruit included; at other times it is a graying, crumbling bush, symbolizing destruction. This

destruction, however, is temporary; from its decrepitude the prickly pear will regenerate itself, turn green, and again give forth its sweet, nutritious fruit.

In more advanced stages of my work, I lead the prickly pear to a place of deconstruction—a symbol of the disintegration of Arab society. I fill the canvas with a model of prickly-pear leaves dipped into a platter of yellow and brown contour lines. Here one finds nothing complete that can be grasped. In other works, the same childhood landscape is treated to decorative graphic flattening as an expression of pain and sorrow for the location, which has been defaced and trampled by an angel of destruction represented by bulldozers. The flattening of the scene expresses a criticism of the State of Israel, which does not allow life and building in this childhood landscape, thus rendering it useless.

Later works express a profound frustration that traces its origins to the problem of my status and identity in Israel. The critical contemplation neutralizes the remaining colors, which contract into a platter that accommodates only shades of yellow and brown. The images to which I relate are greatly simplified. In **“Checkpoint,”** I describe a soldier aiming his rifle at an Arab and ordering him to undress. The painting attests to a personal experience that I had while attending Bezalel and living near Jerusalem, having to cross checkpoints each and every day.

In recent years, my work has been expressing my search for the transition from techniques to development of ideas. I move between technical and cognitive worlds, returning and seeking expression within and through colors. The works are typified by free brushstrokes and knife etchings of gridlike lines of width and height. Layers of gray and black add motion to the painting, allowing the yellow to rise and overshadow the other hues without destroying their harmony. By etching into the paint, I lend the flat painting a measure of power and acute

expressiveness. One who views it from up close may think that I used a needle and thread to produce the effect because the etched lines create the impression of cloth texture. This engraving technique evokes a childhood memory in me: a man who used a needle and thread to produce straw brooms. As a boy, I waited eagerly for the “straw-broom maker” to visit our village, as he did at grain harvest time. Passionately I looked forward to the moment when I would sit at his side and watch him create those brooms with his nimble flying fingers.

The singularity of any artistic act is inseparable from the shaping of heritage. Heritage is fundamentally a living force and, as such, it changes radically. A sculpture or a monument of Venus may appear in forms other than its Greek one, the one that made it respectable and valuable, differing from the gaze of the mediaeval nuns who considered it as vile, as an idol. Both specimens, however, vie for absolute hegemony. Here lies the unique characteristic of transposing an action from one historical era to another, each specimen copying over a heritage and a culture of the time.

Etching in paint is a dualistic act in that it both reveals and conceals a surface. In my recent works, I express the aspects of the suffering that I experience, including collective and self-critical aspects in order to create a tight bond between my artistic endeavors and the society within which I live, with its abundance of problems.

# Fouad Agbaria

Born in Musmus village  
Lives and works in Umm el-Fahem

## Education

- 2014 MFA (Masters in Fine Arts), Department of Creative Art, University of Haifa, Haifa  
2000–2004 BFA (Bachelors in Fine Arts), Department of Art, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem

## Solo exhibitions

- 2015 **Between the Overt and the Covert**, Ramot Menashe Art Gallery. Curators: Yonit Kadosh and Miri Werner  
**Nostalgia to the Light**, Zawyeh Gallery, Ramallah. Curator: Suleiman Mlihat  
2014 Between the Personal and the Political, Al-Bir Association Gallery, 'Arara village. Curator: Manar Zoabi  
**Back to the Open Spaces**, Kibbutz Beeri Art Gallery. Curator: Ziva Yalin  
**King for a Day**, University of Haifa Art Gallery  
**King for a Day**, Artists' House, Tel Aviv. Curator: Daniel Kahane-Levinson  
2012 **Visual Memory**, Umm el-Fahem Art Gallery. Curator: Abed Abdi

## Group exhibitions

- 2018 **Checkpoint**, Museum of Islamic Art, Jerusalem. Curator: Dr. Shirat Miriam Shamir  
Opening Exhibition, Museum of Palestinian Art, New York  
**Jerusalem**, Zawyeh Art Gallery, Ramallah. Curator: Ziad Anani  
2017 **Spring Collective**, Zawyeh Art Gallery, Ramallah  
2016 **Jaffa Art Salon**, Tel Aviv-Yafo. Curators: Amir Neuman and Yair Rothman  
Winter Exhibition, Zawyeh Art Gallery, Ramallah  
**Bond**, Orient House Gallery, Amman. Curator: Rula Alami  
**Lust**, 54 Art Gallery, Beirut

- 2015 **Fascinating Point of Departure**, David Yellin College Art Gallery. Curator: Nava Barazani  
**Land**, Tamra Art Gallery. Curator: Ahmad Knaan  
**Land**, Kibbutz Kefar Yehoshua Gallery. Curator: Netta Haver  
**The Generous Tree**, Umm el-Fahem Art Gallery, Curator: Daniel Kahane-Levinson  
**MFA Graduates Exhibition**, University of Haifa, Makom Art Gallery, Tel Aviv. Curator: Itzhak Golombek  
**Animal, Vegetable, Mineral**, Valley Railroad Site, Kefar Yehoshua. Curators: Michal Shachnai Yaakobi and Netta Haver  
**Masters Degree Final Exhibition**, University of Haifa. Curators: Itzhak Golombek, Tsivi Geva  
**Portraits**, Kibbutz Ayalet Hashahar Art Gallery. Curator: Motti Golan
- 2013 **Galilee Color**, art fair in Galilean Hatzor. Curator: Tali Bin-Nun  
**Painting Station no. 6**, Ramle Municipal Gallery, Contemporary Art Stations Network. Curator: David Wakstein  
**Olive Tree**, Mormon University, Jerusalem
- 2012 **The Olive in Palestinian Art**, Al-Sara'a Gallery, Khan el-Basha, Nazareth. Curator: Ahmad Knaan.  
**Painting Station no. 5**, Ramle Municipal Gallery, Contemporary Art Stations Network. Curator: David Wakstein  
**Aviv Salon for Contemporary Art**, Jaffa Port
- 2011 **A Picture from Palestinian Art**, Tira Gallery. Curator: Naal Kadari
- 2010 **Jaffa Salon for Palestinian Art**, Jaffa Port. Curator: Ahmad Knaan  
**From Here and from There**, Tamra Art Gallery. Curator: Ahmad Knaan
- 2009 **Hug**, Hand for All Art Gallery, 'Arara  
**Black**, Artists' House Art Gallery, Nazareth. Curator: Farid Abu Shakra (catalogue)
- 2005 **Rhythm**, Tamra Art Gallery. Curator: Ahmad Knaan  
**Wounds and Bandages**, Umm el-Fahem Art Gallery. Curator: Eppie Gan (Catalogue)  
**Art Epiphanies**, Umm el-Fahem Art Gallery. Curator: Said Abu Shakra  
**Black Coffee**, Beit Hagefen Art Gallery, Haifa. Curator: Hannah Kopler  
**Landscapes**, Beit Hagefen Art Gallery, Haifa. Curator: Hannah Kopler  
Artic 7, **Ramat Gan Museum for Israeli Art**
- 2004 **Untitled, Exhibition of Graduates of the Department of Art**, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem (Catalogue)  
**Playing Field**, Beit Hagefen Art Gallery, Haifa. Curator: Hannah Kopler
- 2002 **Untitled**, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem

