

INSIDE THE ARTIST'S EXHIBITION KHALED ALKHANI

FEATURE: MARION EELE. PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF ORIENT GALLERY

The outspoken Syrian artist tells us of his artistic origins, the danger of being categorised and his take on the current art scene in his native land.

- **Place of Birth:** Hama, Syria, in 1975.
- **Studio location:** In the countryside outside Paris.
- **Years of experience:** Khani has worked on his art on a daily basis for the past 20 years.
- **Formal education:** Khani received his diploma in Fine Arts from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus in 1998, following this with a master's degree in art from the same faculty two years later.
- **Artistic origins:** "During my childhood my mother discovered that I painted passionately so she encouraged me, and that has continued until today. In school one of my teachers mentored me for many years, which was a huge help. After that I went on to the preparatory stage of art school, which played an important role, before I enrolled in university."
- **Influences:** "I was directly influenced by my professors who taught me in university, and then I began to see the work of other artists from the rest of the world as I visited galleries in all of the countries to which I travelled. These became like an encyclopaedia for me, a compilation of all the artworks and techniques that I had seen. This proved very influential to me, and I hope that one day my work will be an influence on others too." Nowadays, however, he is more ambivalent about influences; "I no longer have the need for artistic inspiration. I keep myself to myself; my experience is my own."
- **Working life:** "I have worked in art since I was studying in university; I've never done anything else, just art every day. I began selling my paintings as a source of financial income, and exhibiting them internationally – you can find them in museums and galleries across Europe and the Arab world. In 2013 the Kunsthalle zu Kiel in Germany invited me to paint large murals across the walls and ceiling of the viewing gallery as part of an installation. So many people wanted to attend that it stayed on display for nine months. That exhibition was named *The Beginning*, in reference to the transformation of my country towards democracy and freedom. This is just an example of the varied work that I have undertaken over the past 20 years."
- **Type of art:** Khani finds it difficult to categorise his art. "It's not easy to describe my work; it's like trying to describe myself, which



no one finds easy... My work is always born from strong emotions that are often on the brink of overwhelming me, and this is what leads to the beautiful insight for which I'm aiming to express in my work." Furthermore, he refuses to be put into a specific genre. "I truly don't know which school I fall into. But I know that I have had my own unique experience and that sets me apart."

- **First exhibition:** At the Naseer Shura Gallery in Damascus. "During my first professional show I sold all the works shown. It gave me strong motivation to work move forward and take my work to the next level."
- **First piece sold:** "It was while I was still in university, and it was actually a trade; I swapped my painting with a friend for 10 packs of cigarettes! Honestly, this was the most remarkable sale that I have ever made."
- **Artistic process:** "Each piece emerges long before I begin to paint, even going back as far as I can remember. I paint with great emotion, not stopping until I am physically exhausted; there are so many feelings welling up inside me that it is unbearable to keep them all in. I am in dialogue with the painting – the process of painting is a conversation with my internal feelings. If I am interrupted during the this process then this will stop the painting from speaking back to me and its essence will

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be lost.”

- **Relation to politics in Syria:** Khani's works are heavily influenced by events in Syria, especially the 1982 Hama massacre, and he has been outspoken in his anti-regime stance. Violence, agitation and loss are prevalent themes within his work, as are muted colour palettes. “In truth, a history of atrocities precede the revolution by a long time, and this is something completely different from ongoing the war. It's not only my mission to transfer information, though maybe I have a role in this too.”
- **Latest exhibition:** From November 10 to December 3, Khani will be exhibiting his works under the title *Ascending Silence* at Abdoun's Orient Gallery. After that he will have a show in France.
- **Current Syrian art scene:** “I don't feel any sense of community at all; everyone is only looking out for themselves.”