

MEDITERRANEAN MELANCHOLIA

MUHAMMAD YUSUF PROFILES A LEBANESE ARTIST WHOSE WORLDVIEW HAS BEEN IMPACTED BY THE EVENTS IN HER COUNTRY



Zena Assi

Lebanese artist Zena Assi has the ravishing good looks of a film star and the weary body language of someone who has carried one burden too many. At her recent show at Art Sawa, one of the latest galleries that add to Dubai's bustling art scene, her art works contained nothing much to cheer about.

The show was basically divided into two parts. One section showed people and the other, buildings. Assi's people have lean and hungry looks and her buildings are scrawny. Pitch-black colour dominates her pictures.

There are no smiling faces on her canvases. Nor are her buildings fitted out with manicured gardens or well-maintained fountains. On the contrary, they are full of little boxes, which are flats. Men and women, as Assi shows them, have brows furrowed with worry. They hug each other for solace. Some of them read newspapers with far-off, vacant looks. They are always skeletal and tensed up.

Her buildings stick together with the intensity of amoeba. In truth, they do look like amoeba under a microscope. Tiny in appearance, with pinholes for windows and matchstick doors, they are visually claustrophobic. It is not difficult to think that the people who live in them lead cringing lives.

Assi hails from Jounieh, a suburb ten kilometres off Beirut's city centre. The paintings she showed

in Dubai are her views of her city and fellow citizens. So, what made her so pessimistic at so young an age? Assi explained the reasons for her despondence.

Her depression is basically the result of the series of wars that Lebanon has suffered from. Her art sensitive soul and her personal experience of war has but affected her life. "I have always lived in Lebanon," she said. "It is but natural I'm influenced by my surroundings."

That Lebanese society is highly divided is common knowledge. However, according to Assi, it is divided on religious, rather than ethnic, lines. "There are all types of people in Lebanon," she said. "You can find Algerians, Moroccans, Egyptians, Armenians and Palestinians living in the country. You could say that even if they meet and crash in some places, where they live basically depends on their religion."

This type of social living has had a tremendously negative impact on Lebanon. At its worst, the alienation of people from each other has led to civil war. "The people I draw are serious ones," Assi said. "They are always thinking, I am not attracted by anything very joyful. In fact, when I see something happy and peaceful, I'm worried."

This is because she fears that the moments of joy will vanish too soon and be replaced by endemic sorrow. She feels that the Lebanese have a "major power of denial," to

carry on as they do. She does not believe in groups with flags anymore, since she has seen what they can wreak.

She labels society "negative" and rails at it for its double standards. "A mother will shout at her daughter for wearing skimpy clothes," she said. "But at the same time she will not think twice about hanging these clothes on the clothesline for all the world to see!"

She finds relief in painting. But many of her friends, who do not have the same talent, have left for Bahrain, Africa, or other places. She has filled a wall in her house with their names. "I never could understand war," she said. Her bitterness comes out in the very way she does the people and places.

"I like skeletons," she said, referring to the skeletal looks of the people she draws. "I think the lines on a skeleton are more expressive. I can play with my figures when they are skeletal. Skeletons give me more possibilities to torture, elongate or squeeze the shapes. It is like playing with puppets."

Assi's liking for skeletal figures is also due to the influence of Italian sculptor-painter Giacometti who liked to stretch his sculptures and elongate their limbs. He once said that he was sculpting not the human figure but "the shadow that is cast." For some, the attenuated forms of Giacometti's figures reflect the view of 20th century modernism that modern life is

increasingly devoid of meaning and empty. This is something which is perhaps echoed by Assi.

Another influence on Assi has been Egon Schiele, the Austrian painter whose figurative work is noted for its intensity. With twisted body shapes and expressive lines, Schiele is known for being grotesque and disturbing (Assi has done a painting titled Autumn Trees In The Style Of Schiele as a tribute to him). She also counts Marc Chagall as one of her inspirations. Chagall painted folk life of his country like Assi does of Lebanon.

There is definitely a feeling of loss in Assi's paintings. You get an idea that she is desperately trying to cling to a life she had known but is now being torn away from her. Her paintings are a way of recording her loss. Even the titles of her pictures give the game away: Colours Of My City; Denial; My City In A Rectangle; News Of The City, etc.

Amel B Makkawi, Art Sawa owner, explained why Assi is one of her favourite artists: "There are layers and layers of many techniques and references to masters in her paintings," she said. "They look different under different lighting. I really feel she has a lot of talent and a lot of sensibility. Personally, she has been affected by the events in Lebanon. There is sadness in her work. But since she is very sensitive to moods, she does not directly show it."

Photographs: Kamal Kassim