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Inside the Artist's Exhibition: Hussein Madi

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The admired Lebanese artist turns to *Trendesign*, on the opening eve of a solo showcase at Amman's Nabad Gallery, to teach us how to read the natural world rather than simply pass it by.

We meet [Hussein Madi](#) on the balcony of [Nabad Gallery](#) in Jabal Amman. Set against a picturesque panorama of downtown on this perfect afternoon, the acclaimed Lebanese artist explains his upcoming exhibition. He holds our Kingdom in such high esteem that he's gifted over 100 works to the [Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts](#), which opened a tribute showcase prior to the exhibition at Nabad.

The latter, *Colourful Impressions on Paper*, marks this acclaimed artist's fourth solo showing at the gallery. Across a five-decade-spanning career, his works have been displayed in exhibitions throughout the Middle East, Europe and Asia as well as in permanent collections at venues such as the [British Museum](#) and [Ueno Museum](#) in Japan.

In line with the exhibition's title, works on paper feature predominantly, including a first-time display of acrylic-on-paper pieces. Alongside the acrylics are charcoal drawings, figurative sketches and limited edition giclée prints of his kaleidoscopically geometric abstracts. Madi's signature vibrant colour palette and his dedication to exacting lines punctuate the entire collection.

Luxury Bed

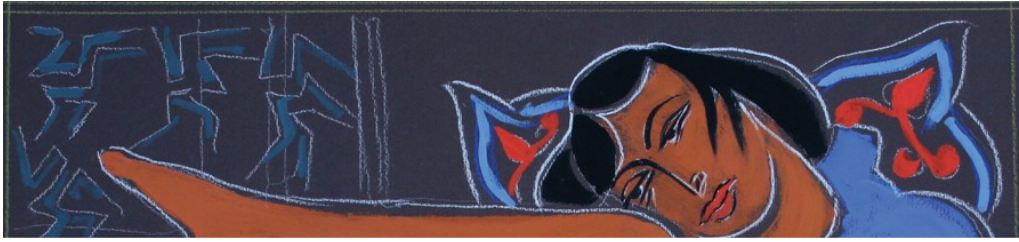
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Acrylic on paper 50×60 (2014)

“These works are all individual, there is not really a theme and, as you can see, I use a number of different styles and subjects,” explains the artist, though he is quick to clarify that small clusters of artworks remain linked through certain aesthetics elements. “The ideas are different but they are interrelated to some extent. For example, from piece Number One I take something to make piece Two, and from Two something for Three and so on,” says Madi, whose creations have been compared to the likes of [Matisse’s](#) and [Picasso’s](#).

The collection spans from present day back to an artwork from 1991, a piece created 41 years after Madi first took up painting at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts in Beirut. Following his early studies, Madi spent much of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s between Rome and Beirut, where he was schooled at the Accademia di Belle Arti and later taught at the National Art Institute of the Lebanese University.

Since 1965, the industrious artist has held over 60 solo exhibitions and participated in a large number of biennials around the world. Although decades have passed since he first started fashioning cut-outs and putting

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brush to canvas, Madi explains he is still hungry to learn more and his processes continues to evolve. "From day to day you gain new experiences and see the world through more enlightened eyes, which of course influences your art," he says, cupping his words in his hands as he delivers them.

In describing the artistic process behind his latest works, Madi chooses to pick up a copy of *Trendesign*. "When it comes to artwork, I don't adopt styles to create something like something else that already exists, but it is good for me to see the works of others and explore them. For example, last month your magazine featured [Georges Bassil's](#) work. I would read this text about him because I am curious, but all of my attention would first go to the imagery. I would start analysing Georges' use of colours and the forms he has created... forming my own reading about his work before looking at the explanations," tells the artist, who takes time to carefully craft his response. "Art does not start with you; from the creation of human beings until now, it is evolving. As an artist, you need to check others' work and it is good to be inspired by them or even just get to know what they have achieved."



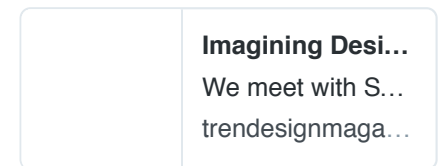
Acrylic on paper 50x60 (2015)

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Many of Madi's artworks represent laborious layers of detail, yet he finds that generating the ideas behind each work is most time consuming. "A new idea takes some time to emerge and then I start developing it through research. When it comes to execution, it doesn't really take time, but there is no regular number of days and weeks leading to the completion," he explains. Encouraging the genesis of such an idea is not related to a particular setting, routine or ritual, but instead occurs as a result of the artist's very hands-on approach. "My ideas are born from other ideas; as I am creating one artwork, I may discover an element that can form the basis of another, so I start cutting that out, sculpting it and painting too," says Madi with an unwavering gaze, that alludes to the depth of his introspection.



Litho P.A 50x35 (2015)

Outside of the studio, he finds great beauty in the natural world and draws from hawk-eyed interpretations of it, rather than skimming glances. "When I look at nature, I see it in my own way. Colours and shapes are a language," he tells. "People tend to look at things thinking about what they can benefit from them but they don't go beyond that. When I hold an apple, for





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instance, I feel the temperature, I notice the colour, I understand the texture and then I eat it. The last thing is the benefit. The same goes for that tree across there. If people walk past it, they will just dismiss it as a tree and maybe notice that there is some wind today. They won't think about how this wind, coupled with the sun's position in the sky, changes the form of the shadows and light touching the ground underneath the Tree. It is really important to pay attention to the details around you and experience them before thinking of them as objects to consume."



Giclée 1/11 48x55 (2010)

In a similar selfless vein, *Colourful Impressions on Paper* includes several giclée (a term used to describe fine art digital prints without conjuring the negative connotations of the modern method) pieces. "The main idea of using this medium is to spread my artwork. There is not only one of each and this way I can have more exposure," tells Madi, who chose to create 11 editions of most prints (for this is a number he believes lucky). "I want working people who love and appreciate my art, but may not have the

budget for the large original pieces, to have access to it. These prints looks almost identical, the colours have the same vibrancy and the quality of the first edition is as great as that of the last," he adds.

Artworks displayed also focus heavily on his triangular animal cut-outs or alternatively, voluptuously Romanesque female nudes. "I appreciate the female form, and I think that the difference between men and women is that women are more flexible. They have strength but also a gentile, feminine side, so they are more dynamic characters to represent," tells Madi. "According to my experience, artists in the Middle East are not brave enough to draw nudity or women. I do not draw men, except self-portraits, because I want to be the only man in my collection."



Giclée 5/7 50x50 (2010)

When reflecting on the Lebanese art scene, the veteran is quick and resolute in identifying his concerns with the current generation of young artists. "I

feel that they don't really know how to draw, and that is a product of their arrogance. True, maybe not enough is being invested in them, but it is more that they don't want to learn the basics," he explains, making reference to the way he learned the alphabet as a child – step by step until perfected. "They get so caught up in the conceptual side of things. Good art is a balance of the message and its mode of delivery."

Teachers are partially responsible in his eyes. In general, they have failed to school students on the rules of art: from form to colour and techniques. "This way students end up copying their teacher's styles and processes. This creates a conflict between them because the work is not original... and they wonder why."

Madi doesn't wish to go on lecturing and encourages that at 77-years-old he too is still dedicated to learning more. "When I get invitations for exhibitions, I scan the artwork and if I feel there is something new and interesting, I go and create conversations with the artist. If I'm not going to learn anything, I won't."

He asks exhibition-goers frequenting his or any other showcases, to rely not on the plaques and what a guide says but to come up with their own conclusions. "When you read art for yourself, the relationship between you and the artwork becomes an exchange; it means something to you, and so its value is enriched."

The artist is of the mindset that politics do not affect art in a direct way and he is hopeful that the turmoil engulfing our region will not inhibit local art scenes. "I take the future as it comes, I will just keep drawing and creating artworks and sculptures of which I am proud," he humbly announces. "Every step towards failure you get closer to success."

Colourful Impressions on Paper was on at Nabad Gallery until June 18, while the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts will exhibit *Honouring Hussein Madi* until July 30.