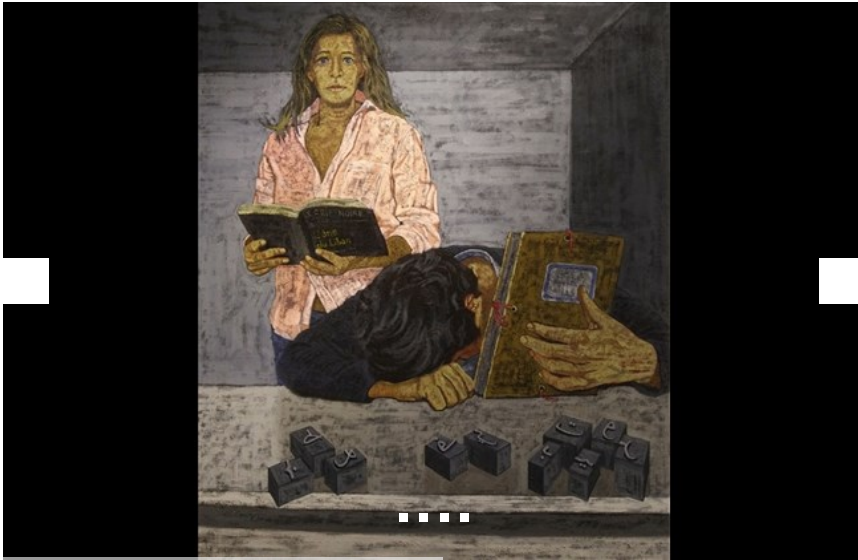


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From literature to family to canvas



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Maghie Ghali | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Sacha Abou Khalil's first solo exhibition, "Breaking the Frozen Seas," breathes new life into classic literature. Now up at Agial Gallery, the show presents a series of portraits based on characters from 14 well-known novels. Now numbering 18 oils, Abou Khalil's series takes a contemplative look at both international and Arab literature, ranging from Patrick Suskind's "Perfume" to "La Villa des Femmes," by Charif Majdalani.

"I was always a passionate reader and I had the idea one day to paint every book that marked me," the artist told The Daily Star.

"It's all about literature, books that I've read when I was young or books from my friends that I've read recently," she added.

The self-taught artist was born in Serbia in 1964 and raised in Mount Lebanon. Now living between Italy and Lebanon, Abou Khalil quit dentistry in 2011 to devote himself to painting. His work has since been selected for several group shows, including the Beirut Art Fair.

Colored by his own readings, the portraits betray Abou Khalil's personal relationship with the characters and their stories. While the characters are taken from literature, the figures he paints are all based on family and friends, acting out the roles.

"My son and other family or friends are in a large number of the paintings and the author is sometimes [present], like Charif Majdalani in the paintings of 'La Ville des Femmes,'" Abou Khalil said. "They all exist and try to represent the fictional characters."

The series isn't about exact descriptions of the characters, Abou Khalil stressed, he wished to adapt the story, so it doesn't matter that his models sometimes look nothing like the characters their authors describe.

"Take this story," he said, referring to Nikolai Gogol's "Dead Souls." "It's from the mid-19th century. Obviously there were no motorcycles then but [my depiction is] a more modern and comical approach

"The dead souls are represented in the background and you have the major character with his valet.

"The story is that Chichikov is going around the countryside in Russia buying dead souls – the legal papers of servants who have died," the artist added, "from the rich families, who still pay taxes on them and the valet is looking at him, like, 'What are you doing?'"

A striking piece from the series is Abou Khalil's interpretation of Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," showing a pivotal moment in the plot.

"The story is about Raskolnikov, who goes to see the woman who lends him money and was planning on killing."

"The crime became two crimes because her sister was there and the whole story is about what happened afterward, about his guilt and regret," Abou Khalil explained.

Modeled by his mother-in-law and nephew, Abou Khalil's "Crime and Punishment" shows Raskolnikov seated between the two soon-to-be-murdered women, with an axe on the coffee table by two intricately detailed tea cups. Raskolnikov looks directly at the viewer, caught in his indecision.

Abou Khalil's paintings all have a gritty, dark aesthetic. Even the brightest hues have a grainy, tarnished undertone, achieved through his layering process.

"I take pictures and make a composition, which I draw on the canvas," he explained.

"I then do a very light first layer in black and white and go over with a very dark and thick layer, which gives texture and gives a dark under-color to all the colors painted on top.

"You'll notice a dark red under all the skin-tones or black under many of the blues and greys."

Abou Khalil hopes to continue adding to the series at a later date.

"There are at least 20 books I still want to paint," he said, "like "Journey to the End of the Night" by Louis-Ferdinand Céline. I don't think I have finished all I could say with this series."

"Breaking the Frozen Seas" can be seen at Agial Gallery, Hamra, until Feb. 3. The gallery is open 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.

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