

# SYRIA

# ART IN A TIME OF WAR

*Crushed by the current political climate, Syrian artists in exile, free from censorship, use technology to create and share their work.*

BY PIA AUNG



Freedom Graffiti: a digital work by Syrian artist Tammam Azzam who superimposed Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* on to an image of a Syrian bomb site.

Photo: Courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery

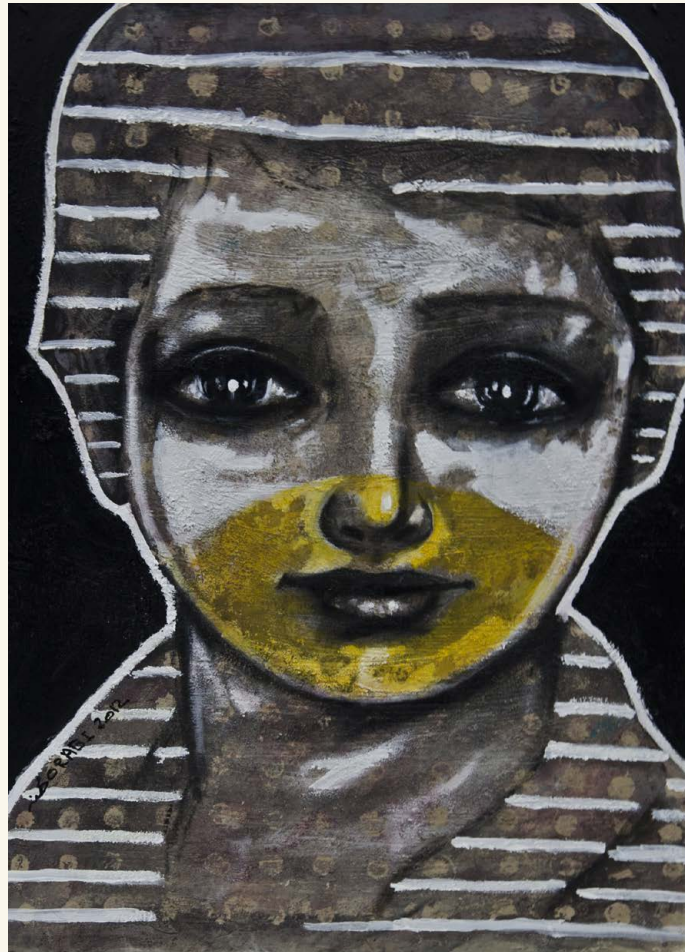
Syrian art is dubbed by some as stumbling upon a new movement—where recently exiled artists have greater freedoms to conceive without the shackles of censorship, while increasingly drastic conditions at home drive the wheels of creation. The results are a surge in politically inspired activist art, with technology, digital media and a globally engaged audience married into the mix.

The first decade of the 21st century saw the emergence of a burgeoning art scene in Syria. With galleries such as Atassi Gallery flourishing since its opening

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in 1993, followed by Ayyam Gallery in 2006, there was an air of excitement and freedom in the city with platforms for eager talent ready to engage. Today the Ayyam Gallery in Damascus has been converted into a place of refuge for those same artists to work and, on occasion, reside in. Others have been forced to flee to safer havens including the Gulf, Egypt and Lebanon. Last month an image by artist in exile Tammam Azzam went viral with over twenty thousand likes on Facebook in just a few hours. The diaspora responded in droves to the images of Gustav Klimt's masterpiece "The Kiss" photoshopped as graffiti on a bullet-ridden building. The haunting photo, breathtaking in its contrast, juxtaposed an image synonymous with love, contrasted against the war torn reality of a crumbling facade.

The internet—which only became available in Syria in 2000—is now



Mohannad Orabi 'Profile Picture' 80 X 60 cm. mixed media on Canvas Paper, (2012)

the very tool supporting freedom of expression for Syria and for many in exile it is the only way to communicate freely with those who remain. Hisham Samawi, the founding director for Ayyam Gallery says, "Technology is definitely playing a huge role in the development of the art scene in the Middle East. Not only does it allow for an artist to reach a much wider audience, as we saw with Tammam's 'Freedom Graffiti,' but it also allows artists from our region to be exposed to the rest of the world as well."

Artist Mohannad Orabi was recently forced to leave Syria and is now living in exile in Egypt. Constrained to resort to communication via the Internet;

Facebook has taken on an entirely different function in his life. So much so, that this influence has inspired his latest series of work entitled "Profile Portraits" which will be the inaugurating exhibition for the Ayyam Gallery in Jeddah. Using images of family and friends as a departure point, Orabi manifests an extension of the digital world in a stylized permanence. Childlike, the faces seem vulnerable and mesmerizing. Dark eyes lure the viewer into an abyss of apprehension. The disturbance echoes the distance between the artist and his loved ones, expressing a melancholia intrinsically linked to his exile, the abomination at home and a newly realized reliance on technology.