

Wall Reversal

Abdul-Karim Majdal Al-Beik Inverts a Symbol of Oppression

“Walls drink in the history of a place,” Abdul-Karim Majdal Al-Beik explains. “Every alley is bound to have a ‘Saeed loves Samira’ kind of graffiti on its walls, a spray-painted arrow to some place, a ‘For Rent’ sign, ‘Allahu Akbar’, or the daubs of letters and numbers by the neighbourhood’s children.” The walls are their palimpsest and the daubed drops of paint, their ink. Amid the cracking plaster lie the hints of hidden layers. “I am trying to portray the passage of time,” he says.

Al-Beik’s creativity reflects a wisdom and sensibility beyond his years. He was born and raised on the outskirts of Al-Hasakeh, in a tiny village consisting of seven houses built of mud, brick and straw. “The cracked walls come straight from my village, Murik, which is a Kurdish word that means ‘bead’, like the Arabic word ‘kharazeh’. It is such an ancient land, Syria, and in my village up in the North, thousands of beads are in the earth, among the stones, like pebbles. It’s some sort of archaeological traditional jewellery, but they are so widespread that the village is named after them.”

Al-Beik has walked around the streets of Old Damascus, observing and feeling the walls; how they differ from those of his childhood but how they are also vessels of reminiscence. “A wall is not just a wall, it becomes a store for memories,” he says. Al-Beik collects the funereal announcements (Na’wat) that are pasted on the walls of the city. “Is it possible to find a wall without traces of an old ‘na’weh’, or perhaps a freshly pasted one, which no doubt is stuck on top of an older one?” he asks.

Al-Beik notices how each wall possesses a different character that over time, changes shape, texture and colour thanks to the sun and the rain. Some are saturated with religious content, commemorating a blessing or warding off ill-will. Others are laden with instructive municipality notices or numbers that nobody understands except for the administrative officials who placed them. Then, there

are walls bearing the graffiti of frustrated adolescence.

When Al-Beik returns to the studio after his stroll, he infuses each canvas with the essence of his surroundings, revelling in the individuality each piece offers.

Careful to maintain an authenticity in his expression, basic wall-building materials are Al-Beik’s tools. Colours are used, but minimally; rather, black, white, grey, a few earthy colours and a sky blue. To reconstruct the passage of time, he applies several layers to each canvas. As ash falls upon charcoal, starch and plaster, cracks appear as if they are, “Forbidden thoughts trying to break out,” says Al-Beik, who applies myriad markings; from the dripping wash of diluted paint to childlike scratches and scribbles, a black spray-painted arrow or a random number.

“I try to paint spontaneously, without deliberation...like graffiti...like kids,” Al-Beik says, in a bid to needlessly rationalise the stick-figures, doodles and scrawled numbers that he etches or sprays on his canvas walls. “Children can’t write smoothly. They usually write numbers backwards. I like to reflect that naivety in my work,” he says.

The immediate sense of the passage of daily life on the walls has made Al-Beik’s work strangely appealing. A paper taped to his studio wall reads ‘The walls alone know our secrets’, which was written by Imad Mustafa, Syria’s Ambassador to the USA, and one of Al-Beik’s closest friends and collectors. This nota bene is just one of many, some composed by Al-Beik. “If walls be the canvases of madmen, then these madmen are my teachers,” he once wrote.

Al-Beik is now exploring tents; also absorbers of human history. His grandfather’s ‘shadir’ (a thick, beige fabric with a rope-like texture) is far more than mere cloth. “It holds the fingerwork of the people who wove it, the breath of the people who slept in it, and the wind of the desert that blew through it.”

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ABDUL-KARIM MAJDAL AL-BEIK

Born in Al-Hasakeh, Syria, in 1973, Abdul-Karim Majdal Al-Beik’s first paintings were inspired by the memory of his birthplace. He painted from the memory of the villages in Northern Syria, and the colours of the townswomen’s clothes. However, displacement drove him to explore the memory of the walls in these forgotten villages and elsewhere. According to Al-Beik, walls are archives and indicators of street life and town history.

After Al-Beik’s graduation from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus in 1999, he received a Master’s degree (with Honours) in oil painting in 2001. He went on to participate in many collective exhibitions in Syria, France, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran. Al-Beik’s first solo exhibition was held at the Arabic Cultural Centre in Al-Hasakeh in 1998, which was later followed by a show at Al-Sayed Gallery in Damascus in 2001, and another in 2005 at Shell’s Cultural Club in Damascus.

Al-Beik’s works can be found in a number of private collections throughout the Middle East and Europe. The recipient of several prizes, he received the silver prize of the fifth Lattakia Biennial in 2003; first prize at the ‘Mirror of the Syrian-British Cooperation’ exhibition held at the British Cultural Centre in Damascus in 2000; first prize for oil painting at the second Youth Art Exhibition in Damascus in 2001; and a diploma of merit in the ‘Think With Your Hands’ competition organised by the Spanish Cultural Centre in Damascus in 2000. Last year, he picked up the second prize in Ayyam Gallery’s competition for emerging Syrian artists and was subsequently invited to join this stable of artists.



Abdul-Karim Majdal Al-Beik. ‘Wall’. 2008. Mixed media on canvas. 170 x 150 cm.