

Jalal Luqman

By Benedict Tomlinson



Killing Words, 2009, Digital painting, Edition of 1, 133x224cm - Courtesy of Art Sawa.

Aggressive, dark and often blunt are the first words that come to mind when describing the work of Emirati artist Jalal Luqman. His work sits on the border between modern digital art and dark gothic sculpture. The result is his unique paintings, which are confessions of the soul portraying the inner most human emotions in his work, both good and bad.

During his early childhood, mixed media artist Jalal Luqman discovered the power to provoke through his art. Every time his teachers pulled him into the corner

for drawing on his books, they did not deter him from drawing; in fact they planted the seeds of works like “The Invisible Giant”, “Don’t think” and “Under a thousand masks”. These seeds would serve him throughout his career. For over 2 decades Jalal’s limitless approach has given his artwork a certain flavour that can only be experienced in his work. “I like when I see people either smile or cry in front of my art”, states Luqman, adding, “my work is not beautiful, my work is meaningful”. Diversity in his painting style reveals his almost

schizophrenic personality that goes from one extreme to the other. Although one piece would show fear and sadness, next to it would be another with a totally different style, material and mood, which could easily be mistaken to be another artist's work.

When Luqman begins a new painting, he might reach for his acrylic paints as he stands in front of a blank canvas. Or, he might sit in front of his computer. As one of the few digital artists in the United Arab Emirates, Luqman is reshaping the way people look at art. One reason Luqman's paintings are so intriguing is the manner in which they are created.

While Luqman has worked with all art media, his favourite way to create combines acrylic paint and digital paint. However, the mystique behind his art does not result from combining traditional painting methods with cutting-edge technology. Rather, it stems from precisely the way in which Luqman blends these two styles together. From his imaginative subject matter to his diverse paint media, each finished work of art is a bit of a mystery that is just what Luqman has set out to achieve. Luqman has managed to become a significant name in the Emirati art scene as well as internationally, holding international exhibitions in New York, Kuwait, Tokyo, Egypt, Morocco, the Czech Republic, Washington DC and Beijing. His unflinching approach has landed him many firsts in his career; first Emirati digital artist, first freelance graphic designer, the first contracted Emirati website designer, and most recently, co-establisher of the first contemporary art gallery in Abu Dhabi.

Today, Luqman's contribution to the Emirati art scene has expanded from only producing artworks to being an advocate for the progression of Emirati artists alongside his individual initiatives to promote art in the UAE. A media favourite, Luqman has been interviewed and featured talking about art on major TV channels around the world; he has been shown on "Etihad" in-flight entertainment as well as in major publications and documentaries.

Luqman acknowledges that he would have encountered the 'Fantastic Realism' of HR Giger during this period and the influence is still apparent in his paintings. Perhaps Giger's dystopian imagery chimed with the surrounding financial collapse; something that we have, of course, encountered again in recent times



The Collective, 2009, Digital Photography & Mixed media, Edition of 1, 260x120x20 - Courtesy of Art Sawa.

and Luqman's artwork can still be seen to emulate this prevalent topicality.

Luqman is self-taught with respect to his knowledge of art history and states rather boldly, "I sought out books on art and read almost everything on the subject. I used to ask people who were travelling abroad to get me books on art. I have read every single book in the fine arts syllabus." His confidence is a useful and necessary tool if we are to consider that digital art, as a mode of artistic practice, coupled with the imagery that he would become recognisable for, was scant to say the least in the Emirates in the 1990s and 2000s. The rapid developments in digital art techniques combined with the ultimate vade mecum for research; the Internet, 'made sourcing art books very easy.' So, it was at this juncture that he 'embraced digital art as [his] prime art tool.' 'When computer graphics programs became powerful enough to respond accurately to my hand strokes,' he says, 'I found myself in digital art.'

On his return to Abu Dhabi in 1992 he was employed as a computer operator. Though he had trained in traditional methods of art production (painting, sculpture etc) he chose to focus his artistic output into making digital paintings and was in effect the first digital artist in the UAE. The culmination of which was a formal digital art exhibition at the Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation in 1996. However, at that time he was still making some work he felt was expected of an Emirati artist; focusing on traditional subjects such as camels and horses.

Luqman drastically changed his working practice in 2004 when he decided to make work that came from an 'internal inspiration' rather than a direct representation. Likewise, 'digital art' has shifted dramatically in how we define it in its relatively short life-span as a medium. In fact, even the title 'digital art' has had to evolve several times in order to represent exactly what it is that we are viewing. That Luqman came to research and be educated in how to produce digital art is note-worthy. It was from the boom of the WWW in the last couple of decades that 'digital art' now has a valid position within the art world as institutions, museums and galleries exhibit and add it to their collections worldwide. The original term coined was 'computer art' in the 1970s, which then changed

to 'multimedia art', and before digital art of the last decade was 'new media art' that was oddly (from today's perspective) a catchall for film, video or sound art.

This broad genre of art, even as it is today, was born out of the military-industrial complex and research facilities. This may come to explain why so many artists have embraced it in order to expose and unveil the workings of society whilst reflecting back ideas of a consumer culture and often failed utopias. It is that which haunts all the messages, all the signs of our societies. Digital art can offer a contemporary take on the concept of the man/machine that has inspired artists ever since Marinetti's Futurist manifesto at the beginning of the 20th century.

The distinctions of what can constitute digital art are multifarious. On the one hand, digitality is informed and born out of the technology it is embracing. On the other hand, it is the technology itself that is the 'digital art' and the format it is presented upon/in/through is the vector for the piece. In this context, Luqman's art is a parallax version in that he is making 'paintings' using the technologies available as a substitution for 'paint,' using brushes in the form of a stylus and a 'pad/tablet' that we can read as a 'canvas.'

The possibilities that are open to the digital artist are limitless and it is when these options are given numerical control that it is both tangible and dizzying. Imagine knowing that you, as a painter, with oil paints say, are using a fair range of hog-hair bristle brushes (perhaps a minimum of 8) and that the tubes of paint that you've squeezed onto your palette range only (let us continue imagining) to 13 base colours. Now imagine that instead of this array that you could have a choice of 4,500 brushes (and nibs and tips etc) to blend a spectrum of 17 million colours.

Luqman says that through the stylus, which is rigged to his computer, he can conjure 'the real physics of real bristles and paints.' With the computer there is the possibility of using anything up to 9 computer programs to achieve the effects he is trying to convey. The seemingly infinite set of possibilities that he is



I Dream of teh Maldives, Digital painting, Edition of 1, 2010, 138x237cm - Courtesy of Art Sawa.

confronted with, delineated by algorithmic variables, is not unlike our encounter with the web on a daily basis. With so much choice we are incapable of maintaining a fixed position, of not seeking newer information and shorter answers. This limitlessness though is bound by precise sets of codes to the bitmapping of the basic 'on and off' of pixels of which we are oblivious, as we are to atoms or individual pigments.

Though we do not immediately register the connectivity extension between the hand/brush/paint/canvas it is a common conceptualization to make a corollary between the hand/mouse/computer and how we can be 'plugged in.' (It should be noted though that in Luqman's case there is also a special glove that he wears to reduce friction on the 'tablet' that he is drawing onto. Also interesting is that these new technologies have taken on the ancient appellation for inscription making of the 'stylus' and the 'tablet'.) The techniques that Luqman utilises with his computers 'start with a normal sketch either on paper or on a napkin, depending where [he is] when inspiration comes knocking; then he develops the painting either on the computer or on canvas with

acrylics.' So, it is not just digital art that he uses to create his work, but whatever comes to hand or how he is feeling at that particular point in time.

Once the digital element to the piece is finished on the computer there are still more options: 'If the artwork is digitally painted I print it and start completing it, either in wood or metal to result in my completed artwork.' This transformative process, from mark-making using pencil to moulding via digital brushes then back again to traditional methods of sculpture using metal or wood, is what I take to understand as his desire to 'complete the circle of Emirati art.'

'I am internally inspired, meaning I get inspired by my thoughts or dreams,' he says. 'I start painting until the painting grows enough to start communicating with me and then I continue to paint and work on the painting, adding wood or metal or both, until the painting decides to finish. I introduced metal as a means to continue the message in the painting; sometimes the painting needs to leave the limits of the frame to really communicate its message.' A recent sculpture called 'The Invisible Giant',



The Messenger, 2008, Digital Photography & Mixed media, Edition of 1, 140x109x15 cm - Courtesy of Art Sawa.

from 2009, relates to this statement that considers inspiration and production. Luqman had been working on a group of work called 'My Own Prison' and 'The Invisible Giant', which was, at this point, in the form of a painting, but he felt that it 'just didn't say enough,' so he attached metal bars on to the painting.

'The Invisible Giant' is 2.5m in height, but retains the figuration of a man, albeit one that is constructed from welded sheets of galvanised steel. The computer was used to render the figure to see if it would be a feasible structure; it then took 9 months to complete and the sheets were joined together using arc welding. The intense amount of electrical current used temporarily blinded him during the building process while the temperatures in the studio were up to 500. The assembly of this sculpture was performative due to his own personal struggle whilst trying to depict the 'unrecognisable genius' and the 'undiscovered' extricating themselves from 'convention'. 'The Invisible Giant' is sexless, but we project masculinity onto it due to the physicality of the metal and the sheer scale of its



Under a thousand Masks, 2009, Digital Photography and Mixed media in Light Box, Edition of 1, 180x150x50cm - Courtesy of Art Sawa.

bulk. It is an immobile figure too; hamstrung by inflexible triangular feet as well as a humpback, emphasising the weight of burden. The implied heft of the metal is juxtaposed with an eternal posture of supplication.

When Luqman worked on 'The Speed Demon' (digital paintings on panels that were attached to a Formula One replica car) he described the work as 'both man and machine are focusing on the finish line, breathing the same air, both feeling and responding to one another.' This ideology of man becoming machine is consistent in his artwork, such as in 'The Invisible Giant', where flesh has been transmuted into metal.

In his 'Faces of Pain' series the human form has again been deconstructed to multiple plains, in this case denoting every perceived angle of a male head. We are aware that these are not human, but simulacrum. They are part robot, humanoid and android perhaps all at once, but there is an observable sentience to them, which is evidenced in the representation of the eyes. Luqman's insistence that he is always representing 'raw emotion' is apposite when looking at these works.



Owned, 2009, Digital Photography & Mixed media, edition of 1, 152x190x20cm - Courtesy of Art Sawa.

The sculpture 'Absence of the Sun' is a digital painting printed on to an industrial metal cage in a steel structure (weighing about 100 kg). The possibilities of digital painting are evident in the metal rust colouring of this cipher of a man, making the application take on the resonance of a Max Ernst grattage painting. The figure is encased in a metal coffin of sorts – one that we can peer into through bars that figure so roundly in Luqman's work. This body-shaped coffin appears to have been sliced open length ways, but now held together with metal bars. The writing on the metal frame is by the Emirati poet, Hareb Al-Dhahiri. He had responded to a sketch sent to him by Luqman by writing a poem that was then handwritten onto the sculpture. 'It depicts the life of a prisoner whose lungs are filled with dust from

the many years he spent behind bars,' Luqman says, and the poem 'describes the changing state of mind of the prisoner who is accustomed to prison. Even when freed, he would rush back to find another prison. His mind would truly never be free.'

The figures that we encounter in his work are presented mostly in forms of distress; they are caged prisoners, they are misshapen, they look haunted and are the embodiment of persecution. The colour palate that he chooses to use, with its limitless range of colours, seemingly always veers toward the umbers and ochres, the blacks and the browns. The grey-skinned protagonists of his paintings are forever in the shadows and their cowed, subjugate stances, often from behind the bars of a 'prison', which could signify defeat at the



The Invisible Gian, 2009, Galvanized steel, Edition of 1, 248x155x200cm, - Courtesy of Art Sawa.

hands of a totalitarian oppressor. He is clear to point out though that the ‘work does not relate in any way to a certain political state, or the uprising of some of the Arab nations, my paintings show human beings in their raw form, if it is anger, hate, love or happiness, I paint it; I don’t pay attention to what brings out these feelings in people, but if the viewer through their own experience somehow links between the artwork and a certain incident, that is purely why I paint.’

It is these contemporary realities that have instigated dialogue in and about his work. He says, ‘I like to see the conversation or debate that occurs between my paintings and my viewer... I have noticed people relating my work to recent political incidents, and enjoy the fact that my work dates before any of this happened.’

In 2006, in collaboration with “Mohammad Abdul Latif Kanoo”, an artist and creative director of the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation, a gallery was inaugurated in the centre of Abu Dhabi. Luqman explains that the decision to open the space was a response to the

‘current state of artists in the area; if artists wanted to exhibit they had to either wait for years to find a spot in certain cultural facilities or had to hire space in a hotel,’ which would be prohibitively expensive. The gallery was therefore well received and by exhibiting a duality of local, emerging artists combined with established international artists it has maintained its reputation. As he points out, ‘The art atmosphere was barren, and with the gallery we wanted to nourish and nurture it.’ Five years later, however, the challenges remain in running a predominately non-commercial gallery with a lack of support or partnership, ‘The costs of keeping up a gallery are sometimes paralyzing’.

A natural development that emerged from the gallery has been Jalal’s Art Trip – the basic premise of which is an open-call submission to amateur artists based in the UAE. The 10-15 successful artists are selected from the hundreds of applications. Luqman then takes them to a designated place in the UAE to inspire creativity, followed by a two week exhibition of their artwork.

Luqman held classes in digital art concurrently with his exhibition, ‘Against the Grain’. The detailed workshops focused on the creation of digital art for experienced practitioners of this medium: a medium which offers ever evolving innovations in an art form that is sometimes overlooked and misunderstood. There is a generosity of spirit here by the artist to dedicate and devote time to art students that perhaps doesn’t quite sit with the ‘volcanic’ temperament and the description of the ‘aggressive’ and ‘unflinching’ nature of his personality that is often repeated in articles about him. It is interesting to note too, that from being the only digital artist in the region there is now a demand from ‘experienced practitioners’. Several exhibitions solely featuring digital art have occurred in the UAE in the past few years.

Luqman’s most recent body of work, ‘Thanks For The Sunshine’, has seen a shift in tone from the earlier provocative, combative and oppressed figures in his artwork. He explains this change of direction; ‘I wanted to show love and how we perceive love as a great and uplifting feeling, however love can also be a destructive

force that makes people do strange and amazing things. Throughout history love has caused peace while on the other hand caused wars, so as I usually show human emotion in my artwork I chose to show love this time.’ The paintings, even with the considered blurring and melding of shape and colour, evince sensuality. He explains; ‘one sees a naked woman and thinks of beauty, although I see it to be a weapon sometimes, a gentle touch and a convincing “please” can make a man do stupid things.’

This shift in the themes of his work also seems to be pointing the way to his next project; he has ‘decided to let the artwork relax a little’. More than 60 exhibitions have given him the opportunity of showing his work internationally in places as diverse as Tokyo, Egypt, New York, Beijing and the Czech Republic. He is now going to revisit the fantasy graphic novel that he began writing 25 years ago, but shelved as he concentrated on his artwork. He is planning to complete his novel which he estimates will take the next 2-3 years. ‘There are many characters involved in the book,’ he says, ‘and I’m painting each scene, once that is all complete I will publish it and will eventually turn it into a movie.’ Luqman defines the dichotomy of his artistic production when he contends: “There are those who believe that great art is a by-product of intense suffering. For me it is the result of moments when I have delved into my dark depths. Almost all my paintings are done at night, listening to soft music.”

Selected Exhibitions

- 2011 Unconventional, Al Mamoura, U.A.E
- 2011 Thanks for the Sunshine, Art Sawa, U.A.E
- 2010 The 4th Beijing International Art Biennale – China
- 2010 2nd Kuwait forum for GCC Art, Kuwait.
- 2010 Against the Grain, Tashkeel Dubai, U.A.E.
- 2009 Under a thousand masks, Ghaf Gallery, U.A.E.
- 2009 The Art of Racing, F1 Fanzone, U.A.E.
- 2009 Smalt Art Vitcovice Ostrava, Czech Republic.
- 2009 Emirati Expressions, Emirates Palace, U.A.E.
- 2009 Art Abu Dhabi, Emirates Palace, U.A.E.
- 2008 ART PARIS, Emirates Palace, U.A.E.
- 2007 After the Silence, Ghaf Gallery, U.A.E.
- 2007 Language of the Desert, Cultural Foundation, U.A.E.
- 2001 The Endurance Races, Cairo, Egypt.
- 2000 The Bungei Shunju Gallery, Tokyo, Japan.
- 1998 Montague Art Gallery Soho, New York.
- 1996 Cultural Foundation, U.A.E.

About the writer

Benedict Tomlinson is the co-founder, curator and director of Alma Enterprises Gallery. Established in 2004 in the East End of London, it has become one of the most vital non-commercial galleries in London that has pioneered performance and video work of emerging and established artists from the UK and internationally. He has spoken on many panels and symposia in Europe: in London, Berlin and Stockholm and also in Dubai. He has written for online art journals such as artvehicle.com, is one of the judges of the LICC (London International Creative Competition) and is currently involved with AIM Europe, an initiative that is creating a European network of independent art organizations. As a commercial ambassador for The Art Newspaper he also frequently travels to the Gulf region.

We would like to thank Art Sawa (Art Sawa Gallery, Al Quaz, Dubai – UAE) for their kind support providing the material needed for this article.