

GREEN ART GALLERY, DUBAI

DRAWING THE NARRATIVE

An exhibition that brings together over 50 works on paper by Modern Arab artists reveals the intricate art of storytelling. Rebecca Anne Proctor reports

Hikayat', which means "stories" in Arabic, is the theme of Green Art Gallery's latest exhibition. Upon entering the show, the viewer will be struck by the gallery's back wall painted in a dark maroon colour and aligned with a variety of differently sized framed artworks. The subject matter portrayed within these works is particularly evocative of family and village life. One particular work of a woman rendered in an abstract physical form stands out. She extends her arms up to the sky as if in surrender – or perhaps more simply, as a gesture to the sky for more rainfall. Entitled 'Thirst', the piece, which was completed in 1980, is an intimate and emotional work by Syrian artist Mahmoud Hammad.

This vibrant and passionate portrayal of everyday life in Syria is one of around 50 works on paper by Modern Arab artists in Green Art Gallery's most recent show, 'Works on Paper: Hikayat.' Taking storytelling as its main theme, the works on display offer a glimpse of the power of drawing within cultural, social and political circles. Through different formal processes, the artists reveal imaginative renderings that are based on present day situations and feelings. As the show reveals, for many artists of this generation, storytelling included the representation of the traditional rural life that they were witnessing around them. Among the participating artists are Khouzayma Alwani, Mahmoud Hammad, Adham Ismail, Jamil Molaeb, Fateh Moudarres, Aref El Rayess, Khaldoun Shishakly, Seif Wanly and Elias Zayat. Their works evoke the period of the 1960s to 1980s in Syria, a time known for its intense political turmoil, and yet, these works address the violence through imaginative and meaningful portrayals about life as it is – even during a moment of uncontrollable havoc.

While the back wall is the most striking area of the show, the visitor will want to start from the beginning to get a glimpse of the intricate renderings of each piece. While not stated, the show begins with several works related to dance by Seif Wanly. One is a piece reminiscent of Degas' ballet dancers while others feature Eastern dancers. One is even a two-sided work evocative of the performing Maharajas in India. The dancers are rendered with gestural brushstrokes which make the figures appear to move on paper.

The next wall shows works that are more political in subject matter. Both Khouzayma Alwani and Aref el Rayess reveal pieces that showcase the political turmoils of the 1970s and 1980s. Following the Hama Massacre of 1981, Alwani's works include a dramatic onslaught of monsters and beasts, but they don't seem violent in appearance. Using ink on paper, Alwani creates these figures with an almost childlike rendering. These ferocious beasts seem simply gathered together as if in a meeting while a sun shines



overhead. Also working in ink on paper, the works by Aref El Rayess included in the exhibition belong to a series of drawings he produced in the early seventies to denounce the corruption he was witnessing within the political circles governing the Middle East after the Cairo accord in 1969 and the 1973 Arab Israeli War. El Rayess' intricately drawn scenes show leaders and politicians busy in conversation as they gamble their people's destinies.

On the last wall of the exhibition are several watercolour works by acclaimed artist Fateh Moudarres. Abstract figures cover the paper and allude to several outdoor scenes. Moudarres' representational language was deeply engaged with mythology, religion and popular lore as well as politics. But these works, like those of Alwani's, are not laden with an energy that one would typically equate to hardship. Instead, the figures appear buoyant and light-hearted. "It looks childish, but it is not childish," the artist once said. "In my paintings one can see, how much I love human beings, in my art I stand near them, when the power of fate and oppressive structures beset them." And so many of the works in this show. Based on everyday life as they see it, these artists took the real to render the imaginary and visionary from little aspects of everyday life. And the medium which was used makes them even more personal and intimate documents of occurrences during this time. ■ gagallery.com

(Above) An installation view of 'Works on Paper: Hikayat' at Green Art Gallery.