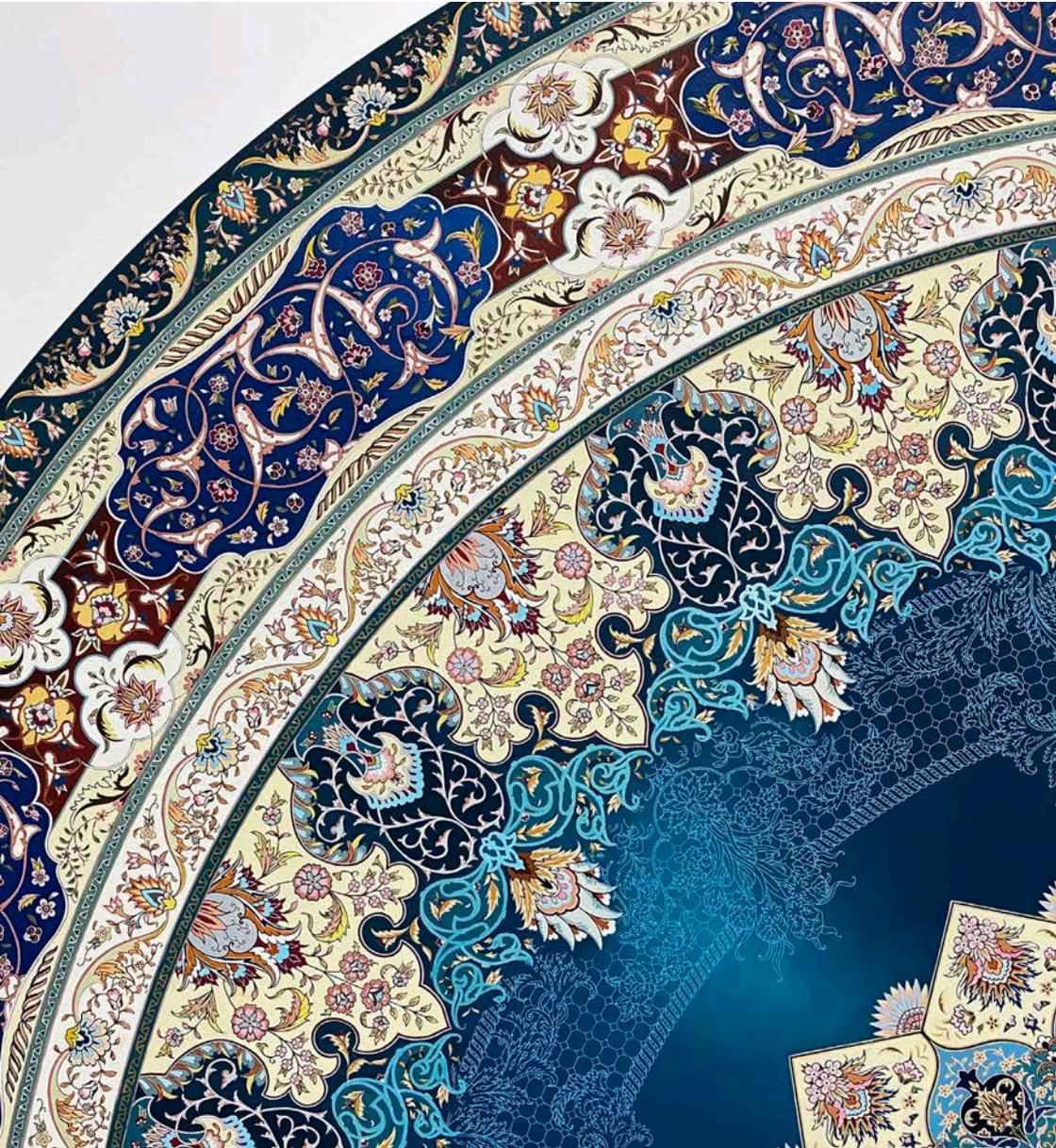


# JASON SEIFE

*A Small Spark vs A Great Forest*

Essay By Vali Mahlouji



## Jason Seife

*A Small Spark vs a Great Forest*

## Introduction

Intentionally abstract, Jason Seife's current show at Unit London has an intriguing title, *A Small Spark vs a Great Forest*. The body of works showcases the artist's first use of concrete - his own signature mortar mix - as his surface for paint. The artist creates a formula for his own kind of mortar, which he prepares, mixes, pours and manipulates to create his own paint surface in some of the works instead of the traditional canvas. The wet viscous mortar becomes less forgiving, rigid and unyielding as it sets which the artist considers as integral to the process. Its porosity absorbs the first layers of applied paint which enhances a particular matt quality to the finished paint surface. Once the paint has dried, it is not possible to utilise that porosity - the accumulation of paint and overpainting blocks and seals the surface texture. That quality is further exploited where Seife accentuates and experiments with various painterly surfaces.

**Opposite:**  
Vali Mahlouji  
@valimahlouji





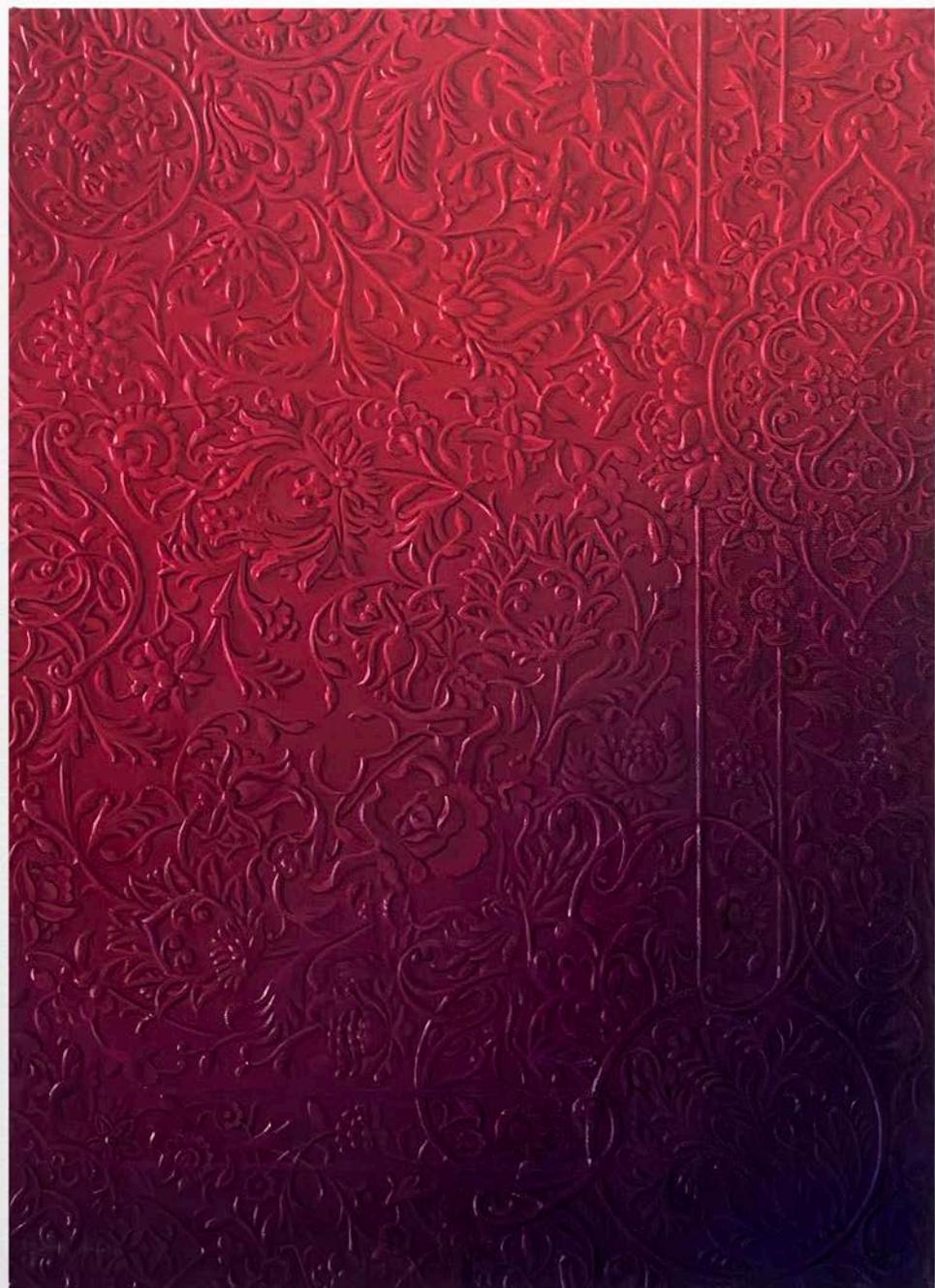
## Material and Subtext: Material and Context

The self-made mortar lends a subtext to the work. It references building and dwelling materials utilised in various cities from Damascus to Sharjah, where Seife studied various forms of urban demolition and decay. Urban fabrics and traces of histories are systematically destroyed, erased or altered, as a result of the paradoxical marriage of forces. There are the devastating waves of conflict whose indiscriminate hostilities scar the human and material landscapes. The detritus left behind in their destructive wake linger as monuments to violence. And there are the grand tides of urban development projects, posturing as benignant inevitabilities of progress, which aggressively erase urban fabrics and memories alike. In the context of Damascus, where Jason Seife has family roots, concrete or mortar slabs are bitterly and painfully reminiscent of the specific human and material destruction that has devastated Syria.

The appropriation of concrete as material here may speak to the temporality of cities, the breakdown of architecture, the crumbling of defences, and the very fragility of our human existence in succumbing to military or political conflict, violence, fragmentation and annihilation. At the same time, it may directly reference the establishment of military bunkers, bases, shelters and military defences built up. Either way, the mortar seeks to make claim to actual and historical territorial space. In referencing a functional construction material, like concrete, Seife intends to draw attention to histories, memories, cultural biographies and human adventures embedded in the fabric of the material itself. In remembrance or in defiance, through trial and error, Seife creates his own formula for mortar as his base material through which he meditates on the process of irreparable loss.

While Seife owns his own surface, he intends to write new meaning onto the material and its socially contracted and assigned application. His process partially appropriates and emancipates the material from its former definition and original context, and alters its meaning and purpose by transforming it into a material and a surface for art. The artwork is at once also a fragmentary monument, preserved where it cannot be touched or affected, frozen, memorialised as a fragment of otherwise, lost history. The very alchemical and transformational process of creation, curing and creatively manipulating the malleable-while-wet mortar base is integral to Seife's artistic drive and practice. In his own words, Seife claims, "The mortar allows me to create my own eroded artefact of history".

**Opposite:**  
*Stare at the Sun*, 2020  
Acrylic on concrete  
91 x 61 cm



## Dematerialisation and Hybridity

The de-functionalisation and dematerialisation of objects are manifestations of the artist's reclamation of personal and collective histories. Seife's creative process is rooted in various emancipations of materials and of forms and in the merging of materialities. For the current exhibition, Seife covers his canvas and mortar surfaces in intricate ornamental designs and patterns, mostly referencing Persian carpet designs or Syrian marquetry works. His referencing of ornamental patterns and designs is equally intent on preserving and freezing them in a time capsule, safe from ravages of time, conflicts and technologies.

With appropriating designs from carpets, those designs are dissociated from the original textile artform and stripped away from the carpet's architectural function – a decorative soft cover that functions as insulation, a surface to sit on, a practical piece of flooring and protection from a hard, cold, earth-beaten, tiled, or stoned floor. The ornamental designs are stripped away; the materiality of the carpet as the object is transformed into that of an artwork. Here, the artist appropriates and realigns the meanings and functions associated with the carpet as a decorative object and repurposes its surface visual skin. Those surface patterns form the archive from which he draws a personal visual palette and vocabulary. Various visual patterns drawn from disparate sources are integrated and personalised to create a fantasised reimagined set of ornamental patterns. The created patterns feign authenticity - they follow the strict original sets of ornamental forms, scales and rules. He then embeds the recreated ornamentation onto the hard surface of his invented mortar or applies -

- it onto a canvas stretched as a painting. The hybrid objects merge and fuse the functional, warm, insulating, woven craft matter with concrete mortar, a solid, unyielding, brittle material or with the traditional canvas, demanding the attention and the value judgements reserved for art. The viewer is invited to engage with the visual form emancipated from its originally assigned value and function. To emphasise the attention demanded by the individuated ornament, some of the works are fragments. These works appear to be zoomed-in details, fragments or segments, drawing attention to details within. The segmentation may compel the viewer into a more enhanced, active viewership – compelling the viewer to imagine flipping the object vertically and horizontally across multiple axes in order to complete the pattern and thus to create a whole.

**Opposite:**  
I, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
61 x 43 cm

## Painting and Labour

Both mortar and stretched canvas afford the textile patterns a new formal rigidity. The fluid delicate designs contrast with that rigidity. The painstaking application of the delicate designs in their determined precision recalls the slow and painstaking process involved in the creation of the original craft. As faithful ode to the centuries-old process of creation of the carpet textile art and craft, the artist prepares a preliminary graphically-precise design as the original masters did, only that they drew their designs on gridded blocks of paper or board. Seife produces his through digital means on a screen. His own physical/digital/physical (preliminary drawing, digital rendering, followed by hand-painting) step by step process does not intend to produce photorealistic qualities, in spite of the fact that the applied paint surface is often close to flat and brushstrokes are not accentuated. The meticulousness of painting carefully and delicately emulates the time-consuming, repetitive, semi-meditative/semi-automatic nature of textile weaving, here through the artist's choice medium of paint. Those are both skill-heavy tasks, demanding precise control of the medium.

**Opposite:**  
*Up From A Dream, 2020*  
Acrylic on concrete  
91 x 61 cm



## Ornament

The meditative act of transference of pre-determined systems of intricate design patterns is intentionally and consciously embraced. The process submits to the visual logics - symmetries and repetitions - of ornament that impose themselves. The aesthetics and the visuals have a distinct symmetry to them, which is dictated/ imposed by the hegemonic and dictatorial logic of the ornament. Structural and aesthetic principles triumph and impose order across the entirety of the art surface. Once released, the ornament's skin-deep reproductive ability with an absolute power to encroach and to devour surfaces. Its inherent uncompromising systems, sequences and serialities - akin to political totalitarianisms that control both positive and negative spaces - subjugate individuality and agency. Pattern is able to multiply and subsume all surfaces, master, subjugate and enslave them. Any breakaway is suppressed, perceived as error or failure. In submission to the dictatorship of an established order, the free hand and the gestural are subjugated, guided and manipulated, seduced by the security inherent in succumbing to the robotic nature of production.

**Opposite Right:**  
2, 2020  
Oil on linen  
61 cm x 43 cm



## **Ageing as Disruption (of order and Symmetry); as Fragility (of Creation and Agency); as Erasure (of History and Memory); As Destruction of Being and Existence (through Deliberate Violence and Removal)**

The deliberate ageing observed in some of the surfaces disrupts the logical order and symmetry, breaks up and disturbs the ornament. The disruption is of two types: embedded into the materiality of the artwork as in the case of the mortar paintings; or painted on top, masking areas of pattern as in the case of the works on canvas. Seife disturbs the mortar surface and incises rough textures into the mortar surface before it sets. The physical disruptions incised into the material surfaces are designed to feign natural ageing, integral to the work, alluding to time-linked incremental erosions of material surfaces. These worn surfaces may also be symbolic of the fragility of history (crumbling civilisations) and a play on infallibility. Concrete, tough and strong, is also fragile and brittle – civilisations succumb to decay in the face of time/history. Structures and fabrics capitulate to the brutality of the industrial/technological onslaught. The works stand as relics: glorious, rigid, fragile, brittle, accomplished, decaying, violated. The object may appear as though it first belonged somewhere else, a found object, autonomous, before being set on display in the gallery. Its distressed areas appear to withhold history and to stand in for an untold truth. The artist aims to seduce the viewer as witness to the negative spaces, especially as he intentionally contrasts them with smooth painted areas which are fresh, untouched and unaffected by the hands of time.

Seife deploys a different disruptive strategy on his canvas works. Here, he assaults the hegemonies of ornament by imposing areas of block paint that obscure the pattern. These literally negative spaces are disconcertingly, and playfully, symmetrically superimposed upon the pattern, decidedly not random. The fluid dark spillages encroach upon the pattern rather than vice versa.

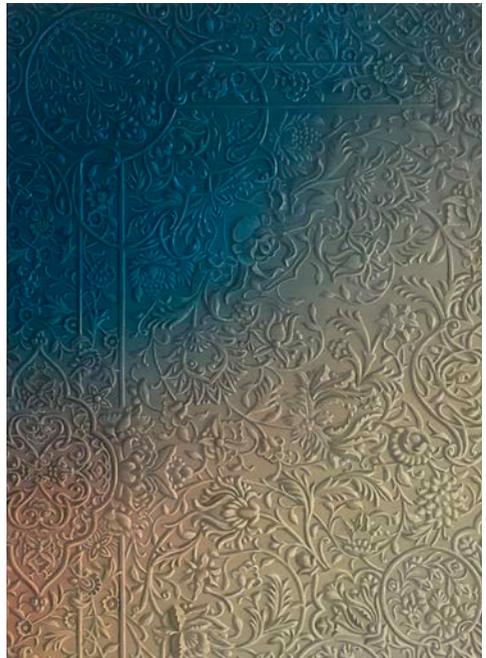
The negative spaces are rendered as foreground. As such, conceptually, they are akin to censorships and various phenomenal realities symptomatic of deliberate and designed removals. Nothing is coincidental. Seife seems intent on countering the romantic allure of decomposition or decay which is at play elsewhere. Seife deploys digital means again when he meticulously designs negative and positive spaces and the gradual colour fades. He then translates them manually onto his art surface. Reverting back to the hand-made is an ode to the original craft and it is in line with his disposition and motivation to engage with the rigour, the focus, the absorption and the attention that the process of creation demands.

A more poetic relationship to erasure may be observed in the 'gradient paintings'. The background colours appear to be drained/faded/sun-bleached from above or below. Bleaching alludes again to ageing - drained of historical relevance, drained of memory, drained of vitality.



**Above:**  
*In Bloom*, 2020  
Acrylic on concrete  
152 x 102 cm

**Right:**  
*4*, 2020  
Oil on linen  
61 x 43 cm





## Symbolism of the Persian carpet

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**Opposite Left:**  
*The Tourist*, 2020  
Oil on canvas  
183 x 122 cm

## Fetishised Memorialisations

The forms and arabesques are real and distinct, but they are also lines of imagination and desire. For Seife, those connections are not only allegorical but also biographical. Those carpets represent actual heirlooms, handed down through generations. Seife speaks openly about his attempts to link the self to a past with an urgency to reconcile history. The individual artworks directly reference unambiguous points of contact with a distinct culture and an individual personal lineage. Burdened with multiple meanings, the works may pose as transitional objects between the here/now and elsewhere/past, between the biographical and the historical, making an imperfect set of memory connections. The embedded, imagined and affective dimensions appear to refer to a desire to retrieve and to memorialise an injured personal and historical past, a possible mournful regression into the necessary safety and containment of an inviolable home. Seife creates his artworks not merely as relics, but as wishfulfilling fetishisations of a utopian image of a distant home, a mirage of a motherland that was itself potentially idealised and only ever partially real.

**Opposite Right:**  
Jason Seife  
A Small Spark vs A Great Forest  
Unit London - Install



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