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*From Pharrell Williams album covers to exhibitions in Italian museums, **Hania Afifi** documents the life and art of Miami-based painter **Jason Seife***

CARPET



Facing page:
Jason Seife.
Chinese New Year,
2018. 33cmx33cm.
Left: Jason Seife.
Upcoming 2021
exhibition piece.
Courtesy of the
artist



oblivious to their home country's racial issues. "When I started growing older and travelling around the US, I recognised the difference," he recalls how some of his fellow Americans regarded him as an 'other'.

At the age of 19 Seife chose to forgo art for a life on the road, playing guitar with his music band after being rejected from his dream art-centric magnet school. The rejection marked a turning point in his planned artistic path. Ironically, it has also proven to be the catalyst that helped propel his professional art career.

"After playing with bands for so long, I realised how much I miss drawing," he explains his slow transition back into the art world through graphic design. Having cultivated a network within the



Above: Artist Jason Seife.
Right: Jason Seife. *Valleys (My Love)*. 2019. 152cmx100cm. Courtesy of the artist

Sitting across the screen from me in the office workspace of his studio, Jason Seife smiled humbly as I complimented his work. I could not resist admiring the intricate tattoos that spiralled from the fingers of both hands, all the way up to the upper arms. The flora and fauna designs with paisley borders mimic his signature carpet paintings. I wondered who the tattoo artist was as I also imagined how anxious they must have been to draw such meticulous work in the presence of an artist renowned for his remarkable attention to detail.

Upon first encounter, Seife is not what he appears to be. With spiky platinum peroxide hair and fully-tattooed arms, he resembles the lead guitarist of a rock band instead of a professional artist. He spoke in a gentle voice and I detected the slight trace of an unmistakable Middle Eastern streak; that when a man averts a direct gaze when speaking to you to show respect and humility.

Born in Miami to a Cuban mother and a Syrian father, he is the definition of eclectic. His aunt, whom he had spent plenty of time with, is married to a first-generation Iranian immigrant. His childhood friends and neighbours included Hispanic, Black and Asian Americans by virtue of the cosmopolitan make-up of his city. Like a dry sponge, Seife absorbed it all. He developed a mighty ability to move fluidly between his Middle Eastern and Caribbean heritage as well as display an uncommon understanding of other cultures.

"There is so much in common," he assures me. "You know the Islamic Empire spread all the way to Spain in Andalusia. Some of the food they took with them then to the colonies. So, in fact, it is the same dish with a Caribbean name," he enthuses as he explains to me the origin of the Cuban Tabaquitos, the stuffed vine leaves dish that carries the exact recipe as the Middle Eastern Warak Enab and the Syrian Yebra.

Like many second and third generation immigrants, Seife and his siblings adopted a hybrid cultural identity which often made them



Jason Seife. *Nucleus*. 2018. Sharjah Art Museum



Jason Seife.
Writings on The Wall installation.
2018. Solo show
at Montor12
Brussels



Jason Seife. *Moon Under Water*. Detail shot. 2020. Courtesy of the artist

music field, Seife designed logos, merchandise and album covers for musicians and pop artists. This included Big Sean's iconic lion logo, Nicki Minaj's video backdrop and Pharrell Williams and Mac Miller's album cover for the single GLOW, to name a few.

The money gained from these commissions helped fund his studio and first round of carpet paintings in 2016. "I grew up with carpets all around me," he says. "In my house and in my aunt's house, my grandmother has some on the walls. They were a staple in our homes and for my high school project, I chose carpet design."

The positive reception of his painted carpets encouraged him to dive deeper into this new style of painting. He first travelled to Morocco and Turkey and when he was finally granted the visa to travel to Iran in 2018, he visited the carpet weavers of Isfahan, Kashan and Shiraz to understand the symbolism used in their work.

He also made a trip to Syria in 2019 to see first-hand the celebrated Syrian marquetry woodwork and pearl inlays. "The funny thing is, when I showed those weavers and artisans my work, they were so impressed, but it is I who is so impressed with the incredible work they do," he expresses.

Seife does not simply copy the patterns on the Persian rugs. He selects motifs and elements from different rugs and mixes them together to create a hybrid design. So, an Isfahan medallion can be combined with a Kashan border and the colours of a Shirazi rug to communicate his own mood and message. In his later paintings, he began removing sections of the rug-paint to expose the gravel and cement-mix base on which he paints his rugs.

"In Tehran and in Damascus you see all those grey concrete buildings," he explains. "So, I was inspired to recreate them as slabs and use them as the canvas for my paintings." The results are what appear to be aged and distressed rugs mimicking the type of rugs he saw at the Tehran Carpet Museum.

The concrete slabs also paved the way for 3D surfaces including cubes and ceiling drops. Chief amongst them is the colossal 304x213cm ceiling-suspended oil rug painting of Firdaus which was displayed as part of an immersive installation called *Nucleus* at the Sharjah Art Museum in 2018.

When asked for his thoughts on 'art for art's sake', he replies, "Before visiting Iran and the other countries, I would have said everyone is free to do art out of sheer passion. I mean, I understand that they say this because they are not producing art for money, but now that I visited those places, I think there is a social element to it," he pauses, "like a responsibility."

Seife's artwork has reignited interest in the seemingly neglected traditional Middle Eastern arts and crafts. By migrating the art of oriental rug-making to a new medium, he has repurposed it for the contemporary lifestyle. This, in turn, is encouraging young people to take up the craftsmanship and Western homeowners who believed that highly decorative oriental rugs have no place in contemporary aesthetic to reconsider the art for their living spaces. ■ jason-seife.com Seife's new solo exhibition will take place at Unit London Gallery in the UK in Jan 2021. Italian debut at Museo Carlo Bilotti in Rome, Italy in 2021 (exact date TBD).



WORDS BY HANIA AFIFI. IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Jason Seife. *Round Rug*. 2020. Courtesy of the artist