

Outlines of the human condition

By Mirella Hodeib

BEIRUT: The medium is rectangular piece of handmade paper, something less than 6cmx29cm apiece. Figures, apparently a man and a woman, or else a pair of couples, are effaced of individual details, rendered in outline.

At times they are drawn in blank silhouette, or else filled with (or placed against) rainbow colors. Their context could be a cross between a block-printed tea towel and a house blueprint, each of them more surreal than the next.

“What started out as a playful, almost automatic reproduction of a motif I had found at my mother’s house quickly developed into a form of art,” says Turkish artist Volkan Aslan of his “Unstable Repetition.” The series is nowadays on exhibition at Q Contemporary as part of a group show entitled “PI@Q.”

Aslan’s work draws upon his fondness for drawing architectural plans as well as photography and collage.

“I wanted to create multiple unusual homes for this couple,” the young artist continues. “Often, I place the couple in houses I lived in or situations I have experienced.”

“PI@Q,” which clusters Aslan’s art alongside the work of six other Turkish artists, has grown from a collaboration between the Q Contemporary and Istanbul’s PI Artworks.

Aslan confides that he’s on a mission to deconstruct the classic concept of a home and to question the notion of time and space by devising what he calls “domestic moments.”

The artist’s main objective is to stretch the moment, magnify it and analyze its details so as to extend the spectator’s waiting game.

“The waiting part is really important to me,” he explains. “I spend my life waiting after all. At the doctor’s you wait. In the lobby of a hotel you wait.”

The artist is fond of bestowing abstract qualities to concrete, sometimes trivial, structures. He overpopulated one blueprint with colorful sofa beds, transforming it into a maze. On another, he draws a lavatory with several toilets within the room.

A man using a leaky toilet is a motif of Aslan’s “Unstable Repetition.” “All of them leak,” he jokes, referring to both the toilets and the men he depicts.

In a deliberate attempt to bring a political dimension to his works, Aslan asked Turkish journalist Pinar Ogunc to contribute texts inspired by his work to the “Unstable Repetition” catalogue. She

composed four short stories on the private vs. the public, ever-transforming identities and truths too ephemeral to be captured.

“What a strange feeling it is to see an exact image of one’s own home,” Ogunc writes. “You know everything’s place as if you are looking at a [photographic] negative. But on the other hand everything is so different.”

The artists in this show combine fierce political militancy with a talent for turning mundane items and vistas into beautiful art.

Turkey’s vibrant contemporary art scene is concerned with the big questions of this new decade, and employs daring techniques to practice their aesthetic activism.

One of these militant artists featured in PI@Q is Mustafa Horasan, who delves into the dark facets of human nature. His work is driven by the motto “If you kill the devil in me, you will also kill the angel.”

His paintings, sculptures and installations cry out against oppressive capitalism and blind consumerism.

Horasan’s work plays on the proliferation of imagery, superimposing layers of images and patterns atop one another. He also employs a range of media, from sculpture to complex installations, to denounce media representations of unattainable, idealized versions of the human body.

Among his less gruesome paintings on display is an oil-on-canvas work “Untitled” (2010), 200x170cm. Redolent of pop art techniques of image distortion, flattening and intense colorization, this green, pink and yellow work depicts a couple kissing.

The borders and contours of the two bodies are erased, leaving the eye to search out the most figurative part of the work – the melded faces joined by interlocking mouths. Horasan’s aim is to capture the beauty of the fervent kiss, when all other details and preconceived ideas cease to matter.

A third artist who questions stereotypes is Mehmet Ali Uysal, depicted as a staunch supporter of interactive art. The work on display here consists of a photo of a plaster relief depiction of the extremities of a woman – apparently nude but for a dark brassier.

The end result of this process-driven, multi-form work is that of an unconventional bas relief, one that alludes decisively to certain aspects of the body – the edge of her ribcage, the back of one hand, the upper arm raised above her (absent) head – while leaving others allusive and conjectural. The work incites onlookers to speculate about the figure’s missing details.

“I want people to scratch the surface,” he says. “I want them to create their own stories without forcing [fixed] scenarios on them.”

Uysal and Aslan arrived in Beirut a week before to the show’s opening, to produce new work specifically for the Q Contemporary show.

With Uysal, space becomes an actor, and gallery walls transform from cement structures to play dough.

Uysal says his next exhibition in Istanbul will be comprised of a series of 3D- installations, aiming to probe the concept of galleries being an integral part of the institution of art.

Art galleries themselves, he maintains, have no character.

“If you give a gallery some sort of identity,” he argues, “it will become an art work.”

Uysal has put his own touch on the Q. On one of the gallery walls, he has carved a rectangular structure with a hinge on top that could be described as a window awning or a mail slot.

“From now on the gallery’s viewers will be tempted to push the window,” Uysal says, “to see what’s beneath, what’s on the other side.”

“PI@Q” runs until June 2 at Q Contemporary. For more information please call 03-300-520.

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