

FRIEZE

10 September 2025

## Work in Progress: Nour Malas

The Syrian artist reaches towards hope in new paintings for Frieze London

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<https://www.frieze.com/article/work-progress-nour-malas-frieze-london-2025>



The day after the Syrian regime fell, in December 2024, Nour Malas went into her Brooklyn studio. Subconsciously, she reached for new, lighter colours: green, pink, blue. In the months that followed, Malas's painting charted new realms of change, optimism and relief. Malas took colour and movement in a radically different direction as she explored what it means personally, artistically and collectively to 'trust in something larger to take the lead'.

As she prepares to debut six paintings with **Carbon 12** at **Frieze London**, Malas discusses why her new works must 'levitate', her duty to excavate figures from layers of paint and the impact of returning to Syria after 15 years' absence.

**LR** How does this shift towards hope manifest in your paintings?

**NM** Within one week, the monster was taken off the throne. The day after, I remember going into my studio and making a painting, and just subconsciously, I used green and pink. The colours that I was gravitating towards were a lot lighter in spirit. My paintings aren't pictures; they're expressions of feeling. Everything matters – the line, the gesture, the movement, the colour.

**LR** How did you begin to navigate this new terrain of colour?

**NM** I used to be a lot more careful with colours. Now they feel limitless. Before, blue was a colour that I didn't like to use. I felt intimidated by its power. *Blue Angel* was one of the first paintings in which I used a bit of blue. I titled this before I had even finished it. From then on, blue started spilling over into everything, like in *Living Multiplicity*. My background is in sculpture, so I'm used to working with objects that already exist and are charged with history. Painting is the one of the oldest forms of art-making and colours have so much meaning attached to them. This made me hesitant, but I've decided not to hold on to that fear.

**LR** You live and work in New York. What was it like to make these paintings so far from Syria?

**NM** Until very recently, I hadn't been in Syria for 15 years. While working on these paintings, I relied so much on memory and living vicariously through my parents who were able to go back after the fall of the regime. I was seeing the city again on the news in a state of celebration – the squares and the streets, I recognized it all. I was listening to Syrian music and chants from the revolution, and having such celebratory conversations with family members.

My new paintings are boundless. Their colour and movement shake the ground. **NOUR MALAS**

It's not like we stepped into paradise. The future is still a mystery and will take decades of repair, the difference is that now we can start to imagine and plan for it. I'm capturing that feeling that there can be change and relief and hope, and that can be applied to anything. It's easy to forget that in life. Some of my new paintings are on the abstract side, because they are expressing feeling through marks and gesture, while in others, many more ghostly and angelic figures appear, pulling out from the layers of the paint.

The painting unravels, shifts and evolves more quickly than I'm able to keep up with. **NOUR MALAS**

**LR** Who are these figures?

**NM** The figures in my paintings emerge on their own. They're androgynous and not necessarily human. The moment that one starts to come through, I notice another and another. I really try to figure out who these characters are and what role they play. Sometimes they feel like multiples of me, or different parts of my personality. Other times, they feel ancestral, from my past and present. In some paintings, there are two or more figures – twins or a mother and child – in conversation, like in *Blue Angel*. The characters are there because they want to be seen, and they operate together.

**LR** How do you see your role in pulling the figures through the painting's layers?

**NM** I see it as a duty. If I see figures appearing, I feel the need to pull them out. In more abstract paintings, like *The Most Exotic Flower*, I'm focused on the movement of the painting itself. But some works lean towards figuration. It's an excavation: the more layered the painting is, the more opportunity there is to find figures and motifs. The work is always unravelling, shifting and evolving more quickly than I'm able to keep up with. I need to be open to the work being both natural and unnatural, abstract and figurative, and working through these poles. Painting allows for a space of discovery and change within me. I'm recording and responding to the world that I'm experiencing. Once I enter the narrative of a painting, I can't stop until it's finished, until I have room for something else to come through.

**LR** You've spoken about painting as a form of care. Can you talk about how this approach informs your practice?

**NM** As an artist, no one puts meaning into what you're creating. It's not a given. When you're in the studio, you're creating something out of nothing. The time, the physical, emotional and mental energy that I put into each work – I can't do this without caring about it. It feels almost sacrificial. I think care is something that we struggle with as a society. What do you choose to care about? And how do you care for it? I think those are important questions that we can all relate to.

**LR** As your new work shifts in tone, has who and what you look to for inspiration also changed?

**NM** The Casper David Friedrich show at the Met really struck me. The second I went in, I knew I had to return – so I did, again and again. The way he captures the sublime in nature and through light is just so magical. I also spend a lot of time in the renaissance section at the Met looking at paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and other Dutch painters from the 1500s. Their ability to work from a place between the natural and the supernatural is insane. I want to bring the feeling of those works into my studio and see how they're recorded in my body and paintings. My work has already changed so much in response: the idea of the top of the painting that glows is definitely from the Friedrich show.

**LR** What sublime state are you reaching for in your work?

**NM** It's looking towards hope. My work is not necessarily coming from a purely dark place, it's a recording of being human, which is multiple things. But I think the work is – and has always been – searching for safety, which I've realized, on a mundane level, is actually my studio. It's the safe place that's always been there. In that searching, there's optimism.

**LR** How do you spend your time in the studio?

**NM** I live in East Williamsburg and my studio is a ten-minute cycle away, in Bushwick. I spend most of my waking hours in my studio. I'm not constantly producing work, but I do think that it's very important to spend a lot of time there. If I don't know why I'm feeling so uneasy, I go into the studio and things just fall back into place. A sense of aloneness is very necessary for me to enter a more subconscious zone. Sometimes, when I come back from being away, it might take me a week or two until I'm ready to work, but I still force myself to be in the studio.

*My work is – and always has been – searching for safety .Nour Malas*

**LR** You've just returned from Syria. Has your trip impacted your new work?

**NM** Going back to Syria has changed my life. After 15 years, I thought that I would never return. I saw the houses, places and objects that I thought I would never see again. It gave me back a sense of belonging that I didn't know I would have again. The work I'm making now is already deeply impacted by my trip. A big part of going back was also seeing the destruction and the amount of loss. I think my characters will shift, too. Maybe the work won't be floating anymore. It might come back down to earth. But these things are assumptions. At the end of the day, it's not me who decides. The painting will go in its own direction.