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Illusions of shape and perception



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BEIRUT: Without the minute details, the beauty of the natural world would be hard to see. Hala Schoukhair's solo show "You Promised Me Spring," now up at Agial Art Gallery, explores what appears to be the precise and boundless data of the universe, the organisms and fundamental fragments of the everyday.

At first glance, each of these acrylic-on-canvas pieces seems to represent microscopic forms – the chlorophyll pigment of lettuce leaves, the geometric crystalline edges of a grain of salt, blue-green algae, fish scales' dark grayish hue, red and white blood cells.

While the paintings may pose striking resemblances to these substances, Schoukhair's aim was significantly more complex.

"It's like showing time," the artist says, "time passing. You cannot escape seeing things, because they are organic, so you can interpret this organic movement as different things."

"Some people see beaches and blue waves. Everybody sees something different, but it is always something organic. It's as if you're looking from afar or down from above or inside a little piece of vegetable. It's like I'm going inside the element and, for me, looking at the details motivates me. It's the whole point."

The artist did not gaze at the items through a microscope, then render them on canvas.

She is simply inspired by the smallness of particles and our own seemingly inconsequential role in the greater cosmos.

"The infinite smallness," she says, "is part of the infinite."

This show is the outcome of a three-year project, and the immense detail in these pieces highlights the enormity of Schoukhair's patience. The canvasses urge us to look closer, which in this case is a necessary thing. It's impossible to appreciate the whole without first beholding its parts – the tiny and repetitive schemes of gradually

receding color in each dramatic curve. No two designs are identical.

By first drawing a line and bending it into a distinct form, Schoukhair articulates a sort of optical illusion. Using a single color and gradually lightening the brush's touch, one minuscule component is seamlessly stitched with the next to create a bold outline that fades and folds progressively into itself.

The artist's peaceful demeanor is evident in her works, as they appear to be poetic translations of her preoccupations. The title of the show, which may seem arbitrary and unconnected to the works on display, is an expression of her thought process in creating her paintings.

"Some people tell me there is wind in the paintings," Schoukhair explains. "It's like when you walk on the street and everything is going wrong and everything seems bad in your life, but then you feel a little breeze or the sun shining on your face and it makes you happy."

"Even if you're not happy now, you will be soon. It's those fleeting moments that I want to capture and translate into my art. So when I say, 'You promised me spring,' it means that I want to capture this small moment that promises eventual and imminent happiness and bliss. I believe in this."

"I don't want to give you the garbage and the war. I want to look in a different direction, see a different perspective, especially since, when we are connected to the little organisms, we are connected to the universe, and this connection makes all hardships worth it."

In principle, these elaborately detailed pieces are meant to be seen and construed every which way. The dizzying encounters with rigid lines and strikingly dissimilar shades of the same color that Schoukhair wields are like parallel universes plucked straight out of Alice's rabbit hole to Wonderland.

Hala Schoukhair's "You Promised Me Spring" is up at Agial Art Gallery through May 6. For more information, please visit www.agialart.com.

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