

Still lifes in a deteriorating world

India Stoughton 07/02/2014

BEIRUT: It sounds like the opening line of a Christmas cracker joke: When is a dead fish beautiful? The answer? When it's brought back to life in the work of Youssef Abdelke.

The Syrian artist is currently in town for "Youssef Abdelke: New Works," now up at Galerie Tanit-Beyrouth. Showcasing some 30 drawings completed since 2011, this is the artist' first solo exhibition since the onset of civil war in his country, close to three years ago, and it was security concerns that finally compelled the artist to exhibit in Beirut.

"I wanted to do this exhibition in Damascus," he says, "but of course ... it hasn't been possible to hold an exhibition there. Every month I told myself: 'Next month maybe things will be better,' but the situation only grew more and more difficult. ... I chose Beirut because Beirut also suffered a lot as a result of civil war and it's a symbol of freedom for Arabs and for Syrians."

The show falls naturally into two parts. Some of the drawings featured follow in the footsteps of the lauded still lifes Abdelke has been producing for the past two decades. Others mark a radical departure from his previous work.

The decision to introduce new elements into his work, the artist told The Daily Star, was his way of creating a visual demarcation between prewar Syria and the country as it exists today. He wanted to represent a complete break with what came before, symbolizing how, whatever the outcome of the war, Syria and the Syrian people will never be the same.

The artist's new direction is marked by the introduction of three major elements – figures, color and words. For the first time in almost 20 years, Abdelke has begun drawing humans. Some pieces capture grieving families

gathered around a portrait of a deceased loved one. Others depict bodies laid out in morgues or lying dead in the streets.

An outspoken political activist, Abdelke was imprisoned for several years in the late 1970s by the regime of Hafez Assad. His name became a rallying cry for artists last summer after he was arrested at a checkpoint in Tartous and spent a month in prison. He was detained, he says, simply because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“My arrest had nothing to do with my work as an artist or with my political work,” he clarifies. “They stopped me and two friends. We happened to be together in the same car. It was because we came from three different very distant places in Syria ... They thought it was suspicious. ... After they arrested us, I think they realized they’d made a mistake.

“It was a situation similar to that of tens of dozens of Syrians. I was imprisoned with around 20 other people and I think that 19 out of 20 had nothing to do with politics. There was no reason for them to spend a single second in prison. They were simply there because the mukhabarat decided that there was something fishy about them.”

Since his release in August, Abdelke has continued to live and work in Damascus and says he has no intention of leaving.

“My work has nothing to do with politics in a direct way,” he says. “It is a door through which to touch the human cost of the Syrian tragedy. It touches the ultimate catastrophe: death – someone who dies for the sake of speaking a few words about something called freedom, which he will never experience. ... My work is about the everyday man, the martyrs, the victims.”

Violence and death are omnipresent in “New Works.” The smooth black-and-white surfaces of many of Abdelke’s drawings are splashed with blood-hued red paint. In another radical departure from previous practice, many

of Abdelke's newest works employ script – adorning images of the dead with words from popular songs, such as the poetry of Ahmed Fouad Negm, as sung by Sheikh Imam.

“They speak about love or subjects that have nothing to do with war or death or blood,” Abdelke explains. “Sometimes I used the texts to create a paradox between death and a text that is happy. ... It's like a sort of nostalgia for an epoch where we could sing of love or other pleasant things. How can we sing about love now, when people are dying in the streets?”

Two of the works on show deal with events in Egypt, which Abdelke says serves as a positive example to other Arab states seeking to make a break with the past. “A Martyr from Tahrir Square” captures a man lying in a pool of dark blood, his eyes glazed and vacant. Another work, “Homage to January 25,” captures a bunch of flowers.

For all their emotive power, Abdelke's newer works – with their huge-eyed, sorrowful children, grieving mothers, bleeding demonstrators and splashes of red paint – lack something of the subtly macabre atmosphere of his still lifes, characterized by the artist's talent for evoking beauty in unexpected places.

Works such as “Mother of a Martyr,” depicting a woman prostrate before a portrait of her dead son, hands clasped in prayer, will please those in search of an anti-war poster.

Aficionados of Abdelke's prewar work may find they prefer pieces such as “Heart,” an enormous representation of what appears to be the human organ laid out on a table. Exquisitely rendered in photo-realistic detail, its meaty center is pierced with a lethal-looking hatpin.

Two of the largest works on show depict enormous carving knives, one plunged into the surface of a table beside the body of a dead songbird, another seemingly about to serve as the unlikely resting place for a

butterfly, which hovers beside the blade as though unsure how to land without slicing itself in two.

Drawings of subjects that occupied Abdelke before the conflict began – discarded women’s shoes, their leather creased with wear, breathtakingly detailed renderings of vases of flowers – are lent a morbid aspect by their context. Empty shoes become ominous, markers of an absence that could prove permanent. Flowers are transformed from the festive to the funereal.

The exhibition is perhaps best summed up by Abdelke’s fish – wrapped tightly in a length of knotted rope like a gruesome present adorned with a bow. Trussed and executed, its mouth open slightly as though in surprise, its dark eye emanating a sorrowful resignation, it is a beautiful emblem of helplessness and waste.

“Youssef Abdelke: New Works” is up at Galerie Tanit-Beyrouth until March 8. For more information, please call 76-557-662.



"Heart," charcoal-on-paper, 108x147cm, 2011 (Photos courtesy of Galerie Tanit-Beyrouth)

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