



With the use of charcoal and adapted images of soldiers, army trucks, tanks and aircraft, 'In Army We Trust' portrays the murky war being fought in Syria

## Stark and clear

Syrian artist Thayer Helal feels this is no time for his usually subtle abstract paintings



By JYOTI KALSI  
Special to Weekend Review

Thayer Helal is well known for his abstract paintings. The Syrian artist, a senior professor at the University of Sharjah, Fine Arts College, uses the symbolic language of colour, composition, texture and repetitive patterns to communicate his concepts and emotions. But the ongoing events in his country and in the region have provoked him to adopt a more direct style. His latest show, titled *In Army We Trust*, is an expression of anguish that comes straight from the heart.

"I have spent my entire life researching and refining the art of abstraction to subtly convey what I want to say. But today, when I see my people out in the streets, I am thinking what I can do as an artist. And I feel that I must remove the covers from my paintings and reveal the truth within. I cannot be silent or subtle anymore. My message must be direct and strong," he says.

As the title suggests, this body of work questions the relationship between the people, the armed forces and those who control them. It features images of soldiers, army trucks, tanks and aircraft obtained from newspapers and other media. These are images we are all familiar with, but here they have been enlarged and the surroundings have been covered with black paint to forcefully convey the message and highlight every detail. The grainy, hurriedly taken images speak volumes about the fear and danger experienced by ordinary citizens. And the black background alludes to the darkness and the control of powerful and violent forces in their lives.

By blowing up the pictures and obliterating the surroundings, the artist draws attention to details such as the Russian origin of the tanks, aircraft and weapons, and Assad's pictures and the words "Assad's army" and "Assad's Syria" emblazoned on the vehicles. Every image raises many questions. "I have been away from my country for

20 years. But seeing these images reminded me of childhood interactions with soldiers in my village. As a young boy, I was fascinated by the tanks and guns and wanted to be friends with the soldiers. As I became older I began to understand that the arms were used to kill and that the soldiers were there to fight for the country and protect us. But when I see what is happening today, my mind is full of questions. I want to know who paid for all these arms and vehicles and who supplied them and profited from them. And I realise that we, ordinary citizens, are mere pawns in a larger game. Also, when I see pictures of young soldiers in the army trucks, I observe their body language and I wonder what they are thinking, how they are feeling about what they have been ordered to do and what their own families are going through," Helal says.

Echoes of his repetitive abstract patterns can be seen in the way he has used paper cutouts of rifles, tanks and aircraft in the background of his canvases. Earlier, he has used pieces of charcoal to create meditative abstract patterns on pristine white canvases. But in this series, he employs bits of charcoal to create a dark, murky background that suggests gloom and an impending storm. His penchant for repetition is also evident in a large canvas entirely covered with rows of toy soldiers.

In a piece different from all the others in the series, the artist pays homage to the Libyans who fought bravely for their rights. Here the canvas is covered with bits and pieces of broken toys and splashes of red that represent the violence and destruction during the conflict. In an allusion to illuminations in religious texts, the entire canvas is painted golden. "This entire series is about the power of these weapons and soldiers. They can be used either to make war or peace. It all depends on the person who is wielding the power," Helal says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai

*In Army We Trust* will run at Ayyam Gallery, DIFC, until March 15.

## Beirut's fading glory

Nadine Kalso captures the city today, a mere shadow of its past and listless about the future



Photos courtesy: Cuadro Fine Art Gallery

History In A Crucial Time (left) and Smile. Nadine Kalso uses a clever device to juxtapose the past and the present in her latest body of work

By JYOTI KALSI  
Special to Weekend Review

Nadine Kalso's latest work is an honest portrayal of a city she loves. The Lebanese artist grew up in Beirut, but has been living abroad for over 15 years. Her show titled *Makan Fi Al Zakerah* — meaning "a place in the memory" — is steeped in nostalgia. But it also acknowledges the realities of the present and expresses her concerns for the future.

"I have this love/hate relationship with Beirut. When I go back, everything I see brings back happy memories. But at the same time when I see that nothing much has changed in all these years, I feel sad that the city is stagnating," the Dubai-based artist says.

Kalso has used a clever device to juxtapose the past and the present in this body of work. The series is based on photographs of Beirut that she took during a visit last summer. But on these pictures she has pasted cuttings from old Arabic lifestyle magazines of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. While the magazines provide a connection with the past, the pictures and words she

has cut out from them combine with the photographs taken in 2011 to create witty collages that comment on the present socio-political situation in Lebanon and the Arab world.

Kalso's pictures do not depict the smart localities, fashionable people and sophisticated lifestyle that one usually associates with Beirut. Instead, her camera has captured dilapidated buildings and the squalor of the inner city. There are no people in the photographs, but thanks to her manipulations, you can see well-known Arab film and theatre personalities and glamorous divas from the old days peering out from the balconies of the rundown houses. Objects such as old-fashioned radios, televisions and cars, words (often taken out of context) and advertisements from those days blend seamlessly with the photographs to create narratives that offer witty observations about daily life with a serious socio-political subtext.

Some of the images feature once elegant buildings that now have crumbling walls and windows blocked with bricks. By putting pictures of well-dressed people in the windows, Kalso tries to recreate the good life of the old days, while also high-

lighting the poor maintenance, lack of basic amenities and general neglect that plagues the city. Other images showing a few brightly painted balconies in otherwise decrepit buildings comment on the way people focus only on looking after their individual area with no regard for the surroundings. There are also pictures of Palestinian camps in Beirut that make subtle remarks about differing attitudes to the Palestinian issue through cuttings of articles on nationalism and advertisements for cleaning chemicals.

*In Kalso's works, well-known Arab film and theatre personalities and glamorous divas from the old days peer out from the balconies of the rundown houses.*

Posters promoting Beirut as the "Switzerland of the Middle East" juxtaposed with her pictures of the city today tell a sad story of denial and mismanagement. Other works use pictures of Western stars and carefully chosen words from the magazines to comment on the long history of foreign interference in

Arab affairs. Kalso uses advertisements of revitalising drinks, household cleaning agents and toothpaste to exhort Arabs to be strong, clean up the mess and learn to smile again. Through pictures of poets, writers and actors, she recreates a past when society was more open as opposed to the growing conservatism in Arab society. Kalso's work is deeply personal. The

black-and-white TV sets with no remote control, the old radios that needed careful tuning and advertisements for products that her grandmother used are nostalgic reminders of her childhood and the Beirut of the past. But her focus is on learning from the past to ensure a better future.

"I feel that instead of facing reality, the Lebanese people are living in the past. They are denying their problems and hoping that things will be resolved by themselves. But these problems will not go away. The more we ignore them, the more they will build up," she says.

"However, this work is not only about Beirut. My concern is for the entire Arab world. Today Lebanon is so paralysed by social and political problems that we are stagnating with no movement forward. I do not want to see the same thing happening in the rest of the Arab world. We should stop our internal power struggles and unite against common enemies. The recent changes are good, but I believe that we should be cautious and alert to ensure a free and open society in the future," Kalso adds.

*Makan Fi Al Zakerah* will run at Cuadro Fine Art Gallery until March 7.