

**Press Release**

**Exhibition at Kunstverein Graftschaft Bentheim in Neuenhaus, "Away From Home",  
21 February to 30 April 2016**

The exhibition *Away From Home* at Kunstverein Graftschaft Bentheim is presenting works by three Syrian artists: **Ammar Al Beik**, **Tammam Azzam**, and **Khaled Al Saai**. In their artworks, all three of them refer to the most recent events in and around Syria, which have affected them personally. All three artists were forced to leave their country because their lives were endangered, not only because of air raid attacks and bombings, but also because of their critical standpoints on the politics of Bashar Al Assad.

**Ammar Al Beik** came via Dubai to Berlin, where he spent several months in a refugee center in Berlin-Spandau, sharing a room of 15 sqm with another refugee. Over the course of these difficult months, he used his camera to record countless conversations and discussions with other refugees in this center. The main emphasis of his work as an artist is on photography and film. Despite all the adverse circumstances in which he found himself, he sought to finish a film trilogy, parts of which had already been shown at the International FotoFest Biennial *View From Inside* 2014 in Houston/Texas.

He is now showing these three films at Neuenhaus: *The Sun's Incubator*, *Dolce Siria*, and *Kaleidoscope*, as well as the *Adam and Eve photographs* with their manifold meanings, and an installation of around 100 photographs dealing with his experiences after fleeing.

**Tammam Azzam** currently lives and works in Dubai. About seven months after the revolution broke out in Syria in 2011, he no longer saw any prospects for himself in his own country. Since leaving his homeland, however, he has not been in any kind of stable situation, since his status in the Emirates is more one of being tolerated. Losing his earlier life and existence, the uncertainty about his own future and that of his family, as well as the escalation of the Syria conflict to a civil war with all its ensuing destruction and human catastrophes have had a lasting effect on him and his work as an artist. Painting counts as one his most important means of expression, but with the changed situation, in Dubai he feels that he no longer receives the type of inspiration that he enjoyed earlier on when wandering through the streets of Damascus. Dubai is so different. "*I now get the stories from the news and social media. That's why I used social media as a body to publish my new artworks. I started to make digital art,*" he states in an interview with Vangardist Magazine. As with Ammar Al Beik, digital photography became a further means of expression as a form of protest. His photo series *Syrian Museum* attracted worldwide attention. Here he incorporates paintings in western art such as *Francisco de Goya's The Third of May 1808* or *Gustave Klimt's The Kiss* into photographs of the destroyed sections of Damascus, where they function as a kind of graffiti, as symbols for the repeated injustices to mankind, on the one hand, and as expressions of hope for love and peace on the other. The exhibition is showing works from this series.

For **Khaled Al Saai**, the artistic focus is on calligraphy. Having enjoyed international success in exhibitions, performances, and workshops, Khaled had intended to establish a center for calligraphy, for which he had already found a location he wanted to buy in the Old City district of Damascus. But it no longer came to a signing of the contract since the events in Syria had come to a head and he was forced to leave the country from one day to the next.

Whereas film and photography only came into increasing use as the preferred media of expression in the 1990s, calligraphy is a traditional art that has enjoyed high esteem in the Arab world for centuries. Originally, it came about in connection with recording the Qur'an. Consequently, one strove to develop a type of writing deemed worthy for this. Thus, criteria were created such as geometric rules and methods of proportions in order to attain the utmost perfection in terms of the legibility of the Holy Writings and the beauty of the lines.

A command of the art of calligraphy required training and practice, both of which often lasted for many years. Over the course of time, calligraphers repeatedly undertook attempts to create new styles, although they continued to adhere to the strictly determined basic rules nevertheless. This was to change with the increasing European influence, among other things, during the course of industrialization and colonial policy. Artists were coming more and more into contact with European painting and incorporating its tendencies and impulses. It brought about a modern Arabic art, in which calligraphy also positioned itself anew.

The calligraphy of contemporary artists is no longer about continuing a tradition. In order to achieve their own free expression, the strict rules are broken and frequently writing utensils other than the customary Qalam (pen) are used, the paintbrush and palette knife, for example. Although the artists rely upon tradition,

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their primary concern is to develop new artistic forms of expression and thus expand the potential of lettering to something that approaches visual images, and indeed, eventually becomes images.

Khaled Al Saai is one of those artists, who studied classical calligraphy, and for whom it is the means by which he is best able to express himself as an artist. For the exhibition *Away From Home*, he created a work for a wall measuring 3 x 10 m, in which he brings together photo collage and calligraphy. The photo collage consists of newspaper pictures, photographs, and various materials having to do with what is happening in Syria. Khaled Al Saai says about the work: *"It is a kind of a visual documentary of the conflict. In my mural work I'll try to re build home according to my memory and future dream, but at the same time to present my anger and pain for what is going on there."*

A special guest attending the opening exhibition *Away from Home* will be the Syrian-Palestinian musician **Aeham Ahmed**, who has just been awarded the International Beethoven Prize for Human Rights, Peace, Freedom, the Fight against Poverty, and Inclusion in Bonn. For months, Aeham Ahmed had pulled his piano on a cart through the bombed streets of Yarmouk, a city district and refugee camp in Damascus that had been surrounded by Assad's troops and ISIS, a place of particularly great need and suffering, in an attempt to give hope to the people who had remained there through his piano playing and song. Ultimately, the ISIS burned his piano, and he was forced to flee at great risk. Since September of last year, he has been a refugee in Germany.

One of the consequences of the Syrian conflict has been flight and expulsion, a theme that preoccupies Germany in particular at the moment, since many refugees from Syria are being taken in here. Flight and expulsion was also a theme for the Germans after World War II. Not only are contemporary witnesses of that time still alive and able to tell of this, but above all, their children and grandchildren as well, who have listened to the countless stories told by their parents and grandparents, who suffered through this personally. Flight and expulsion stands for something that has repeatedly occurred throughout the history of mankind. As if one would never learn from history.

This exhibition might incite us to recognize the parallels that lie in the fact that, due to war and destruction, people lose their native countries, their homes. That they have left everything behind to save their lives and freedom. Perhaps it will spark discussions on how one may cope with such events, how to come to terms with them, and what perspectives might be won from them. Are there approaches we might learn from history and what we might do?

This exhibition has been organized by the internationally renowned curator **Karin Adrian von Roques**, who, following her studies of Islamic Art History in Bonn, specialized in modern and contemporary Arabic and Iranian art. Worldwide she curates exhibitions for museums and galleries, among these being the Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt, the Kunstmuseum Bonn, the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, the Cultural Foundation, Abu Dhabi, and the Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong. Karin Adrian von Roques was a consultant at Sotheby's in London and an advisor for the Deutsche Bank and others, in matters of purchasing Arabic art. She has served as jury member for international art competitions, for example, in Qatar, in Saudi Arabia, in Oman, and in Egypt. She gives lectures and writes contributions for art catalogues, newspapers, and art magazines. On the subject of Arabic art, at the end of the 1990s, she conducted a comprehensive study on the reasons why contemporary art from Arab countries goes largely unnoticed in western countries. This study included a questionnaire for gallery owners at the Art Basel, Art Cologne, and FIAC art fairs. Since then, she has been an advocate for the positioning of Arabic art on the international art scene. She regularly spends long periods of time in Arab countries and in Iran. She works together with Arab and Iranian artists and represents many of them. Most recently, at FotoFest International, she curated the Biennial called View From Inside – Contemporary Arab Photography, Video, und Mixed Media Art, which took place in Houston, Texas in 2014 and which was also shown in the spring of 2015 in Abu Dhabi during the festival of the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation. In addition, she is curator for the Middle East and North Africa for the Art Campus Project of the Meissen Porcelain Manufactory.

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