

# BAZAAR

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CONTENTS **ART**

## ART NEWS

### THE LATEST ART TALES

**18** A look at Toronto's Aga Khan Museum's new Gulf initiative, Sotheby's Dubai's first auction in the city, restoration of the Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Theatre in Fontainebleau and much more

## IN CONVERSATION

**38** With Indian art collector and patron Kiran Nadar

**42** With Touria El Glaoui, founder of 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair

## THE FEATURES

### THE ARTIST

**46** Tagreed Albagshi's celebratory depiction of Saudi women

**50** Kuwaiti artist Shurooq Amin on the futility of censorship

**54** The artistic practice of Iranian-born Shirazeh Houshiary

**58** Egyptian Mohammed Aba's vibrant abstract canvases

### THE MUSEUM

**62** The promise of Louvre Abu Dhabi

**68** The new Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art

### THE GALLERY

**74** London's Parasol Unit founding director Dr Ziba Ardalan on the art space's public-centred approach

### THE COLLECTOR

**78** Abraham Karabajakian on modern and contemporary Arab art

**82** Fadi Basbous preserves his father Alfred Basbous' legacy

## LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

### REBEL YELL

**84** Photography through the lens of East Wing director Elie Domit

### CENTRAL ASIA IN FOCUS

**88** Andakulova Gallery presents works by Russian photographer Max Penson

## THE EXCHANGE

### A PERFUMED CLOUD

**90** Cartier imagines the scent of the sky

### THE LAST EMPRESS

**94** The fairytale creations of Chinese fashion designer Guo Pei

### ART OF COLLABORATION

**98** Chronicling 15 years of Bottega Veneta's artist-led campaigns

### FRAMING THE SULTANATE

**102** Amr Ali focuses on his love of photography

### FIAC 2017

**104** Gaia Repossi walks us through her favourite galleries and artists at this year's fair

### MAISON BOGHOSSIAN

**105** Jean Boghossian on carrying forward an artistic legacy

Mohamed Aba. *The Lover*. 2016. Mixed media on canvas. 60x90cm. Courtesy of the artist



# THE MAGICAL EAST

*Egyptian artist **Mohammed Abla's** new body of vibrant abstract canvases explores the relationship between Eastern and Western cultural and economic ties. Rebecca Anne Proctor speak with the artist in Dubai*



At the newly relaunched Tabari Artspace in Dubai International Financial Center (DIFC) Egyptian artist Mohamed Abla is busy cutting out imaginative forms from long strips of paper. It's hard to tell if he's ready to converse, but with a gentle smile he quips, "I am always playing." Like a child who cannot break away from his toys, Abla is an artist who is constantly fiddling with paper and paint to create his abstract works dressed with rich colours evocative of his native Egypt, incorporating elements from calligraphy and collage. "For me, when I start a new work, there are always some ceremonies that I do," explains Abla. "I research the subject through movies and books. And if I can, as I did with this show, I travel to some countries that have to do with the idea." For this exhibition, aptly titled *The Silk Road*, Abla researched Iraq, Syria, China, Russia and India—all the countries that had links to the ancient Silk Road. "For more than 1000 years printing, religion, language and technology was influenced by trade on the Silk Road," says Abla. "Human beings benefited from trade. We don't need to fight—we can exchange our ideas and help each other. My aim now is to bring people together. Why not create the Silk Road again?"

In works that bring to life folklores from North Africa, the Levant, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, Abla has revealed the cultural richness of this ancient trade route. In these works the artist cuts shapes from variously dyed papers and then arranges them into compositions that resemble animals, heroes, princesses and other scenes of folklore—all derived from the ancient Silk Road network, operational from approximately 120 BCE to 1450 AD. In *Copper City* (2016-17), for example, two high columns hold copper-hued men on horse back with their knives and shields raised as if they were about to fight. In the background, an imaginative blue sky mixed with Arabic calligraphy

portrays a serene and mystical landscape. On smaller columns are softer characters—a bird, a figure at work and a tall plant, all painted in the same copper colour. In *Small Harbour by the Ocean* (2016-17), a dreamy scene of colourful sail and fishing boats refer to the idea of commercial activity—all rendered in the artist's fantastical manner of coupling collage with colour, calligraphy and life-like forms. And in the *White Horse* (2016), electric hues of yellow, blue and green frame a man on a white horse, raising his spear towards a large and colourfully freckled bird. These works charge forth from Abla's mixture of material with a mysticism unseen in the artist's previous work, characterised by depictions of families, Cairo street scenes and expressionistic collage work. "I go to the studio and I let everything come. I download," laughs the artist. "When I work, I never make sketches, I work directly onto the canvas or I play," he smiles referring to the paper cut outs that he still holds in his hand. "The playing then turns into the artwork. When something moves me that becomes my subject matter. Art—painting—for me is the only way to express."

This need for exploration has been with the artist since he was a child. "I grew up in a family that wanted nothing to do with art," he says. "I was always drawing but my father didn't like it. He believed I needed to read and write when I was two years old. When I was five I could already read and write so when I went to school it was boring because I knew everything already. So I spent the first three years always going to the 'art room.' The teachers would tell me to go there whenever I complained. It was like an Ali Baba cave—full of collages, superman images and artwork," he smiles. "Everyone would call me 'the artist.'"

Despite Abla's talent and passion for art, his father still maintained that it was not a practical vocation. So after Abla finished school, his father had him join the army. "But I escaped without his permission," he says defiantly. "And then I went to art school without his permis-

"MY AIM NOW IS TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER. WHY NOT  
CREATE THE SILK ROAD AGAIN?" - *Mohammed Abla*

Facing page: *The Princess*. 2016. Mixed media on canvas. 70x100cm.  
Right: *The Lover and the Potter*. 2016. Mixed media on canvas. 100x70cm.





“ POLITICS WAS ALWAYS A SUBJECT FOR ME TO PAINT. I BEGAN TO BE AWARE OF MY ROLE AS AN ARTIST IN SOCIETY. IT’S NOT JUST THAT YOU SIT IN A STUDIO AND PAINT. YOU CAN EDUCATE PEOPLE ”

sion. He told me that if I go on studying art that I was never allowed to come home. So I spent five years without seeing my family.” Years later, after his father had witnessed his success through various newspapers, they were reacquainted. His mother would encourage him by bringing him materials to work with—even if she had to hide them from her husband’s eyes.

After the artist graduated in 1977 from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Alexandria, he decided to leave Egypt to study in Europe. He enrolled in Zurich’s Bauhaus Oriental School and then traveled extensively in Germany. During the early 80s, Abla studied graphics in both Switzerland and Austria. But after seven or eight years he decided he needed to return to Egypt. “I went back to be part of the art scene. I am between two cultures and I want to bring the best of both together through my work.”

Back in Egypt the artist became involved with Egyptian politics. “Politics was always a subject for me to paint,” he says. “I began to be aware of my role as an artist in society. It’s not just that you sit in a studio and paint. You can educate people through your art.” In 2004, he joined a group of artists and intellectuals voicing their concerns over the Mubarak regime and discussing how they could change the status quo. But then the state turned against them and things got violent. In 2007, the government came to Korsaya, an island on the Nile, where Abla had his studio for nearly 20 years, and tried to overtake it. “They came with weapons and tried to take it away from me,” he recalls, remembering how he began a campaign to protect his island for three years against the regime with fisherman and other workers from the island. “I felt that it was my responsibility to fight against the Mubarak regime.”

In the years leading up to the 2011, Abla’s work focused primarily on social and environmental issues, his canvases crowded with thousands of dots to comment on Egypt’s growing population. In addition, he



Above: Portrait of Mohamed Abla. Photography by Emad Abdel Hady  
Below: *The Princess*. 2016-2017. Mixed media. 70x100cm.  
Facing page: *The Red Mountain*. 2016. Mixed media on canvas. 70x100cm.

painted topping apartments, loosely stacked, about to fall down, yet another comment on the fragility of the Egyptian state and his disgust for the Mubarak administration. His desire for social change was so great that he became one of the organisers of the Egyptian Revolution. Participating in several major protests, Abla was with the late artist Ahmed Basony, who died at age 32 on 28 January during the fourth day of major anti-government demonstrations. The artists had worked together previously and Abla remembers the moments before his death. “He ran before me. He had a mask and he thought he was protected.

He said he didn’t care about the weapons While Abla survived the tear gas that stung his eyes and physical pain from all of the pushing and shoving, the tremendous upheaval of the Egyptian Revolution affected him emotionally. His country was on the brink of change—a change he, like others, believed was greatly needed. Determined to keep going, Abla also assisted in writing the new constitution for Egypt, but then came the dictatorship of Abdel Fattah Saeed Hussein Khalil El Sisi and everything stopped. “I now stick to my studio,” says Abla, contemplative all of a sudden. “The people of Egypt are suffering. They have lost hope. They thought they were going to build a new country.”

The magical images that encircle us at the Tabari Artspace aren’t about war and violence. They are about a fairy tale world, one certainly alive in Abla’s mind and one that also resonates in reality in its desire for social change. Yes, there is also a fight here, even amidst the calmer colours and softer subject matter. “All of this influences my painting,” states Abla. “I always paint what I feel. For me painting is like a diary.” The exhibition is the fruit of much literary, and as Abla says, “spiritual research.” These are stories that people can learn from, he emphasises. “There is always a fairy tale but it is not nonsense. There is always a moral behind my work.”

A childlike wonder prompts the creation of Abla’s new work as it has the new techniques he has incorporated. Several of the works on display have been painted on water. “I fill a container with water and then I paint on the water with oil and then I put the paper on the water and take it out,” explains Abla, almost mischievously, as if telling me about a secret recipe. “What is left is an impression of the painted water. I always mix material.”

The workmen at Tabari Artspace have finally gone quiet. We step out into Abla’s fantasy world of folklore from the *Silk Road*. He still has his cut outs with him, clutching onto them possessively. “I work all the time, otherwise life would be boring,” he laughs. “Art is communication. Through my art I always find solutions to my problems. It happens naturally. Art is my love. People say artists are difficult,” he pauses again, a twinkle in his eye. “We aren’t. We are just children. We are just exploring.” ■

*Silk Road runs until 24 November tabariartspace.com*

Courtesy of the artist and Tabari Artspace, Dubai

