

Tammam Azzam

By Maymanah Farahat



Untitled, Laundry Series, 2011, Mixed Media on Canvas, 180x180cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

In previous critiques of Tammam Azzam's work, much has been postulated about the stark palette, jagged lines and textured surfaces that dominate his compositions. The most common theory is that these distinguishing attributes evoke the black volcanic plateaus of the artist's native Sweida. The dramatic peaks of the area's mountain range, which sweep down in varying shades of charcoal and grey, are known throughout Syria. Without visiting this particular landscape near the Syrian-Jordanian border, even in pictures its dark ashy deposits seem to creep into every detail of its surrounding villages. From its early ruins to the exteriors of recent buildings and homes, the visual effects of such unforgiving terrain are prominent. Perhaps it is merely out of necessity or the practicality of utilizing readily available materials, in that the bricks that were used to construct many of these edifices are from its volcanic deposits.

When built by the ancient Nabateans, the city was crowned "Suwada" (or little black town) because of the ash-coloured stones that adorned its facades. In modern day Sweida, there is a reoccurring colour scheme, a combination of black and white that is carried throughout. This influence of natural surroundings on the manmade environments of communities is not unusual if we consider the painted villages of the Greek Islands, for example, with their vivid white walls and sea-coloured domes that mirror the shores of the Mediterranean. What is striking about Sweida, however, is that although it is an aesthetic that began centuries ago by default, it continues today—perhaps as a tradition, a sort of nod to local cultural patrimony that has translated into daily life.

This detailed portrayal of the artist's hometown serves several purposes. In the immediate, it reveals the frequent connections that have been identified with Azzam's abstract painting style. In 2005, Berlin-based Syrian artist Marwan Kassab Bachi, described a particular "longing" in his work, as he portrays, "a quest for life in the green of trees and contrasts this with the earthy colours of the arid landscapes that surround them." Although this statement was made prior to the creation of the "Laundry Series," his most recognizable body of work, what Bachi describes is the general mood that results from the young artist's expressionist approach to painting. About this on-going

series, Azzam's colleague Safwan Dahoul has noted that his paintings "depict" Sweida, as though he is "painting the view from his window there." As the discussion of his art proceeds, the influence of Sweida will be a reoccurring theme. Whether or not this unique Syrian landscape is a constant or even conscious muse can only be determined through a closer examination of his most recent paintings.

Comprised of mixed media works that have been executed over the span of several years, the "Laundry Series" is unlike anything that has been produced in the recent history of Arab art. In formalist terms it verges on the conceptual with its use of found objects, surpassing conventional forms of regional painting. Although one can argue that there are similarities between Azzam's untitled works and those that have resulted from experiments in international art in which the emphasis is on the incorporation of non-traditional materials, his paintings differ in a significant way. What sets those of the Syrian artist apart is that unlike Jasper John's "target paintings" or Julian Schnabel's "plate paintings", his are defined by alternative mediums from the onset. Clothespins, clothes and rope are all used as tools of high formalism, functioning as central elements that direct both process and aesthetic. While these three dimensional objects were first placed onto the canvas in almost direct replication of an actual clothesline, with each subsequent painting since 2007, his technique has become increasingly abstract.

Azzam first began his "Laundry Series" with a painting that contained three lines of black rope that were hung across a canvas. Attaching pins to the rope, together they took on the appearance of a clothesline. According to the artist, the inspiration for this series, albeit an unintentional one, was the sight of his young daughter rearranging such pins on a clothesline at their home in Damascus. Reconfiguring their placement in multiple ways, he was struck by the potential outcomes of such arrangements. At the time he had been working on a daily series of studies that explored various horizontal lines without particular meaning—their random order, not unlike the patterns that his child was toying with that day. Taking these observations into the studio, he began to research and develop the visual possibilities that would occur if a set of basic components were



Untitled, Laundry Series, 2011, Mixed Media on Canvas, 100x100cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

considered in an organic state, where the driving force of their arrangement would be solely “the mechanisms of creation.” Focusing on technique and experimentation, each painting is a variation of this formalist theme. For Azzam, the benefit of working from such methodology is that it facilitates the creation of an artwork as a “hybrid form,” one that is capable of borrowing and multiplying as it evolves. Each painting belonging to the series is labelled “untitled,” as though indicating that its importance is situated within a larger set of continuous experiments.

Although he began this body of work from three simple lines, the abstract expressionist painting style that he was known for prior to embarking on the “Laundry Series” quickly emerged. With its vigorous markings and what he describes as “the cycle of construction and dismantling,” resurfaced the appearance of Sweida-like details. A 2008 painting in which thin lines of rope are strewn horizontally across the canvas demonstrates this as the composition is separated into distinct areas, adding dimension to an otherwise flat surface. In this work there are several components. First is the original canvas, which Azzam has painted with varying brushstrokes. The upper portion of the composition is covered in a near-solid area of white with the



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application of a thick coating of paint. Halfway down the canvas, this area becomes disjointed, as brush marks have been painted with sweeping gestures, creating a point at which the painting is freed into limitless form. Within this rupture in the smooth surface of the coated medium, the artist releases control and the outcome of his brushstrokes become spontaneous. White paint thus appears either splattered or dripped onto the canvas. These loose markings reveal a black layer that lies beneath his white brushstrokes, an element that makes the lack of colour in his palette all the more impacting. Between these contrasting hues a sort of technical struggle has occurred. Having initially painted the canvas black, in order to achieve the solid plane that appears, a methodical application of white paint was placed atop, inevitably creating breaks in the spatiality of the composition. As Azzam suspends the deliberate nature of his brushstrokes and the painting takes on an abstract expressionist appearance, white begins to puncture black, creating areas where paint splinters into hundreds of lines that descend towards the lower part of the canvas. It is amidst this exercise in allowing the spontaneity of the creative encounter that his painting begins to possess a likeness to the dark volcanic earth of Sweida. The pieces of rope that are suspended across



Untitled, Laundry Series, 2010, Mixed Media, 200x200cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

the composition have also been painted over in white. Distributing a number of clothespins in groupings along these lines, the artist offsets the explosion of random texture and medium that occurs just below. Azzam also creates a two-dimensional surface with these pins. Emphasizing this sense of depth are the shadows that are cast from these objects onto the canvas, which give the illusion that his “clothesline” is detached from the surface, hanging in mid-air. If in the early stages of his “Laundry Series” the artist appears to have been interested in juxtaposing the materiality of these found objects with the sensorial experience of art that quickly gave way to the complete synthesis of these seemingly disparate qualities.

Take for example another work from 2008 in which a composition is constructed from a similar employment of a painted black canvas with white washes and three central horizontal lines. Although slight fissures appear in between broad, pallid films of paint, the artist has moved his focus to strips of cloth that hang from clothespins on a series of axial strands. These long columns have been flattened against the canvas with paint, their black colour hidden beneath its thick texture. A yellow tint to these cloths gives the appearance of burns, as though the artist has taken a



Untitled, Laundry Series, 2010, Mixed Media, 200x200cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.

torch to them. The strips have been placed so that they drape over the rope, accentuating their tactile forms. While the pins and rope still play a fundamental role in the composition as guides for the outlining of its initial design, they no longer stand out as simple found objects that are placed against the canvas. They have become part of a more complex equation—abstraction. As Azzam delved further into the “Laundry Series” he continued to explore new methods and materials—even colour entered his paintings. While a large 2010 diptych was produced around his original concept of “clotheslines”, there is a certain concentration on intensifying the degree to which the surface is built up that is not visible in earlier works. At this later phase in his series, texture has morphed into sculpted two-dimensionality. In place of broad, sweeping markings or solid washes of paint, he has used sizable pieces of cloth. Taking on the aesthetic characteristics of brushstrokes, they have been applied with a similar motion. Although strategically secured to the canvas, they seem to be hung in an arbitrary way, much like the manner in which linens would be hung out to dry. Emphasizing this interest in the visuals of the everyday at random, he added scraps of brightly coloured material, integrating yet another consistency onto the surface. These soft

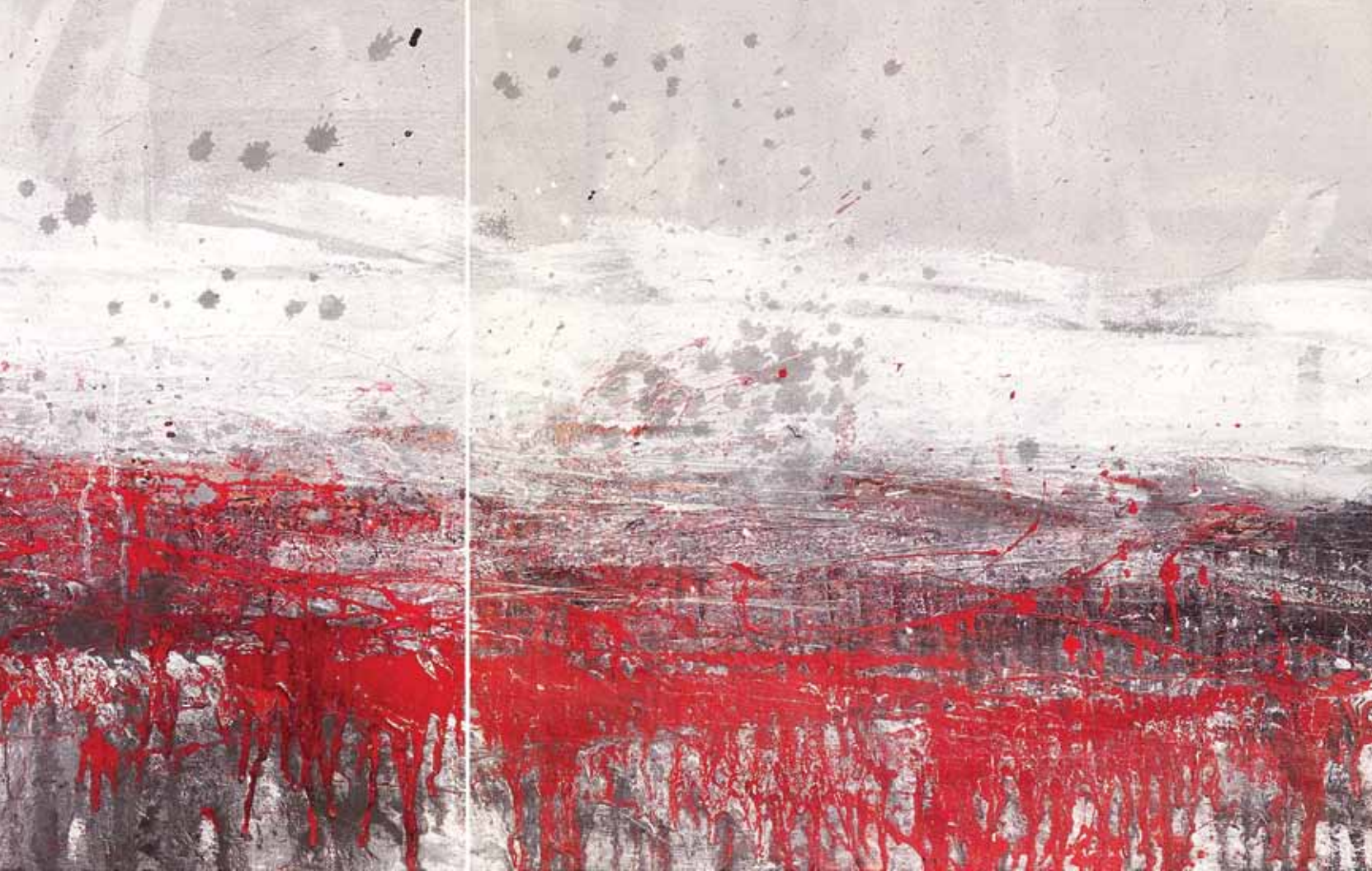


Untitled, Horizon Series, 2007, Mixed Media on Canvas, 60x181cm - Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery. 2007

pieces, of what can be presumed to have been articles of clothing, alter the appearance of the “Laundry Series” altogether. Crude ropes that also hang from the top line of the axes are woven in between, creating unintentional arabesques. In subsequent works, he turned to the use of collage to strengthen this weighty surface, placing newspaper clippings amongst the folds of the cloth while allowing areas of the canvas to be determined by the varying hues, texts and camouflaged images of their pages. Colour was also incorporated into the background of the composition in 2010, in works that increased the number of lines from which strands of hanging material occupied the length of the canvas. By first covering the canvas in a solid, effervescent colour, such as florescent yellow or blue, he was able to accentuate the hundreds of shredded pieces of cloth that hang from multiple suspensions. This not only creates a clear distinction between the background and the foreground even though the composition lacks the illusion of depth—it makes the shadows that are cast

from these bits of cloth emanate, as though captured in a constant state of motion.

In each new phase of the series, Azzam has pushed his experiments to the extreme case of conception and formalism, making changes to every detail of his approach. Last year, however, he decided to depart from this body of work altogether, producing an entirely different brand of painting. Using an airbrush technique, he turned to figuration, depicting ominous cityscapes in a series titled “Metallica” a reference to both the metallic quality of this style and the blunt lustre of industrial environments. These black and white compositions, which are overlaid with the silhouettes of buildings, telephone poles, cranes and satellites, are executed in a manner that hints at the influence of street art, where stencils are used to assemble quick, flat compositions on the side of structures. And yet, these paintings point to the void of a human presence, as manmade monuments overrun the poetics of a terrain. For the artist, “Metallica” explores specific elements of a



metropolis “the beauty of its anarchy, the complexities of its metals, the chaos of roads and the voice of the place...” While this series is only in its beginning stages, he has returned to his “Laundry Series” equipped with a radically new approach to utilizing his ubiquitous found objects.

Taking a cue from the graffiti-like execution of the “Metallica” paintings, his lines and clothespins now appear as ghostly silhouettes that float before pitch-black backgrounds. In some instances he has stressed their semblances by painting over their airbrushed impressions. The result is a transient appearance, as if in the form of a photographic negative, an image that exists but has yet to be fully realized or extracted. It is difficult to make out the clothespins and lines that give the “Laundry Series” its name in these latest works and with the exception of Azzam’s standard palette there is little that indicates the conscious or even subconscious iteration of Sweida.

About The Artist

Born in the Syrian capital in 1980, Tammam Azzam graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus with a concentration in oil painting and subsequently obtained a Fine Arts Certificate from Darat al Funun’s Al Kharif Academy, an esteemed artist workshop series, under Syrian master Marwan Kassab Bashi in 2001. Since joining the Shabab Ayyam young artists program in 2008, he has been featured in several significant events including the group show “Stories from the Levant,” Scope Art Fair (Basel) 2009, and Art Miami 2010.

Abot the Writer

Maymanah Farhat is an art historian who has written widely on modern and contemporary Arab art. Based in New York, she is currently working on a manuscript that examines the multidimensional nature of Islamic art as it relates to contemporary culture.

Writer’s note: This article was written in February 2011. What Tammam latest show “Laundry series” reflects the current situation in Syria. His work has shifted in both mood and aesthetic from his previous works