

one to watch



CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

One of Ayyam Gallery's talented 'Shabab Ayyam' artists, Walid El-Masri creates artworks that are instantly recognisable by their emotional landscapes.



Two chairs huddle together as if clinging to the top of the large canvas they are painted on. Loose brushwork adds a sense of electricity; the chairs appearing to vibrate in midair against a background of blue. A dusting of dark pigment stretches across the remaining fabric and connects with a fat daub of yellow paint below. This yellow may be a mysterious celestial body that brings everything into orbit around it. However, because the form of the chair grounds the composition, one cannot get too carried away with interpretive metaphors. The tension between common image and uncommon emotion is exquisite.

The paintings of young Damascene artist Walid El-Masri have the bravura and technique one rarely finds in the work of someone his age. Although they are extraordinary, they are also hauntingly familiar. This is because the subject of the paintings is always just one simple thing: A chair.

Born in 1979, today El-Masri keeps a studio in the very same neighbourhood in which he grew up. Jaramanah, to the south of Damascus, is still surrounded by what remains of the city's famous orchards. In his childhood, it was still a small, green area where everyone knew each other; a place where the young 13-year-old artist who hated school could slip away every day to run and think in wooded parks. "These were the most important years of my life," he says.

Leaving school at the tender age of 14, El-Masri found a job in a mosaic workshop. Spending hours cutting small tiles into millions of tiny tesserae, it was only a matter of time before he took charge of the workshop. Eventually, the young El-Masri found manual labour unfulfilling and returned to finish his studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, finally graduating in 2005. Thanks to all those years of painstaking mosaic work, El-Masri was able to master the discipline needed



to tame the canvas. Patience and commitment are major traits of El-Masri's artistic personality. Laughingly recalling an early episode at university; a still-life assignment for which he was required to create one work, he ended up with 160. "There was space in the room for just one piece per student," he says. "So I lined up all my work in the hall. The teacher was astonished. He said, 'Sure, he is a hard worker, but there must be something more - maybe he is searching for something more.'" The observation was a canny one. For El-Masri, the act of searching is as important as the resolution.

Interested in the Sufi practice of internalising external rituals, the spiritual side of repetition is central to El-Masri's art. Using repetition as a tool for self-discovery and self-improvement, he seeks to reconcile art and life. While he doesn't actually draw his signature chairs from life, for the form already exists in his head, it is the emotions that find themselves the true subjects of El-Masri's work.

Written by Anneka Lenssen

*Walid El-Masri will exhibit in spring 2008 at the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC).
For more information on him and other Shabab Ayyam artists, call +963 116131088 or visit www.ayyamgallery.com*