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Jaber Al Azmeh's images make compelling statements about people, society and time

By Jyoti Kalsi, Special to Weekend Review

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WEEKEND REVIEW



Image Credit: Supplied

Empty barrels arranged in strangely artistic piles in a junkyard.

Syrian artist Jaber Al Azmeh's latest series of photographs, *Traces*, does not feature people. But the

artist likes to call them "portraits" because they are about people. The pictures of rusted oil barrels, dilapidated houses and abandoned cars say a lot about the people connected to these places and objects. They also compel us to think about the impact human beings have on the environment.

"The people who once lived in these houses or drove these cars are not in my frame but they passed through it and left behind these traces of their lives and personalities. I cannot help wondering about them. And I hope viewers will also connect with these images and find interesting stories in them," the artist says.

Most of the pictures have been taken in the suburbs of Damascus and the surrounding countryside. Al Azmeh's favourite haunts include junkyards, abandoned train stations and second-hand markets. The artist finds beauty in the most mundane objects, such as car doors of different colours stacked together for sale, empty barrels arranged in strangely artistic piles and heaps of weather-beaten windows and doors from demolished houses, waiting to be recycled.

The photographs are visually striking and beautifully composed. A view of a metal shed taken through a pipe is a captivating arrangement of lines and circles, light and shadow and different shades of brown. In another picture, the fresh green shoots of a plant make an interesting contrast to the hard steel, peeling paint and patches of rust on a carriage from an old steam train. Another image features the door of a simple village house. Written by hand on the door are several messages, which include verses from the Quran, funny proverbs, a phone number and a request to knock softly. "As a graphic designer, I have an eye for visually

aesthetic arrangements. My compositions are done instinctively on site and I never alter my photographs digitally. And I do not give them titles so that their interpretation is not limited by my imagination," Al Azmeh says.

But there is much more to the images than mere visual appeal. They make witty and thought-provoking statements about people, society and the passage of time. And they make us think about the things that shape our lives, about our attitude to life and about the legacy that we want to leave behind.

Some of the images have a personal resonance for the artist, such as the picture of decommissioned public buses in a junkyard. "I used to ride on these buses as a student. And the doors lying in the foreground are particularly nostalgic because the buses used to be so crowded that I often did the journey hanging on the door," he says. Others capture whimsical images such as a wall built between the tyres of an abandoned truck.

Many of Al Azmeh's beautiful photographs capture the ugliness in this world. The bullet-ridden walls of a hospital attacked during a war and the factories polluting what was once a green forested area comment on the destructive nature of humanity.

And one cannot miss the message conveyed by the piles of junk generated by our modern lifestyle. "I am not a pessimist but I believe human beings should be more aware of what they are doing to the planet," he says.

The artist has arranged his photographs on the gallery walls in pairs. "This series explores the dual and complex relationship between human beings and time.

And my display reflects this duet," he says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an art enthusiast based in Dubai.

Traces will run at Green Art Gallery until July 15.