

INTERVIEWS

TAMMAM AZZAM

February 23, 2016 • Tammam Azzam talks about his exhibition in Dubai



View of "Tammam Azzam: The Road," 2016.

Like many Syrian artists, Tammam Azzam left his homeland five years ago in search of safer shores. After arriving in Dubai, where he still lives, Azzam spent years making political art that

lamented the international community's passive efforts to put an end to one of the bloodiest wars in recent history. In 2013, Azzam's Freedom Graffiti, a piece in which the artist superimposed Klimt's The Kiss on the demolished facade of a Damascus building, went viral on social media and landed the artist in the news. His current exhibition, "The Road," which is on view at Ayyam Gallery in Dubai through March 3, 2016, marks Azzam's return to painting after years spent working in digital media.

AFTER I LEFT SYRIA FOR DUBAI IN 2011, I didn't have a studio and had to stop painting for a couple of years. This drove me to make digital collages, which I saw as an interesting challenge and took as an opportunity to explore what had until then been uncharted territory for me. What began as a temporary fix became an integral part of my practice even after I was able to set up my new workspace.

My current exhibition is a culmination of that effort. As time went by, I found myself further invested in painting and this body of work. Most of the canvases on display are from 2015, which is when the work really started coming together. When I was living in Damascus, I used to draw my inspiration from the city itself and my daily encounters with its inhabitants. But now I've had to adjust to another reality—one that requires me to source my information elsewhere. As such, I began relying on journalistic images, as these photos represent the closest I'll get to Syria. I chose photographs of places that felt completely vacant and desolate. I became obsessed with the brutality that this emptiness conveyed.

I've always been drawn to images of urban life and the liveliness that used to abound in Syrian cities. Now that the people are gone and the atmosphere is entirely different, I've begun to seek narratives found in the abandoned houses and the desolation of the deserted streets. The empty places have me wondering about the fate and whereabouts of the people who once filled these neighborhoods. I wanted the paintings to reverberate beyond the wreckage, perhaps as a way to counter the desolation brought on by the war.

While I know that my work will always be seen through the scope of the war, I'm more interested in exploring the theme of existential voids that comes out of this destruction. This is why I've turned the gallery's staircase leading up the second floor into an installation by filling it with rubble and setting up a mirror at the end of the staircase that forces the viewers to face themselves amid the wreckage. I'd like to think that my work can go beyond the

political narrative people will undoubtedly assign to it, and I hope that the viewer can judge my work based on its formal qualities as well. Political events come and go, but what remains is the art produced as a testimony of that time.

— *Translated from Arabic and as told to Lara Atallah*

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