

This article, published in Art Unlimited and Radikal in February 2015, revised for *Apricots from Damascus*.

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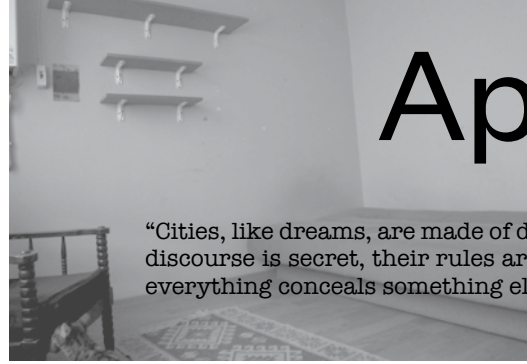
*Apricots from Damascus* is an **apexart** Franchise Exhibition organized by

Atif Akin and Dilek Winchester. For more information, visit us at

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Contact

[delicious@apricotsfromdamascus.net](mailto:delicious@apricotsfromdamascus.net)



“Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.”

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Among the cultural centers of the East, Istanbul has become almost the only center where different people can live together. The tense and unstable relations among the Middle Eastern countries affect people's freedom of travel. It is almost impossible for an Iranian to go and live in Jerusalem, for a Saudi Arabian or Egyptian to live in Tehran... Baghdad is being reconstructed after the war, but it has not yet fully recovered. Aleppo is almost destroyed, and Damascus is in the throes of despair. Gaza was under fire until very recently. Given these circumstances, Istanbul, which is still a safe center, is bound to host all the refugees and help the artists, scientists, and intellectuals from the region heal. This might be an opportunity for Istanbul to reach the cultural diversity it used to have.

Syrians think that they resemble Turks

more than the citizens of any of the Arab countries. And we, how unfamiliar we are with this culture at our elbow! Is not it about time that we take a more careful look at this culture that we have been increasingly approaching only from the perspective of denominations and realize its true richness?

Like Zaza said, despite the houses tumbling down on us, love is still growing...

Translated by: Douaa Sheet

The last movie of Kiarostami's "Koker Trilogy" *Through the Olive Trees*, produced in 1994, focuses on the impact of the 1990 Iran Earthquake on the daily lives of the affected villagers. The leading character of the movie Hüseyin, a construction worker, is in love with Tahire. His proposals are constantly turned down on the grounds that he is uneducated and does not own a house. On the night of an ordinary day in which his insistent proposals keep being turned down, an earthquake hits the village tumbling everything down. In the movie intertwining reality with fiction, Hüseyin and Tahire have to work on the same movie set (Kiarostami frequently works with unprofessional actors and actresses and writes his scripts after getting to know them). In the famous road sequence in which Hüseyin talks with the director, he says that his lack of a house was thrown into his face so many times that his very sadness might have led to the earthquake. After the earthquake Tahire does not have a house any more nor does the rest of the village. Now Hüseyin thinks that everybody is all equal.

When I went back one evening to Van, the city where I grew up, after the earthquake, all I did was to try to find my sister and her family. They had been living in a decently comfortable apartment downtown, but everything changed suddenly with the earthquake. Now they were living in a small and dim tent on the coast of Lake Van with tens of strangers. I cannot forget that night we spent in the tent under heavy rain. A month later, they took refuge in a container and spent the rest of the year here including the whole winter. They had to send away the children to İzmir to my mother's house because they could not endure the living conditions in the container. However, this did not really protect them from dealing with many physical and psychological problems for months. Disasters such as earthquakes and wars equate the lives of everyone in the negative sense. Having lost their house, their belongings, and the worst of all, their dreams about the future, millions of people share the same destiny. Syrians who had to leave their countries after the war are now dispersed over many countries.

In this essay, I will talk about a specific group among those immigrants whom we tend to code as Arabs or Syrians and reduce them to their desperate existence on the streets: Syrian artists.

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November 2015

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Pinar Öğrenci

by

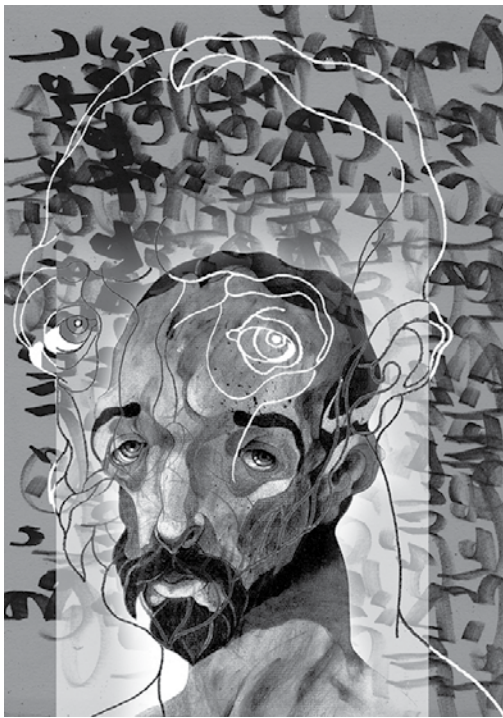
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Damascus

Apricots from

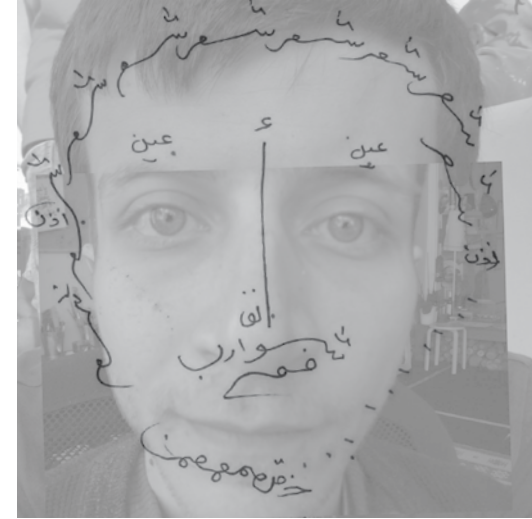


**Mohammad Zaza (Riyadh, 1987), of Kurdish origin, had grown up in Saudi Arabia and moved to Syria at the age of 18. Zaza came to İstanbul one and half year ago and now lives in an apartment in Siraselviler. The day I went to his atelier was really cold, and his heating system was not working. Zaza had set up a stove in the middle of his atelier and piled a tack of firewood before the wall. When I asked about what changed the most in his paintings after moving to İstanbul, his response was “colors”. He told me that he was fascinated by the light coming through the clouds constantly moving in the sky and the subsequently changing colors, and that he found İstanbul quite inspiring. Nowadays Zaza is preparing for his upcoming solo exhibition in İstanbul.**

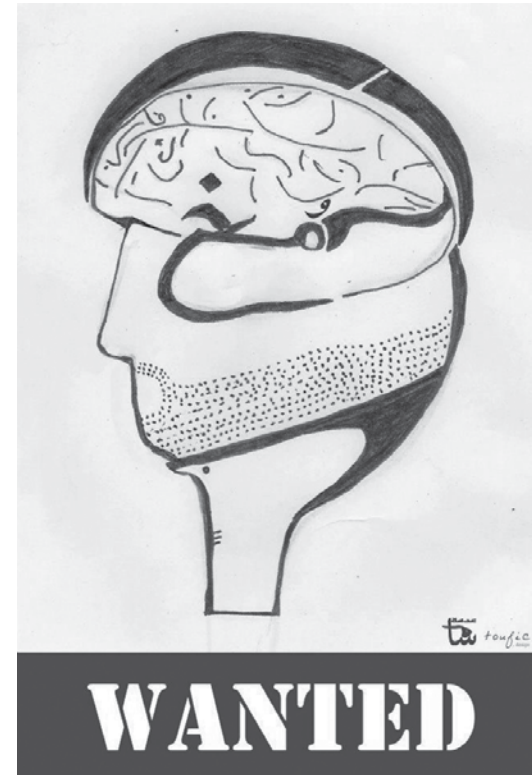


**Zaza: As I was working on a text, I got stuck with the Arabic word “hawa” which means “razed to the ground”, and it provoked and inspired me. Later I kept going on with my work, but my mind kept revolving around this word. As I turned back to my text, I was hearing the “music” of this word that goes beyond its literal meaning. This made me rethink the notion of poetry, identity and names. Then over time I have come to believe more strongly that this word was inert and that it was opposed to the idea of change altogether. And now... I am painting. “Love is still growing, but the humanity could not yet see it.”**

**Toufic Hamidi (Aleppo, 1988) came to İstanbul in March, 2014. His family still lives in Aleppo, but Toufic found a flat for himself in Aynalıçeşme. Toufic had been studying lithography and was still a student when the war broke out. He came to İstanbul immediately after graduating and still lives here.**



**Toufic: First of all, what this process means to me is my constant discovery of myself through art. I am feeling the wartime and its aftermath on a personal level. This is what happens when I look back at my country and the images coming from there after I left there. At the same time, when I see what comes from there within the framework of truth, I can't help ask myself “How can I present what I myself have?” Above all, I would like to give a positive impression about everything we used to have back there. Displacement has both positive and negative consequences. The spirit of the city one moves to and the language problems are some examples I can mention. But at the end of the day everything is up to the artist and his or her personal effort. After all, war made everything more transparent and real. I know more about myself and my family because of the warfare and its daily details.**





**Maher Abdo (Idlib, 1984) first studied sculpture and then drama. He worked as a set and stage designer for movies and TV for some time but later turned back to painting and sculpture. He had stayed in Egypt for a while after the war broke out and worked for a movie project there before coming to İstanbul. Maher's family migrated to Hatay. I visited him at his atelier on the basement floor of a well-preserved building in Kurtuluş. He was so happy that he eventually had an atelier. In our conversation he underlined the significance of "place" and pointed that those who were displaced gets deprived of an important part of their character and that these faces of deprivation increasingly resemble each other over time. He thrust into my hands a jar of honey with ginger as I was leaving. His eyes were full of life and he was hopeful about İstanbul. Maher now lives in a small town called Sulzbach Rozenberg in southern Germany. He is planning to move to Munich after getting his residence permit and is nowadays working on his German.**



**Amjad Wardeh (Damascus, 1984) came to İstanbul and found a flat in Bomonti, while his family settled in Gaziantep. He said that many landlords in his neighborhood treat Syrian people more cautiously than others and ask them twice the regular deposit amount, a treatment that he heard from many of his friends. Amjad travelled a lot since we met. He went to Gaziantep, Bodrum, Midilli, Viyana, but now he lives in Frankfurt.**

**Amjad: I can say that migration has had a great impact on my production style and the issues I work on. On almost all of my canvases, grey is almost naturally the dominant color, but I started to creat a stronger contrast with warm colors. When the revolutionary movement in Syria began in 2013, everything was so peaceful and my works used to reflect this inclination. As much as I try to keep myself immune to what is going on in my country, one can say that it is possible to see all that on my canvas.**

Istanbul has a magic Middle est  
Istanbul is love

Mybe here lm save more  
But i don't have good live and job



**Maher: I moved to Egypt after leaving Syria but I did not stay there for long. This is because I could not get a hold of other Syrian artists living around the Egypt border. I could not get their support. Then I came here and as a matter of fact, the conditions here has been much better both in terms of human relations and the atmosphere in the streets. From my perspective the problem is that the war in Syria is not yet over. There is a great ambiguity and mystery about what the future is going to be like.**

**I first met with Arabic culture when I was learning to read Quran during my primary school years. I was learning to read and write in Turkish and to read Quran in Arabic at the same time. All I was learning was merely how to read the Quran but I had to read it according to the established rules for artistic reading, that is, to read with emotion by raising and lowering my voice and emphasizing certain sounds when needed. Incidentally, our closest family friend was an Arabic family selling fabrics for a living, who had moved to Van from Siirt. They could speak Turkish very well, but they would prefer Arabic for daily conversations. My mother brought to our kitchen different spices and many traditional Arabic dishes she had learned from our Arabic neighbors. My father had a lot of merchant friends and we used to know a lot of Arabic people like Nazife whose fascinating recitals of the Mevlid I cannot forget. My father would sometimes invite his Iranian, Arabic, Israeli customers for dinner and ask my mother to cook something special for them. My mother would sometimes get upset with these sudden requests but she also loved meeting new people. People at the dinner table would somehow communicate despite the lack of a shared language. Now I understand that travelling all round Anatolia as a merchant earned my father a certain merchant ethics. He used to love meeting new people regardless of their religion and ethnicity.**



**When I set to prepare an issue focusing on Syrian artists living in İstanbul, we had to decide how and where we would get together with the participants. My immediate solution without a second thought was to meet around a dinner table at the atelier in Osmanbey. Gathering people around the same dinner table was a reflex that I inherited from my father, and I suppose everybody enjoyed it. Thinking more about it later I felt even more justified about dining together with these five artists who were dispersed all over Istanbul and lived with the risk of finding themselves in totally new conditions overnight, because it was a quite a problem for them to communicate and get involved with the artist circles in İstanbul. The musical tone of Arabic was breaking the ice between us. We were trying not to talk about the war as much as possible, but the war, with its grave reality, was ripping our conversation into pieces.**

**Naser Nassan Agha (Idlib, 1961) lives in Beylikdüzü. He moved to Turkey with his family and has two children. He represents a different generation from the other four Syrian artists, all of whom belong to the 80's. In our conversation he shared his views of the works of younger artists. Naser employs elements of architecture and urban materials in his works. He finds the urban tissue of İstanbul as a historical city very familiar but he has been avoiding historical references lately. He went to Germany for an exhibition project a while ago, and he is planning to come back to İstanbul in spring.**



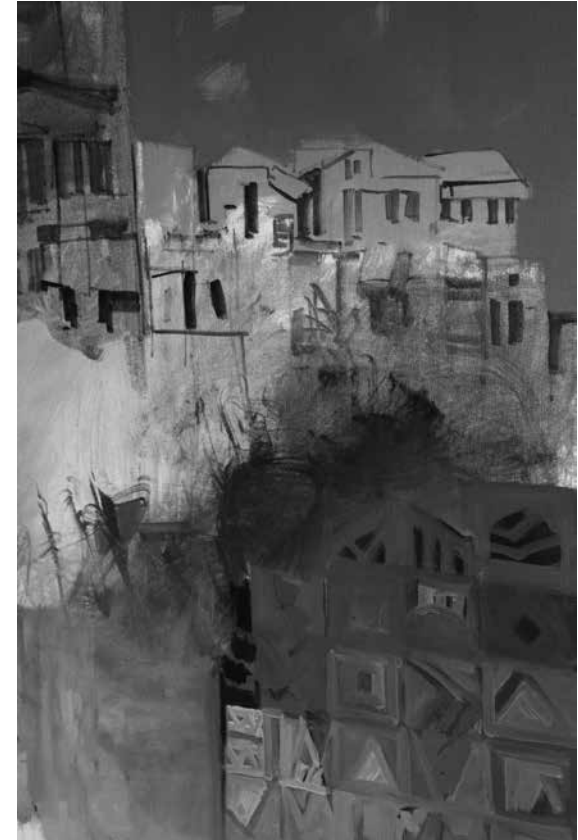
My dear friend Pınar

Im in Germany now

You are in the heart

**Naser: “For how long are you going to put up with us, the Syrians?”**

**Naser: What needs to be done now is to put art as an honest and honorable way of communication before politics and to employ it as a means of bringing people together. The war and its social consequences prevent people from leading a decent life. The destruction inflicted by the dark forces ignores even the most basic human rights. We, as a small group of friends, are trying to continue art despite all the difficulties. We even had an exhibition showcasing the beauties of the Syrian culture and history. However, the majority of these people are no longer living and we are waiting here as a couple of friends. Our dream is still living on the shattered sidewalks of cold cities. In fact, all we wanted was a little bit of warmth.**




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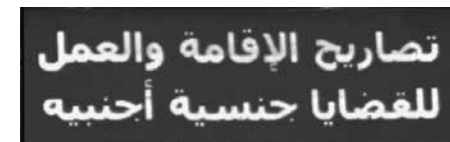
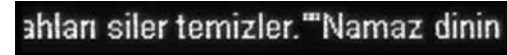
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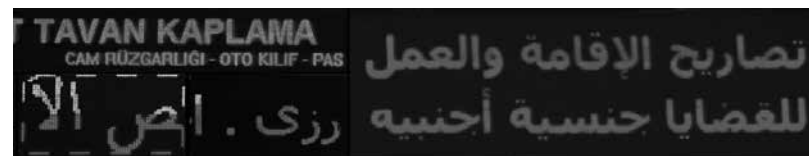
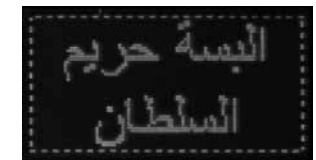
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