



HDK-VALAND – ACADEMY OF ART AND DESIGN

TRAUMA AND ARTMAKING:

The Case of The Syrian Civil War

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Fig. 1, Alhamad, The Day ISIS Took Over Raqqa

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1. Introduction

Within psychology and psychiatry, the concept of "trauma" is employed to describe an individual's emotional and psychological reactions when confronted with a distressing occurrence. The repercussions manifest in diverse manners, utilizing a widespread influence on one's mental, emotional, and physical stability. This condition often originates from life experiences, such as accidents, acts of violence, natural disasters, or the profound anguish associated with significant personal losses.¹

In this essay, I'll be exploring how do Syrian artists use art to convey the traumatic experience of the Syrian Civil War? And in response to this question, I argue that "bearing witness," "symbolism," and "body memory," are methods used by Syrian artists to convey war trauma. As an artist and war refugee, my artistic practice predominantly revolves around exploring the different ways of conveying war trauma and delving into how trauma influences the art-making process. I am convinced that researching the methodologies employed by fellow Syrian artists holds the potential to enhance my comprehension of not only their artistic processes but also to provide insights into how I may navigate the exploration of my trauma and the following creation of my art. The aim of understanding art practices, rooted in methodologies like "bearing witness," "symbolism," and "body memory," is not only to represent or document trauma but to transcend it, seeking ways to work beyond the confines of traumatic experiences, using art as a transformative tool to navigate, understand, and surpass the enduring impact of war.

This essay transcends its classification as a mere writing assignment in my perception; rather, it represents a pivotal artistic experiment within the framework of my master's studies. Here, academia serves as a channel for the exploration and realization of a more multifaceted form of art. The structure of the essay is made up of several parts, starting with an introduction wherein my research question and argument are stated. The subsequent sections deal with the exploration of the Syrian Civil War, explaining its intricacies, followed by an examination of the methodologies employed by Syrian artists. Each facet of the methodology is explained, delving into the theoretical underpinnings and the terminology utilized. Throughout this discourse, illustrative examples from the works of Syrian artists are

¹ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 243-258.

interwoven, chosen to exemplify the application of these methods in conveying the use of art to express the war trauma of the Syrian Civil War.

This essay is anchored within the conceptual framework of "bearing witness," "symbolism," and "body memory." I have selected these methodologies due to their occurrence in my own artistic practice. The driving force behind this choice is a desire to investigate whether fellow Syrian artists also employ these methods in their creative processes, particularly in responding to the trauma inflicted by the Syrian Civil War.

By contextualizing my research within the framework of "bearing witness," I aim to investigate the ways artists use their work to document, express, and confront the realities of conflict. "Symbolism" becomes a crucial lens through which to examine the layered meanings embedded in artistic representations, exploring how artists employ symbols to convey nuanced narratives and invoke collective memories. Additionally, the inclusion of "body memory" in the framework recognizes the substantial impact of personal and collective experiences on artistic creation, acknowledging the body as a reservoir of lived trauma.

It is important to note that while the methods discussed may be observed among Syrian artists, they are not necessarily confined to this demographic. The intention is to examine the broader implications of living under constant threat and its transformative influence on artistic practice.

2. My Understanding of Trauma

In the context of the discussion about trauma, I am drawing upon a broad and multidimensional understanding of the term. Psychologically, trauma may lead to conditions such as PTSD², anxiety, and depression, while physically, it can result in injuries, chronic pain, and somatic³ symptoms. These effects persist over time, shaping thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The definition considers insights from professionals like Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, and Antonio Damasio, who I'll be discussing further in the essay, emphasizing the interplay of trauma with the mind and body. Recognizing trauma's

² Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that may develop in individuals who have experienced or witnessed traumatic events. Symptoms include intrusive memories, flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance of reminders, heightened arousal, and negative changes in mood and cognition. See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (DSM-5) (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 271-280.

³ "Somatic" refers to anything related to the body or the physical aspects of an organism. It is often used to describe sensations, experiences, or conditions that are bodily or corporeal in nature. Merriam-Webster, s.v. "somatic," accessed January 24, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/somatic>.

complexity, I acknowledge its politicized nature, extending beyond clinical implications to legal contexts like asylum hearings.

Definitions vary among actors, influenced by political, cultural, and societal factors. However, I also recognize the politicized and challenged nature of the term. Trauma is not only a clinical concept but also holds legal implications, particularly in contexts like asylum hearings. The limitations of different definitions of trauma are significant, as they can impact the access to support and recognition for individuals who have experienced distressing events. Some definitions may be restrictive, potentially excluding certain individuals from acknowledgment or assistance. Acknowledging these limitations is crucial to understanding the diverse experiences and needs of individuals who have encountered trauma. It requires sensitivity to cultural differences, recognition of the impact of systemic factors, and an understanding that trauma is not a one-size-fits-all concept.

3. From War Trauma to Artmaking

3.1. The Syrian Civil War

My essay necessitates an examination of the Syrian Civil War, or as it is locally known in Syria, the Syrian Revolution. The differing internal and external descriptions of the Syrian Civil War underscore the complex perspectives and narratives that surround this conflict, and thus, my essay begins with an exploration of the Syrian Revolution, as it is termed locally in Syria. Understanding the ongoing events in Syria requires examining the intricacies of its current state. According to Sami Hanna, a Ph.D. candidate at NYC and a human rights advocate based in Latakia-Syria, in a recorded conversation via Instagram on September 23, he stated that Syria as of 2023 is still involved in a conflict characterized by a multidimensional and persistent war which transformed significantly since its inception in 2011. It is in its current state as a web of geopolitical interests, armed factions, humanitarian crises, and shifting alliances.⁴ It's important to note that what happened in Syria was far from being a revolution originating solely within the country itself, as foreign factors got involved. Instead, it was a profoundly transformative period, where Syrians for the first time felt they could speak against the regime and demand their rights. Initially, there was a perceptible potential for these circumstances to evolve into a full-fledged revolution, a radical

⁴ Sami Hanna, recorded conversation, September 23, 2023, discussing the Syrian Civil War via Instagram, translated from Arabic to English.

phenomenon characterized by comprehensive and sweeping changes, such as political transformation, social and cultural changes, economic reforms, etc.⁵

However, the trajectory diverged, and what unfolded was a complex and deeply ingrained sectarian civil conflict. Why did it evolve into a civil war? The answer lies partly in the involvement of external actors, each with their own vested interests and objectives within the Syrian landscape. Consequently, I chose the term "civil war" for two primary reasons. Firstly, it helps avoiding the need to dissect and categorize every facet of the Syrian situation. Secondly, it encapsulates the essence of the prolonged conflict, that transcended its initial revolutionary potential which was taking down the regime and became a multifaceted struggle for power and influence within the country. The multifaceted struggle for power and influence within Syria primarily evolves around the acquisition of political power and territorial control, with various internal and external actors competing for dominance and influence over the country's governance and resources.⁶

This intricate and ongoing civil war took root in 2011, originating from a series of protests that demanded political reforms and expanded liberties within Syria. These protests were inspired by the broader movements of the Arab Spring unfolding across the Middle East and North Africa during that period. Nevertheless, the response of the Syrian government, under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad, was marked by violence and brutal suppression, ultimately pushing the situation into a full-fledged civil war.⁷ The term "Assad regime" denotes the governance helmed by Bashar al-Assad and his predecessor, Hafez al-Assad, who ruled Syria prior to him. The Assad family has held power in Syria since 1970, presiding over an authoritarian regime marked by the stifling of political dissent and the absence of fundamental political freedoms, such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of information, and freedom of political participation.⁸

When Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency in 2000, he perpetuated these oppressive policies, contributing significantly to the unrest that eventually ignited the situation in Syria.⁹ Throughout the course of the Syrian Civil War, various parties embroiled in the conflict, including the Syrian government and its armed forces, have faced allegations of egregious abuses and atrocities. These allegations encompass instances of torture, the

⁵ Hanna, recorded conversation.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Fawaz A. Gerges, *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 127.

⁸ Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970* (Cornell University Press, 1999), 45.

⁹ Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria*, 57.

deployment of chemical weapons, indiscriminate bombings of civilian areas, and other violations of international humanitarian law.¹⁰

3.2. Syrian Artists Bearing Witness

Due to what people face on a daily basis, Syrian artists have been using their art to convey their experience of living in such inhuman circumstances. Judith Herman, a psychiatrist, and author of "Trauma and Recovery" (1992), describes "bearing witness" as the act of acknowledging and validating the experiences of survivors of war and trauma. It involves not only listening to their stories but also recognizing the truth and reality of their experiences. This concept emphasizes the importance of society, individuals, and professionals acknowledging the suffering endured by those who have lived through war, as well as the significance of validating their narratives.¹¹ This concept has significant implications for understanding and addressing the psychological and social consequences of war and trauma, as it emphasizes the need to listen to survivors and recognize the truth of their narratives.¹²

I aim to share my insights into Herman's theory of bearing witness, particularly in the context of how Syrian artists have embraced the role of bearing witness by capturing the unfolding events of the Syrian Civil War and the subsequent war trauma through their art. It involves a more thorough immersion into the scenarios we encounter. For me, bearing witness can also mean documenting stories and first-hand accounts by survivors and eyewitnesses of war. The act of documentation itself serves several important purposes, but mostly, recording¹³ the stories and testimonies of survivors of conflict and making these recordings available to the public, can add to an enduring historical account that is so important. Additionally, this documentation also serves an important purpose in documenting the injustices and atrocities that took place during and after the Syrian Civil War. In these stories, there are often tales of human rights abuses, violence, torture, and discrimination.

¹⁰ United Nations, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," (United Nations, 2013), 75.

¹¹ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 78.

¹² *Ibid.*, 79

¹³ In this context, "recording" refers to the process of documenting or capturing the stories and testimonies of survivors of conflict. It involves creating a tangible or digital record of their narratives, which can be stored and made accessible to the public. This recording could take various forms, such as written accounts, audio recordings, videos, art, or other means of preserving and presenting the personal experiences of those who have lived through the civil war.

What I mean by documentation is in the context of Foucault's ideas, documentation can be seen as a mechanism through which power operates. It involves the creation, classification, and dissemination of knowledge, contributing to the construction of discourses that shape societal norms and activities.¹⁴ In the context of war, documentation operates as a powerful tool, often wielded by those in positions of power to shape narratives and control information. However, what I propose is a form of counter-documentation, akin to "self-documentation,"¹⁵ where individuals engage in a deliberate act of bearing witness to their own experiences. This counter-practice serves not only as a means of personal expression but also as a form of resistance to dominant narratives, allowing the self to appear to both the self and, critically, to power.

By telling these stories of people experiencing violence, in turn, is one way of guaranteeing that the human facet of the conflict is remembered and not lost amid the vast geopolitical narratives.¹⁶ By gathering and spreading these stories, Syrian artists show the world the actions of perpetrators and the consequences that they should face. It's critical for achieving some sort of justice and for ensuring that such crimes don't continue. These abuses are less likely to escape scrutiny and consequences when the world can see them. Cathy Caruth, a literary scholar, and trauma theorist, explores the profound concept of bearing witness in her work, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History." Caruth delves into the intricate dynamics of trauma, particularly in the context of narrative, and highlights the challenges and ethical imperatives associated with representing traumatic events.¹⁷ Caruth's examination of bearing witness revolves around the idea that trauma is fundamentally an event that resists immediate comprehension and representation. Traumatic experiences disrupt the conventional flow of time and narrative, rendering individuals unable to fully articulate their ordeal. It is in this context that bearing witness takes on significant importance. It is the act of acknowledging the unrepresentable and giving voice to the silenced.¹⁸

I argue that bearing witness, as Caruth argues, is a deeply ethical undertaking. It is an act of responsibility towards those who have suffered and an essential step in the process of

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," in *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (New York: Picador, 2003), 112.

¹⁵ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003), 87.

¹⁶ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 211.

¹⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

healing and recovery. Through the act of bearing witness, traumatic experiences can begin to find a place in the narrative of the survivor, even if that narrative remains fragmented and elusive.

3.3. Art-making Processes of Syrian Artists Living in Syria or in the Diaspora

To start laying out my argument, I would categorize Syrian artists who employ their art to express the substantial impact of war trauma of the Syrian Civil War into two distinct categories: Those residing in Syria who have directly experienced the war and continue living under war, and Syrian artists who have managed to flee and find refuge in various countries. This categorization is essential because the process of creating art is profoundly influenced by their respective circumstances, for artists within Syria, their creative journey is marked by numerous challenges, primarily stemming from the strict censorship and bans imposed on artistic expression.¹⁹ These restrictions force artists to navigate a complex terrain, where self-censorship and subtle symbolism often become their means of addressing the traumatic fallout of war. The act of artmaking in Syria, therefore, becomes an act of subversion and resilience against the constraints imposed by the Asaad regime.²⁰

On the other hand, Syrian artists living in the diaspora, especially in Europe after “the mass immigration wave” back in 2015 benefit from the privileges of freedom of speech and artistic expression. They find themselves in an environment where they can investigate the intricacies of their experiences and confront taboos and pressing societal issues through their art.²¹ This newfound liberty allows them to employ their creative skills in a more unrestrained manner, producing art that can be both a form of personal therapy and a powerful medium to convey the complexities of war trauma to a broader audience. To illustrate my point, it is crucial, to begin with the experiences of artists who found themselves in the midst of the Syrian Civil War, witnessing the conflict unfold before their very eyes and how this tumultuous backdrop influenced their creative processes.²²

¹⁹ Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," *Transversal Texts*, September 9, 2012, accessed October 10, 2023, <https://transversal.at/transversal/1011/butler/en>.

²⁰ Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street."

²¹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222-237.

²² Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora."

3.4. Abounaddara

Abounaddara is the first artistic example and what I want to dive into. Abounaddara (translating to "the man with glasses"),²³ is a group of Syrian artists who I argue sought to utilize bearing witness as a method in their artistic practice to harrowing experiences during the Syrian Civil War, and the continuation of life within it. These collective employs irony and dark humor as tools for exposing the enduring undercurrent of violence within the daily life of Syria besieged by its own government. Incorporating references to both a 19th-century history of liberal Arab thought and Dziga Vertov's film "Man with a Movie Camera," which holds a special place in the hearts of Abounaddara members. Just like Vertov's films, Abounaddara's videos are filmed with portable cameras employing natural lighting, capturing spontaneous events rather than meticulously planned scenarios.²⁴ I argue that this implies a real-time engagement with the unfolding events, providing an unfiltered and immediate perspective on the impact of the Syrian Civil War. This approach contributes to a raw and authentic portrayal of the traumatic circumstances faced by the people of Syria, as opposed to a more polished or premeditated representation. Through their lens, trauma emerges not merely as an abstract concept but as a lived reality, manifested in the unscripted and often harrowing moments that define the daily lives of those navigating the tumultuous landscape of conflict.

From the fabric of everyday life, Abounaddara unearths the inherent urge to resist and envisions a future emancipated from violence, irrespective of how distant such a future may seem within the current circumstances. The exhibition, titled "Abounaddara: The Right to the Image,"²⁵ faithfully represents the group's core principles by presenting a vision of Syrians that acknowledges the intricacies of their situation and advocates for their representation beyond the confines of race, religion, or political beliefs. Abounaddara's collective comprises a group of anonymous, self-taught filmmakers and volunteers, with a significant number of them being women. They initiated their work by creating short films in late 2010,

²³ Omar Subin and Anna Della Hussein, "The Egyptian Satirist Who Inspired a Revolution," June 6, 2016, accessed October 10, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-egyptian-satirist-who-inspired-a-revolution>.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch Film Festival, "A Right to the Image," accessed October 10, 2023, https://ff.hrw.org/sites/default/files/films/press_kits/ARighttotheImage.pdf.

²⁵ The New School, "Abounaddara. The Right to the Image," The New School, accessed November 25, 2023, <https://www.veralistcenter.org/exhibitions/abounaddara-the-right-to-the-image-2>.

a period preceding the transformational Arab spring that reshaped the political landscape of the region.²⁶ Presently, Syria requires a representative for those who stand against the authoritarian nature of the regime and the retrogressive beliefs of fundamentalists.

Abounaddara emerges directly from Syrian society, unaffected by financial interests tied to oil, foreign agendas aimed at destabilization, or religious fundamentalism that is out of touch with Syrian values. Abounaddara embodies a distinct and composed presence, illustrating the deliberate and responsible choice of individuals who continue to demand their fundamental rights: liberation from political oppression and the pursuit of freedom and human dignity.²⁷



Fig. 2, Abounaddara, The Syrian Who Wanted a Revolution

Abounaddara's film "The Syrian Who Wanted a Revolution" stands as an exploration of individual aspirations amid the backdrop of the Syrian Civil War. Released during a tumultuous period, the film offers a unique perspective on the complexities faced by Syrians aspiring for change. The narrative revolves around a central character whose desire for revolution reflects the collective yearning within Syrian society. The film's strength lies in its ability to humanize the broader socio-political context, capturing the personal struggles and aspirations of an individual against the backdrop of a turbulent political landscape.

Abounaddara employs a distinctive cinematic approach, eschewing traditional storytelling for a more intimate and raw portrayal. This not only serves to highlight the individual's journey but also resonates with the broader narrative of a nation grappling with transformation.

²⁶ Heba Zayadeen, "Syrian Unknown Groups," IFEX, accessed October 3, 2023, <https://ifex.org/ar/جماعات-سوريا-المجهولة-أبو-نضارة/>

²⁷ Zayadeen, "Syrian Unknown Groups."

Furthermore, "The Syrian Who Wanted a Revolution" aligns with Abounaddara's overarching commitment to bearing witness to the unfiltered realities of the conflict. The film becomes a microcosm of the larger societal upheaval, offering viewers a glimpse into the emotional and psychological toll of the war on an individual level.²⁸

As artists residing in Syria, Abounaddara powerfully bore witness to the realities of war, translating these experiences into artistic expressions. Their creative efforts sought to encapsulate war trauma, and notably, they crafted art intended for audiences beyond the borders of Syria, with a particular focus on those residing in the Western world. I argue that Abounaddara exclusively presents and disseminates its artistic creations beyond the borders of Syria. One could contend that their deliberate choice to personally witness the unfolding war reflects an awareness that neither they nor those in their immediate environment necessarily require these visual depictions. Instead, it suggests a recognition that the Western media and other news platforms from the Western sphere have a greater need to encounter such imagery. Abounaddara's efforts to actively reshape and take ownership of the narrative surrounding the experience of residing in a war-torn environment is a great act of bearing witness to war and its trauma.

3.5. Symbolism as a Method

Due to severe restrictions on freedom of expression in Syria, artists within the country, especially painters, have ingeniously navigated stealthy means to broach sensitive and perilous subjects, such as critiques of the Assad regime, and revolting. This is by employing symbolism and abstract representations for covert messages in their artwork hence providing viewers with layered and nuanced narratives. Furthermore, the symbolism acts as a safeguard for the artist from potential persecution or even fatal repercussions.

To delve deeper into this technique, I will elaborate on the strategic use of symbolism by Syrian artists in their creative processes. Roland Barthes' text "Elements of Semiology" explores the relationship between symbolism, encoding, and art creation. According to Barthes, in the realm of art, symbolism plays a crucial role in encoding messages and narratives that may transcend literal interpretations. Artists often utilize symbols as a means of encoding layers of meaning into their work, allowing for nuanced and sometimes

²⁸ Abounaddara, "The Syrian Who Wanted the Revolution," Documenta 14, accessed September 24, 2023, <https://www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/1524/the-syrian-who-wanted-the-revolution>.

subversive communication. Barthes' semiotic²⁹ analysis can be applied to clarify how symbols function within the artistic realm, particularly in the context of safeguarding against persecution. The act of encoding becomes a strategic tool for artists to communicate subtle or dissenting messages, providing a shield against potential persecution. By employing symbols and metaphorical language, artists can convey ideas that might be politically sensitive or socially contentious without explicitly stating them. Barthes' semiotic approach aids in dissecting these encoded messages, revealing the hidden meanings and subtext embedded within the artistic creation. Moreover, Barthes introduces the concept of the "signifier" and the "signified,"³⁰ highlighting the arbitrariness of the relationship between the sign (symbol) and what it signifies. This theoretical understanding empowers artists to manipulate symbols deliberately, creating a semiotic space where interpretation is subjective and open to multiple readings. In the face of potential persecution, this ambiguity can serve as a protective shield, allowing for plausible deniability or offering refuge in the multiplicity of interpretations.³¹

This being said, I argue that symbolism's power lies in its ability to surpass the confines of spoken language and explicit visual representation. In situations where conventional words and images fall short of taking the depths of an individual's suffering, symbolism steps in as a non-verbal mode of communication. It becomes a vessel for emotions, memories, and collective trauma that others can understand and connect with, all without the necessity for complete verbalization or overt depiction. For individuals who have experienced the harrowing effects of war trauma, symbols offer a therapeutic and comforting avenue. Symbolism aids in the navigation of the turbulent landscapes within one's psyche, providing solace and comprehension amid the tumultuous aftermath of conflict.

3.6. Heba Al Akkad

For a clearer illustration, I aim to utilize Heba Al Akkad's artwork "شهداء" translated to "Martyrs", as a prime demonstration of how symbolism is employed by Syrian artists. It is within the context of her artistry that I examine a studio visit conversation I had with Al Akkad where she explained to me about her work³². Al Akkad is one of Syria's most

²⁹ Semiotics: The study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation. Source: Merriam-Webster, s.v. "Semiotics," accessed September 24, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/semiotics>.

³⁰ The concepts of "signifier" and "signified" are associated with the field of semiotics, and they were introduced by the Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure. Source: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics (La Sémantique)*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966).

³¹ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 45.

³² Heba Al Akkad, face-to-face conversation about the symbolism used in her work, during a visit to my studio, October 10, 2023.

renowned women artists. Focusing on her most personal and visually captivating series of artworks that convey war trauma titled “شهداء”. This collection of 100 paintings emerged in (2012), the same year that marked the tragic loss of Al Akkad's 10-year-old brother, Ahmad. He fell victim to the brutality of torture and lost his life within the confines of a Syrian prison. Heba Al Akkad's artwork “شهداء” is a series of collage paintings that incorporates numerous symbols, primarily featuring images of the victims of the Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon.



Fig. 3, Al Akkad, "شهداء" "Martyrs"

This tragic event unfolded in September 1982 during the Lebanese Civil War, primarily impacting Palestinian refugees residing in the camps.³³ Al Akkad's deliberate use of images from this massacre serves a dual purpose: to symbolize the devastating incident itself and to symbolize Syrians who have lost their lives under the Asaad regime or who remain imprisoned. This strategic choice, commonly employed by Syrian artists, serves as a means of safeguarding themselves and their families from potential persecution by the Asaad regime.

³³ Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 215.

While traditionally associated with death, the concept of martyrdom takes on a distinctive meaning in Syrian and Arab culture. In this context, a martyr transcends mortality, eschewing the customary funeral rites. Instead, the community celebrates the martyrs by organizing a wedding, designating the individual as a groom.³⁴ This unconventional commemoration underscores the martyr's eternal connection to a cause, particularly evident in the Syrian resistance's ongoing struggle for freedom. Al Akkad employs various other symbols in “شهداء”, notably using squares as representations of windows.³⁵ In this symbolic context, windows serve as portals to remembrance, offering a perspective to seek, and spaces to breathe. Unlike a square, a window signifies openness and expansiveness. Al Akkad's choice of squares, therefore the symbolism of the window extends beyond its physical presence, serving as a metaphor for overcoming oppression and discovering alternative paths to liberation from dictatorship and freedom. In this context, the window represents a symbolic barrier that can be shattered, allowing individuals to break free from the constraints of oppression and explore new avenues toward liberation.³⁶

Additionally, Al Akkad incorporated drawings of children into the artwork, adopting a technique where she traces and glues children's drawings of trains found in rubbles of schools following the aftermath of bombings by the Asaad regime. These trains, serve as symbols of railways to cross.³⁷ Children under the age of six use drawing as a way to communicate, as they lack any language skills.³⁸ Al Akkad suggests that the depictions of trains by children can be attributed directly to the profound impact of traumatic experiences, notably within the context of witnessing war and persistent bombardment.³⁹ These childish drawings employ symbols like trains, railways, and cars, signifying a profound desire to escape or evade the dangers and threats predominant in their surroundings as a trauma response to witnessing war.⁴⁰ In this way, Al Akkad cleverly employed a nuanced symbolism to encode, analyze, and express disapproval, providing a powerful commentary on the tragic loss of innocent lives perpetrated by the Assad regime amidst the Syrian Civil War.

³⁴ Samir Khalaf, *Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourj* (Verso, 2006), 40.

³⁵ Al Akkad, conversation, October 10, 2023.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 108.

³⁹ Al Akkad, conversation, October 10, 2023.

⁴⁰ Jean Piaget, *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1954), 34.

Employing encoding and symbolism, she not only expressed her trauma but also assumed the role of bearing witness to the unfolding events of the war, while protecting herself and her family from persecution.

3.7. Body Memory as a Method

Despite the geographical separation from the continuing civil war, Syrian's physical distance has not deterred Syrian artists from harnessing their artistry to communicate their past traumatic experiences or the enduring effects of war. Kozol mentions that this serves as a reminder that physical distance from perilous circumstances does not necessarily ensure immunity from encountering or revisiting harrowing and traumatic episodes.⁴¹ According to Bessel van der Kolk, "body memory" refers to how traumatic experiences and emotions can become imprinted in the physical sensations and reactions of an individual's body. These memories may manifest as somatic symptoms, such as tension, pain, or physiological responses, long after the traumatic event has occurred. The concept underscores the intricate connection between trauma and the body, emphasizing how the body retains the memory of traumatic experiences.⁴²

Antonio Damasio's work "Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain" also offers another perspective on the concept of body memory and its role in human cognition and emotion. In this book, Damasio presents a holistic view of the mind and the body, emphasizing the interconnectedness of emotions, reason, and bodily sensations. He argues that body memory is an integral part of our cognitive processes, challenging the traditional Cartesian dualism that separates mind and body.⁴³ I agree that our emotions and memories are not purely cognitive processes but are deeply intertwined⁴⁴ with the body.

Our physiological responses, such as heart rate, muscle tension, and visceral sensations, play a crucial role in shaping our emotional experiences and memory formation. In other words, our bodies "remember" emotional experiences and influence our decision-making processes. To better explain this, I'll be discussing the impact of war trauma on the

⁴¹ Wendy Kozol, *Life's America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 142.

⁴² Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 102.

⁴³ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 112.

⁴⁴ Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 45.

body, especially when It's triggered or relieved while living far from danger, and how it finds manifestation in art creation.

3.8. Alqumit Alhamad

As of October 28, 2023, a severe situation has unfolded within Gaza, where Israel has initiated a genocide against Palestinians living in Gaza killing more than 7000 Palestinians.⁴⁵ This campaign is resulting in ethnic cleansing, which is being witnessed by the global community, including myself, with a deep sense of helplessness. In addition to these acts of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and apartheid, Israel has strategically severed the essential lifelines of water, electricity, food, and medical aid to the people of Gaza⁴⁶. While observing these distressing events, I couldn't help but notice a significant change in my own behavior over the past couple of weeks. Recollections of my past experiences back in 2013 living in Syria emerged, where similar hardships were faced due to a civil war, causing an absence of water and electricity and constant bombing. During those trying times, my family and I lived on dry, moldy bread and olive oil only for days to come.

Unconsciously, now, I found myself consuming an array of foods, from junk food to ice cream, and even alcohol, as if anticipating an impending conflict that might deprive me of such indulgences. It became evident that my body was reacting without my conscious awareness, responding to the trauma deeply ingrained within me. This reaction was triggered by witnessing the Palestinians suffering from starvation, leading me to the profound realization that my trauma is not confined to my mind but resides deeply within my body. This realization prompted me to explore the ways in which the notion of body memory manifested within my own artistic practice as a case study, my artistic journey has been a cathartic exploration of war trauma, I've carried within me. As an individual hailing not only from Syria but also as a member of the queer community, I have endured both oppression and the trauma of witnessing my friends' tragic fate, as they were thrown off rooftops in my hometown of Raqqa city by ISIS during the Syrian Civil War. The term "queer" is commonly used to describe a diverse range of non-heteronormative sexual orientations and gender identities.⁴⁷ ISIS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, committed gruesome acts of violence during its existence. One of the horrifying acts attributed to the group was the

⁴⁵ As of December 16, 2023, more than 19,088 Palestinian have been massacred in Gaza.

⁴⁶ "Genocide in Gaza: Israel Kills Over 7,650 Civilians, Including 3,195 Children," *Daily News Egypt*, October 28, 2023, accessed November 1, 2023, <https://www.dailynewsegyp.com/2023/10/28/genocide-in-gaza-israel-kills-over-7650-civilians-including-3195-children/>.

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 17-32.

practice of throwing gay individuals off rooftops in Syria as a form of execution.⁴⁸ These traumatic events have left a profound imprint on my artistic process, leading me to repeatedly incorporate specific elements into my work. Particularly, I've observed a recurring motif related to gender in my art, which is closely tied to my identity. Whether consciously or unconsciously, these elements reappear in my work, serving as a means for me, as a visual artist, to convey the emotional weight of war trauma stored within my body memory.



Fig. 4, Alhamad, *To be Nonbinary*

To illustrate this more, I'll be discussing my artwork "To Be Nonbinary". This watercolor painting explores the fear associated with expressing one's gender identity, capturing the complex emotions reminiscent of living in a state of perpetual conflict, analogous to the inner turmoil mirrored in war. The motifs within the artwork serve as symbolic representations of my gender identity. The deceased bird, with a vagina representing the female form, embodies the struggles and vulnerabilities associated with

⁴⁸ Bassem Mroue, "Islamic State group targets gays with brutal public killings," *AP News*, June 13, 2016, accessed November 1, 2023, <https://apnews.com/general-news-bc4cf13c2b41454b820d7297f50bbf08>.

gender identity. Atop the bird's head, an "Anthurium" flower symbolizes male genitalia, underscoring the nuanced and fluid nature of gender. The cracked egg held by the bird signifies the birthing of identity, a process fraught with challenges and metamorphosis, while the moths encapsulate the ephemeral and delicate aspects of self-discovery amid the harsh realities of war. This artwork poetically captures the intersectionality of identity, gender, and the impact of war on the journey of self-understanding.

While body memory shaped my artmaking process, and the expectation of greater artistic freedom in Sweden seemed promising due to my escape from war, I have noticed that symbolism remains a prominent feature in my work even within this perceived safe haven.

In Sweden, where openness and freedom are celebrated, my experience reveals a nuanced reality that challenges the Western notion of absolute artistic freedom. Despite the perception of an open environment, I've encountered self-censorship and apprehension in expressing my beliefs. This isn't a personal struggle confined to my experiences but a broader commentary on social issues. Even in a country known for its liberalism, there are unspoken laws and cultural expectations so-called norms that dictate what can be freely expressed. As a person navigating brown identity in white institutions, the symbols in my art become more than just a creative choice they become a language to communicate the complexities of existing in spaces that, despite their reputation for freedom, still carry subtle constraints. The struggle for genuine freedom of expression extends beyond physical safety. It delves into the intricacies of cultural dynamics, where brown bodies navigate white institutions, challenging the perception of liberation in supposedly free spaces. The symbols in my artwork serve as a visual dialogue on the layers of constraint that persist even in societies that pride themselves on openness.

4. Conclusion

The examination of how do Syrian artists use art to convey the traumatic experience of the Syrian Civil War has unfolded as a multifaceted journey. Through the lenses of "bearing witness," "symbolism," and "body memory," this academic inquiry has aimed to unravel the intricate ways in which Syrian artists navigate and express the profound impacts of conflict through their artistic practice.

The concept of "bearing witness" emerged as a powerful artistic tool, emphasizing the responsibility to acknowledge and validate the experiences of those who have endured war trauma. Syrian artists, exemplified by the work of Abounaddara, demonstrated a commitment

to capturing and disseminating the unfiltered realities of the conflict, transcending geographical boundaries to shape a global narrative. Symbolism, as a method, surfaced as a strategic means for artists to negotiate the restrictions on freedom of expression in Syria. Through the examination of Heba Al Akkad's "شهداء," the essay illuminated how symbols served as powerful vehicles for conveying complex narratives, offering both protection from persecution and a commentary on the collective trauma endured. The examination of "body memory" added a nuanced layer to the understanding of trauma, emphasizing its imprint on the physical self long after the events transpire. The personal reflection on my own experiences underscored the interconnectedness of memory, emotion, and the body, shedding light on the enduring impact of war trauma even in a geographically distant context.

Throughout my journey in writing this essay, I've come to realize the pressing need to explore in the future how the use of symbolism changes for artists when they move from one culture to another, especially considering the shifting constraints on them. I'm curious about how cultural variations impact artistic methods like "bearing witness," "symbolism," and "body memory" in expressing and transcending trauma, going beyond the specific context of the Syrian Civil War.

Reflecting on my own journey as a refugee, I've noticed a significant difference in my experiences in Sweden compared to my life in Syria. What intrigues me is that, despite living in a Western liberal context, I find myself still using symbolism as if I were in the midst of war. This realization has sparked a desire to understand why I feel this way and why I continue to rely on symbolism in Sweden. I'm also eager to experiment with the differences in the symbolism I create, exploring how it evolves in this new cultural setting.

5. List of Figures

Fig. 1, Alqumit Alhamad, “*The Day ISIS Took Over Raqqa*” (my own artwork, 2023).

Fig. 2, Abounaddara, “*The Syrian Who Wanted the Revolution,*” 2016. Screenshot from Documenta 14, <https://www.documenta14.de/en/notes-and-works/1524/the-syrian-who-wanted-the-revolution>.

Fig. 3, Heba Al Akkad, شهداء “*Martyrs*”, 2012. Private Collection. (Used with permission from the artist).

Fig. 4, Alqumit Alhamad, “*To Be Nonbinary*” (my own artwork, 2016).

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