

PRESS RELEASE

Ayyam Gallery
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Thaier Helal: *Landmarks*

Ayyam Gallery, Dubai (DIFC)

27 October 2014 - 10 January 2015

Opening reception: Monday, 27 October from 7:00 - 9:00PM

Ayyam Gallery Dubai (DIFC) is pleased to announce *Landmarks*, the forthcoming solo exhibition of leading Syrian artist Thaier Helal. Presenting two new series of paintings, *Landmarks* will feature neo-expressionist works that explore a multi-sensory perception of Syria's diverse terrain as the artist figuratively reenters the now war-torn country.

Partly based on experiential recollections, Helal creates mimetic compositions that speak of man-made ruin while simultaneously reflecting the resistant forces of nature and a historic landscape that possesses potential for renewal. The exhibition's included works represent the artist's recent Mountain and River series, which are executed in the cool-palette of his early mixed media canvases, and mark a return to abstraction after a several-year period of experimentation with appropriated imagery and found objects that directly relate to the conflict in Syria.

Helal's recent abstract and semi-figurative compositions are executed through formal interpretations of sensations as the artist translates the physiological responses that specific environments trigger with colour, tactile layers of medium, and vigorous brushmarks. In a four-panel work titled *Mountain Area* (2014), for example, powdered paper, sand, and acrylic paint are combined to create a surface that alternates between coarse areas of impastoed media and gestural strokes, calling to mind the geological traits of ancient mountains. Dense applications of media also render the monumentality of such sites, as in the painting *Maaloula* (2014). The large work depicts the rugged environs of the centuries-old town northeast of Damascus, and is painted with a focus on the dramatic rock formations that surround it at the foothills of the anti-Lebanon mountain range. Indications of the town are hidden beneath the folds of a mountain, as the landscape appears to envelope its inhabitants: a metaphor of the significant cultural legacy of Maaloula as the last remaining place where Western Aramaic is spoken, its strategic location having allowed the linguistic tradition to survive the rise and fall of various civilisations over hundreds of years.

In Helal's new works, abstracted rivers also allegorically reference Syria's conflicted state. Painting the Orontes River (known locally as Al Asi or the 'Rebel River'), which runs south to north in contrast to other watercourses in the Levant, the artist emphasises the ability of nature to serve as a vital resource even as it deviates from its own basic logic.

About the Artist

A leading figure in contemporary Syrian art, Thayer Helal's large mixed media works are considered at the forefront of contemporary abstraction in the Middle East. Drawing inspiration from the physical and sensory aspects of the world around him, Helal explores the dynamism of space as it is reshaped by the fluctuation of society and culture. His canvases communicate movement and energy through explosions of colour, the meticulous division of the picture plane, and the repetitive layering of the surface. Although utilising the leitmotifs of contemporary painting, the artist's deliberate approach is reminiscent of the formalism of Islamic art, which relies on units as part of a larger whole to communicate a sense of wonder when alluding to the sublime.

Recently, Helal has employed images of the Syrian Army taken from various media in haunting compositions that isolate the mechanisms of warfare. Isolating such stark imagery against a black background, Helal confronts the abject reality that currently besieges Syrians while pointing to the increased militarisation of global society.

Born in Syria in 1967, Thayer Helal graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Damascus before relocating to Sharjah in the 1990s, where he currently lives and works. He is the recipient of numerous awards including the Grand Gold Award at the Contemporary Painting Biennial, Tehran (2005); and the Award for Painting at the Sharjah International Biennial (1997). Helal has also contributed to the development of regional art as a longtime faculty member of the University of Sharjah, Fine Arts College. Selected solo exhibitions for the artist include Ayyam Gallery, Dubai, DIFC (2012); Ayyam Gallery Cairo (2011); Ayyam Gallery Beirut (2010); Ayyam Gallery Damascus (2010); Green Art Gallery, Dubai (2006, 2003); Cultural Foundation, Abu Dhabi (2002); and Sharjah Art Museum (2000).

About Ayyam Gallery

Founded in Damascus in 2006, Ayyam Gallery is recognised as a leading cultural voice in the region, representing a roster of Middle Eastern artists with an international profile and museum presence. Spaces in Beirut, Dubai, Jeddah, and London have further succeeded in showcasing the work of Middle Eastern artists with the aim of educating a wider audience about the art of this significant region.

Exhibition Facts

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Location: Ayyam Gallery, Gate Village 3, DIFC, Dubai

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