The Art of Hope
Safwan Dahoul and his dream-like canvases
Studio VISIT

DIANA AL-HA
Syrian-American artist Diana Al-Hadid invites Laura van Straaten on a whirlwind tour of her Brooklyn studio in anticipation of her first solo show in the Middle East.
Among the many beautiful things in the Brooklyn studio of Syrian-American artist Diana Al-Hadid, the most beautiful is the giggly baby boy who will surely grow up to equate the smell of paint with a mother’s love. Born in October, baby August and his mother are dressed nearly identically in the blue-and-white stripes of French sailors, though his mother’s worn overalls are speckled with paint, as are the walls of her studio and old wood-plank floors.

As dusk falls on a cold January evening, Diana’s husband, Jonathan Lott, is carting the baby around post-nap as the artist and her assistants showcase the artworks being prepared for Diana’s first solo show in the Arab World, opening 4 March at New York University Abu Dhabi’s art gallery on Saadiyat Island.

In the last decade, Diana has had more than 20 solo exhibitions at museums and galleries around the world. But when asked if the Abu Dhabi exhibition feels like a milestone, she answers, “Yes, totally! I feel like I’ve touched base a little bit with the region,” noting that she’s shown work at the Sharjah Biennial in 2009, in group shows at Sharjah’s Barjeel Art Foundation and at Art Dubai in the booth of her New York-based gallerist Marianne Boesky, “But nothing so comprehensive as this show.”

Born in Syria in 1981, Diana emigrated from Aleppo at the age of five to grow up in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, with her parents, an insurance agent and a florist. She stuck to the Midwest for college, receiving double bachelor’s degrees in Art History and Fine Art at Ohio’s Kent State University before pursuing a Master’s in sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, and then headed to the Big Apple. It was in Manhattan, while temping at a sculpture fabrication shop, that she met her husband, an architect who was sourcing materials for his first project. His proposal—gifting her a series bells that eventually let her chime out *The Wedding March*—was so cute that it merited mention in the much talked-about Vows feature of *The New York Times*.

Nowadays, Diana spends her days in 4,000 square feet of workspace in a somewhat desolate East Williamsburg neighborhood. The building, a former silk-flower factory, is wedged between a wholesaler of produce and an industrial glass facility. It is here, in her studio, that Diana transforms Renaissance and classical figures into contemporary sculptural shapes, often with an element of a cascade, similar to the manner in which dinner candles drip to create new forms. Her sources are architecture, science, ancient inventions, myth and Old Master works. Some of the pieces appear layered as if by time—even calamity. You can’t quite tell if she’s revealing form by removing material or working in an additive fashion.

Her workspace is lined with her characteristic wall-works whose base is a polymer gypsum which, she says, she discovered in graduate school and has used ever since. “This is as kind of as analog as it gets,” she says, as she describes how she makes the painting-shaped wall-sculptures where one can still see the surface behind. “It was a way of articulating this liquid surface that’s kind of frozen but suggesting forms that weren’t there.” The works read like fragile, drip paintings where a canvas may have been stripped away. The same gypsum is also used in her freestanding sculptures, which are
Additionally, a catalogue by Skira Publishing, co-produced with the Bell Gallery, will accompany the Abu Dhabi exhibition. The book, with a launch planned during Art Dubai, offers essays in Arabic and English by Reindert Falkenburg, a historian of Renaissance Art (Diana’s most obvious influence); Sara Raza, the Guggenheim curator and scholar of Middle Eastern contemporary art; and Alistair Rider, a historian of modern sculpture, who connects the materiality of the artist’s practice to the ephemerality of memory and history.

As to that ephemerality: the press announcement for show at NYUAD describes Diana’s works as “inevitable ephemerality” of Diana’s works and how they “slowly drip, decay and melt away.” This might appear misleading to those who have witnessed art that is truly ephemeral. On the contrary, Diana’s work seems to have the quality of disintegration. In fact, her signature polymer gypsum dries hard. Very much so. Previously, I had only seen her work in museum exhibits and private collections, where touching her sculptures is a definite “no-no.” But here in her studio, she let me touch her works. And I was struck by their durability. It was heartening.

Winton Bell Gallery at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island from 3 September until 30 October.
