

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Kufer, Katrina. "Colour by Numbers." Alserkal Avenue. (10 March, 2018).

ART

COLOUR BY NUMBERS

10 MARCH 2018 | KATRINA KUFER



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Leila Heller Gallery typically hosts two exhibitions, and this March is no exception as California-born Kenny Scharf and New Jersey native Philip Taaffe exhibit their works in separate shows that Leila Heller, founder and president of her eponymous gallery, notes do not dialogue between the individual spaces in which their works are hung. It is difficult, however, to not see the shared aesthetic notes of Scharf's works in the larger space, and Taaffe's occupying the hall just across the gallery entryway. Despite being their first solo forays in the region, "They're both great artists who have collectors in the Middle East," says Heller, admitting that while their works have no clear-cut resonances with the Arab world and cultural scene, "If you look at some of Philip's works, you do see a level of reference to Islamic patterns – or at least a similarity. I wouldn't say that it's specifically derived from Islamic pattern,

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but there definitely exists a similarity,” adding, “as for Kenny’s work, there are a few pieces dealing with the topic of oil and other pieces with Arabic text. I wouldn’t necessarily say that either of these artists have a specific link to the Middle East, but some of their works definitely draw on relevant parallels.”

Challenging and welcoming artists to manifest monumental projects in the gallery’s sizeable Dubai space, both practices speak volumes in terms of technical stylization and vibrant hues. “Generally, artworks with more process, craftsmanship and tactility have greater success in the UAE with the local audience,” observes Heller. Showing a selection of old and new works, “I would say that neither of these artists cater to the region, but the monumental scales of the exhibitions cater to our space.” With Scharf’s whimsical political works adopting illustration-like characterizations against Taaffe’s meditative-cum-psychedelic interpretations of form and pattern, the gallery is offering up eye-popping exhibitions that, rather than embracing subtlety, engage an ethos of “more is more”.

While the heavy stylization renders the works accessible, fun and vivacious, they call to attention old school debates about the line between ‘fine arts’ and more illustration-y or graphic works. Dismissing those perhaps outdated limitations, Scharf and Taaffe seem to fit into a generation of artists that favoured of artistic indulgence. Scharf’s *Inner and Outer Space* sees the muralist, painter, sculptor and installation artist engage his Pop Surrealism – a fusion of simplified anthropomorphic figures and pure imagination in paint – along with relief sculptures featuring televisions and found objects. The effect is pop rocks for the brain – befitting his focus on an “increasingly out-of-control situation” that he depicts with melting floating faces. The contrast is jarring – the optimism and playfulness of his fragmented cartoon-like figures combat against the weighty issues of current times, whether ecology, environmentalism and capitalist excess, or most recently, the petroleum industry. They are emotive, but send mixed messages, occasionally losing the viewer’s mindfulness of the themes to the satirical aesthetics. The gallery summarizes it best: “Scharf connects with Modernist art movements by creating new hybrids, almost as if these earlier forms of art had been placed in a blender. The expression of emotion in art is an element he considers essential to his practice; art that is cold leaves him cold.” Scharf is street. He’s pop. He’s the hyper cousin of his Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat contemporaries.

In contrast, Taaffe’s staging of the intimate middle gallery is an exercise in journeying psychedelically. The visual language reads if kaleidoscopes met meditation, and Islamic geometry met tie-dye, but his works are a deft mastering of the inclusion of multiple techniques such as collage, lino, woodblock, silkscreen or marbling. Appropriating symbols and signs onto paper and canvas overlaid with geometric patterning, the eye darts between the decorative front and the effervescent background it seems to restrain, creating a grating, peaceful debate between history and modernity. Intensive and meticulous, Taaffe’s laborious but chance-embracing method has been purportedly cited as comparable to that of producing medieval manuscripts. This grants his works another layer of spirituality, while also serving to further dissolving the boundary between artisanal and high art. The self titled exhibition makes reference to natural history illustrations, Roman mosaic, microscopic imaging of Viking artefacts, Syrian embroidery, Mongolian masks and calligraphy – the influences are plenty – and the dense layering of colour and pattern comes to fruition in tandem.

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With both artists providing works that are chromatically rich, intense in execution, visceral in their visual assault and thoughtfully sensitive in the consideration of their academic, historical and political influences, Leila Heller Gallery has brought two artists to Dubai who may have separate shows, but their universality and accessibility render them closer than they initially seem.

Both exhibitions open on 19 March, Galleries Night, Art Week at Alserkal Avenue.
Images courtesy of the artists and Leila Heller Gallery.
