

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Print

Hussein Madi, the 'Picasso of the Orient'

May. 06, 2004 | 12:00 AM

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

"Physically, he looks like him already," says contemporary art dealer Aida Cherfan, laughing and nodding toward artist Hussein Madi, who is seated across from her at a desk in her airy yet intimate gallery in downtown Beirut.

The "him" in question is Picasso, to whom Madi has been compared on more than one occasion. And on the basis of looks, the resemblance does stick. The two men, from opposite sides of the Mediterranean, have the same domed head, the same deeply grooved brow, the same tempestuous eyes over a sturdy nose and full mouth.

To this, Madi takes a self-conscious tug on the brim of his black fisherman's cap. He flashes a quick smile and then folds his face into an expression of modesty, blending doubt, indifference and disbelief. That cap is a tip-off though, a *de riguer* accoutrement for an archetype of old-school artist, serious, unabashedly ambitious, and prone to grand works and bold visual gestures.

Madi is not entirely at ease with English, so chooses his words carefully and precisely. He is disarmingly soft-spoken outside his native language, yet when the subject turns inevitably to art, his voice rumbles into an earthy growl. He often adds the following classification to his comments: "When I say artist I mean artist with a capital A." But he doesn't need to. His shift in tone, down to the lower register of his gut, says it all.

Born in the southern town of Shebaa, near Mount Hermon, Madi lived and worked in Italy for 22 years before returning to Lebanon for good in 1987. Now 66, he has become one of the most well-regarded and prolific artists in the region - an aesthetically rigorous and stylistically accomplished painter, sculptor, printmaker, master draughtsman and more.

He is presently sitting in Cherfan's gallery, the light of early evening slipping across the walls from the nearby Place d'Etoile, surrounded by his own paintings, prints, and sculptures. Cherfan has just opened a mini Madi retrospective of sorts - a quick sampling of his work over the past three decades - timed to coincide with the publication of the artist's first proper monograph.

Cherfan, who opened her first gallery in Antelias in 2000 and her second one here a year later, has hung the show well, with 33 paintings gracing the walls and many more stacked on the floor, pulling off a casual atmosphere that never feels cluttered, more like an approximation of an artist's studio than a flea market.

Saqi Books released a limited edition of "The Art of Madi" last week - 500 beautifully bound copies, all embossed with a unique drawing committed one-by-one in Madi's own hand with an orange pen on the title page, with one of his small lithographs slipped in between the covers as well.

"This is like the luxury edition for Beirut," says Cherfan. Saqi plans to release a second, larger print run next year, one which will have a greater geographical reach but with a different cover and without the lithograph and presumably without the personalized drawing. Though with Madi, you never know. He seems completely undaunted by huge volumes of work.

Returning to the Picasso comment, he asks: "What do they say, 'The Picasso of the

Middle East'?"

He is now thoroughly dubious of the designation.

"'The Picasso of the Orient,' actually," is the reply. "Ah, even bigger!" remarks Cherfan.

Of course, art critics and historians do not invoke Picasso's name when talking about Madi based on either man's physical stature. The similarities dwell rather in each artist's strength with color and line, dexterity in multiple media and sheer vigor of production. That and a common visual iconography of bulls, musical instruments, and voluptuous women. And probably also a certain shared approach to lifestyle, in which the boisterous, expressive and sometimes temperamental disposition of a great artist rubs up roughly against the more delicate and domestic conditions of polite society.

Madi made the decision to pursue art against his family's wishes. He studied at the Academie Lebanaise des Beaux Arts (ALBA) and supported himself by doing political caricatures for newspapers, first in Lebanon and then briefly in Iraq. In 1963, he moved to Rome, where he attended the Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma and slowly started to carve out a life for himself, artistically committed and financially independent.

The Art of Madi is a dense and distinguished book, 335 pages packed heavy with over 500 color plates. Local critics Helen Khal and Joseph Tarab have contributed essays, in English and French respectively, alongside texts by Michel Tapie (in French), Martina Cognati (in Italian), Mounir Eido and Samir Sayegh

(in Arabic).

Khal's writing in particular illuminates the life of Madi as both a man and an artist, and reveals the depth of conversation that can take place between two artists, delving as it does into intricate layers of technique. (Khal has her own career as a painter and keen abstractionist, from which

the precision of her questions and observations must surely

be drawn.)

But the strength of the book lies, as it should, with the art itself. Across those 500-plus reproductions, one can grasp the full evolution of Madi's work. The Italian critic Joseph Silvaggi once said that "(Madi's) drawings are filled with symbols and rich with artistic conventions in simplified forms; they are an enchanted script, a resume of figurative art." And indeed, page after page of this new monograph dispels the notion, however half-baked to begin with, that modernity is a western construct posed in opposition to the artistic traditions of the Arab world. In over four decades of output, Madi

has consistently wrestled the two together with both grace

and bravura.

Madi paints with oils and acrylics. He renders his drawings and prints in graphite, ink, wash and linocut. His sculptures, angular and whimsical, are most often bent and folded out of single sheets of galvanized iron.

"One thing is very clear," says Madi. "The material can be changing. I can make a painting with acrylics or oils, a drawing with wax or ink. It's not important. I have everything I need in my studio. It's just desire - to make a sculpture or an engraving or a drawing. I don't make a plan to pass my day. It's just what I feel. It takes a very big courage to draw, to paint, to make sculpture - to make art as you think, just to make art, to make art for pleasure."

Forms, volumes, colors and lines take precedence in Madi's art, and he has pried open a wide space in his work between abstraction and figuration. Against a vibrant color palette, he has given calligraphy and the Arabic alphabet a corporeal presence, stylizing his lines and giving letters and geometric patterns both weight and fullness. And at the

same time, he has distilled the more figurative elements of his paintings into stark shapes, so that they comprise a unique system of symbols to be read, something like hieroglyphs with a discernible syntax.

He says: "The bull is for power. The bird is for freedom. The horse is for nobility. The woman," and here he pauses and drops his voice into another rumble. "The woman is for love."

Since 1965, when he won first prize in painting from Beirut's Surssock Museum, Madi has shown his art in scores of exhibitions all over the world. He participated in the 2003 Venice Biennale and represented Lebanon at the 1996 Sao Paul Biennial. "It was a holiday for me," says Madi simply about his trip to Brazil. His work has found its way into permanent museum and corporate collections in Qatar, Jordan, the US and the UK.

For all the comparisons to Picasso, one wonders if young artists from the Arab world, 20 or 30 years down the line, will be considered the Madi of their time. "My advice (to them) is to keep a case and a pencil and to draw everywhere," he says, repeating the verb like a mantra. "To draw, to draw. We cannot make art without drawing, and drawing everything - an apple, a woman, a man, a dog - to draw, to draw, to draw."

That being said, there are no signs that Madi is ready to slow down just yet. He had one retrospective in 1979 and it was high time for another one. Madi may have a third one in him yet. "I continue to appreciate life, whether making art, making spaghetti, or making love," he says.

The Saqi monograph represents a milestone for Lebanese art in particular and art from the Arab and Islamic world in general. "The book is really unprecedented," says Cherfan. "(Madi) decided it was his project for 2004. And it's really been done properly."

As with almost all art forms from here, there are too few resources and too few documents available to trace the continuous history of the region's cultural production. But The Art of Madi is an auspicious addition. A few months from now Saqi will release another monograph for Mohammad Rawas, the Lebanese artist whose dizzying collages carry a contemporary edge and a Rauschenberg-like complexity. To say the least, books like these suggest good things to come.

The Art of Madi is available for \$100 exclusively at Aida Cherfan Fine Art, 62 Hussein al-Ahdab Street, in downtown Beirut. The exhibition of his art continues through May 21. For more information, call 01/983111 or check out www.aidacherfan.com

Copyrights 2017, The Daily Star - All Rights Reserved
06/05/2004