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Houmam Al Sayed's sadness, hope



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BEIRUT: In the myriad exhibitions, theater and music performances taking place in Lebanon, the melancholy eyes and distorted faces in Houmam Al-Sayed's work stand out. The emotional brevity of Sayed's portraiture, sculptures and ink sketches – nowadays on show in the solo show "Futile," at Agial Art Gallery – attracted me to his work. After glancing through his portfolio I felt I understood exactly what he was trying to communicate.

Sayed's work is characterized by one figure – a stooped male man with a distorted face, bulbous nose, and wide-set eyes arrayed beneath a ubiquitous cloth cap. In paintings, sketches and sculptures, this figure is placed in situations that convey what one might be reduced to when a victim of oppression from his state, religion or ideology.

This figure is not just a man but a representation of the cycles of religious and political oppression that people from this region have suffered. The paintings and sculptures also depict the destruction of Syria, the struggles of people fleeing their war-torn country and their resulting loss of identity and power.

The figures are distorted by the external pressures that don't allow them to grow intellectually or broaden their horizons, reducing them to stunted children.

The distorted faces tend to be facing downward on one side and forced upward on the other – suggesting both a loss of hope and hope of new beginnings.

In conversation, the artist notes that one side of the face is shrouded in darkness while the other is brightly lit, suggesting the figure's ambivalence about the future. The figures are wooden, unmoving, restricted, forced to stand still and watch the world move on without them.

The work in "Futile" tells multiple stories and explores the anguish that these characters endure in their reduced positions in life.

In the oil painting "Moses," the figure holds a wheel and has a loose noose around his neck.

The wheel, Sayed notes, was made in a foreign country and represents the lack of productivity in the Middle East. Its people are consumers that don't have a great presence in the global economy and rely on importing products from more developed countries.

He recalls seeing poor children in the street that had nothing to play with but a stick and a wheel, twirling the wheels around out of boredom. This man represents the reduced role some Middle Eastern countries play on the global economy. "For example," Sayed asks, "why can't the Middle East be known for being innovative in technology and commodities like China or India are?"

In "Noah," one of Sayed's figures sits hunched in a boat that barely contains him, one that's stranded on the rocks with nowhere to go.

In light of the ongoing migrant crisis, Sayed is attempting to convey the loss of identity that these refugees will undergo once they've fled their homes and face the difficulties of relocating to new countries. Who suffers more, he asks, the child that will immigrate to a foreign country and be able to adapt immediately – but will never know her heritage fully – or the middle-aged man who must abandon his identity and acclimatize to a new life?

Another hard-hitting work is the oil "Barmeel," which depicts his figure, here with a kaffiyeh around his neck, flung through the air, tail-spinning to the city below – like a human bomb falling on his own city, helpless and terrified, knowing he will explode upon impact.

For all the melancholy that pervades this work, Agial Gallery itself is an oasis, a peaceful white-walled sanctuary that isolates the art from the crowded, traffic-ridden streets of Ras Beirut.

Once alone with the art, you can try to forget the bustling, chaotic, teeming streets outside.

Each canvas takes up a wall, allowing the viewer to fully immerse herself in each piece.

Sayed's ink-and-acrylic drawings are framed and hung next to each other, allowing you to absorb them as a piece.

A few of the artist's bronzes – preoccupied by the same figure as his paintings and sketches – are scattered decoratively throughout the gallery.

Though he's only recently entered the regional art scene, the Syrian artist has made great strides in his work. He graduated from Damascus' Institute of Applied Arts in 2003, specializing in sculpture, his interests later shifting to large-scale figurative painting as well as small-scale freestanding figures.

He first exhibited at Latakia's Teshrin University at age 17. Since then, he has shown his art throughout Syria, and participated in group exhibitions and symposiums across the Arab world and Europe.

Soft-spoken and composed, Sayed is obviously passionate about his work and willing to speak about his practice. We discuss the inspiration behind his work and whether he prefers painting or sculpture.

He says that he prefers sculpture because he feels he is bringing his ideas to life, rather than just painting them on a canvas. It is into the ink-and-acrylic sketches that he pours his frustration and anger, he says, sometimes spending up to a week just lining and shading each character to perfection.

Though the melancholy radiating from Sayed's figures is a little contagious, hope also peeks through these paintings. It's almost as though they were asking directions, seeking a way out of the darkness.

"Futile" is up at Agial Art Gallery through July 2. For more, call 01-345-213 or see <http://www.agialart.com>.