

Oussama Baalbaki's disquieting dystopias | Arts & Ent , Culture | THE DAILY STAR

BEIRUT: Oussama Baalbaki sits in a plush armchair. Legs folded, he gazes down to his right foot, which he holds in his left hand. The fingers of his other hand delicately grasp a nail file, but the artist's foot is covered in a thick layer of fur. Instead of toenails he has three curved black claws. "Trimming" is one of four black-and-white self-portraits in the Lebanese painter's latest solo exhibition, currently on at Beirut's Galerie Tanit, in collaboration with Agial Gallery.

English and Arabic versions of a short text accompany the disquieting painting.

"On their fingers / Painters glance the traces of their artwork / As if they are scratches."

Baalbaki's self-portraits are in a similar vein. In photo-realistic detail, each provides a snapshot of the artist engaged in a mundane task or in a seemingly unguarded moment.

Based on photographs taken by the artist's wife – who also translated the interview with Baalbaki – the works appear realistic. On closer examination, each reveals an element of the unexpected, betraying the thought that has gone into the composition, from Baalbaki's pose to his evocative props.

In "READY To Go!" the artist is depicted from below, rubbing one eye like a child awaking from a nap. Attached to the left shoulder of his white shirt is a tiny parachute. It extends straight up into the air, as though determined to fulfill its function in spite of the laws of physics.

"A Spiritual Steadiness" captures the artist in profile. Sitting in an upright chair, he stares ahead as though blankly regarding the television. In the foreground, he clutches a carpenter's level, standing in for the wooden arm of the chair. The jokey title of the work belies the more profound statement Baalbaki appears to be making about the interior and exterior worlds.

The artist paints himself, he explains, so as to be certain of a reliable model, one with whose features, gestures and emotions he is intimately familiar.

"In my self-portraits it's as if I'm drawing another person," he says, "an adjacent being ... a moral being who haunts the depths. He's the being of intellect and intuition, an

imaginary being, but for me he's the ... true essence [beside] whom my real existence ... seem like the facade.

"These works where I represent myself in different positions [communicate] intellectually and mimetically with their viewers. ... They have their own time and space. It's as if they represent an alternative life refined from all the flaws and excesses and the paleness of reality."

Alongside Baalbaki's portraits, "Shadows of Gloominess" includes a still life and 10 landscapes, which capture the beauty of Lebanon's mountainous countryside, lingering over the scars left on them by human intervention – from mountainside telephone poles to the rusting carcasses of cars, left to rot in the fields.

"The Breathless Path" depicts an unpaved road curving along the edge of a hillside beneath a vivid blue sky. In the foreground, scattered rubbish mars the scene. The accompanying text explores the tension between human beings and their environment with haiku-like simplicity.

"Under a dazzling sun / An old Pepsi can buried amid the gravels and the soil / Radiates like a dull pearl / Overlooked by a sharp row of aligned cypresses."

In Baalbaki's black-and-white landscape "The Death Leap," human impact is more obvious. On a mountain road, a car seems about to run over a corpse. What was once a fox or dog is reduced to roadkill, an obstacle to be driven over.

Describing his approach to painting landscapes, Baalbaki says, "What I see in the lines and mass and weight of the scene ... is a designed and architectural structure that is enchanting to the sight and appealing to the brush in its layers and reliefs, as if I'm working on an abstract painting.

"On the other hand, I do have an ... expressionist obsession that reflects the outlines of a political and environmental ... protest against the mightiness of the sabotage, expressed in an austere way."

These landscapes are rendered with larger, more textural brushstrokes than Baalbaki's careful self-portraits and enlivened by a sense of movement.

In "my self-portraits I find myself instinctively more careful and accurate," Baalbaki says. "This endeavor to realistic perfectionism has echoes in something I've always felt in life: my feelings of strangeness when I look into a mirror or at my old photographs. I feel, every time, like I'm someone else.

"When I draw other themes, like landscapes, I become much more [relaxed] and unconfined, and the brush strokes burst [forth] unplanned ... drawing becomes a muscular recurrence that resembles dancing or doing sports, especially in the big format paintings, since I draw and color the real scene freely as if it's an abstract work of art."

There seems to be a formal-conceptual contradiction in Baalbaki's work between the traditional approach to painting and the intellectual effort he requires from viewers wishing to decipher his contemporary themes.

"I find it hard to identify and classify myself in a specific artistic school," he admits, "because I have always aimed to stand on the edges of the different schools and to develop the confusion and ambiguity that I highly appreciate in any artwork. ... I like to work as a contemporary artist, witness of this artistic epoch, but [I'm] committed to the determination and devotion and discretion of the artists from olden times."

Oussama Baalbaki's "Shadows of Gloominess" is on show at Galerie Tanit-Beyrouth until April 26. For more information, please call 76-557-662.