



Asmahan

Painting impressive people

ARTIST PIERRE KOUKJIAN PRESENTS BOLD, HAUNTING WORKS DEPICTING SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST RECOGNIZABLE FIGURES

Saturated blues, fuchsias, greens, reds and golds merge in the evocative paintings of Pierre Koukjian, a multi-faceted artist who continues to blur boundaries between art forms. Born in Beirut in 1962, the artist and designer fled the region during the civil war, heading toward places far afield. As a result, he describes himself as “a nomadic vagabond, traversing from far East to far West passing by the Middle East,” all the while, “designing, painting moments, objects, situations, characters, discovering places and cultures, catching moments.”

While staying in Europe, the young Koukjian apprenticed in workshops, learning the art of designing jewelry. He gradually developed a process of designing that incorporated drawing and painting, resulting in intricate studies of mechanical pieces and elegant details. His work quickly attracted attention among jewelry and watch connoisseurs. When they happened to catch sight of Koukjian’s studies, sketches, drawings and paintings, they often asked if they could have a piece of his artwork.

In 2002, Koukjian founded deLaCour, an atelier named after his wife, the Countess Graziella deLaCour, and is credited with the meteoric rise of deLaCour watches. While he continued his design work, Koukjian was also gaining inspiration for a series of paintings. The result was “Impressive People,” a series of iconic portraits of politicians, artists and pop stars. He describes his subjects as people “who impressed me through my life, good or bad.”

The large-scale, oil on canvas paintings teeter between reverence and campiness, much in the manner of Andy Warhol’s celebrity series of portraits of Liz Taylor, Marilyn Monroe and Mao Tse-tung, but with the intensity and expressiveness of a Fauvist palette. Koukjian says he enjoys the element of surprise when creating designs. This predilection manifests itself in the way he chooses to depict the subjects of his portraits, allowing surprising details to crack the veneer of the traditionally adulatory, distinguished portrait. He paints Lebanese politicians Walid Jumblatt and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in positions of staunch defiance, while



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an image of Zaha Hadid, the renowned Iraqi architect, exudes diva attitude. Koukjian shows a bit of cheek when capturing the of-the-moment fame of sensual pop stars like Haifa Wehbe and Elissa.

Europa Star, a magazine covering the international watch industry, once asserted that Koukjian’s designs were “eye-catching, not only because of their large format and the bold design and originality of the models, but also because they are *à la mode* and have class and a timeless appearance.” The same could be said of “Impressive People,” as Koukjian captures figures at their height of celebrity, granting them immortality through paint and brush strokes. At the same time, the painter examines how the media transforms individuals into immortal myths.

What makes Koukjian particularly noteworthy is his lack of regard for boundaries between artistic genres. Speaking about his design work, the artist asserts, “Jewelry is decorative art, watches are applied art...in between, they have something in common, which is the forms and the freedom.” The same freedom holds true in his paintings, as he dedicates a designer’s sense of detail to planning his sketches and paintings. He explains, “Painting or design, both are ways of expression. I design my paintings, and paint my designs.”

When asked about his upcoming projects and passions, Koukjian says he seeks only to surprise himself and others. Always seeking the fresh and undiscovered, he clearly approaches his life with an eye toward his next creative project. His vagabond nature carries with it a traveler’s sense of wonder, as his current stay on the shores of Lake Geneva, during a freezing night, inspired him to contemplate the random beauty of naturally formed ice sculptures, and how he would like to emulate their impossibly curving shapes and sharp points through art.

View Koukjian’s “Impressive People” until April 17 at Q Contemporary, Beirut Tower, Zeitouny St., Downtown Beirut, tel. 03.300.520, www.qcontemporary.com

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