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# The Syrian artists using their medium as a weapon

Tahira Yaqoob examines the art emerging from the Syrian uprisings and asks whether it is the role of an artist to pin his or her colours to a political cause.



## Tahira Yaqoob

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March 7, 2013

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Syrian artist Jaber Al Azmeh with his work at the Green Art Gallery in Alserkal Avenue in Dubai.

Pawan Singh / The National

The handful of boxes arrived just a couple of weeks ago, holding everything she needed to remind her of Syria.

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### FASHION

There were no clothes inside, no books and no CDs. There was nothing in the package other than about 30 paintings and photographs.

As Delphine Leccas sifted through the boxes she'd stashed away in Damascus 18 months ago, the artwork brought back bittersweet memories.

"It is too painful to think about," she says now. "I was sure I would go back but I have to accept I will not be returning any time soon. It has still not fully sunk in."

The painting and photography collection she salvaged has a particular poignancy for the 39-year-old Parisian curator, bringing with it recollections of the 13 years she spent in her adopted home, Damascus, before leaving in August 2011.

She is not alone. For the Syrian artists she represents and who are now largely living in exile, their artwork does not simply serve as a painful anchor rooting them to their homeland.

It has also been a lifeline, with many of them expressing the torment of seeing their towns and villages ripped apart in this two-year-old armed conflict.

From its beginning, the conflict has seen an outpouring of sketches, graphic designs, mocked-up posters, cartoons and homemade videos posted on the internet, all tempered with a rage at the injustice of civilian suffering and contempt for Syrian president Bashar Al Assad.

Such work would have been unthinkable before the revolution began. But with galleries shutting down as their owners escape and few daring to put their names to their bold, critical work, the artists' only outlet was to post their work anonymously online on Facebook pages bearing titles such as Art and Freedom, The Syrian People Know Their Way and Comic4Syria.

Now, for the first time, the work has been compiled in a book. Leccas' newly-published *Syrie L'Art En Armes* (Syrian Art is a Weapon) shows the brutality of conflict through the eyes of the nation's artists.

"Almost all artists have been working on this topic, something that is very particular to this revolution," she says. "There has been a sudden explosion of this kind of work. It has probably been inside them all this time but the revolution has given them the power and the authority to express it.

"The artists have been very productive, but with no place to present their work, they have been posting it on Facebook and social networks."

In a revolution whose roots began in an innocuous work of art - it was the detention and torture of schoolchildren who daubed anti-Assad graffiti on walls in Deraa that sparked the start of the uprising - the artwork has been as vital as a tool of communication with the outside world as it has been cathartic for its creators.

As quickly as pages were taken down - and the Syrian Electronic Army has been vociferous in purging websites deemed to be anti-regime - more have appeared in a sign of defiance.

"It has always been difficult for Syrians to express themselves totally freely," says Leccas.

"There was always a kind of self-censorship. Before the revolution, you always felt while the work of a new generation of Syrian artists was interesting, it was trying to look like something else. It was more symbolic and metaphorical. Almost overnight, it became much more expressive, more personal and more pure. The revolutionary art is original and looks like nothing else."

Now that only a handful of artists are still working in Syria and most have fled, fearing for their lives, many now put their names to their work.

Some of the 20 artists featured in the book offer a thinly disguised polemic; others focus on the human tragedy.

And as the violence rages on, that artistic output is becoming bolder still.

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The marriage of art and revolution is not new. Dictators from Joseph Stalin to Saddam Hussein have used art to infiltrate society with their messages, whether it is by controlling artistic institutions, blitzing a population with jingoistic posters, churning out propaganda or by censorship.

But equally telling is the fact that the toppling of a regime, or a population under siege, can lead to a surge in creative expression. Stalin's death in 1953 triggered a wave of nonconformist art in Russia. Picasso's *Guernica* was painted in 1937 in response to the fascist dictator Francisco Franco's stranglehold on Spain and the bombing of a Basque Country village at his behest.

But rarely does original artwork appear while the violence is still unfolding. The revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya may have used the internet to mobilise support and galvanise their cause, but the web was not a platform for a wave of fresh creativity, nor did the Arab Spring produce art elsewhere to the extent it has been seen in Syria.

Leccas says: "Artists in Syria have been using the internet to express themselves and send a message. In a way, it has been a necessity for them to survive and express what they are struggling against."

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When pro-regime forces turned to visuals to enforce their message, from pasting Assad's image on every street to posting videos on Facebook, it naturally followed that anyone with opposing views would do the same. Leccas adds: "It was almost the only way to express yourself both internationally and on a human level.

"Artists turned around that pro-regime campaign in a funny and simple way that could be understood by everyone. They changed their subject matter from abstract and used different media, so instead of painting, they were using graphic design and photo montage to get the message out more quickly."

One of the first striking news images of the Syrian revolution in 2011 was the tearing down of a statue of Assad's father Hafez, in scenes reminiscent of the toppling of Saddam's statue in Iraq in 2003.

That symbolic act was repeated on Monday in Raqqa, the city at the heart of this week's fierce fighting as rebel forces struggled to maintain control against a bombardment by regime troops.

Waseem Al Marzouk's mixed media *Deraciner la Tyrannie* (Tearing Down Tyranny), with a tank adorned with flowers hoisting the deposed statue, seems an eerie portent of those scenes this week of jubilant protesters knocking Assad's statue from its pedestal.

Akram Al Halabi's photo series is pared down to a set of stills taken from videos published on the internet. Blurred and taken out of context, they are stripped down to the bare inhumanity of the violence and its impact on ordinary citizens.

He overlays the images with newspaper typescript to explain what can be seen: house, door, window, trees or in the case of victims, eyes, mouth, ears, blood and in *Children of Syria, We Will Never Forget You*, he prints a single word over the dead child's heart: Syria.

In *I Have a Dream* featuring a little girl carried in a man's arms, taken from an image from Homs, the letters scatter over the child's smashed leg and lifeless body. They cease to make sense.

The clinical listing of body parts, whether evoking the apathy and desensitisation of a population that has grown accustomed to the killing, or representing an attempt to make sense of the senseless, is profound and moving in its simplicity.

"I just wrote what I see - no more," says Al Halabi. "Calling things by their names, writing the words of what we see, is just to remind ourselves that it exists no more."

*Non* by an anonymous collective is an equally powerful series in Leccas's book. Men and women are shown from the neck down to prevent identification, with their arms in slings, spelling out the Arabic word *la*, meaning no.

Yet even amid the savagery, artists have found cause for humour. Assad is a derisory figure in the work of the pseudonymous Abo Alshams Alsoorrii, whether drawn as an effeminate-looking lion or depicted being ridden by his henchmen and leaping for a carrot dangling from a rifle.

Mohamad Omran ridicules the shabiha, armed government loyalists acting in support of the ruling Baath party, by drawing them as thuggish tattooed brutes in tight-fighting clothes.

That mockery has been echoed in films produced during the last two years. Abou Naddara, a group of Syrian filmmakers, has been releasing short movies every Friday. Some are sombre, such as *In The End*, featuring a roll-call of victims. Others like *My People Love Me* are a parody of those in power.

>>>

And the collective known as *Masasit Mati*, named after the favoured drink of Baathist militia, has developed a cult following thanks to its 15-episode show *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator*, released on YouTube and starring the Syrian president "Beeshu" as a lispng finger puppet.

In the episode *Who Wants to Kill a Million?* a parody of the popular TV game show, there is no answer when he uses his phone-a-friend lifeline and he sulks when he loses his chance to go on a killing spree.

"The use of humour in describing the tragedy is a common trait in this work," says Leccas.

"It is a way of laughing rather than crying when things are too dark. Most of the work in the book was by artists inspired by government propaganda."

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Tammam Azzam, 33, grew up in Sweida in the south-west of the country staring out at the same monotonous view of black volcanic rock, day after day, and painting the deserted landscape.

"I lived in my little village and saw this flat view every day with no mountains, no valleys. I painted this emptiness because it was all I knew," he says.

He was working on his *Laundry* series, which featured clothes hanging on washing lines to evoke the sense of homes abandoned and leaving behind only memories, when the revolution broke out.

It was, he says, as if his work had suddenly gained meaning; as if he had been painting scenes he had not really understood until then.

"What I have been expressing for years is now coming true," he says.

Sultan Al Qassemi: Taking a 'Warrior's Break'

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And when it became dangerous for him to stay in Syria in September 2011, his home became one of the abandoned ones too, as his family fled, leaving everything behind.

His work took on an eerie, bleak quality: his laundry lines, painted white and black in earlier work, became gold, red and black to represent money, blood and death. Azzam became so disheartened by the fires endlessly burning in Syria that he set fire to one of his own canvases and exhibited it with a burnt-out heart.

"I left because they were calling up people into the military. As I had done my military service I knew one day, the call would come for me," he says flatly.

"I was not prepared to kill people for demonstrating and the alternative was to join the Free Syria Army. Either way you would have to kill someone - or be killed."

Under the umbrella of the Ayyam gallery, which has branches in the UAE, Syria and Saudi Arabia, he arrived in Dubai with his wife and six-year-old daughter.

"We left everything - our house, my studio, everything we had built - possibly forever because we do not know when the revolution will end," he says.

While he takes risks by publicly criticising the regime through his art, the "real heroes" are still in Syria: "There are a lot of very courageous people making revolutionary art but they cannot exhibit in Damascus.

"All they can do is post it on Facebook. My art will not affect the revolution but the revolution has changed me. It has changed art, music, everything; we are all just little parts in the bigger picture."

He says artists have a responsibility to express what is happening in their native country: "If you are not involved, then what are you doing?"

"How can you draw flowers when this is going on? I am Syrian. I cannot say it is none of my business. These people are my business; they are my family.

"Before the revolution, we said art is art. It still is, but now it has to express people's pain. People have to take their positions now."

Jaber al Azmeh, 39, left Syria a month after Azzam and is now based in Doha but feels the same sense of dislocation.

It transformed his work from abstract art into something much more direct and loaded with meaning.

His Wounds series, originally posted on Art and Freedom and eventually exhibited in the Green Art Gallery in Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz, last year, features a series of photographs of black silhouetted figures against a red background.

The colours are revolutionary, the symbolism even more so as he got his subjects to re-enact events they had witnessed or heard about.

"In the beginning," he says, "people were very careful about what they said, even to their friends.

"The secret police were everywhere and it was known that if you said things you shouldn't, you might disappear."

He too felt compelled to make his voice heard through his artwork: "They were so aggressive and violent and people were dying on the streets.

"Whatever an artist does, it is never going to compare to someone going on the streets and risking their life. You should be there with your people otherwise you are not one of them."

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But is it the role of the artist to pin his or her colours to a political cause? And is the message as effective when the artists are removed from the very people they say they represent and cannot see the tragedies they depict firsthand?

Al Azmeh says: "I do not decide to do a certain kind of work. Artists simply reflect what they are feeling and thinking.

"If I had stayed in Syria, I could never have shown this work."

His material and inspiration comes from his contact with friends and activists still in Syria.

"I am removed only physically," he says. "It is very important artists in Syria produce work in support of the revolution.

"Suffering is related to art, which in turn expresses hope, pain and happiness."

But if the battle lines have been drawn between rebel fighters and government loyalists, they exist too between artists and the community they thrive in.

Ahmad Moualla, the veteran Syrian painter behind Power and People exhibited at last year's Abu Dhabi Art fair, was at pains to emphasise he was not depicting Syria but the general struggle between authority and the individual.

Yasmin Atassi, director of the Green Art Gallery, bristles at talk of revolutionary art: "I am not a fan of what artists are doing now.

"I do not like things which are so in-your-face. It is empty and does nothing for me.

"We have to be wary of a bombardment of images where nothing is analytical."

She thinks Syrian artists have yet to develop their own language and need time to reflect on the current crisis, the repercussions of which will be felt "for the next 20 or 30 years across the region".

Syrian-born Rania Moudaress Silva continues to produce multi-media art focusing on birds, flowers and women.

"I hate politics," she told Lebanon's Daily Star. "I am not going to change what I am painting just because they are killing and murdering."

And the filmmaker Cécile Boex, who was based in Syria for a decade, says it bothers her that militant expressions are now being classed as art: "I find the confusion between the militant and artistic act very problematic. I am pretty shocked by the kind of artistic business around the Arab Spring that emanates from cultural institutions today."

Whatever the politics, there is little doubt frank artistic expression within Syria comes at a high price. In 2011 political cartoonist Ali Ferzat, a former friend of the president whose sketches were becoming increasingly critical of him, had his hands smashed by masked government militia who shouted that he would not be able to harm Assad's reputation any more.

Ferzat, who won the Reporters Without Borders press freedom prize, later reflected: "It is like a voice shouting inside me.

"At the start of the protests I felt like I was possessed, like I was not in control of my own body anymore."

Artists, activists and journalists continue to be targeted in a campaign orchestrated by Assad's militia.

The anti-regime painter and sculptor Mathna al Masarany was shot by a sniper in Homs earlier this year. The journalists Bassam Jneid and Diana Jabour have been charged with "undermining the reputation and dignity of the Syrian army".

And at the funeral last year of musician Rabie Al Ghazzi, who was thought to have been assassinated by regime loyalists, mourners including the author Khaled Khalifa were set upon by baton-wielding government agents.

Amjad Wardeh - whose depiction of Hamza Bakour, a teenager whose jaw was blown off in a shell explosion, features in Leccas's book - had worked on a series called Refugees but had never exhibited them in public until a show in London last November.

"How could it be safe to paint images of the revolution when it is dangerous to even speak the word freedom out loud in Umayyad Square?" he asked at the time.

But it seems the rest of the world is taking note. An exhibition called Syria's Art of Resistance, originally shown in London last year, will be showcased in Copenhagen later this month.

And Leccas, who is the co-founder of the now nomadic Visual Arts Festival Damascus, will be taking the work of Syrian artists to Istanbul later this year.

Like the owners of other Damascus-based galleries, Hisham Samawi, co-founder of the Ayyam gallery, stopped exhibiting in the city and transferred his collection to Dubai.

The Syrian venue has been converted into a studio space - and sometimes a place to sleep - for the artists he supports, who were moved from the more dangerous suburbs into the relative calm of the city centre.

Samawi says he has noticed dramatic changes in their work: "Once artists are out of danger, perhaps they feel more relaxed and able to express themselves," he says.

The transformation includes Mohammad Orabi's playful figures, who were historically depicted with their eyes shut but painted wide open as soon as the revolution began.

"It is almost like they lived behind this false facade and now they are waking up to see the world for the first time," says Samawi.

"The artist told me he felt before we were living in a dream state and now we are awake to the world's realities."

Thaier Helal switched from abstract paintings to suddenly producing a body of political, military and figurative work.

"As an artist," says Samawi, "you don't know how to fight back and feel helpless. This is their way of raising awareness.

"Not all Syrian artists are political now but through history, they have documented and vocalised the environment we live in.

"The world we live in has changed and it is their responsibility to change with it."

**Syrie L'Art En Armes by Delphine Leccas is available in French on amazon.com priced Dh124. English and Arabic versions will be published at a later date.**

Tahira Yaqoob is a freelance writer based in Dubai.

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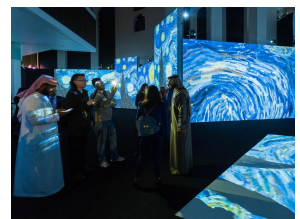
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- [Television \(/arts-culture/television\)](#)
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#### Lifestyle (/lifestyle)

- [Fashion \(/lifestyle/fashion\)](#)
- [Food \(/lifestyle/food\)](#)
- [Luxury \(/lifestyle/luxury\)](#)
- [Travel \(/lifestyle/travel\)](#)
- [Family \(/lifestyle/family\)](#)
- [Home \(/lifestyle/home\)](#)
- [Wellbeing \(/lifestyle/wellbeing\)](#)
- [Motoring \(/lifestyle/motoring\)](#)
- [Comment \(/lifestyle/comment\)](#)

#### Sport (/sport)

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- [Football \(/sport/football\)](#)
- [Cricket \(/sport/cricket\)](#)
- [F1 \(/sport/f1\)](#)
- [Golf \(/sport/golf\)](#)
- [Horse Racing \(/sport/horse-racing\)](#)
- [Tennis \(/sport/tennis\)](#)
- [Rugby \(/sport/rugby\)](#)
- [North American \(/sport/north-american\)](#)
- [Comment \(/sport/comment\)](#)
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