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# Thameur Mejri



Thameur Mejri. Heretic Spaces 3, 2017. Mixed media on canvas, 180 x 140cm.  
Courtesy of the artist and El Marsa Gallery.

There are only traces of form left in Thameur Mejri's portraits, yet I would still call them portraits. His protagonists consist of an assemblage of dismembered limbs, a flash of bared teeth and, occasionally the sole of a boot-clad foot. But, it is not the outer figure that Mejri is interested in portraying; these are portraits of the internal

landscape of the mind.

The newest works in his latest exhibition at [El Marsa Gallery](#) in Dubai are energetic and full of almost frantic brushstrokes denoting rapid movement and a somewhat chaotic psyche. They are also populated with recurrent symbols: a knife, a hammer, a microphone, a housefly and airplanes flying overhead. When viewed together, they capture the spirit of Mejri's generation.



Thameur Mejri. Figures At War, 2017.  
Mixed media on canvas, 180 x 140cm.  
Image courtesy of the artist and El  
Marsa Gallery

Born in 1982, in Tunis, Mejri was in his early 20s when the so-called War on Terror started and was deeply affected by the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the associated media images such as those of tortured detainees in Abu Ghraib prison. It was through this lens that he started making sense of the world and, less than a decade later, when the Arab Spring began in his

hometown and Islamic extremists began to rampage across the region Mejri's worldview was one dominated by violence and aggression.

In the catalogue essay for the exhibition, [Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi](#) says that when he encountered Mejri's work in 2011, it was the first time he had seen an artist directly confronting the rising levels of violence and incitement in the region. "Long before ISIS videos and the push back against democracy by extremist forces, Mejri had the foresight to capture the chaos of the breakdown of human order," he writes.

Chaos certainly reigns across the majority of the paintings

and it is chaos under crushing pressure. There is a giant force at the centre of each of the works that has led his figures to implode. Mejri is depicting the kinds of pressures his generation feel within a society devoid of order and in that respect his works are entrancing. It is to his credit that Mejri has confronted such a subject and still managed to entice the viewer.

When searching for a path through the works, the eye stops on his symbols. The weapons echo the backdrop of war, as do the flying planes – although they also offer an escape route from the commotion. The housefly is possibly the most interesting. It is a fly-on-the-wall, a silent witness - perhaps there is even an element of self-portrait within this humble insect. Mejri doesn't offer an answer. Prolific in his practice, Mejri's art is his protest and also his way of processing.

“Like in my paintings, people are confused, they don't have a clear vision of the future, either of where we are going nor of what we want. Nobody is questioning the roots and core of the problem. We must fight and protest this every day,” he says.



Installation view of Heretic Spaces by Thameur Mejri at El Marsa Gallery, Dubai (Upper level). Image credit: Pia Torelli.

Whilst the stars of the exhibition are certainly the handful of 2016-7 works, the exhibition is expansive and filled with scores of works on paper dating back to 2013. These more intimate pieces, displayed upstairs in the gallery, are compiled from drawings Mejri made when he was a child that have been revisited and reworked. There are also several made in collaboration with his four-year-old daughter. He is fascinated by the constantly changing



interpretations that we all experience throughout our lives and he manages to capture that in these personal pieces.

A short film that Mejri made with his older brother is the final work in the show and reveals another side to his practice. With it, Mejri tells another story about how his father struggled with the idea of having his sons enter the creative industry and as such, points at the core of his message. *Heretic Spaces*, is a rebellious poke at the patriarchal system. He is questioning authority, rallying against the establishment and attempting to portray what happens when an agenda of violence and aggression is the only solution offered.

Heresy is defined in the dictionary as "something profoundly at odds with what is generally accepted". Here then, is a space to disagree.

- *Heretic Spaces. September 13 - October 19, 2017. El Marsa Gallery, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai.*



Thameur Mejri in his studio. Image courtesy of El Marsa Gallery



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