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Emerging Syrian Artist Nour Malas Discusses the Magic of Painting

"The work tells me what it's doing more than I tell it"

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When the Syrian-Canadian artist Nour Malas was a child, someone made an important prediction about her future. That someone happened to be one of Syria's pioneering artists Marwan Kassab-Bachi (1934–2016), who was visiting Malas' family home to paint a portrait of her mother, an art consultant and former gallerist.

"After seeing my drawing, Marwan said: 'This girl is going to be an artist,'" Malas, who is based in Brooklyn, New York, told *Vogue Arabia*. True to his word, she is a must-know emerging talent in the contemporary art scene, creating fascinating paintings that are dark, violent yet vulnerable and at times ghostly, tapping into the chaos of life today.

From an early age, Malas was heading in the direction of art, although she didn't plan to. Born in France in 1995 and raised in Dubai, Malas always visited Syria when she was younger, accompanying her mother to studio visits with artists, including Marwan Kassab-Bachi and Ahmad Moualla. "Every artist had so much work – paintings and sculptures – and they were so generous," she recalled. "I was not interested in art, but now it infiltrated and became part of my soul."

During her high school years, she learned about art movements and visited art galleries in Dubai. She later on studied fine arts and art history at Goldsmiths, University of London for four years. In addition, she learned more about the business side of the art world by working as a studio manager. Malas says that she feels more connected to her Arab roots while living abroad. Our interview happened to take place just a few days after the historic fall of Syrian president Al-Assad on December 8, 2024. "We used to go to Syria all the time. Every time school was over, we were there the next day. Obviously, when the revolution started, we were no longer able to go. My family hasn't been back for 14 years. It's not until now that we can dream of going back," she said. She hopes to one day set up a summer studio in her country of origin, saying that she "feels a strong affiliation with Syria."

Initially trained in sculpture, Malas finds herself painting a lot these days. "There's this relationship with painting or drawing that is immediate. It doesn't give you the chance to think or overthink," she explained. When it comes to her art, where she typically applies earthy tones of red, brown and yellow, and can look like a merge of abstraction and landscape painting, she is inspired

by many things: her surroundings, people in her life, everyday objects, and politics. Full of gestural markings and unclear figures, she explains that her work "is not just about one thing. It's about the experience of life."

On February 4, Malas will be opening her first solo show, "Evil is Banal," at Carbon 12 Gallery in Dubai, presenting a series of paintings that are leaning more towards figuration. All of the works were made in 2024, responding to personal changes in the artist's life, from shifts in her relationships to being far from home. "There's a lot of love and loss," she said.

Prior to working on a painting, Malas doesn't draft any sketches and is excited by the blankness of a white canvas, where her intuition, heart, and hand lead the way. "It's an experience of just surrendering to the painting," she said. "You're just allowing it to take you on a journey. You just have to trust that it's going to lead you. It doesn't happen every day, but on the days that it happens, it's like magic."