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Artist Oussama Diab reads international greed
between the lines of sufferings of the ordinary Arab

By Jyoti Kalsi Special to Weekend Review
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Image Credit:
Oussama Diab, Barcode 1

At first glance Oussama Diab's latest series of paintings appears to be light-hearted and fun. Inspired by graffiti and pop-art, the colourful canvases feature balloons, toys and references to comic characters. But a closer

look reveals that these bright and playful artworks are actually about dark and serious issues. Diab is a Palestinian based in Syria, and this series titled “In the Name of Freedom” is about the socio-political issues that affect the people of this region.

“My work is inspired by the events happening around us, but it is focused on the concerns of ordinary Arabs, because it is they who pay the price for the political, economic and religious problems we face in the region today. As the title of this series indicates, the essence of my art is the quest for freedom at all levels starting with freedom for the Palestinian people and the freedom of the Arab people to have the right to build a decent life, to the freedom of being free,” the artist says.

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Although his subjects are complex and painful, Diab uses humour and a simple approach to deal with them. Laced with wit and sarcasm, his paintings are designed to make viewers smile, while at the same time forcing them to think seriously about various important issues. “I believe that art is incomplete if it does not reflect the problems and suffering of people. Just like Charlie Chaplin used black comedy to make us cry and laugh about our circumstances, I have tried to use humour to ease the pain of my viewers,” he says.

Diab’s paintings are symbolic representations of today’s events in the region and express his views on various issues that impact the lives of ordinary people. They deal with different aspects of freedom, ranging from obvious restrictions on personal freedom to subtle

manipulation of entire countries by powerful nations. In a triptych titled “Contrast”, the central piece shows a fully clothed woman with her head covered with a scarf and a blindfold over her eyes. On either side of her are two women enjoying spa treatments, their shoulders bare, heads wrapped in towels and eyes covered with cucumber and kiwi slices. Through this clever juxtaposition of familiar imagery the artist comments on the fact that a simple difference of circumstance defines whether these women are engaged in a free act or constrained by it, and provokes us to think about whether all three women are imposing blindness upon themselves.

The scenario is quite different in another painting, where two men in fancy suits are standing inside two oil drums, pointing toy guns at each other. The cardboard cartons covering their heads give them anonymity, while also offering clues about their motives. The painting is in bright colours, but the dark message cannot be missed. “Oil is the engine that drives all wars around the world. The international bourgeois are creating fights between different countries just for a barrel of oil, without caring about the struggle and strife caused by their actions,” Diab says.

Other paintings comment on the fact that some people do not value the lives of others and kill with ease those who are vulnerable. They depict one person aiming darts at another whose head has been replaced by a bunch of balloons. The Mickey Mouse mask hiding the face of the dart shooter perhaps alludes to the proxy wars fought in this region by international players. The artist has also addressed the issue of exploitation of young girls through forced marriages and trafficking and of children being recruited to fight wars. In his paintings of child soldiers, the figures of rifle-toting boys have been covered with lines that look like barcodes. “These

barcodes are a comment on traders, politicians and arms manufacturers, who want to make profits even at the expense of arming children. Those who have a vested interest in creating wars treat the children like merchandise, while at the same time encouraging them to become consumers of these products of destruction,” he says. “But, I have surrounded the children with colourful flowers to express the hope that the situation will change soon,” he adds.

In fact, flowers and barcodes appear in all the paintings. Diab has used colourful, flower-patterned wallpapers as the background in every canvas. And along the borders he has created multicoloured barcode-like patterns.

“The barcodes represent the consumerism in our society that has turned everything in life into a business transaction for selfish gain. And I use the wallpaper because it adds colour and texture to my work, and the flowers offer a message of hope for a better future,” he says.

There are two paintings in this series that are different from the others. They stand out and make the strongest statement. The “New Pieta” is Diab’s reinterpretation of Michelangelo’s famous sculpture of Christ’s body in the arms of his grieving mother. Diab’s black-and-white painting accurately depicts this masterpiece, but with one difference. He has placed a typical Palestinian keffiyeh (headscarf) around the head of Christ. “I have used this religious artwork to convey a political message. Christ was born in Palestine, and with this keffiyeh he becomes a representative of every Palestinian revolutionary who is asking for his rights, and the Virgin Mary becomes every Palestinian mother mourning the martyrdom of her son,” the artist says.

But the artwork that embodies the mood and message of this entire series is titled “Human Being”. It depicts a banana against a light-hearted floral background. There

are several sharp nails piercing through the soft fruit. The image is simple, yet disturbing and thought-provoking. It speaks volumes about the pain, vulnerability and mortality of human beings, and encapsulates the entire history of the suffering of the Palestinians and of the people of this region.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

In The Name of Freedom will run at Ayyam Gallery, DIFC until October 30.