Bashir Makhoul

The Middle Eastern artist talks Hamlet, politics and cardboard cities

ADD COMME

2

By Clare Penning
Posted: Wednesday May 16 20

Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost by Bashir Makhoul shows at **Yang Gallery** (http://www.timeoutbeijing.com/venue/Galleries/15131/Yang-Gallery.html) until Sunday 15 April.

Ghosts are notoriously difficult to exorcise. Like tragedies, they leave their mark, whether in real life or literature. In *Hamlet*, the protagonist's dead father repeatedly urges him to avenge his murder; by the end, after most of the cast has perished, best friend Horatio promises to retell *Hamlet*'s story throughout 'the unknowing world'. As long as the tale is retold, the ghost will continue to haunt us all.

It is from Shakespeare's stage directions for the Ghost that Israeli-born artist Bashir Makhoul found the title of his latest exhibition, *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost*. But how does an artist from the Middle East bring Shakespeare to China?

Born in 1963 to an Arab or – depending how you look at it – Palestinian, Catholic family in Galilee, Makhoul takes his complex identity with him wherever he travels. Twenty-one years ago, he relocated from Israel to the UK, where he has built a career as a professor, writer and artist. Now he's in Beijing to launch his seventh major solo exhibition in 798's Yang Gallery.

'There will be 100 metres of cardboard walls covered with 40 panels taking up this space,' Makhoul says, waving at one half of the gallery. As we sit, surrounded by piles of flattened cardboard and wooden boxes, he takes me on a virtual laptop journey through his artwork of the same name.

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE

Art Walk: Caochangdi

798 Art District (798艺术区)

Avant-garde Chinese art in retrospect

Art Walk: Hutong galleries

Wen Pulin Archive of Chinese Avant-garde Art of the 80s and 90s

Red Brick Contemporary Art Museum

Art Walk: 798 art district

Trevor Yeung: The Darkroom That Is Not Dark

Gallery visit: Video Bureau

We move through a maze constructed from tall cardboard walls, each covered with lenticular micro-lens photos. These hologram-like images contain two photographs on one surface; as the viewer moves, the image changes. Makhoul takes out some prints from the boxes, and the kaleidoscopic effect is unsettling. You have to walk to see the images shift, but it is impossible to predict how and when you will see pictures of real cities or cardboard ones – sometimes they even overlap.

One of these images is of a fake town Makhoul made from cardboard boxes. The simple, haphazard structures mimic those of poorer Arabic communities. But if you keep moving, other photographs, taken in East Jerusalem, Hebron and refugee camps such as Shu'fat, also emerge, like the news images that perpetually haunt us, some are repeated at different points in the maze, dislocating and disorientating the viewer further.

Toward the Emergence of Resistance

(HTTPS://WWW.AIRVISUAL.COM/CHINA/BEIJING)
BEIJING ✓   (HTTPS://WWW.AIRVISUAL.COM/CHINA/BEIJING)   ADD EVENT (/EVENTSUBMISSIONFORM.HTML)

The installation is meant to remind us that the images we are fed of Israel and the Gaza region by the media cannot be the whole truth. These places, despite the nationalist, Biblical and news-fed myths associated with them, are real, ever-changing and, like ghosts, cannot be defined by a picture. 'It's something that we invented ourselves, but we can't even describe. If we do, we describe it in so many different ways. It's something intangible,' says the atheist Makhoul, observing that only a child might think they really know what God looks like.

Makhoul himself grew up with nine siblings in devastating poverty. His father was crushed under a tractor when the artist was just five and, by his own admission, his childhood was 'miserable'. The family depended on their mother, a 'real hero' who kept her children fed and encouraged them to be successful. Makhoul later trained as a carpenter, making violins and other fine pieces, earning enough to make his way to university overseas. But he never forgot his past and carried with him his humanist and political ideals, a belief in justice and a concern for the place of his birth where much of his family remain today.

It is only after the presentation that Makhoul, perched on the corner of a small sofa and fuelled by a triple espresso, finally recounts the artwork's history. The tale begins out in the Israeli Negev Desert, where lies one of the country's few 'ghost towns', as he calls them.

Dubbed 'Chicago' by Israeli and US forces when it was built in the 1980s, he tells of a makeshift town created as a training location for 'Military Operations on Urban Terrain'. Never built for habitation, the concrete city is a shell of a typical 'Arab' town. Complete with a peaked mosque, it has been used by the Israeli Defence Force to prepare for invasions into Beirut, the last Gaza evacuation and, more recently, by the US military.

'They built a whole city out of concrete, similar to my cardboard boxes, for training,' explains Makhoul, his relaxed demeanour cracking slightly to betray deeper emotions. 'Be it for operations in Gaza, Hebron or Hanin, they built a city of concrete to practise on. They are merging training and playing with killing; that's what makes the whole thing so absurd for me, and that's why I think it's worth us talking about it.' In his hands, ghosts come alive and the maze of buildings becomes more about the fragility of human life in urban war zones.

Like *Hamlet*'s Ghost, Makhoul's spectre emerges in the artist's personal search for justice for those lives devastated by the Palestinian conflict. Just as the Ghost haunts Hamlet because he seeks justice for his murder, 'You shouldn't lose sight of the fact that this piece ['Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost'] is about death,' says Makhoul. And for all its playfulness, it is a message that will not die.

2

Comments