

Art
on
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Damascus, everything is here



Safaa Alset, a sculptor living in Damascus, takes us through her city and the magic that it continues to hold

The sounds of the hammering of copper in the hands of the Syrian craftsmen is still one of the nicest sounds I have. Throughout history the rhythm of these sounds has echoed life and creativity through this city.

Many things have changed in the last hundred years, but these craftsmen remained, sitting in their sunny corners day after day, to a point that I sometimes feel that they are forgotten in their neglected corner of the city. Today, even while these sounds of hammering continue, I can only hear the sounds of death. The rhythm of death is hitting everybody; the faces of people have become very careful and worried, scared, and questioning when this war will end. Now there are silent voices, sounds and rhythms that follow every Syrian who clings constantly to their daily life.



Each morning I walk to my atelier in the old souk. It is filled with the hustling and bustling of the owners of the neighboring workshops repeating daily the nicest of salutations. They say, "*Sabah El Ward*" (Good rosy morning). They sometimes ask me about my next exhibition and offer their help. The people of my city, despite everything we are going through, still give me warmth. They haven't changed. And me, I am in great need of help because I don't have all the tools and machines that were available to me prior to the Syrian crisis in 2011.

I am now occupying a very small atelier of 15 cubic meters compared to my old workshop that was 150 cubic meters in the area called Zamalka which is now filled with rubble. The only thing I was able to save from my atelier in Zamalka is Hammouda, my apprentice and helper. Hammouda is handicapped but he has a wonderful and sweet soul. He works and dreams and puts together his ideas. Watching his eyes and trying to penetrate his soul inspired the subject of my last show based on handicapped people in the war. They all have good hearts but continued to multiply. The war brings on more handicapped and dead people each day.

For five years death hasn't stopped—not even for a single second. We have not

much left in this city and we always search for reasons to be happy. A call from a friend, an invitation to a small dinner at the end of a long, tiring day brings joy and hope and allows us to find a new reason to be happy. I search inside my soul for songs I like. I walk heavily on the road hearing Fairuz's voice singing in my head: "They remain alone like the beautiful flower..." This vision is disturbed by the strong sound of a Western song announcing a new identity—a new forced identity to our old rooted traditional city that kicked out every invader for centuries. I tell myself everything will fade away. I cross the bumps, the checkpoints that are now pointed everywhere questioning my destination each day.



We are filled with all of these memories that surface now and again. Every memory of those who left us is what we cherish and try to keep. “And we raise the hope, like we raise our puppies, terrified from the boredom of a bigger beast that might destroy us,” so tells me Khalil Darwish, one of my poet friends I often see at our gatherings. There we also meet Youssef Abdelki another artist who left Paris after 25 years to return and share our life. Youssef replies, “We love this land, what do you think we will be doing somewhere else?” These are some of the artists who decided to stay, but the majority migrated a long time. Recently, my father lit a fire with the potent green aniseed flavored liquor from my village Saddad located east of Homs in the Syrian Desert. I left with a few friends to witness this existential ritual offered to our colleagues, mentors and artist friends, Nazir Ismail and Marwan Kassab Bashi, who both left us just a few days ago.

I hold my breath and cry when thinking of their memories that fill my soul. I endlessly question what will come next. I dream. I still dream. And I am still here in Damascus. This was my answer to all who were asking me: “*Inti lissa bil balad? Are you still in this country?*” Despite everything, we are not looking for another country. Damascus and Syria still means everything to us



Courtesy of the artist