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Making the World a Better Place

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Majd Kurdieh's latest show in Dubai, *Stealing Sadness* features playful, childlike paintings that radiate happiness. His characters include smiling children and various animals who are surrounded by colourful butterflies and flowers.

Kurdieh's reality is quite different from the world he depicts in his paintings. He is a Syrian refugee from Aleppo living in the remote town of Amsheet in Lebanon. But rather than being bitter about his suffering and circumstances, the young displaced artist has found solace in spreading happiness and positivity through his art. He has invented fictional characters that he calls 'Fasaean (Arabic for 'tiny ones'), who along with various animals form the 'Very Scary Butterfly Gang' that is on a constant quest to steal sadness wherever it may be.

"My Fasaean are inspired by art and literature such as the *Kalilah Wa Dimma* by Ibn Al-Muuqafa'a, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, and the old poets of the pre-Islamic period. But they reflect the current political situation in the Arab world that has changed the daily life, social patterns, and atmosphere in the region. I believe we need a new type of literature and art to represent the everchanging scenario," Kurdieh says.

His characters are naïve and seem to inhabit a fantasy world, but through these whimsical figures he explores the impact of the political turmoil in this region, expressing the feelings of all those who are suffering, while also offering hope for a better future.

“The very scary butterfly gang is a weird idea because a butterfly cannot be scary. But if you try to carry a butterfly you do feel scared that you might break its wings with your fingers. When the fragility of a butterfly scares you, you become indifferent to the roar of a monster and fight for the right of people to keep their humanity. So this gang is a reminder to all of us that we should not forget our humanity and actively get involved in making the world a better place,” he says.

According to the artist the biggest poison that transforms people into monsters is indifference, and that is something his gang can never be accused of. “Their smiles express happiness, anger or even a challenge to the world, but never indifference. They are nimble-fingered thieves who stealthily steal sadness without making their presence felt. For them, stealing sadness is not only about giving joy, but also watering and nurturing hearts for joy to grow out of them.”

“They understand that when you help somebody, they also help you by putting a feather in your wings to make you fly higher, far above the barriers that separate human-beings from each other, or from their dreams, to get a holistic perspective. In my paintings I have shown sadness that is as enormous as a whale, but also an elephant that can fly because it has the heart of a butterfly inside. Right now, sadness is overflowing on our planet, obstructing pathways and covering seas and mountains. So, the members of the Very Scary Butterfly Gang are looking for volunteers who share their dream of a world that is less harsh,” he says.