

1 October 2019

Anna Seaman

Dubai gallery travels to Amman for Design Week

By Anna Seaman

<https://annaseaman.net/content/dubai-gallery-travels-to-amman-for-design-week?rq=majd%20kurdieh>



Despite all of his paintings depicting figurative characters, Syrian artist Houssam Ballan believes his work should be categorised as abstract because it captures the emotional reality of the human condition. Rather than paying attention to precise detail and Photorealism, Ballan often uses blurred lines and shadowy aspects to portray his figures and scenes. To him, this represents the unreliable nature of memory and the familiar uncertainty of lived experience.

Ballan, 36, is one of five artists whose works will be on show as part of an exhibition in Jordan coinciding with Amman Design Week, which starts on Friday. Presented by Fann A Porter, a gallery in Dubai, the artists were selected to show off the diverse breadth of new talent in the region. Curated by Safwan Dahoul, a prominent Syrian artist who lives and works in Dubai, the show features works by creatives who are all at a critical stage of their careers, having developed a strong sense of their own identities and practices, and who are all ready for a wider audience.

Ballan says his works show a deeper understanding of representation. "It is not about depicting solely what one sees, but it is also about the understanding of what one is seeing and the feelings it evokes," he says. "When we try to remember a person or a specific incident, we see these not in concrete shapes, lines and colours, but rather as a blur of multidimensional feeling. This is what I try to convey through my compositions.

“It is important for me to be able to reach out to different audiences. There are a lot of shared experiences in this region, but sometimes it is difficult to reach out beyond our normal networks. International initiatives like this can really help my career.”

Ballan's narratives are couched in the seemingly banal scenes of everyday life. His figures have a three-dimensional, almost sculptural quality, but their ages, genders and cultural backgrounds are ambiguous. They are also dressed in clothes from different periods in history, casting a universal significance on their presence. The overall effect of his work is that it conveys movement and a sense of the passage of time from the past, to the present and to the future.

Although most of his works are untitled, there is one in this exhibition named Red Boat, in which he has painted sad-faced Grecian-style statues in the foreground and an ambiguous red lifeboat on the shore in the background. The work indicates that the story of people being forced to leave their countries is one that has been repeated through the ages. The lifeboat brings the story into the modern age, but the undercurrent of migration under pressure resonates throughout humanity.

Works by Palestinian artist Omar Najjar will also be shown. Najjar was born in Palestine in 1992 and currently lives in the Jordanian capital. His style is characterised by broad brushstrokes that are almost graphical. He also places his emphasis on seemingly everyday scenes, but uses an Expressionist style to obscure details.

Dahoul says this artistic handling of topics is a curatorial thread that brings the artists under the same umbrella. “Crucially, these artists are all close in age and although they differ greatly in terms of subjects and styles, they are all connected to realistic Expressionism,” he says. Most of them are also exhibiting for the first time in Jordan, he says, making it a “beautiful endeavour” to bolster the regional art scene.

Also on display are the sculptural works of Shereen Shalhoub, 41, another artist who works in Dubai. She has moved through several techniques in her career and is now working with clay to produce sculptural installations. The most impressive of these are her perceptions of bird's wings, which the artist uses as a symbol for human experience. In some of these works, the visible details of feathers are clear, while others are more abstract and fluid, a result achieved by using dripping candle wax to partly obscure the shape. This imperfect finish is part of Shalhoub's concept, which she has based on a biological function of a bird's wing. A bird has the ability to change the shape of its wings to respond to different circumstances and wind.

“I am portraying the message that life experiences are continuously reshaping us and that we are on a constant journey,” Shalhoub says. “We are made of layers of experience and at the centre of it is a core being. My work investigates this core and, in some cases, reveals it.”

Dahoul, who was born in Hama in 1961, has long been invested in young talent from the Arab world. He curated the 2006 Damascus Biennial and ensured the entire event had a focus on artists who had yet to establish themselves. He moved to Dubai and had a series of successful exhibitions of his work displayed in the emirate's Ayyam Gallery. He is now refocusing on his curatorial activities. “This is only my second exhibition after the biennial. I would like to curate more exhibitions in the future,” he says. “It gives me pleasure to help other artists progress in their careers.”

Rounding off Dahoul's selection of artists in Amman are Majd Kurdieh and Khaled Najjad Paez. The former is a Syrian refugee who lives on the edge of a forest in Lebanon. He creates cartoonlike characters in his paintings, which always seem to bring a smile to the faces of viewers. However, the concept behind his work is driven by an intense sadness at the war that once raged

around him. He created his playful characters alongside a utopian vision in which they could resolve the sadness and conflict in his homeland.

At 26, Paez is the youngest artist in the show and is of mixed Cuban and Syrian heritage. His art is a mixture of hyperrealism and contemporary art, and he uses graphical qualities to present his subjects. They have an ethereal presence and his work is infused with an interest in fashion and jewellery.

“Jordan now is a growing area in terms of art,” Dahoul says. “This endeavour is highly positive for both the artists and the gallery.”