



Mousa

Born in Syria in 1966 and raised in the United States, Mousa (Nabil Mousa) incorporates the cultural tensions of both countries into his practice, combining them with his own personal convictions. Using color in unexpected ways, Mousa lets intuition and affect guide his oeuvre. His solo exhibition, *Un-curated* opens on October 18th at the Salamatina Gallery. Oksana Salamatina interviewed Mousa in July 2015.

OS: What is the theme of your new work?

M: Currently I am working on the Burka series. Most Westerners are familiar with the burka and the reason Islamic women wear it. For me, personally, whenever I see a burka, it always evokes oppression. I would say that all of my work revolves around this main idea, and everything else is born from it.

OS: Where do you get the ideas for your work?

M: It's difficult sometimes to pinpoint where an idea started. There are times when I've gone back to my earlier sketches, back 15-25 years, and I'm always surprised to see the metamorphosis of my current work. Sometimes I take walks to relax and enjoy the fresh air, and my mind starts wandering, which is when the beginning of a new idea takes root. Other times, while working on a series, something new pushes its way to the surface.

OS: What is the significance of the Islamic motif in your work?

M: Early on as an art student I strived to find a way to connect my artwork to my heritage. This did not come easily at first. First I started looking at books that had pottery and fabric with Middle Eastern designs. These were primarily from museum books, so you would only get a fragment of what the design would have looked like as a whole. I used these sparingly at first, then I added more and more designs. Once I got my hands on specifically Islamic designs and patterns, things really took off.

OS: Recently you have made a departure from painting to video installation and photography. What made you go in that direction?

M: I wouldn't say I've made a departure, what I'm doing is expanding my practice into new media that I'm eager to work within. I feel I have a lot to say, and I'd love the opportunity to take photographs, and especially videos. Recently I watched a documentary called *Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present* (2012). It was so powerful watching an artist express herself in the most simple, difficult, daring, creative and dedicated ways. While the artist – along with all physical evidence of that performance – is gone, it's forever imprinted in my memory and my heart. That is art in its purest form.

OS: Your first departure from painting was a video installation entitled "Burka Series," which you started in 2015. What gave you the idea for it?

Burdened #15

mixed media on canvas, 47 x 59 in., 2011

M: The burka has stood for oppression to many Westerners and Europeans, so my first series was inspired by the plight of the Middle Eastern women who must wear it. As with all new ideas, you start with the basics and expand on them. My initial idea was to bring their plight alive by wearing the burka in public. I wanted to feel what it's like to go out in public and be unable to be a part of the modern world. I wanted to know how uncomfortable it would be for me, and for those whom I'd have to interact with. Then one day it all hit me; I realized that this again is not just about Middle Eastern women, but about me. I'm the one who's had to wear an invisible burka and be around my family and friends and co-workers. This burka is mine to wear, it is mine to share. I want the public to know how most women and us gay men go our entire life hiding behind this burka, afraid of what would happen if we removed it. This could be for anyone who goes through bigotry, whether its African Americans, American Indians, or Palestinians. In my opinion most of us wear a "burka," and go through life feeling numb and dead.



OS: You seem closely linked to your Syrian origins. Your artworks are always closely connected to the situation in Syria, but you have lived in the USA for a long time now. You live in a sort of ubiquitous cultural position. I imagine that this diasporic cultural identity influences your vision.

I haven't spoken to a family member or relative for over thirteen years. Being around my family gave me a sense of my Syrian identity. Once that connection was severed it was very difficult. I felt very empty, which is perhaps why I tried to find a place for it in my work. Perhaps it's the illusion that there's still something there for me to reach for, a hope that one day I can reconnect.



M: I'll start by correcting your statement. My work isn't always closely connected with the situation in Syria. Most of my work is closely linked to my life experiences, which are woven into the fabric of my heritage. The saying goes: no matter how far you go, you will always at some point in your life want to go home. Culture and heritage is like family – it's in everyone's blood, you just can't deny it. You can try, but it will always manifest itself somehow: in the food we eat, the way we behave, the clothes we wear, and especially in our life values.

OS: With the current situation in Syria, do you think your artwork could be shown to the public nowadays? Why?

M: It's because of the current conditions in Syria and around the Middle East that I feel now is the right time to show my work. My current project, Paradise built on the bones of the slaughtered, was started three years ago. I've held back on that project until now; now is the time to make a daring statement about what is going on in Syria and around the Arab world. How can we as a people keep watching these atrocities and still do nothing to help each other? Why are we always waiting for someone else to save us from our misery?

What really moves me is a feeling that wells up inside of me, like when a leaf falls from a tree, and it floats in the air before it hits the ground. That moves me. It's the struggle of people; the abuse of the weak; the loving kindness that someone shows. Those are my inspiration.



(facing page bottom) **Burdened #5**
oil on canvas, 28 x 36 in., 2001

(facing page top) **#4**
charcoal on paper, 17 x 14 in., 2004

(top) **Web of Life #1**
oil on canvas, 27 x 60 in., 2001