

Behind the Masks

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A multidisciplinary visual artist, Nedim Kufi was born in Baghdad and has lived and worked in the Netherlands since 1994. Here, he talks to Artscoops about his latest exhibition, Virtuality, a series of pop-art style portraits inspired by social media avatars, on display at the Dar Al-Anda Art Gallery, Amman, Jordan.

Virtuality looks at our tendency to conceal our true identity behind a mask and adopt different personas online. What triggered the idea for this theme?

I joined Twitter at some point and felt like a stranger so I started searching for friends, in the way people do. It turned into an obsession and I found myself wanting to understand my new friends from a trust standpoint. I discovered there was an issue with trust and envy online. I sensed that our virtual world of social media was like a different planet, inhabited by millions of people. I felt that this faceless society lingered in space, bearing no relation to reality. However, the positive aspect of this society is that it brings together people from all countries and races. I liked its universality and breadth and felt inspired to put together a selection of avatar figures or masks that spoke to me as a painter. In this sense, I shifted from being a tweeter to a painter. There was a magnetism between these avatars, my perception and my eyes. As subject matter, I found them very inspirational and, over time, they evolved. I tried to obtain permission from all my subjects, even though I wasn't actually drawing the real faces of my subjects.

What conclusions did you draw about people inhabiting this virtual world?

There are different types of tweeters out there. Some are gentle, sensitive, empathetic and respectful, while others are vulgar and conduct themselves unacceptably. Their way of behaving is a manifestation of what they hold within them. After I observed their tweets on a daily basis, I gained a better perspective. I realized that some people sought refuge in this virtuality because of a despair with reality and could live in freedom and express themselves in a manner, which I consider to be a naïve form of art which is no different from painting a portrait.



Intellectual & Writer, 2017, oil on canvas

Given that you focus on this concept from the angle of social media, would you describe Virtuality as an exhibition for the 21st century?

Most definitely, since the circumstances that social media presents only came about in this century and they have evolved based on human behaviour. Humans and their behaviours have hugely influenced social media's evolution. I believe that through people's actions on social media, they are determining the way in which it evolves.

Tell us something about the technique you used to transform people's tweets into oil paintings or portraits.

Sometimes a tweeter's virtual name is more important than the avatar. There were times when the adopted screen name of a subject, such as "Antar", which is a homage to Antar Bin Shaddad, one of the pre-Islamic era's most celebrated poets and knights, "Is Not" or "Insane" inspired me more than the related image. I would ask myself, how this person inspired me, and, based on the answer, I would adopt a technique with my two resources: oil and canvas. I opted for a size in between a miniature painting and a small portrait and painted the faces with my bare fingertips, as I found this to be the ideal route. I was already obsessed with portraits before I came across Twitter, having never done them before, but always wanting to.

It was a new experience for me, feeling the oil and the strokes on my fingertips as they went along the faces. The strokes were minimal, as were the colour palettes and the shapes, so that I could portray the core identity of my subjects.

In your research for this project, you spent two years questioning tweeters. What kind of questions did you ask and did the answers you received shock or surprise you?

People were cautious in their responses, as was I when posing my questions. My main question was, "What would have happened if you used your actual photograph?" Most answered with a laugh that they were more comfortable using avatars as they could speak their minds

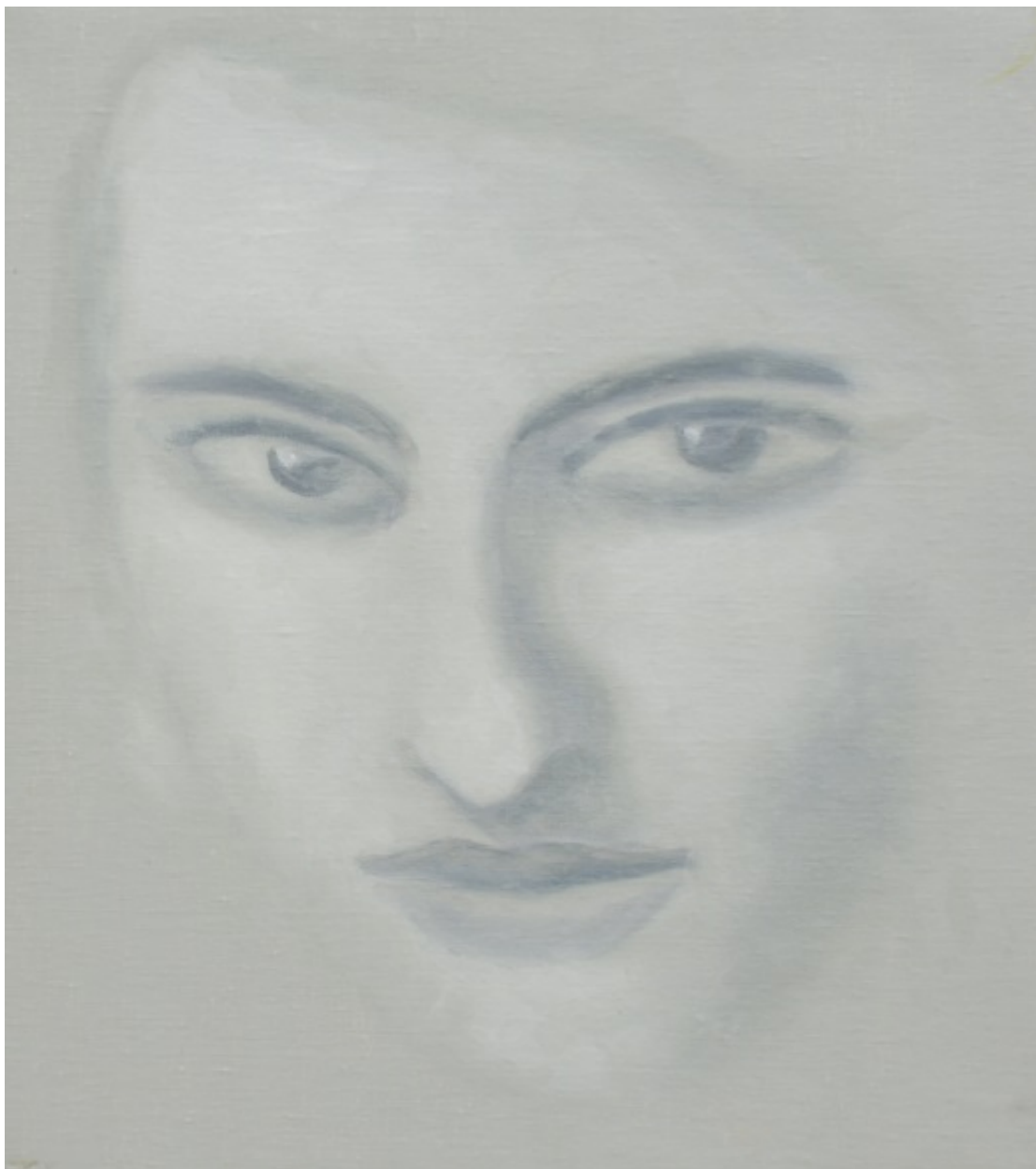
without repercussions. I sensed that people felt secure behind their masks or avatars. But they tend to forget that the limited scope of these avatars - tiny squares with an image inside them - also limits their dimensions. I found that people showing their real faces as avatars were more courageous and capable of expressing themselves in a more direct way.

What did you learn from this Q&A project?

The main lesson I learned was that everyone possesses the ability to express themselves artistically through their choice of position, shape and disposition conveyed through an avatar. It might not necessarily be a face; for example, it could be a cup of coffee, or a feather, to indicate that they're writers.

Would you say cultural identity is a personal struggle that you are expressing through your work or something that you have now reconciled?

I have most definitely not reconciled it and it saddens me. The contrast between East and West was very clear in Virtuality. For example, a Western persona is more likely to be transparent and happy to express themselves without fear, inhibition or limitation, whereas an Eastern one is enveloped and covered up with fears and threats of blasphemy. I wished that Tweeters would show their true faces without fearing that they might pay a price for it, as a stance, as a principle, as a statement. I have my actual picture up as my avatar as a way of leading by example.



Merimo, 2017, oil on canvas

***Have any particular artists influenced you as your style has evolved?
Or do you take inspiration more from outside of the art world?***

I have definitely drawn inspiration from other people. The whole concept of inspiration translates into having a constitution, a personal one you carry with you. From a technical standpoint, I think of German artist Gerhard Richter as both a teacher and a source of inspiration, largely because he has a concept of freedom and variety. I don't like being confined to a cage of technicality or style.

While Virtuality is, strictly speaking, Pop Art, it did not assume the typical American form à la Andy Warhol, per se. The idea itself evolved into something that was more expressionist. It also has aspects that I've lived with for a long time, so they made it personal, such as how the outline moves and how the coloured spaces took shape.

How did you select the six graffiti works on display here in Amman, having started with over 50 finger-painted oil works?

Going from finger painting to graffiti happened very organically. Since it was spray on paper, it was more youthful in spirit and faster to execute, and there is something very poetic about that. I wanted the grit of the Virtuality story to make a hit and run statement.

What's your next project?

I'm working on a sculpture-sound hybrid. It addresses the relationship between the sequence of sound and modeling of shapes and sculptures. It is rooted in studying voice sequence and should be finished very soon.