

Welcome to my World

The Freedom of Mohannad Orabi

“The best thing to do is to forget everything that you’ve learnt; forget theory, forget colour wheels and just do it - paint,” says Mohannad Orabi. Painting is a pleasure, plain and simple. His studio is an anarchic mess of paint and canvases. He also keeps his vinyl records in a traditional brass cauldron, and plays them on an antique gramophone he bought as a student. “I like things with soul,” he says. “I love African masks because they are so spiritual... every dab of colour, every carving on them has a deep meaning that has to do with their belief system.” Orabi may not understand exactly what these are, yet he intuitively senses their significance. “A small, wild flower making its way through a crack in the cement in a forgotten street corner can be more beautiful and more mesmerising than a meticulously designed, landscaped garden,” he says, in a bid to explain that art should not be too orchestrated; rather, it should be random, innocent and free.

Orabi has a distinctive style of painting. A stylised character dominates his canvases, all of which he titles ‘Self-Portrait’. “Sometimes she turns out to be feminine,” he says of this character, “sometimes masculine, sometimes childlike.” Nevertheless, they are all self-portraits in that they capture a certain

state of being. “They don’t look like me physically, sure, but their mood is mine,” he says. Sometimes the character sits cross-legged on the floor, or curled up in a foetal position to sleep. Other times, they play with a yoyo, meditating, waiting for a lover, seeking to fly or to float. Their eyes are always the largest feature; almond shapes in bold black lines that pull the viewer in like a magnet. “I like that shaky sense that comes out of the repeating of broken lines; as if the image is not quite frozen on the canvas, not stable, but tense, vibrating with the possibility of movement.”

Orabi’s paintings do reveal a tendency towards curves, vertical lines shooting upwards, and small horizontal dashes that hint at fallen shadows. “Two arcs cross each other in two places and suddenly you have an eye,” he says. “It’s like poetry. Poetry is not just about sentimentality, it is also words, grammar, metaphors, sounds, hyperbole, rhythms. It is everything.”

“The time for exhibitions, auctions and sales - that is the gallery’s concern. My world is my studio and my creative release.”

Body-language also plays a key role in his works; the relationship between arms and legs that expresses a state of mind. “Before I begin a shape or a line, there is a craziness of colour. I just play with

buckets of paints - without any plan or intention - simply as a release,” he says. “You could ask me why I chose yellow, for instance, but I wouldn’t have an answer. It is just something that happens.”

Orabi sees painting as a lyrical and creative process where the final work is almost secondary. “I am always immersed in what I am doing at the moment. Old paintings I forget, once they’re done,” he says. “The time for exhibitions, auctions and sales - that is the gallery’s concern. My world is my studio and my creative release.”

According to Orabi, there are two ways of reacting to a painting. The first way is by examining it structurally, and analysing the relationship between the lines and the shapes and the colours. “You might look at a painting this way and say, ‘Yes, it is a balanced painting - check!’” The other way has nothing to do with these kinds of calculations and formal analyses. “Just get a random guy off the street and stand him in front of a painting. Either it makes an impact on him or it does not,” he says. “Usually, the impact comes from something personal from the viewer, a forgotten memory, a subconscious tug of recognition. The viewer can sense if I am sincere but that is a different aspect of the word ‘art’ and it is not really my concern,” says Orabi. “I think I need to paint because I would probably be a really annoying person if I didn’t! It is just my release.”



MOHANNAD ORABI

Born in Damascus, Syria, in 1977, Mohannad Orabi’s fascination with colour and the human form started when he saw a row of babies in the incubators of a local hospital. Watching them squirm and cry, his imagination erupted and he began furiously sketching as he pursued this experimental line of enquiry further.

The graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus has participated in several collective exhibitions and workshops inside and outside Syria over the last eight years. In 2007, his work was exhibited at the inaugural artparis-AbuDhabi by Ayyam Gallery at Emirates Palace in the UAE capital. Also in the same year, Orabi enjoyed a solo exhibition at Zara Gallery in Amman, Jordan.

Orabi has already been commended for his artistic practice and has received several prizes; including first prize at the 2006 Youth Art exhibition in Damascus. His pieces can be found in the permanent collections of private individuals in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, France, Canada and Switzerland.



Mohannad Orabi. 'Self Portrait'. 2008. Mixed media on canvas. 162 x 162 cm.