

Three outstanding Middle Eastern artists

By Sheena Baharudin, 3:19 pm Friday, 5th December 2014

Misunderstandings and threats are but mere catalysts that feed their creation; they create art that keeps the important conversations going, allowing discussion and exploration while keeping dialogue alive. By **Sheena Baharudin.**



(L-R): Ahmad Moualla, Shahzia Sikander, Rokni Haerizadeh

Anmad moualla

The great Syrian poet Adonis once visited the studio of Ahmad Moualla and was powerfully affected by the artist's works that were arranged everywhere. 'You look, meditate, explore: everything opens the doors of seduction to you. Each painting throws its net over you,' Adonis exclaims, as read on the artist's website.

'When you walk inside this studio you say to yourself: I like what contradicts me. It completes me and makes me different.'



Adonis clearly got what makes Moualla *Moualla*. Born in 1958 in Syria, he is today celebrated as one of the Arab world's leading postmodern expressionists. Following in the footsteps of other postmodernists, Moualla shuns conventions and boundaries; he still refuses to title his pieces, for example. The difficulties one might

have when dealing with nameless paintings apparently don't affect him. In an interview with Jyoti Kalsi in *Gulf News*, he remarked that 'a title

restricts the imagination of the viewers and ties the work to a certain time, place or event that may become irrelevant'. His style is instead to translate current events into figurative paintings that respond to the mental process of the viewer. Moualla explained to Kalsi why he portrays most of his subjects and shadows with no distinguishing features:

I do not want them to be identified with any specific cultural group. I also never make any distinction between humans and animals. The shadowy part-human part-animal people in my work reflect the ambiguities in our minds and lives, and the fact that we are always in a state of change and uncertainty.

Aside from his poignant interpretations of the modern world's anxiety and lingering sense of displacement, Moualla is also famous for his calligraphy paintings. This is where the artist's true genius comes out. Sweeping and massive, his calligraphic artworks are designed to overwhelm. Using verses from literary works, they are also highly dramatic and vibrant.



In recent years, Moualla developed a new signature style that combines his figurative and calligraphic brands of art. Scripts are dispersed across massive canvases, the result of a series that succinctly balances the dark quality of his figurative pieces with the luminosity of his calligraphic paintings.

So it was surprising for some when his 2011 showcase, *Grey Ash*, did not feature the usual voluminous chaos of colours. Instead, Moualla presented paintings that used only 'a palette of white and black'. He explains his decision in the same writeup, 'For me, grey is a colour that encompasses all colours. I wanted to play with black and white to create a super-transparent effect that conveys what happens just after a matchstick has been extinguished.' Calling himself a social commentator, this matchstick 'could', he says, be a response to the tumultuous events in the region that took the Middle East (Syria included) by surprise.