

He who asks questions: Thameur Mejri



When Thameur Mejri was a child, his mother took him to see his uncle, who was an artist in Tunis. The visit to the studio made such a lasting impression on him that it influenced his career and life choices.

“I was in a dream, watching my uncle with the colours and paints. I thought he was a magician,” Mejri says. “I told myself from that age that I wanted to become like my uncle—an artist—without even knowing what that meant.”

His uncle had a real human skull in his studio, an object that fascinated the young Mejri. “I always wanted to go visit him to see the skull,” he says. “The image is in my subconscious.”

The skull is a reference that we see in his works to this day. In his latest solo exhibition, *Heretic Spaces*, currently running at Elmarsa Gallery in Alserkal Avenue, skulls are a prominent element in the paintings. This is Mejri’s first solo show in the UAE, and his third solo show with the gallery.

The exhibition is comprised of his paintings from 2016/17, which are filled with a collection of figures, all male, some almost bursting out of the canvas. The paintings are laden with symbols of war and brutality such as grenades, barbed wire, gas masks, and tanks. There are also fragments of bodies and dismembered limbs, sitting alongside everyday items like toys, television sets, even a pair of flip-flops.

Despite the images of weapons and war present in his paintings, the artist does not describe his work as depicting violence, but rather the darker side of our reality.

"I don't feel like my work is violent. Every day, we are exposed to more violent images than what you see in my work. I'm just trying to speak about life," he says. "At first glance, you might see something aggressive. If you look closer, you see graphic work, colours, movement, strength, and energy. Positive things."

With *Heretic Spaces*, Mejri wants the Arab world to confront the chaos that exists in its societies today. This goes straight to the heart of what he sees as the artist's role in society, particularly in the region. For him, the job of an artist is to provoke and make people think and reflect—on life, death, and the world we live in.

"'Heretic' means you have to deny everything, to question everything. We have to question our origin, our way of thinking, our heritage, in order to move towards something better," he explains.

Mejri has referred to each painting as a "space", and though these spaces are filled with chaos and symbols of domestic life, they also encourage viewers to confront the terror that exists in the world today, and possibility find a way to tackle it.

"You ask questions as an artist. You don't give answers."

"I want people to think closely about their environments, the spaces where they live. I want them to question their daily lives," he says. "I think violence, like war, is not something that is far away from you. In your own space, you can exert violence. I want people to limit these tendencies in their own environments, because they can lead to a bigger disaster later on."

Indeed, Mejri, who refers to himself as a pessimist, contemplates deeply about our own mortality and the fragility of our lives.

On the upper floor of the Elmarsa Gallery are some of his earlier works, which are more intimate and personal. They are the result of the artist working through his emotions and thoughts after the birth of his daughter Beya in 2014.

"I asked myself, 'what kind of world did I bring my daughter into?,' so I tried to work with those feelings, that anxiety," Mejri says.

He collaborated with his daughter on a few pieces, building his collages from her scribbles. Mejri also took inspiration from his daughter's drawings, finding new shapes and figures to create from them. The collages have a child-like quality, but still possess Mejri's style of contrasting chaos with loss of innocence.

The final piece in the show is a short film Mejri produced with his brother, who is based in Montreal. Although he uses a different medium, there is continuity in his work. He uses the same characters from his paintings, existing in the same spaces and interacting with the same elements. The gas mask is reminiscent of his paintings and collages.

In discussing the collaboration with his brother, Mejri touches on something more personal: his relationship with his father. He mentions that another brother, now based in Paris, is a photographer. The three brothers have all ventured into creative careers, a fact that their father disapproved of.

"I was in a bad relationship with my father about that. He didn't believe I could make it. He thought I was wasting my time. He didn't really show interest in what my brothers were doing," he said.

The effects of this family dynamic play a role in Mejri's art. For him, young people in the Arab world must learn to cast away expectations and social pressures, even those coming from our own families. He cites an expression, "To succeed as a man, you have to kill your own father."

"I don't mean literally. It's an expression," he said. "But you have to choose your own way, your own vision. In the Arab world, we have that problem. People don't make their own choices," he explains.

It is this ability to question the status quo that informs Mejri's work and he hopes to provoke viewers into doing the same. It is what *Heretic Spaces* is all about: the act of questioning ourselves, of challenging norms and established systems so that we can choose our own way.