

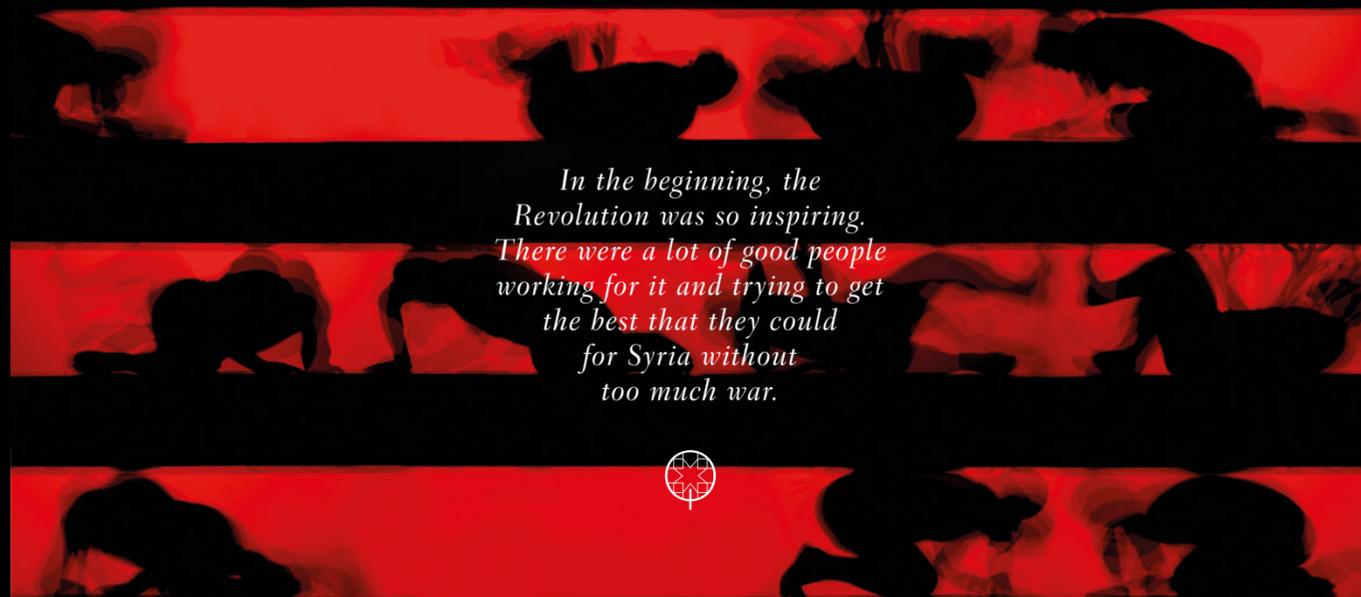


# THE DUNGEONS *of* HEAVEN

By Jaber Al-Azmeh

They are trapped contorted beings now debased to struggling forms which push in agony to break free from the closed walls which bind them. Syrian artist Jaber Al-Azmeh explains the inspiration behind his works *The Dungeons* and *Heaven* and how the above scene reflects the current mental and physical state of those fighting in the Syrian Revolution.

Jaber Al-Azmeh. Heaven. 2012. Printed on cotton rag fine art archival paper. 70 x 105 cm. Edition of five plus one artist's proof. Image courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai.



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Jaber Al-Azmeh. The Dungeons. 2012. Printed on cotton rag fine art archival paper. 100 x 150 cm. Edition of five plus one artist's proof. Image courtesy the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai.

We all knew there was a red line before the Syrian Revolution that was not meant to be crossed and we stayed on the other side of that red line because we wanted to live. But then, it happened. The Revolution began and we crossed the line. But once you cross it, there is no turning back. The fear which held you back before is still there, but it is insignificant compared to the cause at hand. There is a time when people must put their fear behind them and fight for what they desire – for what they feel is just.

It was in the midst of this mood that I came up with the concept for my work *The Dungeons*. I was still living in Syria and we kept hearing of friends who were being captured and put in dungeons where they were placed in very small cells at times the size of two by two meters for 15 people – so small the prisoners couldn't even sit down. In reference to this unimaginable situation, my photograph depicts people squeezed between two walls and struggling to move. A lot of prisoners told me that they could not breathe anymore. The feeling of suffocation is thus what I wanted to show. I then posted my photographs on Facebook so that I could share the horror of what was happening.

In the beginning, the Revolution was so inspiring. There were a lot of good people working for it and trying to get the best that they could for Syria without too much war. We knew that one day things would get violent, but we believed the fight was necessary to save the country. Instead this violence has overtaken Syria. It has become more than we ever anticipated. It has nearly destroyed our country. I wouldn't have thought that humanity was capable of this level of cruelty. I believe this is one of the most pivotal revolutions in the world because the Syrian people are going against a killing machine. We always thought people would come to help the country like in other world disasters. But there has not been enough help.

I made the second work *Heaven* in Doha after I left Syria in 2011. It was inspired by a story recounted by friends in Syria who go out and protest. When they described the experience to me they said it was amazing – how they got goose bumps as they chanted songs for freedom and how wonderful it was to be unified in their demonstration. They sent me a photograph one day related to a particular protest where they were chanting “heaven, heaven” on the streets

of Damascus in late 2011. The words came from a particular Revolution song which states “heaven, heaven, heaven, oh our home land you are heaven. You are our beloved homeland even when on fire you are like heaven”. People would sing this song while they protested with tears in their eyes and goose bumps on their arms. The feeling that they must have felt – this otherworldly elation even when faced with violence and destruction, is what I wanted to transmit in my work. I have thus incorporated within the same tight walls housing the struggling forms in *The Dungeons*, men who stand side by side with their arms around each other in unity. The constraints, the violence and the pain are still there but they are one in their fight for freedom.

Despite the current destruction, I do believe that the country will rise again. All we can do is to think of the future now. Syrians haven't lost hope – they still believe that change will come and they still believe in Syria. Like the people who fight it, this is a very brave Revolution. As an artist, when you see people heading towards the streets in protest, you admire their bravery and wish to also participate in the battle. I have chosen to do so through my art.