



**HANNY
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Art Gallery of Alberta
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Abstracted forms swirl together in the works of Hanny Al Khoury. They blend and morph into one another and can shift in meaning as you look at them and as you see them through eyes with different experiences. Is that a hand? Is it making a gesture of Christian blessing? Or is it the Hand of Fatima (*Hamsa*)? In places, fingers seem to cradle or support different forms and become the outline of a chalice or other rectilinear shapes. Evil Eyes could be bullseyes or spotlights, protecting or exposing and bringing things to light. Their abstraction, however, means that there are infinite entry points into the works. The artist has a clear and defined personal symbology, but he presents his objects with an ambiguity that offers space for others to create their own associations.

To understand the work of Hanny Al Khoury you only need to take the time to look and be adventurous enough to dive into your own personal associations with symbols and shapes. To understand Hanny Al Khoury himself you need to understand the history of Palestine and the overlapping religious and indigenous groups who have lived there for millennia. Hanny Al Khoury is a Palestinian Christian from Eilabun, a small town situated between Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. While the town's history dates back to at least 1000 BCE, it also has a very unique recent past.¹ Eilabun was among 531 villages attacked in 1948 and whose inhabitants were forced to flee.² With thousands of other Palestinian Arabs, the residents of Eilabun—including Al Khoury's grandparents, aunts and uncles—were forced to leave their homes and walk to neighbouring Lebanon as refugees. At the behest of Archbishop Maximos V. Hakim, in 1949 the Pope intervened on behalf of Christian Arabs and several hundred Christian residents of this tiny village were allowed to return.³ Currently there are only 50,000 Arab Christians living among the nearly 4 million Muslims in the scattered Palestinian territories.⁴ As Al Khoury and other Christian Palestinians describe it, they are a minority within a minority. Add to that class, gender, or sexuality, and one's community becomes even more fractured and marginalized.

Eilabun is less than 20 kilometres from the Sea of Galilee where, according to the New Testament, Jesus performed the miracle of walking on water. Water, seas and streams are common motifs employed by Al Khoury. In *Revenge*, your attention is immediately drawn to a glowing boat in the top right. There are stylized turbulent waves nearby with a glowing warm sun above. Somehow this boat sits calmly beside the waves. Have the strange objects that float around



Hanny Al Khoury, *Revenge*, 2022. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

the rest of the canvas been scattered after a boat crash? Have they washed ashore? Are they remnants of other miracles? Is this a lifeboat there to pick up these forms and salvage what it can? Or maybe the operator of this tiny vessel has come out to sea to purge their life of these objects and hurl them overboard. Or, are we to imagine the relief one feels after pulling up to the shore and feeling calm after a turbulent time in one's life?

Almost all objects in Al Khoury's paintings are vessels with obvious volume but no clear indication of their contents. For Al Khoury, each holds and contains a memory, an experience and a story that is both personal and pivotal to the artist's identity and lived experience of the world. Wine glass or chalice shapes appear in many of the works in various forms. The chalice has a number of religious, secular and art historical meanings and connotations. In the Catholic tradition it represents the vessel of the body of Christ. For a secular person it could mean celebration, friendship, delight, joy, excess or addiction. Jesus' first miracle was to turn water into wine at a wedding in a town not far from where Al Khoury grew up. As a Christian symbol it represents both the start of Jesus' miracles and the end of his life at the last supper—or more broadly, the duality of beginnings and endings.

One of the more abstract forms of Al Khoury's is the broken brick. It is easy to miss or to read simply as negative space between other more recognizable forms. However, it is a volume that appears in almost all of Al Khoury's work. The broken brick relates to the bible verse Psalms 118:22: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." This passage tells the story of a child who builds a fort in his family's yard at the same time workers are building a brick patio for the house. When a brick breaks or is damaged, the workers discard it. The young child's fort keeps falling down and he asks if he can use the discarded bricks. Of course the workers oblige, having deemed these broken bricks useless. The broken bricks work perfectly for the child's fort. When the child's father sees his son's sturdy fort he is pleased with the ingenuity and resourcefulness and proclaims, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

Many meanings can be gleaned from this story. Those rejected by society can still be embraced and have a greater purpose. Pieces that do not fit perfectly in a mold still have an important role to play. Even if you are rejected from one sphere, there are many other possibilities. Even if someone views you as



Hanny Al Khoury, *Awakening*, 2022. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.



Hanny Al Khoury, *Rebel*, 2022. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

unimportant, there will be others who see and embrace your value. Not initially getting what you want could position you for something better. This story resonates deeply with Al Khoury and in many ways has guided him through his life. The child's fort can be seen as a *La La Land*, a place that would not and could not stand without the many weird and wonderful rejected bricks.

This same iconography is picked up in Al Khoury's shattered painting installation. A shard of painting does not cease to be a painting; it is still whole. No matter what we face in our lives and what traumas may befall us, we are still whole, valuable people. This divided and fragmented image is also reminiscent of Palestine itself, a nation that has been divided into three main isolated areas: Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank, which itself is separated into over 100 separate enclaves that are interspersed with settlements. Like these isolated territories, Al Khoury's fragments of shattered painting are separated by large swaths. Furthermore, this fracturing reflects the larger stratified realities that Al Khoury has experienced while living in Palestine, Israel and Canada.

The colours used in Al Khoury's works are just as symbolic for the artist as what they depict. Previous series were much darker and until recently his work has been almost entirely shades of grey, black and brown; moody and muted. Here, the colours are more lively but not vibrant. Al Khoury sees them as references to the earth and describes his palette as being in balance. They are not "depressed," as he describes the colours he has used in the past, nor are they overly bold or energized. What he tries to project with these colours is the calm balance that he now feels after facing and truly dealing with moments of the past. He presents his exposed collection of experiences not with self-consciousness nor with celebration. His lived experiences are offered as fact. This work illustrates where Al Khoury is along his healing journey where he wants to experience belonging neither because of nor in spite of past traumas. His *La La Lands* are where he can just *be*.



Hanny Al Khoury, *Complication*, 2022. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.



Hanny Al Khoury, *A Night*, 2022. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

Endnotes

- 1 Gilad Cinamon, “Elabbon Final Report” *Hadashot Arkheologiyot – Excavations and Surveys in Israel*, no. 127 (2015), www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=24819&mag_id=122.
- 2 Hisham Zreiq, dir., *The Sons of Eilaboun*, (2007; Germany/Palestine/Israel: Hisham Zreiq Production), vimeo.com/110974785.
- 3 Motti Golani and Adel Manna, *Two Sides of the Coin: Independence and Nakba 1948*, (Dordrecht, The Netherlands / St. Louis, MO: Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation and Republic of Letters, 2011), 126.
- 4 “World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Palestine: Christians,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, May 2018, www.refworld.org/docid/49749cd12.html.



Hanny Al Khoury, *New Beginning*, 2022. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Hanny Al Khoury

Hanny Al Khoury was born into an Arab Palestinian minority community in occupied Palestine. Raised in a society that valued critical debate, Al Khoury was exposed to socio-political, literary, and intellectual issues of the day from a young age. As a Christian Palestinian, a minority within a minority, he was active in religious activities which would later influence his work. These seemingly contradictory aspects of his life spurred an interest in art. Khoury's first technical training was an art program presented by his high school. He learned materials, techniques, colors, and basic artistic styles from his teacher Ola Al-Henawi. For Al Khoury, art is a lifeline to new worlds. It is a space in which he can represent his connection to Palestine, while reflecting core human values and emotions.

WRITER'S BIOGRAPHY

Lindsey Sharman

Lindsey V. Sharman is Curator at the Art Gallery of Alberta. She has studied Art History and Curating in Canada, England, Switzerland and Austria, earning degrees from the University of Saskatchewan and the University of the Arts, Zurich. From 2012-2018 she was the first curator of the Founders' Gallery at the Military Museums in Calgary, an academic appointment through the University of Calgary.

List of Works

New Beginning, 2022

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Artist

Revenge, 2022

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Artist

A Night, 2022

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Artist

Complication, 2022

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Artist

Rebel, 2022

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Artist

Suspicious Try, 2022

Oil on wood

Courtesy of the Artist

Awakening, 2022

Oil on canvas

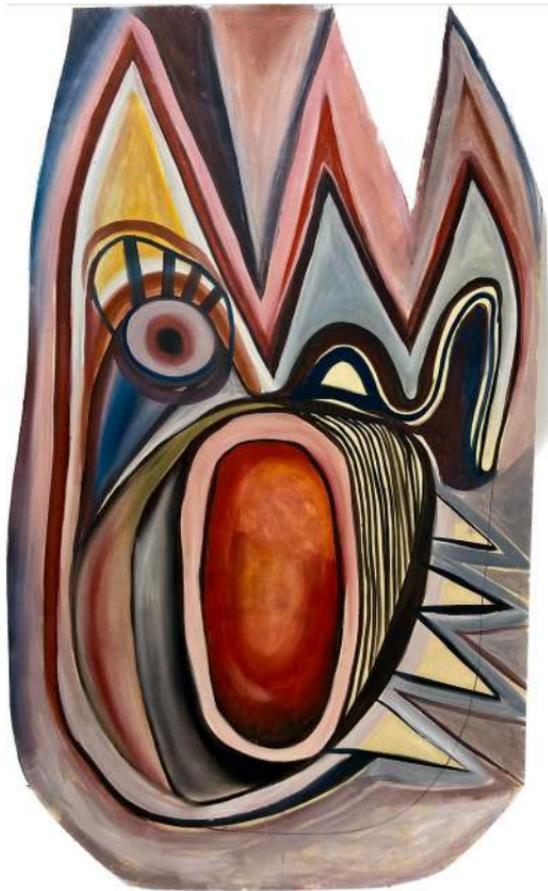
Courtesy of the Artist

Bomb I, 2022

Bomb II, 2022

Ceramic

Courtesy of the Artist



Hanny Al Khoury, *Suspicious Try* (detail), 2022. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.



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