

# Intensity & Innovation

Walid El-Masri

**W**alid El-Masri, a tall, soft-spoken, young man, comes from the town of Jaramanah, which lies on the Ghouta outskirts of Damascus. Over the past five years, it has lost its trees, increased its traffic and expanded its buildings at a rapid rate. "I knew Jaramanah before it became a crowded, concrete city," he says, "When it had orchards and rivers and houses made of stone." As a boy, El-Masri would often escape school punishments and take refuge in the forests of his birthplace. His defiant will-power is still rooted in a quiet self-confidence; a deep-seated conviction that tells him learning exists beyond the walls of classroom convention. "I used to carve patterns into the river bank and then wait for the water to slowly fill up the channels of my drawings. I watched everything. I was fascinated by the way the water rose," he says. By witnessing nature, El-Masri quickly learnt that "everything changes with each passing moment," and that, "Repetition is never the same."

Fast-forward 15 years (after a formal art education and having indulged in a frenetic spell of stylistic experimentation), today El-Masri spends his time exploring the notion of chairs. He slowly builds up his paintings from a blank canvas to a meaningful entity that captures the moment. "Sure, you go to school and get a broad exposure to different styles, but the things that stick to you are the things that are similar to the way you already are," he says. El-Masri's current fixation with painting chairs may seem outwardly repetitive, however, each one is entirely unique. He revels in placing emphasis on their intangible differences.

El-Masri defines the process of painting as a condensing of a greater reality. His works have a vanishing point that lies beyond the surface of the painting. "It is a Japanese style," he explains. "It instinctively made sense to me." His chairs are depicted from obscure angles; as if they are floating in space or truncated by the canvas's edge. They are rendered with rough and multi-layered contours with a signature emptiness that fills the lower part of the canvas and allows the work to resonate.

"Imagine having a place where you can forget everything."

It might be a challenging notion to follow, but El-Masri needs chairs - or rather, the simplicity of chairs - to be able to explore the more elusive meaning of existence. "We like to recognise an artwork, and to know what we see," he says. "The chairs are a continuous project. Yes, you will recognise the subject of a 'chair' but it is not really about that anymore. That's the beauty of painting; I no longer need to explain."

El-Masri is creating a conceptual unit. "Visually, an image is either simple or complicated," he says. "A circle looks like a simple image, but it is a complicated one. It could mean an orange, a ball or a planet. A chair looks complicated but it is actually very simple. No matter how you draw it, it is just a chair. Any horizontal line on a set of vertical lines can be recognised as a chair." El-Masri's chairs are dissecting the semiotics of imagery. He invites the viewer into his world through the use of a prop, or rather, a key, so as "not to be lost in the darkness." El-Masri's world is a purely visual, graphic and guttural place. "Imagine having a place where you can forget everything," he says. "That is what it feels like to paint."

Understanding this ever-evolving expression is the combination that unlocks El-Masri's art. "Either we [artists] sink into a daily routine where we lose our perception, or we sink into a solitary life of creation where we lose touch with our friends," he says, recalling how he had once made a phone-call and realised it had been weeks since he had heard the sound of his own voice. "I can't be balanced if I don't paint. Painting is a solitary activity." Just as El-Masri's art isolates him, it also connects him to the rest of the world. **A**



(Detail) Walid El-Masri. 'Chairs'. 2008. Mixed media on canvas. 180 x 180 cm.



WALID EL-MASRI

Born in 1979, Walid El-Masri insists on having the chair as a subject for all his works, giving it different connotations as a central or an abandoned item. He asserts that his use of repetition raises a different question each time, related to human existence.

No stranger to acclaim, El-Masri received several prizes during his studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus. He won the second prize for photography at the 'Colours of Damascus' workshop in 2006. One of his paintings won the third prize in Ayyam Gallery's inaugural competition for emerging Syrian artists, The Shabab Ayyam 2007.

El-Masri participated in many collective exhibitions in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Italy, Spain, Iran and Turkey. He also participated in a number of workshops, such as 'Discovering Modern Art' which was held in Paris, France, in 2005. He also participated in the 2006 summer academy of Darat Al-Funun, Amman, Jordan, at the end of which he received a certificate in oil painting.

A solo exhibition at the French Cultural Centre in Damascus in 2006 was followed by a second at the Syrian Cultural Centre in Paris in 2007. Now signed to Ayyam Gallery, El-Masri's work is set to spread its wings even further as his career progresses.