

Rewriting our own stories

Lebanese artist Zena Assi's artworks draw inspiration from the



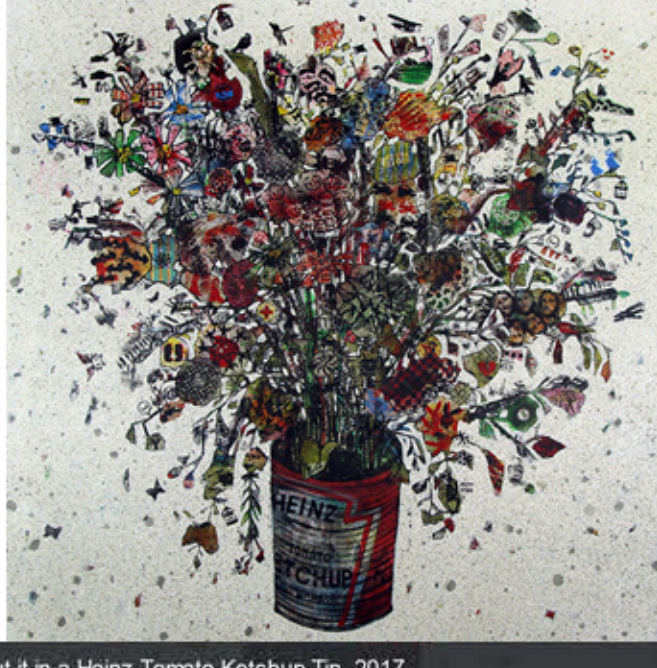
Zena Assi, City Wall 1 & 2, 2016, mixed media and paper collage on canvas

Image Credit:



Zena Assi, Late Late Late, 2016, mixed media and paper collage on wood

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Zena Assi, Put it in a Heinz Tomato Ketchup Tin, 2017, mixed media on canvas

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By Jyoti KalsiSpecial to Weekend Review

GULF NEWS



Zena Assi's latest series of paintings, Put It In A Tin, and My City Wall are inspired by her personal experience of moving to a new place, and the plight of immigrants who are being forced to move due to the political and economic situations in their countries. Her mixed media works speak about the emotional, social and cultural baggage we all carry with us when we move from one place to another. They deal with the struggle of questioning your own culture when faced with a new one, of tackling issues of identity when we are rewriting our own stories based on tainted memories, and the cross-cultural conflicts caused by migration.

"After decades of living in Beirut, when I moved to London three years ago, I found that adapting to the change was much more difficult than I had expected. I had to deal with so many conflicting feelings. I wanted to retain my identity and culture, but I also wanted to cut the strings that kept me tied to it, and to have an open mind so that I could adapt to my new environment, and learn new things. As a mother, I felt it was important for my children to not lose their connection with Lebanon, but I was also aware of the way I tended to embellish the stories I told them about our country, thus controlling the image they would have of it. As an artist I wanted to think afresh, and absorb new ideas, but I also wanted my work to be in touch with my roots," the Lebanese artist says.

She has expressed these mixed emotions and experiences through the dualities in her series, Put It In A Tin. Each painting in this series features a big, colourful bouquet of flowers planted in a coffee, tea, ketchup or soup tin. But a closer look reveals that hidden among the flowers are a variety of other forms such as soldiers, emojis, birds, animals, words and numbers that reflect what is happening in our world today, and in the artist's own life.

"My mother and grandmother would grow plants in food tins, because the metal from the tin leaches into the soil and makes the plant stronger. Putting my flowers in tins symbolises my desire to remain connected with my culture and identity, and the strength I derive from it. The people, bicycles, dogs, emojis, soldiers and other images hidden among the flowers reflect the visuals I encounter in my daily life in London, and my memories of Beirut. These paintings are not about conveying a message; they are just about depicting what is happening around me," Assi says.

The process by which the artist has created these paintings is interesting. She spread out her canvases on the floor of her studio, leaving them there for months. As time passed, the blank canvasses got covered with dust, footprints, coffee stains, paint from her brushes, her doodles and scribbled notes, stenciled figures and motifs, and various other traces of daily life as it unfolded around them. She then took control of the process, by stretching the canvasses on a frame, looking for forms that appeared through the layers, like shadowy memories of the past, and outlining and highlighting them with ink or paint to create her bouquets of daily life, growing in food tins.

While these paintings are quite personal, Assi's My City Wall series is about contemporary city life, and the current conflicts between refugees or migrants and the cities they hope to get into. Here, she has covered her canvasses with buildings, billboards, graffiti, words and numbers, and various scenes from contemporary city life to create huge walls. With just a narrow strip of sky visible at the top, the paintings convey the chaos and claustrophobia of urban existence. The overwhelming walls comment on the sad reality of walls being built to keep refugees and migrants out.

"I used to like walls because when I walk on the streets of a city and look at the graffiti on the walls, it tells me so much about the place and its inhabitants. I always take a lot of photographs of city walls wherever I go, and often incorporate the images in my work. But the hectic activity and movement in these towering walls remind us that the fast pace of city life has made us cold and less humane. Despite the conflicts and suffering happening around us, life goes on. We see or hear news of a terrorist attack, or destruction caused by war, and feel sad, but nobody has the time to stop and do something about it. I hope viewers take some time to look at these paintings, and to contemplate their own attitudes, feelings, actions and ideologies," Assi says.

In other paintings, the artist has depicted the plight of immigrants, the risks they are forced to take in their desperate search for a safe haven, and the emotional struggles they have to deal with as they cut the strings that bind them to their homeland and try to adapt to a new environment. She has also created an animated film, Chronicles of a Migrant, that speaks about the current immigrant crisis and the insensitive response to it from many affluent countries through animated paintings.

"I have tried to depict the state of mind of people who have lost their homes, their possessions and their loved ones, and are willing to face so many dangers in their search for a better future. It is heartbreaking to see that they come to the West hoping to live a better life, but what they find is hatred, suspicion and walls built to keep them out. They are fleeing the war but the war and violence catches up with them in the refugee camps, in their perilous journeys, and in the new places they go to," Assi says.

The artist has also addressed this theme in works that are currently exhibited in the Grenada Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

Put It In A Tin/ My City Wall will run at Art Sawa, DIFC, until July 23.