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Creations in shades of solitude and grief

Yemeni-American photographer Ibi Ebrahim's images isolate sights and textures that caught his eye in Paris, while his paintings express anger over the diminishing stature of coffee in his homeland

By Jyoti Kalsi Special to Weekend Review

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Yemeni-American photographer Ibi Ebrahim is known for focusing on gender issues and the status of women in Muslim societies, particularly in Yemen. But his latest exhibition in Dubai, “Light, Leaves and Yemeni Coffee”, marks a turning point in this emerging artist’s career.

The show features works created during a residency at Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris and includes photographs of objects and sights that caught his attention on the streets of Paris, as well as a series of abstract paintings made with Yemeni coffee.

“I have no formal training in art; and this was my first ever experience of an art residency. Living in Paris and seeing the work of so many different artists made me want to experiment and challenge myself. I wanted to push myself out of the safe zone of doing staged studio portraits, and create photographs that did not feature any models or people. Also, before I went to Paris, I hated being alone and always wanted to have my friends around me. But in Paris, I spent a lot of time by myself and started enjoying the solitude. Being on my own and in a new place made me attentive towards sights, sounds and textures that are beautiful but I had not noticed before, and that most people would not give a second look to,” Ebrahim says.

The mundane things he has captured through his lens include some lush green bushes alongside a pile of fallen dry leaves; a cup of coffee spilt on the pavement; rusted window grills; light shimmering on the water; an empty coach on the metro; a sculpture in a church; the edge of the beach; and a colourful bow of wire tied on the metal grill of a door.

Ebrahim also got interested in the texture of fabrics, and took several photographs of different fabrics in his studio. His beautifully composed street photographs and his hazy, ethereal studio images of the delicate fabrics have a meditative quality, reflecting the artist's own state of mind.

“I was feeling lost and vulnerable. I was also living quite a solitary existence, spending a lot of time working alone in my studio, just walking on the streets, enjoying the art in churches; reading by the beach, waiting for that moment when the sunlight would hit the ripples created by a boat; and learning to be comfortable with myself and finding happiness in my loneliness. So, these pictures are like self-portraits that convey my thoughts and feelings as I tried to discover a new city, and new facets of myself. That grill in the doorway with a colourful bow perhaps indicates my desire to somehow stand out from others,” Ebrahim says.

“I got so obsessed with abstract photography, that rather than taking a picture of a model, I preferred to photograph the costume she was supposed to wear,” he adds, pointing to an image of a pink belly dancing costume.

Ebrahim has no formal training in art, and has never done painting before. But in Paris he began working on ink and acrylic paintings. “I experimented by mixing different spices from my kitchen with the paints; and I loved the beautiful colours that were created when I sprinkled some coffee on the paintings so much that I did this whole series of abstract paintings with a mixture of milk, water and Yemeni coffee,” he says.

His playful experiments with coffee took on another dimension after he did some research on the history of

Yemeni coffee.

“I learnt that coffee had been discovered in Yemen in the 15th century, and that the Mocha coffee bean got its name from the city of Mocha in Yemen, from where the Dutch and French exported it. The first coffee houses were also in Yemen. In fact, the idea of tax originated there because the government levied taxes on coffee houses to prevent people from getting together and discussing politics.

“Yemeni coffee has a distinct flavour and is considered to be one of the most unique and richest coffees in the world. But the sad thing is that today, my country is one of the lowest ranked producers and exporters of coffee.

In my earlier work I conveyed my views on the status of women in a country that was once ruled by a famous queen. Through these coffee paintings I want to express my anger and sadness about the decline in production and export of Yemeni coffee, and the replacement of those revenues by narcotics and war,” the artist says.

“This show conveys the vulnerability I felt during this period of my life, as well as my love for my country and engagement with the sociopolitical issues in the region,” he adds.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

Light, Leaves and Yemeni Coffee will run at JAMM art gallery, Al Quoz until February 12.