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## The alchemy of Nedim Kufi

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BEIRUT: Before you enter the main hall of the Gemmayzeh gallery Espace SD, duck into the small movie theater on your right just after you cross through the glass doors.

Inside, Dutch-Iraqi artist Nedim Kufi has installed a preface of sorts to his current exhibition, on view through March 4, in the form of a looping two-minute digital animation.

On screen, amid total silence, a kaleidoscope in deep shades of red, brown and purple spins out an endless sequence of patterns against the faint outline of an opened notebook. For Kufi, spending a few minutes in front of the film is adequate preparation for his show, the visual equivalent of concentrating on the third eye chakra in yoga to clear your head.

"It needs total silence. After 10 minutes you can get in and swim," Kufi explains of the undulating, mesmerizing patterns pacing the animation.

Kufi's exhibition is entitled "Attar in Beirut," the first word meaning an alchemist or healer who, in the artist's interpretation, is capable of giving practical advice and making magic at once. In addition to the animation, the show features 15 paintings which are probably best (if grimacingly) described as large-scale spiritual abstractions. Three are older works that Kufi made in Amsterdam, where he is based. The rest were produced over the course of a single month in Beirut.

How did he work so fast? "It's the difference between working and thinking. I came to Lebanon in November. I was ready to start. But there were no colors in my thoughts," he says. "By the time I really started, they were already done, one by one."

Kufi was born in Baghdad in 1962. He studied sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts and etching at the Institute of Fine Arts. Then he left for the Netherlands, where he pursued graphic design.

"Design changed the way I research and practice art," he says. "It supports painting and makes it a mentally rich experience, teaching me how to look and how to behave. And fine art supports design, too. It gives it special blood. But anyway," he adds, "I started late."

Kufi settled into his current subject and style in 2001, "by coincidence or conclusion," he says. He remembered a friend of his father whom he had known in his youth. This man had worked as an attar, and Kufi discovered in his memories of him the way he himself wanted to work as an artist.

"If we say art is a profession only, then it is not enough for me," he says quietly. "I mean, I know art is a profession but it has to be more than that. I have to find in art a temple, a ritual, spiritual behavior. So in general, I behave in art as an attar to feel comfortable and complete. From that moment, I feel very much settled."

In his canvases, Kufi uses such materials as soap, coal, henna and wax. Visually, his works involve objects or shapes on a grid, working on repetitions and faint patterns, on the logic of Islamic art where geometry yields reflection, unification, elation. Conceptually, many of his paintings are in fact performances.

Kufi moves to stand in front of a single work, 150 centimeters by 180 centimeters,

streaked with dark neutral tones and made from coal, among other materials.

"I washed it four times," he explains, "as an action, to clean it and do it again. In general, I like to recycle everything. History, identity, everything. I let the weather help me, the sun, the rain, washing by water is a ritual of healing. My painting is an action, an accumulation with many layers on one surface."

If the weather helps him, then Kufi, in turn, helps his viewers with titles. The above mentioned canvas, for example, is called "History."

"I cook them in my mind a lot," he says of his titles, "to make the distance to the viewer closer. Some artists leave their work untitled, which makes no sense to me. I am very careful with my titles. They come as a conclusion. I give myself a month, or two weeks, to come up with them, to understand."

Perhaps the most evocative title in the show is "Iraq=Chaos," a work that consists of a small wooden box divided into compartments, each with a different material inside, including yeast, cotton, twine, dried flower petals and a few mystery materials contained in closed satchels. Kufi made the work during a residency in New York. Other paintings in the show employ similar satchels, like teabags but rather more poignant, as if each little package held a secret, or a tragedy.

"Always the package has something inside," he says. "It has a smell or a special color, maybe autumn leaves from the street, as a message for winter, for the next season."

And this begs the question, what is Kufi's relationship with his homeland these days?

"Emotionally I am dead with this case. It is dead. I don't like to see Iraq in bed, sick. It is painful, this image, but we adapt."

Kufi has no plans to return and in fact, prefers working in Lebanon (he has shown twice previously in Beirut, at the Agail Art Gallery in Hamra).

"I prefer to make paintings here, in this atmosphere. It is healthy for me, as an alternative home. I travel a lot and this kind of attitude is necessary to have a ritual of healing and cleansing, especially with the events of the world, these bad events. Art has this kind of power so why not? Silence is important. Much more important than talking. And we need to listen, especially in Iraq. We need another Gandhi to settle the spirit of the people."

*Nedim Kufi's "Attar in Beirut" is on view at Espace SD in Gemmayzeh through March 4. For more information, please call +961 1 563 114.*

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