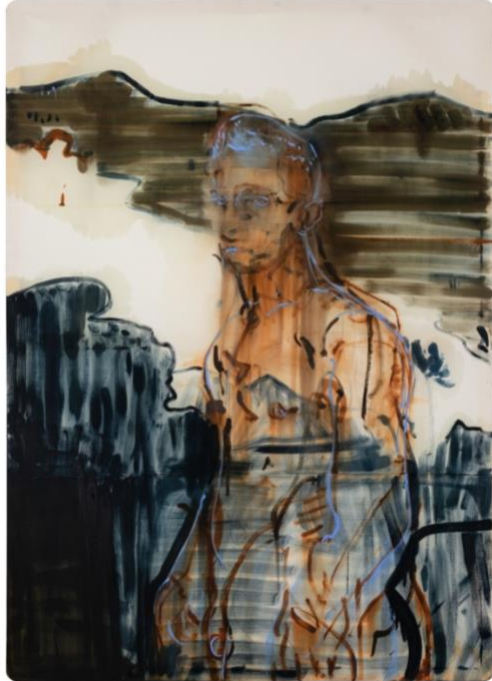


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A Conversation with Malik Thomas Jalil Kydd

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Malik Thomas Jalil Kydd (B.1995 Kent, UK) is a painter working across drawing, charcoal, oil, and dyed silk. He studied at Central Saint Martins and the London College of Fashion, and later at the Royal Drawing School. He recently showed at Art Dubai, and his next exhibition opens in November at Carbon 12 gallery, Dubai. I sat down with Malik at his studio in Amman to hear more about his practice.

On instinct vs. concept

Alia Kaawar: You're often described as working within a contemporary art context but is your process more conceptual or more instinctive?

Malik Thomas Jalil Kydd: A lot of what I do responds to contemporary art and the art world, but I think I'm working instinctively more than conceptually. I keep repeating certain processes, techniques, and motifs, and I think I'm learning something through that repetition. A composition, like a central figure in the middle of a landscape, I'll revisit over and over. That doesn't mean it's how my work will stay forever, but I think something emerges from having a repetitive, dedicated practice.

AK: What does repetition feel like day to day — does it take you somewhere?

MTJK: The act of repetition reminds me of how people describe prayer: sometimes you repeat the words without feeling connected, and then suddenly you're completely in tune again. That's how it is with my work. Some days it's very methodical; dyeing silk, drawing with charcoal, applying oil paint, and returning the next day to respond to what the work has given me. It's often only after a show, when I look back at the pieces, that I know which ones I was most connected to.

If I'd studied a humanities subject, I would have loved to study theology. I'm captivated by religious history, the relationship between religions, and religious art—Christian traditions especially, though not exclusively. When I think about saints and icons, that's often how my work feels to me: a form of veneration, created to be revisited and dedicated to.

On symbolism and the current moment

AK: At a time when much painting responds directly to the political climate through symbolism, how do you want people to encounter your work?

MTJK: It's a popular time to make work full of symbolism because of the heightened political situation globally. I'm thinking about it constantly, but I'm hesitant to be too direct. I don't want my work to be clever, to impress intellectuals, or to look current simply by referencing headlines. I think it is current in a deeper sense.

I want people to actually pay attention. A painting can make you stop, pull you in, and perhaps teach you more about what exists around you, what you've been ignoring or haven't been paying attention to.

On the "underworld"

AK: You've mentioned an "underworld" versus the world above ground. Can you say more about that?

MTJK: I think some people, through othering and marginalisation, gain access to an underworld, and once you're part of it, you can't unsee it. You move through spaces differently, noticing interactions, stories, and small, unspoken signals that others may not register. That opens up another way of experiencing the world, and I think that's what I'm painting.

AK: How does this idea of different realms relate to the landscapes in your work?

MTJK: I believe there are realms to our existence. My being gives me access to a certain realm, which I emerge from to exist with everyone else before returning to it.

You connect with people when you're in that world together, while the space around you feels expansive, as though no one else is there, or only certain people are allowed in. That's why the portraits sit within landscapes. The landscape represents expansiveness, isolation, privacy — maybe a final destination, a place where you're protected by the expanse, where nothing can get close, where you can finally see one another.

On the figure

AK: How did the figure evolve in your work, and when did you begin expressing yourself more directly through it?

MTJK: I started making figurative work when I was very young. I did a lot of live drawing, which taught me to think in terms of linear movement. I developed a very expressive line, and that's still how I see things now; if I were to draw you, I'd understand you in terms of line more than anything else.

I later took a break from the figure while making textiles. My work became more mythological and historical, drawing on archival imagery such as Byzantine frescoes, castles, and mosaics. There was more direct symbolism and explicit reference to culture, but I felt I was hiding behind a concept rather than expressing what I actually felt.

That's part of why the work I make now is more literal. After returning to London and studying at the Royal Drawing School, I felt ready to start painting again.

AK: How do you want people to encounter your work?

MTJK: Intellectual expression can be so inspiring to me, but I think I'm a poet who makes art. That's my art, it's poetry.

You could take a painting apart into words, and that's how it should be read, but I don't want it to read like a thesis and be analyzed in that way. My work is more like a poem, a novel, a love story — it is a commentary on the times, but you have to get close to it. I want people to get closer to themselves through my work, and understand from there.

On silk

AK: You have worked with fabric since university, but more recently your practice has focused primarily on silk. What keeps drawing you back to it?

MTJK: I'm mainly focused on silk now because it's an incredibly symbolic and charged material. In Islam, men aren't supposed to wear silk because it's so luxurious—silk and gold are reserved for women, though I wear both. It also makes me think of undergarments, of the body, and of clothes against skin.

Different fabrics interact with paint differently, but it's hard for me not to work on silk. It's strong, and I like that I can dye it, even though I still do a lot of preparatory work on paper first.

AK: Tell me about the dye process?

MTJK: I often dye the base first. Whatever fibre I'm using has its own code, and it produces a work of complete abstraction before I build my drawing on top of it. The dyed marks can look like fire, like a burn, like a mountain, or like something linear. I feed off what comes out of that. It's not entirely automatic, but it guides me.

On rituals and process

AK: What gets you ready to draw or paint, is there a ritual?

MTJK: I have to empty my space. I'm always cluttering it with objects that inspire me, then clearing them all out so I can actually get an idea. When I start a new work, I take everything out and things suddenly feel clear. I work in Amman and love being here, though I'm not from here, and I miss things about being in a bigger city — feeling like a small speck in a huge space, feeling like your life doesn't matter, and finding freedom in that. So I try to recreate that feeling: emptying the space, drawing the curtains but letting some light in, making it feel as blank as possible so I can feel free.

AK: What does Amman mean to you, given you're not originally from here?

MTJK: It's been a home for my mother's family since the nineties. I think it's a beautiful place, one that's still in touch with human values. That simplicity matters if you want to sit, think, and make work. You can't get everything from Amman, I still travel to look at art from across the globe, but you get an overall lifestyle that feels simple and connected to essentially important things.

On career and hopes

AK: And what's your biggest hope for what you produce?

MTJK: That I get to keep doing this. It would be such a privilege to continue, it's not easy, and you can't guarantee every year will look like the last. If I were able to keep making work for my whole life, that would be the biggest privilege in the world.