

Coming back to the beginnings of time through art

Florence Thireau 23/02/2009

BEIRUT: "Habibi do black roses exist?" is a mysterious name for an exhibition. The show, featuring the latest sculptures and painting by Lebanese artist Tanbak, is currently on display on the ground floor of Hamra's Agial Gallery. In fact, the title perfectly reflects the obsessive theme of this exhibition: That is, duality and contrasts.

"Roses are fragile," the artist says, "and my work conveys a world of brutality." Also, she introduced a pinch of humor in her title.

Born in Beirut in 1954, Tanbak (born Tania Bakalian Safieddine) studied Spanish literature in Madrid and Barcelona in the late 1970's, a time of liberation for art and expression in the Iberian Peninsula. The journey changed her in many ways.

In the Prado museum, she discovered Francesco Goya's "Black Paintings" series ("Pinturas Negras", 1819-1823), which inspired many of her aesthetic choices. She commonly uses a chromatic scale reduced to black, grey, golden, earthy and ochre shades and creates dark backgrounds to signify the death of light and create color oppositions, as in Goya's "The pilgrimage to the San Isandro hermitage."

Although admiring Goya's choice of subject matter - such as his criticism of religious excesses and civil conflict - in this exhibition, Tanbak mainly focuses on the painter's interest for contrast, like in "Women laughing" and "Men reading" in which Goya opposes satire to tragedy.

She also frequently introduces both Spanish symbols and raw colors in her work, such as the bull-shaped black-and-red painted sculptures that were

already present in her former exhibition "Toro" (2003).

She says a painter's life was not her immediate goal. She wanted to become a writer but finally realized it was too rational a way of expressing her "malaise." The start of the Civil War seemed irrational, and she chose art as a better way of getting straight to the point.

Tanbak explains she understood that Lebanon's history, as well as her own life, were always in transit between extreme beauty and pure misfortune. This duality, she says, is a direct inspiration for her work.

There is no partisan position in Tanbak's artistic work, only a vision of her native country as a violent and brutal one. She would prefer to not define herself as a Lebanese artist. "The Middle Eastern world resonates in my work," she says, "but I translate it in my own way, as part of the humanity. I don't feel compelled to create an ideological art."

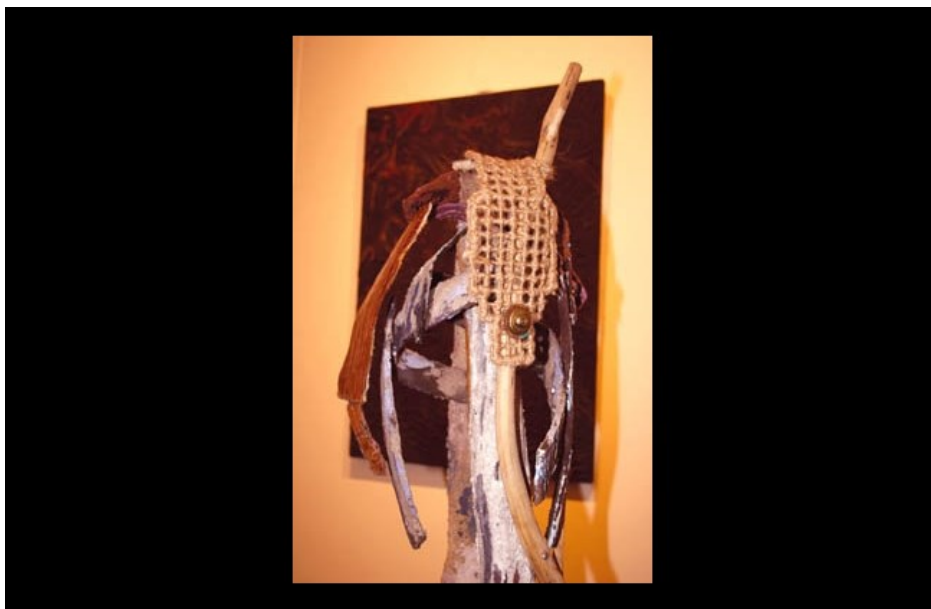
Tanbak's own experience of the Civil War inspired her choice of materials for her work. In her paintings, she uses concrete and sand from the destroyed Beirut center, creating relief.

She works on a succession of complementary concepts: Light and dark, body and soul, human and inhuman. "In order not to talk directly about my country," she says, "I wanted to come back to the beginnings of time, when it was nothing but darkness and life was given through light." As an example, two of her paintings show a white or golden circle on a black background.

Her sculptures suggest antique casks and beast heads. They merge natural elements - wood, fur - with industrial ones - iron, nails and electric wires - to evoke the complementarities of the modern and the primitive. Two of her larger sculptures made of wood and rope also refer to totems and idols from a primitive world.

Concerning this interest for ancient spirituality, Tanbak explains that to refer to the beginnings of society is to evoke universal concepts. As such, literally everything in her painting also refers to essence: the primary colors - black, white, brown - the natural materials - sand, water - and the forms. Two of her paintings even seem to refer to a primary alphabet.

"Habibi do black roses exist?" is up at the Agial Gallery in Hamra until February 28. For details call +961 3 634 244 or visit www.agialart.com



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