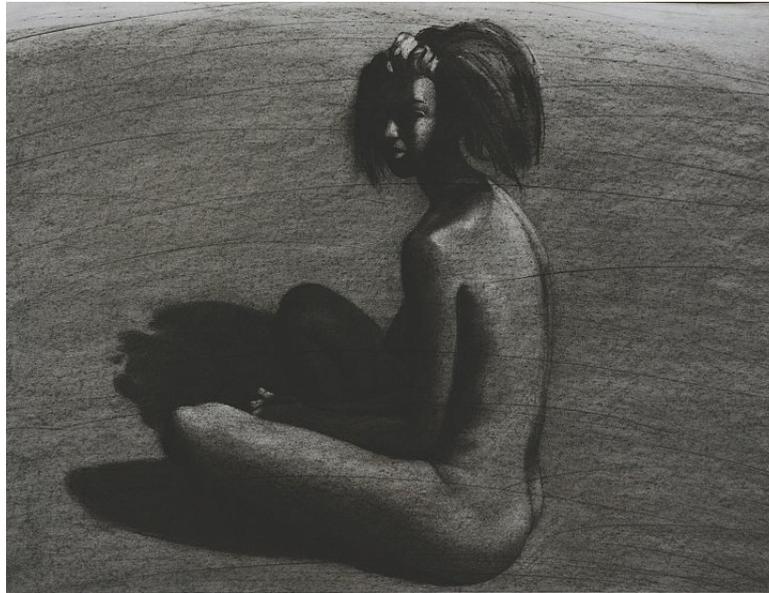


Youssef Abdelke: the Naked Against the Dead

[Emmanuel Daydé](#) > 24 October 2017



Youssef Abdelke, « Nude », 2016.

© Youssef Abdelke, courtesy [Galerie Claude Lemand](#), Paris.

“He’s alive, we’re dead !” This cry on a poster showing a martyr of the Syrian revolution could serve as a caption for all the paintings of Youssef Abdelke. If the bleak work of this Syrian artist looks like a tombstone or an obituary notice, it is the better to celebrate the lives of those who have died. This satirical cartoonist turned engraver and painter, this champion of freedom or death has always made his art a miraculous weapon against the abyss.

“What is a rebel ?” wondered Albert Camus in *L’Homme révolté* ? *“A man who says no. But also a man who says yes. Man is the only creature who refuses to be what he is. In order to exist, man must rebel.”* Rebel against injustice and all the onslaughts on human integrity. Abdelke turns his anguish over death into a new way of surviving and breathing: *“I cannot bear the idea that anyone should die for having said or done something*

political,” the artist explains. “Nothing deserves such a punishment. It’s an existential question, deep inside me, which upsets me utterly, which is far beyond politics. Everything can be repaired except death.”

When, in 1976, he completed a course in printmaking at the School of Fine-Arts in Damascus, young Youssef’s graduation project—Black September—an attempt to illustrate the 1971 massacre of Palestinians in Jordan—revealed the birth of a committed artist, who embraced socialist realism, but only the better to undercut its radiant optimism. Known as an active member of the Party of Communist Action, Abdelke served a term in the jails of Hafez Al-Assad in 1979. At 28, the young man experienced an extremely harsh penal system which seeks to break the bones and souls of inmates and turn the Syrian desert into a land of forgotten men. Released in 1981—injured but unbroken—the artist was forced into exile. In Paris, he pursued his studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, graduating in 1986. At the Paris VIII University, he received a doctorate in the visual arts. At the same time, impressed by the raging expressionism of Grosz and Dix under the Weimar Republic—even while he felt closer, visually, to the absurd and facetious world of the Argentinian artist, Antonio Segui—he began a long series of brightly colored paper and pastel collages, which he entitled *Figures*, and which all consist, obsessively, of head-on views of the ever-identical trio of infernal torturers.



« Figures », 1991.

Then suddenly, in 1995, he abandoned color to plunge into the eternal darkness of black and white. Still striving to drive out death even while putting it on display, he would tease it out of the most trivial detail, the next to nothing, the degraded, the invisible. Trying his hand at those *“passages of silence and night”* painted by Georges de La Tour amidst the horrors of the Thirty Years’ War, the Syrian mourned for his beloved land in realistic large-scale charcoal still-lives — Fish with head cut off, Dead bird with knife planted in a table, Heart pierced with a needle,...—*“as if by candle-light, one tiny candle, flickering in its holder,”* as Alain Jouffroy has observed. And for this poet critic, from that moment on, *“it is no longer art but the metamorphosis of death into living existence. Abdelke’s fish is not a fish but an arrow, a light beam, a respiration, a whispered call to life. When he achieves this result, which I call resurrection, he stops.”*

When, after a Parisian exile of 25 years, he obtained permission to return to his native country in 2005, the artist persisted in his hyper-realistic, “resurrections ‘of things, settling with his metaphysics of the object in one of the oldest parts of Damascus.

The Syrian people’s uprising in 2011 caught him by surprise. This man who had always been an opponent of armed struggle and who advocated a secular democratic State, was a helpless witness to the massacre of the population and the increasing militarization of the opposition. Bearing witness to these events became for him an absolute necessity. No longer could he avoid the human figure, its frail corporeality invaded the nights of his soul in still-lives of unnatural deaths: resurrection had now become increasingly uncertain. A long succession of recumbent martyrs, with bulging eyes and bodies splashed with red blood stains, Deraa Martyr, Father and child or the series Mother of Martyr, all loomed up like so many solitary and tragic ex-votos, merciless offerings that adopted the primitive style of early Arshile Gorky. While this theme of martyrdom is not new in Syria, its nature and affiliation have significantly changed. *“We grew up*

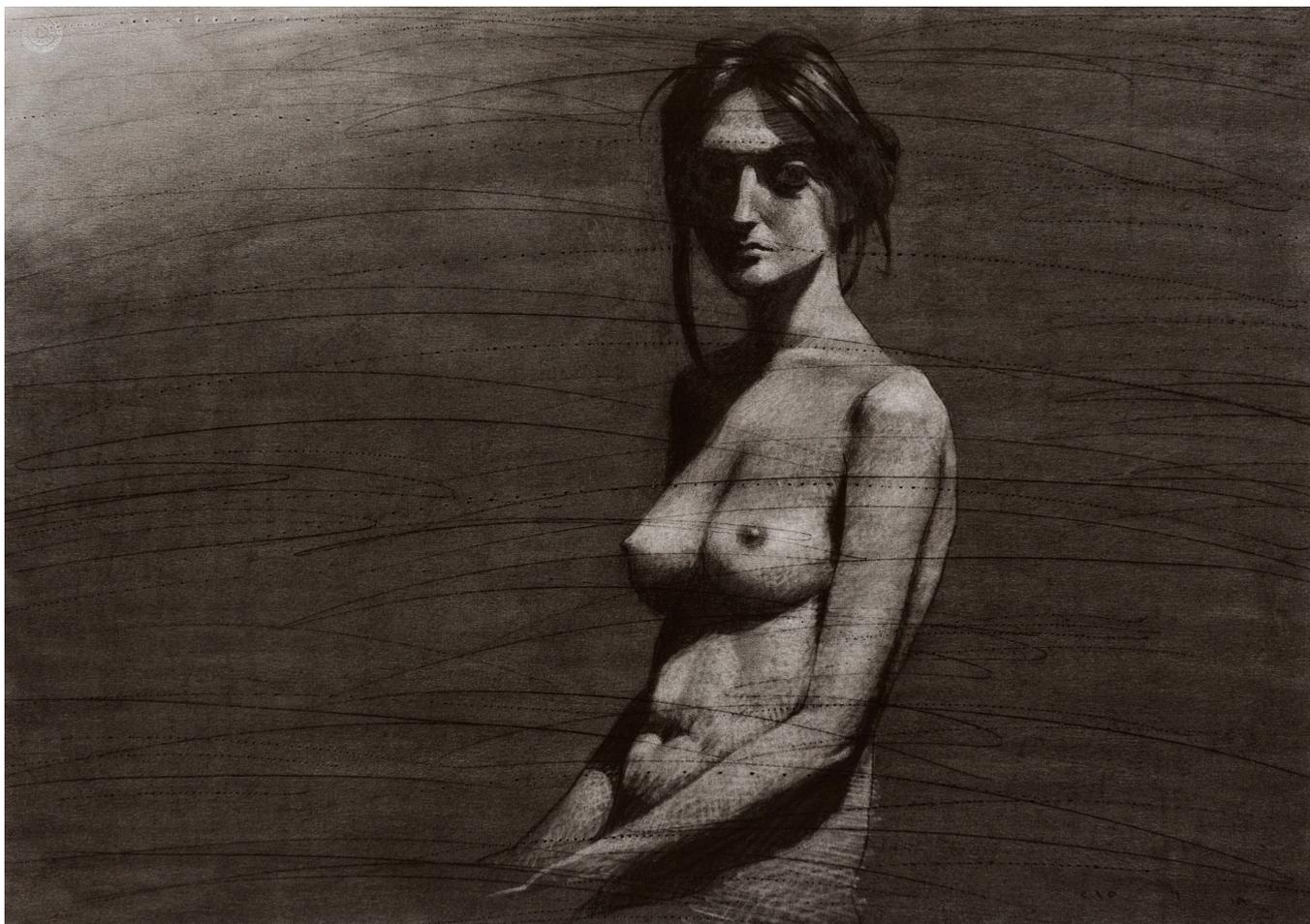
with the idea that the martyr, the image of heroism, was the Palestinian,” says Mohammed Omran, a young artist. *“In our drawing class, we were asked to draw a martyr as we might have been asked to draw up a mountain.”* After depicting in exile the martyrdom of things, Abdelke, returning home, wanted to portray the martyrdom of people. He didn’t imagine it might also be his own. Deprived first of his passport, then arrested by the Bashar Al-Assad regime in 2013 — on account of his commitment *“to a democratic multi-party system and to the principles in the name of which the revolution had broken out in 2011”*—Youssef Abdelke was released a month later only after a vigorous international campaign in his favor.



“St. John Chrysostom is buried in Damascus...,” 2014.

What did the artist think about in his prison cell? Peace, no doubt. It is said that he sculpted doves with bread crumbs gleaned from his daily pittance.

But judging by the splendid drawings of the female body undertaken after his release, solemn, hieratic charcoals, as if sculpted in the flesh of the night, one can imagine his thoughts were clouded by other desires: a hankering for the vanished beauty of the world and the ravishing delights of womanly splendor. These wayward nudes are perhaps what give the full measure of the man's despair. For three years, in the secrecy of his studio, the artist had models of various origins pose for him, Syrian women but also Sudanese. The poses are simple and natural, like intimate illuminations snatched from reality. These short sessions—some 90 minutes each—produced tender drawings of nudes, filtered through a soft, diffuse light the source of which is located, as in a Rembrandt, out of the frame. But these copperplate engravings of women sitting, kneeling or lying down like modern odalisques, are always scratched, lacerated, defaced with dots and lines which suggest the barbed wire imprisoning figures doomed to torture, disgrace and destruction. As if the Naked conjured up the Dead—as Abdelke had already suggested with his striking recumbent nude Saint John Chrysostom, an emaciated Christ-like body in the manner of Holbein.



"Nude," 2015.

Faced with this sudden swarm of female statues carved in marble, one cannot help being reminded of Jacques Abeille's *Jardins statuaires* and his foolhardy traveler who sets foot in a mysterious land where statues are grown out of reach of the barbarians. An ode to the imagination and the unconscious, a refusal of verisimilitude and authorial omnipotence, Abeille's surrealistic writing offers affinities with Abdelke's lithe, plant-like, flowing strokes : *"I am not into control, I'm trying to capture a flow,"* this novelist of the obscure explains. Though the Syrian artist, somewhat in the manner of Fragonard with his *"figures de fantaisie,"* sets himself a time limit to draw a model, he works in two stages, in keeping with this same principle of intense and inspired flow. Thus he begins by doing a quick pencil sketch of the figure he wants to conjure out of the paper's whiteness, in snapshots with a heavy erotic charge, worthy of Egon Schiele's razor sharp gaze. In a gesture at odds with the paradisiac quest of Matisse, who blurred the crude realism of his initial sketch to achieve a schematic, quasi-

mystical vision, Abdelke begins with an abstraction, slender, emotional strokes, before giving substance to sensual, solid reality, building it with bold hatching and washing, various degrees of shading, to bring forth a living entity which he leaves deliberately unfinished.



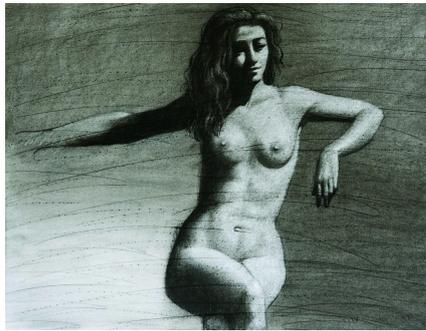
"Nude," 2015.

It would be a mistake to express surprise that Abdelke, the eternal rebel, should be satisfied with sketching plain naked bodies while so many are still dying amidst the ruins of tattered Syria. It would be a mistake because to paint nudes in the Middle East constitutes an act of resistance. While the generation of his teachers had been able to practice that art during the thirties and forties in the major art schools of the Arab world—in Cairo, Alexandria, Baghdad, Beirut, Algiers and Oran as well as Damascus—Abdelke was never allowed to create his own totems to challenge the taboo. It is not so much “woman” as the Syrian woman, with her full breasts and

dark eyes that glow forth from his “*night papers*” in all her dramatic and voluptuous majesty. A Syrian woman, light-skinned or dark, it does not matter: beneath the bombs, all the women of Syria are Syrians.

Rejecting any and every voyeurism, Abdelke glorifies these martyred women’s curvaceous forms and hair worn loose in compositions harmonious and serene, like female statues, female gardens, to be cherished and saved. Seeming to guide the people, like Delacroix’s bare-breasted Liberté, these proffered women stand as a proud and delicate allegory of Syria itself.

“Nude,” 2017.



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