

JEFFAR  
KHALDI  
An Interview  
With Jeffar  
Khaldi On  
His Life,  
Practice And  
Response  
To *How Do  
You Sleep At  
Night?*

Isabella Ellaheh Hughes

Jeffar Khaldi is an intriguing amalgam of contradictions. Meeting in his Al Quoz studio in Dubai's industrial district, this Lebanese-born, American educated and Dubai-based Palestinian painter cuts a hyperactive, yet moody figure. These traits are reflected in many

*Been Here Before* (2013)

Oil on canvas  
160 \* 230 cm



of his monumental, large-scale paintings that litter his dusty studio. Vivid, dreamlike, surrealist paintings that have one foot in reality and the other in another realm altogether, Khaldi has a penchant for juxtaposing contrasting symbols, figures and experiences onto one canvas, often with an element of introspective humour and regional historical reference points. Beneath many of these contemporary, Bosch-esque scenes, pins an underlying air of something hauntingly sombre, openly pervading in the faces and body language of the figures he paints.

Quick to offer criticism on Dubai's art scene and the general state of the Middle Eastern art market, Khaldi appears to have consciously positioned himself as an outsider artist, unrepresented presently by any gallery and self-declaring that if he sees someone he knows, he 'goes in the other direction and disappears.'

His frequent commentary on the incestuous ecosystem of the regional art market and brash criticisms of many key players show his unabashed tendency to veer away from a politically correct veneer. His uninhibited boldness, in life and more importantly, in the content of his work is refreshing. Dedicated to developing his own painterly dexterity, Khaldi's obsession with constantly perfecting and growing his technical abilities is an example of true painterly expertise and dedication—a rare trait in this day and age, where few artists are focused on spending a lifetime honing one true talent to a masterful level like the great master painters of eras past. Speaking with Khaldi in his studio in August 2013, he opened up on his life, practice and shared his surprising response to Meem Gallery's commission for Abu Dhabi Art 2013.

**IEH: How did you come to Dubai?**

JK: I came in 1995. I was in Texas before that, studying, working hard. After I finished my interior design degree, I took over this artist's five-thousand square foot warehouse studio. But then there was a huge fire; I remember watching the studio burn to the ground, wearing only my boxers.

A few months later, I was held up at gunpoint. I had always wanted to leave [the US at some point]. Around that time I had a nightmare where I wished I had listened to my mother's advice to come here, which prompted me to come.

When I came, it was really depressing and hard, no greenery, so hot. I was in Sharjah, sleeping on my uncle's couch. For a long time I was the only art guy, there were no galleries, no one to interact with, it was like my life had stopped, especially coming from this underground, bohemian lifestyle in the US.

In 1997 I heard about the Sharjah Biennial. I approached them, I proposed a few paintings that I did in the States after the fire. They accepted me and I won the grand biennial prize in '97.

After Sharjah I came here to Al Quoz and felt the need to get back into painting. I rented a warehouse and built my studio as a live-work space. Slowly, to my surprise, things started to develop. A real gallery, The Third Line, opened just across the gallery b21 that I had established a year earlier. My whole behind-the-scenes involvement in the art scene made me see through all the superficiality, how it built up so quickly here. It made me recognize who the sharks with new money and no taste are. Things started to get-overhyped and over-inflated quickly. To me it's bull\*\*\*\*, you know? I see through it all.

For me, I don't live from my art. I work very hard, I have a decoration company, with fifteen staff. I'm also very athletic, I do all my sports in the afternoon and then I paint all through the night. It's hard, I have to invoice, chase people with my business, it's my bread and butter, it helps me support my family and son. He is my priority. I want to cover myself financially so my son has a good life, I want him to have an easier life than me and want him to never feel deprived. With painting, I kept thinking this could be my break, but nothing ever opened up and was my break [in a big way, financially]. Life isn't cheap, so I work. I could have just painted, but for me I have to be financially solid to feel good, to travel and enjoy the good things in life.

**IEH: Since you've freed yourself from the financial pressure to produce work as a means of your livelihood and are not represented by**

**a gallery presently, you must feel very free to produce anything you want, correct?**

JK: I do my thing, I don't care about anyone's opinion; I never really cared anyway, I am the way I am and always have been like this.

Now I don't want to even be part of it, the whole Middle Eastern art scene is not for me, it's a lot of bull\*\*\*\*. Some people want to be the Saatchi's of the Middle East, but they have no taste and it's like, who are they, imposing their poor taste on everyone? Here with the new money and constant flow of newness, everyone wants to be an artist. Nowadays, all the works look too similar to each other. Also, I really don't know what's the big deal with this kitsch style that is so trendy now. This style won't last, it's just a fad.

Now I do my own thing without rushing and playing into the whole collector bull\*\*\*\*. You work so hard for a collector to come in and some of them, not all, are just bunch of losers. And now everyone wants to open a gallery, people with no art education under their belt. Besides, there just are not enough good Middle Eastern artists to fill them [galleries] with.

I'm an artist. I don't want to be categorized as just a Middle Eastern artist, if I want to make it, it has to be from the outside and not because I belong to this region. I am also a realist and think it will be years until I reach my full potential. This is my opinion and perspective on everything.

**IEH: You've been committed to painting since your primordial beginning as an artist. What has caused you to be so committed to this medium?**

JK: I paint because the whole act of painting is very romantic. I am always changing and trying new things, but I have ideas for other mediums too, like sculpture. It's important to keep surprising audiences and keep developing. It's also good to take time and focus on one thing and perfect the craft, I am trying to do that with my painting.

I remember years back Saatchi did a show, *The Triumph of Painting*, and it summarized that painting is the truest form of art; it has so much

power in it as you tend to feel it more emotionally and spiritually... you see the emotions in the brushstrokes, colours and textures, even the smell [of paint].

**IEH: You often use political imagery, yet have adamantly denied being a political artist in previous interviews, but how do politics play into your overall practice?**

JK: I use imagery that sometimes is political, but it's just strong imagery. I create based on my own thoughts. I do use politics as a reference in *some* of my works, but it doesn't mean they are political. It's often using historical events to make young people think and question what their own views are, but for me, the core [of my work] always comes down the practice of painting.

**IEH: How do you go about creating a new work, what is your process?**

JK: Nowadays, my time is more limited and I need to be more efficient. I am always thinking about things and I keep visual memories. I don't write down too many things, I have become good at remembering. I have so many ideas that I could be busy for so long. My ideas come from day-to-day life and also from reading things.

It's important to me to improve my painting skills, get the colours to work together, discover new compositions and see what works and what does not. The work is semi-calculated; I always try to make the new painting better than the one before it.

**IEH: For Abu Dhabi Art, you've been commissioned by Meem Gallery to produce a work responding to the John Lennon track, 'How Do You Sleep?' How have you chosen to respond to these lyrics?**

JK: I haven't really. For me, working with a theme is not right; it should not be applied to an artist. I don't feel like working with this imposed theme ... I've never been a fan of the Beatles or Lennon. I've never heard the song and still have not listened to it!

I need to create work based on what interests me. When I heard the question, 'How do you sleep at night?', of course one thinks about the current situation of the world, because there is so much s\*\*\* happening, it can apply to some Arab leaders who have responsibilities towards not only their people, but towards humanity in general, and it is their duty to try and make the world a better place, to bring people together no matter what side or what sect they belong to, especially in these very, very disturbing times where entire nations are literally being destroyed and many lives wasted. I feel shame and wish I had the power to change things.

**IEH: That's an honest response and much appreciated, rather than you pretending to have responded to the theme and coming up with some licentiously fabricated explanation. Nevertheless, what can one extrapolate about the content of this work that you'll be exhibiting?**

JK: This painting, it's called *Emergency*. It's a painting of a special Nepalese divinity skull, atop a lifelike human torso with a pink flower and a dead bee.

I saw a documentary about how bees are dying throughout the planet and it seems like a sign that something is deeply wrong. In China they hire people to hand-pollinate each flower on pear trees now. I think people should pay more attention to what's really important; I have a child and really want to see him living in a healthy planet.

I think bees are beautiful and have always loved bees. But at the same time, everyone gets scared of them, they are so small and full of energy, they will give up their existence to protect their surroundings.

I remember my first serious drawings when I was ten years old, they were of carcasses, bones and skeletons aflame. I don't know where this came from, but somehow this painting resonates with the feelings of that time.

## BIOGRAPHY

Born in Lebanon in 1964, Palestinian artist Jeffar Khaldi grew up amid the turmoil of the Lebanese

civil war. To avoid coercion into one of the militias, he emigrated to Texas at the age of sixteen. In 1988 Khaldi enrolled at the University of North Texas, in Denton, where he studied interior architecture, receiving his degree in 1992. After eighteen years in the United States, Khaldi relocated to Dubai in the mid-1990s. In 1997 he participated in the Sharjah Biennial, as well as other group exhibitions including *Espejismos* (Mirages), *Contemporary Art from Middle East and North Africa*, Museo San Pedro de Arte Mexico, 2007; *Cultivating the Desert*, Wunderbox, Netherlands, 2007; *Best of Discoveries*, Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair, China, 2007; *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*, Saatchi Gallery, London, 2009; *Told/Untold/Retold*, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, 2009; and *Residua*, Maraya Art Centre, Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, 2010. Since 2006, he has exhibited his work in solo exhibitions in Dubai, London and New York: *Disco Desert*, Thierry Goldberg Project, New York, 2008; *With You Without Ever Seeing You*, John Martin of London, London, 2008; and *Remove the Invisible Blindfold*, Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai, 2010. His work is held in collections around the world including the JP Morgan Chase Collection and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. In 2005, he established the gallery B21, in Al Quoz, Dubai. He lives and works in Dubai.

## FURTHER READING

Ruba Asfahani. 'The Voices of Palestinian Artists: From Palestine With Hope.' *MUFTAH* (13 May 2013). <http://muftah.org/from-palestine-with-hope-hearing-the-voices-of-its-artists/>.

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Jyoti Kalsi . 'Jeffar Khaldi's Paintings are an Eye Opener.' *Gulf News* (Dubai, 21 January, 2011).

Arsalan Mohammad. 'Jeffar Khaldi In Conversation With Arsalan Mohammad.' *Saatchi Online Magazine* (29 October 2008). [http://magazine.saatchionline.com/articles/artnews/jeffry\\_khadri\\_in\\_conversation](http://magazine.saatchionline.com/articles/artnews/jeffry_khadri_in_conversation).



Emergency (2013)  
Oil on canvas  
230 \* 180 cm