

# The woodcuts of Jamil Molaeb celebrate nature and nostalgia

BEIRUT: “A Life Worth Living” is the title of the latest exhibition at Raouche’s Janine Rubeiz Gallery. The title itself intrigues the visitor enough to enter the venue. More than 50 colorful woodcuts are displayed, forming a platform for Jamil Molaeb’s art. Molaeb doesn’t see these works as representing images in and of themselves, but as forming a visual narrative that moves from rural landscapes to crafts to traffic jams – a reasonable approximation of what drivers must undergo to get to Janine Rubeiz’s Raouche gallery.

In woodcutting (xylography, for the initiated) the artist first carves an image into a panel of wood. Using pigmentation he then uses paper to frame this woodcut in order to duplicate the impression onto the paper.

Earlier this week, Molaeb presided over a book-signing for a volume at the gallery. A collaboration with Joseph Tarrab, who penned the texts, the book portrays the artist and his vision of art.

As Tarrab puts it, Molaeb always kept this link between human and animal, human and nature. The artist’s use of wood to make his art underlines this cherished proximity.

By using wood, rather than canvas, as his medium, Molaeb shares with the viewer his perception of what Tarrab terms a “paradise lost,” where heritage and tradition mingle in a society going faster than ever before.

There is a rustic feeling about Molaeb’s art.

He brings the old technique of woodcut-making to a whole new level. The complicated details of the technique with which he carved each piece are balanced by the lightness of paper and the colorful patches he chooses for each work. This dichotomy sheds light on the fact that “simple” art does not necessarily stem from simple practice.

“Each proof is thus something like the projection of mental images of very precise observations of peasant home and country life,” Tarrab writes.

Assembled together, all these images form a story of Baysoor, the artist’s beloved hometown in the Chouf region of Mount Lebanon.

Aside from painting, Molaeb is known for his sculptures, drawings and mosaics. Woodcuts can be seen as an extension of his artistic versatility. As the artist has said, for him, rendering nature in art is not just a career but a means of celebrating nature, like an ode.

Molaeb’s woodcuts may be two-dimensional, but they are expressive of the artist’s precision. Each leaf is rendered with great detail, each feather, and each wrinkle of a man’s face demonstrate the immense period of time Molaeb has devoted to creating each woodcut.

Some of these works exude an interesting color palette. Hardly restricted to a single color, Molaeb juxtaposes a pleasing mix of colors. In one woodcut, the viewer can see a couple hugging one another. On each side of the paper, one can find bulls, birds and other animals, alternatively colored in red and blue.

The paper Molaeb chose for his woodcuts is an old one, with its edges torn. It enhances the traditional aspect of the works, and emphasizing even more Molaeb’s attachment to crafts and custom.

Jamil Molaeb’s “A Life Worth Living” is on show at Raouche’s Janine Rubeiz Gallery until June 7. For more information, please call 01-868-290.