Sharjah exhibition tells stories of the 20th century

N.P. Krishna Kumar
Dubai

Looking at key social, cultural and intellectual developments of the 20th century through art can reveal the human truths that go beyond culture and geography.

The Short Century, an exhibition of modern Arab art from the last century organised by Barjeel Art Foundation and Sharjah Art Museum, is just such a tour de force in curatorial presentation.

Because of the diversity and styles of more than 100 works on display from artists across the Arab world, the exhibition offers an account of the sweep of history that the show seeks to uncover.

The artists include Egyptian painters Mahmoud Said and Sief Walmi, Egyptian modernists Abdel Hakim el Gazzar and Iraj Effanoub, Iraqi modernists Dia Azzawi and Shaker Hassan al-Tehrani and Lebanese abstractionists Salima Douaysi and Salama Raoufa Choucair.

“The subject matter they represented – whether highly political works reflecting social reality or introspective, experimental abstraction – determined the themes and sections of the show. We began with the works and with a historical sensibility as a backdrop,” Takesh said. “Many works stand out highlighting different eras, regions and styles.”

As far as the political and social peak, the work by Hamed Ewais, The Protector of Life (1967-68), painted after Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 war, is a complex work that shows both a sense of injured pride but an underlying sense of deep anxiety around the collapse of the Arab nationalist project at the time.

“An interesting contrast to such an overtly political work emerges in the section that shows works by both forward-thinking Lebanese artist Salim Raoufa Choucair and experimental Iraqi artist Shaker Hassan al-Said – both pioneers with their respective styles,” Sultan said.

“The works, presented in opposition to one another, show how uniquely expressive abstract works can allow for deep and meaningful introspection for both the artist and the viewer and engagement with the world through a range of disciplines, including architecture, spirituality and identity.”

The exhibition is scheduled to remain on display until December 24th.

*N.P. Krishna Kumar is a Dubai-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.*

Dunia El-Zobaidi
London

Contrasting with Hollywood’s Star Wars, Arab visual artists have used science fiction to depict reality and address contemporary urgencies surrounding identity, conflict and the future, in Makyson, New Short Films, which explores the intersections of science fiction written in Arabic writing and film.

The screening, curated by Rachel Dedman and presented in London’s Nexus Centre, featured four films by artists from or based in the Palestinian territories, Lebanon and Egypt.

In The Pessimist, Mirra Khamis’s protagonist is abducted by aliens to mirror the miseries and horror of the occupation of the Palestinian territories.

In Nation Estate, Larissa Sansour imagined a futuristic solution to Palestinian statehood – an enormous high-rise building with the entire Palestinian population living inside.

The screening featured four films by artists from or based in the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon and Egypt.

Tom Boddart’s pepsi, cola, water? shows Afro-American jazz pioneer, poet and philosopher Sun Ra and his fascination with outer space and ancient Egypt. He describes the disembarkment felt from Ra’s 1973 concert in Gaza.

The Last Life Light, Lea Najjar explores the effects of artificial light on society, its ability to affect and nurture the body and its use in a techno-commercial context to control the psychological wellbeing of workers.

Dedman said she wanted to discuss traditional narratives of science fiction in writing and film and how sci-fi might disrupt established narratives, present alternative views of the Gulf and offer subtle negations of the future.

As stated in Edward Said’s Orient alism, the idea of Arabs seen as the other is shown in both negative and positive ways in the films. Palestinian are seen as others by Israelis and Ancient Egypt is shown as a positive other as an Afro-Africanian is fascinated by Egypt’s history.

“Sci-fi is a way of making the other and with the Middle East especially, they are shown as the other,” Dedman said, arguing that science fiction may give artists and writers authority that other genres may not.

“Roger is aware somehow of the authority that science fiction has. He writes the text of the film in a very authoritative way. Even if it is wrong, it doesn’t feel it is self-authoritative.”

“Halter is a film that explores the subject mainly because of the constraints in the constructed histories of then-new nation states to create voices that sought to be authentic both to themselves as well as to their placers of origin,” Sultan said.

The exhibition is scheduled to remain on display until December 24th.

Curator Suheyla Takesheh with The Protector of Life by Hamed Ewais, at The Short Century exhibit in Sharjah.