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Majd Kurdieh's simple dreams for 2017

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When Ghada Kunash discovered the work of artist Majd Kurdieh, it was a “light-bulb moment” for her. She looked at his simplistic, childlike drawings and immediately recognised the depth and poetic stories within.

Kurdieh is a Syrian refugee who lives on the edge of a forest in Lebanon. He is in his late 20s and lives alone, with only the characters he creates as company.

He makes artworks about a boy called Fagoon and a girl, Fasooneh, who are sometimes joined by their animal friends, sometimes alone, but always smiling despite the fact that their world is filled with hardships.

They have simple dreams, such as removing the thorns from the land and replacing them with flowers, or talking to the Sun and the Moon and asking them to shine brightly to eliminate the darkness.

Kurdieh's images are deeply moving because they provide an insight into the reality of life for the children of Syria – but they are also extremely uplifting and hopeful, striking a difficult balance between poignancy and optimism.

Kunash, who has owned an art gallery called Fann-A-Porter in Dubai since 2009, developed an eye for talent and was quick to act when she saw Kurdieh's portfolio.

“You can't imagine the excitement,” she says. “The work is captivating and makes you smile. Also, the more you look at it, the more you think.

“What is really special is that it makes you understand the impact and strength of the current situation but it absolutely does not undermine it. It is not heavy on the heart.”

Kunash discovered Kurdieh's work in 2014. She made the decision to close her existing galleries – Fann-A-Porter, which was in the Kempinski Hotel, Mall of the Emirates, and Vindemia, an antiques store on Jumeirah Beach Residence – and open a new store to encompass both and also expand.

Kurdieh, meanwhile, began working on his exhibition, The Land Needs Ironing. He produced more than 500 drawings of Fagoon and Fasooneh, who he describes as "smaller than a cherry blossom but bigger than the world. They are always smiling even if they are in tears; they do not own a house. They hate walls. They dream of a wide-open window and floating in the air".

It took longer than expected, but last month Kunash finally opened this exhibition in The Workshop, her art gallery, design boutique, antiques store and interior design showroom rolled into one, with a cafe and an outdoor garden to boot.

"It has always been a dream of mine," says Kunash, who is from Jordan but has lived in the UAE for 20 years.

"The idea was always to support young artists and designers, and I have also wanted to bring people to sit within the art and the furniture to experience it and spent time with it," she says. "The Workshop is my vision, my home away from home and I want to transfer my passion and feelings to the public."

Such passion is clear as soon as you walk through the doors. Attention has been paid to every detail, from the wall mural outside to the artwork and even food in the cafe, which is made by artisan entrepreneurs whom Kunash sought out.

"It is art in every single sense," she says. "I try to find people who present food in a different way, designers who are working locally and artists who have something to say."

"I am also a huge advocate of craftsmanship – I believe it is what everyone is missing around the world at the moment. We need to go back to hand-crafted, good-quality pieces and I am always happy to work more with that."

Kunash trained as an architect and studied the history of art and design. She describes the discipline as the "top of the line" when it comes to understanding the development of cultural civilisation.

"What is reflected in art and design is reflected in architecture, and they move together to show the history of civilisation," she says. Perhaps this is what gives her the discerning, curatorial eye that allows her to select artists and designers to fill her boutique. It is certainly a big part of what gives the visitor a warm and welcoming experience.

"My goal is not only to support artists but collectors too," she says. "We need to nurture the art scene from all sides and here in the UAE, I am passionate about that."