



BENEATH THE



*STAINS OF TIME**

SHAWKI YOUSSEF

Hollow Flesh, Negotiating Placenta Limits, Sky Meat and *Dislocated Femininity* are just some of the titles of Shawki Youssef's works, which tackle the concealed injuries and explosions we carry within. **Myrna Ayad** meets the Lebanese-born artist in Beirut and discusses visual and emotional detonations.



trigger releases a bullet, which burns rapidly towards a plump watermelon. In the millisecond that the cartridge hits the fruit, the membrane fractures, revealing a white rind which rips, uncovering ripe red flesh. The bullet blazes through the watermelon tearing apart its innards in an explosion of colour, shattering its epidermal and dermal layers and squirting liquid. What we have here is a frame-by-frame visual of a detonation. So it is too with Shawki Youssef's works, except for him, the blast happens within the human body – and stays there – and the triggers are emotional. "I'm sure thoughts go somewhere, they must manifest themselves," he explains; "On a real level, bombs mean people explode, as in their insides come out, but what we don't see are the little explosions within us – say, lovers' arguments or road rage – so we do explode and implode, but it's not as obvious as a physical condition."

Artistically rendering peoples' emotional traumas is a heavy undertaking and may seem like an act that consumes time and a great deal of empathy; the latter is taken as granted by Youssef, but the former is not. "I crouch over it, pour onto it, mix it, interact with it, then I get more liquid, ruin it, pour something thick, erase it," he says quickly; "The paintings get really tired and I love that." Youssef may be spontaneous, but he's not rash. This multimodal process brings Pollock to mind – impulsive and unprompted, the act accentuating the physical performance of painting as part of the artwork itself. "I explode in them," Youssef says of his works, which feature not only a collision of colours but also square inches of manipulated movement or chance encounters.

Opening spread, left to right:
Schiele's Sleep, Abboud's Hand and
Klimt's Absence. 2010. Mixed media
on canvas. Triptych. Each panel 100
x 70 cm. Private collection, Iran.

This spread *Negotiating Placenta
Limits II*. 2010. Mixed media on
canvas. 129 x 135 cm. Private
collection, Kuwait.

"I don't want to continue the body."





“The body’s construction, between the skin, meat and bones, is just brilliant. It’s amazing how it can be strong and vibrant, but can die at any second.”

Where *Action Painting* was defined by its time – a Post-War style reflective of a new era of psychological comprehension – Youssef vehemently asserts that his paintings “have a lot to do with the subconscious”. Not to mention that he lives in Beirut, a politically confused city which, in many respects can be classified as ‘mid-war’, ever-teetering on the brink of conflict. And therein lays another inescapable facet to many a Middle Eastern artist: politics. “Sure, you have to deal with it, you can’t help it,” Youssef smirks, “but isn’t it ironic that something as insignificant as a speed bump can affect the psyche of Lebanese youth and actually make them stop? The reality is, the current situation is worse than the Middle Ages, making it seem as though the provision of information in a contemporary age is negative.”

EMOTIONALLY CHALLENGED

We are sitting amidst a number of Youssef’s works – some hanging, others spread out on the floor – at Agial Art Gallery, whose founder, Saleh Barakat shoots me an occasional grin, all too aware of Youssef’s constant wit in an interview which will take up over six hours. The Lebanese-born artist is on a roll, citing figures and publications as varied as Federico Fellini and Paolo Pasolini to *The Sexual Life of Catherine M* and the writings of French philosopher Jacques Derrida to Ehud Olmert and Samir Geagea. “I like to call myself a trilingual illiterate,” he grins. His Dubai gallerist Yasmin Atassi is also present, and together we engage in a conversation on how Youssef’s works take their cue from weighty emotional turmoil, with hints of Francis Bacon, for whom Youssef has a great deal of respect; so much so,

that he painted *Tribute to Francis Bacon*, exhibited at Green Art Gallery in its May 2010 group show, *Connecting Heavens*, which took its name from one of Youssef’s paintings. “I once read something Bacon said, that when you draw, you have to be as near as possible to your neurons,” he says. “Well, I’m *in* my neurons while painting.” Perhaps *Hollow Flesh* – also the title of Youssef’s sell-out solo exhibition at Agial in February – is among the works which bring Bacon to mind; after all, one of Britain’s celebrated 20th-century artists often incorporated geometry with his caged-like mutilated subjects. “From the moment you bring space with bodies, it’s Bacon; the moment you set a table or an object inside an internal space, it’s Bacon, especially when it’s Expressionistic,” he explains. “Maybe the table in *Hollow Flesh* is a last resort, an ironic joke.”

One may be forgiven for assuming that the bodies in many of Youssef’s works are solitary. Who’s to say that a pair of arms or feet belongs to one person? By his own admission – “I don’t want to continue the body” – one can even go as far as to presume that the figure embodies a schizophrenic characteristic. After all, probing the human soul reveals many facets. The illustration of a collective is often intentional, reflecting a society anatomically impaired by the impact of war, poverty and disease. “It’s them trying to regroup, as though they’re stuck in the middle of a path,” explains Youssef; “Sometimes I really want them to pick up the pieces of themselves.” We discuss the impact of the Lebanese wars and their aftermath – reverberations of which are ever-present in the contemporary society and political structure, with fleeting bouts of stability. “I believe victims and victimisers are the same,” he

Facing page above: *Hollow Flesh*. 2010. Mixed media on canvas. 145 x 165 cm. Private collection, Lebanon.

Facing page below: *Sky Meat*. 2010. Mixed media on paper. 140 x 165 cm. Private collection, UAE. Photography by Haider Yousuf.

says. "It depends on when they have a chance to be either or. Sometimes you're a victim of your own will."

In *Negotiating Placenta Limits I*, a charred figure seemingly falls into an abyss, his limbs clearly decipherable – as is his gender, which Youssef quickly points out, "was just a stroke and not a conscious decision". He prefers instead that his figures are gender-less, all belonging to a group which are outwardly calcified yet writhing in some form of agony or energy. "Some might see pain in your work," I suggest. "Maybe it's the red,"

he replies. "Do you consider yourself a surgeon or a coroner?" I ask. "Neither, I just caress," he answers, before abruptly asking, "doesn't anyone see sex in my work?" We had, especially in his *Sky Meat*, where two – or maybe more – figures intertwine in a beautiful medley of colours which accentuate the corporeal, evocative of a climax. "I'm sure there's a war within sexuality," he adds. Perhaps we are conditioned to look for conflict by artists from "the tormented Middle East". The body and its sensuality is a topic which Youssef can discuss endlessly; his fascination with it transcends the erotic. "The body's construction, between the skin, meat and bones, is just brilliant," he says, in awe. "It's amazing how it can be strong and vibrant, but can die at any second."

"There is no violence without a mirror effect."



ORGANICALLY PRODUCED

One would assume that Youssef's life was one that had witnessed the brutality of Lebanon's many wars, as though such artistic maturity can only be borne from having encountered warfare and all its ugliness firsthand. *Au contraire*. Born in 1973, the eldest of six children spent his first 17 years in Nahrieh, a town on the Lebanon-Syria border "where only one road takes you there and where there were 10 homes and school sometimes meant a one-student class or third-graders mixed with fifth-graders in one session". Youssef's only recollection of the wars – aside from the distant noises – was "seeing elders gather around a radio, holding the antenna vertically enough to hear the news". For Youssef, these wars almost seemed to be happening elsewhere, so idyllic was the setting in which he grew up – fishing in the nearby river and "always" sketching bodies. "A kind of 'body-awareness,'" he adds. "I'd go to the river, pick up and rearrange rocks and found out later that they called it 'land art,'" he says. "I never took a picture of it because so what? It's a moment, a feeling you reacted to." Encouraged by his parents to pursue fine arts at

This page: *Untitled*. 2010. Mixed media on canvas. 170 x 125 cm. Private collection, UAE.

Facing page: *Dislocated Femininity*. 2010. Mixed media on canvas. 170 x 125 cm. Private collection, UAE.





“I am condensing a cinematic frame into one work. That’s a lot of time and feeling into one frame, but I’m sure it’s not static.”

Left: *Negotiating Placenta Limits I*. 2010. Mixed media on canvas. 193 x 157 cm. Private collection, UAE. Photography by Haider Yousuf.

All images courtesy Agial Art Gallery.

the Lebanese University – “the laziest thing in the world” – Youssef arrived in Beirut in 1990, at a time when Lebanon was trying to gather its bearings following 15 years of war. “People here hate each other so much that they begin to look alike, as though they’re of the same faith; there is no violence without a mirror effect,” he says; “But the war was over and there was a feeling of hope and security.” Beirut devoured the simple Youssef – “complete innocence thrown into the void” – as he manoeuvred around her streets, still licking their sectarian wounds, somehow subdued in the ashes of war. Classes were dull and uninspiring for him; nude drawing sessions presumably had an impact but he was apathetic about them. “I don’t paint nudes, I memorise them,” he emphasises, “in fact, there is an over-presence of the body that lies before me and I need to liberate myself from it.”


In 1994 Youssef won a scholarship to the Institut de Jeunesse Education Populaire in France after answering the competition question: where and what is the Pacific Ocean? “I do paintings, I don’t do geography,” he laughs, “and my answer was ‘I don’t know where it is but I’m sure it’s blue.’” Paris devoured him too and he returned to Beirut to complete mandatory military service before staging shows at Espace Sandra Dagher and Agial.

Aside from continuously painting, Youssef experimented with installations, video and even clothing, which incorporated his calligraphy, taught by his father. “I was really concerned with my work being accessible,” he says, “and a lot of it sold because I am a storyteller.” By this time, he had begun teaching art classes at the American Community School and currently teaches drawing classes at the American University of Beirut and ALBA: University of Balamand. “It’s enormous pressure as a teacher to re-see everything,” he says with exasperation, “but somehow, things get configured over time.” Speaking of configuration, Youssef is currently working on video installations for his participation at the

Venice Biennale through the Lebanon Pavilion, for which the Commissioner is Barakat.

VEHICLES OF EXPRESSION

Youssef’s medium of choice is paper. He’s spent a lot more time with it and given the fast pace at which he works, paper allows him the opportunity to view his own outpouring created in so little time. “I can’t help it, I have a compassion for paper,” he explains. Mind you, that doesn’t rule out canvas, on which *Negotiating Placenta Limits II*, *Hollow Flesh* and *Dislocated Femininity* are made. “There’s a lot more contemplation in those,” he smiles, “but I do give more time to paper.” Youssef never approaches painting with a preconceived idea – “I tried that but failed miserably” – and prefers instead for accidents to happen. It is the challenge of attempting to illustrate what’s in his mind that he continually seeks, something which surely means revealing private thoughts. “Are you saying I’m an exhibitionist?” he laughs. “It’s probably very, very cliché to say, but revealing these private thoughts is very painful, in fact, it’s soul-stripping. But lovely nonetheless.”

I glance at the disfigured bodies and it suddenly doesn’t seem appropriate to call them bodies, despite the physicality of apparent limbs. The works are more of a laparoscopic viewing of unseen sensations, which Youssef has depicted in what feels like a flash – reminiscent of Harold Edgerton’s infamous stroboscopic image of a milk drop falling onto a surface. “I am condensing a cinematic frame into one work,” Youssef says. “That’s a lot of time and feeling into one frame, but I’m sure it’s not static.” 

*Article title taken from the song *Hurt*, by Nine Inch Nails.

Shawki Youssef will hold a solo exhibition at Green Art Gallery from 2 May until 4 June. For more information visit www.agialart.com and www.gagallery.com