

ARTnews

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Reviews: New York

Hanibal Srouji

June Kelly

Lebanese artist Hanibal Srouji's elegant and inviting paintings belie their bleak backstories. The colorful, sparse works here derived from the artist's preoccupation with war and other atrocities, including the destruction of the World Trade Center and the Civil War in Lebanon in the mid-1970s, during which Srouji worked with the Red Cross. The acrylic-and-graphite diptychs, collectively titled "Cages," consist of two square panels that nearly abut each other, save for a small gap between them.

These are the works of a master colorist and storyteller, with each piece having its own palette. Purples coexist with chartreuse in *Cage 19* (2008), and in other



Hanibal Srouji, *Cage 19*, 2008, acrylic and graphite on canvas, diptych, 28¾ x 57½.
June Kelly.

works thick bands of color at the edge of the canvases frequently seem to buffet the objects set against their beige background. Light-handed daubs and vertical lines, despite the brightness of their hues, convey melancholy and violence.

The paintings in the show were largely abstract, although certain objects as well as motifs appear throughout many of the canvases. Sets of bars resembling flags and cages, in orange, yellow, or green, show up in some paintings, along with what look like dying flowers. Suggestions of falling leaves express a sense of downward movement, such that, to some observers, those "leaves" might call to mind people jumping out of a building.

Most striking here was the artist's treatment of explosive cloudlike formations, where bright, carefully blended colors encroach on gleaming whites, evoking everything from cotton candy to mushroom clouds. Each painting captures the precise moment when beauty perishes. It suggests that everything in this world—our cage—is lovely, but only for an instant. —*Doug McClemon*