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The life and times of Hussein Madi



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BEIRUT: There are many ways to approach the curation of a retrospective. In "Hussein Madi: A Boundless Life," an exhibition bursting at the seams with work spanning six decades of feverish output, Aida Cherfan has chosen to forgo the tried-and-tested but somewhat staid approaches of arranging work according to chronology, subject matter or media. Instead, she seduces visitors to the Beirut Exhibition Center this month with playful groupings of work dictated by ever-shifting criteria, allowing viewers to piece together their own understanding of the 76-year-old artist's staggering body of work.

Madi, one of the region's best-known artists, is represented here in 475 individual pieces. The works on show include legions of his distinctive sculptures, folded into being like origami from sheets of galvanized iron, paintings spanning the breadth of his career and hundreds of sketches, the proof that Madi follows his own dictum.

"My advice [to artists] is to keep a case and a pencil and to draw everywhere," he once told The Daily Star. "To draw, to draw, to draw."

To the right of the BEC's entrance, a colorful 2008 painting capturing two angular birds – one of the artist's self-professed favorites – is flanked by a series of delicate sketches in colored pencil capturing exotic animals. Dating from the 1960s, when Madi was an impoverished art student in Rome, they recall a period when, bereft of subject matter, he would visit the city's zoo to sketch the lions, tigers and other captive creatures.

Madi was born in Lebanon in 1938 and studied at the Academie Libanaise des Beaux Arts, before moving to Italy in 1963. Intended to stay a month, he ended up lingering for over 20 years, finally returning to Beirut to live in 1986.

This is not Madi's first retrospective since moving back to Lebanon. Cherfan exhibited work spanning a 30-year period in her compact downtown gallery in 2004 to coincide with the release of Saqi's comprehensive monograph on the artist.

"A Boundless Life," however, completely eclipses this mini-retrospective in scope, as

well as size.

The artist himself helped make the selection of work, Cherfan says, insisting that certain pieces – among them the zoo sketches – should be included. Refreshingly willing to display work in every state of completion, Madi has allowed Cherfan to display it as she sees fit.

Each cluster of pieces, in which sculpture abuts large-scale paintings in oil or acrylic, quick studies and pencil sketches, charcoals and watercolors, provides a glimpse into the artist's passion for rich, earthy colors, evoking the warm hues of Paul Gauguin's sunlit pastoral scenes, and his sensitivity for line and form, which lend his compositions a pleasing economy.

Several critics have noted that Madi, who is often compared to Pablo Picasso, constructs his works, whether abstract or figurative, painting or sculpture, from two simple elements: a straight and a curved line.

In "A Boundless Life," the artist's mastery of these geometrically driven compositions holds the wide-ranging show together. They betray his love of classical subject matter, including horses, bulls and birds, flowers and musical instruments, and statuesque women whose rounded thighs, buttocks and breasts are pleasingly at odds with their pinched waists and impossibly delicate feet.

Alongside these pieces, immediately familiar to anyone versed in Madi's work, are the realist sketches, accomplished portraits and delicate watercolor still lifes that demonstrate the extent of the artist's abilities. They also provide the context that reinforces the consistency of his approach toward his artwork since 1959.

Madi demonstrates himself adroit in a number of styles as well as media, but the overwhelming impression is of an artist engaged in a never-ending struggle to reduce his compositions to their simplest form, distilling everything to two all-encompassing gestures.

Cherfan has grouped many of the sketches according to subject matter. Five self-portraits of the artist capture the changing contours of his aging face. A corner boasting a comprehensive selection of nudes demonstrates a preoccupation with the curves and hollows of the female form, whether captured in a few spare lines, draped over a chair or face down in bed, or evoked playfully in Madi's geometric, almost cubist figurations.

Viewers with an eye to the evolution of his work will find that Madi, always experimenting, never abandons anything. Demonstrating his dexterity in an unusually broad range of media, he revisits subject matter as well as style.

The animal sketches from the 1960s, in which he struggles to convey the sinuous movement and tautly coiled power in the curve of a lion's back, are echoed by a series of sketches of a domestic cat completed half a century later.

A series of understated watercolors capturing traditional still life subjects such as bowls of fruit and bunches of flowers might suggest art student toil, but a glance at the exhibition tag reveals that they were completed in the 1990s, evidently the result of a passing preoccupation with the classical.

Other works are grouped according to media. A crowded forest of variously-sized white plinths support 25 or so tiny sculptures, paper-thin sheets of folded metal whose diminutive size renders them whimsically amusing, lacking the sturdy presence of their larger counterparts.

Cherfan has struggled somewhat with lighting the smaller works on show in "A Boundless Life." The larger sculptures appear to greatest advantage when placed close to the walls of the hall, where the multi-directional lighting casts angular shadows that overlap unevenly, creating their own three-dimensional echoes of Madi's strong lines.

Cherfan's easily accessible approach may frustrate those who prefer a more academic curatorial principle – the exhibition tags, which consist of spreadsheets printed on A4 paper and pinned to the walls, provide almost no context to the work and the exhibition is devoid of a catalogue.

In visual terms however, "A Boundless Life" seems likely to be deemed a success by visitors of all ages, who are free to wander the space as the whim takes them, hopping from one subject, medium and time period to another just as Madi appears to himself.

"Hussein Madi: A Boundless Life" is on show at the Beirut Exhibition Center until June 6. For more information please call 01-962-000 ext: 2883.

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