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Stories Untold: Art from Syria

Manas Ghanem

During the peak of the “Europe refugee and migrant crisis” from October 2015 to the end of 2016, I was based in Greece, working for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Lesbos. Later, throughout 2017, I worked with UNICEF in Athens. We were part of the emergency team deployed there to support the international response to the crisis.

Most of the arrivals on the Greek shores at the time had miraculously survived the rough sea crossing on flimsy, overcrowded rubber boats or had been rescued at sea by the Coast Guard. The majority were from Syria and Afghanistan, two countries with continuous, indiscriminate war. They were exhausted men and women, young and old, and large numbers of children.

Our main concern during the emergency phase was attending to the basic needs for the refugees and migrants, especially the children and the most vulnerable among them, the people with disability, the elderly, the traumatized—practically everyone. Providing food and adequate shelter for everyone soon became the biggest challenge among the waves of new arrivals. As a Syrian myself, I was often asked which boat I had come on. It was difficult to say I had arrived by a different route. Though we tried to avoid talking about the journey in order not to retraumatize the refugees and migrants, some survivors recounted for us their memories of the harrowing crossing, especially the children, who also used the materials we provided to draw pictures of the sea and the boats.

When the borders closed in spring 2016, Greece became overwhelmed. Most of the refugees saw Greece as a gateway to other European countries, especially Germany, where they have family. But now they had to stay until their cases were processed, in overcrowded camps or, for some, in rented apartments in the cities, where they were vulnerable to all types of dangers. Greece was already suffering from economic and political crises and now had to deal with refugees and migrants forced to stay in its territory with no prospect of a life there or even the will to build one. In addition to ensuring that basic needs were covered, the Greek authorities and local and international aid agencies had to expand their efforts and try to provide education, health and psychosocial support, and other services while resources were depleted and international aid agencies were beginning to withdraw.

Stress, anger, and fatigue began mounting among the refugees and their host community. Mixed with these feelings, however, was a warm sense of nostalgia and empathy. To the Syrians, Greece looked and tasted like home in peace times, though with a different language. At the same time, the Greeks knew very well how it feels to have nothing. They also knew how it feels to be a refugee. Many spoke of being decedents of Asia Minor refugee families.

Manas Ghanem is a lawyer, Fulbright laureate, and international specialist with the United Nations. She built her international career working for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in various emergencies and post-conflict countries, including Syria, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Libya, Tunisia, Jordan and Yemen. She worked with UNICEF in Greece on child protection as part of the emergency response to the European refugees and migrant crises. She was recently named a visiting research fellow at the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict.

The Exhibition

The war in Syria and the refugee crises in Europe were making headlines. Every day people all over the world were seeing images of mass migration, severe destruction, violence, terror, and misery and responding with feelings of sadness and helplessness. But after a while, as our systems try to shield us from pain, we become numb to those feelings. Numbness of feelings, even sympathy, is never good, especially when there is no sign of hope.

Seven years of war in Syria turned the country into one of the most dangerous places on earth and the Syrian people into mainly victims, refugees, or terrorists, creating one of the worst humanitarian crises in history. Somehow the war and the ensuing crisis managed to wipe out Syria's history and all signs of life or prospect for the future. When my search on the Internet for a comprehensive portrait of Syria turned up only pages and pages with images of war and ISIS and the misery of refugees, I had to dig much deeper to find images of natural beauty and images of life during times of peace, when Syria was one of the safest countries in the world. This did not feel right at any level. There was a missing part of the story. Syria is a civilization that is more than seven thousand years old. Through its thousands of years of rich and eventful history, Syria's resilient, inventive, and highly cultured people always managed to survive and recreate home.

On social media, I was happily surprised to find sparks of life in Damascus, to find that despite the war, art was celebrated in small initiatives. I followed a group of remarkable Syrian artists. The art pieces they started and completed during the war changed my perception and made me believe the war will end and the country will survive. I thought of the words from William Shakespeare's *King Henry VI*: "For where thou art, there is the world itself, / And where thou art not, desolation."

With two Greek friends of mine, Jennie Barham, a retired psychologist, and Dimitris Salmatzidis, a Unicef consultant, I talked over the idea of exhibiting some of the art work created in Syria during the war. I wanted the refugees and the host community to see how much they have in common in terms of art, culture, and resilience. When we read together the life, love, beauty, and creativity embedded in images and share the same sentiments and feelings, we connect and build a relationship. Art speaks a universal language that we all understand.

The purpose of the exhibition we created, *Stories Untold: Art from Syria*, was to show that there is more to the Syrians than what the Greeks were seeing in the influx of refugees and what the rest of the world was learning about them through news stories, which were reducing them to nothing more than miserable war refugees and victims. We believed there was another side to the story of the Syrian people, yet untold, that might be hopeful and inspiring and could promote respect. We also wanted the refugees to feel again a connection with their culture, to hear the stories of families they left behind, and relate to their resilience and creativity in the face of battle trauma in order to help them overcome their victimhood mentality. We thought an art exhibition might lighten spirits and change negative perspectives. We hoped to show that countries do not just die, and that it is naïve and unfair to stigmatize a nation because of one phase of its history.

The artists whose work we chose, responding to daily news about disasters, wars, and misery all over the world, had teamed up and decided to change the mood, starting in Damascus at a local art gallery that was a home for visual arts and spirituality. Their plan was to celebrate life and love, to dream of peace and normality, to create hope from the simplest things, and to spread beauty through art

and creativity. Against all odds, they managed with their productions and positive energy to succeed and impress. They still hold regular cultural and artistic events in Damascus, where every success is celebrated with joy, light, and music as it was in the old days. We wanted the refugees and the host community in Greece to be part of this experience.

We selected paintings from photographs to which we had access through social media and on artists' websites. Our criterion was high-quality work with an inspiring story. We selected paintings that appealed to us as eye opening and stereotype changing and those on a topic one would not have expected to see come out of Syria in its present circumstances. Once we made our selections, we appealed to the UNESCO National Commission, which agreed to provide patronage for the exhibition, and we received permission from the artists to exhibit their art using copies rather than the originals. It was impossible to bring the originals from Syria because of various logistical complications, including sanctions, and financial restraints, such as the costs of transport and insurance.

Stories Untold gave audiences a unique opportunity to enjoy images of art pieces by eight distinguished Syrian artists who remained in the country during the war, experiencing its difficulties first hand.

Though the images in this unique collection varied technically, they were in serene harmony creatively and spiritually. Because the art was created during a grim period in the artists' lives, it is filled with intense emotions and feelings. But to our surprise, despite their uncertainty, their fear, and their losses, the thoughts and emotions the artists embodied in the paintings gracefully and powerfully reflect the resilience and life-loving spirit of Syria, reminding us of the legendary phoenix that reinvents and invigorates itself from its ashes.

The images took us to mystical realms, where a child symbolizes life, joy, and hope for the future and a woman symbolizes home, love, and life-giving force, and where beauty is strength, vigor, and optimism. These eternal symbols bring us together in harmony and peace regardless of our differences to complete the circle of love around us all.

The show was a success and ran throughout 2018. It started in Athens and traveled twice to be put on display in Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece. It was also presented in digital form at the first World Cultural Heritage Youth Symposium in ancient Olympia to an audience of five hundred students from all over the world and at the annual conference of the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict in Oxford University.

The Artists

Sarab Al-Safadi

Sarab Al-Safadi is the only female artist among those who exhibited in Stories Untold. Originally from Al-Swaida in southern Syria, she has lived and worked in Damascus since before the war. Her native city is famous for its black volcanic rocks and strong talented people. Many heroes in Syrian history came from there; the most famous is Sultan Pasha Al-Atrash, the leader of the Syrian revolution against the French mandate. Al-Sweida welcomed thousands of displaced people who had to flee the neighboring embattled city of Daraa and surrounding villages. Al-Sweida itself was attacked various times by terrorists because a majority of its habitants belong to the mystical Drouz sect and the Islamic fundamentalists consider them infidels.

Al-Safadi's paintings are dominated by female figures wearing colorful traditional dresses, surrounded by the warm walls of the village houses and its traditional carpets and motifs. The women and girls gather and console each other in silence.

Bachir and Nimat Badawi

The brothers Bachir and Nimat Badawi create their art in their native city of Aleppo. In 2017, their art workshop and all their work was destroyed in the violence of war. They were left with only photographs and memories. But they went back to work creating art, using broken wood as their medium and any other materials at hand as their canvas, including broken doors, windows, and furniture. Since the end of military operations in Aleppo later in 2017, the brothers have also worked continuously rehabilitating damaged churches and working with traumatized children using art therapy. During 2018 they restored the dome of the Roman Catholic cathedral in Aleppo, destroyed during the war.

In his art, Nimat, who hopes for peace and normality for all children, portrays children playing with what little they have. Bachir portrays Syria as a wounded warrior horse in battle. And though the warrior horse is bleeding and exhausted, with many broken javelins protruding from his body, he is triumphant and glorious in a second portrayal of hope for a better future. The colors the brothers use are vivid and intense, the subjects strikingly strong and unconventional for a war zone.

The face of six-year-old red-haired Estelle, with her beautiful smile and innocent blue eyes holding jasmine flowers, in the painting Nimat named for her, captured everyone's heart and became the face of *Untold Stories*. Estelle, who was displaced with her family because of the war in Aleppo, played often with the artist's daughters, Jasmine and Jouri, who are also featured in his paintings. In another painting, *Letters to the World*, letters are sent flying and sailing by girls who are hoping their voices and wishes for peace will be heard. *Making a Wish* features a girl blowing a dandelion flower. The children in Syria make a wish before blowing on a dandelion. Their elders have told them that their wish will come true when the small seed grows and blossoms in its new land.

In *The Cello Player*, Bachir honors a neighbor from his apartment building who was a musician in the national symphony orchestra. She used to rehearse at odd times. The sound of the music, Bachir says, slipped into his heart and calmed his mind.

Jean Hanna

Jean Hanna, the youngest of the artists, lives in Aleppo. He is originally from Al-Qamishly, a remote town on the borders with Iraq and Turkey. He is Assyrian, the ethnicity of the people who inhabited ancient Syria for thousands of years. He has lived and worked in Aleppo and Damascus for many years. When Aleppo became too dangerous, he moved to Damascus, where he worked as an illustrator for children's book.

Hanna is a master at drawing portraits. His portraits are classic, but each tells its own story. The war, the artist says, took its toll on Aleppo and everyone was feeling pain, fear, shock, and sadness. He saw young women everywhere and observed that they were struggling alone because so many men had left the country or gone to fight or to die. He portrayed the women as beautiful, as if to say to them, "You are beautiful and strong, and I see you." Most of the artist's models were his colleagues and friends from Damascus and Aleppo. Using their faces and features, so realistic

and so familiar, was the best way to show that Syrian women look just like everyone else from the basin of the Mediterranean Sea.

During the war, Hanna produced large-scale paintings and drawings using only charcoal and black and white paint. The figures do not smile but the eyes say a lot about their characters. One of his models cried during a posing session while telling Hanna about her love life. He offered her a glass of wine. “Even in wartimes,” he says, “there will always be time for love and a glass of wine.” One portrait, because of the frequent power outages, was reworked to be in candlelight.

Hanna created a remarkable piece in Aleppo of a young girl with short red hair and piercing blue eyes wearing a white top stained with blood. She may have been slightly injured. She is in pain yet resilient; she has the determination to live yet feels the helplessness of her situation. All that can be seen in the drawing *I Am Here*—a cry for peace and hope for a better tomorrow. It was one of the first pieces after the outbreak of war in which Hanna used color. Before then, he says, it was difficult for him to even see or use color amid all the sadness. As a reserve in the military, he had to carry weapons and be in battlefields, and so it was impossible for him to send good-quality photos of his drawings to be printed for the exhibition until the very last minute. We were lucky, though. When things calmed down a bit, he went on a short leave and sent us the photos from his computer. He said, “I am glad my ladies will be exhibited in Greece. They will enjoy a good vacation out of here.”

Badie Jahjah

Badie Jahjah was born in Latakia but moved to Damascus before the war to study and work and now owns a small art gallery in one of its quiet streets. He used his skills in social media to draw people to the gallery and its exhibitions, spreading messages and signs of hope and a better tomorrow. Under the conditions of war, the images he posted of exhibitions and other events looked surreal but also surprisingly joyful. During the unrest and insecurity, people responded enthusiastically to invitations to an exhibition in Damascus and came despite the dangers of random mortar shells and roadblocks, which always sent them home before dark.

In the early years of the war, Jahjah’s family was torn apart. His wife took their two boys and moved out of Syria, leaving him totally alone to face the changes and challenges that the war brought. He isolated himself in a farmhouse, where he found consolation in reading about Sufism. There he created his signature dervish that became his symbol for endurance, acceptance, and recovery. He then reinvented himself, published a book about his experiments and the symbols he created inspired by the movements of spiraling dervishes and the constantly rotating world. During the years of the crisis, he exhibited in the opera house, despite the dangers, and invited many artists to exhibit in his gallery, celebrating life the best way they could, one day at a time.

One of Jahjah’s series of paintings look like a galaxy of swirling dervishes. “Each one of us,” the artist explains, “can shine love and kindness like a star, then we can be a peaceful galaxy.”

Moaffak Makhoul

Moaffak Makhoul was born in the city of Homs, which is famous for its incredible medieval site Crack de Chevalier, or Castle of the Knights. Its people are renowned for being very smart and witty.

Before the war, Makhoul lived in Damascus, where he studied and then taught art. He is an activist in social and environmental issues, encouraging everyone to recycle. When the fighting began, he continued his activism. His team Tune of Life won a Guinness world record in 2014 for a mural they constructed in Damascus. It is the largest mural ever made using recycled materials. The team worked on the mural despite the lack of security, dodging mortar shells and, sometimes, people's negative reactions to their work: Why would you even care about beauty or recycling waste if you are in a war zone? Well, they did, and after completing the mural, they went on to rehabilitate damaged public schools, public gardens, and the national library, inspiring many others to follow their example and preserve respect for art and beauty, for animals, for education, for the environment, and for their fellow human beings.

Jumaa Nazhan

Jumaa Nazhan is from the city of Deir Ezzor on the banks of the Euphrates River in the eastern part of Syria near the border with Iraq. The city was once famous for its hospitality and tolerance. The residents are a harmonious mix of majority Muslims and minority Christians and also the Armenians whose ancestors fled the Ottoman persecution in 1919–1920 and found sanctuary there. The inhabitants of this region have a strong tradition of warmly welcoming guests and are well known for their generosity that stands in aid of the weak and those who are in need. They value family and community and respect women. In almost every village you will find a naturally gifted poet.

Nazhan lived in the city with his wife and young children and taught art in public schools. But in early 2012, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) moved in and slowly tightened its grip on the city. All the schools, except religious ones, were closed, forcing him, like many others, to stop teaching and also to stop shaving his beard and wearing jeans, which were associated with the West. Women were required to dress only in black and to cover all but their faces. When ISIS took full control of the city in 2013–2014, Nazhan moved to his ancestral village in the desert, far from the city. He felt a bit safer there but suffered from limited communication with the rest of the world and a shortage of supplies, including food and art materials. Using whatever materials he could find, including tissues, ink, glue, paper and pencil, he continued to create works of art, putting into them all his intense emotions. He portrayed his wounded and sad city, its minarets and churches and closed windows.

He sold some of his pieces to friends in Damascus, smuggling them at the bottom of vegetable carts that were leaving the city. In late 2015, he was able to buy his way out along with his family, and they joined the millions of displaced persons in Damascus.

There, with the help of his friends and the local art community, Nazhan was able to exhibit his work to earn an income. His work is captivating. It speaks of “houses that live in us but we don't live in them anymore.” At first, he used mostly black, white, and gray shadows; colors were faded and rare. Soon his children went back to school and he went back to teaching. Once Nazhan was able to enjoy a relatively safe life again, walking and laughing freely with his children in the streets of Damascus away from the ISIS terror, he began to put colors into his paintings. Even though the war was far from over and every day random mortar shells took the lives of innocent people, life went on in Damascus, where millions were displaced.

Aksam Talaa

Aksam Talaa is an amazing calligrapher, writer, poet, and teacher. He has an exceptional ability to bend letters and form them the way he likes. His portrayals of letters as individual characters with charisma show a lot of sensitivity and depth of meaning. Originally from the Golan Heights, as a child, he was displaced to Damascus with his family during the war with Israel in 1967. Because of the challenges he had faced as a refugee when he was a child, Talaa refused to leave Damascus during the recent war. “I don’t want to repeat the history, or to become displaced again,” he said. “This is home where we will stay.”

Even in difficult times, he says, we need to be grateful for all that we have. “I am even grateful for the shadows of the roses. It is giving much despite its being fragile.”



Jean Hanna (Al-Qamishly, Syria)
I Wait Here (2012)

Acrylic on canvas 80x150cm

The girl in this painting is in her modern daily outfit, seated on an old, traditional wooden chair with her hands crossed and her lips closed. Her piercing eyes are staring straight at us across time and space. She is in a waiting state, yet she is full of life, ideas, and potential.



Jean Hanna

Time for Love and Wine (2015)

Acrylic on canvas 200x90cm

The model for this painting, a friend of the artist's, began to cry while telling Hanna about her love life. Hanna offered her a glass of wine and they talked while he painted. He assured her that even in a time of war, there will always be time for love and for a glass of wine with a friend. The size of the original piece is impressive. The artist wanted to emphasize the great meaning of love at all times, and the importance of offering consolation. Despite his decision to use no colors because he was internalizing the daily sadness, pain, and shock caused by the wartime events and news, his realistic portraits of the women of the city show the beauty in them and document their beautiful existence.



Jean Hanna

I Am Here (2015)

acrylic on canvas, 120x83cm

The original piece was made in Aleppo during the war. We don't know where it is now. The situation in Aleppo in 2015 was very bad—scary and worrying on all fronts. The artist was trying to give women the power to speak their feelings and change their mental state from sadness to hope for a better tomorrow.

I Am Here carries mixed feelings and intense emotions about the war. The subject is tired of the violence and chaos and of the continuous uncertainty, and she is angry about feeling helpless. Her resilience and refusal to accept that this is the end and her determination to live and go on show in her eyes. The blue background symbolizes her hope for a better future and her white shirt symbolizes purity and peace.

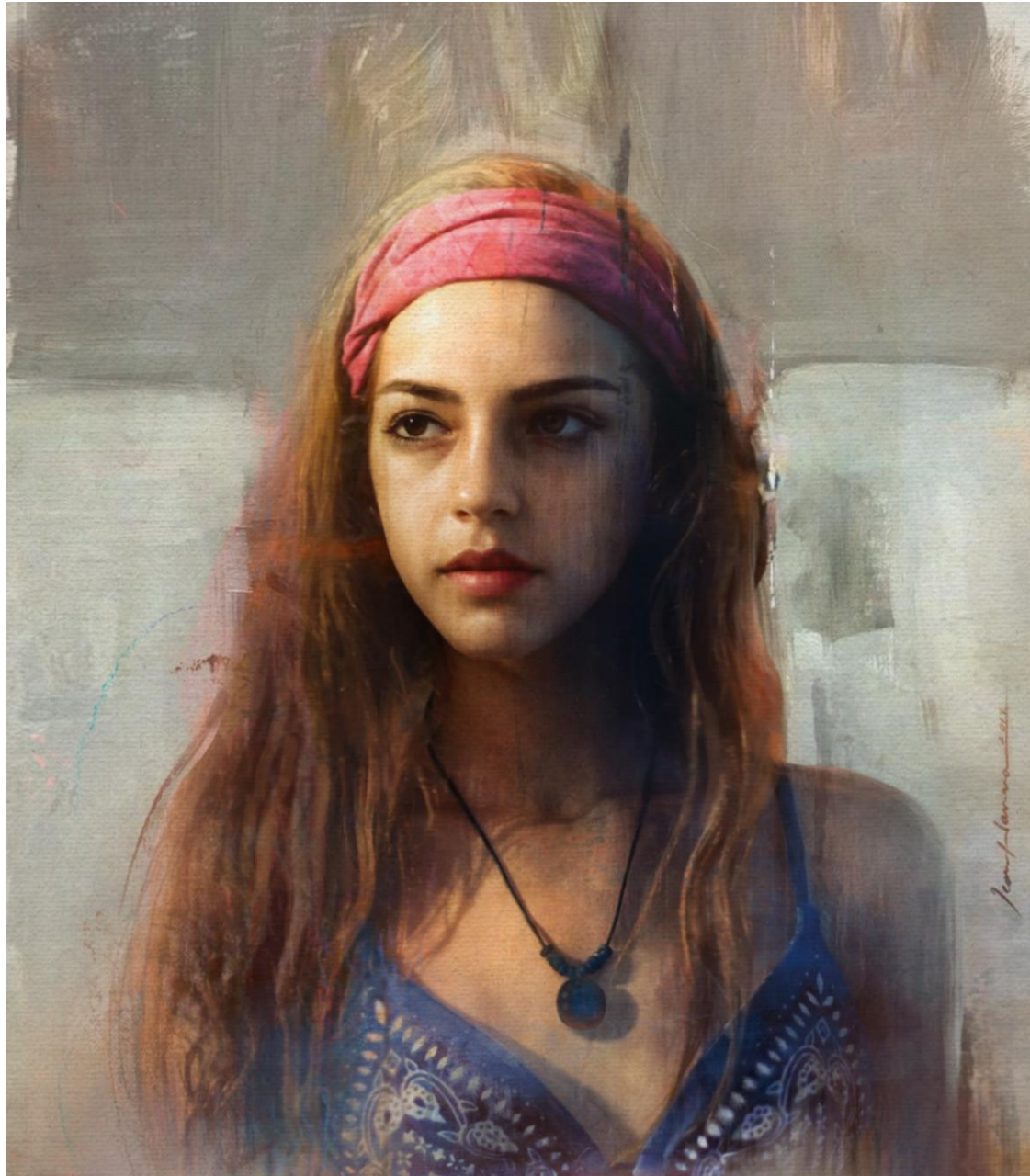


Jean Hanna

Candlelight (2015)

Acrylic on canvas 150x80cm

The painting of this piece was often disrupted because of electrical outages. During the war, electricity became a luxury. It was available only a few hours a day, if at all. Many power stations across the country were inoperative because of attacks by ISIS. In addition, mortar shells fired randomly into residential areas by the various fighting factions left the population in a constant state of tension, always ready to run for safety. Despite the regular outages and despite the tension all around, Hanna decided to complete the painting. He used candlelight, allowing its warmth to reflect on the face of his model. This angelic face is a classic beauty from Aleppo, where ginger hair and blue eyes are common.



Jean Hanna
Blue (2017)

Acrylic on canvas 150x80cm

The model for this beautiful piece, dressed in her summer outfit, is another of Hanna's friends. When Hanna worked on this piece, he was beginning to put more color into his paintings, projecting hope and a prayer for better days. The war is six years old, yet life must go on. Despite of the daily dangers, the checkpoints, the mortar shells, and the threats of terror attacks in public places, students continued to attend their college and university classes. The youth dress up and go out to meet friends at the bustling cafés and restaurants as they always have, challenging the war and the fear. Every day is a new miracle of life. This girl let her beautiful curly hair down and wrapped a pink bandana around her head, enjoying a summer day wearing her favorite blue top, which reminds her of the sea and the lazy days she spent at the beach before the war.



Badie Jahjah (Latakia, Syria)

Evanescence 1 (2012)

Acrylic on canvas 100x100cm

The words of the Italian American architect Paolo Soleri perfectly describe this painting: “The Bridge between matter and spirit is matter becoming spirit” (Paolo Soleri, *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man* [1973]). Spirituality and sophism and the dervishes became the medium that helped the artist cope with the difficult circumstances of the war and find the sanity, acceptance, and inner peace to go on with life.



Badie Jahjah

Evanesce 2 (2012)

Acrylic on canvas 130x90cm

Like *Evanesce 1*, this piece, depicting spiraling dervishes, reflects the spirituality and sophism that helped the artist cope with the difficult circumstances of the war and, against all odds, to create a brand name, re-invent himself, and thrive with love, family life, and successful career as visual artist.



Badie Jahjah

Jawhar (2012)

Acrylic on canvas 50x50cm

The artist created this symbol during the war to assert the importance of love and of polishing one's essence. *Jawhar* is an Arabic word that translates as "jewel." The three entwined hearts symbolize love for oneself; for one's family, friends, and neighbors; and for the larger, surrounding world. The wings of the heart move up to form the hands of the whirling dervish and the turban is the shining, vivid mind. This symbol became the artist's signature and one of many other creative symbols he formed to provoke thinking and spread positive thoughts.



Badie Jahjah
Stars in the Galaxy 1 (2013)
acrylic on canvas, 100x100cm

This painting depicts the whirling dervishes as stars in the galaxy. The artist is saying that if each one of us applies the principles of universal kindness, applying tolerance and love in keeping with the teachings of Rumi and the other Sufi masters, then each one of us will be a shining star in our existence and there would be no wars or clashes.



Badie Jahjah

Stars in the Galaxy 2 (2013)

acrylic on canvas, 100x100cm

In this piece, there are more whirling dervishes, all rotating in harmony in a universe filled with this beautiful, harmonious existence. From afar, one might think we are looking at a galaxy in which each star is an individual dervish in motion.

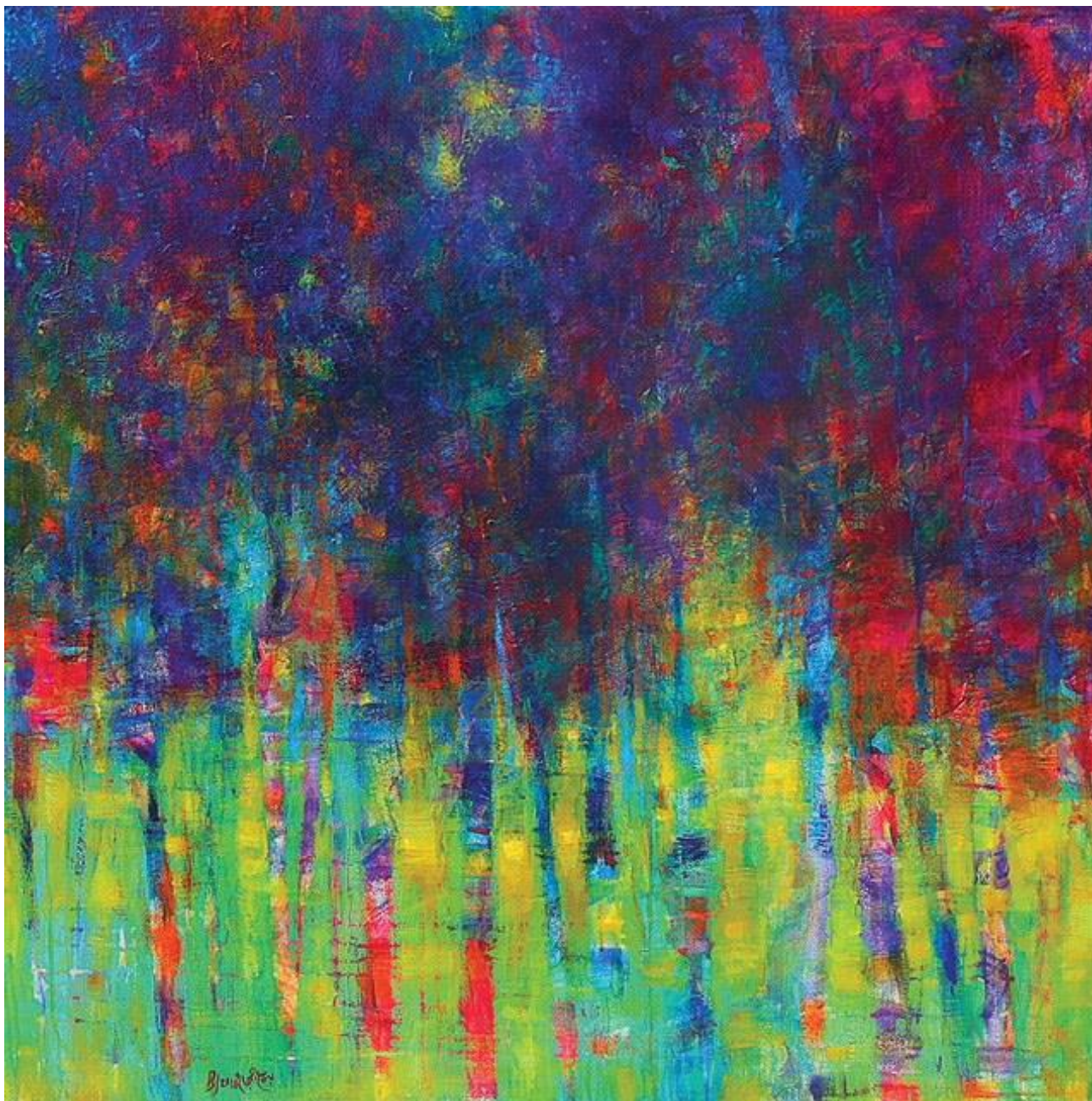


Badie Jahjah

Dervish (2013)

Acrylic on canvas 150x200cm

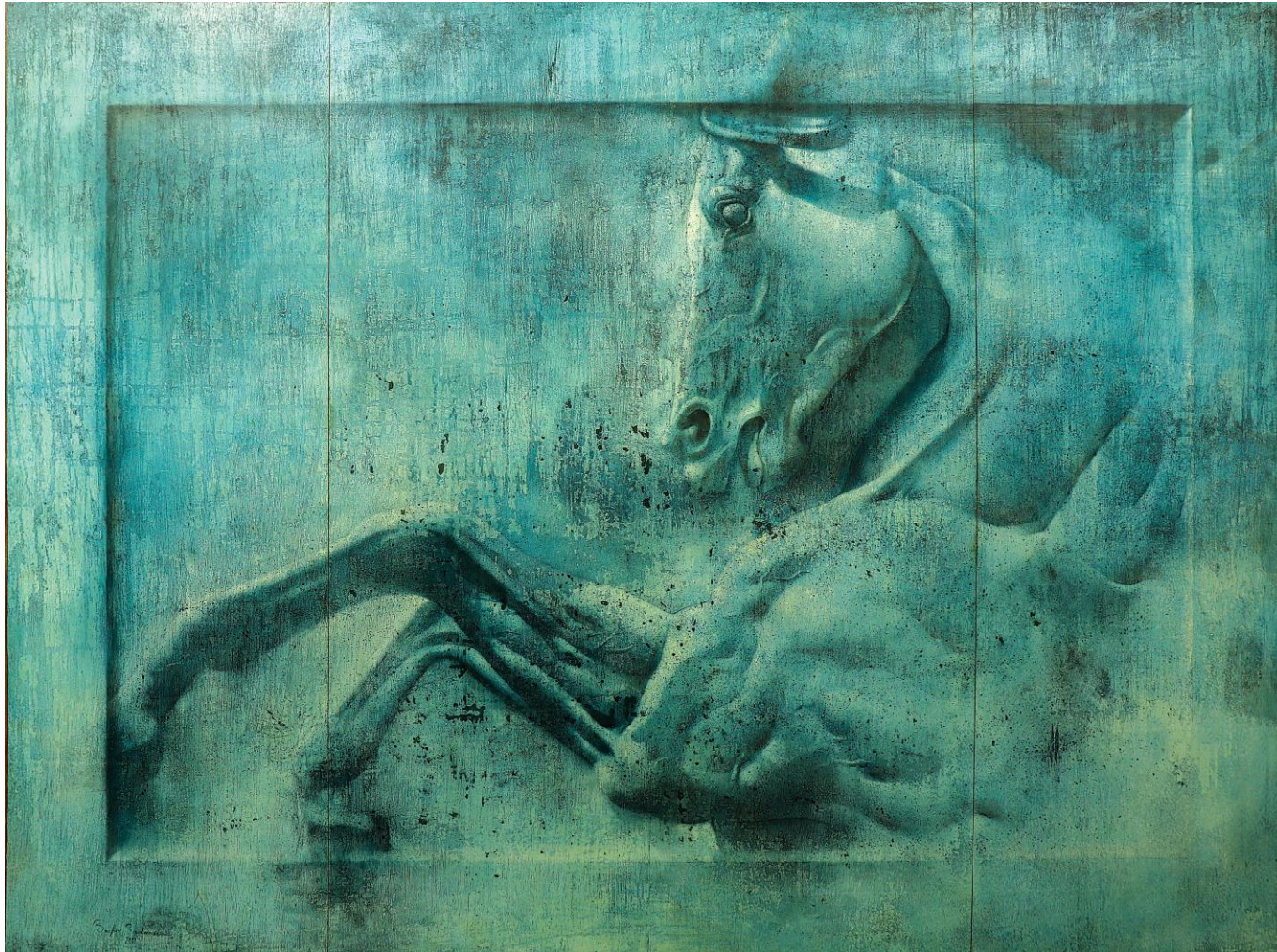
This painting illustrates the whirling dervish in motion in black and white. One hand is pointing up, receiving grace with gratitude, and the second is pointing down, symbolizing the giving and sharing of the same grace. The constant spiraling movement makes the dervish one with the universe and the spirituality shines on and creates this mystic glow.



Badie Jahjah
Trees (2017)

Acrylic on canvas 100x100cm

When Jahjah is not painting dervishes, he likes to illustrate the beautiful mountains and forests of his hometown of Latakia City. The artist says that for him focusing on trees of all colors is a form of meditation, and that from trees he has learned resilience and adaptability. For the viewer, wherever there is color and art, there is hope.



Bachir Badawi (Aleppo, Syria)
Alexander (2015)

mixed materials on wood, 200x150cm

In the culture and history of Syria, horses are honored for their beauty, strength, and nobility. They symbolize health, wealth, and victory. For the artist, this beautiful and powerful horse is a projection of the fate of Syria while the drums of war were to be heard and the increasing state of instability and insecurity in Syria warned of dark days to come. To emphasize his hope for victory over the powers of darkness and for peace to prevail, the artist calls the horse Alexander, a name, after Alexander the Great, that is popular in Syria.

This piece, a strong sign of hope, was selected for the Stories Untold exhibition in Greece because of its resemblance to many engravings on the Greek historic monuments. It is also honoring Alexander the Great and asserting the link between the two ancient countries. War can destroy stones, but it can never erase history or kill the will of life.



Bachir Badawi
Warrior Horse (2015)
Mixed materials on wood 200x150cm



Bachir Badawi

The Cello Player (2016)

mixed materials on wood, 89x160cm

This woman, the artist's neighbor in Aleppo, was a musician with the national symphony orchestra. The sound of her practicing accompanied the artist's work and brought him calm, though during the war the music was muted by the sounds of explosions and fighting.



Nimat Badawi (Aleppo, Syria)

Estelle (2014)

mixed materials on wood, 120x138cm

With this portrait of six-year-old Estelle, a friend of the artist's daughters, and other portraits of children painted on wood, Badawi sought to document the beautiful existence of the children, their innocence, their simple toys, and the warmth of their smiles. They symbolize his hope for war to end and for peace to prevail for the sake of all children.

Estelle, whose face became the face of the Stories Untold exhibition, defies all stereotypes about what Syrians look like, though ginger hair like hers is common in Aleppo. The artist does not specify where the girl comes from, but the jasmine in her hand tells us that she is from Syria, the Land of Jasmine.



Nimat Badawi

Making a Wish (2014)

mixed materials on wood, 75x150cm

The children were most severely affected by the war in Syria. They lost their playgrounds and their peace of mind. This child is blowing on a dandelion, sending the seeds to land in new earth and bloom, hoping that by her doing so her wish for peace will come true and her friends will come back to play again.



Nimat Badawi

Flute (2014)

mixed materials on wood, 100x75cm

The artist's daughter is the model for this painting. It is one of the paintings the artist did on wood because canvas was unavailable during the war in Aleppo. He is hoping for peace to prevail so children will stop living in fear and go back to a normal life and activities, to learn, create, and play sports and music. Most children who witnessed the war had to grow up fast, miss school, and even do hard labor to support their families.



Nimat Badawi

Letters to the World (2014)

mixed materials on wood, 200x150cm

For this piece, the artist used mixed media on wood. He shows his daughter and her friend playing with paper because they have no access to toys. They are making paper airplanes and boats and writing messages of peace on them to send out to the world.



Jumaa Nazhan
Syria (2015)

Acrylic on canvas 120x89cm

While the artist lived in exile in his ancestral village, he worked on his art at night, expressing his feelings and worries in illustrations of the darkness and his sad city. This painting summarizes his view of Syria. Some areas of the country are gray, distorted by war. But that is not the color or the shape of the whole country. Elsewhere it is green and beautiful and it will recover.

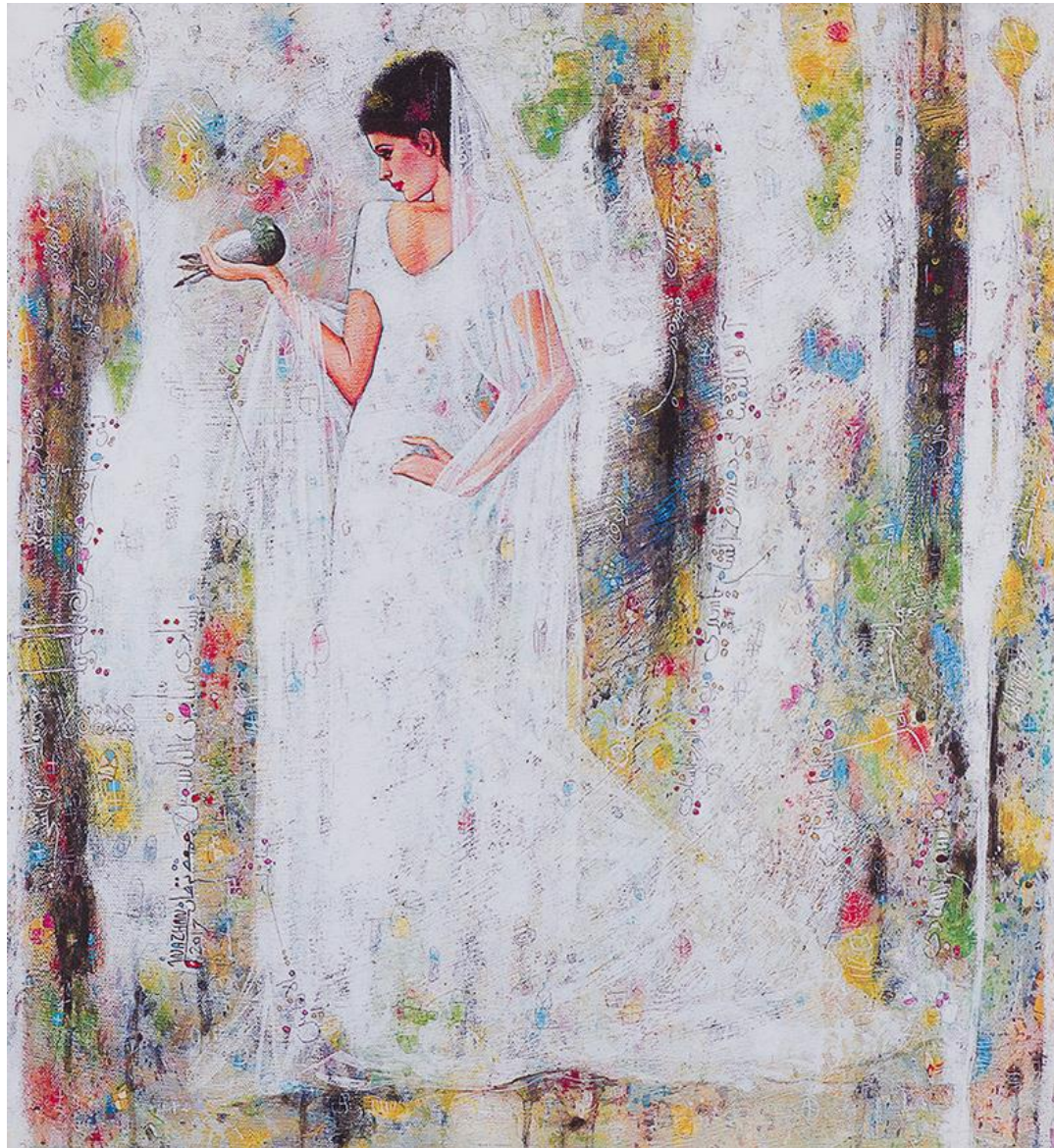


Jumaa Nazhan

Blue (2016)

Acrylic on canvas 100x100cm

In this painting, the artist is remembering the houses and their reflections at the bank of the Euphrates River in his home city. The houses are dark and sad, but the little lights in the windows are signs of life. A copy of this beautiful painting was displayed in the library of the American Collage in Thessaloniki following the exhibition of Stories Untold elsewhere in the city in September 2018.



Jumaa Nazhan

White of Jasmine (2017)

Acrylic on canvas 65x60cm

While displaced in Damascus, the artist created this painting when he heard the news that his beloved home city, Deir Ezzor, which had been occupied by ISIS for over four years, was finally liberated in 2017. He celebrated this news by drawing the bride that represents his beautiful Deir Ezzor, victorious and happy. She is wearing a jasmine-white dress that is untouched or stained by the dark days under ISIS. Arabic calligraphy is mixed with the bed of colorful flowers in the background. The vertical letters spell out a love poem by the famous Syrian poet Nizar Qabban.



Jumaa Nazhan
Damascus (2015)

acrylic on canvas, 100x100cm

The artist painted this piece while he and his family were displaced in Damascus, the city that was his home as a young art student and now as a refugee with his family. His depictions of the city's colorful trees, its houses with green balconies and colorful bright windows, and its ancient tiled mosques and churches, with their checkerboard floors, show the love he feels for his new home.



Jumaa Nazhan

The Lonely Orange Tree (2016)

Acrylic on canvas, 25x30cm

Remembering his home city of Deir Ezzor, the artist illustrates its buildings and yards with all their beautiful details, windows, doors, and trees, yet all in shades of gray. The only colorful soul he could find in his memory was the lonely orange tree.



Jumaa Nazhan
On a Rainy Day (2016)

acrylic on canvas, 100x100cm

This is another painting drawn from the artist's hazy memory of his home city of Deir Ezzor on a rainy day. It is part of a beautiful collection titled "Houses That Live in Us and We Don't Live in Them Anymore" that the artist exhibited in Alefnoon gallery in Damascus with the support of his friend Badie Jahjah. The title of his exhibition was relevant to a majority of Syrians. The proceedings of the sale, though modest because of the war, helped the artist pay rent and start his new life in Damascus.



Jumaa Nazhan (Deir Ezzor, Syria)

My Town (2012)

Mixed materials on paper 30x50cm

The artist finished this piece in his hometown of Deir Ezzor while ISIS gangs were starting to come into the city and create an atmosphere of fear and terror. You can see the houses and the windows, the churches and mosques, the decorative fences and the bent roads. But there is a cloud of sadness covering the whole scene. The sad houses are trying to shoulder each other to provide support. Maybe the simple tissues used to create parts of this painting and mainly its walls and streets symbolized the bandages or the shrouds and the death.



Jumaa Nazhan

My Town 2 (2015)

Mixed materials on paper 35x35cm

The artist completed this piece in Deir Ezzor in early 2015 before he and his family escaped. In this piece, made on old yellowish paper, you can still see the emphasis on the decorative fences of the balconies and the artist's focus on the windows of the houses protected by metal bars. Once light and the fresh smell of earth after long-awaited rain came through these windows. Now these same windows have become more like prison cells locking people behind bars, where they wait for the nightmare to end.



Sarab Al-Safadi (Al-Swaida, Syria)

Healing Alone (2016)

Acrylic on canvas 100x100cm

The women and girls portrayed in the three painting by Sarab Al-Safadi that were chosen for the Stories Untold exhibition are all indoors. They are in simple village houses that provide warmth and sanctuary to their female inhabitants, who are waiting for those who have gone off to fight, went missing, detained or migrated abroad. The women and girls try to comfort each other. All are missing their childhood, all look sad and in pain longing for peace. They are healing alone, packing suitcases, and waiting for the war to end so the men can come back home and complete the picture.



Sarab Al-Safadi
The Doll (2016)
Acrylic on canvas 100x100cm



Sarab Al-Safadi
The Suitcase (2016)
Acrylic on canvas 100x100cm



Aksam Talaa (Damascus, Syria)

Letters (2015)

Acrylic on canvas, 100x100cm

This beautiful work of calligraphy portrays Arabic letters in different shapes and with different densities. They are like characters dancing and forming their own paths and their own vivid lives. They group together in lines and create a harmonious text, at times perhaps some poetry. Some break loose, and a single letter grows bigger than the rest, taking up a larger space. The broken and united letters, the clear and the vague ones fit perfectly into the bigger picture. The blue beads are the charms used since ancient times to cast away evil and envious eyes and provide some sort of protection. The warm golden orange and earthy colors with spots of turquoise form a beautiful, harmonious collage that speaks of heritage, authenticity, and the artist's love of his roots.



Moaffak Makhoul (Homs, Syria)

Spiritual Night (2017)

Acrylic on canvas, 75x75

The artist said about this painting that he sometimes he goes to church, where he watches the reflection of light on the stained-glass windows, observing dancing colors mixing and creating harmony and joy. He gets his inspiration from the beauty of every little thing and allows himself to be the medium between the reflection, the thought, the feeling, and the canvas. “Nothing in life,” he says, “can be done without love.”



Moaffak Makhoul

Dancing (2017)

acrylic on canvas, 100x100cm

The artist says he sometimes does not understand why the color choices happen, but he enjoys the colors dancing in harmony and creating beauty from their contrasting tones and shades.



Moaffak Makhoul

Love (2017)

acrylic on canvas, 100x100cm

The artist calls this painting *Love* because that is the feeling and state of mind he had when he picked the colors and created the piece. All the different colors and spots and dots and sparks were made while in love. Every time he looks at it, he remembers this state of love that tickles his heart.