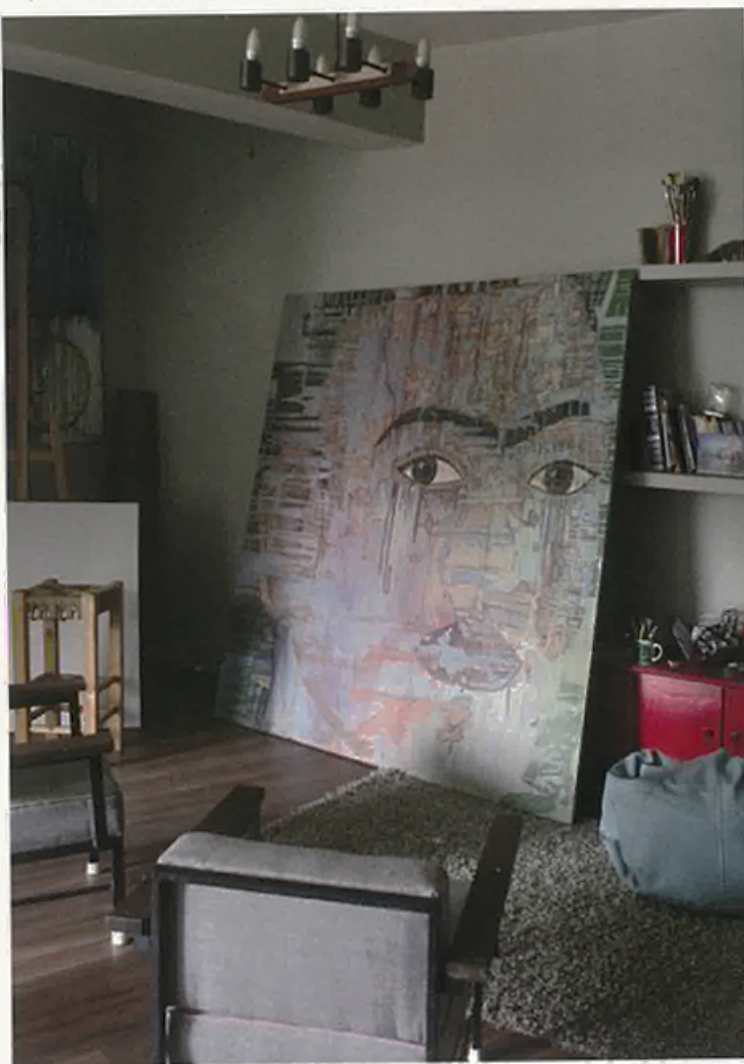


The Free Hand of Joe Abou Jawde

Like many painters, Joe discovered his talent early on. Today, when the 31-year-old is not busy designing clothes for the Georges Hobeika fashion house, he lets his hands do the painting, moving by the free will of his emotions and his talent.

Who are the artists that have inspired you most?

Jean Michel Basquiat and Frida Kahlo. The strong feelings in Kahlo's paintings are similar to mine. Basquiat's free graffiti style is also an inspiration.



When did you discover your artistic talent?

My mother was a singer, so I grew up in an artistic atmosphere. I used to love drawing and drew on everything I could find. Later, when I was sent to boarding school, I studied under the well-known painter Ashraf Elias, and he encouraged my parents to nurture my talent, which they did.

So why did you decide to study fashion design and not art?

There wasn't really any art in Lebanon at the time. Art was not appreciated. It was easier to go into fashion, and I like that too. Other than being a painter, I'm a head designer at Georges Hobeika. But I continued to draw and paint all the time; I never stopped.

At which point did you decide to really focus on painting?

When I started selling paintings! Some friends of friends—a French couple—saw a painting of mine and bought it. They have bought three more paintings since then. People heard about me through word of mouth and wanted to buy my work. When the well-known artist Nadim Karam saw my work, he bought a painting too, saying that one day it would be worth a lot. Of course this was very encouraging.

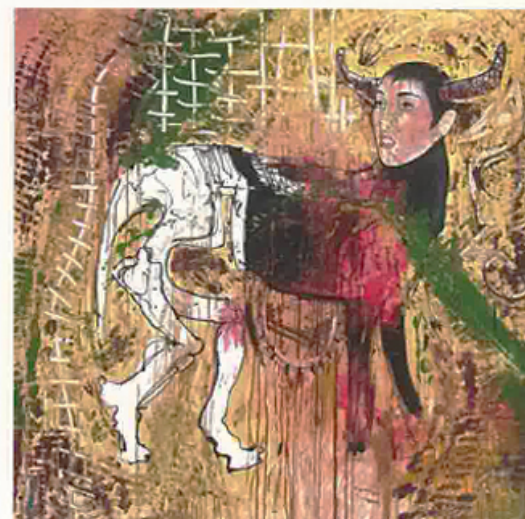
What inspires you to paint?

Stories and people really affect me. I don't think about painting as "art", it's more about the person or the story. Some of these stories are controversial subjects, and a lot of people are sensitive about that. But whatever I'm painting, all my energy—whether it's positive or negative—goes into it. I don't sketch; I just feel, and it's as if the painting paints itself. I only paint when I'm in the mood. I usually put on some music, and I can paint for up to seven hours straight. I feel as though my hand is moving on its own. Painting is like a therapy for me.



How would you describe your own art?

It's modern, abstract, freestyle. I have no rules, no technique. I do anything I feel.



Other than your first customers, the French couple, who has bought your work?

An American couple, people in Paris, and a lot of Lebanese. I like to sell to people who really appreciate my paintings and the messages in them, not because the colors match their couch. I have actually declined to sell paintings to people who I felt didn't really appreciate the work and sold instead to people who were really in love with it and passionate about it. My work has also been used in editorial photo shoots in Aishti magazine.



Where can we see your work?

Right now I'm in talks to prepare a solo exhibition. The problem is I can only paint when I'm in the mood, so I can't just produce 20 paintings at once because somebody offered me an exhibition. The exhibition space is also really important to me.

How do you hope to contribute to the Lebanese art scene?

There are more exhibits nowadays. People care more about art in Lebanon, but I don't know if it's because of art for the sake of art or because art can be an investment. There's a cause behind my art, and if it's a strong enough message, people will get it and society will accept my paintings. When you become successful, it's easier to send out a message faster. You become influential and people listen. I have lots of messages to send. Each painting is a message.