Tadmor's Ghosts: Postscript on Syrian Art

miriam cooke
Duke University

The situation in Syria has continued to deteriorate. The government has increased its aggression against the people, and outside elements with unclear motives have joined the opposition. On 21 August, the people of Ghuta suffered a chemical attack, and over a thousand died dreadful deaths. Despite his assertion in a cocky interview with Charlie Rose that he has not deployed his chemical arsenal, Bashar Al Assad is now apparently cooperating with the UN investigating team. Meanwhile, artists continue to respond to the violence with images, cartoons and films.

Art

In a 16 September interview, cartoonist Ali Ferzat affirmed the role of professional artists in the revolution but he also drew attention to the people's spontaneous creativity:

> The unique thing about street art and graffiti in this revolution is that it has allowed all of the people from Syria to engage with the movement, and [they are] platforms for the creativity of people from different background and different ages.... Caricature is on the front line against dictatorship. It is an art form for *all* people—people who may not necessarily understand painting or sculpture, but [who will all] understand caricature. Also, it's daily, and so it gives the audience a daily view and keeps them up-to-date. [It] allows people to claim their rights, and to be openly and actively against a certain problem. In *this* way, it gives people a sense of freedom.[1]

"The Syrian Revolution in Art" Facebook page provides a visual documentation of the violence inflicted on the Syrian people, including grisly photographs of victims of the 21 August chemical attack on the people

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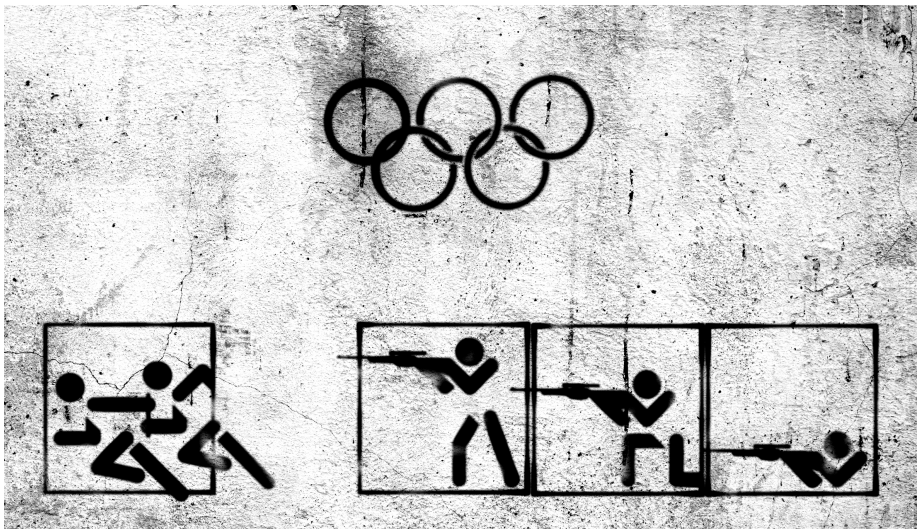


Figure 1. Tammam Azzam's "Syrian Olympic." Courtesy of the artist and Ayyam Gallery.

of Ghuta. Some of the images of bombed-out neighborhoods in Syrian cities and towns look like 1945 Berlin or 1990 Beirut just after no-man's land was cleared of snipers and the artists and filmmakers turned the ruins into art.[2]

Among the millions displaced inside and outside the borders are a few artists who have been given safe haven and livelihood in Dubai. "It's a tragedy what is happening there now, but it would be an even bigger tragedy if all this art and culture that Syria has so much of would be lost," said Hisham Samawi, owner of Ayyam Gallery that moved from Damascus to Dubai in late 2011. During the past two years, the gallery has sponsored fifteen artists, including Tammam Azzam, and imported over 3000 paintings. On 16 September 2013,[3] Ayyam Gallery held an auction where a copy of Azzam's projection of Klimt's "The Kiss" on to a destroyed building, now called "Freedom Graffiti," sold for $6,000. His "Syrian Olympic," one of five signed digital prints, sold for $12,000.[4]

Music

In 2011, pianist Malek Jandali composed the song '*Watani Ana*' (My Homeland is Me), hoping that music calling for freedom and justice would help to create a new Syria. In spring 2013, he released his 'Syria Anthem of the Free,' a stirring anthem that tells of martyrs, women, children and refugees. Jandali believes that music can "cut through the social political limits, and geographical boundaries, and go right into humanity, into the hearts of those children.... Music, as this universal language, can tell the story and put a human face to the sacrifices and the story of those courageous kids."[5]

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Film

On 6 September, the Toronto Film Festival premiered Muhammad Malas's "Ladder to Damascus." Shooting had begun in early 2011 just before the outbreak of unrest with the story of twelve Syrian boarders in an old Damascus house. As violence escalated, Malas turned his fiction film into a documentary that one of the festival organizers called "a captivating window into the psyche of ordinary Syrians grappling with a historic upheaval." For Malas, long one of Syria's most important filmmakers, cinema has always had a role in times of turmoil, especially now: "It was impossible to ignore the goings-on around us...I didn't want to wait for the revolution to end to talk about it."[6]

These artists insist on the power of the image to mobilize the people to fight for a better future.

End Notes

[1]See *Review of Middle East Studies*. Summer 2013. Volume 47 (1): 28-36.

[2]http://iranian.com/posts/view/post/20959.

[3]https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution.in.Art.

[4]Brian Murphy, "Art of War: Dubai Gallery Haven for Syrian Artists" ABC News 18 September 2013 http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/wireStory/art-war-dubai-gallery-haven-syrian-artists-20289116.

[5]http://www.syriauntold.com/en/story/2013/08/04/4694.

[6]http://news.yahoo.com/movie-filmed-amid-syria-unrest-debuts-toronto-festival-134003932.html.

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