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Homage to Amine El Bacha's 'light'

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21/09/2017

BEIRUT: Featuring work from the Amine El Bacha Foundation collection, "Partitions and Colors: Homage to Amine El Bacha" captures the diversity and beauty of Bacha's paintings across the different cities and landscapes. Now up at the Sursock Museum, the exhibition samples the Lebanese artist's oeuvre from the 1960s through to the first decade of the 21st century.

It is the first in a new series of Sursock shows dedicated to collections of Lebanese artists. The new exhibition series aspires to offer "more content and context for a better understanding of Lebanese art," museum director Zeina Arida explains, "an introduction to art in Lebanon, forcing the public to get interested in one specific artist or theme and do its own research on it.

"Four themes have been chosen for this exhibition, all assembled under one big theme: Light. The four themes are; abstractions and landscapes, fantasy, music and religious inspiration, with the Last Supper and the Cathedral St. Georges depicted during the excavations in 1991."

The selection on show in "Partitions and Colors" is diverse in its materials and themes. Works range from watercolors, such as "The Mountain," 1988, to painted wooden objects, to Chinese ink with "Memory," 1973, and to oils on canvas, like "The Intimate Dinner," 2004.

The exhibition captures Bacha's dedication to a modernist tradition of media exploration. The works are also a reminder of the artist's training at Beirut's Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, at the Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts and finally at Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris.

In a sense, the collection itself becomes a modernist collage of thematically fragmented works, with each fragment embodying an autonomous idea, or a new chapter. In fact, paintings and objects are often clustered thematically, with each forming a world of its own.

This chapter-like presentation showcases the array of Bacha's ideas. Rural Lebanese landscapes are represented with "Fog over Dhour Choueir," 1987, an abstracted, almost impressionistic, color study of the eponymous village.

"The Orchestra," an oil from 1999 featuring sober figures with their music instruments, conveys the artist's interest in music.

Religious motifs are evident in "The Last Supper," 1984, seemingly inspired by da Vinci's famous fresco of the same name. Instead of the intricate Renaissance lines and astounding background perspective, Bacha's painting abstracts the Christ and his disciples, and cuts the canvas into three layers.

At the center, Jesus and 10 of his disciples are depicted in pastel colors that range from blue, to pink, to white and gold. Two disciples are left in the dark and the supper is variously represented in dark colors and vividly bright ones. Heavy biblical references are, likely deliberate, reimagining themes of good and evil in that dark chapter of the passion.

Bacha was inspired by Italian art, stemming perhaps from his journey to Italy in the 1970s. The Italian influence is evident in the mythological references appropriated by the Italian Renaissance.

Indeed, an "Untitled" watercolor from 1997 contains direct references, such as the goddess Venus from Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus." Bacha adds a modern twist. In his appropriation of Raphael's "Three Graces," he gives the goddesses wine instead of apples.

This integration and transformation of mythological references from revered Renaissance paintings suggests an appropriation of appropriation. As the Renaissance artists offered their own interpretations of Greco-Roman mythology, Bacha offers his own readings of those interpretations while transporting them to 20th century settings – complete with bins and a Pepsi-Cola logo.

Perhaps, the gesture offers a critique of Renaissance preoccupation with classical themes. If so, they also criticize the pollution-as-branding aspect of the contemporary market economy, which has superseded once-revered mythic themes.

“Partitions et Couleurs: Hommage à Amine El Bacha” is up at Sursock Museum through March 12, 2018.



"The Intimate Dinner," 2004, oil on canvas, 142 x 203cm. Photos courtesy of Sursock Museum

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