
ARAB

MASTERPIECES
AZZAWI ● ABBOUD ● BENANTEUR



Shafic Abboud.
Le Marche St Pierre, 2002.
Oil on canvas, 90 x 94 cm
© Succession Shafic Abboud.
Courtesy Galerie Claude
Lemand, Paris.

Galerie Claude Lemand - Art Paris Art Fair
Grand Palais, Paris, France
27 March - 1st April 2013



Abdallah Benanteur.
Les Béguines, 1984
Huile sur toile,
150 x 150 cm
Copyright of the Artist.
Courtesy Galerie Claude
Lemand, Paris.

To celebrate the 25th anniversary of Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris,
Dr Claude Lemand will exhibit masterpieces by three celebrated Arab artists
at the renowned Art Paris Art Fair

Featured works include:

Shafic Abboud - Paintings from 1959 to 2002

Abdallah Benanteur - Important paintings, diptychs and triptychs from the 1980's and 1990's

Dia Al-Azzawi - Three groups of historic masterpieces, The Golden Odes 1978, the Gilgamesh 1987 triptych,
and the powerful Bilad al-Sawad 1994-95, triptych 330 x 450 cm Al Azzawi's meditation on Iraq's war and tragedy,
as well as other pieces from Bilad al-Sawad 1997 and 2011.



Dia Al-Azzawi:

The rebellion of shapes

Dia Al-Azzawi.
Gilgamesh 2, 1987.
 Copyright Dia Al-Azzawi.
 Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

Dia Al-Azzawi.
Bilad al-Samad Polyptych, 2010-2011.
 Acrylic on paper laid down on canvas,
 330 x 760 cm.
 Copyright Dia Al-Azzawi.
 Courtesy Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris

A forerunner of Arab modernity, Dia Al-Azzawi, an erudite painter, sculptor, draughtsman and printmaker, has always firmly asserted the cultural heritage of Arab civilizations and the importance of its relevance in contemporary art.

Born in Baghdad in 1939, he studied Archaeology and developed a passion for Islamic art and for the rich cultural heritage of Mesopotamia. Although based in London for the past thirty-five years, he patiently created a unique oeuvre, halfway between figurative and abstract, yet at the same time referential and decorative, expressive and open, which derives just as much from the optical than from the haptic - the eye and the sense of touch, a unified way of thinking, from sensation to vision. He achieved this through his permanent

contact with the artists and poets from the main capital cities of the Arab world, his clear and humanist commitment, his theoretical and aesthetic stand and his acute awareness of History's tragedies which plunge this region of the world into mourning too often (Palestine, the wars in Iraq, etc.).

In full knowledge of the current outburst of contemporary Arab artists, along with an expanding gaze over the planet being the most important reality of the first decade of the 21st century, there is no doubt that the place of Dia Al-Azzawi's oeuvre will become effective in the museums of Modern Art across the globe. What comes out of the present always compels us to look back to the past.

In this exhibition, the painter presents drawings from his series dedicated to the Epic Tale of Gilgamesh, of 1987.



‘what is present here is neither the words nor the ancient times that contain these poems, but rather the accumulation of letters and the series of symbols through a single path. Poetry is not only a symbol or a language. It is the capacity to imagine and to remember depending on the power of this ability and on the extent of meaning that it can adapt itself.’

This extraordinary legendary story from Mesopotamia is one of the oldest literary works of Humanity. The first complete known version was written in Akkadian in the Babylonia of the 17th century BC. The story is inspired by several oral mythical traditions, namely Sumerian, put together around the end of third millennium. Engraved with a reed stylus on clay tablets which were often divided into cells, the cuneiform script, humanity’s first ever script along with Egyptian hieroglyphs, juxtaposes ‘figurative’ pictograms symbolizing objects with simplified ‘abstract’ signs, made up of lines in the shape of ‘corners’ or ‘nails’, transcribing a sound (more precisely, a syllable). Incisions, signs, pictograms, symbols : these are the core elements of the formal vocabulary in Dia Al-Azzawi’s graphicoeuvre that he naturally liberates from their literal meaning to give them a visual poetic equivalent that captures the sensitive resonance - within himself: body and soul - of the Sumerian epic’s extracts that he has chosen to reveal to us. The horse, the bull, the eye, the sexed bodies, the sensory and emotional journeys of an outlined figure to another that materializes the ornamental intricacy of the marks and diagrams, the lines and colours, the dynamic emergence of the depth towards the surface characterized by the transition of the paper’s bi-dimensionality to a virtual tri-dimensionality, the legacy of the past like a free persisting memory and eternal expansion, all come together to the benefice of a new expressiveness of the present.

Another series of drawings, executed in 1978, is devoted to the Mu’allaqat, or pre-Islamic odes. Dating from the 6th and 7th centuries, these odes were supposedly ‘suspended’ at the Ka’ba in Mecca, during arguments between rivalling important poets from various tribes of the Arab Peninsula. The ten famous pieces - qasida - preserved by the Arab tradition, praise the protector, glorify courage, denounce the enemy, wistfully mention the beauty of the loved one, celebrate euphoria, the stretch of the desert, the inaccessible hereafter, ... A man of words himself, Dia Al-Azzawi is infatuated with poetry and the absolute, inspired by the black and more rarely red calligraphy of the Arab verses, that he displays on a white page, used in a similar way to a music score or a banner. At the same time, he creates vertical blocks of abstract symbols and lively suggestive figures that are also black. Although they don’t illustrate it, these correspond to the ode’s sound and visual density. What counts here are the harmonic, or sometimes on the contrary discordant, relations that carry all the weight and the emptiness which are necessary for the spatial composition generated by the

confrontation or interlocking of the text and the image. The artist wrote in one of his critical analysis, that ‘what is present here is neither the words nor the ancient times that contain these poems, but rather the accumulation of letters and the series of symbols through a single path. Poetry is not only a symbol or a language. It is the capacity to imagine and to remember depending on the power of this ability and on the extent of meaning that it can adapt itself.’

The accretion, or even the compaction, of Arab writing and of figurative and abstract elements brings back the sensations and emotions declared through the poem, as if the hand was not only the extension of the eye but also the sensitive seismograph of the entire body, being in the grip of its own drive, its own memory. The architectonic - the line of thought embracing the accidents of the mental ground - is even steeper in that it suggests the unlimited created by the imaginary world of shapes and the dream world caused by the reading or listening of the text: through its challenging practice, the black and white drawing draws from the original source of the inscription and mark, saying or rather dictating the essence of the being.

In another later series, which Al-Azzawi undertook in 1996 and where he pays tribute to the famous poet Al-Mutanabbi, verticality gives way to horizontality. The block breathes, dilates, as the lines obtained with India ink on the white piece of paper create an organic body. At the same time, the latter appears eternally alive with its gaps and graduations, its ruptures and resummptions, its connections and passages overlooked by the two caesuras of the Arab verse calligraphed in black or red, just as in the Arab-Islamic manuscripts. The sentences drawn from the exhilarating and exhilarated autobiographical story of Al-Mutanabbi, written in the 10th century between Baghdad, Aleppo and Cairo, are catchphrases that are surprisingly contemporary in their way of advocating the rebellious spirit and self-assertion, for example: ‘I preferred exile because no one is superior to me and because my only judge is my Creator’, ‘Time is man’s only assassin’, ‘I don’t seek to settle on a specific land nor to leave it for good; always worried, I sit on the winds that I orientate towards the South or the West’. There is no doubt that the gest of this renowned poet, roaming between a harsh lyricism and a language that is sometimes glorifying or castigating, has continuously echoed in Dia Al-Azzawi’s imagination, a man of convictions and stringencies.

The Gulf War of 1990 and 1991 struck the artist as a full shot. He hadn’t seen Iraq since his exile to London

yet he saw, like many others, through the images of the media, the fire and blood blindly pouring over the living and the dead, friends that were still very dear to his heart, Mesopotamia’s cultural heritage, civil victims and over one of the historical lands of Arab civilization, that of its pioneering city, Baghdad. First of all, Dia Al-Azzawi produced different sketches imbued with a suffocating atmosphere in drawing books - these constitute the genesis of his series titled Bilad Al-Sawad. Translated as ‘the land of burnt land’, it refers to the land cursed by oil, when the latter loses control over the greediest appetites. In 1993, the painter with a wounded conscience executes charcoal drawings depicting a series of close-up broadly outlined faces, where the white of compassion fights back against the tenebrous black of suffering. Emotions are omnipresent: the faces cry, the opened mouths scream, the two hands cover the eyes that are disproportionately dark... He is perhaps thinking about that other mass massacre fallen from the sky known as Guernica. He maybe recalls that the only weapon, which is at the same time ridiculous in front of the barbaric army yet simultaneously precious for the soul, is Picasso’s masterpiece, as it is the human assertion within inhumanity.

During that last decade, Al-Azzawi painted several black and white canvases, in which a man’s figure, the ‘unsolvable human’, emerges from a both physical and mental landscape of a blazing fire, where death’s dark forces are intertwined with life’s dynamics. Then, very recently, two years ago, the artist painted a magnificent polyptych of 330 by 760 cm. These dimensions recall the bas-relief frescoes in the Sargon Kings’ Palace, located in Khorsabad where the ancient monarchs of Assyria used to live. These frescoes are not only impressive visually but even more so through their perception of the body. Despite the funeral theme that Dia Al-Azzawi chose to mention, the body parts - the outlines of the heads, legs, feet, hands - the structured silhouettes and the broadly outlined faces coming from the nether world, built with equally geometrical facets, overlap and piled on top of each other in a freely expressive and almost ethereal way. Everything is a hymn to freedom and a song of life. Everything is rebellion and donation.

-PASCAL AMEL

writer and editor in chief of art absolutement

Translated from French by Valérie Hess