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A bouquet of life

Zena Assi's flowers and her sitting people urge us to think about whether a society that is resigned to sit and wait and has given up its will to act is still or lifeless



Image Credit: Supplied

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Weekend Review (http://gulfnews.com/weekend-review)

By Jyoti Kalsi, Special to Weekend Review (http://gulfnews.com/writers/jyoti-kalsi)

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Lebanese artist Zena Assi's canvasses are filled with huge bouquets of flowers. But these pretty 'still life' paintings contain within them a narrative about the chaos and ugly realities surrounding the artist. The paintings are accompanied by a series of steel and papier mache sculptures of men and women sitting in various postures. Titled Les Assis or Sitting People, the sculptures convey the sense of resignation and inertia felt by people whose aspirations have been destroyed by a never-ending cycle of wars and civil strife.

The title of the exhibition, Still Nature, is a combination of the English term 'still life' and French nature morte used to describe inanimate subject matter. Since morte means dead, the artist plays with these contrasting terms to ask questions about the fine line between being still and being dead. Her bouquets, sitting in vases, pots or coffee mugs and her sitting people urge us to think about whether a society that is resigned to sit and wait and has given up its will to act is still or lifeless. The allegorical artworks refer to the socio-political situation in Lebanon. But the artist's exploration of the physical structure and emotional subtext of contemporary society has a universal resonance.

Detaching the self

Assi's bouquets are not still life paintings. They have been created by an interesting process. She began by spreading an empty canvas on the floor of her studio and it remained there for many months, while she went on with her daily routine. She walked all over it, cleaned her brushes on it, noted down numbers, names, messages and ideas on it, spilt her coffee on it and drew doodles on it. When the white of the canvas was no longer visible, she had it mounted. Only then, did she put it on her easel and consciously use her brush on it.

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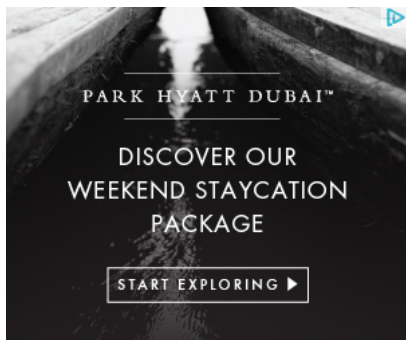
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"I detach myself completely from the canvas and let it develop on its own. And the fun part is that the flowers emerge on their own from my mess. I can see the floral shapes in that mess and all I do is to outline them with my brush, paint over some of the mess to create a background and add the vase or pot. I do not intervene in any other way because I do not want to influence the innate rhythm of the canvas. The bouquet that emerges has the story of everything that was going on in my life and around me during the months it was being unconsciously created," Assi says.



Her bouquets contain emotions and elements of modern urban life that most people can connect with. "My canvas is a beautiful, white empty space. But when I look around my environment I see no such open space. Hence I allow the dust, humidity, colours and sights such as the ubiquitous billboards in the city to completely obliterate the whiteness of the canvas. My bouquets reflect the energy and chaotic life of the city and the wall-paper like backdrop conveys a feeling of being indoors. Essentially, they represent the attempts of city dwellers to make up for the absence of green open spaces and to escape from the stress of city life by urbanizing nature through the flowers and potted plants in their homes," the artist says.

Assi also expresses her love for nature through two other paintings. One titled November Again is an imaginary winter landscape. The other is a diptych that combines trees with a cityscape full of amusing details such as clotheslines, election posters and graffiti. "All around us public spaces such as forests and beaches are being appropriated by those with power and money. So, I named this painting 'A bench with a view' and invited people to sit and enjoy this view of nature for free," says Assi.

The artist's sculptures developed from the many portraits she has always drawn of people around her. "In Lebanon we have a society that is fed up of war and political instability. People have given up and you always get this feeling that everybody is sitting down and waiting for something. This stagnation makes me want to scream. The drooping heads and resigned attitude of my sculptures suggest that these people are depressed and have given up. But maybe they are waiting and hoping for something. Who knows, whether they are still waiting or they are dead," she says.

Assi has deliberately chosen to use images of flowers and ordinary people in her work. "In Lebanon you wake up every day to news of war and crises. I was born a few months after the war began, and I have never lived in a peaceful atmosphere. I do not want to talk anymore about heavy issues like identity, struggle and war because I am living it every day. In my studio I want to escape by painting flowers and depicting the beauty and simplicity of ordinary people in the streets," she says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

Still Nature will run at Art Sawa, DIFC until January 10, 2012.

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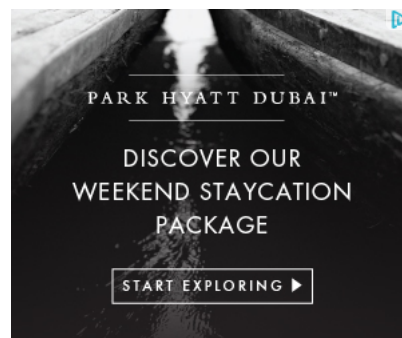
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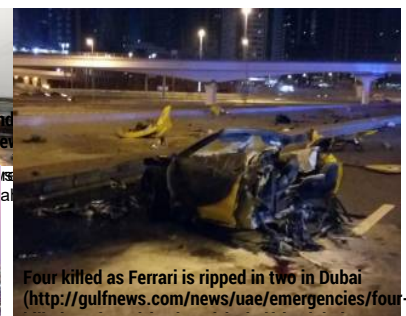
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