

By Elspeth Dehnert

ABSTRACTED MEMORIES

Palestinian-Jordanian artist Ghassan Abu Laban uses flashes of internal, retrospective images as inspiration for his art, expressing the associated figures, colors, shapes, and feelings on canvas one stroke at a time. This month, he presents his solo exhibition "Observations" at the Orient Gallery in Amman.



"I remember that I was drawing and sketching before I was six. I would just read and start to daydream, imagining myself painting a scene from the novel," says Ghassan Abu Laban, once a three-year-old boy abruptly uprooted to Amman, Jordan from Bethlehem, the West Bank, during the 1967 Palestinian exodus, "and that, I think, created an environment for painting."

By the time Abu Laban finished high school, his sights were set – he wanted to be a professional painter. Unfortunately though, his family was not supportive of his impassioned career path. "We come from families that think of life as a serious goal," he says. "You need to be a doctor or engineer, or maybe a teacher...a productive and financially supportive profession." Despite their disapproval, Abu Laban enrolled in an

art program at Yarmouk University, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1988 – one year after he had his first solo exhibition at Amman's Plastic Art Association Gallery and the same year he received the first prize at the University of Jordan's Youth Arts Painting Contest.

In 1991, after several more successful solo art exhibitions, the young artist began what would eventually become a 21-year-long, full-time, art-teaching career at the University of Jordan. "I love teaching drawing, watercolors and painting," says Abu Laban. "I work with all levels – some students start from scratch and some are very advanced, producing a full painting."

Although dedicated to teaching, Abu Laban continued to indulge in his love of painting



during his free time, presenting new pieces in exhibitions around Amman every two to three years. “I just keep on experimenting and working on the technique, surface, light, color, spaces and figure,” he says.

Using all of the basic mediums – watercolors, pastels and acrylic, but mainly oil paint because “it has feeling and depth” – Abu Laban portrays his “visual memories” in painted form. “I start to flash back to things I saw, to movements I’ve seen – some vivid colors and thematic scenes – which could be something from an early age or later, but I’m not really focused on which part of the memory goes to which time,” he explains. “I’m more focused on what it represents and the actual feeling in it... how I can put it into a painting.” After receiving inspiration, Abu Laban begins his

creation by layering paint onto the surface of a canvas, first with a white brush and then with a gold brush. “I use very, very thick paint,” he says. Afterwards, he utilizes knife work to apply the painting’s final texture.

The result of his creative process is usually an abstract-figurative style containing one or more elusive figures – most of them female and depicted in motion or an expressive, yet static, pose – organically contained within a colorful, abstract background. “The figure for me is more related to feelings,” says Abu Laban. “It could be a friend, someone I love or someone who had influence or a visual impact; it could also be something I imagined from a book or a movie.”

More concerned with, what he calls, aesthetic, visual concepts rather than an embedded



message, Abu Laban likes the audience to view his paintings naturally, without the pressure of searching for a prescribed meaning. “You can interpret the painting in whatever way you like,” he says. “I’m not implying any kind of feeling or thoughts.”

Only ten years after making his debut within the Jordanian art scene, Abu Laban solidified his artistic position in the kingdom. In 1998, he won second place at Cervantes Institute’s Lurca Centenary Contest and in 1999, placed first in the institute’s Don Quixote Painting Contest.

Despite his success, in 2001, Abu Laban made the bold decision to move to Boston, Massachusetts, where he delved into the local art sphere. “I was painting there; just doing art and being a part of the theater,

music, painting and gallery scene,” he says. But being an Arab in the US right after the collapse of the World Trade Center was not an easy position to be in, so he decided to reach out to the community...in a somewhat unconventional way. Utilizing his teaching experience, Abu Laban collaborated with two of his American friends to conduct several art therapy and poetry workshops for troubled youth. “At that time the 9/11 incident was huge in the States,” he says, “so working with middle school students with problems and trying to heal them using art and poetry was a really good way to communicate with the community.”

After two fulfilling years in the US, Abu Laban made his way back to Jordan and picked up right where he left off – teaching, making art and showcasing his paintings in



exhibitions around Amman. And, although using the same tried-and-true creative process, the artist soon realized that his paintings had organically evolved over time. “The figure through time has changed from a realistic figure to a more simplified one and then a more geometric, abstracted, divided figure,” he explains. “The brush and knife work got wider. The spaces around the figures got wider and simpler, and there are more clear colors with emphasis on texture, surface and depth of color.”

Abu Laban’s most recent paintings, which are currently showcased at the Orient Gallery in Amman as part of his latest solo exhibition “Observations,” are proof of his art’s constant evolution. Based on his life experiences over the past two years – the people he has met, his thoughts, dreams and

expectations – the oil on canvas paintings portray whimsically vague figures that appear to be the quickly fading victims of an actively consuming background made up of soft, multicolored geometric divisions. “In the past, the figures were filling most of the space, but in these paintings the abstract spaces and colors take up more space than the figure, and there is more emphasis and focus on the technique and style,” the artist explains. “They have clear, strong colors with layers and layers of brush and knife work on the surface, and there is less detail in the figures...even less than the last time.”

As for when his paintings will complete their evolutionary cycle nobody knows, not even him. But just as memories are a living, breathing and timeless entity, so is Ghassan Abu Laban’s art.