

INSIDE THE ARTIST'S STUDIO

FEATURE: MICAH MCGEE. PHOTOGRAPHY: LEVON PELTEKIAN AND COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

SHAKER ABU GHAZALEH

After 20 years, Shaker Abu Ghazaleh, a master of layering, tells of his artistic moods, the complications behind abstract art and why he took such a long break from the world of exhibiting.

- **Born:** 1974 in Amman
- **Studio location:** Abu Ghazaleh's current studio is inside his home in Amman.
- **Artistic origins:** Abu Ghazaleh began painting and drawing almost as soon as he could hold a pen. From the age of five, his works featured sailboats and colourful landscapes; however, he tells that he also drew many Bedouin faces. "I have this fascination with faces – portraits – especially the Bedouins. The shades and features of their faces wrapped in keffiyehs are very interesting to me."
- **Formal education:** Abu Ghazaleh holds a BA in Graphic Design from the Applied Science University in Amman. Although he had desired to study fine arts, his family was afraid of the lack of prospects offered by such a degree and begged him to choose otherwise. He bowed to the wishes of his family, yet this move could not eradicate his love of art and painting. While his family prompted him towards a different field, he shares that they, along with close friends, have always been supportive of his artistic ventures. He is currently a partner at Voi Artis, a Jordanian bespoke furniture design company, though he blithely shares that he has never quit painting and hopes to return to university at some point to study art in further depth.
- **First exhibition:** At only 14 years, Abu Ghazaleh was the first young artist to be showcased in the Royal Cultural Centre under the patronage of HRH Princess Alia in 1989. He exhibited a few more times in the 1990s, but stopped for a period of 20 years to focus on business. Again, he has never stopped his art; he had just put on hold displaying his varied works until recently.
- **Artistic influences:** Abu Ghazaleh finds the works of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Paul Klee to be great inspirations to him and affectionately refers to them as the "old masters." Yet he declares, "You're influenced by everyone around you; it doesn't have to be someone famous or in the same profession." Abstract art is the doyen's favourite genre in which to both study and work. He says that while the word "abstract" exists here in Jordan, he feels that the concept requires further exploration. "It's easy as a word, but it can be difficult to arrive at an understanding of it. A person has to be open to various interpretations of the same art piece."
- **Creative space:** A large room in a lower storey of Abu Ghazaleh's home acts as his studio. Upon entering the artist's lair, one sees that his workstation is quite similar to his multimedia *mélanges*. Bright paintings sitting in the corner, a long rectangular table covered in paper scraps, a collaged mannequin standing to the side and a table solely dedicated to holding glue and paint brushes all serve as the creative space for Abu Ghazaleh's fantastical creations.









- On his works:** "My work is different, especially my most recent pieces. It's happy, full of positive energy, love, life and colour." Deviating from many artists who express their darker feelings via art, Abu Ghazaleh proclaims that he only paints when he's happy, more specifically, "when I am in love." His works reflect this uplifted spirit with their bright colours, mixed media and several shapes all layered on top of one another within the same piece. Newspaper, magazines, wood, metal and canvases might all be utilised for a single work, creating a surprisingly pleasing effect as the medias qualify each other. He balks, however, at the idea of working on any sort of circular surface, as it makes him depressed. He sees his art as a form of self-expression, "Not I as Shaker, but my work will talk about me and reflect what I am more than I ever could."
- Latest exhibition:** Abu Ghazaleh's exhibition, *Symbols of Love*, will run from April 5 to April 28 at Orient Gallery. When asked why his works remain untitled, the painter discloses, "I don't give any of my paintings names. I always like for the person looking at my art to see or discover what he or she wants to in the painting. I don't want to tell them what to look for. This is what abstract is all about. You like it or you don't."
- Role as an artist:** "An artist is just like any other human being. Each one of us has a role in life. As artists, we should teach people more about love, creativity, about always being positive. This is the most important, to me at least, in our troubled time now. You have to have art in your life. Life is completely dull without it! I was born to be an artist. I don't think I can do anything else except painting, drawing, printing, sketching etc. I think the purpose of my art is to foster enjoyment. I want people to be happy when they look at it."
- Jordanian art scene:** Abu Ghazaleh sighs upon hearing a question regarding the life of the art scene here in the Kingdom. He admits that part of the reason he took such a long a break from exhibiting here in Jordan was that he had received little to no motivation to showcase his work. However, he believes that lately things are improving and that the local artistic community is being aroused. "We need to do a lot of work. Everything is a replica of something else." His creative spirit longs for things of a different, more original nature. But he hopes that with fresh exposure and artistic exchange with talents from other cultures, Jordan's art scene can continue to expand and grow.
- Advice to young artists:** "Keep on drawing and painting. Do the things you love in life."

