

In Old Damascus, a sombre exhibit of artists who have fled Syria's war

In a traditional cafe in the heart of Damascus, young Syrians linger at an art exhibition evoking the despair and loss of their country's war. The only thing missing? The artists themselves. Instead of standing proudly by their works, the artists in the exhibition "And They Left" are scattered across Europe, having fled Syria's brutal five-year conflict in search of safety abroad. They entrusted their pieces to Bernar Jomaa, 39, who curated the exhibition of works coloured by sorrow and nostalgia. After arranging the last of a series of carved sculptures, Jomaa logs into Skype to show artist Sara Khatib, now living in Denmark, her section of the display.

Khatib, 29, begins to cry as she sees her work-including a stone figure of a woman hugging herself-displayed in her homeland, thousands of miles (kilometers) away. "I was really moved by the idea of the exhibit. I couldn't hold back my tears when I saw my work next to an old Damascene wall," said Khatib, who claimed asylum in Denmark in 2012. "I couldn't bring them with me to Denmark, but I didn't want that anyway-I wanted to leave a part of myself back in Damascus," Khatib told AFP. "My

art pieces are like my children... I'll come back one day to brush the dust off them, to see how much they've grown and what they've become." Syria's war has displaced half its pre-war population of about 23 million, with many displaced internally and nearly five million seeking refuge in neighboring countries or Europe.

'Forgotten works' in Damascus

The exhibition at Ziryab, a popular stone coffeehouse in the Old City of Damascus, features nearly two dozen works by 15 different Syrian artists who are now abroad. Their work is displayed under stone archways fitted with stained glass windows and on rustic wooden tables. "There are many pieces I've accumulated over the years from artists who have fled Syria without their art. I took all of these forgotten works and curated an exhibit by those who have fled," said Jomaa. Twenty-three-year old Yazan Kelesh pauses at a photograph of eight children, strained smiles shining through on their war-weary faces.

"Usually, artists are present at an exhibit to explain more about their work. But their absence today says everything about the

amount of suffering and pain caused by so many young people leaving, including so many artists," he says. The works emit a sort of tired, worn sadness: faceless blue-and-green creatures embracing next to sketches of a bald man with an anxious, furrowed brow. They are also nostalgic: One photograph shows the historic Bab Touma square in Damascus "before it was filled with checkpoints", says visitor Mayss, 31.

"Most of the works here are sad, whether in their colors, the photography angle, or the way they were sculpted. The artists clearly are very sensitive to recent events." On a typical afternoon in Ziryab, a dozen Syrians sip cups of bitter coffee or puff on water pipes during chats about what become typical subjects of high prices, mortar shells and military conscription.

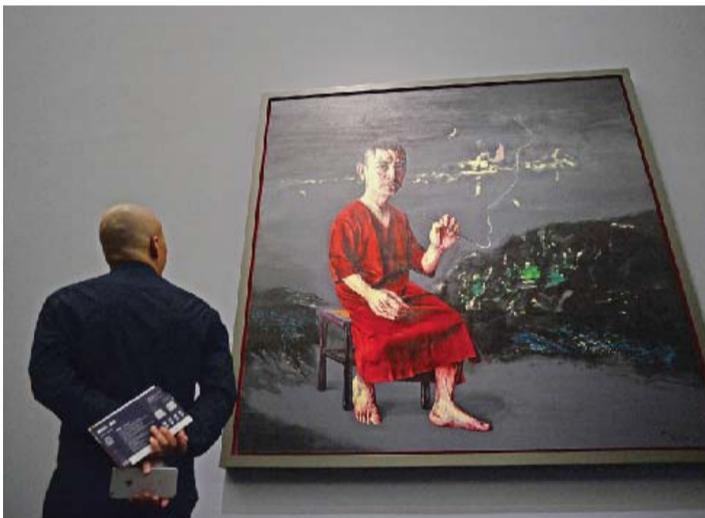
Too 'dangerous' for art

Although Damascus has been spared much of the violence of other major cities like Aleppo, young people in the capital have been hit by skyrocketing prices and unemployment. One corner of the coffeehouse is dominated by a large monochrome snapshot of a weary woman leaning against a wooden

plank, her eyes closed and her head in her hands. The photographer, Rami Skeif, is among thousands of Syrians who made the perilous journey to reach Europe by boat, travelling with his wife and young daughter in late 2015.

"We had to ride in a small boat for part of the journey, and we couldn't bring anything other than the essentials," 40-year-old Skeif wrote to AFP from Sweden. "I couldn't bring my works with me on a journey full of obstacles and danger, by land and sea, so I left them behind in Syria with my friend Bernard." Skeif says he hopes to return to Syria one day "to participate in an exhibition depicting a happy woman, expressing the joy we have demanded for my country".

One visitor in a long black coat scrutinizes the artwork very intently. "This exhibit is for artists who have left. Meanwhile, I'm still here, but my paintings are all gone," says the young man, who declined to give his name. He left his paintings behind in an eastern suburb of Damascus as rebels advanced several years ago, "and they were all stolen". "I visit all these exhibits, examining the paintings carefully, looking for my own way a mother searches for her sons." — AFP



This picture shows a man looking at an oil canvas by Chinese artist Zeng Fanzhi entitled "Self-portrait 09-8-1" at the "Parcours: Zeng Fanzhi" exhibition at Beijing's Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA). — AFP



This picture shows a woman walking past an oil on canvas by Chinese artist Zeng Fanzhi entitled "Fly" at the "Parcours: Zeng Fanzhi" exhibition at Beijing's Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA).

As China rises, top-selling painter looks to his roots

Blue-chip Chinese artist Zeng Fanzhi built up a lucrative career by looking to the West for inspiration and buyers, but a new retrospective in Beijing reveals an unlikely turn back towards China's own aesthetics and traditions. It is a story increasingly common in the world's second largest economy, where a growing disillusionment with material wealth has sent a generation in search of a heritage lost. Zeng is China's second best-selling living artist, according to wealth publisher the Hurun Report. "In the beginning, you feel happy that you've attained a certain kind of recognition, and are sold for a very high price, but as time goes on, it vexes you," he said.

"People badmouth you, and the success influences your emotional state and creative process," he added. In 2013, his painting "The Last Supper" sold for \$23.3 million at Sotheby's in Hong Kong, at the time the most expensive contemporary Asian work ever sold at auction. It was one of his "Mask" series, paintings whose empty-eyed, white-masked figures spoke of the psychological tensions lurking in China as the political idealism of the 1980s gave way to the

1990s' single-minded focus on rapid economic growth.

The media attention paid to just one period of his nearly three decade-long career left him feeling pigeon-holed, Zeng told AFP, following the opening of a retrospective of his work this month at Beijing's Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA). The masks became a brand, he said, an easily commodified image that reinforced Western preconceptions of China and were used by auction houses and art publications to boost their own sales.

Zeng rode the wave of China's development, rising to fame from humble beginnings at a time when the country had no significant art market of its own. Now that its art scene is well-established, he has lost the need to seek validation and inspiration from the West, choosing to look instead to his own roots, he said. "In the '80s, we were so starved for outside information; we wanted so much to understand the world and know about Western art," he said, explaining his early obsession with artists like Paul Cezanne, Willem de Kooning and Lucian Freud. He said: "But nowadays, there's such an overwhelming



Chinese artist Zeng Fanzhi in his studio in Beijing.

amount of information it's cognitive overload. I have to close myself off and look inward to maintain my sense of self."

Stark contrast

Zeng's new show "Parcours: Zeng Fanzhi" exhibits more than 60 works from each of his wildly different major artistic stages, many for the first time on the mainland. He hopes it will provide a more complete picture of his continuous process of reinvention. Monumental oil

paintings of abstract landscapes overgrown with dark snarls of branches dominate the gallery's central nave, flanked by detailed portraits of his Western muses. The canvases are a stark contrast to his latest series: understated, black-and-white works on paper inspired by Song dynasty paintings.

They arise out of Zeng's 2008 shift towards an exploration of paper itself, finding inspiration for his brushwork in the subtle variations of its grain - a technique inspired by Chinese artistic philosophies. "As you grow older, your whole aesthetic sense and preferences change," said Zeng, who has started collecting traditional Chinese art and designing literati gardens like the one outside his studio, which features jagged scholar's rocks, stone lions and a koi pond. Despite Zeng's philosophical shift, UCCA director Philip Tinari admitted that it was impossible for the show to escape the shadow of his sales records: "He has probably created more financial value than all but a very few artists alive today." Nevertheless, "there's an honesty about this work that's not immediately apparent," Tinari said. — AFP