

wereview

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A group exhibition by Arab and Iranian artists

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Birds are used as a metaphor for the many cultural and political issues that hold women back

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Image Credit:

Cheerful and ferocious Lebanese artist Hussain Madi is known for his abstract paintings

A bird evokes the idea of freedom — of moving with ease across physical borders or soaring towards a higher level of spiritual awareness. But the birds in “The

Other Sky”, a group show by well known Arab and Iranian artists, speak about social, cultural and political factors that restrict the freedom of people.

Through paintings, sculptures and video art featuring birds, the artists question the injustice of the different skies that exist in our world, compelling viewers to think about the meaning of flight in a society divided by religious, cultural, ideological and economic borders.

The artists in the show belong to different generations; and the birds in their work symbolise different ideas and concerns. Saudi Arabian artist Manal Al Dowayan’s handmade porcelain doves are from her well-known project “Suspended Together”. Stamped on the backs of the birds are the travel permits that women in Saudi Arabia are required to obtain from their male guardians when they wish to travel. The beautiful, “standing” and “pecking” doves, with the stamps clearly visible on their delicate, pristine white bodies, make a powerful statement about the situation of women in her country and about women’s rights in general.

The birds in Abdulrahman Katanani’s work represent the pain and despair of life as a refugee, as well as the hope that things will get better. The Palestinian artist grew up in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp in Lebanon. He uses materials from the camp such as rags, old utensils and metal scraps to tell stories about the lives of refugees. His untitled sculptural piece in this show is made from aluminium scrap. It depicts a boy holding a bird in his hand, while watching another headless bird struggling to spread its wings. The work evokes the duality of being confined and the innate human desire for liberty.

Also on display is an array of renowned Bahraini sculptor Jamal Abdul Rahim's famous bird sculptures. His whimsical, abstracted depiction of the birds and use of heavy materials such as bronze, marble, granite and lapis lazuli speaks about the difficulties of flight, both from a physical and spiritual perspective.

Hussain Madi, a pioneer of modernism in Lebanon is also known for his abstract paintings and sculptures of birds. In his colourful acrylic paintings and stylised iron sculptures, the birds tread a fine line between looking cheerful and ferocious, evoking the myriad connotations of flight, migration and displacement.

Paris based Iranian artist Azadeh Nilchiani's video of birds trying to get past a boundary in the sky also depicts the contemporary realities of migration, with some birds getting across while others are blocked. Yashar Samimi Mofakham's sinister take on the traditional "rose and nightingale" theme in Iranian art reflects today's situation in his country. Behnaz Ghasemi's ethereal paintings are also inspired by the same traditional theme. But she looks at the spiritual aspect of the relationship between the flowers and the birds.

"The flower in the traditional paintings is a metaphor for the lover or for god. The blurred flowers and shadowy birds in my paintings play with the idea of what is real and what is imaginary. The birds are not flying. They appear to be meditating and searching for the meaning of the flower and perhaps of flight itself," Ghasemi says.

The Other Sky will run at JAMM art gallery, Al Quoz until December 4.