

An abstract painting by Dia Azzawi, featuring bold, geometric shapes in a rich color palette of red, yellow, white, black, and brown. The composition is layered and textured, with some areas appearing to be made of paper or fabric. The overall style is expressive and modern.

BAZZAAR

Harper's

ARABIA

ART

ISSUE 25

Dia Azzawi
**PIONEERING
THE IRAQI
ART FRONT**

NEWSHA
TAVAKOLIAN
**REFLECTIONS FROM
ANOTHER WORLD**

MARC QUINN'S
**TRACES
of LIFE**

Lovers In A Park. 2016.
Acrylic and collage on
paper mounted to canvas.
121 x 121 cm. Courtesy of
The Third Line



The fabric of our



Distant Treasures. 2016.
Acrylic and coloured pencil on panel. 60.96 x 60.96 cm.
Courtesy of The Third Line

IDENTITY

*Amir H. Fallah's works offer an at once playful, mysterious and investigative look into the nature of our identity. **Rebecca Anne Proctor** meets the artist in Dubai*



The Costume Maker. 2016. Acrylic and collage on paper mounted to canvas, 7.6 x 10.16 cm. Courtesy of The Third Line



Below: *Rays of Eternal Union*. 2013. Acrylic, collage, pencil, oil, on paper mounted to canvas. 243.84 x 182.88 cm.

mass of coloured fabric adorns two sitters in a room. They sit comfortably together with one, presumably a woman by the blue necklace that she wears, casually relaxing into the other's arms while her legs are propped up on a trunk of sorts in the likeness of an 18th-century odalisque painting. The fabric is draped around each in a fashion resembling that which dons ancient Greek and Roman sculptures, but is decorated with bright and intricate patterning in the likeness of Islamic textiles. Below the couple is a charming gathering of various items—several flower pots, a painting of what seems to be a piano and some fruit—personal objects that are analogous to what the ancient Egyptians might have stored in their tombs—cherished items to take with them on their journey to the afterlife. It's a pleasant scene, and the viewer can easily imagine that this couple is very much in love. The only things we don't see are their faces.

The work is *Rays of Eternal Union* (2013) by Iranian-American Los Angeles-based artist Amir H. Fallah. In the likeness of all of Fallah's works, the portrayal of an individual(s) takes on an endearing and very intimate view into the person's life through the rendering of the person and their possessions. Somehow and surprisingly, one doesn't feel that the individual's face is

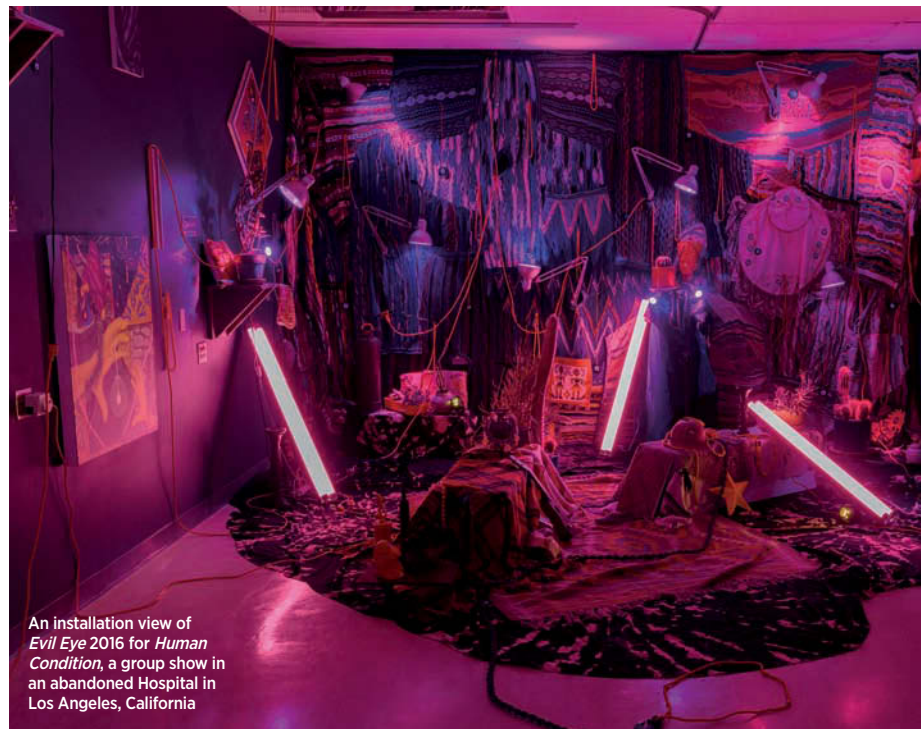
missing—we can still feel his or her presence; the essence of the figure before us shines through via Fallah's delicate painting technique and sensitivity to the individuality of the sitter. "Historically, portraiture has depicted the subject's likeness," says Fallah. "I've always found that what someone looks like doesn't tell you much about who they are. I'm interested in expanding and redefining what a portrait can be. I don't think of my work as portraiture in the traditional sense."

As in all of Fallah's works, many layers are incorporated into his diverse range of media—from 3D installation to murals, figurative painting and still lifes—and unite under the artistic umbrella of his investigative, analytical gaze. Moreover, the various components that go into the creation of each artwork are done in a distinct manner. "My approach to art making is akin to the process of an archaeological dig," says Fallah in his artist's statement. "I begin by assuming the role of an analytical historian. I investigate my subject's lives through the analysis of their personal belongings. Investigation of these objects slowly reveals the lives of my subjects, a history that becomes a complex mixture of facts and symbolism."

Fallah is largely known for his figurative paintings whereby the figure is completely covered with fabric and personal possessions. Each of these paintings begins with a photo shoot where he goes to his subject's home and conducts an informal interview with them. "For each painting I conduct an informal interview with my subject," he explains. "I use the objects, artefacts, clothing and decor as way to start a dialogue about their life. These things can look mundane at a glance but I've found that most people surround themselves with things that are charged with very powerful meaning and history. I'm interested in removing as much of the body as possible while still retaining the notion of a figure." Newly completed portraits such as *Distant Treasures* (2016), *Shell* (2016), *Back Home* (2016), *Lady Luck* (2016) and *Bow* (2016) are several works from *The Collected* series which Fallah displayed during this year's House of Bazaar at Mall of the Emirates in October 2016. The series investigates the complex dynamics between the artist and the sitter and ultimately, the many "collected" or rather, selected objects, through which the viewer ascertains the individual rather than focusing on the person's face as in traditional portraiture. The symbols that gather around each individual reveal the character and personal preferences of each individual. As such, these paintings question traditional portraiture with Fallah obscuring his subjects under a multitude of fabric and objects in their home. In this sense, Amir captures the sitter's true essence—the 'realer' self-portrait behind an individual's exterior façade.

Yet such representations also ask big questions. Does allowing the artist's interpretations of an individual's personal memorabilia transform the sitter's true identity? Or does limiting their real-life exposure bring about a better understanding of their real persona? It's ultimately up to the viewer to decide. But what is certain is that many subjects, including prominent art collectors, have regularly commissioned Fallah to do such portraits. Perhaps an individual does not need to be fully exposed in order for his or her character to be revealed.

The artist's recent exhibition *Embedded Memories* at Mohsen Gallery in Tehran was Fallah's first exhibition at the gallery and also in Tehran. It comprised a mixture of works on paper and paintings offering the artist's characteristic bright colour palette merged with layers of meanings—nods to his native Iran and well as his adopted homeland of L.A. It's easy to see stylistic kinship between his work and that of fellow American artist Kehinde Wiley, known for his large-scale portraits of African-American subjects influenced by iconic European paintings, and that of Fallah's who similarly updates the Western canon of figurative representation.



An installation view of *Evil Eye 2016 for Human Condition*, a group show in an abandoned Hospital in Los Angeles, California

"I'm often asked if my work is referencing the *hijab* or the *Burka*," says Fallah. "I can see how one might glean that from the work but it's never been an interest of mine. I think we all are veiling ourselves in one way or another. Concealing the body with a fabric was the most direct way to abstract the gender, age, and physical features."

Fallah also offers a constant dialogue between old and new in his *oeuvre*. In his on-going *Arrangement* series whereby Amir reinterprets seminal floral still life paintings associated with the Dutch Golden Age by hybridising the iconic visual vocabulary of the era with a more contemporary approach to image making. Like Amir's portraits, these floral works question notions of appropriation throughout art history thus creating a new version of the 'floral still-life.' Works such as *Circling the World To Return to the End* (2013), also displayed during the House of Bazaar, and *Last Time Around The Sun Before The Birth Of Our Son* (2016), are made through a mixture of acrylic, collage, pencil and oil on paper and mounted on canvas. Upon closer look amidst the multitude of leaves and flowers, one will find little details such as spiders and rats. With Fallah there is always more to discover.

In addition to painting, Fallah also is known for his large-scale installations. His most recent takes place in *Human Condition*, a group exhibition at the former and now abandoned Los Angeles Metropolitan Medical Center. It opened in 1971 as the first black-owned hospital in the city and operated successfully for decades. In 2013, however, the hospital closed due to purported criminal mismanagement and insurance fraud. Here Fallah's *Evil Eye* installation takes the form of a psychedelic treatment for the post-surgery recovery room. Bathed in an eerie purplish light, the room offers a mix of the artist's paintings, objects and fabrics as well as plants from Fallah's home endowing the space with much needed oxygen. And yet again, his trademark objects come to the fore and illuminate the space with their personal connotations—this time in the form of collected pendants and prayer beads—offerings it seems ways to ward off bad spirits and bring about positive energy in Fallah's typical manner to this otherwise dark space. ■

Embedded Memories ran until 26 October at Mohsen Gallery in Tehran. mohsengallery.com. *Human Condition* is on until 30 November at the Los Angeles Metropolitan Medical Center. humanexhibition.com