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Poetic storytelling of Modern Arab masters

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How they have commented on the society, culture and politics of their times through drawings and paintings on paper

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Jamil Molaeb, untitled, c 1992, gouache on carton

The latest exhibition at Green Art gallery, “Works on Paper: Hikayat” brings together more than 50 works on

paper by Modern Arab artists such as Khouzayma Alwani, Mahmoud Hammad, Adham Esmail, Jamil Molaeb, Fateh Moudarres, Nazir Nabaa, Aref Al Rayess, Khaldoun Sheishakly and Seif Wanly.

“Hikayat” is the Arabic word for stories, and the title of the show refers to its central theme of storytelling.

“Drawing and painting on paper offers an intimate and open field for imaginative elaboration in which concepts and ideas can emerge and change with relative ease. We have tried to bring together works that tell cultural, social and political stories. Some of these pieces are experimental, while others are studies that developed into famous paintings by these renowned artists. I wanted to do this show because there is something so beautiful and poetic about works on paper; and also because being more affordable, these artworks offer an opportunity for young collectors to own works by Modern masters,” Yasmin Atassi, director of the gallery, says. “As one of the oldest galleries in Dubai, we have longstanding relationships with Modern Arab artists. This show links our programme as a contemporary art space with the history of the gallery,” she adds.

The show presents a panorama of daily life and the sociopolitical history of the region through the prism of the personal experiences and perspectives of the leading artists of the time. The works of Syrian artist Khouzayma Alwani (born 1934) and Lebanese artist Aref Al Rayess (1928-2005) comment on the political turmoil of the 1970s and 1980s. Alwani, who lost many loved ones in the 1981 massacre in Syria, depicts the devastation of Syrian society through his naive drawings and paintings of a crazy world populated with beasts and monsters.

Al Rayess’s paintings belong to a series he produced in the early 1970s to protest against the corrupt leaders

governing the Middle East after the Cairo accord in 1969 and the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. He depicts the unscrupulous politicians as poker players, gambling with the lives of ordinary people through their manipulations and jeopardising the ideals of the revolution his generation fought for.

Syrian master Fateh Moudarres (1922–1999) is represented through a set of drawings, from different series, based on mythology, religion, popular lore and politics. Featuring the artist's signature motifs such as penguins, the works express his love for his fellow human beings and his solidarity with people struggling against oppressive structures. These works are especially significant because the artist was also an accomplished writer and poet, and his childlike drawings or "dessins" were an integral part of his books.

Egyptian artist Seif Wanly's (1906–1979) charming paintings from the 1950s of circus acrobats, ballet dancers and other performers portray the esoteric dimensions of society in an allegorical reference to the theatre of life.

Other significant works on display include Syrian artist Adham Esmail's drawings done with a calligraphy pen; and five works from different periods in the career of Syrian master Elias Zayat, including very recent works by the octogenarian. His dramatic compositions are inspired by mythology, ancient civilisations and religions in the region as well as his interest in the conservation and restoration of orthodox icons.

A segment of the show is dedicated to works documenting scenes from traditional rural life. These include paintings by Lebanese artist Jamil Molaeb, who took inspiration from the landscape of his country and the traditional lifestyle of different Arab communities to

tell stories about life in Arab villages and cities. Also seen in this segment are paintings by Syrian master Mahmoud Hammad (1923 -1988). The artist is well known for his abstract calligraphic works, but the paintings of rural life he did early in his career are equally important. Like many Syrian artists of his generation, Hammad was educated in Italy. After returning home, he spent two years in Dara'a, where he created a series of paintings depicting everyday life in the southern area of Horan. In an attempt to adapt his Italian art education to his own roots, and find his own voice, Hammad focused on themes of family, motherhood and local politics. His works on paper in this show are from the "Horan" period. Most of these artworks went on to become studies for much larger paintings, and many are being shown in public for the first time.

A highlight of the show is a rare set of 500 works on paper by Syrian artist Khaldoun Sheishakly. This little-known artist from Homs spent his entire life documenting various professions in his country. The result is a series of breathtaking ink drawings that depict shops, artisans' workshops, and other workplaces in exquisite detail. Titled, "Shops and Vendors of the Past", this series represents an important history of storytelling and life in Syria, and beautifully showcases the possibility of conveying social, cultural and political stories through simple lines and brush strokes on paper.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

"Works on Paper: Hikayat" will run at Green Art gallery until October 26.