

Dubai Collection

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Meet the Artist: Nour Malas

Artist Profiles

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<https://dubaicollection.ae/en/story/between-form-and-subject-exploring-nour-malas-artistic-practice>



New York-based, Syrian artist Nour Malas is known for her dramatic paintings that oscillate between abstraction and figuration, and her palette of earthy reds, browns, and greens interspersed with brighter contemporary tones of pink or yellow. Despite being a relatively young artist, Malas' works convey a certain maturity, both through her skilful command of her often large-scale canvases, and through her mastery of both formalist and conceptual concerns.

Born in Cannes in 1995 to Syrian parents, Malas spent most of her youth in the UAE. Through her mother, an art consultant and former gallerist, Malas was exposed to art from an early age. She remembers, "I was taken on a lot of studio visits and there was always artwork in the house, or in and out of the house, and we used some of our house space as storage. So I was around paintings a lot [...] I was very exposed and [saw] a lot of things. And I think even my paintings resemble Syrian modern art quite a bit, because that's what I was looking at."

It was not until her high school years, however, that Malas began considering a career as an artist, "My high school art teacher, Assya Makawi, changed the way that I felt about art. She opened up the doors, she taught us about movements and artists that I would never have known [...] it was then that I discovered that I had something to say. So it was when I started painting [that] I just became really into [art]. It was the one thing that I would spend my afternoons doing."

Following school, Malas embarked on a Bachelor of Fine Arts at Goldsmiths University in London, followed by a Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. Recalling her initial interest in sculpture, she says, "There was something in my practice that was so much more aligned with [sculpture], even my conceptual way of thinking where object became important. Tactility [and] physicality became important to me. So that was [when I thought], 'Okay, this is what I want to be doing. I want to be an artist because I'm so obsessed with the idea of the physical experience of making work.'"

Ultimately however, Malas began pivoting towards painting, which is still the main focus of her practice today. "As I developed in the two years of my MFA, there was something about just focusing on more immediate work, pen to paper, paint to surface, where I moved away from conceptual and went into a more intuitive, explorative, spontaneous kind of path. And then that's when painting completely changed for me, because it became about not knowing what I'm getting into," she remembers.

Malas' paintings unfold gradually and reveal their subject matter through contemplation. At first glance, they appear like abstract compositions of warm, vibrant colour fields interspersed with brightly coloured dynamic lines. But as our eyes travel through the canvas, indistinct shapes start to emerge – heads, eyes, arms, or hands – until we wonder whether the work we had initially perceived as abstract has a narrative, and if so, how it goes.



This gradual reveal of her subjects reflects the artist's process of creation, "When I'm making a work, my focus is not what it's about or what is happening. My focus is [on] the painting itself, on a technical level, the colours I'm using, the composition, the flow of the painting [...] and then the painting leads me, it guides me."

It is only towards the end of the painting process, that Malas starts developing specific figures from the appearing shapes, and assigning meaning to them, "As I'm developing my work, I'm excited about the figures, so I am looking for them. But I don't go in figuratively – I leave figuratively."

She goes on to explain that the content of her work often revolves around her own thoughts and feelings, "I am dealing with myself, and my thoughts, and my feelings, and my body every day. So it's the things that occupy me that end up being projected onto the painting [...] I am an artist [with] a Syrian background [and have] for the past 15 years had politics occupy my mind or affect my everyday life quite literally. So I don't think it's possible to make work that is void of that, but it's not my intention."

The artist keeps a list of potential titles on her phone, which can be inspired by song lyrics, books, a conversation she has had, or her own thoughts. She then assigns a title to a painting, once completed, "I match a title that I like to a painting, so really, it's an afterthought. It's something that happens later on."

An example of her way of working is her 2023 painting *The Demons Have Migrated to Earth* in the Dubai Collection. Held in Malas' signature colour palette and permeated by energetic lines, the painting immediately exudes a sense of dynamism and movement. On the upper part of the picture plane, we can make out the outlines of heads, while the lower seems more abstract – perhaps a table around which these figures are congregated, or else a landscape over which they stand sentry.

"This painting specifically happened in a very critical time, right after October 7 [...] so I was way too occupied mentally with what was going on to even pretend like I don't know what I'm painting. It doesn't mean that it's a documentation – it's an emotional response. So it is fully subjective, but the title is also a text message that I received from a friend's Mum at that time."

Ultimately however, Malas is keen for her viewers to develop their own interpretations of her works. "The goal for me is that the longer one sits with the work, the more they feel they can pull out of it or they can connect to it. That's my purpose. It's the purpose of my whole practice," she concludes.