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Jamil Molaeb and the importance of working with nature



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Rima Barakat

Review

BEIRUT: "Istiriha" ("rest"), the new exhibition of work by Jamil Molaeb at Gallery Janine Rubeiz, is comprised of 37 paintings of various sizes. The work is a mix of abstract compositions, portraits, and semi-representational pieces working in rural motifs. Oil, pastels and oil pastels, mainly on canvas, are the artist's preferred media, all

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known to give a shimmering, luminous effect. Molaeb uses an abundance of bright colors - red, orange, and yellow - emphasizing the richness and the variety of the mountains, in contrast with the repetitive, dull elements of the city.

"By using strong colors in my paintings," Molaeb says, " I return to the origins of man, to the period before industrialization." The paintings, whether purely abstract or representational, are rendered flat, with no depth or spatial perspective. Thus, Molaeb accentuates nature's timeless and spaceless qualities. On the other hand, lack of precision and inattention to details celebrate the diversity in nature unhampered by technology.

A professor of fine art at the Lebanese University, Molaeb last exhibited at Janine Rubeiz two years ago, with a show called "Sleeping Beauties," singular images of reclining or seated female nudes. His new exhibition, entitled "Serenity" in English, takes as its subjects groups of villagers working in the field and enjoying music and dance.

In conversation, Molaeb, who was himself born in the mountain village of Baysour, southeast of Beirut, expresses his pride in village traditions, emphasizing the importance of nature and the harvest.

"The title, 'Serenity' is the state of the villagers occupied in their field work," says Molaeb. "As it also reflected my nature as I was creating the paintings, I hope it will instill serenity in the viewers."

The first series features groups of villagers engaged in agricultural work. Here, Molaeb defies man's obsession with time by swamping the space of the paintings with many villagers interacting incessantly with children, animals, the harvest, and musical instruments.

In "Shearing Sheep" (2008) and "The Ismail Pilgrimage" (2008), for example, the sky presses down on the villagers. In response, the peasants are depicted either engaging in collective agricultural activities or striking poses meant to represent mutual empowerment.

Against the chaos of nature, the villagers organize themselves by dressing similarly, stamping their feet, clasping their hands together, and moving in unison to traditional village musical instruments such as the daff and buzuk.

In other paintings, peasants sit in a triangle or circle, collectively picking squash and lemon, resting, or attending to their children or animals. For Molaeb, man must create or unite in harvesting nature's bounties to confront the passage of time. However, Molaeb seems to suggest that the process of creation - or harvesting nature's creation - is as important as the product.

In "Dabkit al-Doyouk," for example, dancing, clutching hands, and the simultaneous swerving of bodies is as significant as the music or dance itself, created differently each time.

The answer to the existential dilemma of humankind could be to



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share the process of creation with others, to interact, and to respond to our innate desires. Instead of a global civilization that revels in the cloned, identical products that erase differences between cultures, Molaeb suggests a creative process, where all are involved, and all have a role to play.

The result could be different depending on the dance and music produced, the shape and size of the squash or lemon gathered, or the texture and quantity of the wool sheared.

The second group of paintings are oil-pastel portraits of men and women. The women wear scarves with their bodies are totally covered. The men are also wearing the traditional headgear worn in the mountains and they generally have moustaches.

The faces are iridescent and healthy-looking with strokes of orange, red, and lilac, and their clothes and scarves are either bright blue and purple, or earthy brown and ochre. Their garments blend with the bright flowers and trees, the soil and bark of their surroundings.

Some portraits are in profile, some slightly oblique, while others face the viewer. With their clearly articulated, wide-open eyes, these figures do not dare the viewers with their gaze. Rather, they seem to look into the distance with humility and serenity, accepting their continuity with nature and the rules of nature.

Molaeb's purely abstract compositions are basically a series of monochrome paintings in different shades. "My Secret Window" (1999) is a painting in bold patches of bright red, advancing in space and threatening to swallow the viewer into the inner core of the universe. Amid all this, a window in black and yellow opens in the middle, and the possibility of internal mental serenity emerges, despite the physical pressure pushing on all sides.

Zippers (one above and two below) frame "Beyond the Seas" (2008). The hues of blue in between receding endlessly into the distance suggest spiritual tranquility, despite the physical limitations of this world symbolized by the zips.

This exhibition captures the dullness of the mechanized world, the threat of materialism, and the refuge sought in nature and spirituality. Uniting with nature, searching within oneself, and interacting with other villagers resolve existential dilemmas, emphasizing both the process of creation and its product.

"To me," Molaeb says, "the process of creating paintings is as important as having my paintings hanging on the walls of exhibition halls."

"Serenity" runs at Gallery Janine Rubeiz, Raouche, until November 26. For more information, please call +961 1 868 290.

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