

A Fairy Tale of Love and Freedom

Ousama Diab tackles social and political problems with the naïve technique of children.

"Her name is Mariam!" says Ousama Diab pointing to a fleshy woman who appears in a collection of his paintings entitled Mariam, as if introducing an old friend. However, Mariam with her bent head and slightly curled up body, seems stuck inside Diab's canvases. Painted with earthy colors and rugged lines, she seems as if sculpted from mud. "Mariam is Palestine," Diab says. "She represents Palestinians stricken by massacres, hunger and displacement"

Though she never looks you in the eye, Mariam's forefingers are always stretched out, as if trying to draw your attention to her story; a story Diab lived as a Palestinian refugee who was forced to flee his country and as the son of a fedayee who fought hard for unachieved independence.

As Diab's style leans towards naïve art, wars and massacres are no longer his subjects. Instead, he criticizes the lack of love and solidarity among people and their everyday struggle to make ends meet.

"People used to give without taking only two decades ago; today they act like the Syrian proverb says: scratch my back and I'll scratch yours, or even worse; they say scratch my back but I won't scratch yours." Diab says recalling with nostalgia how his mother used to fill a plate of their favorite food for the neighbors to taste and how warmly neighbors used to greet each other in the street; customs that Diab says aren't that customary any more.

Except for Diab; in his studio, I was received with extremely sweet tea, delicious handmade Palestinian pastry and was seen off with a shot of strong black coffee prepared by his cheerful father. On canvas, Diab's paintings remain grim and grey though. He depicts screaming faces, dark monsters and frightening animals. For him, a painting doesn't have to be beautiful, what matters, is that it reflects his feelings. "I'm not a singer, I don't need to entertain the audience; I showcase what I feel and they are free to like it or not."

Nevertheless, since Diab found love himself, his paintings became more colorful and jolly. In one of his latest paintings, Diab presented his own version of "the little red riding hood" where instead of trying to eat the red riding hood, the wolf falls for her.

Painted mainly with acrylic and oil colors, Diab's paintings are finished off with pastel to remind you of children's drawings on the school's blackboard. Also similar to children's drawings are Diab's repeated elements like hearts, wings and arrows symbolizing love, freedom and killing. In fact watching Diab's paintings and his strange mythological characters, with five eyes, seven toes and a great verity of colors, is like leafing through a fairy tale. Even Diab's still life paintings, mainly in the form of a flower pot with three flowers in it, have an air of supernaturalism about them. But then who wants to depict life exactly as it is? Certainly not Diab! "While a painter paints an apple, an artist eats it and paints how it tastes." He says.

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