

*This interview was conducted on August 1, 2017 between Mohamad Hafez and Julia Rooney in his Westville studio.*

*JR: I would like to begin our conversation thinking about the title of this exhibition, “Critical Refuge” and what that title means to you. Specifically, what does the word “refuge” mean to you?*

MH: The meaning of the word evolved over time to me. I started in my art practice taking refuge—out of homesickness and nostalgia, escaping from my world here, trying to be in my world in Syria. While I couldn't be there physically, I took refuge in the miniature models that modeled Old Damascus way before the war. This was fourteen years ago. Then we went through the refugee crisis and the war in Syria, and seeing my country deteriorate and seeing the number of refugees leaving the country, “refuge” took a different meaning. The real turn in the meaning of “refuge” was when my sister and her husband became refugees in Sweden. Then the word took a completely different meaning, a very personal one—it hit home. It evolved. You can go from a simple label that societies put on people—a negative label—and suddenly to a label that could describe a member of my own family. This then turns into a drive for changing the narrative around the words “refugee” and “refuge.”

*JR: Here in New Haven, would you consider your studio to be a refuge of sorts?*

MH: Absolutely. I think my studio is, as much as I can get it to be, a sanctuary. Everything in it should take me away from my physical presence in New Haven. It should take me—transport me—to a different era, to a different location. Everything that I do in my studio through smells, music, strong Syrian coffee—I sometimes will leave the coffee boiling on the burner just for the sake of getting the smell in the atmosphere, because that will remind me of my mom's kitchen, and our home in Damascus. They say smell, and I believe also sound, is the strongest tie to memories.

*JR: Yes, I think those two senses are among the most evocative—even more than visuals, even though in many ways we are such a visually-driven culture.*

MH: That is right. A professor of mine once said that your conscious and subconscious will never forget a single image you've seen in your life. You might not recollect it or always remember it actively, but it's somewhere in your brain. However, the senses will bring it back. You walk into a room and you smell strong Syrian coffee, and you immediately remember the visual part. So, to that extent, I can have an intense experience in everything. The incense that I burn is super strong, the coffee is super strong, with extra cardamom. Everything is intensified to have a really heightened nostalgic experience.

*JR: I'm curious about that word “nostalgia,” because I've heard it come up a lot in other interviews and articles about you. Can you break down what “nostalgia” means to you, and how it is a productive word, or concept, in your work?*

MH: I think it's a concept shared by many migrants in the diaspora, especially those who come from an extremely rich cultural fabric. There is so much to be missed, every day. I haven't met a single Syrian that would tell you they wouldn't move back in a heartbeat if things calmed down. No matter how well we live here, no matter how comfortable our lives are here, it is just so different. We are physically here, but emotionally there. This is very common between Syrians, Lebanese and many people that left their countries, not having chosen to leave. This is very common in forced migrants. They didn't choose to leave, so everything becomes so romanticized about their home, even though it's not. They might be romanticizing about a trip on the public bus system in Syria, even though that experience stinks. But in the diaspora, you're remembering so much, and you're yearning for so much that it becomes a romantic

vision. But the thing is, it's like a bad habit. You keep feeding it, and it keeps growing on you. You start listening to more and more music from back home, you start buying more and more stuff that reminds you. For instance, the CD player in my car has six CD changers, and I've never changed them since the day I came to the United States. One plays Fairuz, the other one plays several other artists, and they are the albums that I used to listen to before I left Syria. The moment I left Syria, I followed no new music. Culturally, I am a man frozen in time—as far as music goes and social attributes like that. Oftentimes on my ride home, if I need to connect back home, I'll play a CD.

Many people are like this. In the diaspora, you're hovering in between two planets. You're not belonging to one of them fully, because you're not fully assimilating. And yet, you left that other planet and you can't go back. You're really homeless, or without a refuge, and that's what's irritating about it—that you look on the backside, and you see your home country being torn apart, you can't go back, and you know deep down that those nice memories that you've had are not there anymore. Even if you go back there is so much that changed—people have changed, societies have changed, war has changed so much. So your image of the country is a romantic memory that some of us don't really want to realize is gone. And because we hold on so dearly to those memories we don't want to fully assimilate in the other planets. We're successful professionals, don't get me wrong. We're doctors, lawyers, engineers, doing great work in the diaspora. But the inside person, the cultural person, is frozen in time.

So that translates two ways: it could generate deep depression and a stagnant situation of inactive people that just go to work, eat, and shop on the weekends. Or, the flipside to that coin, is that you can make something creative with that energy. And that I think is what I was able to do with my work: to not fall into a deep depression, but rather to recreate home out of nostalgia for what I love. A lot of times Syrians will come to me and say, "Well, the Syria that you miss and you love is now no longer there." I say, "Leave me alone. I don't care. It's alive in my brain, and it's alive in my pieces, and these are the things that I celebrate..." So you see me modeling the old historic sculptures and the minarets.

*JR: I am reminded of something you said in a previous interview about time. You said that when you're living in an apartment for two years, you leave behind scuff marks and picture-hanging holes in the wall—but imagine a city that's thousands of years old, and what kind of layering is in that city. There's so much accumulation. I'm wondering where your own work sits with regard to time? Are they works that are in the present, the past, or in some imagined future? Or are they perhaps rotating among all of these?*

MH: They rotate. It's an aftermath of the piece itself. I don't design that ahead of time. It just evolves in the amount of detail and rustic effects that I put on the walls. Sometimes it looks super old, sometimes it looks more celebrated, and perhaps it reflects my current mood. My earlier work, before the war started, looked very clean—kind of pampered historic streetscapes. A great example would be *Unsettled Nostalgia*. I haven't been able to make pieces like that since. Everything that I touch these days, even though they're not fully bombed out, is not so romantic. The patina on the wall is of dirt and soot and rust and abuse, and I don't know where that sits historically—if that reflects today, yesterday...I don't know the answer to that. I think they rotate.

*JR: What is your relationship to representation—how does it serve your interests, or your process, in a way that abstraction might not? Or, do you consider parts of the work abstract? How do you think about those two modes in your making?*

MH: I've thought about this a lot. All the pieces are imaginary places. However, the windows might be inspired from one photo that I really loved, or from one door in Old Damascus that I really liked. These elements continue to pop up between pieces, even though the whole scene is imagined. So, is it representational, or is it abstract at that point? Some works you can see clear architectural order: "That's a window, that's a door, that's a floor." Other works are more abstract and you can't tell what's what. I suppose that's driven from the most recent faces our

cities have taken—completely decimated. When a building is shaken to its bare bones and a bomb decimates an entire neighborhood, there are so many foreign objects in the rubble, you can't even decipher if they were part of the original building, part of the bomb that fell, or part of the shrapnel. You can't decipher between a wall and a floor, and everything is just a mix. Rubble in that sense becomes abstract and intriguing at a certain level of detail.

*JR: What does it mean to reproduce that kind of destruction in a way that is to some degree artificial, but also extremely experienced at the same time? As an artist, what is the responsibility and what is the difficulty in that for you?*

MH: Well as a human being, the work serves as a therapeutic outlet for myself—to vent out the pain of witnessing thousands of years of civilization being bombed out of existence in front of my own eyes—and then all the baggage that comes with that. All the people that we've known that have passed away, all the people that we know today that are in refugee camps. Our status quo is a sad one. Yet even if I put on a face that's happy just to live, to work, and to be productive, there must be an outlet for all these embedded emotions. I model destruction to let it out of my system. Because there's an intense amount of emotion built into these pieces, it comes across genuinely to the viewer. And there's a flipside, or another kind of educational component that comes in the aftermath: "Oh by the way, this is a Syrian artist, documenting his times today," and the work raises awareness of the situation on ground.

*JR: I think of scale being so important in this. Because your works are in miniature, a viewer can step in and you can step out, as opposed to an immersive environment, in which they are the scale of the thing being rendered or created. I wonder how you think about scale, and if you've ever done something that's more life-size.*

MH: That's on the list to be done. With the bigger pieces—*We Have Won*, for instance—part of me wants you to dive into it and for your subconscious to forget for a millisecond that you're looking at a sculpture. Particularly when the sound system is on, and you hear the bombs, the cries of the children, and the people running away, and you're looking at it, and you're seeing bombed out facades. I want to trick people into (for one millisecond) living that experience. And just latch out of it, in a millisecond. That way, this is not a real neighborhood. Or, in *Collateral Damage*, when you stare down a street and you see a bombed-out car, your subconscious—just by the nature of the miniature—you can't help but dive into the detail and the scale of it. Once you see a really realistic ambulance that's blown up, then everything takes scale in your mind and that means, okay, that's a building, and that's a balcony, and so on. So, scale is important. But sometimes I play with that. If it's not too big, sometimes it's too small, like these two cases, that focus you in a different way.

*JR: There's also something unique about the suitcases because they are to-scale: they are real suitcases. There's a shift between the suitcase as a life-sized object and the miniature world you're constructing within it. With the other works, it's as though this is reversed. I see the materials that you're using to make these built environments as such tiny objects—nails, screws, latches—yet they're being used to construct much larger worlds. So, there's a 'zoom-in' and 'zoom-out' at the same time.*

*I've also heard you talk about your sourcing—where you get these materials from, and how you compile an 'alphabet of tools'. How specific are these raw materials for your work?*

MH: They're not specific. But I always care about keeping an arsenal of a diversified body of objects. Sometimes I have a shortage of certain components that I like using and that's it, they're gone. It is what it is. It's sort of the menu of the day—whatever the chef has, that's what I'm going to make things out of. However, when I am on the lookout for more materials, I am always conversing with these found objects, on the spot. "Oh this object...you could be... an

air-conditioning unit outside a wall...you could be a lantern, you could be a chandelier, you could be..." And they are day-to-day, nuts and bolts—but I am having these conversations. Sometimes I don't know what they will be, but I know their scale is right. The miniature scale, and the amount of detail, and their size, is right. So I just latch onto it, immediately.

*JR: I think there are two levels of realism you're evoking. When I look at your work, part of me just sees a hinge, and another part of me sees an architectural feature that the hinge has become through illusion. That keeps me grounded in the real space of my viewing position, but also takes me into the world that you've fabricated.*

*Relating this to your day-to-day life here in New Haven, I'd like to hear more about your work as an architect, which is a full-time job. As an artist, I know that balancing studio life with employed life is a constant challenge. Some people think of their employed work as a day job, separating it from their studio, while others find more of a continuum. I wonder where your architectural world intersects with your studio world, or if they remain largely separate.*

MH: They're not separate—they connect. But they don't connect in ways that you can put your finger on. Because my artwork is so architectural, the more experience I gain as an architect, the more complex my works become. When I break a floor in an art piece, and I'm exposing the rebar, I say, "Oh wait a second, there's more to the rebar," because I know a lot more about buildings now. There is plumbing, and chases, and electrical wires, and grout, and layers of sand and gravel, and tiles, and then concrete padding, and a finished concrete. That level of detail is critical in my art work as well, because if you look closely at the context we live in, it's not just walls and floor and windows and doors. There's so much more to the eye. The banners, the light poles...if you study just a light pole in our streets, the staples left from all the posters on it, the electrical wire that's chaffed down, the pole, the metal things on it—it's got nails for the contractor to climb it as a ladder. That's just a light pole! So, that amount of detail is critical when I go model a light pole in my scene. To me, it's not just a stick. It's a stick with so much more on it. The more I am experienced in the architectural field, the more I am learning about the different parts and components that come into buildings. And that reflects in the work.

*JR: It's also a give and take between what you design and what the world designs. You build a structure and then it becomes "lived,"—people interact with it. It seems you are interested in the element of its change—that it might actually be unstable and look different in ten years. This is not tragic to you.*

MH: No, it's not tragic, not at all. It is engineered and intentional by design. The work will never fall apart. It will always hold its integrity because it's built well. However, like any piece of architecture in the world, undoubtedly the paint on houses gets old, oils surface onto the concrete surface...salts, efflorescence—they show up. Rust shows up. So, what I do is embed all of these natural materials in the work so that they too will surface in the work. A piece that I finished today looks much different a year from now. All the rusted metals have gained another layer of patina. Or, the paint will get a bit of crackle in it that I've enticed. Sometimes I use intentionally metallic paints with rust activators so that the rust shows up and grows over time. I am trying to mimic a fabric that is millennia old—thousands of years. That patina that's reflected in the Syrian fabric has been caused over years, so it's only natural for my work to be evolving just like the fabric—changing and getting antique as it evolves. I find it very intriguing that the work is a living organism.

*JR: I think that mentality is sometimes countered in many art contexts. There's this idea that the object must be preserved at all costs. We engage with it wanting it to be static, wanting to really capture or possess it. But I think your fluidity in allowing decay to change the object is quite beautiful.*

*Again, thinking about professions and how they intersect with your practice: did your father's work as a physician have any creative impacts on your sensibility of the world?*

MH: It did in ways that I didn't realize at the time. Now, the entire story is making sense but back then it didn't. I graduated high school not knowing what field I would go into. I was a kid that didn't play sports, didn't play football, didn't play basketball. What did I do? I played with Legos. What did I build? Lots of structures. Lots of houses. Yet I graduated not knowing what I would be. I would take old cardboard boxes and turn them into sculptures and little computers. I would carve plaster and make a clock out of it. I took a big, old TV that no longer works—I opened it up and I made it an aquarium. I watched the screen, and in the body of the screen, I made it an aquarium. My parents supported all of this, so from early on, I would take found objects, play with them and do something else with them. Now it's making sense, when I look back.

*JR: I think of a doctor as a very creative profession in a lot of ways.*

MH: Yes, that's right. And not only any kind of doctor—he's a surgeon. I get his hand skills from him. I get his precision from him. I'll pass out if I see blood, but I do a lot of surgeries for these models, and I love it. I am not afraid of going into a piece, cutting it open, fixing it—doing completely drastic changes to a piece. Even if I finished it a couple years ago, I'll still revisit it, and change it. I use x-acto knives—really sharp knives. Clean cuts, fine edits, and I stitch. I think I got that from him, the attention to detail and to work, when you're focused.

*JR: I'm curious what other influences you have, artistically or in other fields. You have said music is a huge influence—are there also visual artists or other sources you are inspired by?*

MH: I'm inspired by beauty wherever it exists. I don't look at other artists' work for inspiration. I do appreciate the work and I do appreciate many, many artists. But when it comes to inspiration, I look at the built condition and the human condition. My inspiration is what you're seeing here. So my challenge is how can you make a piece of architecture that tells that kind of intense emotion. Street shots—urban Middle Eastern street shots—are inspiring to me. The layers and layers of people. I didn't even grow up around that at all. I grew up in a really controlled campus for doctors in Saudi Arabia for fifteen years in a nice villa where everything was nice and brand new. It's not until I moved back to Damascus when I was fifteen years old that I discovered, "These walls have two million coats of paint on them. This doorstep is older than my house." People are living side by side with it like it's nothing—they take it for granted. "Okay this is an Umayyad door." "Umayyad door?! What do you mean Umayyad door?" "It's eight hundred years old." "Yeah, it's eight hundred years old." They paint over it, they mount stuff to it, and they screw their shops and shacks to it. So, the architect inside me wants to go crazy, but the artist inside me appreciates that complexity in life, and I pull inspiration from that. That's why in my pieces I'll paint, scrape off, and paint another coat and scrape it off, and paint another coat and scrape it off. Many colors come through, because I'm trying to mimic hundreds of years of human interaction and its footprint on architecture. That naughty kid that kicked the door open every single time—he's going to leave the indentation at the bottom of the door. So, while there are no humans in my work, their footprints are there.

*JR: Yes, the lack of individuals is extremely noticeable. Sometimes I think you can inhabit the spaces more when they are left bare in this way—and yet they still seem like they have been lived in and touched.*

MH: Yes, it's a thin line you're walking between kitsch and meaningful, professional art. I can't afford the work to be seen as kitsch.

*JR: How do you use that word "kitsch" and what would that distinction be for you?*

MH: My test of quality is when I hold a tiny camera against any corner of the work and show it to somebody in the street and they think it is a real photo of somewhere. If you take a photo from any angle, and they think that's a real place—a real built architectural piece—then the work is realistic and genuine. If they think it is a dollhouse or a model, the work fails.

*JR: Who would your ideal audience be, or is it something that changes depending on the work? Is this question of audience on your mind?*

MH: It is on my mind. I take pride in saying I appreciate the fact that the work reaches out to a wide, wide audience base. Because of the architectural nature, because of our collectively trained eyes and minds, everybody understands what a window is, everybody understands what a door is. A seven-year-old can interact with my work; an eighty-year-old can interact with my work. It's not an abstract painting that you stare at for two hours trying to figure out. In that sense, the work speaks to many people. The nostalgic, the refugee part, the forced migrants, are all common denominators among many people—not only Muslims, not only Arabs, not only Middle Easterners. Everybody at one point feels they're living out of their suitcase and their dreams and they're connecting to nostalgia. I do not intend for my work to be featured to Syrian audiences, because I'm not trying to stir up any buried emotions. If they find the work and they make their way to it, excellent. But I don't make the effort to take this work to people who just left areas of conflict. Particularly the work that depicts full destruction and decimation. That's not the point.

*JR: Have you found that you've been able to have a conversation that is productive around your work—with artists or with whatever community you've made for yourself here in New Haven?*

MH: Absolutely. It's been great. The work has been received very warmly. I strive to not come across as the guy that's doing work about Syria. The recent work is not only about Syria. These are all about common denominators among many, many humans—particularly this body of work with the immigration and moving and nostalgic part. Some work was inspired by events in Syria. When I first started, I started with works about Iraq and the invasion of Iraq, the invasion of Afghanistan and the millions of people that died. I was a student here in the Midwest and I tried to raise awareness about the atrocities being committed in Abu Ghraib prison. All the boxes that will be featured at the Whitney Center—these boxes were made about Iraq, and American soldiers posing over bodies of prisoners, naked. So, the people that spend time studying the work relate to it. They get it immediately and they support it. In that sense, I've been blessed to have so many people react warmly to the work. Because the work is so diverse for somebody that studies it further. At a first glance you might say, "Okay, he's a Syrian artist about Syria," but upon more inspection you would see that there's a lot more than meets the eye.