

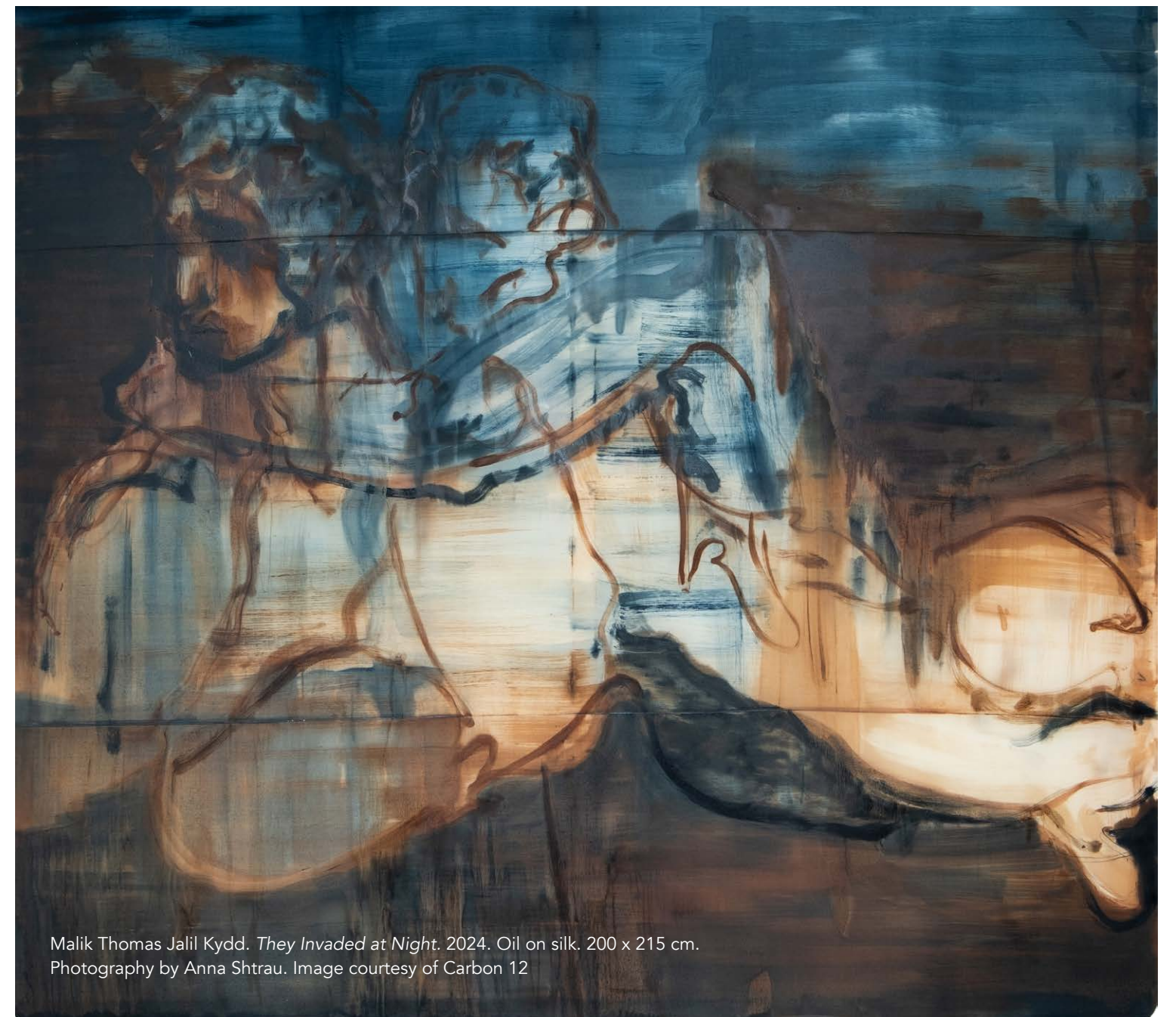


Malik Thomas Jalil Kydd. *Fury*. 2025. Charcoal and sage dye on silk. 80 x 62 cm. Photography by Anna Shtrau. Image courtesy of Carbon 12

LANDSCAPES OF ADORATION

What does it mean to portray Arab masculinity with empathy and spiritual depth? In *Garden of Murmurs* at **Carbon 12** in Dubai, **Malik Thomas Jalil Kydd** depicted the male form with sensitivity and reverence.

Words by Yalda Bidshahri



Malik Thomas Jalil Kydd. *They Invaded at Night*. 2024. Oil on silk. 200 x 215 cm. Photography by Anna Shtrau. Image courtesy of Carbon 12

Entering *Garden of Murmurs* (ended 23 August) felt like stepping into a spiritual landscape. Within this world, Malik Thomas Jalil Kydd's slightly larger-than-life male figures, in what the artist calls "angel scale", occupied its centre with a quiet gravity. His paintings open like portals into another realm, where these forms show deep reverence, shaped by a practice that feels devotional, not only in subject but also in method and material.

Kydd paints the male form with a gaze that is adoring, offering a counter-image to a world that often dehumanises, vilifies and flattens Arab masculinity. The figures recall the *ma'shūq* (beloved) of Persian and Sufi poetry, not merely romantic objects but also spiritual vessels, carrying that same devotion through arched surfaces, stitched silk, oxidised oil colour, sage dye and calligraphic lines. "These are people I love deeply," he tells me. "I understand

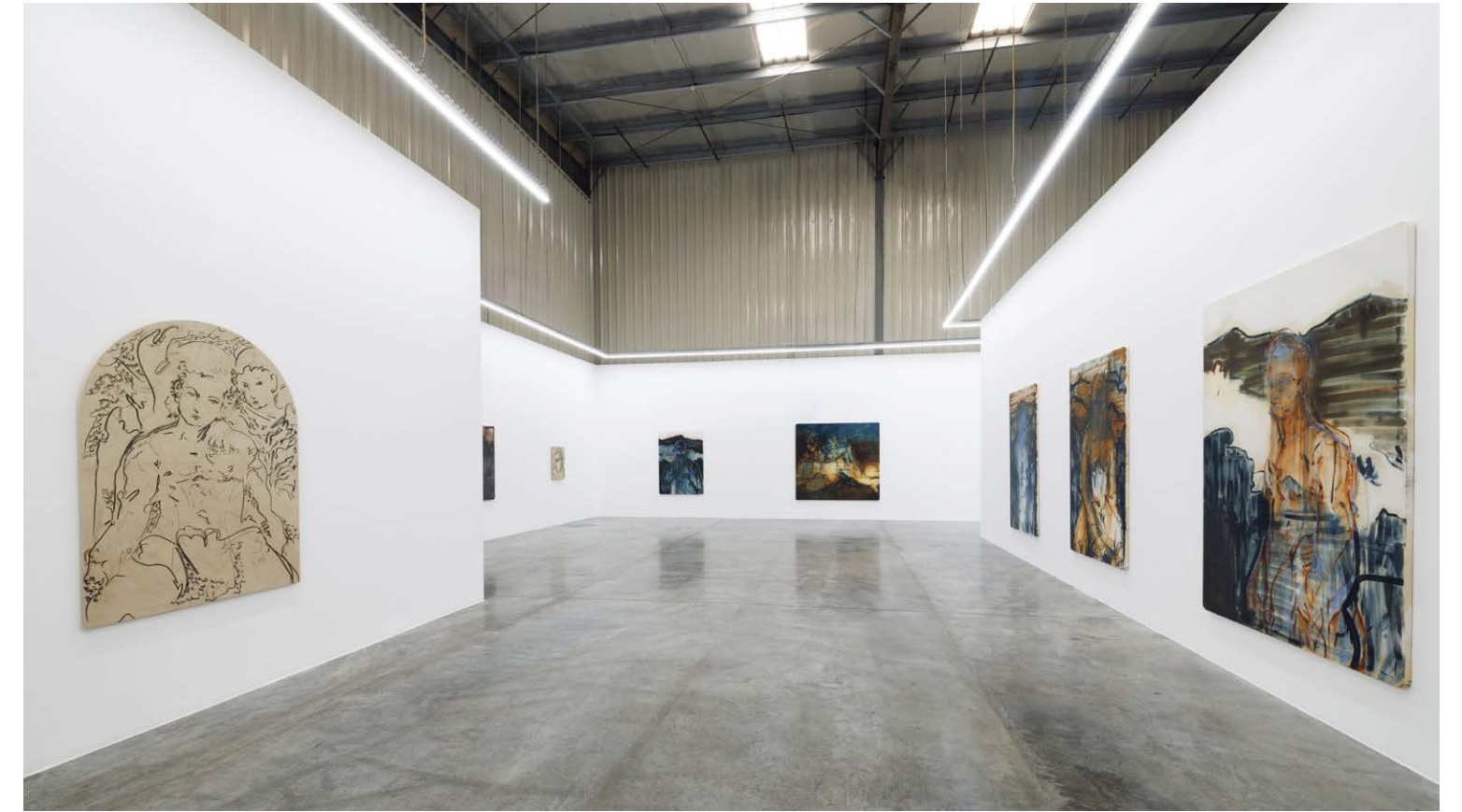
them to be unloved in the world. In geopolitics, the cost of men is cheap. They're seen as threats." In response, his works insist on care. They draw the viewer into an encounter shaped by empathy. His figures are not posed with destruction, defiance or dominance, instead emerging softly with bodies relaxed, leaning, gazing and folding into one another. In a global political climate where Middle Eastern male bodies are often framed as expendable, collateral damage in war or displaced, the choice to represent them with care and veneration is political. The tenderness with which he paints is not passive – it is defiant.

Works from 2024, such as *Former Constant Love* (oil and pastel on cotton) and *Man from protest* (charcoal on cotton), offer a glimpse into the evolution of the artist's practice. With defined lines and contained colours, they feel more structured compared to his later

Malik Thomas Jalil Kydd. *Former constant love*. 2024. Detail. Oil and pastel on cotton. 153 x 54 cm. Photography by Anna Shtrau. Image courtesy of Carbon 12



Malik Thomas Jalil Kydd. Installation view from *Garden of Murmurs* at Carbon 12, 2025. Photography by Anna Shtrau. Image courtesy of Carbon 12



REVIEW

works. As Kydd moved from working on cotton to exclusively using silk, a shift occurred toward abstraction. His palette narrowed into contrasts of light and dark, his line became fluid, curved, disjointed and calligraphic.

In *They Invaded at Night* (2024), just three oil paint colours were used on silk: deep blue, warm amber and earthy brown. Through oxidation, their transformation was unpredictable in the artist's process, becoming luminous and layered. The painting depicts one figure leaning into another, hinting at a relationship between the two. Yet the relationship portrayed reaches beyond sensuality, extending into a tenderness that can be felt towards family, friends and even strangers.

Silk, stitched and dyed, is central to Kydd's practice. On silk, oil paint behaves differently, soaking in so that marks feel stained rather than painted. Because silk is often woven in narrow panels, Kydd sews his surfaces together to create scale. The seams read like horizon lines, gesturing expansion. "These all came from an experimental approach of how to work with oil painting," he says. "I don't think anything came very deliberately in terms of the material language of making work."

In *War* (2025), charcoal bodies emerge from an arched threshold, with one turning its back on us while another gazes forward. The curved frame recalls the architectural elements of sacred spaces designed to elevate the spirit toward the divine. When paired with the male bodies that evoke heavenly figures, the composition intensifies a sense of transcendence. In another charcoal portrait, *Fury* (2025), the silk has been dyed with sage. In many traditions,

sage is associated with purification and spiritual clarity, a link that amplifies the sense of the work as a space for divine encounter.

Dyeing, especially with sage, is more than a practical process for Kydd – it is also a ritual. As the scent of sage fills the studio, it becomes embedded in the fabric. This olfactory memory becomes part of the painting, just as much as the pigments or lines. "It's very spiritual in that way," he says. "I think of the dyed works as studies for the painted ones. It's such a powerful part of the process." Drawn to abstraction through dyeing, Kydd reflects, "The pattern is something nature gives me, I have very little to do with the composition."

Prayer (2025), a charcoal and sage-dyed silk drawing, reveals itself gently. A solitary figure holds his hands together in a moment of silent invocation. The charcoal lines articulate the curve of a body caught in humble reverence, while the muted hues of the sage dye infuse the work with a spiritual presence. There is something sacred in the simplicity: no overt gesture, just the weight of form and a stillness that feels profound.

In Sufi mysticism, the *ma'shūq* represents the divine. The lover (*'āshiq*) is the seeker, and their longing for the beloved mirrors the soul's yearning for union with God. Bearing that same devotion, Kydd's figures carry the possibility of intimacy, vulnerability and transcendence. Like the *ma'shūq*, they invite the viewer to look toward a deeper register. "There's not one deliberate thing I want people to walk away with," Kydd says. "I hope they can allow themselves to feel sensitivity in this harsh world and extend it to the people around them." ■