



Hanibal Srouji

Wishful Thinking

Born in Lebanon in 1957, Hanibal left for London and Montreal in 1976. He's been a resident of Paris for twenty years, but his heart and soul remains forever in The Levant.

"My work reflects my own relationship with my feelings about what is happening in my home-country". His work is a thirty year long discourse on Lebanon, and its people.

Speaking prior to the opening of his recent exhibition at The Suban Gallery, he explained "Part of what you see here is the 'Cage Series', it is inspired by the way we keep birds in a cage".

"For me, keeping these birds makes me focus on the meaning of liberty. And it makes the viewer think, for example, if I am the bird, am I on the outside or the inside?"

Are we trapped in the cage, or trapped outside the cage? Perhaps we are in the process of going through the bars. "For me", Hanibal feels, "they are like open cages".

He incorporates very lyrical spaces in his work, very feminine spaces. He gives the work room to breathe, and he gives the viewer the space to consider.

There is no clear answer to the riddle he poses. Nor does he feel that there need be. He draws the viewer in to a dialogue within.

He challenges further - "You'll see that amongst the bars of the cage, amongst the soft petals that I paint, there are often the expressions of bullet-noises, of damage and of pain".

In 1997 Hanibal returned, prodigal son-like, to hold his first exhibition in Beirut. "For this show I had damaged canvases with fire, and deliberately inflicted the marks of bullets on my paintings. It was very poetic". Indeed, whilst such damage may easily be construed as the reactionary rants of an artist seeking only to shock, they must be seen juxtaposed against the serenity of the larger parts of his works. When they are it becomes clear that they add an honest element of grit and reality.

"In '97, after the city had largely recovered from civil war, and they had filled in all the holes and rebuilt the buildings, I came along and reminded them of what had gone before. I think they were shocked. Certainly for the younger generation it was good for them to see what we had been through for them".

Hanibal creates his work as therapy for himself, and offers them in a similar vein to those who may also need this.

A restless soul lies within. As an artist he refuses to describe himself as content, "I'm not. But I don't think we have a choice whether we are or not". His work, whilst a salve to his soul, does not yet satisfy him. "I have so much more to do. I don't feel I will ever reach a conclusion. When I look back over the last thirty years I see my work as one long continuous piece yet to be finished".

Life is beautiful. Hanibal's life is beautiful, and ultimately positive. When considered in their correct context - his works are ultimately positive pieces too.



PHOTO: PHILIP AL-SAYED