

## Moving matter

By Muhammad Yusuf

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Lebanese artist Zena Assi's show at Dubai art gallery Art Sawa titled Mass Movement (May 27 – June 26) is a shocker in many ways. First is the crying paradox between the artist's sunny disposition and the pictures she draws. A well settled mother-of-three in Beirut, Lebanon, it is Assi's art nature to see the dark side of things. Second is the total absence of the Mediterranean sun in her current show.

Assi's Lebanon is not the touristy kind, with bright sunshine and picture-postcard people. The world she shows is far removed from this. In fact, it is a place where people, buildings and books are thrown together, pell-mell or so

painfully squeezed together there is no space to breathe. The defining feature is claustrophobia and an overwhelming sense of suffocation. "I used to hate it," says Assi by way of explanation. "Now I love it, this chaos we have here."

Third is her use – or non-use - of colour. Assi dilutes her colours, so much so they are lifeless. The reds and blues, for example, are so drained of vitality that they just cannot get a rise. Even her nature scenes are anaemic – deliberately so. The sea is waveless and the flowers are blown.

Finally, the title itself is ironic, since there is little or no movement in the pictures. "The society that surrounds me made me do it," says Assi. "I have tried to do a portrait of the masses; I wanted to show how one reacts in a crowd." Assi has a love-hate relationship with Lebanon. She can reel off details on its many faultlines before you can say "Beirut." But at the same time, the country is home for her. "Beirut is very crowded," she says. "With noise, colours and buildings." She lives and works among a cluttered cityscape that is crammed with wires, television antennas and buildings stacked precariously on top of one another.

Her canvasses reflect this. They are full of interwoven lines, varied in width and texture. A kind of defeated dynamism cries out of them. They evoke an overarching sense of loss and sorrow. This, according to Assi, is the result of man's own misplaced yearnings.

"We are all searching for our identities," she said. "But somehow don't find it. The search is a trap! You end up being in a group, following a leader and losing your identity." Assi depicts the failure of this search, the loss of individuality and the immersion of a person in the mass with a matchless quality.

Her flatplane paintings, projecting rows of zombie-like people moving robotically, uniformly angular buildings and undecorated ambience, is a twilight world. It is one inhabited by bats and owls, not nightingales or larks. It is straight out of the poet's despondent imagination:

We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

Our dried voices, when

We whisper together

Are quiet and meaningless

As wind in dry grass

Or rats' feet over broken glass

In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,

Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

This is the dead land

This is cactus land...

Assi does her pictures on a scary, white background. "White reminds me of blank paper," she says. "It gets me back to the first level of painting, like a blank A/4 sheet. It is black that is usually considered frightening; but I want to show otherwise."

She bravely tries to show the European sensibility and the multi-national hues of Lebanon, but doesn't quite get there. "When you zoom in," she says, "you get the same colour in the accumulation of people. You have the same colour as your partner. In some way, you repeat your neighbour."

Amel Makkawi, Art Sawa's moving spirit (she really makes art move!) said: "We often fall into the habit of believing, thinking and being the same way, perhaps finding our identity but losing our individuality." She said that Assi had a recognisable international language. "Her works cross borders and one can place it anywhere," she said. "Since she talks of what is inside us, she speaks to everyone."

Assi is a global traveller, though she has always lived in Lebanon, where she has deep roots. In a one-minute snapshot of Lebanon and the Lebanese, she said: it is a hostile land; it is stagnating when all places are moving; many injustices are happening there; the Lebanese are very aggressive because they are minorities everywhere.

As an artist, she finds inspiration in this. "I don't search that hard for my inspiration," she says. "There is always a

feedback between the artist and society." Closely focused on her country and its saga, Assi's art mills do peculiar justice to its many travails.