



Addolcendo 7. Courtesy Meem Gallery

Soothing art aims to look past the darkness of war to find beauty in life

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Describing the thought processes behind his current work, Kamal Boullata, one of the region's foremost artists, references two of the greatest painters of the 20th century and their responses to war.

After the Spanish Civil War, Picasso painted *Guernica*, a graphic depiction of its horror and terror as a reaction to the bombing of the Basque village of the same name, while during World War One, his compatriot Matisse, focused on beauty and the clarity of light.

Boullata, 74, says that "today's Aleppo is our most recent *Guernica*".

As a painter working against the backdrop of war in Syria, he says that he holds the same sensibilities as Matisse.

"Beauty restores faith in life and goes beyond the darkness," he says. "Art, in this case, is not an escape, rather it is like a soothing balm that

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emphasises life, not death."

He is referring to *Addolcendo*, a series of small watercolour works on paper, painted in his signature palette of pastel colours that are on show now in his second solo exhibition in Dubai, at Meem Gallery. The pieces are indeed beautiful, as well as delicate and soft, as the title of the series suggests.

Addolcendo is an Italian musical term that means "becoming gentle" and is used to describe a gradual softening of a musical passage. It can also refer to an improvised flourish a musician adds to give an unexpected but subtle emphasis to a particular part of the score.

In this respect, the soft or soothing parts of Boullata's paintings come in ways you might not expect.

On the surface, the paintings are reminiscent of many of his previous works. They are geometric forms, painted in complementary muted shades, dissecting the paper and enticing the eye to follow.

But unlike earlier works, where precision was paramount, these paintings are more free, with blurred lines and transparency. He uses an outdated stencil technique called pochoir to achieve this, so that the paintings seem to be covered in small dots of colour.

Smiling, he says a friend described the effect as being like the powdered-sugar dusting common in Arabic sweets.

"It never occurred to me but I like the description," he says.

"I wanted the powdery feeling and, at the same time, the rigidity of the straight line. I wanted the contrast of control and freedom."

The best way to respond to Boullata's work is without preconceptions. In fact, he says that children are the best observers of his work because they are not bogged down by ideas of how to interpret a piece of art, nor do they overthink it.

A piece of abstract art is like a piece of music: it touches you in ways that you cannot always describe, and nor should you have to.

In fact, he usually listens to classical music while he is working, and has described the process of painting as being like listening to a composition for the first time.

"In anticipation of hearing an upcoming note, the listener is usually surprised by the composer's turn, just as I am by the accidental turn of a brushstroke amid solid, angular forms," he said in 2014, at the time of his previous exhibition in Dubai.

He expands on that idea with this show, comparing the act of looking at his paintings to that of listening to music.

"Looking and seeing takes time," he says. "Just like with music, you cannot start listening to a piece of music and think of the end. The difference is that when you look at a painting, you see the result and not the beginning.

"To be able to see a piece of art is not to see the surface, but to imagine the whiteness below it and to relive the way it was made. Then you can begin to touch the heart of it."

These profound statements are invaluable to the observer who might normally shy away from an exhibition of abstract art.

Boullata is not only an artist but also a writer and an art historian, so he has a certain eloquence that is rare among artists, allowing observers to delve deeper into his works with greater understanding.

• **Addolcendo runs until February 20 at Meem Gallery.**
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