



Global Research Network  
Working Paper

**The Alchemy of Art in the Midst of War**

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When Homer described war he spared his audience the gore by torturing the grammar, by pulling apart the line, reshaping it to convey the horror. He moved his audience not with the superlative of violence, but instead, elicited the fevered cadence of battle. Goya voyeuristically evoked the intimacy of violence between the executed and the executioner. While Picasso's use of line and color conveyed the pointed, raw energy of war.

Violence is no longer a curiosity. A century of conflict euthanized sensitivity and the ability to be moved by images of war and suffering. Our eyes, ravaged by violence seeks a respite, a sanctuary that inspires, creates and envisions peace. As the war in Syria rages, and Eastern Ghouta is pulverized by aerial bombardment and starved by years of blockade, a Syrian artist dares to hope.

Akram Abo Al Foz, an artist who lived under siege in Ghouta, creates inspiration as he transforms the medium destroying his city into a vehicle of hope. His work speaks optimism in a language that transcends speech.



## Painting on Death

Abu Al Foz left his artistic passion for almost three years due to the war, but in 2014 it was rekindled by an unexpected source, a shell hit his home:

*I obtained the first shell in 2014 when it fell on my house. My plan was to dedicate a corner of my house to display some bullet casings and fragments of the shell, as a reminder of this time of the revolution for future generations to see and remember.*

He explains why he felt compelled to return to art despite the war:

*Three years after the beginning of the revolution, and after leaving my art, my paint*

*brushes, and my colors, I felt it is was time to go back. I felt that the revolution had lost its peaceful spirit, but on the other hand, the bombs were falling. When I started the project and acquired the first mortar shell I envisioned it could be a message of love and peace. I love beauty and art wherever I find it. I see art in all its forms as an integral part of a peaceful revolution, but not necessarily a peacefulness embodied in the art and drawing.*

As the war raged on Abu al Foz 's inspiration derived from the peaceful protests that began the Syrian uprising. He recalls;

*At the beginning we held olive branches in our hands to demonstrate and show the peacefulness of the revolution. We did this until the revolutionaries were coerced into carrying weapons under the weight of the Syrian government's violence.*

Al Foz's commitment and desire for peace motivates him to create and distil hopefulness into his craft, "I felt at the time that the shell was the most beautiful thing and it was falling on the most beautiful landscape and I knew it would send a beautiful message." His work is a message and a metaphor, encapsulating death, inspired by the art of Syrian domestic life. Al Foz chose to use the transcendent voice of art to evoke the sublime and transform the medium destroying daily life in Syria, into a metaphor of preserving the domestic heritage of a civilization besieged.

## **Inspiration**

What strikes the viewer first when encountering Al Foz's work is the juxtaposition of the medium with the elements used to transform each munition, be it a bomb, bullet or grenade. Each piece is exquisitely crafted into a kaleidoscopic explosion of vibrant hues. Reminiscent of Faberge eggs and the life and rebirth metaphor they represent, are grafted onto these symbols of post-modern death, resisting, refusing to accept a dystopia, instead seeking to celebrate life in all its beauty.

Al Foz's work is imbued with rich elements that pay tribute to the Ottoman decorative arts popular in Damascus. These elements were first employed by Syrian artisans in the early era of the Umayyad Empire to embellish mosques and palaces, and during the rule of the Ottoman Empire, this art form took root in the domestic arts in the ancient city of Damascus and remains popular today.

The repeating geometric patterning and use of the architectural structure of *muqarnas* used decoratively on vaulted ceilings, are transferred to the domes of bomblets by Al Foz. The bodies of projectiles hold the viewer transfixed by his use of multi-hued Turkish Rococo gilding. Bullet cases are bejeweled and encrusted with the design technique of stippling that is typical of Turkish and Syrian fine jewelry craft. Missiles are filled with densely patterned motifs found on the walls and wood work of domestic spaces in Damascus.

Al Foz explains that his technique is inspired by the decorative arts present in the domestic spaces of Damascus;

*As for the application of my technique, I'm a fan of the drawing of Damascus, Ottoman and Ajami domestic spaces and the various techniques they use. Anything in that style draws*

*my attention and my interest. I'm keen on apparel and home décor harking back to the old days and the decorations of that era found on the walls and ceilings in wood and stones. Those walls represent the colors of the houses of Damascus.*

The work pulls the observer into an allegory of domestic life being eradicated and the Syrian peoples' desire to preserve it. Each piece captures not only the intimate picture of domestic life, but the hustle and bustle of domestic life in Damascus, established in the third millennium, one of the oldest continually inhabited cities, now decimated and being emptied of life. The work beckons the viewer to experience the piercing splendor of the distillation of the eradication of thousands of years of history, into the potent medium of a munition. It is an allegory of the vanishing of a people, of our common cultural heritage, but it is not decomposition or a grave marker, it is a cathartic recreation, a reclaiming and an affirmation of humanity and life.

Abu al Foz continues explaining,

*My idea was to decorate the shell case, which reflects death, in a way that makes it show life and liveliness, to erase the traces of sorrow from it and transform it into a source of hope. I started collecting as many shell cases as possible. I also collected bullet casings that fill the streets where we live.*

*The idea grew more and more clear over time. I kept collecting missile casings from planes that bombed my city and the shells from the heavy artillery that fell over our heads from the mountain. I was recycling the objects into ornaments that took the lives of innocent women, children and elderly and painted them with jasmine.*



## **The Process**

The canvas that Al Foz chose is unique. The process he uses to create his work takes multiple steps. Al Foz described the process;

*The initial step is to collect the bullet casings, mortar shells, rockets and other weapons, which fall day and night in the Eastern city of Ghouta. Sometimes I'm forced to go to the frontlines with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to gather some of these pieces for my collection. I also picked up some empty ones from the headquarters of the FSA in Ghouta.*

*Some of them need to be cleaned of residual materials, which is done by specialists from the FSA. They need more than a normal wash before I can bring them into my home and sketch patterns on them.*

After they are cleaned and polished, he then draws a pattern directly onto the metallic surface. The technique he developed is best suited for the metal surface of the shells and casings. He explains;

*This kind of gilding or stippling requires a special type of applicator that applies a substance similar to silicon that dries when exposed to air and turns into a hard, rubbery substance. Under the siege against the city, this substance is no longer available, but I kept some reserves in my house. When my house got burnt I was thankful the fire didn't reach them.*

## **Life Blockaded**

The blockade that lasted from 2013 until it fell to Russian and Syrian government forces in 2018, extracted its toll on the people of Eastern Ghouta, but they hang on to life and try to carry on with their daily routine as best they can. The blockade also created a number of challenges for Al Foz's art;

*I face large obstacles, most notably the scarcity of colors and painting materials because of the siege. We've also had a continuous outage of electricity for the past three years in Eastern Ghouta, so I started drawing at sunrise and stop at sunset. This artwork remains trapped in my house because there is no way to transport them out of Eastern Ghouta, despite the increasing demand for them from international museums and exhibitions.*

His artwork, like the inhabitants of Eastern Ghouta, remain captives. Held prisoners by their own government.



## Transformation

Alchemical transmutation is fused into Al Foz's work by his Midas-like touch, which transforms these objects of despair, into symbols of resilience and endurance. Under his artistic skill, he seeks not only to imbue his work with optimism, but transform public sentiment surrounding the Syrian revolution;

*We are not terrorists. We are advocates of peace and we have the right to live in dignity and freedom; this is our demand. The world will see what it means to be free and that we are able to be creative even though we are living under the atmosphere of war. This art reflects Syrian history.*

We do not know if Abu Al Foz or his work will survive this war; their fate and that of Syria are nebulous and unclear. So much is lost during wartime. His work, like that of Homer, Goya and Picasso, offers us a glimpse into our shared humanity. Despite the bleakness of his current situation, he is able to envision a better future for Syria.

During World War II, William Churchill was told that funding for the arts would need to be cut to support the war effort. Churchill replied, then what are we fighting for? What are the Syrian people fighting for? What is Al Foz fighting for? They are fighting for their freedom, but not at the cost of their humanity. They are struggling to find beauty amongst ash, hope amid destruction.

Since I interviewed Al Foz the blockade and the daily bombardment of his city ended. Yet life did not return to normal. The threat of Covid-19 brought with it fear, but also a stalemate between Russian backed, Syrian government forces and rebels. Life remains precarious and

fragile. This article is my homage to Al Foz's act of preservation of beauty amongst rubble. I share Al Foz's work as a mirror for the Syrian people to gaze into, to say, this is who you are. Do not lose hope. You are beautiful and worth saving.