

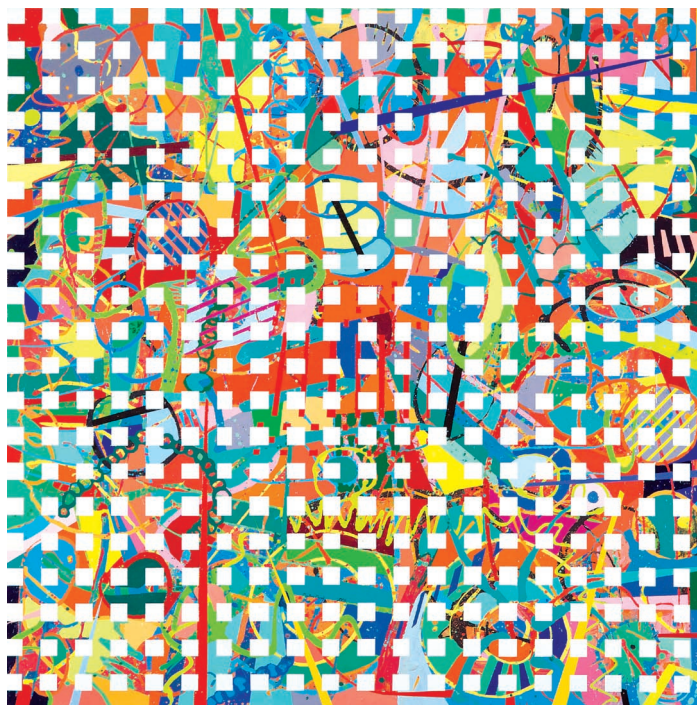
From February 19 to April 19, Ayyam Gallery Dubai will proudly present “Shabab Uprising,” an exhibition featuring a selection of work by some of Syria’s most consummate young artists. Drawing a number of emerging talents to the forefront of regional art, “Shabab Uprising” is organized under the umbrella of our Shabab Ayyam Project, an incubator for budding creativity through which we seek to nurture the careers of artists breaking onto the scene. The exhibition will provide an unprecedented introduction to the new wave of contemporary Syrian art through the work of painters Thailer Helal, Mouteea Murad and Kais Salman, in addition to a stellar lineup of up-and-coming artists.

In Thailer Helal’s abstract paintings we find a collision of forces sprawled onto the canvas. Inspired by a variety of elements found in his native Syria—including those of a spiritual, cultural and political nature—Helal’s work is a rousing contribution to a long tradition of regional painting that incorporates bold expression with sociopolitical undercurrents. Born in 1967, Helal graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Damascus in 1991 and has participated in solo and group exhibitions throughout the Arab world and abroad. “Shabab Uprising” will be the artist’s first exhibition since signing with Ayyam—a milestone that is sure to be one of many in his promising career. In Helal’s *Trance* (2008), the canvas is divided into a



grid of equal squares, creating a sense of depth and dimension. Yet despite its careful geometric composition, abstraction reigns supreme. From the center of each square comes a blast of color, creating dozens of epicenters. Deliberate markings create a sense of circular motion, giving way to expressionist cyclones of brushwork. These moving forms recall the whirlpools of light resulting from the spinning garbs of whirling dervishes, a form of Sufi mysticism originating in Syria that Helal finds artistic inspiration in. These outlines of color can also allude to violent explosions, an image that has stayed with the artist since witnessing an Israeli bombing campaign in Syria as a child in 1973. The memory of this fatal experience is evident—“I never forgot the large gapping hole that destroyed our serenity,” Helal said recently in an interview with writer Nada al-Awar. The impact of such resonates in his work, speaking volumes of the profound ways in which Syrian artists respond to their surroundings

Also working with the vast creative freedom provided by abstraction, Mouteea Murad will present a recent series titled “Playful Coloring.” Born in Homs, Syria in 1977, Murad has exhibited extensively in the Arab world since graduating from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Damascus. Although building on previous works which incorporate a range of abstract approaches including those found in Russian Constructivism and Abstract Expressionism, Murad’s new series is informed by a linear and horizontal division of the surface, similar to that found in Thayer Helal’s work. While square partitions serve as the



initial point of departure of the artist’s new canvases, what occurs within the margins of these compartments are striking explorations of color, shape and positive and negative space. In one particularly vibrant work, a black background is overrun by the dozens of mini compositions that are painted within the canvas’s multiple squares. Pulsating with vivid cubist forms, each square is vastly different from the next, yet Murad is consistent in his bold sense of design and clever manipulation of color. The result is a geometric mosaic in which forms intersect and overlap, recalling the abstract ingenuity of American painter Stuart Davis and the youthful spirit and vitality of Swiss painter Paul Klee.



In contrast, the figurative paintings of Kais Salman represent the opposite end of the Syrian art spectrum. Following a lengthy history of social critique and satire, Salman’s campy caricatures of the elite can be viewed alongside the works of master Syrian painter and engraver Youssef Abdelke—whose unapologetic caricatures have influenced generations of Arab artists. Born in Tartous, Syria in 1976, Salman has exhibited regularly in the region since graduating from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Damascus. A rising favorite among Arab collectors, Salman’s work is housed in Syria, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait and Tunisia. The artist’s recent

mixed media work “Fashion Series” (2008), includes disfigured portraits that take aim at the contemporary society, subject matter that has proven to be widely popular among viewers. Grotesque female figures executed with fine lines and wild splashes of color are at once sensual and sardonic. Solitary temptresses stand among effervescent color planes, exposing themselves with an apparent contempt for the viewer, while a running theme of three women poised side by side recalls the mythological story of the Three Graces, Greek goddesses associated with beauty and charm. This ironic posturing of Salman’s gluttonous heroines infers weighty social commentary. Could the artist be tapping into a growing epidemic of narcissistic consumption in the Arab world? The content of this latest collection suggests the artist is concerned with the abandonment of all reason in pursuit of false perceptions of beauty.

Similarly, the enigmatic figures found in Yaser Safi’s paintings exemplify an unconventional yet remarkable approach to depicting the human form. Essentially colorist compositions, Safi’s animated canvases attract the viewer’s eye with highly stylized portraits executed in bright hues and fluid brushwork, demonstrating a command of medium. Born in Kamishli, Syria in 1976, Safi studied sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts Damascus and later pursued a master’s degree in engraving. Since graduating in 1999, he has participated in solo and group exhibitions throughout the Arab world. Safi recently joined Ayyam’s long list of cutting-edge artists and will make his first appearance in the gallery in “Shabab Uprising.” His latest



paintings possess a distinct psychology, as he captures the fundamental nature of social interaction and the predicament of man in the modern world. In an untitled work that will be on display, two large figures are shown walking in an unidentified city. Street signs, roads and a small car suggest a bustling metropolis. Yet despite being surrounded by this urban setting, the figures are monumental in size, towering over the man-made elements of the city. They are also seemingly elemental to their environment, informing its existence. Is the artist suggesting the importance of man over the city? That no matter the drastic changes of our urban landscapes, the essence of man shall survive? “I try and absorb the street and give it boundless scope. The street is part of me. I like to paint its people and offer them immortality,” Safi recently asserted in an interview with writer Myrna Ayad. The artist’s creative insights are far reaching in their scope and quite relevant to today’s global society.