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**Arts and Culture: Syrian artist explores the human condition**

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Syrian artist Houssam Ballan loves to watch people and capture their emotions on his canvases. His expressive figurative paintings reflect the daily life of the people of his war-ravaged country, but they also go deeper to explore the universal human condition.

The artist, who lives in the Syrian town of Sweida is presenting new works in an exhibition titled Motif at Fann A Porter, Dubai. Ballan's subjects range from scenes of people dancing at a wedding, women enjoying a shopping trip or children playing on the street to themes inspired by works of famous masters, ancient folklore and biblical stories.

Although his paintings depict contemporary life, he has used the simple style of ancient Roman portraits and the classical Egyptian Orthodox icons of Fayyom for his figures. Like a composer uses a scale of notes to write music, Ballan has carefully chosen his palette to create a scale or 'maqam' of colours each expressing a different emotion or idea but blending beautifully to form harmonious compositions.

“Just as a listener rarely considers the intricate details of the composition of a piece of music, Ballan’s mastery lies beneath the surface pulling together his artworks and allowing the harmony of colour and form to reveal their stories. As a motif recurs throughout a piece of music, Ballan’s paintings unravel themselves around his subtle motifs,” says Ghada Kunash, founder of Fann A Porter.

Ballan’s compositions capture the ebb and flow of daily life depicting moments of joy, sadness, love, and deception often played out within the confines of cold gray walls and with the backdrop of the war raging outside. But layered within these mundane scenes are many other narratives. In Three Girls he has depicted three friends enjoying music. As they share these carefree moments of joy and togetherness, the windows behind them subtly suggest the war going on outside.

“For me music is directly connected with a love of life and defying the negative conditions we are living in. It says that life continues despite everything. The instruments played by the girls - the traditional rababa and the saxophone symbolise the connection between the old and the new and the idea of continuity. As in many other paintings in this series, I have chosen a ‘maqam’ of three colours to maintain the balance of the composition while conveying the mood and the message,” he says.

Other paintings explore darker emotions. Crooks depicts a gullible person painted yellow to indicate weakness being deceived by some conmen shown as larger figures looming in the darkness. Greed shows a group of people grabbing food from a table. Although there is enough food for everyone, some have taken more than they need, while some remain empty handed and some are prevented by a fence to even reach the table, making a strong comment on the current situation in Syria and across the globe.

In paintings inspired by the works of classical masters, Ballan explores the timeless human condition. El Guernica, named after Picasso’s famous war painting, borrows from an ancient folk tale to tell the story of two battling groups who realise that their king is the cause of their conflict and throw him into an abyss. Two Prisoners Fighting is based on Goya’s painting of two peasants fighting as they slowly sink in quicksand.

“These two men fighting inside a tiny prison cell share the same destiny but instead of sympathy for each other they only have hatred. This indicates that we have forgotten our history and are doomed to suffer the same tragedies that generations before us experienced,” Ballan says.

The same message is conveyed through the symbol of the severed head of John the Baptist in Conspiracy.

“As a child I remember seeing a painting of the decapitated head of John the Baptist in my friend’s house and wondering who this person was. In my painting the empty plate in front of the girls and the platter with his head in a frame behind them represent how the idea of violence is embodied and subconsciously passed down across generations through a painting on a wall. It tells us that violence in our society has existed for a long time and is part of human nature,” Ballan says.

The most touching work in the show is Barrier, showing a group of children playing on the street. “A road barrier has become such a normal thing for Syrians that I saw some children in my neighbourhood playing with a barrier made of empty boxes. It is sad to see the atmosphere they are growing up in, but I am still happy to see that human beings can transform a situation like this into a fun game,” Ballan says.