TEMPLON

BILAL HAMDAD

DAPPER DAN MAGAZINE, Summer 2026

Artist Bilal Hamdad creates vast oil paintings depicting quotidian scenes of contemporary, cosmopolitan Paris—bustling café terraces, thrumming crowds outside metro stations, a child on a scooter, a woman engrossed in her phone.

This is the city in which Hamdad lives and works. Hailing from Sidi Bel Abbès, Algeria, where he undertook his first degree in fine art, he moved to France to continue his studies at Les Beaux-Arts schools in Bourges and then Paris.

We spoke to Hamdad during his acclaimed solo exhibition Paname (French slang for Paris) at the prestigious Petit Palais in the French capital, where his paintings entered into direct dialogue with the museum's historic collection.

Indeed, Hamdad's work is in constant discourse with art history. While his portrayals may appear realistic at first glance, closer inspection reveals meticulously constructed compositions, into which quotes from works by Manet, Degas, or Velázquez are deftly inserted.

Bilal talked with us about the narratives he creates, the visual language he uses to do so, the multiple readings his paintings invite, and the pressure on an artist to apply words to their oeuvre.

BILAL HAMDAD

PORTRAIT BY
CHARLIE DE KEERSMAECKER

talks to KIM LAIDLAW

Conversation translated from French

KIM LAIDLAW: You create large-scale oil paintings based on photographs, often of urban scenes. Why is oil painting your chosen medium for these subjects?

BILAL HAMDAD: There's a long tradition of oil painting, and it suits me because I can rework it. I work on three or four paintings at the same time. I can leave one aside, forget about it, then come back to it later. Oil paint can also be modified over time. Other mediums are more immediate, but with oil painting, it's like a story you can rewrite.

KL: From a distance, your scenes seem naturalistic, almost photographic. But upon further observation, one sees the brushstrokes and one realises that these aren't real scenes—they're constructed.

BH: They're constructed from several photos, multiple moments. I always try to achieve a pictorial balance. Large formats give me more time and freedom to invent scenes that resonate with me.

KL: How do you decide what to include in a scene? There's a strong sense of harmony and visual flow, but you also make narrative choices.

BH: Yes, I try to have multiple narratives. I don't decide from the outset that a work will be about a specific subject; I try to allow several readings. I often think about what happens outside of the frame as well as on the inside. If a figure exits the frame, we imagine what's happening nearby. If there's a reflection, we imagine what's being reflected. All of this creates little stories.

KL: Like the child in the foreground in *Lueurs d'un soir*, whom we also see in other paintings.

BH:Exactly. It becomes a kind of series—you see the same child in other paintings, like *Paname.*

KL: So there's a reading that unfolds across your works.

BH: That's right, like a passage. And in *Lueur d'un soir,* there's a soap bubble—a reference to [*Soap Bubbles* by] Chardin—which also appears in *Paname*, though barely visible. It adds a sense of ephemerality, something fleeting.

KL: A fleeting aspect that makes me think of Monet, too, whom you quote directly with this orange globe in *Reflets*, echoing the setting sun in Monet's *Sunset on the Seine at Lavacourt,* which is exhibited in the Petit Palais near where *Reflets* is hanging in your exhibition.

BH: Actually, I painted that before seeing the Monet. The connection was made afterwards by the curator [Annick Lemoine], who linked it to the setting sun.

KL: So the orange globe in *Reflets* wasn't a deliberate quotation?

BH: No, more a coincidence, or something unconscious. The curator suggested the link, and we tried to create as many connections as possible with the [Petit Palais] collection.

KL: In other paintings, though, you do quote works from the history of art. In *Lueurs d'un soir*, for example, there is a woman sitting on the café terrace who is a reference to Degas' *Dans un Café.*

BH: That's right. Degas painted that figure, and Manet later reworked almost the same composition. Initially, I thought of including both references, but it felt too much.

I often think about Degas and Manet because they drew on the Spanish School to speak about their own time. That idea interests me: addressing one's own era while drawing on references to the Spanish School. When I was in Spain for the year during my residence [at Casa de Velázquez in 2023], I painted four works referencing *Las Meninas* by Velázquez—that's where the reflections come from, including the reflection of the king and queen [in the background of *Lueurs d'un soir*]. Seeing Velázquez—especially *Las Meninas*—was a revelation. I first saw it as a student in 2017 when I visited the Prado Museum. I was torn between abstraction and figuration, and suddenly it made sense. Even though Velázquez is figurative, there's a great deal of painterly play; nothing is fixed.

KL: Like Manet, who drew on the Spanish school to depict his own time, you use this inherited visual language to speak about ours. And in *Sérénité d'une ombre*, you reference Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* directly.

BH: I painted that in Madrid. Before starting, I already had the elements: the marble, the oranges, the waiter. The connection to Manet was immediate. What interested me was the relationship between inside and outside—we imagine what's happening inside.

BILAL HAMDAD, *LUEURS D'UN SOIR*, 2024, 245 × 200 CM
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TEMPLON. PHOTO © ISABELLE ARTHUIS.

BILAL HAMDAD, *REFLETS*, 2024, 245 × 200 CM
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TEMPLON. PHOTO © ISABELLE ARTHUIS.

KL: What role does this tension between inside and outside play in your work?

BH: Pictorially, it creates chiaroscuro: a dark interior against a bright exterior. It allows forms to emerge. It also lets me create depth without using traditional perspective. And with darkness like this, it isn't a wall—it's an opening, so we imagine what is happening inside.

KL: There's often this sense of intrigue and mystery in your paintings: we wonder what's happening behind or beyond the frame.

BH: I often try to think about that, to allow for multiple interpretations.

KL: I get the impression that you speak more about your formal and pictorial choices rather than revealing the meaning, perhaps.

BH: Often, yes. Formal choices, how I work and how I came to an idea. I'm happy to share, but I never define a painting. I talk about light, composition, what happens off-frame—but never about the subject itself.

Las Meninas, for instance, is full of mysteries—because of the reflections, and so on. And I'd rather keep my interpretation than have Velázquez explain why he did that.

KL: And yet, as an artist, you're often asked to speak about your work. How do you feel about that part of the process?

BH: Honestly, if I could avoid it, I would. When I arrived in France, [to study fine art] in Bourges, I struggled to explain my work. I could paint a portrait, but not explain why. In my first year, I turned to video because it allowed a narrative, but it didn't suit me. I got bored and returned to painting, working from newspaper photographs and building compositions.

During assessments, twice a year, we had to speak for an hour about our work and our process. And that helped me with the research side and to deepen my practice. Later, at the Beaux-Arts de Paris, there was more freedom, and we were treated as artists already.

My three experiences studying fine art were really important for me, because I think if I hadn't studied at Bourges or Paris, perhaps my work wouldn't have as much meaning.

KL: What advice would you give to art students today?

BH: Be patient. Keep going. It takes time for the work to make sense. Decide if it suits you—and then commit. Get a studio as soon as possible.

When I graduated in 2018, I took a studio straight away while also working for the luxury brand Moynat, where I painted initials on luggage. It was a way for them to connect past and present—and so the Art Director would send me to the archives to research the house's history. I really enjoyed it!

KL: So there are people who have bags hand-painted by Bilal Hamdad without knowing it?

BH: Exactly!

KL: Talking of hand-painted gestures, we sometimes see visible brushstrokes in your work. The scenes seem realistic from afar, but up close, we see expressive touches of thick paint in unexpected colours. And this brings another layer of reading for the viewer.

BH: I like playing with complementary colours. From afar, they disappear; up close, they make the viewer ask questions. Why did he do that? Did he forget? Sometimes they're little marks, sometimes playful gestures: I'll use pink or orange, for example. They affirm that this is a painting—that there is that freedom of painting.

KL: In your process, you mentioned earlier that you don't necessarily know what you're going to do before you start?

BH: Maybe 70 or 80 per cent. The rest comes later. Sometimes it doesn't work. In *Reflets*, I initially included figures in the foreground [on the right-hand side], but it felt repetitive. Having an empty space felt more abstract and created a sense of absence and passage. So I took the figures out, but when I varnished the painting, you could see traces of them. When it went on show in an exhibition in Madrid, I retouched the painting during the opening. That's why, if you look closely, you can see that some areas shine differently.

KL: That's so interesting. It's called *Reflets*, and you're playing with reflections in it, and then you added another layer to that—quite literally! And in *Paname*, there's a small self-portrait?

BH: Yes. It's a nod to Léon Lhermitte's *Les Halles*, in which he includes himself and his wife. I didn't paint my wife, but I included her hand holding flowers. I was trying to work out how to put her in it—at first, I thought of a portrait somewhere, but I didn't have enough time so, in the end, I just put her hand in.

KL: You refer to several artists who caused a stir in their time—Monet and Manet, for example—and when I visited your exhibition at the Petit Palais, I saw that your work had created an unsettling effect on the public, too, apparently… Next to your painting *L'Attente*, the text label

explains that the composition "evokes Bilal Hamdad's *L'Angelus*", because your painting *L'Angelus* references the painting of the same name by Millet. And someone had crossed out your name and written "Millet" instead. What do you make of that?

BH: I find it amusing. I understand it as if they think I've copied Millet. Millet is the original. I don't do reproductions; I make interpretations. For *L'Angelus*, I didn't even think of Millet at first; the association came while painting. It's a nod to Millet, not a decision made in advance. It's often like that. In *Rive Droite*, for instance, I already had the people and the map of Paris and I thought of Courbet's *The Painter's Studio* while constructing the scene. So I try to create that story.

KL: So that kind of reaction doesn't bother you?

BH: Not at all. Everyone has their own perspective. There's no fixed definition—and that's the point.

KL: Your *Odalisque* could also invite strong reactions. It has different layers: an exhibition poster with an Odalisque in the foreground, a metro corridor, a veiled woman. You use the language of orientalist imagery to speak about contemporary Paris.

BH: I hesitated before painting it. Both the nude figure and the veiled woman can be unsettling. But I paint what I see; I wasn't seeking controversy. What interested me was the contrast between what's revealed and what's concealed. Any political reading belongs to the viewer. There is also the story of the Odalisque, but I didn't know about that at the time. Or perhaps it was unconscious. I discovered the story later when a journalist came to my studio and saw the painting. He told me that the curator for the exhibition on the poster was Annick Lemoine, the director of the Petit Palais. He sent a photo of it to Annick, and then she began to follow my work. Then two years later, she contacted me about the exhibition at the Petit Palais—so this painting made that link.

KL: Coming back to the idea of interpreting—or misinterpreting—your work, I wanted to talk about the concept of solitude. The scenes you paint often seem to suggest loneliness, but I've heard you say that this isn't necessarily something you are exploring.

BH: The idea of solitude came from an exhibition I had in Cannes in 2022, entitled Solitude Croisée. The curators came up with the name, and I said why not? But, once again, it wasn't something I'd decided at the outset. I start by wanting to paint someone, to create a harmony and to capture the person's soul. But, as a result, a figure in space naturally evokes solitude.

KL: And what about the subject of immigration? In previous interviews, you've mentioned listening to podcasts about immigration. Does that feed into works like *La Nuit Égarée*?

BH: Perhaps. It refers to exile. At the time, I was listening to stories of people crossing borders, and I was also thinking about the painting of *Ophelia* [by John Everett Millais]. So I thought it could be interesting to make that connection. But I didn't know if I really wanted to spell it out. The curators wanted to write it on the labels, but I said no. If you see it and think about immigration, fine. If not, that's fine too.

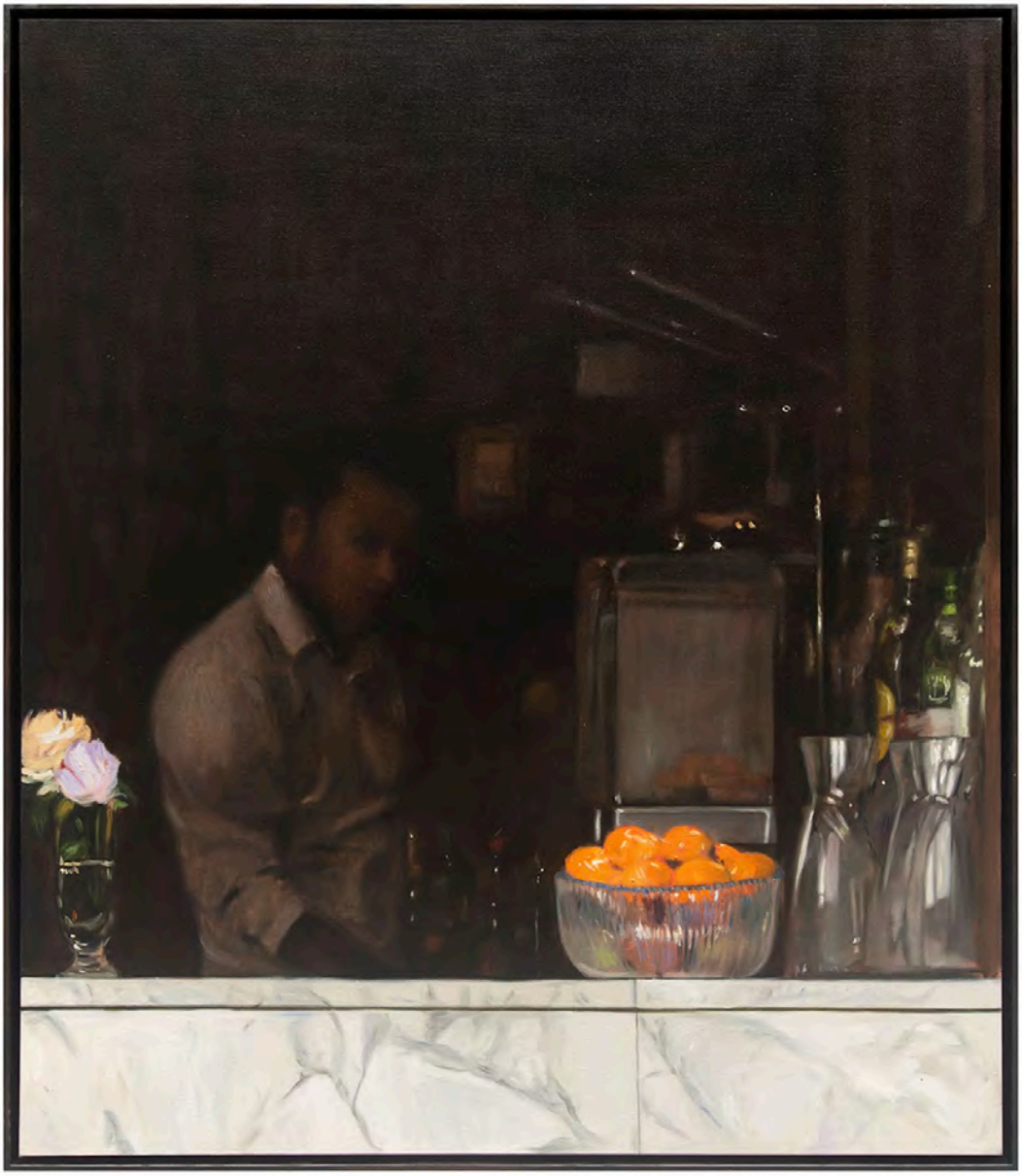
KL: You're not making a political statement.

BH: The statement is there, but I don't give it a definition. I prefer not to define each painting.

KL: Yet here I am making you talk about your work!

BH: And discussion is valuable. Asking me questions helps me to almost co-write my work. It generates new ideas, and that's important. Painting is hard to explain, but talking helps clarify what I'm doing.

SPECIAL THANKS TO
THÉA CHEVALIN AT TEMPLON



BILAL HAMDAD, *SÉRÉNITÉ D'UNE OMBRE*, 2024, 150 × 130 CM
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TEMPLON. PHOTO © ISABELLE ARTHUIS.

BILAL HAMDAD, *OLIVIA*, 2025, 200 × 120 CM
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TEMPLON. PHOTO © LAURENT EDELINE

BILAL HAMDAD, *PANAME*, 2025, 300 × 394 CM
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