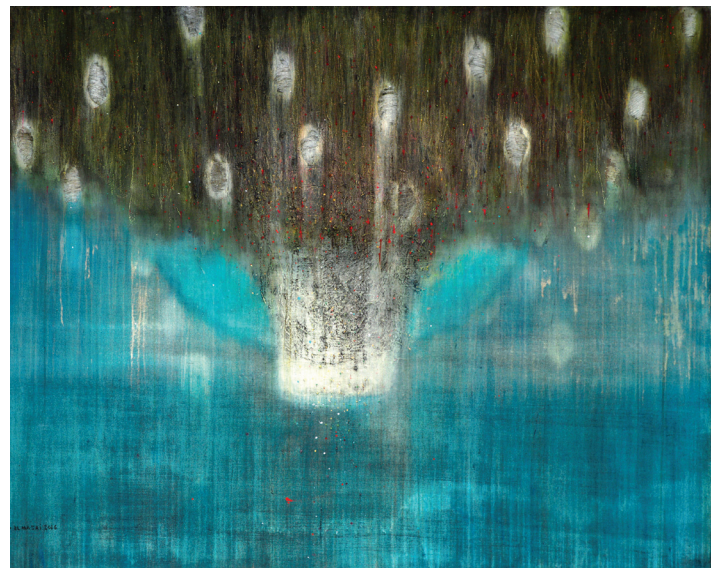


COLOURFUL TRANSMUTATIONS

FEATURE: ANAS AL HORANI. PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF GALLERY KARIM



Walid El Masri's artworks are delightful and daring explorations of animate, as well as inanimate objects.

Repeated contemplation of specific objects in the world has always been an artistic fixture. Claude Monet's *Haystacks* is a celebrated example, and Kobayashi Kiyochika's *Before Taro Inari Shrine* is a less-analysed, though no less worthy, instance. Both examples are relevant to a thorough consideration of Walid El Masri's paintings.

Born in Damascus and of Lebanese descent, Walid El Masri holds a degree in Fine Arts from the University of

Damascus, 2005. Before graduating, El Masri studied mosaics and was apprenticed by artist Marwan Kassab-Bachi in Amman, Jordan. He also attended a workshop with Syrian artist Ziad Dalloul and the French artist Pierre Balas, as well as "The Damascus Photography Days" event at the French Cultural Center in Damascus.

Since 2004, Walid El Masri has been occupied with a number of projects, among which two collections have been exhibited: *Al Kursi* (The Chair) in



2004 and *Al Sharnaqah* (The Cocoon) in 2014. Both collections revealed an artist whose minimalism and expressionism crosses cultures and dares to unravel and investigate hidden aspects in ordinary objects.

Like the host of artists before him who used objects to explore forms of expression rather than perfect their depiction, Walid El Masri has never settled on a specific style or method in his paintings. His work is an ever-shifting experiment in density and technique, of which each of his paintings and works on paper features a variation. These variations relate to different stages in the creation of an artwork, which endows his oeuvre with an enthralling freedom.

Al Sharnaqah, El Masri's latest collection, unlike *Al Kursi*, is not only a contemplation of an object but also a reflection of its growth. In this case, the object is the cocoon, metamorphosing into a butterfly. This transformation is depicted in all its vitality and violence, and the repetition, when it occurs, isn't contemplative but expressionist in intention. The inclusion of hot orange and green in a number of paintings is indicative of this change and the inherent violence in it. A case could be made about the large context of the collection as a symbolic mirror-image of El Masri's Syrian and Lebanese backgrounds; both countries undergoing violent change, both on the path to become butterflies.

The possibility of transformation in El Masri's paintings is always present. He endows his dynamic impressionism with a depth that is both vigorous and rich with nuance. El Masri's ability to traverse different styles, engage with a number of techniques, and work with a variety of media frees his artworks from formalism and reveals a vitality essential to his paintings.

Colours are not the only essential element in Walid El Masri's paintings. Texture and transparency are also extremely pertinent. Giving dense texture to parts of his paintings, while keeping other parts almost semi-transparent is not an artistic whim, but a tool to create depth and enrich meaning. The black of the air is so thickly dark and the brown shades forming halos around the trees are so delicately transparent that one can be forgiven for thinking the cocoons are blessing the trees with their imminent transformation. The effect is a testimony to Walid El Masri's artistic talent.

Gallery Karim in Amman, Jordan will host an exhibition of Walid El Masri's artworks on the 1st October, 2016. The exhibition will include eight paintings from his collection *Al Sharnaqah*, as well as other artworks and works on paper. The exhibition will also display a documentary that reveals the process and progression behind one of El Masri's works. Following El Masri's exhibition, Gallery Karim will host an exhibition for Nazar Yahya on 29 October and Sinan Hussein on 26 November 2016.

