

Social and cultural dynamics in the Arab world

Filled with faceless, fragmented bodies, Thameur Mejri's paintings express the physical and psychological effects of recent upheavals in the Middle East

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Emerging Tunisian artist Thameur Mejri's work examines the social, political and cultural dynamics in the Arab world, especially Tunisia by focusing on the linkages that contemporary mass media creates between masculinity, violence and war. In his first solo show in Dubai, Heretic Spaces, the artist is presenting mixed media paintings, drawings, collages and a video that express the physical and psychological effects of the recent upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa. Mejri's paintings are filled with faceless, fragmented bodies and scenes of violence. These are surrounded by menacing tools of state control and surveillance such as guns, tanks, warplanes, and microphones, as well as seemingly harmless everyday objects like televisions, toys, cars and light bulbs. The dramatic compositions reflect the chaos and turbulence in contemporary society, and the dehumanisation of people by religious and political authorities who control their minds, and are omnipresent in their lives from childhood.

Mejri was born in 1982 in Tunis. He studied art at the Institute of Fine Arts in Tunis, and is now teaching at the Higher Institute of the Arts & Crafts in Kairouan in Tunisia, while also completing his PhD. His work has been exhibited in various countries, and his video, The Plague, created in collaboration with his brother, film director Kays Mejri, was adjudged the best experimental short film at the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival a few years ago.

The young artist spoke to the Weekend Review about his work and the questions it raises. Excerpts:

What is the concept behind Heretic Spaces?

As a young Arab artist and a Muslim, I want to understand and to talk about what leads to the continuing violence in our region. I believe that we must dig deeper within ourselves and confront what is wrong with us. Rather than looking at the problem on a macro scale, we need to pay attention to the smaller details, such as our daily lives, because that is where the problem starts. To combat extremism, each of us has to become a heretic — in a good way, and have the courage to question ourselves, choose a different path, and change ourselves to bring about change in our society.

Why do you focus on the male body in your compositions?

I think the root cause of the problems in our region is our concept of masculinity, and the ideas of physical strength and dominance associated with that in our patriarchal society. The male body in my paintings represents that. Women do not go to war and kill others, and they do not need emancipation. They are already emancipated, and they are waiting for men to elevate themselves. The faceless, hooded, fragmented figures in my compositions are both perpetrators and victims of the destructive powers that seek to dehumanise us, and incite violence. They represent a society, which is fragmented and lost, because it is not based on a solid foundation.

What do the different objects and creatures in your paintings signify?

These objects speak about the oppressive powers that invade all layers of our lives. The tanks, and surveillance equipment represent external factors. But the domestic items such as lamps and televisions remind us that war comes from within our own environment — from inside the comfort zone of our homes. The toys and gun-toting cartoon characters represent childhood influences that could make us monsters or

good people. The gasoline cans refer to the revolution in Tunisia, which was triggered by a desperate man immolating himself. The dinosaurs and a fly are a reminder that if we carry on with our destructive ways we will be extinct one day, and perhaps the fly will be the only remaining witness of our disastrous stupidity.

What is the significance of the interesting titles of your paintings?

My work is about asking questions, and the titles are part of that. Titles such as 'Pray for me' and 'I'll bury my love around you' reflect the contradictions and manipulation we are dealing with in our daily lives; whereas, 'I dreamed about Picasso nearly every night this week' expresses my reverence for a great artist who has influenced my work. Others like, 'Consume your heritage' is a warning that if we do not acknowledge and accept the history of violence in our region, and learn from it, this heritage will be passed on to future generations.

Despite the dark subject, why have you used such a bright palette in these paintings?

These days, blood and gore is good business and violence is being marketed through movies, video games, media, and other things. The seductive colours in my paintings reflect how war and violence seduces people by infiltrating our daily lives in this way. The bright colours also convey the message that despite the darkness, we must look at the bright side of our existence, and not lose hope for a better future for the next generation.

How are the drawings and collages, which seem more personal, related to the theme?

The birth of my daughter has changed my entire perspective on life and the world around me. After becoming a father, my way of looking at my own childhood has changed, and I have started analysing how my childhood experiences and interactions have influenced my beliefs, attitude and personality. This show features a series of works where I have collaged my early childhood drawings onto new ones, in an attempt to meet and understand my younger self.

It was a therapeutic personal journey of self-discovery, confronting truths, and learning from that. In another set of works, I have made some drawings alongside my daughter's child-like drawings on rough sheets of paper, taking inspiration from the freedom, innocence, and honesty with which children express themselves and the way they perceive the world. Both series are about questioning yourself and your society and changing what is wrong.

Heretic Spaces will run at Elmarsa gallery, Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz until October 19.