

# FADI YAZIGI

**Born 1966 in Latakia, Syria**  
**Lives and works in Damascus, Syria**

Graduating with a BFA from the University of Damascus, Yazigi specialises in sculpture and has been working as an artist since 1988. His body of work focuses on the human form and faces, often with an anthropomorphic element, and his influences range from Babylonian imagery and daily life to the current conflict.





**Ali Y. Khadra:** As a Syrian artist who is still inside Syria, you are best able to explain how the situation is there right now. What are your memories of the art scene before the war, and how did it compare with what has happened since 2011?

**Fadi Yazigi:** Around 2004/05, when Contemporary Arab art was really flourishing, things were going increasingly well in Syria, at least in terms of the market. As for me personally, I've been devoted to my work since 1992 and carried on in the same way except there was now an open market and a foundation that was active in Syria. It used to work with young artists, organising exhibitions for them, putting them in contact with international magazines such as *Canvas*, for example. Galleries were opening up, there were Iraqi artists resident in Syria, and people were always exhibiting here. Things were booming, and Syrian art was coming out into the limelight and receiving the attention it deserves. It kept on going this way until 2010. The following year saw the start of



the war and the art scene has been very different since then. The country has been fully barricaded these last five years, with hardly any contact with the outside world. The organisations that used to invite artists in the first year or two of the crisis just don't do so now. Even the embassies have stopped, because they won't issue visas any longer.

**AYK:** Do you think the problem is because the foundations, galleries and museums have forgotten about Syrian artists or is it down to the visa question?

**FY:** The political situation has the greatest impact. For example, I received an invitation from the Delfina Foundation to go and do something in London, but it's impossible for a Syrian to get a UK visa. I've exhibited several times in Britain, but now can't get permission to enter and do my

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work. That's just one of the issues. If someone buys an artwork from you and wants to transfer the money to you for it, that's an even bigger problem. We can't receive dollars or euros into our accounts now. It is real isolation and has many ramifications. I suffer from it on a monthly basis. A while ago I was invited to a symposium in Amman. Getting into Jordan was a masquerade, as if I were going to the South Pole. There was an interrogation, an investigation, hours spent standing up and waiting. I didn't even want to go, I'd been invited there by a museum. You finally get in, then leave them a \$50-60,000 artwork as a gift and they treat you in the same way when you're leaving, interrogating you and making you stand and wait for half an hour to get your passport back. It's a tragedy.

**AYK:** Have you considered leaving Syria and going to a Gulf country, Europe or America, as other Syrian artists have done?

**FY:** No, I have not considered it, and I could not do it. In reality, it's a decision for both me and my wife. We have two children who will be going to university soon. If they want to travel to study, that's not a problem, but it's different for my wife and I. I've been to Europe and America, and have had the opportunities to submit my papers for immigration. But I just do not want to.

**AYK:** Why not, if you are suffering in Damascus? Why do you refuse to leave?

**FY:** Because this is the appropriate place for me to be. My life is here, all my work, my home, all the people I know around me. Despite the difficult situation right

now, I could not live in any other place. I also feel responsibilities towards Syria. When the country's comfortable, I am happy to stay here, so when the country's in trouble should I just not be here anymore? In any case, I create my daily memories here with the people of Damascus. What would I be doing somewhere else?

**AYK:** What sort of memories are you creating?

**FY:** What I paint, a relief that I am making or a sculpture, it's a part of my daily life. I go down to the studio every day and there I paint and I sculpt. Then, maybe six months later when I look back after being away for a while, I feel like this period of six months is in my painting or in my relief. What would I do abroad? Live on the margins because I am scared to die? Fatalism takes over. You might be abroad and die of a stroke, of boredom or of desperation, because you are away from your place, the place that suits you. I could not ever contemplate it, not for a moment. A while ago I received an invitation from the Institut du Monde Arabe to participate in a dialogue about artists living in exile. I remember talking to the director of IMA about how I could never think of living abroad. However beautiful Paris and other places might be, I still feel out of place there. Perhaps these places are beautiful for their own inhabitants, but I just feel that I am better here.



**AYK:** Do you consider that your work has changed as a result of the war?

**FY:** Oh yes, it has changed a lot.

**AYK:** Is this totally because of the war or did you want to change or reinvent yourself anyway?

**FY:** I was trying to change a lot of things about my work from 2009, but 2011 and the war had a huge impact on me. It brought me down to earth and made me feel the isolation, the fear, how things

have no value. In particular, how humans have no value and how it is a big lie that humanity has evolved. I felt like we were living in a time before the Middle Ages, not just us here in Syria but across the whole world. People going after the idea of religion and killing each other for an idea, plus the notion of colonising whole countries, this made me suffocate and work on entirely different things. Before I used to do rather dreamy works. My work now has more

symbolism, but at the same time I don't market the idea of war and that I am suffering. I keep doing art for art's sake. These are works that are coming from my unconscious, from my consciousness, from my memories, from the ambience that I am experiencing, from the looks in people's eyes on the street.

**AYK:** Your work used to have an *art naif* quality to it before, would that be fair?

**FY:** It wasn't as much *art naif* as a little childlike, in that my figures had the appearance of a child. There was innocence, for sure. There was always someone smiling, someone with a big head and a smaller body, the idea of people who are beautiful but still not aware, who did not grow up correctly. They did not grow up correctly because circumstances did not allow them to do so.

**AYK:** How have those particular characters changed?

**FY:** They are still more or less the same, but their faces are less defined now and their actual features are no longer present. In my sculptures, the figures were soft before. Now there's







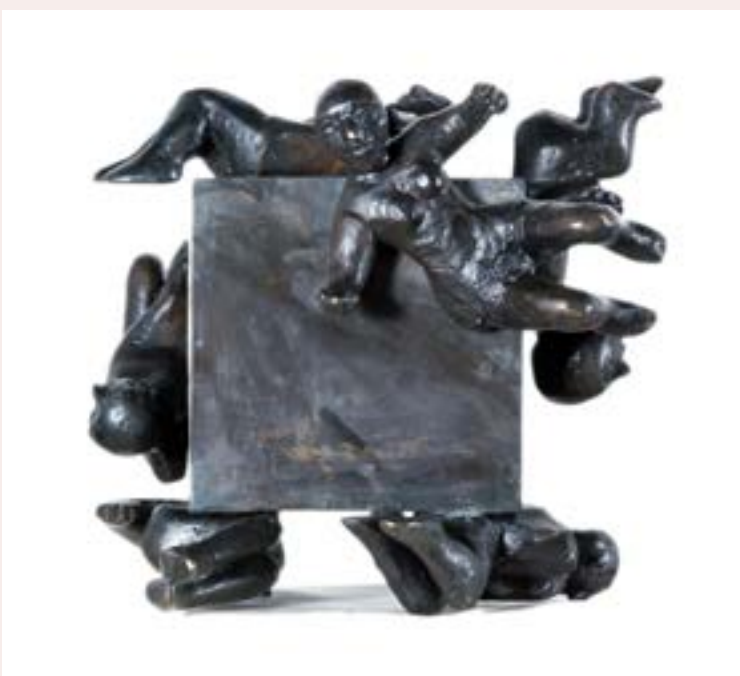
Photography by Nassouh Zaghloul

a harshness on the surface, the characters are differently built, like a sphere or a cube that has people all around it: any way you turn it, there are some on top, some on the bottom and some on the side. It's like a dice that you throw, not knowing where it will land. I lived in that state myself, and I started applying it to my work. A sphere with people and animals all over it, no matter how it turns, looks very much like a bomb or a torpedo.

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**AYK:** How has the war impacted on the practicalities of your work and where you obtain your materials?

**FY:** I have to buy everything abroad now. There is very little here and it's not of good quality. I only have three or four bags left of the clay I use for my reliefs and I'm afraid to finish them. The clay isn't available anymore at the workshop where I used to get it and so I now have to buy it in Beirut. I used to cast



the bronze here in Damascus, but there's no foundry any longer. The workshops and foundry were located in the suburbs of the city and those are now in flames.

**AYK:** How do you maintain the spirit to be productive when news of what is happening in Aleppo or in Damascus reaches you?

**FY:** It's not about having the spirit anymore. It's about existence. You are documenting something you are living with on a daily basis. There's increasingly more to document, and so your responsibility to document it also grows. You are not working solely to exhibit anymore.

**AYK:** Do you still go to your studio every day?

**FY:** Yes, every day.

**AYK:** Do people still visit your studio?

**FY:** Hardly at all. Not even five per cent of those that came before 2011. I used to receive several visitors a day while I worked, of all different nationalities. I'd be making coffee and we'd be having discussions throughout the day and well into the evening. Every day there would be two or three people coming to ask me to be part of exhibitions abroad. There is no one left today. Now I go back home by 2 or 2.30pm in the afternoon. Every week or so one of my friends might visit and we sit for a little, or I might go and meet a fellow artist. We try to keep in touch with each other, but it's not at all like before.

**AYK:** Do you feel that painting makes you calmer and helps you forget the suffering that is going on?

**FY:** The suffering is too close to me. I can never forget it, and not forgetting is the least I can do. But art has always been a mental

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therapy to me. It is always a matter of balance, now even more so. If you used to feel like you had five kilos on your shoulders before, now it feels like 50. It really feels like that. When you work now, it is tiring, it is hard, it feels heavy, the brushstrokes, the movement of the pen... It's all different from before. There is pain and harshness now.

**AYK:** Do you feel a sense of abandonment?

**FY:** Personally, I keep trying to go to places and participate, and although I pay a hefty price to be able to do so, I do not feel that the crisis has killed me or excluded me. Others do not have the same opportunity and they really feel isolated. There are no galleries to approach, no foundations supporting artists, and the exhibitions about Syrian art that take place now are very quiet events. It's impossible for me to exhibit even in Amman now, the borders are too complicated to cross and transportation is not easy. It's like we are living in



isolation on an island and we have the plague. Very fine people have been marginalised or have left the country.

**AYK:** What plans do you have for your art for when the war ends?

**FY:** I have many small pieces that I want to enlarge, especially sculptures, because they deserve to be reproduced in a larger size. Now is not the right time to do so, obviously. I have 170 x 45 cm bronze pieces in Beirut that have already been cast at the foundry but which I cannot bring here. I've asked the guy there to take photos so I can see them, because your eye looks at things differently after time. The most important thing is that the war ends and I have to be optimistic about that.

**AYK:** Are you considering producing a work around a specific city or event from the war?

**FY:** All my work resembles the crisis. It resembles this whole period. I am automatically affected,

unconsciously, because I am in it. That's why I tell you that I cannot leave. If I lived abroad and produced artworks about what I heard in the news, I would be lying.

**AYK:** Do you have a message to send to people outside, to the lovers of Syrian art, to museums and galleries?

**FY:** I'm not good at sending messages. Nobody can carry the weight of the worries of somebody else, and it is true that pain makes you not want to look, but I would invite them to consider what is happening here and not close their eyes. From my own point of view I'd say that my commitment to creating genuine art has not changed. On the contrary, my concern and sense of responsibility are greater, as is my love for the place and my sense of attachment to it. I'm not being nostalgic or patriotic, it's simply the feeling that I am living. I can escape from here, but I don't want to. It is my place.