

## The Lebanese pop artist



From manga to Michelangelo: we deconstruct the work of postmodern master **Mohammad El Rawas** to see what makes him tick. Words *Nyree Barrett*

Gracious yet opinionated, Mohammad El Rawas's love of pop art seeps through his postmodern canvases. He borrows elements from the greats: influences from Picasso's and Michelangelo's creations sit comfortably in his assemblage works alongside manga characters and portraits of anonymous women. His creations juxtapose such differing elements, he explains, in order to 'prove that there are no borders between cultures and times. It's about trying to create a hybrid that more or less represents the duality of our culture.'

This merging of influences is what he believes to be fuelling the

Arab and Iranian art boom. 'Middle Eastern art in general is witnessing a very interesting movement of courageous and innovative expression, thanks to exposure on

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the internet and people travelling. If you let the doors open, this process of osmosis happens.'

For El Rawas, the tumultuous nature of some Middle Eastern states is a creative petri dish for its resident

artists. 'It's a fertile soil for art,' he points out. That said, he lived through Lebanon's civil war and notes that artists need to be out of crisis before they can get their creative juices flowing. 'You need the luxury of peace of mind to create – you can't be threatened by a falling mortar shell and think of making good art at the same time.'

This is El Rawas's first exhibition in the Gulf region, because he refuses to compromise and bow to the threat of censorship. Luckily, this is something he has avoided here in Dubai.

*Mohammad El Rawas's show continues at Art Sawa until June 6*

## Dissecting the art

El Rawas talks us through his work 'An Outing on Wheels'

**1** 'The first thing I knew about this work was that I wanted an aerial view of a cityscape constructed in balsa wood occupying the top part, so it looks like it's from afar. I left the front section open at first, but then I had the idea of showing people on an outing or having a picnic. It developed into them being on wheels in one way or another.'

**2** 'The main figurine is a manga character: manga is a very marked icon of our time and is, after all, a work of art. You know how in the Renaissance you had the symbol of pointing upwards, as in 'God is a witness'? I noticed that this manga character was pointing downwards, so in a way she's refusing to obey the religious rule.'

**3** 'These two old guys are from a painting called 'Jesus in the Presence of the Doctors' – they represent religious authority. The speech bubble above them reads: "She's refusing to point upward, what is to be done? What punishment is to be meted out? Flaying, lashing or stoning? I can see the dark clouds of your angry thoughts gathering. Please master, quickly make up your mind, your thoughts are beginning to smear the city's white buildings." I suppose these two are commenting on the manga character.'

**4** 'This figure is taken from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. I've always had a fascination with this image. It appeared in a previous work of mine about 10 years ago, and I had her operating a machine – I named it 'Delphic Sybil at Work'. In the original by Michelangelo she's holding a scroll, and I always thought this seemed like too much of a pose. She's now leaning on a stroller, but the baby has come out of the stroller and is also on wheels.'

**5** 'The girl kneeling on rollerskates is from Sir Peter Blake's work 'Have a Nice Day Mr Hockney'.'

**6** 'The baby is siding with the manga girl – he is warning her, saying, 'Beware what they (the religious authority) are planning to do to you.'