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This is Beirut

The Metaphors of Majd Kurdieh

By Lea Samara

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Born in the historic city of Aleppo, Syria, in 1985, Majd Kurdieh now resides and practices his craft in Amchit, Lebanon. Within the premises of the distinguished newspaper Assafir in Beirut, Fann À Porter – a contemporary art gallery with establishments in Dubai and Amman, renowned for representing an eclectic array of emerging international and regional artists – in unison with ZAAT, a multifaceted platform established to advocate and bolster artists and designers, have collaboratively curated a retrospective exhibition showcasing the oeuvre of Majd Kurdieh.

Majd's Universe

The artistic praxis of Majd is an amalgamation of painting with a preponderance of oil painting, drawing, and literature, utilizing recurrent motifs that weave a narrative, typically suffused with a potent moral undertone and imbued with a positive aura that the artist emanates into the world. At first glance, Majd's paintings might be misconstrued as juveniles; however, they are, in essence, imbued with an astute application of literary techniques and narrative strategies. These whimsical characters seem to recount an ongoing tale that extends across various series. Over the past four years, the artist has orchestrated a veritable pantheon of characters, among whom the two pivotal figures are the Fasaeen (an Arabic term denoting "minuscule"). They are devoid of arms, symbolizing their disinclination to take from the world, and conveying that whatever they offer originates from

the heart. The anecdotes and tales relayed through these characters do not allude to specific moments or locales; rather, they transcend time and space, serving as metaphors that resonate with a wide audience. This *modus operandi* affords the artist creative latitude and more importantly, grants the audience considerable scope for personal interpretation.

In Majd's oeuvre, adverse elements depicted through motifs such as rain, cacti, or tempests, are tackled with nonchalance and wit. The Fasaeen, comprised of a male (Fasoon) and a female (Fasooneh), perpetually wear smiles despite inhabiting a world steeped in animosity, and are typically flanked by anthropomorphic creatures. The artist reflects pensively, "I did not fabricate or conjure them, but rather, I discovered them, akin to scientists unearthing new avian species in uncharted jungles. Had they bestowed upon me the honor of inscribing about them in the annals of nature, I would have professed: They are beings who harbor an affinity for the light that engulfs them."

This cadre of characters congregates to form what the artist dubs "The Very Scary Butterfly Gang". By employing this paradox, Majd broaches formidable subjects with a palpable tenderness. He elucidates, "When the fragility of a butterfly instills trepidation, one becomes impervious to the roaring of a behemoth, and instead channels energies toward safeguarding the rights of fellow humans, preserving their quintessential humanity." The crux of his entire body of work lies in a keen sense of human guardianship and the imperative to highlight the basic rights and necessities of mankind. The gang embarks on small, optimistic endeavors, such as extracting thorns from the earth to supplant them with flowers, or engaging in dialogue with the sun and moon. The sun's arbitrary rising and setting bestows upon the viewer a sense of liberty. The gang's perennial task is to pilfer sorrows with their everlasting smiles, which might be construed as smiles of jubilation, wrath, or defiance, but never of indifference. "Indifference is the venomous alchemy that metamorphoses us into monsters," proclaims Majd.

At first blush, Majd's creations bear resemblance to animated cartoons and are disquietingly simplistic. However, upon closer scrutiny, the spectator is inexorably drawn into a labyrinthine world which the artist has adeptly distilled, almost with childlike innocence. Profoundly poetic and sensitive, Majd channels the multifarious strata of his emotions to craft art that is quintessentially human. The ingenuity embedded in his paintings and drawings reflects the artist's guileless disposition and draws attention to issues which, in his belief, warrant sincere representation. Majd derives inspiration from stalwarts of freedom such as Mahmoud Darwish and Ahmad Fouad Najm, to whom he pays subtle tributes across several canvases.

A Retrospective in Flux

This retrospective exhibition embodies Majd's artistic trajectory and his unwavering commitment to elucidate the human experience of sorrow in its unadulterated simplicity. The exhibition inaugurates with "The Land Needs Ironing" (2014-2016), a series conceived amidst a decade scarred by conflict. Irrespective of the trauma he harbors, the artist articulates it through resolutely positive emanations. Majd elected his brush as his instrument of choice, rendering pacific yet potent messages. While accentuating the dolorous fault lines wrought by political upheavals, he manages to minister to the vestiges of innocence, beckoning the Samsh ("Suns") and Fasaeen to herald an era of rejuvenation. True to its moniker, "Stealing Sorrow" (2017-2018) portrays "The Very Scary Butterfly Gang" on a mission. Though ostensibly menacing, the gang seeks solely to supplant sorrow, which can often seem as ponderous and colossal as a whale, with a plume that aids in soaring above one's sorrows and the barriers that estrange us as human beings. The whale glides through the waves, appearing unburdensome; the Fasaeen engage in dialogue with it: "Knock knock, open your heart!"

In his series, “Surrender to Love” (2018), Majd’s characters exude tenderness, both metaphorically and literally, having shed their erstwhile contours, the characteristic black lines of earlier collections, and by extension, their boundaries.

They surrender to the paramount force, love. A stark contrast is evinced in “Hold Onto The Flower” (2019), a monochromatic series rendered in ink on paper. The iconic characters retain their nomenclature, albeit with technical enhancements on canvas, bolstering their capacity to articulate intricate realities. In this series, Mr. Mouse, for whom nothing is insurmountable and who brandishes the standard of the sun in the face of tempests, joins them. Mr. Elephant, whose heart is embodied by a fish, embarks on an extensive discourse with his heart, which ultimately outgrows him, and he forsakes the world, clinging to a flower. The gang burgeons inexorably!

“We Continue To Raise The Flag Of The Sun” (2020) heralds the advent of the Cactus, which assumes centrality in the subsequent chapters of Majd’s oeuvre.

“Watermelon Peace” (2021) juxtaposes the escalating turbulence and unrest of humanity with portrayals of unyielding love, faith, and the quest for inner peace. Brimming with light and colors, the paintings exude a fervent aesthetic consonant with the intensity of the subject matter. The King of Watermelon is suffused with eloquent symbolism: “If the gang is hungry, they would eat the crown,” indicating a burgeoning and unabashed politicization in Majd’s work as it unfolds over time.

Top of Form

Love takes center stage in the series “One Wound, One Smile” (2022), wherein two antithetical forces emerge as recurrent motifs in stark juxtaposition: the wound and the smile. While sorrow is depicted as a deluge with surging waves, the wound amalgamates nostalgia, hope, and grief. Although the wound is conspicuously manifested in select canvases, it is tacitly omnipresent in every nuance, symbolized by a beige bandage adorning the characters.

Majd Kurdieh’s latest oeuvre crafted in 2023, titled “The Wing of the Dream,” diverges from his earlier corpus, as it accentuates the portrayal of avian creatures in a more veridical manner. The avifauna within the paintings is intended to not only epitomize the liberty inherent in flight but also allegorize the fragility of life and the evanescent nature of existence. Through his dexterous application of chroma and texture, Majd cultivates a dreamlike ambiance, obfuscating the demarcation between reality and reverie. Fasoon emerges as the true helmsman of this ensemble, portrayed in diverse avatars—at times a maternal figure, at others a chieftain, and often more abstractly, as an emblem of a city or an entire nation. In an allegory to Beirut, Fasoon addresses her: “I am rescued from death because your body is the city.”

The common thread interwoven through this panoply of creations is indisputably the dissemination of an inexorably positive message, employing graphical naïveté in service to the artist’s philosophical tenets, facilitated through this coterie of diminutive characters and fauna – reminiscent of the creative process employed by Jean de la Fontaine in his Fables. The audience is imbued with an effulgence of optimism.