

A lifetime of artistry in motion

Aref el Rayess is a man of word, action and image. Robust and animated in body, he is passionate in temperament, mercurial in impulse and uncompromising in conviction. He is also a painter and sculptor of dramatic force and prodigious energy, who during the past five decades has produced more art than most other artists could produce in five lifetimes.

The current exhibition honouring his stature as one of Lebanon's leading artists, which opened at the World of Art Gallery on Wednesday, is intended as a mini-retrospective. To those who know Rayess and have been following the myriad directions of his work through the years, the collection will be regarded as considerably less 'honouring' than what his remarkable output deserves.

To understand and appreciate his art, you have to know the man and the uncommon manner of his life. They are inseparable. Like the chameleon that changes colour to match environment, Rayess channels his art to match experience. He clothes each experience, immediately and emotionally, in the exact style, medium and content befitting its tenor.

Let's start with Aref el Rayess in Africa during the 1950s.

Imagine a young man painting in isolation for several years in the bushland wildness of Senegal, where he lives and works (with forced interest) in his father's merchant business. He spends hours each day painting the dense landscape of lush foliage; the forlorn plains of petrified trees; the dark, weather-beaten faces of the villagers, their eyes stark and silent.

He paints one canvas after another until there are dozens. Then, deciding to hold an exhibition, he hangs the paintings in an abandoned hangar, dresses up in his white Sunday suit and formally walks in to attend the show ? a sole audience of one, followed by his manservant carrying a bottle

of champagne.

He leaves Senegal in 1957 and over the next three decades travels from his home base in Lebanon for extended stays in Paris, Rome and London; in the US, Mexico and Venezuela; in Morocco, Algeria and Saudi Arabia. Wherever he is, he absorbs experience with the instant reflexive action of a sponge thrown into water, all senses alert to the sights, surfaces, sounds, smells and tastes around him.

In the sixties, while in Paris, Rome and New York, Rayess moves into an abstract mode of expression. He is provoked by the dehumanising mechanised tempo of the new world environment, but at the same time eagerly explores the aesthetic potentials of its prevailing avant-garde art forms

With painterly skills honed, new techniques acquired and innovative media adopted, he produces several series of abstractions during this period, each different than the other in style or media, but all in one way or another reflecting design and symbolic elements that echo his Arab cultural heritage

Outstanding among these abstractions is the Tapis Volant series, executed in 1965 after his two-year stay in the US and Mexico.

They are large in scale, low key and sombre in colour, austere and elegant in design. The beautiful spatial balance of vertical stripes, in tonalities of blue, purple and crimson fit for a king, give these 'flying carpets' a vibrant soaring energy.

Two years later, in response to the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict, Rayess produces what many consider his most powerfully disturbing works. Deeply Arab in ethnic commitment and always strongly pro-active to political events, he reacted with intense disillusionment and rage at the disastrous outcome of the June war.

Powerless to reverse events and lacking an army to do battle, he turns to his art, the only sure ammunition he possesses. Literally locking himself up

in his Aley studio, he emerges six months later with 13 large paintings (most of them 4m2 in size) and immediately arranges for their exhibition.

That these paintings (all of which he refused to sell) startled the public is an understatement. Here, in images of condemnation fiercely delineated with the blacks and reds of rage, Rayess gives vent to his anger ? at Israel, at the Arabs, at the world. Using the damning pre-war circumstances of the June debacle as a catalyst, he takes critical aim at all wrongs everywhere. While his attack against the agents of Arab failure dominates, he also wields his accusing brush at student riots and police brutality, at Western imperialism and political hypocrisy, at the martyrdom of revolutionaries past and present.

I still hold in my mind's eye the astonishing force of his Homage to Martin Luther King ? the life-size image of a black man, with head bent over a wall, hands gripping the edge and blood streaming down from his fingertips in ten long screams of undiminishing sorrow.

I cannot begin to recount, let alone describe, the endless variety of art produced by Rayess ? on canvas, paper, wood and metal, in every medium existent or imagined His richly textured sand paintings from the Rome period; his compassionate drawings of the 'ladies' living in Beirut's red light district (now a levelled parcel of Solidere land); the serene desert landscapes he painted while living in Saudi Arabia; the repeated portrayals of the Virgin Mary, whom he looks upon as 'the symbol of life, of love and continuity'; the portraits and landscapes (but, curiously, never a still life nor the sea).

There are also his innumerable pieces of sculpture, which is the medium Rayess prefers. Those included in the exhibition were conceived as small models, but are intended for execution in monumental dimensions. His residence in Saudi Arabia (where cost is no hindrance) brought him commissions to produce several monuments. The largest is a 23-metre-high shining aluminum Column of Light: Allah, executed in Italy from his model and under his supervision.

Unlike most artists of singular vision who find one style and stay with it, continually seeking to refine it, Rayess is a creature of change. He is, without exaggeration, as protean ? and as dynamic ? as Picasso.

When asked about this aspect of his character, Rayess remarked, “Art to me is like the weather, always changing. I feel the change, the difference between a windy, stormy day and the warmth of spring with its scent of flowers, and I respond to it. Poetry, music and painting all derive from such feelings. This, along with love, is the only magic in human existence. Without this magic, life is finished, dead, even when the body survives”.

Some day, when you’re passing through Aley, I suggest you stop by for a visit to the Rayess studio. It’s the best way to get to know this unusual man and his unusual art. You will, I assure you, receive a gracious welcome.

He lives just a block off the main street at the centre of town (ask any shopkeeper to direct you) and his studio is an ancient 250m² space with double-vaulted ceilings. Only a small section of it, outfitted with all the paraphernalia of an artist, is the actual working area. The rest is full of Rayess art works ? thousands of them, though they’ve never been counted.

Meanwhile, don’t miss the exhibition. Another date for your calendar is 6pm on Tuesday, when you can hear Rayess talk about his art.

*World of Art Gallery, Ramlet el Bayda, near the Egyptian Embassy.
From 10am to 6pm daily, until November 5. Telephone: 03-313-337*