

The world of Jaffar Al Oraibi

By: Anna Seaman



Untitled 35, Jaffar Al Oraibi, 2010. Oil, Charcoal and Spray Paint on Canvas. Image Courtesy of Cuadro Gallery.

“Al Oraibi ventures off down another path of self-reflection and philosophical musings...”

Al Oraibi sees the world in immaculate detail; a passionate and emotional man he almost laments about a life he once knew when people took the time to stop, think and ponder. Today’s frenetically paced existence where technology reigns and construction booms is at odds with his sensitive soul and so, on a daily basis he takes refuge in his studio in Jidhafs, a northern municipality of Bahrain. There in a rented house filled only with his art, Al Oraibi can find silence and at his own measured pace, he paints the world as he sees it. “I think in general we have lost the meaning of life,” he says. “It is so fast and because of that we lose many things. We don’t look at the simple things anymore, so I think we need to take a break and think again about what makes us human. I try to convey this with my art”. Born in 1976 in his native Bahrain, he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Education from the University of Bahrain in 1999. Having exhibited in many group shows in the Gulf, the Middle East and in France where he was a resident at La Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris in 2006, he still straddles the border between emerging and established artist.

Whilst his dedication to his art spans the period of over 20 years, his exhibition history has only picked up real traction in the last four years after his solo show “The Man” in Manama. Those paintings, depicting Al Oraibi’s trademark distorted and imposing black figures cavorting over a canvas of color were an attempt to stab at the heart of what he describes as a “male-dominant culture”. He was attempting to upset perceptions of beauty by presenting his interpretation of men and women as chaotic. “When you upset someone’s expectation of beauty it can be shocking and this is what I was aiming for when I created this body of work.”

So what was he responding to when he began work on “The Man”? Was it the male-bias so prevalent in the Gulf region or was he addressing what he sees as a common misrepresentation? Actually, he was responding to something far more specific. “I began thinking about this series after they opened a brand new mosque close to my home in Bahrain. It was beautiful, very large and made from marble with incredibly detailed architecture



Untitled 28, Jaffar Al Oraibi, 2009. Oil, Charcoal and Spray Paint on Canvas. Image Courtesy of Cuadro Gallery

but then I noticed the sign indicating the women’s section. It was painted on the wall in thick black paint in a very ugly and cheap way. From this small thing I took many ideas and painted many pictures.” The exaggerated and heavily daubed black male figures have since played a prominent role in his work.

His 2011 show, “When Ali Met William” in a Dubai gallery featured these men prominently. Using both the human and animal form, the figures questioned the male role in contemporary society and took the viewer further into notions of good and evil. Are the black and menacing forms aggressive or simply strong? And importantly, as Al Oraibi himself is a man, was the entire show a very personal inquiry into his individual experience? Al Oraibi says that part of the inspiration for the show came from his 2010 residency in London’s Delfina Foundation. However, he was not necessarily expressing the differences between the east and the west or any cultural friction, rather he was underlining the similarities. “Every time I travel I’m always faced with the same conclusion that all humans are 90% the same and there is much more that unites us rather than divides us” he says. When viewing his paintings from this perspective, it is easy to see that within his works is



Untitled 32, Jaffar Al Oraibi, 2010. Oil, Charcoal and Spray Paint on Canvas. Image Courtesy of Cuadro Galleryt.

a place for everyone; look closely enough and you will find yourself in there through irregular geometric lines and overlapping structures, drips, dots and genderless figures. The artist Oraibi produces tangled interactions that compliment one another, his bright and sometimes luminous colors are in stark contrast with the black forms or scrawled script and create a chaotic balance in which the reality of humanity can exist. Put simply, he is trying to pin down the intangibility of human emotion. “Emotions are difficult to paint,” he admits. “Everyone

feels but to describe that feeling is complicated. You can’t make one painting that is sad and another that is happy so instead I rely on colours, which to me are like a language and I punctuate them with textures and lines.” This language took on a new significance last year, Al Oraibi says, when he completed a two-month residency at The International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York. “During that time I had many meetings and interactions with other artists and again I was struck, not by our differences, but



Untitled 2, Jaffar Al Oraibi, 2010. Oil, Charcoal and Spray Paint on Canvas. Image Courtesy of Cuadro Gallery.

our similarities. What was interesting for me though was that by the end of my time I wasn't only seeing myself in my work but many things from my past life and from my future." These somewhat profound findings led into what was to become the backbone of Al Oraibi's upcoming show "Clear and Unclear" currently exhibited in his hometown. Although he set out attempting to focus more on the role of the woman, when he got back into his studio, Al Oraibi found himself able to take a cue from the most basic things in order to counteract his previous exhibitions and balance out his practice. "I started focusing on the very normal things that we use but we don't care about such as the spoon." Studying the spoon and its every day banality as well as its ability to reflect and distort like some kind of fun-house mirror, Al Oraibi then embarked on a new series. Encased in precise and brightly coloured frames, Al Oraibi's most recent work features swirling discs of

colour and spoon-shaped faces staring out of the canvas. Perhaps a more obvious call to self-consciousness than his previous works, they are also accompanied by a series of installations of metal, wooden and rubber spoons in varying shaped containers. "It was like a spark when I discovered it," says Al Oraibi. "I took many different materials and kept developing the idea."

Other than his life-long dedication to his art, Al Oraibi is also a full-time primary school teacher at a government school for boys in Bahrain. Although sometimes clashing with his inherent need for seclusion and privacy can also restrict his schedule Al Oraibi says there is something unique about working with children "there is part of me that does not want to work as a teacher and I hope for a time when I can work only on my art, but spending time with the children has really taught me a lot; Children are direct, honest and not able to hide their feelings. By talking to them and observing their interactions, I have learned a lot about human nature and this is very relevant for my practice. In a way, these are live subjects for my art and it makes me realise that every experience is valid." Al Oraibi is also focused on the wider society. As a member of the Bahrain Fine Arts Society and a supporter of the art scene in his home country, he says there is no better time to be an artist in the Gulf "the last five years has seen a lot of growth especially in Saudi Arabia and UAE", he says adding that he has at least one new visitor to his studio every week seeking out his work.

"The whole world operates in cycles so I know the spotlight will not always be on us, that is why I say the time is now. Now is our time to shine and to show the rest of the world what we are about. Everything is possible in art and in life - this is my motto - and by that I don't mean only good things but bad things too. Personally my future views is to dig deeper and look harder within myself.....art is the only way to find ourselves. I started this journey long ago and I don't think it will stop."

About the Writer

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