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Nour Malas: “Abstraction Is Necessary”
By Zara Khan

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There are many unresolved debates in the artworld: Paris or London? Frieze or Art Basel? But one question resists an easy answer: can abstraction be political?

In the June 1974 edition of Artforum, the late muralist and art historian Eva Cockcroft wrote that abstract artists succeeded in creating an important new art movement ‘by giving their painting an individualist emphasis and eliminating recognisable subject matter’. The artists, Cockcroft argued, contributed to a phenomenon of ‘the supposed divorce between art and politics’.

Can one then be an abstract and political artist? Syrian-Canadian painter Nour Malas seems to think so. At Victoria Miro's Wharf Road galleries, Malas is showing three new paintings, alongside work by May Cockcroft and Sarah Martin-Nuss in a group show titled *Alchemies*.

The exhibition's title refers to the ancient practice of transmutation - conjuring ideas of transformation and experimentation; a fitting frame for Malas. Born in France and raised across Dubai, London and Chicago before settling in Brooklyn, she draws on a restlessness she describes as central to her practice: never fully belonging to one culture or narrative.

Her intuitive paintings build through layers of colour, from which barely perceptible figures emerge, images she has said she always seems to be ‘running away’ from. Her Syrian heritage moves through it all, a thread in a life lived between places, feeding an ongoing exploration of memory and identity.

Malas speaks about whether she considers herself an abstract artist, what it was like returning to Syria after the civil war and how Marwan Kassab-Bachi, Syria’s pioneering painter, predicted she’d grow up to be an artist.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Zara Khan: Could you start by telling me about the works being shown?

Nour Malas: I'm showing three paintings that I did over the summer. I would call it a series, but 'series' feels a little too linear, because the way I paint, there's a range. Sometimes they stop where the abstraction is, and other times there's a lot of build-up until figures come through. So I hesitate to say series, but they were all done around the same time.

I have a background in sculpture; only more recently, in the past five or six years, have I focused on painting. Painting was a more immediate, more urgent way of making, of expressing, of putting my body into it. Less thinking in my head and more body.

Abstraction makes you want to imagine what these things are, and that imagination opens up potential. If you look at history, a lot of abstraction came out of the most turbulent times. This idea of letting go, of more physical expression, of not wanting to control everything. That allows for potential, and I hope it allows for hope.

So I think abstraction is necessary. It's not a direct impact on life, but it's a record of time, it's a response to what's happening, and that's very important for history and for people today.

I think I've also recently realised that I'm not fully an abstract painter. Abstraction is a big part of my work, yes, but I'm still thinking about it. I just feel like this thing between abstraction and figuration – if figures start to come in, does abstraction get eliminated? I'm questioning how far abstraction can go into this more emotional landscape.

ZK: I wondered how you see your practice fitting into a larger Arab tradition of abstraction then, which perhaps also pushes the boundaries. I was reading that Marwan Kassab-Bachi visited your family home and said you were going to be an artist when you were a kid.

NM: We were in Syria, in our garden, and he asked my mother to pose, and my sister and I were drawing her. I think he saw something that I didn't see. I wish I'd asked him what he was able to see.

ZK: Do you see your work as part of a larger tradition, following in the footsteps of his?

NM: Yes, though not in an academic sense. I don't know if I've earned any title to be part of a Syrian tradition, because I didn't grow up there. Yes, I'm from Syria, yes, I grew up going there a lot, yes my parents are very tied to the region. But I didn't experience what people living there have. I didn't go through the war physically. I was affected psychologically, emotionally, but not personally, so I don't know how much I can claim.

However, I grew up looking at Fateh Moudarres, Marwan Kassab-Bachi, Safwan Dahoul and Sliman Mansour. There are a lot of Arab artists who have these emotional landscape paintings where some figures are hidden. Clearly that's also where I'm going. I don't think it's a coincidence.

ZK: I see what you're saying about looking in from afar. My family's from Kashmir, where there's a military occupation, but I've spent my whole life in the States or in Europe. I don't feel like I can claim that experience the way they can. It's not a direct lived experience – but it almost feels intense in its own way, experiencing something like that through other people's stories.

NM: Exactly. Especially when you meet people who aren't from that region and know nothing about it. Having grown up with that turmoil, even in conversation at home – then you realise how much a part of it you are.

ZK: And you almost have to be a voice, because most people in the region are actually having to get on with their lives.

NM: I do feel like it's a duty of mine. I'm not necessarily a political artist, but having an Arab voice in the conversation – whether contemporary or historical – is a duty, because I was given this opportunity. I think that's why I take it so seriously. There's few Arab artists that are part of any conversation.

ZK: And contemporary art sometimes tries so hard to be devoid of politics. I was in Paris a few days before Art Basel when there was a lot of unrest, and being in the white tent felt like entering a different world where such conversations didn't exist. That's a critique levied at abstract art, that it doesn't engage with the world. But your work stakes a claim that abstraction can be political and can also not be, and that's its own terrain.

NM: I hope so. It's difficult – I don't want to be boxed in as a political Arab artist, but I don't want to be void of that either. So how do I bring both? Because as humans we're affected by the collective, we have our micro worlds that affect us. The complexity of human experience is much more vast than the way the artworld categorises us.

ZK: Have you been able to go back to Syria since the regime fell?

NM: In the summer of 2025. It was amazing, because you mourn a place that you think you can never see again, and then you're given the chance to go back. It's like someone coming alive from the dead.

Going back to my grandparents' homes – the mugs, the carpet, the smell. Everything still exists. It was like time was frozen. And then the celebrations, the freedom – you could feel it in the air. But then you see the destruction, the trauma, the poverty. The residue of the war, the buildings, everything destroyed.

It was a very intense few days. I thought it was going to be expressively emotional, but it wasn't. It was as though you were entering a dream state and just observing all of these things. Almost postapocalyptic.

ZK: Did it change the way you work?

NM: Yes. I produced a four-panel piece for Art Basel Miami in December, right after my trip. It was about going back into my childhood in Syria, and then the experience of the revolution turning into war and turning into the fall of the regime. I was remembering the depression we were in, the fear. If I hadn't gone, it would still be a distant memory. It just brought it all back.

ZK: And for this show at Victoria Miro – was there a source of inspiration or were they a natural evolution?

NM: The starting point is me remembering a moment I spent by the sea in the summer. It was at night. I was looking at the sea and the moon was setting into it – a blood moon. It was very dark, but the moon lit everything up. There was this moment of divine, unexplainable experience – you're looking at something you can never understand and you have to accept its beauty and its force. And you're nothing. It's the cheesiest thing.

But that picture stayed in my mind, that feeling stayed in my mind, and when I got back to my studio I started working from there. I'm not making landscapes, but visually, emotionally, I'm channelling a water and sky feeling.

And also thinking about alchemy as a word, on a more symbolic level – alchemy as metamorphosis or transformation: these paintings felt like they were happening when something was dying and something new was being born. It was a moment of shift.

I read something – in the book The Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle. He was saying that alchemy is turning metal into gold, and turning suffering into consciousness. That's exactly the feeling of what happens with my paintings. Starting, going through this turbulent, beautiful experience, and then coming out of it feeling almost like a high, or a moment of resolution.

ZK: If you could have dinner with five artists, dead or alive – they don't necessarily have to be visual artists – who would you pick, and what would you serve them?

NM: I love hosting dinner parties, so I'd choose people I'd love to meet, but also people I'd love to see in conversation with each other. I do have six, though.

Eva Hesse, Joan Mitchell, Etel Adnan, Dolly Parton, Jean Cocteau and Mahmoud Darwish. That's my dream. And I would make a Syrian feast, multiple dishes.

It's funny, because a lot of them are poets. And I'm the furthest thing from a poet possible.

ZK: You don't want too many painters or no one will talk.

NM: Exactly. There's maybe one painter in that whole list.

Alchemies, Victoria Miro, London, 13 November 2026 – 23 January 2027