

Wall and peace

by Muhammad Yusuf

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Artsawa, Dubai's very own cutting edge gallery, has mounted the works of its old favourite, Lebanese artist Zena Assi (May 24 – July 23). Assi is famed for her tangy views of urban life. She now lives in the UK, where she moved in 2014.

Her current show is a two-part event. It consists of 'Put it in a tin' and 'My city-wall'. These series also include her latest artworks produced in her London studio.

They draw sustenance from the emotional, social and cultural baggage one carries with him when he moves from one environment to another – something which Assi should be a veteran of, given her recent house changes.

Facing a new culture forces you to utilise your old convictions to interpret your new setting. Assi's canvas tackles this identity issue and all the conflicts we face when we rewrite our own story and launch upon a fresh narrative, based on previous memories.

'Put it in a tin' is a collection of big bouquet paintings. Here, the canvas itself is treated as a carpet. It has been laid on the floor for months together. It becomes a victim of footsteps and dust, now used as a draft of rough ideas, and then as a palette cleaner or a coffee holder ... When time takes hold of it, as it does to everything, Assi stretches the canvas on a wooden frame. Images then start to appear through

the layers of paint, like shadowy memories emerging from the past.

The canvas tells its own story and the artist only has to outline the images, to make them visible. Finally, the bouquet is taken and what is done to it is what the artist's grandmother did before her, and her mother before her: it is put into a tin, so the iron sinks into the soil and makes the plants grow stronger ...

In Lebanon, and parts of the Middle East – much before Warhol got the idea that everyday objects could be part of art and life - the legend is that you should put your plants in a tin, than a vase, so that the iron enters the plants, and makes them more healthy and vigorous. Assi gives a twist to the lore and puts her memories into tins. Her hope is that they emerge the more powerful for their experience.

The second series, 'My city-wall' reflects the relations and conflicts between refugees/migrants and the cities they aim to get to. Through her work, for more than a decade now, Assi has been trying to visually translate urban life of modern societies.

She believes that the structures we build, the architectural language we adopt and the borders we draw, are all witnesses of the ideologies of the time. Of course, we are now unfortunately witnessing the rise of walls again ...

A video 'Chronicles of a migrant' which embellishes the exhibition, is a short experimental animation of three minutes, narrating the story of a migrant. The visuals are made from the artist's own series of paintings on canvas. They have been put in motion by her friend and colleague, Amandine Brenas, who is a French artist and animator living in Lebanon.

'Chronicles' attempts to describe the daunting trip that a migrant or refugee takes to survive. It tells the story of his awakening to the horrors of war and death in his home country, how he is obliged to flee on a dinghy and the dangers he faces, the sea being one of them.

He is trapped in a fearsome limbo, where countries re-draw their borders, erect walls, demolish bridges and enforce segregation ... all in the name of containing people like him, traumatised and on the run. The movie depicts the chronicles of passage, of the saga of how a migrant surmounts one conflict after another, in a desperate attempt to reach shore, bury his dead and, finally, build a new home.

"In many ways", Assi said, "life is a comedy and tragedy at the same time. The question is, how much can we take from both sides?" She acknowledges being a devoted draughtsman. "I agree!" she said. "I focus on details. It is perhaps also because my studio is smaller now; it makes me work more intricately, due to lack of space!"

She is someone who radiates optimism (though her work may not indicate this!). She holds up her chin, no matter what the circumstances.

Born in Lebanon in 1974, she now lives and works between Beirut and London. Her contemporary work on canvas shows the relations and conflicts between the individual and his spatial environment, society and its surroundings.

Her pieces are punctuated by strong visual references to her native Beirut and the predicament of its citizens, caught in attritions of various kinds. Her work takes shape in installation, animation, sculpture, and mainly paintings on canvas, and replicates the tumult, angst and cacophony that everyday life in the city is fraught with. Her use of pallid colours, jagged angular outlines and intricate layering, imbues inanimate objects, landscapes and buildings, with the emotional burdens of their inhabitants.

Themes that are central to her vision include present-day issues related to countries in the Middle East as they battle internal strife and civilian unrest. Many of her pieces have been repeatedly shown by international auction houses.

"We are a doomed generation, I think!" she said dramatically. "We are parents living in Lebanon, trying to find new roots and a new future for their children elsewhere".

In London, she sometimes feels like a number. There is a strong feeling of claustrophobia, with walls and towers – including towering skyscrapers – bearing down. But on the plus side, there are the charms of Old London, with magical buildings and Alice and Peter Pan ...

Why does she lean more to blacks, greys and whites in her pictures? Why does she not use colour more frequently? "I was hesitant to use colours", she said. "But slowly, they came to the fore. Perhaps the black and white and colour combination takes after the life around you; you have grey walls and grey buildings, but colourful messages with graffiti, funky visuals and brightly painted advertisements, on them".

Why do her compositions look like the complications of clocks or timepieces? "I have always been very manual", she said. "I am very much taken by machines and their inner workings. This is perhaps reflected in the works".

It is sad but true, her characters look like puppets. In fact, she said that the idea of strings and puppets was part of the identity crisis she felt in London, where she feels more a spectator than actor. "I am being played on by strings!" she said.

This is par for the course for the general immigrant experience. "They are treated like flies!" Assi said, a creature she feels explains a newcomer's condition aptly. "They are labelled, and considered mere statistics".

But ever an optimist, she insists people should never lose their humanity. "I hate it when politics takes over humanity", she said. "We should embrace everyone". In other words, build walls if you must, but build bridges if you can.

