



Feature - Movers and painters

<http://www.timeoutdubai.com/dubai/features/review.php?id=3505>

Movers and painters

By **Chris Lord**, July 2008

*Featured in Ayyam Gallery's latest show, **Khaled Takreti** talks to Chris Lord about change, his mother and moving to France.*

After much confused staring we realise it's a scooter. 'At the beginning I made it very figurative and clear, but then I erased it slightly. I wanted to make it a little bit ambiguous,' says artist Khaled Takreti. Indeed, standing before his huge diptych 'Azure' (right) in Ayyam Gallery is just such an experience – ambiguous.

On one side is an angular image of a seemingly bourgeois woman clutching a bag, while opposite her stands a bow-tied, skinny man who stares wryly out from the canvas with a strange metal pipe between his legs (which, as it happens, is the scooter). An image like this begs explanation, a story – something to soften its edges and make it speak.

But the Syrian artist's works are as implicitly tight-lipped as they are affecting; they positively shy away from explanation, unlike the artist himself. *Time Out* came to him wanting to know how life in France had affected his art since he moved there in 2006, but instead found a much more interesting story of how quieter, personal movements so often shape the way we express ourselves.

Trained as an architect, Takreti's works bear the angular marks of his draughtsman past. 'They used to have a very geometrical structure,' he explains, 'but now that's changed a little bit. You can still see the clear, vertical lines in them, but the shapes have become rounded.'

Has his work changed in other ways since moving country? 'When I arrived in Paris, more colour started to come into my paintings,' he replies. 'I have found light to be different between the Middle East and Europe, and this seems to have changed the way I put colour on the canvas.'

Yet women still figure highly throughout his work. Whether framed by the austerity of his earlier period in Damascus or in his later Paris works, there's always the same atmosphere among these characters. With Klimt-like deference, Takreti's female subjects seem to harden on the canvas, carrying a sobering silence with them.

'You must understand, before I moved to Europe I had a very close relationship with my mother,' the artist reveals. 'She was always in my paintings. For years and years, whatever I started would always end up with my mother's face'. Is it her we see in the 'Azure' diptych? 'Absolutely,' Takreti affirms, 'but there's more of a story than that. When I came to Paris, I decided that I had to stop painting her, so I worked for one year just painting myself, never my mother. From that time I learned that when I paint women they're very static, but when I paint myself it's a different shape – I have more movement in me. You can see this here in "Azure" in the way I've represented myself at the end of that time.'

That accounts for the scooter and the wry smile, but offers no further clues as to how we can interpret the sober women that characterise his paintings. 'The women I paint are always static because they are reflections of my mother,' he explains. 'She always has the same soul and I am always the same painter, so I can change the colours, sometimes I can alter the movement, but it's always the same soul of my mother that I represent in the women in my work. I try to paint other women, but I can't do it'.

Always at the mercy of Takreti's architectural eye, the vertical and horizontal lines present in his work seem to freeze his female subjects into the bare wash of colour behind them.

In 'A Serene Morning' (inset), we see this implicitly. The composition gives the effect of these figures being etched into the canvas. Unlike the plant that grows beside them, their shapes are set and then bisected by colour.

So to perceive these figures as bourgeois or austere in light of Takreti's insistence that they express something of his own recollections is as static. It's easy to approach his subjects as reflections of something simpler that we want to find in there, about place and change, but when we asked if the people he paints are different since moving to Paris he's resistant to answer. 'I've lived in five or six countries in my life and I've come to the conclusion that people in all countries are essentially similar. The differences I've found come in the way we express our ideas and how we use words to explain what we feel'.

So it's not always the simplest explanation. Too often we want to frame artists with histories and stories. Somewhat like Takreti's figures, we force them into the horizontal lines of time and place to make sense of change in their work. But, as the artist hints, change is more immutable, only expressing itself fully when we let it speak and be heard.

Khaled Takreti's works appear as part of Ayyam Gallery's Contemporary Syria show. Until September 9.