

ZEST



Mark Mulligan / Houston Chronicle

"In my paintings, I would like to show the world that's beautiful. We have to always be positive," Iraqi-born Ammar Alobaidi says. His show "A Tale of the City" is at the University of Houston-Downtown's O'Kane Gallery.

GALLERY SHOWS

Middle Eastern works share optimism, love of Picasso

By Molly Glentzer

The timely confluence of gallery shows by a pair of Middle Eastern artists — one escaped from war, the other still in the midst of it — piqued my curiosity.

Ammar Alobaidi, a refugee from Iraq who has lived in Houston for three years, creates brightly colored, abstract paintings and sculpture.

Fadi Yazigi, a Syrian who lives in Damascus, works figuratively, in a primitive style; he casts works in bronze, sculpts in clay and paints on a diverse assortment of materials, from paper and canvas to pita bread.

Neither aspires to be overtly political. Beyond that, I did not expect to find much in common with their work. So to imagine my surprise when I ran into an old friend at both shows: Pablo Picasso.

Many artists borrow their language from others, building on history. But I wondered, is it bold or naive these days to appropriate such iconic early-20th-century imagery? And is it just a coincidence that both of these artists are from the Middle East?

Well, no. And duh: Picasso was the copycat first. He, of course, borrowed from the primitive imagery of African, Babylonian and Greek figures.

"The inspiration might be there," suggested Yazigi's agent and curator, Myriam Jakiche, "but Fadi's figures very simply are an extension of his region and its people's figures."

A beautiful world

Alobaidi likes Picasso's Cubist-period compositions and the works of Wassily Kandinsky and Henri Matisse. He also appears to borrow from Dia Hazzawi, an older, well-known Iraqi artist.

Although some of the imagery in his show "A Tale of the City," at University of Houston-Downtown's O'Kane Gallery, looks familiar, it's flattened, abstracted another notch and often brightly colored, in a happy, primary palette.

"In my paintings, I would like to show the world that's beautiful. We have to always be positive," Alobaidi said.

Gallery director Mark Cervenka said when he met Alobaidi about a year and a half ago, the artist showed him images on a smartphone.

"I see a lot of images on phones, but these were different," Cervenka said. When he saw Alobaidi's works in person, he was elated to discover a full body of paintings, enough to build a show.

Cervenka said he was responding partly to Alobaidi's technical follow-through and emotion. "I was just entering his world. There's the utmost sincerity in what he's doing. It's honest work."



Courtesy of the artist

An untitled mixed-media painting by Fadi Yazigi employs his signature, universal babylike figure that reflects the people of his native Syria.

'Ammar Alobaidi: A Tale of the City'

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, noon-5 p.m. Saturdays, through March 25

Where: O'Kane Gallery, University of Houston-Downtown, 1 Main

Info: Free; 713-221-8042, uhd.edu

'Fadi Yazigi: Still life ... Still alive ... Still a life'

When: 1 p.m.-5 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, through March 25

Where: Deborah Colton Gallery, 2445 North Blvd.

Info: Free; 713-869-5151, deborahcoltongallery.com

The muted palette of one of Alobaidi's largest, most recent canvases is inspired by "Guernica," Picasso's famous mural about personal turmoil and a brutal civil war in Spain. Alobaidi's painting tells a different tale, illustrating a complete cycle of life that can be read in either direction.

"It is global. Life is continuous. We don't know how we started, we don't know how we end," he said. He has, however, let one dark black-and-white work of disembodied body parts into the show.

Susan Baker, an art-history professor at UH, suggested that Alobaidi doesn't feel like he has to reinvent the wheel.

"Whatever expression he is trying to convey is paramount, and he'll use whatever form to get there," she said.

A few of Alobaidi's newer, black-and-white paintings show his

analytical side and hint at a unique voice. A native of Baghdad, he came to Houston legally about three years ago, by way of Libya and Jordan. He had already decided to devote his time to art, after a career as a nuclear engineer, he said.

Growing up, he often visited museums and heritage sites such as Babylon and Mesopotamia.

"In Baghdad, before the war, there were museums, sculpture and paintings everywhere," Alobaidi said.

He makes his living now as an assistant at YMCA International Services. He doesn't want to talk about war.

"I don't want to be in politics," he said.

'Still a life'

The title of Yazigi's show at Deborah Colton Gallery says it all: "Still life ... Still alive ... Still a life."

His decision to continue living in Damascus, in spite of Syria's civil war, brings a poignant sensibility to his work. A signature, universal figure — often babylike and crudely rendered — appears in all the mediums he powerfully employs. It can be male or female.

Colton said the figure reflects how Yazigi sees people on the streets or in his studio. "He's looking more at their aura — not their clothing or makeup or anything like that," she said.

The Picasso influence comes through most clearly in the show's drawings, where faces drawn from ancient Syrian culture often look like Dora Maar or Picasso's self-portraits. Yazigi's own self-portrait often involves a bird metaphor: Though many birds have left Syria, he is the one who stays.

It's hard to imagine even the day-to-day difficulties of eating and sleeping in Syria right now, much less the business of creating art.

Yazigi's persistence seems a miracle in itself: His foundry was bombed, so he now travels to Beirut to have his bronze pieces made. His local clay source closed. You can imagine why he resorted to painting on pita bread for one group of works in the show.

All of his figures appear to be under assault and stress, with bodies often skewed sideways or upside down. It's dark but not fatalistic. Colton even sees optimism in it.

"His vision is hopeful, that things will get better," she said.



O'Kane Gallery

In addition to Picasso, Alobaidi's work recalls Wassily Kandinsky.

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