AN EXHIBITION FEATURING THE DRAWINGS, PAINTINGS, PRINTS, INSTALLATIONS AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF SOULAF ABAS & MUZAFFAR SALMAN

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Soulaf Abas, Aleppo, oil on canvas, 2013.
“Casualties become trivial numbers during times of war, and neighborhoods become insignificant remains. My artwork and my project ‘Seen For Syria’ are an attempt to create a visual memoir of what my beloved home is going through with all the passion, love and sadness I feel inside.”

–Soulaf Abas
FOREWORD

The Orange County Center for Contemporary Art is proud to announce and host Seen for Syria (SFS), an exhibition curated by Soulaf Abas and Alyssa Arney. The show presents the works of Soulaf Abas and Muzaffar Salman which documents physical and emotional loss due to the crisis in Syria. The exhibition fosters the honest voices of the artists and curates their work in the frame of global citizenship. SFS is a visceral and heartfelt memoir that discusses the intense agony of physical and emotional loss and the therapeutic endeavour to heal from the damaging experiences of war.

As a paradigm, SFS presents the viewer with the context of a culture in revolution. Abas and Salman play a part as artists operating in the material culture produced by this harrowing crux in history. The exhibition offers the personal narratives of Soulaf Abas and Muzaffar Salman with the objective to resonate with the audience by sharing and connecting to universal emotions via photographs, prints, drawings, paintings, collages and interactive installations. The art presented in this exhibition provides the platform for emotion to trump the bifurcation of the East and West. It grants
viewers a chance to see this exhibition through a personal and relatable lens and to directly make their contribution by exposing themselves to the current condition of Syria as well as through donations.

The entirety of SFS is comprised of three segments: a traveling art exhibition to raise awareness and funding for the current situation in Syria; an art education program that contains therapeutic programming that allows for Syrian refugee children to express their traumas; and an art and letter exchange between under-privileged U.S. children and the displaced, disabled Syrian refugee children. The sales generated from Abas and Salman’s artwork, the exhibition posters, the miscellaneous prints and handmade bookmarks from Abas, the interactive earth mound ‘Blooming Syria’, and Abas’ publication Me and You will be used to support the Syrian children who participated in the Me & You project.

A year after the revolution in Syria began in 2012, Abas visited her family in Damascus. There she discovered her perspective and sense of home that was radically altered by the effects of war. Upon returning to the U.S., she lost her uncle, who was a writer, translator, and lifelong activist for
human rights; Abas considers her uncle to be one of the most influential people in her life. When she lost him, she lost her home; the experience was and still is staggering for Abas. This was the catalyst that led her to produce her current body of work and for her to develop the art therapy program with the children. Abas’ works range from mixed media and installation to paintings, drawings, and etchings. These pieces employ diverse artistic processes and techniques that conjure certain emotions through various and sundry modes of display. SFS is a testament to her emotional deluge and protestations to the unconscionable deaths resulting from the violence. Her images depict the horrific and fleeting moments burned into her memory of explosions reducing buildings into crumbling ashes, moody and ominous atmospheric skylines of cities to denote imminent threat and instability, and impressionistic, gritty portraits of the dead or maimed.

In conjunction to Abas’ work, Muzaffar Salman has purposefully presented black and white photographs to strip distractions from his images. Salman shoots documentative, illuminating, and exquisite photographs that are wrought with heavy emotion. He captures the essence of the Syrian reality which is marked by pain, hope, and loss. In
Syria, Salman documented the first protest of the revolution at the al-Amawi Mosque back in 2011. Since then Salman continues to propagate his art as a vehicle to openly present the most violent and painful moments in Syria’s modern history. Salman states that, “all stories related to human beings excite me, whether they’re happy or sad. Through my pictures I want to show the world what people are struggling for and what they’re going through... Every photo tells a story, capturing the details of faces, of the suffering, happiness and dreams of the people they belong to—their fear and tension speak louder than words.”

Abas and Salman dive headfirst into the emotional and physical impact that war generates for those directly and indirectly affected from its shock waves. Abas laments, “Casualties become trivial numbers during times of war, and neighborhoods become insignificant remains. My artwork and my project ‘Seen For Syria’ are an attempt to create a visual memoir of what my beloved home is going through with all the passion, love, and sadness I feel inside.”

It is an honor to be co-curating this exhibition alongside Soulaf. It is crucial to produce exhibitions that investigate issues of violence, loss, and
displacement during such turbulent times in our global history. This exhibition features two people, both originating from Syria, a place they once called their home, who create art that discusses what they had to leave behind, and what their families and friends who still reside there are dealing with. The art of Abas and Salman are culturally and globally relevant since the outpour of this revolution are impacting the globe’s borders.

The traumas we experience, whether it's struggling with the loss of a loved one or losing a home, make it immensely difficult to express feelings and emotions verbally. At this juncture, material culture speaks louder than words and it is the art of those who suffer that can communicate their pain. These moments that are documented by visual culture radiate across borders and allow humans to connect through empathy. This show is about trying to find ways of coping with the disorienting and difficult nature of a war-plagued life. The answers are not clear but we are still trying to make sense amidst the raucous. Seen For Syria will memorialize and speak to all of those who have ties to Syria, to those who have have ever been uprooted and been deprived their sense of place in the world, and for those of us who have ever felt the incorporeal sensation of loss from a loved
death.

It is at this time that acknowledgements must be made for those who have aided in realizing this exhibition: first and foremost, thank you to the artists, for if it was not for them, the works and the installations would not exist; to my father, Donald Arney, who introduced me to Soulaf Abas; an enormous amount of gratitude to the members of the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art for accepting the exhibition proposal and providing a beautiful gallery to display the works in; to Stephen Anderson and Craig Sibley who volunteered their time and effort into installing and preparing for the exhibition; to Jane Szabo, Rachell Frazian and Robin Repp for public relations, marketing, and labels; to my boyfriend, Jeff Dolle, who continues to constantly support my curatorial endeavours and art practices, and most importantly to the audience who continues to make their impact through donations and visitations to the gallery to empathize with the people of Syria.

Alyssa Arney
SOULAF ABAS
Soulaf Abas was born and raised in Damascus, Syria for over 20 years. She attended art school in Damascus starting in 2004. In 2006, Abas received the PLUS scholarship to finish her BFA at Indiana State University (ISU) and received it in 2008. From 2008-2010 she taught at the Arab European University in Syria and then came back to receive her MFA from ISU in 2013.

In 2012, a year after the revolution began, Abas went back to visit her family in Damascus. The trip completely changed her perspective and the idea of what having a home means. It was shocking in terms of how her surroundings had changed and how many people she had lost. Shortly after she returned to the U.S., she lost her Uncle Abas, who was deeply influential to her. She began creating images through painting and printmaking that depicted her experience with these complex feelings and emotions. Shortly after this devastating blow of losing a family member, Seen For Syria, the exhibition and program, was realized on a bus ride from Washington D.C. to New York City in August of 2013.

Abas has lived in the states for 7+ years and currently teaches at ISU’s art department. She has travelled to many countries and participated in a number of symposiums, workshops, lectures, book signings and exhibitions in Europe, America and the Middle East. Her work has evolved from plein air, insect and animal paintings to that of the intense emotional content as witnessed in the Seen For Syria exhibition.
I created this painting after ISIS burned a bridge in northeast Syria “Deir Ezzour”. I saw it on the news and felt the fire burning in my heart. That action represents all of the violence that ISIS stands for. They have destroyed historical sites in Syria and Iraq; they are burning bridges between our past and us. They have burned bridges between two neighboring countries: Syria and Iraq to limit the fleeing of Syrians, and they have killed so many Syrian children…burning our only hope, and one of the most important bridges to a better Syria.
Soulaf Abas, Qudsaya-Damascus, oil on panel, 2015.

Qudsaya is the neighborhood I grew up in. We lived there until I was 12 years old. The oil painting is of a picture I found reading an article about the destruction of neighborhoods in Damascus. The scene in the picture is of a street I passed often on my to school and to friends houses as a child. It’s a place I often visit as an adult because it carried all of my childhood memories but now, it carries my painful memories of a place I once called home.
I started this painting the day my uncle Abbas Abbas died. It was Wednesday, September 5th, 2012. I was in my studio for days working on this painting. Losing my uncle made me face the loss of my home and this painting was the result of that painful confrontation. Soon after I started this oil painting, I was painting multiple canvases at the same time. It’s as if losing my uncle had opened up a space inside me I never knew existed; a door to a room in my heart filled with loss and grief and many brush-strokes.
This oil on panel was the first figure painting in the Seen For Syria series. I had avoided figures for months because I couldn’t bear to look at the facial expressions of people in agony. Then, one day, while reading an article online, I found this image of an adult holding up a child by his arms crying in pain. I closed the article, but his face stayed with me for hours, days and weeks. Finally, I decided to look at his face again and deal with all the emotions that came with it. I cried a lot, and painted a little. For about two weeks, I lived with his face inside and outside the studio. When I was done with the painting, I felt transformed, as if staring at his agony made me stare at mine. It allowed me to weep the loss of many loved ones back home and gave me the courage to put those moments of grief on canvas permanently.
Soulaf Abas, 253, oil on canvas, 2013.
An Intimate Conversation with Soulaf Abas

This is an interview between the co-curator, Alyssa Arney, and featured artist and curator, Soulaf Abas, of the Seen For Syria exhibition installed at the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art during the month of January 2016.

Alyssa (A): Why did you pick the title ‘Seen For Syria’ for the exhibition?

Soulaf (S): Seen is the sound for the letter ‘S’ that Syria starts with; it’s sort of like saying “B is for Boy” but also, and most importantly, the “scenes” I am creating are FOR Syria.

A: Can you talk about your painting process a little more in depth; for example, the various techniques you employ to create certain textures, colors, gestural mark makings, etc.?

S: Art making in general is a very meditative process; it allows me to work through a lot of emotions and ideas without having to verbally express them. Depending on the medium I am working with, the process will involve and express different sides of me. Oil painting, for example, allows me to show the different stages my work has gone through and reveals moments in a painting’s life and phases: from a thin wash of paint to a thick impasto, and from calm and quiet to more disturbed and emotional. I see those processes as
metaphors to what happened back home (in Syria); where we were as a country then, and what we have now as a result of the war.

**A:** You’ve talked about how each piece in your collage series becomes damaged, abused and beaten when the paper is overworked and the paint completely saturates its surface. You describe the process and result on the paper as a metaphor for what the people depicted in the images have gone through emotionally, mentally and physically. Do your other works reflect this same sort of intense process?

**S:** In many paintings, areas of canvas are left unpainted and untouched, leaving room for the imagination, or the future, to finish painting that picture. In the same sense my etchings, when exposed to acid, contain many areas left to be eaten away—“open bite”—without any soft ground to protect it. It leaves areas exposed and susceptible to losing complete control—while it’s something I’ve always been inclined to do in my work before the Syrian crisis—it now resembles the many lives that have been exposed, the many cities that have been abandoned and what little control, we Syrians have over what happened to our home. The play between chance and control and the balance between dripping paint and highly representational areas of paint is what fascinates me about the process. It’s where I live in my work and my life.

**A:** What is your favorite medium to work in: painting, printmaking, mixed media collage, or drawing?

**S:** I have been enjoying oil painting quite a bit for the past few years.
A: Why? What do you think this media offers to your work that the others can’t?

S: It’s such a forgiving and challenging medium. It allows me to build a surface as rich and complex as my subject matter is. Printmaking brings out a different side of me: a more patient, organized and rational side; every process activates a side of me that others don’t. I use different media when the imagery calls for it, though I try not to force a medium on an image that can’t tolerate it. For example, watercolor is a very transparent and sensitive medium that won’t allow me to build up the surface on my portraits as oil paint would, but, it would work beautifully for landscape and more atmospheric images.

A: Will your body of work concerning loss continue as long as the revolution is happening? Do you think you’ll ever return to painting landscapes and nature again? What kind of content do you think your work will contain and discuss five years from now?

S: I can’t predict what I will be painting years from now. I know that the Syrian cause touches me deeply and I will continue to work on it as long as it means something to me. I actually do other paintings simultaneously with the Syrian body of work. I experiment with different media and subjects; I never try to limit myself or block out any source of inspiration.

A: Who and what are the things that inspire you the most when making art? Do you have a favorite painter or painters or genre of art?

S: I think all artists have people and paintings that made a strong impression on them. I can’t tell for sure how much
each one of them played a role in my process, but I certainly learned a lot from artists like J.M.W. Turner, Van Gogh, Kathe Kollwitz and poets like Mary Oliver and Rumi. My direct inspiration, however, would be the images I see on the news and the memories and feelings I’ve experienced first hand when I visited Syria in 2012. Some moments come back and haunt me. It feels as if they belong to someone else’s life, as if they’re borrowed long enough for me to paint about them; or maybe, they’re just too painful of experiences to claim or own.

A: Do you only use painting and fine art as an outlet for the incredibly powerful emotions that you feel? Do you also try diary writing, blogging or poetry as a textual catharsis?

S: I express most of my emotional experiences in painting, printmaking, making collages and gardening. I took on writing briefly but couldn’t continue with it. Writing exhausts me. Maybe I chose painting in the first place to run away from words.

A: I know you’ve talked to me before about gardening being a meditative process for you as well. Is it in part due to the volunteer work you’ve done in the past with helping refugees plant gardens in the shape of Syria? What else can you say about your gardening practice as a form of mental health healing?

S: I actually started gardening before my project with the refugees began. I only thought of the “Blooming Syria Gardening Project” after I had started my own Syria garden. I like to know where my food comes from and to grow my own in the cleanest and simplest ways possible. Also, the metaphor in the process helps me cope. Symbolic as it is,
having a garden in the shape of the Syrian border in my backyard gives me a sense of comfort and hope. I go out and check on it in the morning, and make sure that no cities have been destroyed. The only attacks come from the beetles on my zucchini plants and that’s fine with me! The only thing that falls from the sky on my Syria is rain, not explosive barrels or airstrikes. When new plants blossom, that’s my beautiful Syria emerging from this horrible war, ever stronger, and ever greater.

A: What is your favorite piece from the exhibition that you think best defines or encapsulates the theme of Seen For Syria? And what piece do you think is Muzaffar’s most powerful or representational image for the exhibition? Do you happen to know which piece is Muzaffar’s personal favorite?

S: I really don’t know if I can pick. I’m not sure Muzaffar can either. At the time each piece was made, it was my entire world and it prepared me for the next painting or etching. When I think of this body of work, I think of it as a whole; and while I may have moments in each painting that I appreciate formally, I can’t pick one out as a favorite. I can say, however, that the painting “In Syria I” of the old man crying was one of the most difficult and painful painting experiences I’ve had so far. It was a true challenge to stare at his face in the picture and not get emotional; to read his story and not cry. A part of me still feels that that specific painting was a turning point in my journey as an artist.

A: If there was one statement, thought or idea that you would want the audience to take away from this show, what would it be? Do you think Muzaffar would agree with you, or do you think he would have something different that he’d like to impart on the viewers?
S: I think it would be to recognize the individuality of each human experience in Syria and the life and pain beyond the image. I believe Muzaffar would agree with me, as he has risked his life more than once to record such moments, and to project the voice of grief and pains for the many people back home.
MUZAFFAR SALMAN
Muzaffar Salman was born and raised in Homs, Syria and currently lives in France. His father was a carpenter with a fond passion for photography and would shoot in his spare time. His father would show pictures of his travels in Europe to him as a child. Salman became interested in photography because he loved the idea of capturing a moment, and when he started shooting photographs, the image of his father with his camera never left his mind.

When Salman was 18, he received a Russian Zenith camera and began photography as a hobby. Simultaneously he started to attend college to study tourism and then completed his mandatory military service for 2 ½ years. During that time, Salman was cut off from everything that interested him, except for his passion for photography. When he returned from service, he read books about photography for beginners and registered with an institute to learn the technical side of taking photographs.

In 2006, he went to Rome during a meeting of countries from the Mediterranean coast. There he discovered he was the only person from Syria, triggering his desire to immerse himself in photography. He went back to Damascus and started working for Al-Watan newspaper.

He had covered many stories before, but he felt his first real assignment started on the first day of the Syria revolution, March 25, 2011. He heard of the protests happening in
the al-Amawi Mosque, so he rushed over with his camera and began photographing the historical moment. Salman sent the images off to the Associated Press which went around the world. It was however, forbidden to publish them in the Alsatian newspaper, where he worked as Director of Photography, because it was pro-government.

After this he traveled to Aleppo, the second largest city in Syria, where he received no encouragement from his wife or family because they believed he would get killed for his work. But through his photographs, Salman depicts a world where people are struggling daily by living in a war zone. When he shoots, he feels his father’s presence and uses his memory as the primary inspiration for the work that he creates.

Salman has had his photographs published in Thomson Reuters, the Associated Press, the New York Times, and Time Magazine’s LightBox. He has exhibited his work in Rome, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunis, Algeria, Turkey and the United States.
One year before starting my baccalaureate in high school for scientific research, my childhood dream job, I came to realize that the institution was a place to improve imported armaments. Somehow, it was like a huge prison; one that a person could choose to be jailed at! This shattered my dreams and caused me to start failing every class, which was indeed shocking for my teacher who could not understand how I was passing my physics exams one day and failing it the next. School was becoming progressively more complicated and eventually caused me to lose everything after having been at the top of my studies for so long.

What was I to do now? I didn’t have another dream! My father had promised to send me to Europe to complete my studies when he saw the inventions I was making during my youth. But he had long since passed away and now I had to discover who I was and what I wanted for myself.

The first step was to discover who my father was by piecing together old relics from around the house. After searching for a bit, I found old camera film among his personal belongings which I questioned my brother about. He assured me that it was the last one in dad’s camera before he sold it many years ago. When I inspected the film it was completely ruined; only
one picture remained inside. The technician at the print shop said it was impossible to print because of the low quality, but I was determined to find out what was on it! When I had the film checked it was ‘97, but six years later, in 2003, after I had studied how to manually print pictures, I was able to develop the picture by myself—it contained the biggest surprise of my life. In the image was a boy with two girls: my sisters and and me! To this day, I find it difficult to describe my feelings upon seeing that photo for the first time. For me, this photo was a sign. It was as if my father was giving me his helping hand after I’d failed at school. It was like after all the times I felt I was reaching out in the dark, attempting to hold his hand, he was finally reaching back through this 15 year old photograph! I discovered a new road that would lead me to my father; I left my science studies and followed the path of photography.

I feel lost, always searching everywhere for potential photos to take. I was shooting pictures of people during the day so that I could go back to my small room in Homs and search for my father in the developed pictures at night. My cousin and best friend once told me that they saw my father wandering the streets of Damascus, only one year after my father died. A phantom! My cousin said that he shouted for him but my father would not answer. I believe him because I never saw the dead body of my father and never visited his grave. It was this moment that made me decide not to shout for him but to continue shooting pictures as a way to project his voice and my endless search.

In 2011, I was arrested for covering a protest in the Al-Maidan neighborhood in Damascus. I confronted the face of my jailer along with the faces of all of the officers who questioned me for taking pictures; I scanned the countenances of my fellow prisoners; I walked countless streets; I ran in
front of snipers; I entered vacant and dilapidated houses through huge holes made in the walls by targeted scud missiles; I trudged through the ruins of the city; I searched the faces of the dead and visited many graves, and yet, I couldn’t find my father. I grow more confused every day.

My dear father,

In the recent past, I took a boat so that I could illegally cross the Al-Asi River from Turkey to Syria. Al-Asi River flows through Hama city, where you spent your childhood, and Homs, where I spent mine. I was hoping while looking at the reflection of my face in the water, in the same way Narcissis did, that the Turkish policemen would fire at me so that my face would fall in the water. Then I would meet you there in the afterlife; I would hold your hand again and cross the river of death to another world. They say that in this world, we can only be reborn if we drink from the water of oblivion.

Your son,
Muzaffar
50% of the sales from Soulaf Abas and Muzaffar Salman’s art and 100% of the sales from the exhibition posters and donations from the “Rebuild Syria Dirt Mound” will go directly to the 30 children who participated in Abas’ publication Me & You to help feed and clothe them and their families.

The Seen For Syria program continues in the form of the traveling art exhibition, artist lectures and book signings.
This catalog was organized by Alyssa Arney and co-authored by Soulaf Abas, Muzaffar Salman, & Alyssa Arney