

Somewhere between pop art and pointillism

By Jim Quilty

BEIRUT: Sunlight isn't what it used to be. Sun worshippers can no longer adore it with their former unconditional love, thanks to something called melanoma. When climate change reduces the world's coastal cities into saltwater cesspools littered with storm wreckage, people will likely shake their fists at the sun, not the petrochemical industry. More innocent associations appear to have inspired Randa Ali Ahmad to name "Plein Soleil" (Sunlight), an exhibition of 29 oils, most of which are in the upper registers of the color spectrum, with yellows dominating.

The work is installed in a waterfront commercial space of terraced design, which divides the show into two galleries. For someone gazing upon the work for the first time, "Plein Soleil" is (in the first gallery) redolent of a past, Italian, age when film stars were young and beautiful and (in the second) people embraced the joys of blowing bubbles.

The bubble motif emerges in several works hung in the show's second gallery. The nine-piece "From bubble to bubble" series and a few other works – "Bubble catcher" I and II, "Bubble dreams" – either depict people blowing bubbles or else apply it metaphorically to vegetable matter.

The Italian motif expresses itself in several works in the first gallery, whose subjects are reminiscent of things peninsular.

The first and last works of the exhibition – a pair of mauve-tinted portraits called "Delicious surprise" and "Eyes closed" – evoke a young Sophia Loren. Two yellow-hued canvases – "Why would you want me to remember?" and "Do you see me?" both 200x100cm – depict a gent in shades who film lovers of a certain age will recognize as a 1960s-era Marcello Mastroianni.

Reinforcing the assumed "La Dolce Vita" reference is the red husk of a vintage Alfa Romeo convertible, sitting amid some greenery in the midst of the space. (True, Mastroianni's character piloted "an English car," probably a Triumph, but at least one Alfa Romeo-loving website claims he drove a Giulietta.)

More evidence of an Italianate motif can be found in "An elsewhere over here," 200x200cm, depicting a man making a lateral leap over some obstacle – which reproduces a black-and-white photo adorning the walls of more than one Italian-themed restaurant, albeit relocated to a wooded habitat.

A landscape series depicting a vineyard at various times of the day – "Different times," "From Dawn," "To dusk," all 200x100cm – tends to complement the Italianate motif.

Ali Ahmad herself denies having had such cultural references in mind as she composed these canvases. She paints from her imagination alone, she says, pointing out that someone at the show's opening asked if her daughter had been the model for the mauve Sophia Loren pieces.

What the artist has painted is probably less important than her technique, and the mood she means to evoke with it.

Forearmed with the exhibition's title, visitors entering "Plein Soleil" may for a second or two imagine that it refers to the mutable play of light upon surfaces that inspired pointillism – the impressionist technique of rendering solids as colorful points.

Though its use of color is exuberant, Ali Ahmad's work is in no way pointillist. The momentary impression that it is stems from her oils' dimpled, pitted surfaces. Asked how she accomplishes this effect, the artist says she starts a work with her hands and finishes with her feet. When pressed, she confides that the pitted surfaces are made using the soles of a particular pair of shoes.

Individual pieces legitimately echo the work of American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein. This has less to do with the artist's style ('Plein Soleil' doesn't appropriate cartoon formalism) than it does

her fondness for bright colors – especially in “Charmed” and “Hypnotized,” 60x60cm each – and the seeming pop culture familiarity of some of her subjects.

The mood the artist means to summon with her canvases is expressed in a brief text she composed in French and posted alongside the husk of Alfa Romeo. “To live in the present, to enjoy the moment,” she writes near the end of the text. “Otherwise we’re taken by time; and we rust instantly. It is the now that counts essentially to live intensely.”

Carpe diem, then, “Seize the day.” It’s a sentiment that’s not so very alien to Beirut.

“Plein Soleil” is up at a shopfront in the Karagulla Building, Beirut Waterfront till May 31. For more, see <http://www.randaaa.com/>.

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