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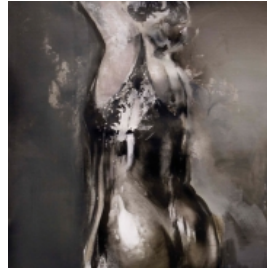
Artist Interview

Zsolt Bodoni

For his first solo exhibition in the Middle East, Hungarian artist Zsolt Bodoni explores childhood games and how systemic education shapes youth.

Through this show at Dubai's Green Art Gallery, Zsolt Bodoni uses *King Give Us Soldiers* as a reference to the games children that play, a seemingly innocent title that explores a more sinister subject matter. His paintings feature youthful characters who engage in scenes of physical education, an apparent nod to the artist's early life in Hungary under Communist rule, which praised youth's physical strength through conformity. "The whole idea behind the show is about how education leads to something else through sport or games, to something else like war," says the artist.

Bodoni, who took part in the gallery's group show, *Referencing History* in 2012, also explores the representation of the human body, and how it has evolved throughout art history. In focusing on the female form, he examines the cult of health and beauty in Europe that prevailed in the mid-20th century. "Through sports, human representation was modified into a vision of conformity," explains Bodoni. "Everybody was similar - young, healthy and beautiful, but losing their personality. Socialist propaganda at the time represented the woman as a working machine and a mother; she was becoming more masculine and powerful, and served the purpose of giving birth." Bodoni talks to *Canvas* about *King Give Us Soldiers*, and tells us he is curious to know people's reactions to the show.



(Detail) *Butt*. 2012. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 115 x 75 cm. Image courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai.



(Detail) *Untitled (Ants)*. 2012. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 195 x 250 cm. Image courtesy Green Art Gallery, Dubai.

Can you tell us about this striking artwork, *Untitled (Ants)*?

It was inspired by a photograph, in which there is just one person wearing a swimming costume and coming out from the pool. By multiplying the number of people in my work, I changed the message. The setting [background of maps and borders] refers to how landscapes have changed into maps. In some of the research I made of photography from the first part of the 20th century, around the First World War, I found postcards that were transformed into maps and routes for armies. So, this is the landscape reference in the works. You'll see in *Two*, the starting point was also a photo from the period of German propaganda art - and I doubled it. I make it into something very controversial by positioning these two figures in a very strange environment, which references a factory, a place of preparation for something that isn't happy.

Animals are recurring elements in your artworks, and often look tortured. Why is that?

Animals like horses were used as tools of war by humans for very strange purposes. During the First World War, more horses died than humans, but people didn't care about animals. When you take these elements of history and change their location, shape, name and other details, you are recasting the scene - to me, it's an act of not accepting what has happened and of recreating it. I'm building up a different history.

How did you choose which point in time to go back to, and why?

The photos that I drew inspiration from are from the 1930s-40s, that's the reference point. It isn't just art from Germany; art was the same in the whole of Europe at the time, from Hungary to France, it was the same propaganda. I don't want to position these stories in time exactly, but through my experiences and research, I create this kind of world, which some call dark, but for me, these are not dark works.

The piece *Butt* is quite different from the rest. Tell us about it.

It's the same figure as the one in *Untitled (Ants)*. But in this work, the body is really the focus. It's a very robust figure that was inspired by a photograph from the 19th century of a sculpture by a Neo-Classicist Dutch artist, except I dressed her up in a swimming costume and that changes the meaning. I don't use models when I draw, I use sources like photographs. I have to use elements that exist already; I don't create my personalities otherwise they would no longer be references.

So, you are adding your own narrative to things that already exist?

I don't want to have an exact message. At the end, what I want is for the viewer to impose his or her own narrative. What's important is that people get the impression that something is going on, or that something is going wrong. And if these works can make the viewer feel something or think about something, that's enough reason for me to make art. I do it because it's very interesting to refresh these kinds of stories and educational elements. When I was growing up during communism, we had to exercise in groups in front of a leader and perform during celebrations for 23 August (when the Communists seized power in Romania in 1944), even when children died because it was too warm outside. But still, we had to go on and celebrate.

At first impression, the works seem dark and sombre. What do you see in them that viewers may not see?

I know they seem dark at first, but they are full of energy - and darkness has no energy. There are things going on in these artworks, something is moving. That's why I wouldn't qualify my work as dark. There's a strange atmosphere, and you feel the action and power. There is, however, a definite sense of irony in these works; the grotesque is in there, because you are watching a sinister scene.

Zsolt Bodoni's *King Give us Soldiers* is on at Green Art Gallery until 3 March.

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