

# Impressions of Syria at Al Markhiya Gallery

By Christina Maria Paschyn

A new exhibit in the Souq showcases the talents of two visiting Syrian artists, Abdullah Murad and Ghassan Nana. OH met with both painters as they interpret their esthetic through a combination of mixed media and oil canvases.



Abdullah Murad



Ghassan Nana

I'm tense when I arrive at Souq Waqif. Traffic was bad and now I'm late to meet the artists of a new exhibition at the Al Markhiya Gallery there. After I spend several minutes pacing up and down the souq's main street, desperately trying to locate the gallery's entrance, I finally find it about two blocks behind the Zaatara W Zeit cafe.

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I drag my flustered self through the door and allow my eyes a passing glance at the art on the walls. Unexpectedly, I feel my shoulders start to relax. The art gallery, a small two-story building made of white stones, is cool and quiet. Only the artists and my photographer are inside waiting for me and the gallery's calm and soothing atmosphere slowly envelops me. I take a deep breath and begin to gaze at the artwork surrounding us, an interesting collection of varied textiles and vibrant colours. I wonder why I have never bothered to visit this art gallery before.

The Al Markhiya Gallery's mission is to support and bring attention to the work

of Arab artists, particularly those living in Qatar. The gallery holds about 10 exhibitions per season; their flagship event is called '40 Minus', a show dedicated to highlighting the work of young Arab artists below the age

of forty. But today I am here to meet Abdullah Murad and Ghassan Nana, two artists from Damascus who are making their exhibition debut in Doha. Murad and Nana have been friends for most of their professional lives; they live on the same street in Damascus,

which is also the home of dozens of other Syrian artists and art studios. They often tour together because, as Murad explains to me through a translator, although they may have very different artistic interests, visions and characters, their work complements each other's. I can see what he means. Murad's art is modern and abstract whereas Nana's is much more traditional; they operate on opposite ends of the spectrum.

Murad's work consists of many mixed collages, and I ponder each of his canvases carefully, trying to decipher symbols, shapes and meaning behind each one. It's a guessing game for the viewer, a game



that Murad also seems to engage in when creating his art.

"After graduating from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, I became convinced that art is an invention of reality and not simply a reflection. I was therefore impressed by the modernism of artists such as Ernst, Gorky, Kandinsky, Klee and Miro to name but a few," he wrote in the exhibition brochure.

"My evolutionary diagram is a wave. Furthermore, the fact that creating art is difficult places me in a constant state of anxiety and doubt. I myself am always confused by the question, "what does this painting mean?" For me the answer is always the same: it means itself. Each painting has its own special identity; it has nothing to do with any other, but is a mixture of colours moving in a private world, away from speech or the written word. I

like to say that a painting is a language fabricated from silence that can be heard by the eye and felt by the brain."

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Nana's artwork, on the other hand, is somewhat easier to interpret but is no less captivating. His paintings resemble the masterpieces of the Impressionist era. Each art piece evokes a different emotion and moment in time. On the upper floor, his work seems mostly bright and airy in tone; he depicts colourful scenes from the French Revolution. But it also becomes clear that he has a penchant for painting musicians. One stunning painting of a violinist and pianist playing together conveys a dark and even disconcerting tone through Nana's use of oil to create evocative shadows on the canvas; I think to myself that this is the one painting here I would purchase if I could afford it.

Meanwhile, Nana's nebulous paintings on the lower level recall for me the religious stories I heard when I was child, although

I am not certain that this was the artist's intention. According to Nana's introduction in the exhibition program, he is more interested in viewers' emotions than their interpretations of his work.

"For me art is interpreted by the senses. Art cannot be 'explained' but is rather a transfer of signs and symbols to one's emotions and brain that reflect basic human concepts such as love, pleasure, sadness and fear. If art has not been successfully conveyed to the viewer these 'signs' remain simply lines and colours."

What is certain is that Nana's artistic passion is deeply tied to his vision and hopes for society.

"I have dreamed and I am still dreaming of a better world... My vision was formed by life, nature, history, people and world problems, and then by the works of important artists in history such as Bruegel, Goya, Rembrandt and the blue and war periods of Picasso and the dreams and visions of Jerome Bush. From cloud faces to icons to Islamic geometrical forms, my

dreams and hallucinations are all related to humanity."



The Abdullah Murad and Ghassan Nana exhibition at Al Markhiya Gallery in Souq Waqif runs until March 3. Gallery hours are Saturday-Thursday: 10am-12pm and 4pm-10pm. Fridays from 4pm-10pm. ●