



Kurdish painter finds beauty in truth

Himat Mohammed Ali wonders if returning to Iraq might best be left a dream

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: A few years ago, Himat Mohammed Ali, the 44-year-old painter who goes by his first name only, was participating in a group exhibition in Baghdad. The organizers asked him to make the invitation, and he responded with an abstract image bursting in reds and turquoises. A well-known Iraqi artist came to the show, looked at the invitation, and said: "Nice colors. But I could never use them." The combination was just too jarring. "The red I can understand," he said, "but not the turquoise."

"I can use them," Himat said quietly.

"But why, how?"

"Because I'm Kurdish."

Himat is telling this story while balancing on a high stool, elbows and shoulders hunched over a marble countertop in the storefront space of Beirut's Agial Art Gallery. To punctuate the punch line, a quick and mischievous smile flashes over his face.

It's a stereotypical explanation turned around, he explains, twirling two silver rings on the fingers of his left hand, one set with dull black stone, the other one deep and shining red. People often regard his paintings - multilayered abstractions all blending organic and geometric forms - and comment on the Kurdishness of his color scheme.

Indeed, to survey the 34 canvases on view at Agial, the artist's first show ever in Beirut, is to brace your eyes against an assault of vibrant shades and hues. There are sun-like splashes of yellow and orange mixed with moody mauves, bright blues, and hyper-succulent greens, all meshed into a web of earth tones, rusted reds and unforgiving browns.

"For me, it is simple to see the Kurdish colors," says Himat, because his paintings have the same exuberance and brightness of Kurdish carpets and Kurdish clothes. "But the important thing is what you can find that's more, what you can find that's different. It's very easy to see this as Kurdish. And I like to be Kurdish," he

adds, "but international Kurdish."

Here, Agjal's owner and director Saleh Barakat interjects: "Kurdish without the fundamentalist approach to Kurdish nationalism; Kurdish in the sense that he is somebody who has this strong attachment to strong colors. But not particularly to be Kurdish because he is part of a Kurdistan nationalist party or something."

Himat prefers the approach to national and artistic identity articulated by Eduardo Chillida, the Spanish sculptor who once compared himself to a tree, saying that his roots were in the Basque, but his branches were everywhere.

"Yani, you have an imperialistic approach!" says Barakat.

"No, no, no!" laughs Himat.

Born in Kirkuk in 1960, Himat has shown his work in numerous solo exhibitions in Paris, Tokyo, Switzerland, the Netherlands and throughout the Arab world. He got a boost to his profile with the recent, well-toured exhibition and book project "Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art." And his work now sells for \$600 to \$6,000. But he may be best known for his joint projects with such poets as Adonis, Kassem Haddad, and other French and Japanese men of letters.

But despite his attraction to the written word, he says: "Sometimes it is not important for me what I do. Sometimes, what I have inside I want to speak. Sometimes you go the coffee with someone, you've been in the house all day, you want to get out and speak, and it doesn't matter what you say or to whom."

It's worth noting that Himat went through an impressionable period where his paintings were far less colorful. He reduced his compositions to black and white, not because he was down - Himat insists that his use of color is exactly the opposite of, say, German Expressionism, as his colors are not intended to evoke mood, tone, or emotion - but because he had no other materials at his disposal but black ink and white paper.

"I went to Japan, and for six months, I didn't paint. So for me, it was like prison." Himat had traveled for a show and planned to stay in Japan for just two months, the duration of the exhibition's run. "This was 1990. There was the war, Iraq and Kuwait, I don't know what. I decided I didn't want to go back," he says. "Two months has now become 15 years."

"I didn't have my materials. I didn't have my canvases, my oils. So I found Japanese inks and someone gave me Japanese paper." He painted with them for two weeks straight. "When I finished, I couldn't stop. So I painted the side of the house. And when I was finished with that, finally I relaxed. I felt empty. When I do this, it's for what I have inside. And sometimes the place decides for me what I do. When I come here," for example, "if I stayed in Lebanon, I could find my materials and automatically (my painting) changes, not the style but maybe the form, maybe the color."

As someone made rootless from his country, this sense of movable place has become a strong undercurrent in Himat's work. Every painting may be viewed as a landscape, as the artist hones in on portions of wilderness - a thicket of trees, a bunch of flowers, a handful of stray leaves - and breaks them apart in his compositions. Yet his touch is not violent but smooth.

Himat is now based in France, where by his own admission he leads something of a hermit's existence, painting every day and often all day. He works out of a studio in Paris's 18th district so small that he can rarely stand two of his larger canvases side by side. There, using acrylics, oils, lithographic inks and paper, he constructs and deconstructs his paintings, sometimes cutting up a series of canvases to make an entirely new creation out of the scraps.

"I cut, I mix, I make another painting," he says. "Sometimes it is like playing for me, like children."

Himat also says he prefers not to represent what he sees but rather to recreate it. In this way, his work bears a curious resemblance to that of the cubists. His impulse toward abstraction comes not from a physical gesture that conducts an emotion from limb through brush to canvas, but from an effort to capture some sense of perceptive truth.

Commenting on a recent survey in London on cubism and its legacy, Jonathan Jones wrote in *The Guardian*: "Cubism was never a style ... It was an inquiry ... Art today is made from the building blocks of ordinary life. Cubism took these building blocks, or working premises, apart ... 'I went to the cafe' - cubism asks what a cafe is, what is it to go, and, most provocatively of all, who the hell you are."

One hundred years after Braque and Picasso, Himat may have stumbled into their previously and deeply etched groove accidentally or by instinct. But where he skips off that cubist groove is in his notion of beauty. According to Jones: "Cubism claims to be not beautiful, but true."

Himat, by contrast, has said: "My artwork is an attempt to discover the truth. To me the truth equals beauty and therefore my artistic search is primarily an aesthetic quest."

It would be easy also to read into that artistic search a quest for home, homeland, return, back. "You need that," he says. "But sometimes it is not important. Because maybe if I sent you to your country, your city, your village, you couldn't live there today. Everywhere you have negative and positive."

On the likelihood of him going home anytime soon, in light of the current conditions in Iraq, he spins the rings on his fingers once more and adjusts his precarious pose. "Sure (it's difficult)," he says. "It's my dream to go back, but I don't know. Sometimes if the dream stays a dream it's better."

Himat's paintings are on view at Beirut's Agial Art Gallery in Hamra through June 19. For more information, call 01/3452

All rights reserved, 2018 HimatmAli

Himat

Powered by ENANA.com