

Youssef Abdelke: KING OF DARKNESS



Artist Youssef Abdelké's highly acclaimed work is renowned for its sinister undertones and unique symbolism which expose the brutalities of life.

Based in Paris, the 57-year-old Syrian painter breaks with tradition through his unique approach to still life drawing. His intriguing works have turned heads the world over, selling in such international auction houses as Christie's and Sotheby's. In addition, his long-awaited exhibition in Damascus in December 2007 generated huge interest among art lovers.

Trivial items such as a nail, a fish or a shoe are the focal point of Abdelké's works. *"In order for a bone fragment, a dish or an empty sardine to do what a king and his horse or a woman and her possessions usually did, the artist is required to exert exceptional efforts and to display great skills,"* art critic Emil Manaem writes in his introduction to Abdelké's book. *"In his drawings, Abdelké allows simple things in life to impose their sovereignty over spaces, pushing them from the very beginning from the realm of realism to the realm of symbolism."*

According to Manaem, true artistic talent does not reveal itself in the way a fish is drawn or the manner in which its details are captured, but in its power to make the fish an expression or a symbol of life. *"A fish embodies free movement and the vast sea. In the fish, there is both coherence with place and the impossibility of living outside it,"* writes Manaem. *"In its eternally wide-open eyes, there is a blatant challenge and condemnation of death."* When the fish is depicted sliced open or pierced by nails, the brutality of this image conveys an underlying message about the world. >

Left: Youssef Abdelke
**Saint John Chrysostomos
in Damascus**, 2013
Mixed media on paper
150 x 200 cm
© Youssef Abdelke
Courtesy Galerie Claude
Lemand, Paris

Right: Youssef Abdelke
**The Knife and
the Bird**, 2012
Charcoal on paper
250 x 150 cm
© Youssef Abdelke
Courtesy Galerie Claude
Lemand, Paris





Youssef Abdelke
Pierced Heart, 2013
 Charcoal on paper, 150 x 200 cm
 © Youssef Abdelke
 Photo Nassouh Zaghlouleh
 Courtesy Galerie Claude
 Lemand, Paris

Symbolism has always been integral to Abdelké's vision. His early ink drawings were full of symbols expressing clear-cut political messages. The 'People' series from the 1980-90s expressed oppression in the Arab world with its images of jails, guards, crowds of people and horses.

"I revealed the darkness I felt inside in my 'People' series," Abdelké said. *"This helped me move on to more positive and peaceful projects."* However, Abdelké's harsh style and severity of subjects remained, even in his still life drawings in the form of skulls, bones and sharp knives. *"Artists can't change their skin even if they change their subject matter,"* Abdelké explained.

Abdelké's concept of space has however changed. *"I've been inspired by the philosophy of people in South East Asia. They see man as a small part of the universe; space in their*

paintings reflects the huge space we have in our universe. Europeans on the other hand, see man as the centre of the world, that's why you find their paintings full of people and elements," Abdelké said.

Abdelké now integrates both European and Eastern perspectives into his paintings. *"Europeans developed scientific rules for perspective so that things would look the same as in reality,"* Abdelké said. *"Easterners like the Arabs, Turks, and Chinese ignore perspective; they paint the most important elements of their paintings in a bigger size regardless of how they see look in reality."*

Finally, after more than 20 years of living and working in France, Abdelké is returning to Syria. *"Unlike many of my friends, I never planned to settle down in Paris,"* he said. *"I've always wanted to come back to my homeland, Syria."*

- Claude Lemand

Youssef Abdelke

Youssef Abdelke is one of the rare and strongest Expressionist Arab artists. His works are in a large number of Private collections and in museums and institutions, such as The British Museum in London, the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, The National Museums of Kuwait, Amman, ...

Born in Qameshli (Syria) in 1951. Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Damascus, 1976. Studies at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1986. PhD in Arts, Université Paris VIII, 1989. He lived and worked in Paris as from 1981 until his return to Damascus in 2005. After 25 years of compelled exile and of being forbidden to go back to Syria, it was finally possible for him to go to Damascus in 2005 and to organise an important exhibition there. Since 2010, his Syrian passport was confiscated.

Youssef Abdelke was arrested last July and liberated 5 weeks later, after an International action of protest, and he is now free to travel outside Syria. He visited Lebanon, Egypt and he is coming to Paris in March 2014, where Claude Lemand will show in the Grand Palais 3 large Drawings in Art Paris Art Fair (26-30 March) and hold a solo exhibition of his Recent works in his gallery (3 April-3 May).