

Muhannad Orabi: Syria's new art find



“My current work explores the theme of ‘remembering my early childhood,’” says Muhannad Orabi. “I reflect on personal experiences and memories, and reminisce through my paintings. I am inspired by the history of my childhood experience.”

Orabi joins the ranks of such plastic artists as Safwan Dahoul, Fadi Yazigi, Youssef Abdulki, Munzir Kam Naqsh, gracing the halls of Ayyam Gallery with his works. “Joining Ayyam gallery gave me the opportunity to stand on my own two feet, feeling secure and dedicating my whole time to painting.”

Born in Damascus in 1977, After his graduation from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus in 2000, Orabi participated in several collective exhibitions and workshops inside and outside Syria such as a collective exhibition in the United Arab Emirates’ Palace in Abu Dhabi in 2007. He also had solo exhibitions such as his exhibition in Gallery Zara in Amman, Jordan in 2007.

Orabi was recently accepted into the gallery after raising the interest of their selection committee. “I was among 20

other winning Syrian artists under the age of 37, all competing for a spot in the gallery,” he says. “Before, I used to paint 20 paintings annually on average, but after joining Ayyam, it’s now 40 but with more depth and skillfulness in production.”

For Orabi, not every Syrian artist of the old generation is creative. Indeed, he was influenced the most by Picasso, and of the old Syrian artists, he feels only Mahmoud Hammad, Nasir Shoura, and Fateh Mudarres, as well as a few others, could survive, as they pioneered and developed their own artistic intuition and skills.

Orabi won several prizes for his work, one of which is the first prize in the Youth’s exhibition in Damascus in 2006. He is also the winner of Shankar’s International Children Competition in New Delhi in 1991. His works are present in important collection in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, UAE, Saudi Arabia, France, Canada and Switzerland.

Much of your work is portrait based. What are your reasons for that?

I deal with the creature we call humans,

but the identity of the human being however, changes with the changing of the stages my work. I started with the portrait, and then it became the whole person. However, what matters to me is the composition of colors rather than the human form. The form suddenly changes into a child, after I had seen closely lines of babies in the incubators of a hospital. I went on watching them, imagining their fate and scratching countless sketches.

In my self-portraits collection, there is a story behind every face exploring what those faces tell about my latest mission and artistic preoccupation. I love painting; it is a way of life. I had to paint just to draw a comparison with the outer world. The big challenge for me was to ensure spare time for my painting. I find relaxation in my drawings, a sort of enjoyment and a special world of fantasy. Playing with colors is very difficult, since encompasses people while for an artist to draw his portraits needs to be talented and trained simultaneously.”

What do you think is the major inspiration for your work?

I find much of my work is stamped by the elements of the Syrian local environment, with the aim to serve the lofty goals of the Syrian art movement, making the work very contemporary and time-relevant. Our times are filled with work, chores, over-stimulation, television, stress and lights. Therefore imagination is not the only plaything available to ignite the intuition of the artist. I try to put in each painting the fleeting moments and moods of past and present experiences. Childhood taught me much, and molded my artistic experience. I have learned the secret to artistic success is honoring the Syrian past and its traditions as a ‘melting pot,’ while moving ahead into the future.

Who do you feel is your target audience, and are you reaching them?

The Syrian art viewer is well educated and very critical. Artists are the very production of their art, and since we have good viewers and good artists, we only lack art galleries to display these works and market the artist. I am grateful to Ayyam gallery for giving me the opportunity to do so.