

By Elspeth Dehnert

STROKES OF A PAINFUL PAST

Exiled Syrian artist and survivor of the 1982 Hama massacre Khaled Al Khani uses art as an outlet through which to purge himself of pain and shed light on the atrocities that took place during the deadliest month of his life.

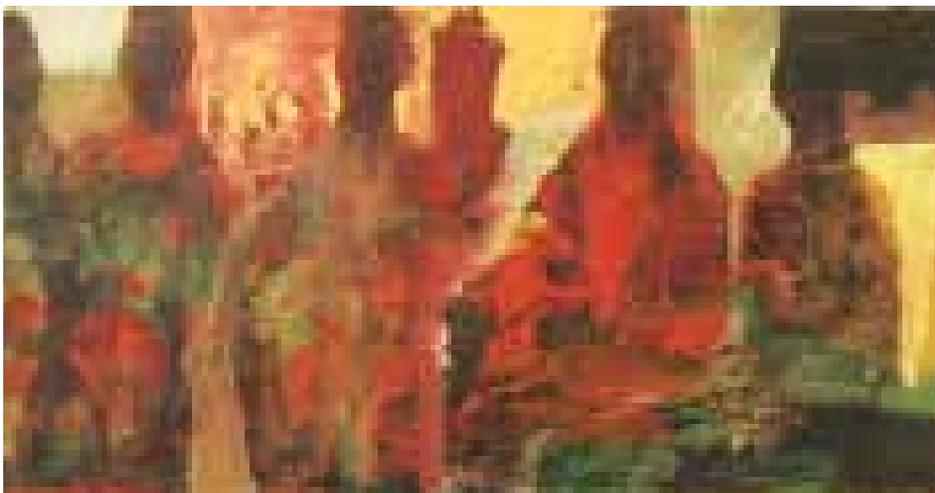




“I need to heal and move on, but I haven’t been able to; I never will...,” says 38-year-old Syrian artist Khaled Al Khani – once a young boy stuck in the midst of one of the worst massacres in modern Syria. About seven years prior to the dramatic end of what he calls “the first part of his life,” Khani was born into “a home that cared about education and intellect.” His father, a liberal-minded optometrist educated in France, was one of the estimated 40,000 civilians brutally murdered by the Assad regime during its 27-day military assault on the city of Hama in 1982. As Khani candidly explained to Al Jazeera, his father’s eyes were gauged out by security forces, which then left him to die a slow and painful death in a porcelain factory.

“After seeing the massacre, I experienced the strongest type of pain and fear because my brain had discovered something so alien and unexpected. I couldn’t handle what I had witnessed,” he says. Khani wasn’t alone; his mother was also having a difficult time coping with the trauma. In an attempt to heal her wounds, she began drawing all the time, day and night. “The first time I saw my mother draw on paper I was shocked and surprised. She drew her old beautiful home in Hama in detail, as though she wanted to draw everything that she had lost. But she never drew us, her children,” he says.

Feeling the therapeutic benefits of drawing, Khani’s mother began to teach him and his siblings how to draw, in order to, as he explains, “help transfer emotions onto paper as she was doing.” Not surprisingly, the act of drawing got the young boy interested in art.



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By the time Khani was 16 years old, he had completed an art program at the Suhail al Ahdab Center of Plastic Arts in Hama. Seven years later, he graduated with a concentration in oil painting from the College of Fine Arts in Damascus. And two years after that, Khani completed his academic art training by receiving a Master's of Fine Art, also in oil painting, from the Syrian capital's Faculty of Fine Arts.

But despite his rapid acceleration within the art world, Khani continued to have difficulty putting the memories of the massacre to rest. "There is nothing tougher than coming to grips with what happened in Hama. Even after my academic studies and graduating with an art degree, it is the only image that I carry around with me," he says, "...the image of the stampeding crowds, the cellars and the prisons.

Pledging himself to Syria – Hama in particular – Khani uses his art to both cleanse himself of pain and shed light on what happened during that deadly month in 1982. Using acrylic paint, because oil paint gives him headaches, in addition to "many other art supplies," the Syrian artist utilizes inspiration from humans, their thoughts and emotions, to create abstract-figurative style paintings, which tend to depict blurry and elusive female forms set against indiscernible backgrounds. "The female is one of God's most beautiful creations, at least for me, because she is the mother, the revolution, the city, freedom and the sky," he explains.

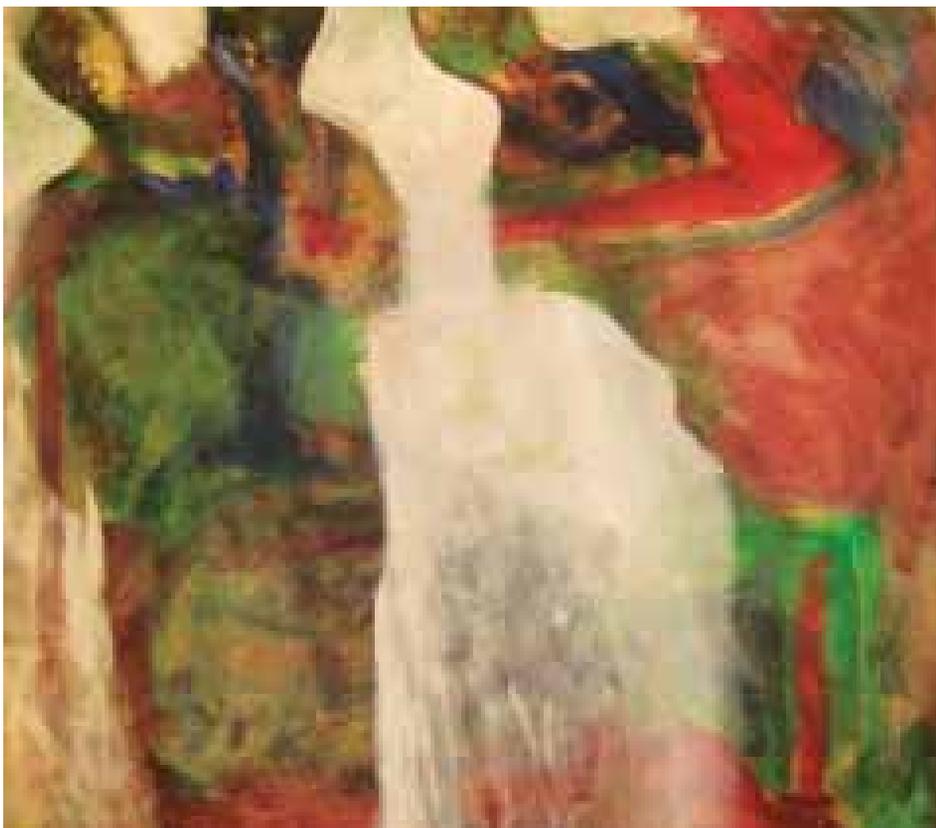
When an idea comes to Khani, he obsesses over it until he is able to release





it onto a canvas. “I try to empty out what’s on my mind as soon as I can so that I don’t lose that train of thought or emotion,” he says. “The urge doesn’t go away until the piece is finished.” His paintings – an amalgamation of one or several color schemes brought to life through impassioned strokes and airy, whisked formations – are evidence of his furious inner purging. “I wanted to say more about my struggles in the past, but everyone knows that the spoken word is what gets us in trouble. Now, however, I am able to clearly and effectively speak my mind through my art,” he says.

The majority of the pieces presented as part of Khani’s Orient Gallery exhibition, entitled “Raqis Bila Tawaquf” – or “Non-Stop Dancing” – portray seemingly feminine figures with faces and bodies masked by layers of variously-colored wayward strokes, emitting a sense of struggle set within a chaotic, despairing atmosphere; while a few appear to be the physical embodiment of hazy flashbacks consisting of in-motion human figures melded together into a single flowing entity. “Syrians used to dance in every corner of the country. It’s nice to hear the beat of a genius melody and a rhythm that has no end,” says the artist when asked about the concept of the exhibition.



Although it may be some time before Khani, who currently resides alone in Paris due to threats from the Assad regime, can dance freely again in his homeland, the Syrian artist is already making plans for his return: “I want to draw and color on my country’s land in the near future. I don’t know when, but it is a certainty.” ■