

Redefining the Saudi Art scene

In conversation with Ali Chaaban and Khalid Zahid

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The Arab art world is currently witnessing the emergence of underground cult heroes, two of whom we met in Jeddah recently.

Ali Chaaban and Khalid Zahid are similar in the way they see the world, approach their art and interpret life. Chaaban describes Zahid as “the Yin to my Yan”, referring to the meaning of the ancient symbol which pictures the pairing of two opposites creating a synergy through their very different

takes on life that results in a unified whole.

Ali Chaaban and Khalid Zahid come from different homelands and are polar opposites in many ways too. What unifies them is their authenticity and bravery in interpreting comfortable social mores and challenging fondly held and comfortable assumptions.

Khalid Zahid is a native from Jeddah who was born in London and spent part of his youth in California. Ali Chaaban is originally Lebanese but was born and raised in Kuwait. He also worked in Egypt during the revolution and has now found a home in Jeddah.

Chaaban moved to Jeddah on “6/6/2016” he told Saudi Gazette. Chaaban said the duo are working towards spreading a new art movement, that helps give voice to contemporary art now in a bold rather than what had become somewhat stale and unchallenging ways in the past.

Of their artistic Yin-Yan relationship Chaaban said, “It was as if we were doing duets without even meeting.” They were fans of each other’s art before they even met. And when they did, they found themselves merging ideas and influences giving rise to a synergy that drove the creation of some riveting art. The inseparable duo now works together at a local art gallery in Jeddah.

“Everything I find myself working on goes back to my Arab identity.”

Chaaban is working on themes that follow his journey, through time, discourse and emerging individuality. His subjects range from refugee status to unchallenged doctrines and the world around him. His works are by-products of his environment.

“We are addressing particular topics now more than ever. I have omitted

the idea of aesthetics in my work. I have to get the message across,” he said.

This decision to make the medium the message came at a point while Chaaban was reflecting on his upbringing and identity and increasingly recognizing the value of diaspora.

“I was born and raised in Kuwait, but I am originally from Lebanon, a place I cannot call home; now I have found it living in Jeddah. Being scattered helped me focus on nostalgia, refugees and right now I am working on censorship. But mainly everything I find myself working on goes back to my Arab identity.”

His new works remain embedded in themes that are relevant to current affairs and consequences. “I like to comment on social issues that erupt around us and in or our time and how our identity falls there. ‘Mashakel AlArab’ problems in the Arab world or ‘Strangers Everywhere’ part of refugee emotions, is all part of it”.

“My country triggers me”

Raised in Jeddah, Zahid studied in the US and came back to pursue a corporate life with a MBA. Even with his day job and involvement in corporate affairs, Zahid admitted art had always been a part of life and still is.

“I started drawing as a child. It went from sketching to creating pop art or calligraphy to putting them on t-shirts. I had a fashion line called ‘Jin’ which basically means ‘go crazy’ in Lebanese slang. A friend of mine once saw my works at my place and he just loved it. He asked me to display it at Art Dubai and honestly I had no idea what it was.”

He said that the same time, Athr gallery was working with young Saudi artists and he had the realisation then that changed his life.

“When I was at the exhibition and I saw how people were reacting to it, that gave me a high,” Zahid said excitedly.

Ever since then, he has never looked back. “It was actually at Loud Art when the founders told me that if I was to continue doing pop art, they couldn’t have more of my work. They wanted me to grow further. It was going to die out.”

The truth of the time limit on the fashion of pop art caused Zahid to step back and re-evaluate his art. He asked himself the question ‘What do I really want to do; what moves me?’

“Society triggers me, my country triggers me. I want people outside the Kingdom to see the positives in our country. Just like Ali talks about his home and past, we both tend to share a lot of it in our works,” he said.

Zahid took a turn into unexplored territory and made it his playground where ideas thrive and evolve. Things got serious as the ideas grew and Zahid made a huge impact with a series of poignant photographs exploring the missing and hidden fun quotient of life when it comes to religious and conservative factions. The idea of mapping them as serious, no-love-for-life groups has been a hackneyed theme in the mainstream media for years. His photographs document the everyday lives of sheikhs enjoying life, be it sharing an ice cream, at the park or the beach and challenging the assumption that ‘fun’ can be found in simple yet rewarding activities.

Chaaban, who is a proud owner of Zahid’s works, added that the dark comedy used to portray simple facts is one of the reasons he liked them.

“All this shows you is that just because you’re religious doesn’t necessarily make you serious or unhappy. It does not mean you cannot have fun,” Chaaban added.

His Yin could not help but agree. “Art helps bring these matters to life. These pieces are the ones that get people talking, smiling and saying words like ‘thank you’ to me. It’s all about positivity,” Zahid said.

This Yin-Yang convergence of unusual sensitivities and takes on life breaks from traditional modes of labelling. With the bonds of labels and the assumptions that go with them gone, the imprisoned individuals are free to dream, explore and aspire to a new and richer interpretation of life.

No longer, Zahid and Chaaban contend, do you have to leave joy tied to the rails outside while you engage in what are by many assumed to be the more ‘serious’ aspects of life.

The renowned novelist Hanif Kureishi once said: “Artists were allowed, indeed encouraged, to lead more libidinous lives on behalf of others who had, of necessity, to leave their jouissance, at the door while they worked.”

We hope Yin and Yang or in their case, Chaaban and Zahid make the best of it.

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