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Shawki Youssef interview

Opinionated Lebanese artist on his carnal creations Discuss this article



Picture 1 of 2

Stare too long at one of Shawki Youssef's canvases and you may begin to feel uncomfortable: feet become hooves, a smudge something obscene, eyes tormented and limbs distorted. As with the works of Francis Bacon or Egon Schiele, the paintings can make our own skin crawl, our own bodies feel questioned – but at least they hold that rare ability to make us feel. We met the artist to discuss his influences, the human body and the art scene in Lebanon.

Do you see a connection between your work and that of Viennese artist Egon Schiele and British painter Francis Bacon?

Yes, these works on bodies find their sources in the history of art – in expressionism, in the names you mention, in pre-Renaissance Italy, in some Arab and Turkish miniatures, Hans Bellmer (a German artist known for the life-sized pubescent dolls he produced in the '30s) and more. But I paint, in many ways, based on an emotional and intuitive core.

Tell us about your artistic process.

I believe that all art waits for accidents to happen. Somehow you create the environment and hope for that little extra, because without it the work is within the 'known' and, I think, dull. Think, for instance, of that superb accident in Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ* – in the scene where Christ dies the screen burns into this powerful white, but the effect was due to a faulty camera.

Your works bear titles such as 'Apple', 'Ego Fall', 'Fluid Being, Evaporated Bones', 'Grasp That Spine' and 'Mercure'. How do you choose the names?

Naming a work can't be anything but reductive – it limits the works to one reading – mine. Nevertheless, it's an exercise that I enjoy. As a viewer you can liberate yourself from the explanatory or the descriptive aspect of the title, but you can't escape the fact that the title is a parallel work that might enhance one aspect within the painting.

What's the rationale behind the exhibition's title, 'Fluid Beings'?

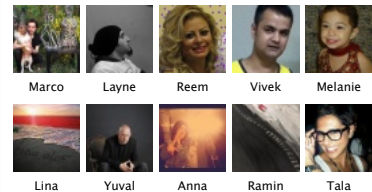
These bones I draw are more reflective of people's vulnerability than their biology.

What does your work say about the human body?

This 'weak' (human) body was able to vanquish all other animal bodies and conquer the planet, and all due to the brain, even though I believe that not everyone is aware of the responsibilities born from such domination. I draw the body as if a mirror image of the brain: regressed, enlightened and softened.

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