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'The monster that's devoured everything': Syrian artist's Hong Kong show is a response to the horrors of war

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Four years into Syria's civil war, Fadi Yazigi clings to routine as he creates art that makes subtle but unmistakable reference to the horror all around him

Come rain or shine, Fadi Yazigi insists on walking to his studio every working day, even when there is a chance of bombs exploding along the familiar route from his home in Damascus. This is how the Syrian artist copes with a devastating war that has ripped his country apart and, four years in, seems depressingly interminable.

"I have to pretend nothing is happening. I don't want to just wait for it to stop," he says from the safe confines of the Yallay Gallery in Wong Chuk Hang, on the south side of Hong Kong Island, where owner Jean-Marc Decrop is hosting the artist's first solo exhibition in Asia.

Yazigi, 49, works in the old city area of the Syrian capital. It is among the longest continually inhabited settlements in the world and redolent at every corner of 9,000 years of history. That history flows through Yazigi's art.

On show in Hong Kong is a row of rough, miniature reliefs made with red clay that are tableaux from his own life. These hark back to Sumerian clay tablets, on which the first written language in Mesopotamia appeared.

The thick, black outlines of the figures in the large ink paintings hanging nearby produce an almost chiaroscuro effect and pay tribute to the region's ancient sculptures, which enchanted artists such as Henry Moore. Yazigi favours local materials, such as the clay that generations of houses have been built with, and the ink used to dye local fabric.

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The references to the region's heritage are heartbreaking. Since 2011, the world has looked in disbelief as the destruction wrought on ancient monuments in Syria by Islamic State militants and pro-government forces.

IS controls the ancient city of Palmyra and has been systematically blowing up its monuments after beheading Khaled al-Asaad, the city's head of antiquities, in August. The Arch of Triumph, built by the Romans, is gone, The Temple of Bel no more than a memory.



And then there is the huge loss of lives. Some estimates put the death toll in Syria at a quarter of a million people since 2011. That doesn't include the many refugees who have died on their way to Europe.

Amid the death and destruction, Yazigi creates art that makes no direct, graphic reference to the horror. But it's there in the form of a bird-like, mythical beast which popped up among the clay tablets that mostly depict family life in the Yazigi household.

The "diary" tablets, as he calls them, include intimate scenes

between father and children, husband and wife. But in the middle of these serene, happy images is the monster. "This is the monster that has devoured everything," he says.

Damascus has been home since he went there as an art student in the 1980s. Before the war, he was living a comfortable, middle-class life with his mechanical engineer wife and two teenage children, with weekends away at their holiday home in the beautiful hills of Marmarita.

"Things are better now. But the bombing in Damascus was really bad in 2013 to 2014. I was gambling with my life every time I left our apartment for my studio," he says.

Marmarita, previously a popular destination for day-trippers from the capital, has not been spared either. He finds a photo on his iPad that shows the imposing Krak des Chevaliers, the 12th century castle built by the Crusaders. Until recently, it was considered one of the world's most well preserved medieval castles.

"It's really famous and it is very close to our house," he says fondly. It is now badly damaged from being caught up in battles between IS militants and government forces.

His family have tried hard to maintain their routines. His 14-

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year-old daughter and 16-year-old son have continued to go to school near home. Yazigi has been showing his works abroad, including shows in Lebanon and Kuwait last year. He makes light of his trip to Hong Kong, which involved taking a taxi for two to three hours from Damascus to Beirut in Lebanon ("the only window left to leave the country"), a flight to Dubai and another flight to Hong Kong. "There's no problem at all," he says.

But everything is different. "Four, five, years ago, I was a dreamer. Now, I have become realistic. Now, I don't understand the meaning of life. It's been very dramatic, and hopeless," he says.



That hopelessness is seen in the drooping head of one of the figures in his paintings. The adult figure stands there, looking defeated, while a child reaches out towards a flying bird. "This painting is how I feel since the war," he says. Another painting in the exhibition, drawn well before the war, has lively, dancing lines.

Random fortunes is the theme of *Cube 1*, a black sculpture that has human figures sticking out from all sides of a cube. He says it is a dice of human fortunes, as he

picks it up and spins it around. This work is among the group of bronze sculptures in the exhibition that are somewhat at odds with the rough surfaces of the clay tablets and the raw lines on the ink paintings.

"I like to keep trying new materials. It's a way of saying new things," he says.



The Arch of Triumph in Palmyra before it was destroyed. Photo: AFP

Given that the war has disrupted supplies and closed down businesses, the need to switch materials is not always by choice. He is down to the last 5kg of the red clay. "I can't find any more. I am going to run out soon," he says.

Some of the bronze sculptures are fable-like. There's a crown that seems to be made of dead birds' skulls. Kings often wear crowns made up of dead bodies, or dead dreams of hope and freedom. Every kingdom has a crown like this, he says. There's a tree which has heads where there should be leaves, and a donkey with its eyes shut, ears flattened, and a rectangular hole in the middle of its

muscular body.

"The donkey works hard. But there is an empty space where he hides things. It is for himself and not for showing," says Yazigi. The donkey is one of his favourite pieces and not for sale.

Wong Chuk Hang, in all its industrial ugliness, must seem like paradise. But he is definitely getting on that plane after his short visit. He and his family have never considered leaving Syria.

"I would rather die from the bomb in Syria than to die from a heart attack in a foreign country," he says.

"Fadi Yazigi: Contemporary art from Syria", Yallay Gallery, 3/F, 6 Yip Fat Street, Wong Chuk Hang, Tuesday to Saturday 11am - 6pm or by appointment. Ends November 28