

# ARTS & CULTURE

## Houssam Ballan bathes mundane pursuits in musical lines and colours



**SHARJAH:** Syrian Postwar & Contemporary artist Houssam Ballan was born in Sweida, Syria, in 1983. An emotionally driven painter, he is among the favourites of The Workshop and Fann A Porter Galleries, Dubai, who recently hosted him.

Ballan's canvases are informed by his accomplished technical abilities and an extensive academic and research endeavour. His young protagonists are executed with close attention to detail - a form of realism that relies on painterly effects and meticulous line work, that creates a sculptural sense of figuration.

As the bodies of his subjects are given dimensionality, the artist renders their clothes as lines, patterns, and evident brushstrokes, with a stylisation that alludes to the passage of time and the presence of an ongoing narrative.

Titled Motif, his solo exhibition at The Workshop and Fann A Porter Galleries (till Aug 23), consisted

of recent works. "The title of the exhibition alludes to the act of viewing the artwork itself," said the hosts. "Just as a listener rarely considers the intricate details of the composition of a piece of music, Ballan's mastery lies beneath the surface, pulling together his artworks and allowing the harmony of colour and form to reveal their stories".

As a motif recurs throughout a piece of music or a work of literature, Ballan's paintings unravel themselves around his subtle motifs. He is interested in capturing the unreliable nature of memory and the familiar uncertainty of lived experience. Pursuing a figurative practice,

he gives insights into the daily life of people in his home country as well as into the general human condition.

His characters are done in relief and take inspiration from ancient Roman portraits as well as from the oriental Orthodox icons of Fayyoun. Their expressions are loaded with emotion, despite being mostly imprecise and at times movement is implied, though it remains subtle.

He also has a clear dedication to colour, describing his process as delving into individual colours to find a vast world of expression within each one. It is to be noted here that the musical reference in the exhibition's title came into context because, just as a musical composer uses a scale of notes from which to write his music, Ballan has a scale or "maqam" of colours, allowing each colour to take its full value within his paintings.

It may be that many of the works seem to

depict every-day scenes not worthy of deep comment: women shopping; a wedding dance, a couple kissing or an orchestra playing. But look closely: you will find deeper meanings. He has also done several other works inspired by classical paintings, ancient societies or scenes from biblical or literature stories.

In one piece, his figures morph - at times limbless - in front of a deep blue background, reminiscent of a battle scene. The subject, as described by the artist, is about two groups of people on either side of a river coming together against a figure of authority.

This work was affected by a mural done on rocks in Australia but also carries the title of El Guernica, after Picasso's famous antiwar painting. In another piece, two men with imprecise outlines and faces contorted in struggle, fight in a confined space. It takes inspiration from Goya's seminal work Two Peasants Fighting.

Another particularly striking piece narrates the story of the head of John the Baptist, where loosely depicted figures swirl in gloomy monotone shades around the chopped head at the centre.

Impacted by the dark and shadowy style of Caravaggio as well as the artist's subject matter, it explores the murky concept of subverted power.

Ballan draws his viewer into a myriad of questions looking for answers, but finds only an internal journey. If anything, his works explore the human condition. They take after his own observations and also are birthed by classical paintings.

"I love to watch people and capture them on my canvas. I am interested in the timeless condition of humanity," the artist says.

He is not empty of academic achievements or distinguished qualifications. He has been a tutor and a member of the Teacher's Association at the University of Damascus. He has also participated in workshops with artist J Bradley Adams and painter Jose Friexanes, and trained in mural painting with Pierre Palas.

He has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including BBA Gallery, Berlin, Germany (2019); Hafez Gallery, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (2019); Atelier Stories, Paris, France (2018); Fann A Porter (2019 and 2018), among others. His works can be found in numerous private and public collections.

Ghada Kunash, founder and curator at Fann A Porter says: "Houssam highlights the contrasts and contradictions of our daily lives. He manages to capture happiness and tragedy at the same time, painting every day scenes of children playing or people dancing at weddings, while the war serves as a backdrop.

"In his work, we see a whole range of emotions, from people falling in love to people fighting and deceiving each other. Although everyone is different, the common factor is that all of the characters are imprisoned, confined within the same cold walls and scarce conditions of war."

Motif was the largest exhibition of Ballan's work to date and its size and scale gave a full perspective across his wide and prolific practice, offering an insight into modern concerns that have existed since ancient times, in the stories of the human race.

Muhammad Yusuf, Features Writer