

A personal reflection

Syrian artist **Mohannad Orabi** presents an emotionally driven solo exhibition that touches on themes of self-awareness, history and loss. *Jenny Hewett* asks the artist to analyse a few of his favourite pieces

Much of the art being produced in Syria today shares a common theme: a reflection on the past and hope for the future. Damascus-based artist **Mohannad Orabi's** new solo show at Ayyam Gallery in DIFC, entitled 'It's No Longer About Me', is no exception. But while 35-year-old Orabi says he subtly touches on his connection to his homeland, he explains that the body of work is

more about 'the interaction with the face and the person in particular'.

'I can't really explain all the things that inspired me to come out with this collection, but it's definitely influenced by the people's pain in my country, old pictures of my parents and sister (who I lost in the past) and the vagueness of the future,' he says. 'All these things have left a print inside of me and are reflected in my portraits.'



Orabi enlists some unusual techniques to create his pieces. 'I use sand melted with particular materials to give the surface the feeling of a wall or a piece of land, as if I'm drawing my portraits on my land and on my walls. This is a way of expressing my attachment – and anybody's attachment – to land, country, home, family and memories.'

In this exhibition, he uses primary colours sparingly to depict subjects with emotion so strong, it pierces the viewer. 'In my previous collections my paintings were self-portraits. I was the centre of the subject, the only one in them, but here I became a part of this world, trying to figure it out in my own way. What's interesting in art is that you can reflect reality through it. Humans are emotional and passionate, and they are affected by it. Colours and brush strokes are my way of expression, and to me they are exciting and beautiful.' Here, the artist takes us through some of his standout pieces.

◀ M01057

'The lady is very feminine and proud. Her gaze is very direct towards us, and full of challenge and repression. The mask covers her mouth so she's unable

to speak. It's red because that colour, for me, is love, anger, revolution, instinct and warning. It always leaves a different impression depending on its placement in the painting. I like using red. I deal with colours with spontaneity and joy and honesty. It's my most sincere tool and it makes me feel human and alive.'

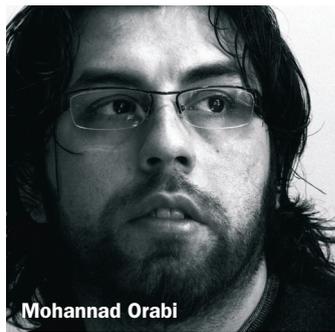
▲ M01650

'This is a figure with a mask. After painting the figure, I tried to play with it by putting the yellow mask over it and keeping the eyes wide open. The eyes have lots of light, as if they are an invitation for hope for the future. My portraits become more realistic with open eyes towards the world and reality. Art reflects reality and I deal with my paintings as if they are the mirror of my life and my feelings, and what I think and live at the moment. That's why you see the colours are very limited and the figures are more expressive and realistic. The yellow mask could suggest the inability to express properly what's happening in the surrounding world. The grey colour manipulates the painting, so the yellow comes to balance all this grey to give a strong statement.'



▲ M0158

'This shows a boy who has lost his father or brother, or someone dear to him. We see this scene every day in our part of the world. What's important in the child's gaze is his sharp look, which follows us wherever we go, from whichever angle we look at the painting, with determination and lots of pride. It's as if he's suppressing his tears from falling, caressing the picture of the deceased person as if he's embracing that person, as if he's still alive. My subjects are the people around me, or those whom I meet in my daily life. You can meet many people during your day and their figures get stuck in your head. They appear within time as visions with colours that race me in my dreams, and they ask me to jump on the surface of the canvas. They ask me to see the light by painting them.'



Mohannad Orabi



▲ M0162

'The girl, once again, is inspired by my family (specifically, my sister who passed away). She's wearing her school outfit, and there's innocence in her eyes. The yellow, again, covers her mouth and her nose as a mask that's stopping her from expressing her true feelings. This yellow, along with the dots, are a technique I use to find the desired balance for each painting in this collection. I leave the rest of the details to be explained by the viewer.'

1 THE LOWDOWN
Exhibition: It's No Longer About Me, until June 14 at Ayyam Gallery, Gate Village 3, DIFC (04 439 2395).
Artist: Mohannad Orabi.
Price range of works: Dhs62,445 to Dhs202,027.

M0161 ►

'Very simply, this painting is inspired by an old picture of my family. It shows how we were attached to each other. Each subject has their own personality and placement in the family. I pictured five boys and one lady. It also signifies how important women are in my life and in everybody's life. I always intend to show the woman as pretty, very proud and strong. As for the dots, this is a long story. It's also a visual solution to balance the figures, the background and the thickness of the painting. This piece is an accumulation of memories, feelings and experiences of one's life.'



► **NEXT WEEK:** A preview of Iranian art on show at the new RIRA gallery in DIFC