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**Anna Seaman**

**Majd Kurdieh: Stealing Sadness**

By Anna Seaman

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There is something about Majd Kurdieh's work that touches the soul. His simple and childlike characters, whom he calls The Very Scary Butterfly Gang, exude personality despite their two-dimensional and crude appearance. He places them in a fantasy land, where the sun, moon and stars are alive and animals embody metaphors. Accompanied by snippets of poetic verse in Arabic, the compositions take on new meaning and become deeply emotional.

Kurdieh is a Syrian refugee who lives on the edge of a forest in Lebanon. He was driven to create his gang and the two leaders – a boy and a girl called Fasaoon and Fasaooneh – by an intense sadness at the war that continues to rage around him. He buried himself away in his studio and carved the characters from his imagination into a kind of utopian vision where they could iron out the scars of sadness and conflict upon his homeland.

His first series of drawings were exhibited at The Workshop in Dubai in 2016 in a show called *The Land Needs Ironing*. He produced more than 500 drawings of Fasaoon and Fasaooneh, 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”.

Now, he has returned with an exhibition of much larger pieces on canvas in a collection called *Stealing Sadness*. Kurdieh has set his characters onto a mission to remove the sadness from the world, which the artist himself describes as being as enormous as a whale. He represents misery and destruction in the form of massive sea mammals yet maintains his

whimsical context so that the pieces are simultaneously uplifting and tragic. In one particularly moving piece, the whale is showering the world with a rain of flowers from his blow hole. The whole concept of stealing sadness is achingly idealistic but somehow drives home his plaintive cry to humanity to stop the suffering. The smiles that are painted onto the faces of his characters belie their tears and through their happiness, the viewer can feel the shadows.

*“When you steal sadness you do not simply give joy, but rather, you water and nurture hearts for joy to grow out of them. For any joy that grows outside the heart, stays outside of it” — MAJD KURDIEH, 2018*

In another piece, the characters ride on the back of snails underneath the rain pouring from purple clouds. The words of the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish are painted along the bottom of the work, coming from the mouth of the donkey, the only figure with an umbrella. “I am actually not different from them all,” he says. “I am just fatigued by this endless journey.” Symbolism abounds in this image. The donkey is sheltered because he can no longer face the rain, but in the end, we will all have had enough of the rain. The innocent yet sometimes heart-breaking simplicity of his images often need no explanation – such as the elephant that is able to fly because he has the heart of a butterfly. This artist may be unknown to many but in my opinion, all it takes is an exposure to his work to be charmed and entranced by his concept and style.