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Understanding the Syrian Revolution Through Nontraditional Art

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Understanding the Syrian Revolution Through Nontraditional Art

By

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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Abstract

In my thesis, I will explore the Syrian Revolution through the nontraditional arts that are being produced. I will be focusing on several different modes of creation, including street art, digital art, comics and cartoons, and installation. Social media is the primary tool for artists working in Syria to distribute their work, so I will also be discussing the importance of social media, both as a means to publish their work and also spread their message. I will answer the following questions: what role does street art and other nontraditional mediums play in the revolution? What are the artists' purposes and intents when creating such pieces? How is social media relevant to the revolution? The answers to these questions and more will help to legitimize nontraditional arts, not only as examples of art themselves, but also as a means of communication. I hope to shed some light on the Syrian Revolution by looking at the war through the lens of an artist.

Introduction:

What is Art History, Nontraditional Art, and who are Artist-Activists?

Art history is the study of human activity and expression that produces objects which have a dominant function of artistic expression, meaning that these objects generally don't have a functional purpose in society.¹ The study of art history is a combination of varying methodologies, but with surrounding the ideas of subject matter, formal concerns, and relation to the real world. Art historians have developed ways to take what is visual and translate it into written and descriptive word. This is done primarily by using the practice of visual analysis, where the two main ideas are subject matter and style. Subject matter refers to questions asked about the content of the work. For example, is it representational or abstract? Are there people or characters in the work? If so, who are they? What is their role? And continuing on with other questions to help the viewer understand the possible narrative or meaning within the image. An interest in the style of the work is focused on the question of *how* the work is produced. Is it a painting, sculpture, installation, etc? What materials were used to make the piece? What was the process used to create the work? To bridge the gap between subject matter and formal concerns is an important question that is often overlooked, asking what is the relationship between the spectator and the subject depicted — meaning, what is the audience supposed to know, understand, learn, or feel while or after looking at the piece?²

There is a divide in the art history community about how and when we should contextualize an artwork. That is, whether we are to objectively look at the piece without relating it to ourselves or current position in the world and only look at it in the

lens and time of the artist, or if we should take our own personal subjectivity and apply it to the work and what we know about it. This divide in the art history community makes you see the difference between the terms “art history” and “the history of art.”³ By which I mean, which has precedent over the other? Is the art itself more important than its historical context, or is the historical context in combination with the work what makes it art?

In the context of this thesis we will be looking at provocative and harsh imagery that is strongly rooted in reality, and where emotional response is important to the overall intended effect of the work. Therefore, the methodology that we will proceed with is that we should both take what we know about a work and its biographical historical context and apply it to the understanding of the work, without ignoring our own subjectivity. I think that emotion is a key player in understanding art and that “a work’s aesthetic meaning is constituted by the brain’s response to a set of stimuli.”⁴

Additionally, we will be taking these art history methodologies and applying them to nontraditional art. Just as we have defined the methodologies, I will define nontraditional art as the use of nontraditional materials, or processes, as a vehicle for artistic expression. This can include materials that we typically regard as “low materials,” like spray paint. Or processes and end products that are not typically regarded as a high art form, like comics and graphic novels. For example, an artist that we will look at in further detail is Akram abou al-Fouz, who “has redefined traditional materials. Instead of painting on hard-to-find canvas and paper, he paints mortar shells.”⁵ So he is using a combination of traditional and nontraditional materials and processes to create his

pieces. There is a level of give-and-take between the use of traditional materials and nontraditional processes and vice versa that we will explore with more specificity later on.

Continuing further into the nontraditional process of these artists is the way that their work is distributed. Social media is a primary tool for artists to exhibit their work while living within the borders of Syria, rather than the traditional exhibition at a gallery. We will be exploring the ways that the use of social media has impacted these artists. For example, because of political circumstances a lot of artists won't sign their name to their work and the works are shared anonymously for fear of what the regime will do. Additionally, they are shared via social media for the purpose of being appropriated, used, and shared repeatedly by others.⁶ The artists' main concern is therefore the message rather than name recognition. This is in contrast to the traditional idea of what it is to be an artist and have your work exhibited in a gallery with a little label next to your work with your name printed neatly on it.

Miriam Cooke, a writer, scholar, and professor at Duke University, specializing in Middle Eastern and Arab culture, coined the term "artist-activist" in her latest book *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution*. She notes:

The story... of the revolution is known. Less well covered has been the role of artists and activists, what I like to call 'artist-activists,' in representing to the world and to their people the resilience of revolutionary resistance and defiance... For artists inside and outside Syria, art is a form of social engagement.

“Artist-activist” is a term which I will use frequently throughout this thesis and that is important to understand.

Several of the artists that I will discuss were demonstrators in the first of the peaceful protests and they took on that identity, as protestor, as demonstrator, before they took on the identity as artist. However, given their situation and their purpose and intent, there was no way for them to separate those two parts of themselves and instead they became one, artist-activist.⁷ They were creating art, the human activity of visual expression, but it was not to only express their own emotions, but at times to express the emotions of an entire country, and with the purpose of outsiders to see and feel that emotion and hopefully do something to help.

There is a thread that underlies and connects all of these ideas. We will take what we know about the study of art history, the use of visual analysis and biographical historical contextualization, and apply it to nontraditional art being produced with reference to the Syrian revolution. This is art which is made either with typically nontraditional materials and/or a nontraditional process that is a reaction to the Syrian Revolution and the struggle of its people. Lastly, we will use these tools and the inferences made to try and understand the art through the lens of an artist-activist—a person that embodies both the skills and talent of an artist and the spirit of an activist.

The Syrian Situation:

The Assad Family, The Arab Spring, and the Syrian Revolution.

The intent of this thesis is not to reiterate the history of Syria and the current state of the revolution but, in reference to our established knowledge of art history methodology, it is important to have the historical context of the art that is being produced in relation to the current revolution. The best way to understand the current situation in Syria is to start from the beginning.

In 1970 Hafez al-Assad took power of Syria. It was amidst the chaos that followed years of war and the repeated changing hands of controlling powers that Hafez al-Assad seized the opportunity to finally lead his nation in the way that he saw best fit. It is important to understand that Assad, and his clan, are Alawite, a branch of Shiite Islam.⁸ The Alawite make up only a small portion, about twelve to thirteen percent of the Syrian population.⁹ This is important to understand because it feeds into the tension between the centuries long Holy War between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. Continuing on, Hafez al-Assad took control and immediately began making changes, some were for the good but they all came at the price of the bad. He began with infrastructure like roads, schools, and hospitals. The rate of illiterate citizens began to plummet, and the economy was on an upswing. The tradeoff was that he also organized several secret intelligence agencies, not only to spy on other countries and governments, but to spy on his own people.¹⁰

Additionally, Assad amended the constitution in places where it referenced Islam, which enraged the Muslim Brotherhood, a religious and political organization

that is fundamentally based on Sunni Islam. The conflict came to a head when the Muslim Brotherhood decided to fight against the Assad regime. It started after the Brotherhood assassinated members of the Assad political party that Hafez al-Assad retaliated against the Brotherhood by almost completely leveling the town of Hama, a base for the Brotherhood, in 1982.¹¹ The numbers of casualties are still under dispute, but the minimum is said to have been 10,000 innocent citizen casualties. Although, other reports have numbers closer to 40,000.¹² Hafez al-Assad took that as the perfect opportunity to rebuild the city of Hama with new schools and hospitals as a way of saying that he will “help the Syrian people to live better provided that they not challenge his rule”. He justified doing this by saying he was protecting the people from terrorists.¹³

Hafez al-Assad ruled as the Soviet Union did, a police state that was distrusting of anyone and everyone. He didn't allow most modern technology into the country, like the use of the internet, fax machines, or cell phones, for the fear that they would be used to topple his government.¹⁴ The implementation of security personnel, called *Mukhabarat*, into the public sphere is another example for his distrust of his own people.¹⁵ There were also only a handful of media outlets in Syria, all of whom were controlled and censored by the regime. But Assad's distrust didn't stop there, in 1983, Hafez had a heart attack and his brother Rifaat, who had military control, stepped in for Hafez, but when he was ready to come back to work Rifaat was unwilling to step down and Hafez simply exiled his own brother for the years 1984-1992.¹⁶

Upon the realization that his health was deteriorating, he called his son, Bashar, then in London working as an ophthalmologist, to return home and begin learning what it meant to rule a nation. Bashar was a quick study because the similarities between the Hafez-era and Bashar-era Syria are undeniable.¹⁷ In 2000 Hafez al-Assad died and the government officials quickly amended the constitution for Bashar to take power at the age of 35 rather than the previous 40.¹⁸

After Bashar took power he made similar reforms like his father, and again the good came with the bad.¹⁹ He allowed for the use of cell phones to come in to the country, but he gave the one and only cellular company to his cousin, making it convenient to hack into and track civilian's phones, as well as turn off the network all together.²⁰ He also denied the use of birth control. He continued to use the intelligence agencies to keep tabs on the day-to-day interactions of the people. There was no freedom to gather unless at the mosques or during national holidays, and no freedom of expression against the government, whether that be in the form of social media, journalism, or casual conversation.²¹

In 2006 Syria faced what the United States faced in the 1930s, a drought and Dustbowl. It forced farmers to give up on their crops and livestock and to move into the cities to try and find work. The nation was starving and unemployed and tensions were rising. This is partly due to the ban on birth control, which led to an unbalanced population-to-resources ratio, but also because the government had greedily sold their emergency wheat reserves before the drought.²²

Syrian people looked to their neighboring countries as they protested for the fall of their authoritarian regimes and prevailed. It wasn't until March of 2011 that the Syrian people decided to join in the Arab Spring. Tensions had been rising for years, since Hafez took over in 1970, after Hama in 1982, through the drought in 2006.²³ Although, it wasn't until after an alleged group of teens scrawled anti-regime slogans on the walls of a southern town that the regime took it one step too far, and the citizens had finally decided that they had had enough. The teens were imprisoned and tortured for over a month before being released. In turn, the people gathered in a peaceful demonstration, wanting the regime to listen to them, and they were met with bullets.²⁴ It was not the massacre like Hama in 1982 that killed thousands, but also unlike Hama the people weren't going to be silenced by a show of military force and they fought back.

Soon, several ground soldiers and government officials defected and joined in the rebellion. There are several rebel groups now, the main group being the Free Syrian Army.²⁵ What started as a civil war in Syria quickly morphed into a proxy war within the international community, shifting between a civil war, cold war, and holy war. In the beginning, it was people for the Assad regime fighting the people against the Assad regime. Underlying this is the centuries-long Sunni versus Shiite conflict, which is what influences the divisions in the surrounding Arab countries.²⁶ Others say that the conflict really comes down to who wants the Assad Regime to fall and who doesn't. Regardless of what it *really* is, the differing objectives is one of the major weaknesses of the rebels.²⁷

Without trying to go into all of the complexities of the current situation, this is a brief overview of the sides that have been taken. Within the holy war, Syria is allied with Iran, a primarily Shiite country, the Lebanese Shiite Militia group called the Hezbollah and similarly, the Iraqi Shiite Militia group. These countries and groups are sending arms and boots into the country. Against the Shiite Assad regime are the Sunni countries of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain.²⁸ Some of these are not direct alliances, but it follows with the well-known saying “the enemy of my enemy is a friend to me.”²⁹

In 2013, there was a use of chemical weapons in Syria against a civilian population. Although Assad denied responsibility, the Obama Administration held him accountable and made him surrender his remaining chemical weapons, with the supporting effort of other UN countries like France and Italy. By the United States taking a side in the Syrian Revolution it also caused the other world superpowers to step in, raising the Cold War aspect. The Russian government was not in the favor of Obama’s accusation because Russia’s only military access point to the Mediterranean is located on the Syrian coast. This makes Russia more invested in what ultimately happens with the control of the country. With both Russia and the United States taking a soft stand in the revolution, the web of alliances become further tangled.³⁰

Being the well skilled manipulator that Bashar al-Assad is, he decided to make it even more difficult for the United States and its allies to back the rebellion. He released known jihadist terrorist members from prison so that they were able to join the rebellion, giving him justification for military action.³¹ Repeating a tactic used by his

father, Bashar is claiming that he is fighting terrorist organizations when he is slaughtering his own people.³²

However, when combining the two, Holy War and Cold war, there are stark contrasts to what the anti-Assad countries are fighting for and what the pro-Assad countries want. For example, in the beginning, if the United States was in support of the rebels they would be essentially supporting ISIS because of the similar objectives of the rebels and ISIS. Even though the rebels and ISIS are fighting to bring down the Assad regime now, they would later be fighting against each other for governing control of the country. This is similar to the way that Russian and United States governments fought against Germany in World War Two, only to later fight against each other for control after the war.³³

Additionally, the United States is hesitant to fully engage with Syria and the downfall of the Assad regime, because of the ways that it has turned out for other Arab Spring countries and the instability that the countries now face without their authoritarian governments. In combination with the history of control of Syria and its constant changing of hands, the prospects don't look good for the immediate future following the hypothetical fall of the Assad regime. Like the son of former Lebanese president, Samy Gemayel, said, "Before you can know what to do, you have to know what you want," which is what the United States government is currently facing.³⁴

The obvious remaining solution and question should be: why didn't, and why won't, Assad step down like (most) of the other Arab Spring country's rulers? Simply, because there are so many documented accounts of war crimes and public injustices

that the Assad party would be put on trial, or killed before, similar to the Nazi party after World War II and the Holocaust. So now, what started as a peaceful protest has turned into a fight to the death.³⁵

In summary, Syria has a long and bloody history of who is in control and who has power of the country. The Assad family took control of the country in 1970 and will now do anything and everything to remain in power. The tangled web of alliances and contradictory objectives make it impossible for superpower governments, or rebel groups, to make a full-fledged stance form a united front. Now, after six years of war and hundreds of thousands of lives lost, there is still no end in sight.

Art & War

Art and war are both abstract ideas. When we think of them on an individual level, we immediately think of examples of both that turn the abstract into the concrete. What allows that to happen? What is the underlying similarity between the two? Human activity. There would be no war unless people participated, and there would be no art unless people created it. Now we can ask why are both art and war such intuitive actions? Why are we fighting? Why do we create? Often, the answers that follow are in dialogue with one another, and they run in a never-ending cycle.³⁶ We create for the spread of peace, and fight for peace. To take this idea from the abstract to the concrete I would like to briefly review some examples from history, and the different ways that war can influence art, and vice versa. The discussion of these pieces will later relate to examples that inspired by the Syrian Revolution.

Don McCullin, a war photographer, once said, “when I took pictures in war, I couldn’t help thinking of Goya.”³⁷ Similarly, when I see photographs of war I am immediately transported back to the first shocking moments when I saw Francisco Goya’s series, *The Disasters of War*. It is a series of eighty-two prints, separated into three different categories



Figure 1: Francisco Goya, Disasters of War, Plate 39, 1810.

and time periods. The first group Goya created documents the invasion of Spain by Napoleon, the second presents the famine of Madrid and the death and despair that followed, and lastly he explored events relating to the Peninsula War. *The Disasters of War* is a series of etchings that portray first-hand experiences of war. They document the horrifying and beastly actions of people, and the total lack of humanity during times of war. The images are sometimes equated to photography, because of the ways that they are documenting the times. The images were created in real time with the events taking place contemporaneously, but they were so critical of the powers that be that they weren't published until 35 years after Goya's death for fear of fines, imprisonment, or death.³⁸



Figure 2: Honoré Daumier, *The Past, The Present, and the Future*, 1834.

Similarly, Honoré Daumier worked as a caricaturist for a satirical paper in the middle years of his life before he became more interested in painting. By living in the chaos of the aftermath of the French Revolution and the onset of the Industrial Revolution, Daumier had strong ideas and felt compelled to

critique his society. Daumier grew up poor and was forced to drop out of school at an early age. This allowed him to sympathize with the poor, and he used his understanding to be highly critical of the French government and society. His pointed political cartoons earned him a suspended sentence from the French government, but he soon released another cartoon and spent six months in jail. Upon release, he wasn't as critical of the upper classes, but focused primarily on the middle class and lawyers.³⁹

Timothy O'Sullivan was working in a similar mode to try and document the atrocities of the American



Figure 3: Timothy O'Sullivan, *The Incidents of War. A Harvest of Death*. 1863.

Civil War and the impact that war had on a nation and its psyche. He was a photographer who, "built his reputation on images that conveyed the destructive powers of modern warfare." His photos also suggest "the dismal psychological as well as physical effects" that warfare had on soldiers and communities. These images were included in Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, so that they could be distributed to the general public.⁴⁰

The psychological effect of war was also a primary focus for a group of young radical artists who named themselves The Dadaists. They created art that was a

reaction to what they perceived as the illogical and absurd actions of World War One. Their reaction was to mirror and exemplify the absurdity of the war in their own work. Underlying the seemingly illogical imagery was a comment of the technology of war, consumerism, and the political atmosphere of the time. The Dada movement was international, but had hub cities and groups in Zurich, Berlin, and New York. The Dadaists were pioneering the term “nontraditional art” that we have defined in the



Figure 4: First International Dada Fair, 1920.

context of this thesis. They were using found objects and combination of material as a way to express their social concerns, but also as a way to heal from what they felt during and after

The Great War. The International Dada Fair of 1920 showcased 174 different works from artists from 7 different countries. The most iconic photograph of the event shows a suspended effigy of a German soldier with a pig head hung from the ceiling, epitomizing the absurd tendencies of Dadaism. The Dadaists used nontraditional and found materials, the juxtaposition of ideas, and subversive political commentary.⁴¹

Northern Ireland also produced images with direct and politically charged messages. During the years of 1968-1998, Northern Ireland was experiencing what is now referred to as “The Troubles.” It was a civil war between the Catholic, Republican, Nationalist faction which was fighting for equal rights against the Protestant, Unionist

Loyalists. After the Irish Civil War against Great Britain in the early 1920s, the British divided the island of Ireland into the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which would still be under the direct rule of Britain.⁴²

The timeline of The Troubles parallels the timeline of the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, and thus acts as a good point of comparison. The Troubles broke out after the economy bottomed out after the boom of World War Two, like the drought of Syria causing the economy to plummet. Additionally, the civil rights movement was happening around the world and the Nationalists of Northern Ireland decided to join in the march, once again, comparing to the Arab Spring of the Middle East. The Nationalists protested in Northern Ireland and they were matched with force from the British Military. It escalated into a full-fledged civil war that through its 30-year span killed 3,600 people, and wounded approximately 50,000. It wasn't until the Good Friday Agreement of June 1998 that peace was finally brought to Northern Ireland.⁴³

A prominent feature of the revolution was the amount of street art that was created that documented the civil war. The murals were used as a way to mark territory, remember the



Figure 5: Bobby Sands Mural, 1981.

martyrs that died for the cause, intimidate the other side, and perpetuate the hatred that they had for one another. After the Good Friday Agreement, artists came together to paint over the murals that referenced The Troubles in order to help reunite Northern Ireland. ⁴⁴

Now we have a broad understanding of the ways that art historians use different methodologies to make inferences and assumptions about works of art, along with a base level, and necessary, grasp of the current state of the Syrian Revolution, and the events leading up to it. Moving forward, we will use these ideas about art history and the Syrian political culture to understand the nontraditional art that is being produced. This, in combination with the contextualization of art and war as a prominent historical pattern, we can make connections to the past in hopes of being able to make conjectures about future Syria.

Where It All Began: Street Art, Graffiti, and Murals

As we have already noted, the Syrian Revolution began after a group of teens tagged some walls in the small southern town of Daraa with anti-regime slogans. The use of street art and graffiti had proved successful in previous Arab Spring revolutions, and it was enough to spur Syria's people to stand up and fight for their rights.⁴⁵ The protesters and rebels continue to fight day after day, and the artists continue to create new imagery every day to encourage the people not give up their fight for freedom. Because of the immense amount of work that has been created, it is impossible to look at all of the examples. Thus, we will narrow our focus to include only a few specific artists which, in my opinion, capture what the artist-activists are trying to say as a collective whole.

Banksy is the well-known and illusive graffiti street artist that has been tagging Europe, and London specifically, for years. The works that he produces are light, easy to look at, at times they are comical, but there are also undertones of political unrest and commentary. Comparatively, Syria now has its own Banksy, Abu Malek al-Shami, who is creating murals on destroyed buildings across the Syrian town of Darayya, and has since been dubbed the "Syrian Banksy."⁴⁶

Abu Malek al-Shami came from Damascus after participating in peaceful protests and demonstrations, but he soon joined the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and was stationed in Darayya. Having been interested in art from a young age, he used his artistic instinct to make posters for the protests. After being stationed in Darayya he began painting murals at the base, including optimistic phrases or murals of martyred comrades. He

soon met citizen-journalist Majd Moadimani, and was encouraged to paint his murals and phrases across the town. They started to work together to find the perfect sites to paint, and decide on what sort of imagery to produce. Abu Malek al-Shami was inspired to paint on the collapsed roofs of buildings and homes because the pictures could then be seen both on the ground and from the air. However, al-Shami said that he was nervous to paint on people's destroyed homes because even though they were in complete ruin, their homes were all that these people had left. After seeing the happiness that his first picture created, there was no doubt that he had to keep working.⁴⁷

Al-Shami had posted his work online on social media and it was well received. He started getting suggestions for different sites and subject matter, as well as technical tips for painting additional street art. In this way, social media plays an important role in the creative process for these artists. Not only does it act as an online exhibition space, but it is also a forum for artist-activists, like Abu Malek al-Shami, to get their message out.

Although the artist-activists have tools like Facebook, they are limited by the materials that have at their



Figure 6: Abu Malek al-Shami, Hope.

disposal. A lot of times there aren't proper brushes or paint to use and artists are forced

to find a less effective alternative. Specifically, al-Shami has the added difficulty of finding a time where he isn't under siege, and responsible for other tasks that are pertinent to being a FSA soldier.⁴⁸

For logistical reasons, Darayya is an important city for the regime to occupy, because of its close proximity to Syrian military bases. Because of the regime's desire to take back the city from rebel forces, civilians spend most of their days hiding underground in shelters while their lives are turned to rubble and dust above their heads. However, when they emerge and see one of al-Shami's murals, it offers them hope for the future. *Hope* is one of his most impactful pieces to the civilians of the town, and he explains it by saying, "It shows that there is always something beautiful waiting for us, despite all the pain that we're experiencing."⁴⁹

Al-Shami also has a message for the regime soldiers that are working to occupy the town. The message is embedded in a series of three murals. The artist summarized his



Figure 7: Abu Malek al-Shami, *Use Your Heart*.

message in a simple statement saying, "be merciful and use your heart, use your mind and don't be a pawn."⁵⁰ The murals all depict a small girl teaching a lesson to a soldier wearing a helmet and holding a rifle. In the first image the girl is pointing to a picture of

a heart that is leaned on an easel, while in the next image she is pointing to a picture of a brain, and the last is an image of a chess pawn that is crossed over with a large “X.” The message is simple and easy



Figure 8: Abu Malek al-Shami, *Use Your Mind*.

to understand, and with any luck it may sink in to the minds of the soldiers that are patrolling the ground, sniping on rooftops, and dropping barrel bombs out of the sky. Use your heart. Use your mind. And don't be a pawn.⁵¹

Abu Malek al-Shami is working within Syria as a soldier in the Free Syrian Army, but in his spare time he works to elicit hope through his murals on walls in Darayya. His intent is to send messages to the troops destroying civilian homes, and remembering those who have fallen in the name of freedom.⁵²



Figure 9: Abu Malek al-Shami, *Don't be a Pawn*.

There is another group of artist-activists working in Syria known as The Leftist Collective of Saraqeb paints murals and portraits of rebels and revolutionaries that

have been killed fighting for freedom. The Collective does this as an act of remembrance, but also as a way



Figure 10: The Leftist Collective of Saraqeb.

to highlight religious diversity. In this way, they are combating the people that say the revolution is motivated purely by religious differences. It wasn't the regime that reacted negatively to their work. Other extremist factions said the Leftist Collective's murals were against Islam, and painted over them. This is proof of the fact that, although the rebel groups are all fighting to bring down Assad, they still disagree and are not

working together as a unified front.⁵³



Figure 11: Omran Media Image

Currently working in London is an artist-activist, who, like Banksy, remains anonymous through the use of the pseudonym, Pegasus. When the image of Omran, a little boy that was pulled from the rubble of Aleppo, hit mass media outlets, the artist Pegasus said he was

“instantly broken hearted.” He soon created the piece that is now on the side of a restaurant in London, which depicts Omran sitting atop a set of children's blocks that spell the phrase “END WAR.” The piece is done in all black and white except for the red

blood that is pouring from the child's head above his eye. The artist employed a well-known and easily recognizable image of the Syrian Revolution in order to "help bring awareness to the devastating consequences of war." For the people that see Pegasus' work both in person and online, the message is two-fold. The first is that we, as people with control of our lives and



Figure 12: Pegasus Street Art, End War.

resources, need to stand together in solidarity for the people that fall victim to the atrocities of war. The second message is that we need to find a way to help those who have nothing and are fighting for their lives. In essence saying, stand up and do something.⁵⁴

There are other artist-activists that are working within Syria, however because the graffiti is so anti-regime, and the consequences of being caught are so severe, they decide to remain anonymous. These groups of anonymous artist-activists work as a community by sharing techniques and tactics with one another. This is done both in person and by virtue of the internet. Trying to be as careful as possible, they have devised ways to try and evade the *Mukhabarat*. Some artists create a stencil on the bottom of a bag so that they can set the bag down, spray inside of it directly onto a sidewalk and then simply walk away. Others may hide a stencil within the pages of a newspaper, so that the stencil can be transported easily and used quickly. These artist-activists are also able to create, download, and send their stencils through the internet

to other groups working outside of Syria, so that their message about the murderous regime in spread worldwide. One piece that is representative of this anonymous collective, and the degree to which the works are anti-regime, is the image of Bashar al-Assad with the phrase “step here” written beneath it in Arabic.⁵⁵

When comparing the activities of the artists working in Northern Ireland during The Troubles, you can see several similarities between their fight and that of the Syrian artist-activists. Both groups created murals and street art as a way to remember the fallen and claim territory against the opposition. Additionally, these different instances of street art are in dialogue with one another. For example, the Protestant artists and the Catholic artists would create imagery surrounding the same event, but



Figure 13: Anonymous, Step Here.

would look at it from differing perspectives, always supporting or creating sympathy for their own side and demeaning the other.⁵⁶ The Leftist Collective had similar experiences with the extremist groups, even though they were both working toward bringing down Assad.⁵⁷ However, they had different ideas on how to get there and those ideologies were communicated through street art.

Abu Malek al-Shami and the Leftist Collective are working with muralist techniques whereas Pegasus, and other anonymous artist-activists, are using traditional

stencil graffiti techniques. All of the artist-activists are discussing and processing the events of the Syrian Revolution, but their responses are very different. Al-Shami is trying to make Syria a better place in its current state, both by fighting with the FSA for freedom and by spreading optimism to the people through his murals. Pegasus is empowering the people that have control of their own lives in order to help those who don't. The anonymous collective groups are directly fighting against the regime. The Leftist Collective highlights the ways that the rebel forces should work together regardless of religious identity. Through these few examples, we can generalize about what other street artist-activists are working for and the tactics that they employ. One of the most important strategies is the use of social media, along with several different creative techniques, and a strong initiative for change.

Posters & Digital Art

Before the protests, no one spoke out against the Syrian regime or the government, and there wasn't any freedom of expression in any form.⁵⁸ When the revolution began civilians were urged to speak their minds, and this rejection of government inspired artist-activists. After the civilian protesters and the artist-activists developed a relationship, the two groups began sharing ideas and soon art as well. This was possible because the protesters could download and print off posters before the demonstrations. The first wave of shareable posters were simple in text and imagery, but they soon evolved into the creation of digital art.⁵⁹ Just as street art evolved from quick and sloppy tags on walls to full murals and premeditated stencil graffiti, the posters transformed from protest signs to full works of art, and carrying strong messages.

One of the most appealing factors to the artist-activists working within Syria is the ability to hide their work on computers, or to wipe their computers clean if necessary. This is contrary to the artists that have a specific process which is based on the mark-making of the individual artist, as well as artists working outside of Syria, and without the looming threat of the regime.⁶⁰ Some people may say that the use of the digital process is cowardly because the artist remains hidden and anonymous, but the digital process enables artist-activists to make work with far more striking imagery and a direct message.

Sulafa Hijazi is an incredibly insightful artist who grew up and began working in Syria, until she left the country in 2012 when the revolution became exceedingly violent

and several activists were arrested. In her work, she reflects on what it was like to grow up in a militarized society, how the regime stole her childhood, and the ways that the country's conflicts have escalated into a revolution. Two of the main ideas that she explores in her work are the concepts of cyclical violence and death. She discusses the ways that the regime



Figure 14: Sulafa Hijazi, Untitled.

works to maintain this cycle of violence because it continues to give them an excuse to murder people as they wish. This is portrayed in an untitled illustration of soldiers riding a Ferris wheel—in one moment they are fighting alongside each other, and with a single rotation the soldiers are shooting one another. Additionally, she struggled with what it was to be Syrian and not live in Syria after experiencing the war first hand. She said that, “Inside Syria, people live as prisoners inside a huge cell. Once we try to escape from there, we discover that we are still inside.” This feeling of disconnection from where you are, and where your mind is, is also represented in her work, and representative of the way that many displaced Syrians feel. ⁶¹



Figure 15: Sulafa Hizaji, *Ongoing*.

A powerful statement that Hijazi made in *Syria Speaks* is that if women were in power there would be no war. After a woman gives birth to a child she truly understands what it means to give life to someone, and in turn understands what it means to take the life of

another. She magnifies this concept by making an image of a man birthing a military rifle, with other weapons nearby which are implied to be surgical instruments. The contradictions of a man in labor, and him birthing violence instead of an innocent baby make the image all the more powerful. This is because the image infiltrates one's mind and asks questions about the intent of the artist and how one should decode the work. She continues and says that she doesn't directly quote imagery from the revolution or the regime because her work is more about the *idea* of conflict, although her work is derived from her experiences surrounding Syria.⁶²

Tammam Azzam is a Syrian digital artist who lives in exile in Dubai. His work blurs the lines between street art and digital art. I say this



Figure 16: Tammam Azzam, *The Kiss*.

because when you see the work there is a moment where you have to decide if it is street art or if it is a digitally produced image. In a series titled, *The Syrian Museum*, he appropriates famous Western images and places them in the setting of a war-torn and destroyed Syria. An early work of Azzam's uses Gustav Klimt's, *The Kiss*, and places it on the side of a bombed-out building, calling it, *Freedom Graffiti*. For Azzam, he isn't living and working in Syria, he isn't fighting the regime, but he says that he has to be involved



Figure 17: Sedki Alimam, *Obama=Putin*.

with his country. The difference for him is that he is working to support his people, hoping for peace to eventually return to his homeland. ⁶³

Another digital artist-activist, Sedki Alimam, extensively discusses his intent and the political message behind his work. He believes that Bashar al-Assad is not the problem, the rebels are not fighting against him directly, but that he is a mere puppet in the regime's

greater scheme. Additionally, he doesn't think that Syria's foreign neighbors and the greater overseas powers need to get involved. His statements are exemplified in the image *Obama = Putin*, and the series *Kingdom of Hyenas*. In the former, we are staring into the eyes of a man that looks like Barack Obama and at the same time is Vladimir Putin. The overlapping of the two men thwarts their presence and implied power, ultimately making them insignificant, and unnecessary to the Syrian people. ⁶⁴



Figure 18: Sedki Alimam, *Kingdom of Hyenas*.

In the series, *Kingdom of Hyenas*, Alimam takes the heads of warring leaders and replaces them with the heads of hyenas. He explains his process and how “it shows all fighting factions as monstrous creatures, mercilessly killing innocents, and stealing everything they lay their hands on.”⁶⁵ These images compare powerful and power-hungry leaders to illogical and impulse-driven animals who kill for the satisfaction of killing, all while trying to prove that they are alpha.

Sedki Alimam is working on documenting all sides of the Syrian conflict, whereas Fares Cachoux, another Syrian artist-activist, is using the digital process to document the evolution of the revolution. His subject matter ranges from the Syrian government’s reaction to the protests, to Russia joining the conflict in support of Assad. He uses bright colors to catch the attention of his viewers, his philosophy being that, “we live in a society of pictures, videos, and



Figure 19: Fares Cachoux, “Lavrov: Depicting the relationship between Assad and Russia.

screens.”⁶⁶ His meaning is that there has to be bright colors and interesting graphic design elements to make the images important to people that are constantly bombarded with advertisements and media.

Cachoux compares the amount of media coverage between World War II and the Syrian Revolution, and how we see the progression of importance of citizen journalists. If we include the Vietnam War between WWII and the Syrian Revolution, we can trace the impulse of these journalists and artist-activists’ desire to document. During World War II, there was only print copy and state controlled media, limiting the role of citizen journalists and combat zone media. During the Vietnam War there was an exponential increase in documentation by journalists, specifically film journalism, that Vietnam was later dubbed “The Living Room War.” It was given this nickname because of the number of people back home that were watching the televised news of the war from the comfort of their living rooms. This also made civilians far more invested in the events of war than ever before because they were seeing real time footage.⁶⁷ Now, in Syria, with the addition of camera and video phones, there are hours worth of documentation of the conflict from ground level. With drastically improved technology, the citizen journalists of today’s age can document the war easily, and then seamlessly upload the images and videos online. This only amplifies the desire to document.

The impulse to create and document drives artist-activists like Fares Cachoux, who create pieces to catch attention and spread awareness of the events happening in Syria. Cachoux says that, “the role of the Syrian artist is, and will be, telling the story of the Syrian Revolution... we will see a very clear timeline consisting of works of art.”⁶⁸

Similar to Goya and Timothy O'Sullivan, who were working to document the horrors of war that they had witnessed by using some of the innovative techniques of their times, so are the artist-activists using digital technology to fulfill the desire to document their own experiences. The digital technology allows them work in a safe environment where they can easily evade the attention of the security forces, and the *Mukhabarat*. Digital artists can put more time into creating their images, unlike the street artists that have to work quickly and in an exposed manner. Additionally, they have the ability to publish their work online for the world to see, and with the ability to remain anonymous.

Comics & Political Cartoons

What is most interesting about studying a revolution through art, instead of media or history books, is that you get to hear the individual stories of the artists, and in this case the stories of artist-activists. By understanding the artist, we are able to decode the message and find answers to what they are depicting and why. Additionally, the interaction with the artworks become more personal, and in turn they are more effective at evoking the emotion desired by the artist-activist. Not only are we looking at the works that are created, and making connections with our own historical understanding of the conflict, but now we get to combine that with what we know about the artist-activist's experiences related to the war.

Ali Ferzat is a Syrian political cartoonist and caricaturist who has been critical of the Assad regime for years, beginning with Hafez. At one time, during the first years of Bashar's new presidency, Ferzat was in regular communication with the president. Assad had even encouraged Ferzat to start his

own satirical newspaper.⁶⁹ Shortly after the onset of the revolution Bashar sent his



Figure 20: Ali Ferzat, Self Portrait, 2011.

security to attack Ferzat. The attack was in retaliation for a cartoon depicting Bashar on the same level as Muammar Gaddafi, the leader of Libya who had been killed earlier that year. The *Mukhabarat*, or “government thugs,” kidnapped Ferzat, broke both of his hands, and left him to die. However, this wasn’t enough to stop him. He had already seen too much of the revolution, to have this attack stop him, and he knew that he had to keep working for a better Syria.⁷⁰ His most potent response to the attack was a self-portrait of himself laying in a hospital bed with broken and bandaged hands, except for his “defiant middle finger.”⁷¹

During the same year of Ferzat’s attack, he was named one of the top 100 most influential people by *Time* magazine. He was on the front line of the revolution, and his actions inspired many other cartoonists and caricaturist artist-activists. A younger artist-activist, Amjad Wardeh, followed Ferzat and made a cartoon of Bashar snorting a



Figure 21: Amjad Wardeh, No title.

line of dust and rubble from one of the destroyed Syrian towns. It’s a comment on Bashar being addicted to “getting high on the death of his people and

the destruction of his country.”⁷² Effectively, comparing Bashar to a drug addict that will do anything to get another hit, chasing a better high. What makes these images so popular and effective is, as Ferzat says, “caricature is... an art form for *all* people.”⁷³

It was soon after the internet coming to Syria, under the control of Bashar and his people, that Japanese *manga* became very popular within Syria. After the revolution began, similarly styled comics and *manga* became an outlet for artist-activists. They tell stories that incorporate aspects of Syrian culture and the citizen responses to events of the revolution. The comic, *Cocktails*, written and illustrated by a team called Comic4Syria, exemplifies the degree to which citizens are brainwashed by the regime and the state controlled media. *Cocktails* tells the story of two childhood friends that grow up in Syria together. When the revolution begins, one man wants to protest and stand in solidarity with those who were shot during one of the early demonstrations. However, the other man believes that the Assad regime would never do something so cruel, and that Assad is truly fighting terrorists, like the news is telling him. It isn't until the second boy comes to a protest to prove his friend wrong, that he is beaten and detained with his friend. After that, he believes in the revolution, the horrors of the regime, and the right for freedom. ⁷⁴

The comics and cartoons are honest and effective because of their level of accessibility. Although, without some understanding of the revolution, the Assad regime, or Arab culture some of the smaller nuances may be missed. Mariam Cooke responds to this concern and says that, "the reader may not understand the message that the artist-activist intended, but ultimately it is the reader's search for meaning that matters," just like we can look back at the comics that Honore Daumier created after the French Revolution.⁷⁵ We don't have to be a part of that society to understand what the image is trying to say, just like we don't need to be a part of the Arab or Syrian culture

to understand what its artist-activists are saying. At a very base level, the artist-activists are trying to make you think, ask questions, and seek answers.

Nontraditional Materials

We discussed several other nontraditional art practices, but there are some works that are more accurately a use of nontraditional materials which are transformed by traditional practices. As we have done in previous sections, we will only be looking at a couple of specific examples that encompass the tendencies and intentions of other artist-activists.

The first is the YouTube video series called, *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator*. It is a show that is produced by an anonymous collective of Syrian artists.

However, what makes it



Figure 22: *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator*.

so interesting and pointedly ironic is that it is a puppet show, paralleling Sedki Alimam's idea that Bashar is a puppet in the regime's play. The show is a satirical play featuring main character Beeshu, who takes on the role of Bashar al-Assad. The writers use current events and news to make something light out of their situation, but they are highly critical of Bashar and his plans for the revolution. Someone may ask if you could "imagine a military regime that is scared of tiny puppets?"⁷⁶ The script of the play is so sharp-witted and smart that it thwarts all of the power and intimidation Bashar and his regime cling to. "Ironically the ability to laugh at the tyrant and his henchmen helps to

repair the brokenness of a fearful people,” Mariam Cooke notes as a possible intent for satirical artists.⁷⁷

The nature of the project also highlights the importance of the internet and social media, which are vital for them to share their shows. They are posted on YouTube and Facebook, so that they can be shared, but also so that the videos and their content can be discussed. The format of YouTube and Facebook allows users and viewers to communicate their ideas and ask questions about what they are watching. This is specifically important for the younger generations that are less informed on the history and complexity of the politics surrounding the Syrian Revolution.

The functionality of the puppets also extends into the ability to conceal them and smuggle them over borders and through military checkpoints.⁷⁸ Military checkpoints make it difficult for day-to-day life, but they put such a hindrance on Akram Abou al-Fouz, a Syrian artist working outside of Damascus in Douma, that he had to forgo most his traditional materials. The checkpoints made him unable to access, or afford, paper and canvas. He

began looking for alternate materials and then decided to start painting on mortar shells



Figure 23: Akram Abou al-Fouz working on a mortar painting.

and rockets. Al-Fouz says that these found objects act as a reminder for the beauty that can come out of destruction. Douma is one of the most bombed cities in the country, so there was an abundance of materials for al-Fouz to work with. He says that his children enjoy watching him work on his art, and working alongside him. For them the ability to “draw childish things has...helped quell the fear within them.” For al-Fouz, who also helps organize protests and works with the paramedics, his art is a therapeutic activity. It gives him time to work through what is happening to his family, and his country. He is working to “tell the world that we are art in and of ourselves,” that by simply living and existing we are a work of art.⁷⁹

Al-Fouz collects shell casings and other debris from the area around his home, which is now burned down to nothing. Sari Kiwan, another Syrian artist, escaped after several buildings close to his home were blown up. He found refuge at the Art Residence Aley, which we will discuss in more detail later, and was given the opportunity to scavenge through junkyards for materials. One of his most well-known works is *Dancing on a Barrel Bomb* which depicts a figure balancing on a red barrel. There are several layers represented in this work. For example, the body language of the figure comes off as defiant and strong, giving the viewer the feeling that the figure is angry at the sky. This piece references the barrels bombs that have been dropped all



Figure 24: Sari Kiwan, *Dancing on a Barrel Bomb*.

over the country. The red of the barrel may be in reference to, and remembrance of, the blood of the many martyrs that have fought for their freedom. Mariam Cooke summarizes the discussion of the work by saying that the figures that Kiwan creates, which represent the men and women on the ground, will “keep on protesting and demanding the continuation of the revolution. They will keep dancing on barrels.”⁸⁰

These artist-activists and many more use what they have because they are filled with the impulse to create and document the revolution as they see and feel it. Similar to the ways that the Dadaists expressed their emotions about World War One, with the use of nontraditional materials and found objects. They were trying to recreate the absurdity of war by employing illogical imagery, scripts, and objects, but this was all an effort to try and survive the mourning and confusion following the WWI.⁸¹ In Syria, barrels are dropping from the sky, but the people won't give up. Shells fall and burn down your home, but you find and create your own beauty. The puppet that is running your country is a joke, so you might as well laugh. The artist-activists need to create, need to document, and need to show others what it is to live in the time of the revolution.

Installations

I am defining installations as a nontraditional art form because of the way that installations are created with a different mindset, by trying to “provide an intense experience,” as well as the use of mixed media materials. It is a different experience when you walk into a gallery and you are consumed by a work of art, rather than experiencing each piece individually. Installations are unique because they are “a complete unified experience, rather than a display of separate individual artworks.”⁸² When confronted with decoding an installation piece, there is a lot more emotion and psychology involved, because of the combination of several works. Therefore, this allows for several layers of meaning.

When the revolution began, Syrian artist Khaled Barakeh was living and working in Germany. However, he was confused as to what an appropriate response would be to the news and devastation. He recognized that he wasn’t risking his life or his safety on the front lines of the protests, but he still had a desire to be involved. Barakeh describes the feeling as having his body in Germany, but his heart in Syria.⁸³ The feeling of disconnect between being Syrian, yet not being in Syria is similar to what Sulafa Hijazi explored in her digital artwork.⁸⁴ This caused him to take to the internet to find connections to his home country. He developed several online relationships that were primarily facilitated through social media sites, like Facebook. By doing this he had access to the real news, to what was really happening every day that the mass media news outlets had since decided was no longer breaking news. Social media became a

crucial tool for him to not only formulate the creative idea for his installation, but also to help him execute it.⁸⁵

The revolution began in 2011, but by 2012 it was considered old news by the media outlets. Barakeh concludes that it is because “people were sitting in their comfort zones watching the news from a distance, unaffected, and impersonal.” This inspired him to believe that he had to bring a physical piece of Syria and its devastation to Germany. In doing this, people can’t go unaffected, they have to confront what is happening, and it becomes personal.⁸⁶

A *na’ash* is a prop used during a funeral to carry the body. It is similar to a casket but without any sides, and they are typically reused from one funeral to the next.⁸⁷ Arab funerals vary from region to region but are generally set in a different state-of-mind than a typical American funeral. They are a celebration of life, and a celebration of the passing from life into death, whereas American funerals are a time for mourning the loss of a life. However, they are still solemn events and treated with a great amount of respect and consideration for the deceased.⁸⁸ In Syria specifically, a funeral is one of the three occasions that people can gather freely without backlash from the government. But when the funeral is for a revolutionary, the event becomes more of a protest than a funeral. It was images of these funerals-turned-protests that inspired Barakeh to create his installation.⁸⁹

Barakeh used his online connections to get into communication with a religious leader in Syria that wanted to help him in smuggling a *na’ash* from Syria to Germany. Because of the numerous military checkpoints, the *na’ash* was disassembled and given

to several different people to zig-zag through Syria and across various borders. When it finally arrived in Germany, Barakeh reassembled it into a



Figure 25: Photos of Khaled Barakeh's installation

throne rather than back into a *na'ash*, using only its original parts. However, he decided not to stand the new throne up, but keep it on its back, as to not disrespect the one hundred and thirty-five bodies it had carried from life into death. Then, he surrounded



Figure 26: Photos of Khaled Barakeh's installation

the throne with the rest of the unused pieces, nails, and dust. The reshaping and reforming of the *na'ash* into a throne parallels the idea of the purpose of a revolution. How can we reform the Syrian government? What can we do for the Syrian people and their government? How can we take what is there now, reform and reshape it into something new, all while keeping its essence?⁹⁰

During the smuggling process, Barakeh had asked the people participating to track their experience. It was in this request that Barakeh received a photo of a man

that had been released from prison after participating in a protest. The man had been tortured while in prison, which left his back bloody and scarred after the regime had whipped him repeatedly. Barakeh then noted that those scars are the signature of the regime. He digitally isolated the image of the wounds and scars and printed five separate copies, each one lighter and less visible than the one before. He layered the images on top of each other, therefore giving the illusion that the wounds were healing. By doing this he said that it was representative of a positive look toward the future; that even though all of this hurt and destruction is happening now, there is hope in healing.⁹¹

Barakeh exemplifies the installation aesthetic by creating a work that will alter the way that people see the revolution. He took what people were used to seeing in the news and made it personal. Seeing the corpse of a protester on the news is distant and impersonal, but stepping into an installation and being consumed in an environment that showcases the vessel that has carried one hundred and thirty-five men, women, and children from life to death is overwhelmingly personal. Barakeh was able to bring a tangible piece of Syria to Germany, but what came with it were layers of meaning larger than he could have ever anticipated.

A Look Towards the Future...

So far, we have discussed the art that is representative of the artist-activists in some of the earlier years of the revolution. What is important to note are the ways in which the art and the messages within the work are changing. Most of the artist-activists are no longer trying to gain attention by shock value, but instead by emotional appeal. In this way, an image will sink into your mind and continue to remind you what is happening on the other side of the world.

Abdalla al-Omari is changing the scene for Syrian artists. In *The Vulnerability Series*, he explores the ways that world leaders don't know what it is to live the lives of their people. It highlights, on large scale, how disconnected they are from the reality of the situation, even though they should be the people working to improve these situations. For



Figure 27: Abdalla al-Omari, Bashar al-Assad, 2017.

example, he portrays Bashar al-Assad sinking in the Mediterranean. The position of Assad being in the sea is referential to the thousands of Syrians that tried to flee Syria

by crossing the Mediterranean, only to be consumed by the sea. A disheveled Assad is standing with his suit jacket falling off, his tie barely still tied, and the top of shirt is unbuttoned, with a look on his face that is complete and total despair. You can see in Assad's eyes the confused way that possibly asks, how did I end up here? How did I become the victim when I am supposed to have all of the power? Why is it me that is drowning and fading away in the Mediterranean?⁹² Al-Omari does an amazing job of placing these men of power in situations that they would never had expected themselves to be in, and an even better job of capturing that emotion of vulnerability within the faces of the men.

Al-Omari began working in Damascus, but soon fled to Belgium. Once there, he began wrestling with being forced into another country, into another culture, and having to fight homesickness and the anger of displacement. In his series, he wanted to explore those emotions, and specifically vulnerability, because of the ways that he wasn't in control of his life, but rather at the will of others. In a larger sense, he was looking at all of the people that were experiencing this all over the world, and with special interest on the way that it impacts the children. His show of *The Vulnerability Series* is set to debut in Dubai at the Ayyam Gallery from May 22 to July 6, 2017.⁹³

As we have previously discussed, the media image of Omran was so impactful to London street artist Pegasus that he created a stencil piece of Omran sitting on children's blocks that say "END WAR." After the work became popular, Pegasus had decided that he would sell prints of the image and then donate the funds raised to a children's charity for refugees.⁹⁴

Also working with Syrian children in a refugee camp in Jordan are the Mercy Corps. The volunteers take their time and donate it to the children who have grown up living in conflict and war. They use art as a channel for the kids to work through their trauma, and explore their feelings. The activities and projects give the children a healthy and constructive outlet for emotion. The Syrian children show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder at a rate which is ten times greater than other children around the world. It brings the children and adults together and facilitates an arena of team work and healthy conversation. This initiative is important for the growth and development of these children that are going to grow up and become citizens of the world, and with any hope they will make the world a better place. ⁹⁵

We have also touched on Sari Kiwan and how he was given the opportunity to live and work at the Art Resistance Aley (ARA). The creator of ARA is a woman by the name of Raghad Mardini. She is a civil engineer that came across the ruins of a stable that had been destroyed during the Lebanese Civil War. She saw the life in the building and restored it. Now, the ARA is a place for resident artists to come and work as a refuge from conflict. The ARA program is centered on peaceful living and working despite the several different origins, religions, and social classes represented there. It is about supporting one another and finding hope in healing.⁹⁶

Another project that is geared toward youths and is trying to help them understand the world around them is the Marvel and ABC News sponsored online graphic novel called *Madaya Mom*. I wanted to include a discussion of this work in this section because even though it is solidly based about the Syrian Revolution, it is

produced in the United States and is primarily used as a lesson plan. The comic itself features a mother that lives in the town of Madaya with her husband and five children. Madaya has been blockaded by the regime against the rebel forces so that they were unable to get supplies and other resources. But this act by the regime affected the civilian population as well, severely limiting their access to resources.⁹⁷

The novel recounts telephone conversations that the mother has had with journalists. However, sometimes the power gets shut off in Madaya and she is unable to charge her cell phone, and it may be days before she is back into communication with the journalist team.

She tells the team about their day to day struggles; about how she won't eat because she gives her children or husband her



Figure 28: abc News and Marvel, Madaya Mom, 2016.

portion. When they do eat, the food upsets their stomachs because it isn't used to having to digest food. She shares the story of the time that her children were at school when a bomb hits the school and killed several of the children. When her kids came home, they told her about how they had leave the bodies of their friends behind. What I love about this initiative is the way that it depicts mother as hero.⁹⁸

The message that the novel brings to youths around the world, specifically the United States, is very important for the understanding of privilege. Just like Khaled Barakeh and his installation piece, the writers and illustrators of *Madaya Mom* are trying to make the impersonal news coverage about Syria personal to the younger generation that can so easily ignore what it is happening. By showing the affects that war has on families and children in the graphic novel context, which is highly accessibly to teens, makes the youth of the world more aware of what is happening around them. The writers also produced additional lesson plans and discussion topics to follow along with the graphic novel. Mimicking the concept of online discussion via social media, the in-class lesson plans allow for educated and guided conversation to help round out the discussion of the revolution.⁹⁹

In the more recent years of the revolution, the focus on humanitarian action has only grown. The emphasis that artist-activists put on spreading their message, and coping with the trauma of the war is paralleled in the responses of those trying to help. Through discussion, awareness, and healthy coping, we can build a more effective and responsible world population. Although the results of these actions may not be seen immediately, the actions are necessary.

Conclusion: The Reality of it All

A challenge that I encountered when beginning this project, and throughout its progression, is the continual developments being made in the Syrian Situation. The war is still going on, in full force, and without an end in sight. This means that the artist-activists are still relevant to the cause and are still working fervently to bring attention to their situation. It also means that there is a constant flow of new imagery. Just as the Syrian Revolution has developed and grown, so have the artist-activists and their tactics.

We saw in the beginning of the war the use of quick and sloppy graffiti tagging which evolved into highly technical murals and stencil graffiti. There was the use of demonstration posters that gave way to digital art and posters. There are several artists working outside of Syria that use their resources to spread awareness, and in some cases, raise funds for varying humanitarian groups. Now, we look at work that is being debuted in the current state of the revolution and the message is different. It is morphing out of a defiant, shocking, and morbid state and into something that is far more emotive. Artist-activists are working to provoke emotions like desperation and vulnerability.

The revolution is constantly changing and transforming into something different. Beginning first as a simple Arab Spring demonstration, then into a civil war, and now operating as a proxy war for several larger ideological identities. However, the reality of it all is that it is a war, and with war there is death. This has affected the Syrian art world because several artists have been killed before they could ever show their work

or get their message out. Although this is partially due to the fact that the only journalism within Syria is citizen journalism. Both the journalists and the artist-activists



Figure 29: Abu Malek al-Shami, Mural for Majd Moadimani.

in Syria are operating under the constant fear that the government thugs will show up on their doorstep, or working with the fact that at any moment a barrel bomb could

drop from the sky. For example, citizen journalist Majd Moadimani, who encouraged Abu Malek al-Shami to paint outside of the FSA base, was later killed while photographing bombs falling from the sky.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, Ali Ferzat was attacked and almost killed by the *Mukhabarat* for a simple cartoon.¹⁰¹

These stories aren't exceptions to the rule, but rather the expectation, as unnerving at that is. There are also artist-activist groups that have collected online on social media platforms like Facebook. Several of these Facebook pages have just stopped posting because the artist-activists and account administrators have been killed, detained, or have disappeared.

I say that the continual evolution of the revolution, and the cease in creation by artist-activists has been a struggle for me while researching, but it is more important to see this as the daily struggle of the people that are living and working in Syria during

the reign of both Assad regimes. The purpose of this thesis is to recognize the artist-activists that work against the regime, try to make a positive statement within the midst of war, and look to the future for hope. The people of Syria are incredibly resilient and their visual culture is representative of that. The nontraditional art produced during this time needs to be acknowledged as legitimate and as a viable source to understand the complexities of the revolution.

Notes

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- ¹ "What is Art History?" (Carleton University, 2017) <https://carleton.ca/arthistory/about/whatis/>.
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- Figure 21; Amjad Wardeh. Source: *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution*.
- Figure 22; *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator*
- Figure 23; Akram Abou al-Fouz working. Source: Syria Deeply.
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