

# Evocative art

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Artist Jeffar Khaldi says he is lousy at selling himself. "I can't do publicity and am just incapable of putting together a CD with high-resolution images for art galleries. It's not me," he says of his lack of marketing skills. And so, instead of hiring an agent, or improving his PR abilities, Khaldi went ahead and opened his own gallery. The gallery will host his first public showing titled Evocative Force.

B21 Gallery was not, he insists, set up to act as a platform for self-promotion but to bring controversial and thought-provoking art to Dubai. "The city needs controversiality [sic], because there's too much superficiality. If we want to be cosmopolitan we need to be open to discussion and different ways of expression," he says.

Though his criticism seems harsh, particularly when he describes Dubai as "one big theme park with so many cities", Khaldi continues to stay and work here because of what he believes it could be and makes it clear that his criticism is constructive and not intended to be destructive. "The more forms of art and allowances you make for expression - without hurting - the better it is for culture," he says.

Khaldi's work as a whole doesn't instantly come across as controversial - certainly not intentionally - though the large canvasses with harsh lines do present the works as being energetic and attention-seeking.

However, despite the furious strokes, the colours he uses balance the works and pull them away from the label of angry or dark. "I suppose there is some angst," he says, pondering over what was going on in his mind while he was working on his paintings. There is an apparent preference for oils though the occasional tapestry, garment or paper cutting creeps on to the canvas.

## Random technique

The angst stems from the subconscious and he can't really say what the issues are or describe the conflicts. Perhaps the Palestinian cause, given his Palestinian origins, even though he hasn't lived there. "It used to feature a lot in my earlier efforts, but not in this exhibition," he says.

Khaldi's technique is random as he paints when he pleases and not for a collection or a series. "I stand up [and] paint the works in one shot. Like in one concentrated period of time, at least for this exhibition. But I don't think about what I should do. It just sort of happens and depends on what's going through my mind at that point," he says.

Khaldi says he has progressed from being an artist who painted a lot of figurative works to one who paints near-abstracts - he doesn't think they're completely abstract. He attributes this shift to two reasons. "One, perhaps because this place is not too big on figurative art, and two, because every artist evolves. Growing up Picasso was God to me," he says.

With his leanings more towards the Neo-Expressionist movement now, Khaldi doesn't like self-censorship. And this is evident through a large canvas that he calls Abbreviation of Jesus. With a figure emerging out of an American flag being dragged across by a police-like figure it states an obvious anti- Americanisation sentiment. Khaldi confirms this without hesitation.

"I'm anti- globalisation or anti- Americanisation. But not anti-American," he says and adds that he can't be. Having spent 18 years in the US, Khaldi understands the culture and way of life and expresses pity at what he bluntly calls "stupidity". However, he doesn't blame the average American for this ignorance, and puts a large part of the blame on the media forces that control what is fed to the general public. "Their media is propaganda and I'm glad I lived there, so I know how they think and how to communicate with them," he says.

Dubai-based Khaldi earns his bread and butter running an interior design company. But painting is what brings him joy. With no formal training in the arts, Khaldi admits to painting because of the sense of creation he feels at the end of the day. And the large canvasses enhance the experience by empowering him with more freedom and space.

"I feel like the king of the world," he says, his arms outstretched and head tilted back - a la Leonardo DiCaprio, "when I finish a painting. I walk out on the streets and don't care for the Ferraris and Lamborghinis because I know I've done something no one else has done. It's that sense of exclusivity and power that is the best feeling in the world."

*- Evocative Force by Jeffar Khaldi runs until May 10 at B21 Gallery in Al Quoz. Gallery timings are from 11am-7pm, Saturday to Thursday.*