

Marwan's exhibition reminder of Syria's cultural destruction

In numerous corners of the Arab world, [modern and historic artifacts](#) are at best being neglected and at worst being destroyed. Libya, Iraq, Palestine and Algeria have all suffered conflict in the past few decades, but none more so than Syria, which has seen centuries-old communities, markets, architecture and art that took years, sometimes decades, to construct suffer decimation in a matter of months from regime and rebel artillery. In Syria, after the weapons are laid down and the [foreign mercenaries](#) depart, it will be the Syrians themselves who rebuild the country.

Until this [tragic civil war](#) ends, the outside world can support the documentation, archiving, preservation and promotion of [Syrian culture](#) so that the invading Islamic State (IS) fighters and foreign mercenaries do not succeed in erasing the culturally rich recent past and replace it with its own nefarious version. In that spirit, this past summer the opportunity presented itself to support the young architect Khaled Malas in representing Syria at the [Venice Architecture Biennial](#) with his project “[Excavating the Sky](#).” Even in these dark moments, it is essential that culturally rich and diverse Syria remains alive and present in our minds and that the image molded by extremists is prevented from displacing it.

Another Syria is also receiving deserved attention in the art world. Earlier this year, I traveled to Berlin to meet with the Syrian-born artist Marwan Kassab-Bachi and to visit his studio. In an apartment in the Tiergarten area of the city, I found myself enthralled by his work, as if I had walked into a cave of treasures.

“This series I produced after I had just arrived in Germany, in the 1960s, when I worked in a tannery,” Marwan, 80, recounted, pointing to it with a

hand also holding a cigarette. “I used to work all day and paint all night.”

Marwan explained how desperate life had been in those days, about how many of his works were sold for a fraction of their value and how people took advantage of his trust, some never paying for or returning works he had allowed them to take. I positioned myself on the ground in front of two works: “Selbstbildnis” (“Selfportrait”) from 1964, which would adorn the cover of the catalogue for his show at the [Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Portugal, and a 1965 portrait of Munif al-Razzaz, former secretary-general of the Syrian Baath Party covering his right ear with his hand. Both works, from Marwan's “tannery era,” were so engrossing that I got lost in them, only realizing how long I had been looking at them when Marwan asked where I was. As I stood up, Marwan said, “I kept these for decades. I refused to let go of them.”

Over the past few years, I have been keen to see as many of Marwan's works as possible. I traveled to Amman to see “[Al Wakef](#)” (1970) at the Darat al Funun, where he taught for many summers, and I viewed a New Figuration work from the 1970s at the Berlinische Galerie, which has acquired more than 200 of Marwan's artworks. Few living artists can lay claim to being among the very best of their generation. This is a claim, however, that Marwan could have easily made in 1994, when he became the first Arab member of the prestigious [Akademie der Künste](#) in Germany.

Next month, the [Barjeel Art Foundation](#) will host the first solo exhibition in the Arabian Gulf region of Marwan's work. “Topographies of the Soul” opens at the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, Dec. 6. Although Marwan's inaugural solo show in the Gulf has been long in coming, his work is not entirely disassociated from the Gulf region, ironically where much of the funding for extremist and foreign fighters wreaking havoc in his native Syria originates.

The artist had formed a close friendship with [Abdul-Rahman Munif](#) (1933-2004), a writer born to a Saudi father who became famous for his controversial five-part novel, “[Cities of Salt](#).” Munif's series, banned in

Saudi Arabia, recounts the evolution of life and the advent of modernity in Arabian Peninsula towns following the discovery of oil and was seen by many as critical of the tribal structure of these societies. When asked about his friendship with Munif, Marwan replied, “We would stay up talking for hours.”

Marwan first encountered Munif in the 1950s in Damascus, but only became close friends with him many years later. Their relationship resulted in Munif writing a rare collaborative book, “[Journey of Art and Life](#)” (1997), which was about Marwan. Following Munif’s death in 2004, [new editions](#) of many of his books were reprinted including Marwan’s works, among them “Cities of Salt,” “When We Left the Bridge,” “East of the Mediterranean,” “Mother of Vows,” “Memories for the Future” and “The Journey of Light.” Another recently published book, “[Literature of Friendship](#),” includes previously unpublished letters exchanged by Munif and Marwan over the years, a testament to their friendship and sustained interaction despite the geographic distance between them.

Marwan has lived in Berlin since 1957 and saw divided Germany recover from the devastating destruction of World War II and then reunite 25 years ago, becoming one of the most prosperous nations in the world.

Marwan's adopted home offers a tale of hope for the artist’s country of birth, that a nation ravaged by war can be rebuilt and catapult to the forefront. Although Marwan spent most of his life in Europe, his relationship with the Arab world endured through his painting and the friendships he developed with intellectuals from the region.

Defeating IS will not be possible with military might alone. An ideological battle must also be waged, and art and culture are another front in this war for the soul of the Arab world.