

REVIEW

# An art emerging from the chrysalis

Fadi Chamaa's media-manipulated works take up the death, or rebirth of art

By Chirine Lahoud  
Special to The Daily Star

**B**EIRUT: Where does art go when it dies? Can art die or does it just transform itself through the years? These are questions that we could ask ourselves when visiting "Transformations," an unconventional exhibition of canvases by Lebanese artist Fadi Chamaa that opened at Gemmayzeh's Joanna Seikaly Art Gallery Wednesday.

Chamaa's exhibition combines video installation and paintings, all 28 of them oils on canvas. What makes Chamaa's art so original is the two-stage process of media-manipulation, which effectively transforms his art into something else.

Entering the gallery, visitors are abruptly confronted by a flat screen showing Chamaa at work. A camera is poised some meters behind him as he stands, barefoot, painting quite blurred portraits and landscapes. He then rolls-up the canvases, knots them and hangs them from the ceiling.

This is the art on display at Joanna Seikaly. Chamaa's paintings are not set upon canvases stretched and framed for consumption, representations of figures set against a horizon line. They are spinning mobile art.

The walls of Joanna Seikaly have been painted an immaculate white and Chamaa's works are accompanied by a light, peaceful music. The space's stark colorlessness provides a beautiful contrast with the canvases, which (even in their rolled-up and knotted state) exude a range of strong primary colors -



Chamaa's untitled works now up at Gemmayzeh's Joanna Seikaly Art Gallery.

bright reds, blues, browns and yellows.

"I want to 'represent art in its basic shape, without any philosophical or deep thinking,'" Chamaa told The Daily Star. "It is 'art is dead,' or maybe a re-birth of art."

As his works are rolled up and knotted, it is impossible for the spectator to know exactly what the subjects of Chamaa's paintings are. For some of those spectators, that's what makes the artwork so interesting.

"It has never been seen before," as one visitor said. "We can interpret his art the way we want."

The absence of an obvious subject doesn't mean the works leave no impact. When gazing upon the artist's works - hanging from the ceiling like

hypnotic pendulums - the visitor may experience a dreamlike sensation, as though he or she is inside a vortex where time has stopped.

Although Chamaa says he is addressing the death of art, his works are, ironically enough, far from dead. They convey the impression of occupying an intermediary space between the earth and the sky, or possibly between reality and what can be conveyed by art.

Assessing this art in the context of the accompanying "Making-of" video, each comes to bear a more than passing resemblance to the chrysalid state - that stage in insect development when the larva transforms into an adult. These works are like the cocoons within which the caterpillar invisibly trans-

reside within a collection of exposed, but undeveloped, films.

A Lebanese contemporary of Hadjithomas and Joreige, Walid Sadek, who trained as a painter but no longer paints, has over the years felt compelled to absent image and object from his practice. Yet his work obsessively references individual art works that can readily be seen, whether in art history books or via the Web.

One of the pieces in "Place at Last," Sadek's debut solo at the Beirut Art Center last year, used text to provoke dialogue with the spectator.

The subject of one exhibit was the oft-rendered classical story of Cimon and Pero - about a daughter who suckles her imprisoned father, who's been sentenced to death by starvation. Sadek cites 11 different depictions of the Cimon and Pero myth (dating from the 16th-19th centuries) but the images themselves are absent. They are evoked, rather, by 11 fictive aphorisms that the artist ascribes to the back of each work.

Another work, "Love is blind," takes the form of a conversation with ten works generated between 1933 and 1952 by Lebanese painter Moustafa Farroukh. Here the absent subject is Farroukh's romantic renderings of Lebanese landscapes. The paintings themselves are missing, of course, but their exhibition labels are ubiquitous, as are Sadek's image-skeptical rejoinders.

Chamaa's art obviously works with more traditional media but it clearly speaks a similar dialect as that of image-critical artists like Sadek, Hadjithomas and Joreige, whether he intends to reference them or not.

The emphasis on practice over image and the absence of explanation serves to imbue the work with greater presence.

Fadi Chamaa's "Transformations" are on display at Joanna Seikaly Art Gallery in Gemmayzeh until April 11. For more information call 70-776-711.

## Artists threaten boycott of Guggenheim in UAE over workers

By Michael Casey  
Associated Press

**DUBAI:** More than 130 international artists and writers vowed Thursday to boycott a branch of the Guggenheim Museum under construction in Abu Dhabi, unless authorities do more to protect the rights of workers on the site. Human Rights Watch released a statement from the artists saying they will refuse to cooperate with the project until Guggenheim and Abu Dhabi authorities ensure that workers are reim-

Island that left migrant workers deeply indebted and unable to protect their rights or leave their jobs. Each of the 94 workers interviewed for that report said he paid between \$1,800 and \$4,100 in recruitment fees before his employment, highlighting the nearly universal acceptance of such practices.

If the Guggenheim Museum is to address the artists' concerns, the museum may become better known for exhibiting labor violations than for exhibiting art," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. TDIC said it has long worked with an independent monitoring consultant

