

Q&A: Lebanese Artist Shawki Youssef on “Acid Fields,” His Solo at Green Art Gallery, Dubai



Shawki Youssef/Green Art Gallery

Detail, Shawki Youssef, “Fragment/De-fragment,” 2013, Mixed media on paper, 60 x 100 cm

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Lebanese artist **Shawki Youssef** doesn’t confine himself to painting or drawing. His oeuvre is preoccupied with every facet of language; his brush strokes are exercises in poetic economy, his lines are testimonies to the human capacity for violence and fragility, and the titles of each of his works, particularly those in his ongoing show “**Acid Fields**” at Dubai’s **Green Art Gallery** are imbued with lyrical intensity so that they are not simply meant to provide context to the visual metaphors but to hint at larger philosophical meditations.

Born in Beirut in 1973, Youssef graduated with a BFA in 1994 at the **Lebanese University of Beirut** and went on to complete his MSc at **St. Joseph’s University** in 2007.

ARTINFO spoke to Youssef while he was in Dubai for the opening of “Acid Fields.” He told us more about his ambiguous conception of figuration, his Bedouin identity that impels him to oppose the studio format for the creation of work, and the influence of painter **Francis Bacon** on his artistic process.

Much has been said about what is construed as your conception of the human body. Could you, for the record, tell us more about your relationship with the human figure without us putting words in your mouth?

When I read this question, I was silent for some time because it became apparent to me that there is no clear definition for my relationship, or how I address the human body. I remember my initial approach to the human body at 16 or 17 was actually a learning process in which I was simply trying to grasp the idea of it. Both structurally and in essence. Characteristically I remember my first encounter with [Egon] Schiele’s portrayal of the human body, I was completely overwhelmed by his ability to encode so much sexual essence in a simple line. Today, 20 years later, I no longer fear ‘form’ itself, but the quest and process of learning to find meaning in the bodies I create is still very much present.

How did you arrive at this point in your life as a painter, this moment that has resulted in this body of work you called “Acid Fields?”

The gravity of the things that have been, and still are taking place, around us have crept into this body of work more visibly. The feelings of collective disconnection, the proximity of being dislocated from the familiar, whether that is a piece of land or a piece of your childhood, perhaps even with a lover. The necessity of being able to express these things through the helpless medium that is art all merged in this series of works.

Tell us about your earliest body of work. Were your preoccupations vastly different then?

Yes and no. I think there is a central core which runs through my entire body of work, but this is also in a constant state of flux. My previous body of work had in a sense more of a visceral urgency. It dealt directly with the relationship to the other, whether that be a partner, a parent, a stranger; the exchanges that occurred between individuals, and how these manifested within the body itself. This was an intimate experience which the viewer could relate to directly. My work today, however, shifts the focus to the “big picture,” the tragedy that exists on a collective scale, and the way in which that then affects the individual. This transition took me almost by force.

If you were to draw out your artistic lineage in terms of a family tree, what are the names that would prefigure?

I never liked Surrealism, and two years ago I did a work called “An apology to Surrealism.” When I was younger I never liked Cezanne, and now I’m horrified by the beauty of his works. Do you see what I mean? For me, the history of art cannot have a hierarchy to it, because it is so subjective, it’s constantly changing. There is not enough time to live and experience this “history of art,” to go through its different phases, to be appealed or repulsed by it.

Tell us more about your technique. How do you manage to get in all of that intensity in your work?

There is a phrase by Bacon where he says, “When I paint, I need to be as close as possible to my neurons.” I try to be, and that is perhaps the “intensity” which you see reflected in the work. In terms of technique, I would say the material I choose as a surface to work on defines my process. The texture of the paper, for example, the similarity of Braille, reminds me of when I teach, and I realize that people are no longer able to take the time to stop and really look at images. This overexposure blinds us.

Your practice is not limited to painting, you also write, make videos, and stage performances. Tell us about all these other lives.

The body is something that I address in all these lives. Drawing in a sense is quite similar to the phrases that I write, both are a poetic testimony, an electric one, and both compliment and grow from each other, one is borne of the other and vice versa. Video or other mediums have a completely different process. The bodies and faces I record respond in a different way, from a different viewpoint, and are almost always interactive. With video I can also get rid of the weight of subjectivity, I become more of a spectator, allowing my subjects to just be.

What has the reaction been to this new body of work?

It is still too early to tell. From the few encounters I have had so far, I think the connecting thread on which this series is based was well read.

What do you feel you are moving towards in your work? Do you see this moment as you having arrived at something that you hope to then extend? Or do you see it as a destination in itself?

Most of my work comes from the experience of creating it. Because this series is still quite new, I haven't had the time to have both a critical and emotional distance, to then say what will come next, or understand where this has taken me. What I do know, is that my way of being is defined by what I consider art in that moment.

Do you have a studio where you produce your work?

I am a Bedouin. The process that would usually take place in a defined space like a ‘studio’ does not work for me. The conception of the work, and the process, right up to putting it down on canvas, paper, or video, takes place in my normal everyday life, whether that be in a car while I’m driving, or looking at my kids while they play.

Lastly, tell me about your understanding of light. Light plays a very important role in your figurations; I would like to know more about whether you consciously seek it out?

There is so much darkness in my work, which is inevitable because the issues it addresses are such. But at the same time life, my life, is filled with joy, and light. Light is necessary to complete the picture.

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