

SAFWAN DAHOUL (SYRIA, B. 1961)

With a career spanning over three decades, Safwan Dahoul is now a household name both regionally and internationally. As one of the foremost painters in the Arab world, the artist has repeatedly demonstrated how contemporary modes of figuration can describe the psychic terrain of a region that is in constant flux. Throughout his career, Dahoul has managed to include varying artistic styles while still keeping to his core identity and style.

Dahoul is mostly known for his beautiful melancholic and monochromatic works that present influences from the Cubist style of Picasso ranging to Assyrian and Pharaonic art. Since the late 1980s, the artist began an ongoing body of work investigating the dream state. Simply entitled the Dream series, these works have explored the physical and psychological effects of alienation, solitude, and longing that punctuate the human experience at various stages in life.

Partly autobiographical, this seminal body of work uses the formal properties of painting to recreate the subconscious sense of enclosure that surfaces during times of crisis, whether in the event of mourning, estrangement, or political conflict. The artist's recurring female protagonist facilitates this visceral experience through her contorted body, often-vacant eyes, and minimised yet monumental physicality. Depicted in the confinement of ambiguous settings, her presence is defined by the placement of various objects that seem to deepen the state of her disaffection, as even the familiar becomes a trigger of distress.

Born in 1961 in Hama, Syria, Dahoul was initially trained by leading modernists at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Damascus before travelling to Belgium, where he earned a doctorate from the Higher Institute of Plastic Arts in Mons. Upon returning to Syria, he began teaching at the Faculty of Fine Arts and was a prominent member of the Damascus art scene. In the span of a decade, Dahoul nurtured a new generation of artists as an active mentor whose evolving aesthetic often ignited new directions in painting. Given the trajectory and status of his painting style, Dahoul's career is regarded as a crucial link between modern and contemporary Arab art.

Dahoul's paintings are held in numerous private and public collections, including the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris; Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah; National Museum, Damascus; The Samawi Collection, Dubai; The Farjam Collection, Dubai; the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, Kuwait. Recently, he has participated in solo and group exhibitions at Ayyam Gallery DIFC and 11 Alserkal Avenue, Dubai (2018, 2017, 2016); Samsung Blue Square and Busan Museum of Art, South Korea (2014); Ayyam Gallery DIFC, Dubai (2014, 2011); Ayyam Gallery Beirut (2014); Ayyam Gallery London (2013); Edge of Arabia, London (2013); and Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris (2012).