



# CLOUDS OF HOPE

British-Iraqi street artist Marwan Shakarchi gave up a comfortable life to dedicate himself to his passion. Now, the Dubai-based creator is using clouds to help displaced Iraqis, says **Faris Al Jawad**



From New York to Madrid and Lisbon, Marwan has left his clouds worldwide, and finally found a home at Dubai's Tashkeel



**M**arwan Shakarchi is cruising on his skateboard behind Dubai's Tashkeel art studios.

Surrounded by a bunch of kids pulling off tricks, he seems at home in this open space.

In the distance, past the golden minarets of the mosque, the sun is going down behind the sand dunes as the call for prayer echoes around the Nad Al Sheba neighbourhood.

Behind the buzzing stream of skaters, on the backboard of the skate bowl, is a colourful mural, radiating lush oranges, reds and violets. Marwan painted it in 2014 with two Dubai-based artists. Among El Seed's beautiful Arabic calligraphy strokes, and Ruben Sanchez's quirky interpretation of cubism are dozens of Marwan's colourful clouds – the artist's signature motif.

The British-Iraqi, who goes by his artistic name Myne and Yours, gave up a whole lot to pursue his passion here in Dubai. 'Before, I had everything; I had a good job, I had security, I had a nice car... and I was miserable,' he says. While working as a marketing manager in London, Marwan was pursuing his artistic dreams in his free time, effectively working two full-time jobs.

'I studied economics in university, but I quickly realised that wasn't what I wanted to do. I started phasing out, and was spending more time making music and drawing.'

This passion for art grew as Marwan began working. He taught himself to use Adobe Illustrator to create the clean lines that define his style. He was soon being asked to paint at events such as Upfest, Europe's largest street art festival, with his work also being showcased at exhibitions around London.

**B**ut it was when he was invited to exhibit his work in Dubai, in 2012, and later introduced to Tashkeel, that he began to consider risking it all for a space at the art studio. A year later, impressed by the artist's unique style and industrious work ethic, Tashkeel offered Marwan a spot.

'I fell in love with the place,' says Marwan. 'I don't think this exists anywhere else – I haven't found it in the UK – this creative hub, this energy, these like-minded people that you can feed off, the support system that Tashkeel gives you.'

Marwan has left his clouds all over the world, painting iconic and dramatic murals in cities from Lisbon to New York, but it is in Dubai, and particularly Tashkeel, that the 31-year-old has been given the time and space to dedicate himself to his art.

As well as collaborating with brands such as Nike and Red Bull, and creating eye-catching street art, Marwan is also commissioned to paint canvases for collectors, and recently has produced a series with the Amar Foundation, a charity that supports struggling communities in Iraq. When Marwan came across the London-based organisation, he felt compelled to get involved.

'I wanted to use my work for the greater good. Everything that we've seen [in the Middle East] over the past few years has been terrifying, and to watch people go through that is overwhelming, in the sense that you can't continue with your own daily life.

'It's all well and good to speak like this, but to not do anything about it is another thing. I guess I could go there, and I could be hands-on, but I haven't got to that stage yet. I don't know if I ever will. But what I can do is take a small step in the right direction.'

**M**arwan started searching for charities who work from the ground up, and came across Amar. 'Unique among other charities, it focuses on training Iraqis in medical, educational and psychotherapy skills, so as to keep a sustainable system in place that is run for and by the community,' he says. He decided to create an image that represented his feelings towards the Arab world, and donate the sales from 20 of the 50 limited-edition prints to the Amar Foundation. Thus, the *We Bleed As One* series was born.

'It's the idea that if someone else is bleeding, we're all bleeding together. The clouds represent us, as a civilisation, and they are all bleeding from beneath. But there is this angelic, beautiful Middle Eastern lady looking down on them saying, "It's going to be OK. We'll do this, but we'll do this together"'

In a little over a year, the situation in Iraq has become increasingly desperate for millions. From January 2014 to August 2015, the number of internally displaced Iraqis has risen from 85,000 to over three million. The vast majority of these are women and children, fleeing from the terror of Daesh.

Each print of Marwan's series, of which just 16 are left, is priced at \$250 (Dh900).

'Buying one of Marwan's limited-edition prints can help us to provide more than 2,000 vaccinations to children throughout Iraq,' says Mysa Kafil-Hussain, fundraising coordinator at Amar. 'It could also support a social worker in Northern Iraq for five weeks. These workers are visiting women who have escaped Daesh, and are a vital part of the psychological support system we are currently raising money for.'

Some of those who escaped Daesh have endured horrific trauma at the hands of the



The clouds held by the veiled girl in the vivid *We Bleed As One* series (left) represent a civilisation that's bleeding together



militant group. Fifteen-year-old Zeynab, for example, lost everything when it attacked her home, killing her mother and leaving Zeynab so badly injured that doctors were forced to amputate both her legs. And Zeynab's story is just one among those of millions who have fled their homes. That's why Amar's work, which helps to support these victims both medically and psychologically, is so important.

**F**or Marwan, this priceless endeavour that is paving the way for a brighter Iraq is vital not only for Iraqis, but for us as humans, and this links to the print's title *We Bleed As One*.

'I believe that we are all connected, and what affects one person affects us all,' Marwan says. 'The print we released touches on this idea, and reminds us that we are all one, and that there is hope.'

One of the projects that Amar Foundation is running, which links to this philosophy, aims to create more religious tolerance and cultural understanding within some of the sectarian areas of Iraq. 'We've been getting schoolchildren together from different sects

and religions; Yazidis and Christians, Sunnis and Shias, and having them dress up in each other's clothes,' says Jessica Scoot, head of corporate engagement at Amar.

'This then extended to getting leaders of these groups together, to see past their divisions and encourage them to see themselves as one,' says Jessica.

The *We Bleed As One* prints, which have already raised \$1,000 of a targeted \$5,000, are an important part of the donations that make projects like these possible.

And although the impact may be minor, Marwan is hoping it will have a knock-on effect.

'It's a very small thing to give \$1,000, but that small thing can have a ripple effect that can make a huge difference,' he says.

'I don't want this to be a one-off. I want to do as much as we can together.'

To own a copy of Marwan's *We Bleed As One* print visit [www.drawdeck.com](http://www.drawdeck.com). Proceeds from the limited-edition series will go to the Amar Foundation, [www.amarfoundation.org](http://www.amarfoundation.org).