London fair showcases Arab art

Dumia El-Zoabadi

London

Six art galleries based in the Middle East participated in the Artids fair, presenting paintings, sculpture, photography and visual art that reflected Arab society and culture. It was a major exposure for Arab art in an event that brought together 100 galleries from more than 30 countries displaying more than 1,000 artworks in London on May 20-22.

Doha-based Azima Gallery showcased Qatari artist Ali Ha- saan, who presented a series about the desert and the palm tree. Commenting on his work, the gallery's art expert, Ghada Shway, said the artist uses calligraphy and Arabic letters to represent Arabic culture and society.

Hamad's pieces Face One and Face Two show vague facial features that could represent anyone in the Arab world. "There is no facial expression as they represent everyone. So many Arabs are expressionless but yet we have so much to say," Shway said.

Berlin-based Lebanese artist Mou- hamad Rashid's Backwards series represents an automaton who collects the masks illustrated by the bees. "He takes honey from them but he knows if they are all together they can attack him so his head and hands are covered with gloves. He is protecting himself against the stingers he is oppressing," Shway said.

"Today, art works are like news." —Palestinian visual artist Walid al-Wawis

A tour of southern Lebanon, Rashid moved to Beirut when the south was bombed and then to Beirut to flee bombing in Beirut. His headdresses represents the suffer- ing people left behind," Shway said.

Ladgh Gallery in Saudi Arabia presented Patrick Alley's painting The Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which is part of a trilogy.

"Babylon does not exist anymore except in the memories of people. However, we can create our Garden of Eden where we can focus on the accumulation of all the places and the people we have met. It is a dynamic process. I have tried to create a place of contemplation and inner harmony," Alas said.

Referring to the French conquest of Algeria, Alas uses the idea of the peaceful Garden of Eden to help bridge gaps between countries.

"Post-colonialism manifests itself in so many forms," he said. "I like to make links between people. I belong to a group of people that have a hard time viewing Algeria as a free country. My blood is half French, half Spanish but I consider myself Algerian."

The event brought together 100 galleries from more than 30 countries displaying more than 1,000 artworks at Olympia, London.

Mark Hashem, owner of Mark Hashem Gallery in New York, Paris and Beirut, presented works of photographer Yves Hayat, who wants to find political links be- tween luxury and violence, psychologi- cal problems and war. Les larmes sortent des yeux shows mur- dal issues with their eyes closed to show they are tired. Perles de ré- velation are a Chanel bag as a symbol of luxury and consumerism.

"Most wars are fought for ideology but Hayat reminds us that it is for finance, business and power," Hashem said.

Fatima Chalabi, co-founder of the Baida Foundation in Iraq, spoke of influences of Iraqi artist Ahmad Abu Jawdah, who conducts "a permanent dialogue with himself," influenced by ancient Mesopota- mia, he talks about his own inner violence. The "deep" light in his work is meant to tell the inner voic- es to stop hounding him. He uses powerful and mythical creatures in his imagination.

Naif Hattan, an Iraqi-australian visual artist living in Berlin, looked at images of Iraq taken by US soldiers but he could not find any pictures without soldiers or violence so he kept the shadow of the soldiers and focused on the landscape.

Yasmin Perwerr's photography Saddam is Here shows a photopost of Saddam Hussein held by Iraqis. Perwerr said he was curious about the responses it triggered and found some were afraid, some were upset and some were proud. The message he delivers is that Saddam is omnipresent, he may be gone but the destruction of Iraq remains.

Iraqi photojournalist Julia Ad- nan's multimedia project You May Go imagines a world without bor- ders and passports. Her father im- migrated to Switzerland and she has never been able to get a visa to visit him. She asks people in Iraq where they dream to go and has a picture of their dream place en- larged. Palestinian visual artist Walid al-Wawis from Maraya Art Centre in the United Arab Emirates talks about displacement and hybridised identity in the Middle East.

There is a cultural enforcement of identities. We get a sense of na- tionalism in a place we don't actu- ally belong to in a practical sense. I try to tie the string of vague be- longing and actual belonging," said Wawis, who grew up in the UAE.

"Today, art works are like news. There is a lot of sentimental- ism and a need that things should talk to you emotionally before logi- cally," he said. "I think that is de- caying. I want to strip any emotion out of my work. I want to strip it to just a problem and a solution."

Dumia El-Zoabadi is a regular Arab Weekly contributor in London.