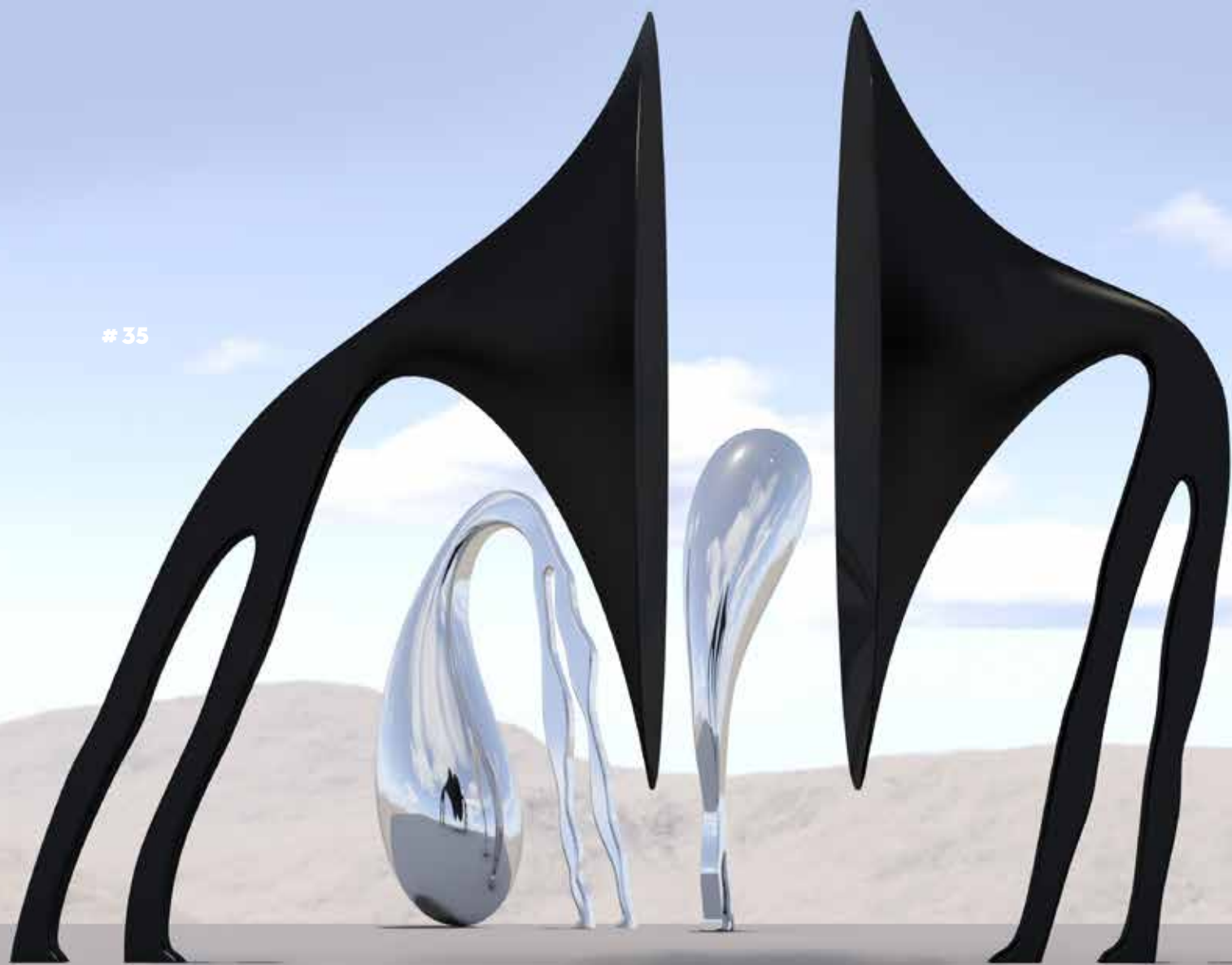


SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

35



THE ONE-ON-ONE ISSUE

• IN CONVERSATION WITH NADIM KARAM • SAFWAN DAHOUL ON THE ORIGINS OF DREAMS • ONE-ON-ONE WITH CATHERINE DE ZEGHER •
• WELCOME TO WALLPAPER • DR. ZAKI NUSSEIBEH TALKS COLLECTING • IN THE LIBRARY WITH MOHAMED AL MAZREOU •

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WALKING DOWN SYRIA'S DARKENING ROAD

Tammam Azzam's latest solo show abandons hopeful colours for the grim black-and-white truth about the present reality in Syria

by Danna Lorch

In Dubai, a peaceful enclave with a blossoming contemporary art scene, it's all too easy to forget the steadily worsening conflict affecting so many civilians' lives in nearby Syria. Syrian artist Tammam Azzam brought a hard dose of reality to Alserkal Avenue in his latest solo show, *The Road*, which ran at Ayyam Gallery from January 18 to March 3. Large-scale paintings of decimated Syrian neighborhoods from the *Storeys* series greeted jovial art night crowds. Unlike previous digital-centric shows, including *Syria* (2012) and *I, The Syrian* (2013), which employed splashes of saccharine colour to represent the potential for a positive future for Syria despite political upheaval, this series is somberly black and white.

The show is a reflection of daily life inside the country, where one family is displaced every 60 seconds by violence, forced to take what they can carry and run. "These are in black and white because it is just about two sides," Azzam explained. "It's not colourful. It doesn't contain hope or happiness. It is about the present moment — not the past or the future."

The mental strain of continuously placing himself into the narratives via the paintbrush has been tremendous. "After three years of working on these scenes, I want to stop talking about the destruction," he admits. "I want to start talking about people and their stories."

A powerful installation brought literal meaning to the concept of "walking a mile in another man's shoes," when visitors entering the space momentarily became the displaced as they were funneled down a path marked with debris leading towards a stairwell that headed towards indeterminable darkness. A man's dusty pair of dress shoes were left abandoned nearby. Although Azzam received widespread recognition for his digitally enhanced photography when *The Kiss* went viral in 2012, and the artist views himself primarily as a painter, this breakthrough work hinted at an important new direction.

While the Emirati collector base is supportive of regional work that has a quality of beauty about it, it's still risky business for a commercial gallery to show a body of art that reflects current political events and that isn't necessarily salable to private collectors looking for something to hang in a home setting. Ayyam Gallery boldly opted to open *The Road* at the art night that took place smack in the middle of the city's art season. Let's hope the show triggers other dealers to nurture artists who have something urgent to say about the Arab world, even when it isn't a pretty truth. ■

Tammam Azza,
Untitled,
Storeys series, 200 × 250cm,
acrylic on canvas, 2015

