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The raw emotion at the heart of violence

Marwan Sahmarani's recent series of abstract paintings are inspired by contemporary socio-political events, and by nature



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GULF NEWS 

Marwan Sahmarani was born in Beirut in 1970, studied art in Paris, and currently lives between Beirut and Spain. His work reflects his own experiences of the political turmoil in Lebanon, the beautiful landscapes of Spain and contemporary socio-political events in the Middle East and around the world.

The artist belongs to a generation of Lebanese that has grown up in an environment of constant conflict, hence violence is a significant theme in his work.

He often situates the violence he has grown up with, and that we see daily in the news, within the context of traditional representations of violence in art history by referencing classical masterpieces of European art.

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By linking the past with the present, and specific events in his environment with universal experiences, he seeks to understand the root causes and motivations for violence, while conveying its physical and psychological impact on those who have been born and raised amidst perpetual strife.

Sahmarani won the Abraaj Art Prize in 2010 for a monumental mixed media installation comprising paintings, drawings, ceramics and film. But since then, he has focused on oil on canvas painting. In his latest show at Leila Heller Gallery Dubai, Drifting Island, the artist is showing a recent series of abstract paintings, inspired by contemporary socio-political events, and by nature.

His gestural paintings are infused with colour, energy, spontaneity and emotion. One set of paintings focuses on the plight of refugees, with the monumental size of the works reflecting the enormity of the problem and of their suffering. From the seemingly abstract strokes on these canvases emerges a mass of faces and figures — some crowded precariously on boats in turbulent waters, some marching wearily in a mass exodus with only a candle to guide them, and some lined up behind a barbed wire fence, desperately reaching out for help.

The paintings evoke the tragic images of Syrian and other refugees that we see in the news daily; and their titles, such as Alep (from Aleppo), Tribute to a Tragedy, and I Had A Dream speak about the trauma and the shattered dreams of ordinary people who have been forced to flee from their homes. But by abstracting the figures, and placing them in an unspecified place and time, the artist links the contemporary issue of Middle Eastern migrants and how they are being treated by Western nations, to the displacement of people around the world and throughout the history of mankind, raising questions about ideological intolerance and social and ethical responsibility.

“I want to understand how people can arrive at a point where they attempt to destroy each other. This appetite for destruction spans human history, and our failure to transcend this destructive force constantly haunts me. I try to investigate this failure, and to explore the raw emotions at the heart of violence,” Sahmarani says.

The artist is also exhibiting a series of abstract landscape paintings, inspired by the Spanish countryside. “I come from a bustling city. The first time I was alone in a forest in Spain, I was terrified by the solitude, the silence and the stillness. Overcoming this fear has helped me to liberate myself from trying to focus on an idea, and instead looking and seeing things around me. I now work en plein air, always referencing elements from a real and specific space, and concentrating on transcribing what I see in the moment, and then working on it further in my studio,” he says.

His layered and textured paintings are abstract representations of tranquil forests and picturesque orange farms. They capture the exuberance and vitality of nature. Yet, there is a hint of violence in the way his thick, vigorous brush strokes and bold colours express the brutal force of nature and the primal energy of the elements.