

I am excited to nominate Hanny Al Khoury and his work *Revenge*, 2022 for this year's Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize. Artist Hanny Al Khoury (b.1990) was born into an Arab Palestinian minority community in Palestine and in 2017 emigrated to Canada.

*Revenge*, 2022 was the central painting included in the exhibition *La La Lands* at the Art Gallery of Alberta from February 18 – May 21, 2023. Abstracted forms swirl together in this work and blend and morph into one another. Objects shift meaning as you look at them and as you see them through eyes with different experiences. Are those hands? Is one offering up a chalice? Is one raised in a Christian blessing? Or is that the Hand of Fatima (Hamsa)? Evil Eyes could be bullseyes or spotlights, protecting or exposing and bringing things to light. Al Khoury's use of abstraction, however, means that there are infinite entry points into this work. He has a clear and defined personal symbology, but he presents his objects with a generous ambiguity that gives space for others to also project their own associations.

To understand *Revenge* 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 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. Eilabun was among 531 villages destroyed in 1948 and whose inhabitants were forced to flee. 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. Currently there are only 50,000 Arab Christians living among the nearly 4 million Muslims in the scattered Palestinian territories. 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 this turbulent sea to comfort his disciples who were caught in a storm. 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 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 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 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 and one can be seen to the right of centre in *Revenge*. 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 is the broken brick which is found along the right edge of *Revenge*. 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. If you are rejected from one community, there are many other possibilities. Even if someone views you as 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 place that would not and could not stand without the many weird and wonderful rejected bricks.

In the top left of *Revenge* Al Khoury has included an abstracted view into the center of a seedy watermelon, an abstraction of an abstraction of the Palestinian flag. Just below

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are patterns found on traditional Palestinian clothing. These are coded symbols that are likely not be picked up by all audiences but are messages from the artists to those who have similar experiences to him. Many of the symbols are multiple things at once. In the bottom left quadrant, there are two types of fish. Some are fish and also flags; one is a fish and a bomb and a phallus. Along the bottom of the canvas a flower is and a fire, an explosion and a lit wick.

The colours used in Al Khoury's works are just as symbolic for the artist as what they depict. The colour palette from this work is taken from a photograph the artist took of Damascus Gate, one entrance into the historic centre of Jerusalem. Previous series of works 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.

Al Khoury came to Edmonton in 2016 seeking a place to belong. It is often said that the best revenge is a life well lived. In *Revenge* Al Khoury's little raft is unpacked, a common therapeutic term for delving into and understanding psychological traumas and patterns. This work illustrates where Al Khoury is along his healing journey where he wants to experience belonging neither because of nor in spite of his identities of past experiences. In Edmonton, he feels like he has found a place where he can just *be*-truly the best revenge.

Sincerely,  
Lindsey Sharman



Curator