

Ammar Khammash Landscape and Light exhibition at Nabad Gallery, Jordan

2009, October 8th

Ammar Khammash is best known for his stunning interpretation of the unique landscapes of Jordan. His technique has a distinct quality in that he uses mixed media, including chalk, pencil and pigments along with oil colours on canvas. Drawing and paintings both hold strong grounds to bring the final image together. Also the quality that is particular to his large canvases is that they need to be viewed from a distance, and in that sense his exhibition at the Zara Center a few years ago was a kind of revelation to me, in that the large exhibitions space gave better justice to his work than was possible in any other exhibition hall –in Amman. While Khammash's landscapes are an enchanting and skilled interpretation of his natural and geographical environment, standing important grounds to the genre of landscape painting in Jordan; it is the other works presented alongside the landscapes that I now await to see.

I recall in his 2003 exhibition at Zara Gallery a series of large scale cityscapes depicting burning cities were striking and remain fresh in my mind. This exhibition coincided with the political turmoil of the region, mainly the attention was on Iraq at the time, and I recall the exhibition reflected the general mood quite accurately.

In this last exhibition at Nabad gallery "Landscape and Light", the artist presented several new 'experiments' alongside the landscape series. One of these, were two portraits on large canvases. These were a close up of a face with nothing in the background, cut off near the top of the head and at the base of the chin. Immediately, the works reminisce on portraits by Jordanian painters Hani Alqam and Bader Mahasneh, as well as Syrian / German Marwan Qassab. In the context of the landscape signature works by Khammash, these were not very successful to really present anything new in portraiture that could allow a claim to uniqueness or new grounding on the subject.

The second experiment included several 3D small relief-like works produced on wood, the flat surface as well as the sides of which were not straight. On these were depictions of landscapes. While the work seems to be quite new in perspective of both the artists' past works, as well as art-historically in Jordan. They do present themselves as a natural investigation of an artist/architect. None-the-less, while some were visually 'interesting', they did not present a full-fledged investigation of the complexities automatically presented in the transition between 2D and 3D 'paintings'.

Finally, and again in only two exhibited works (a 3<sup>rd</sup> work of the same subject was apparently in storage) the artist presented the audience with an interesting new narrative. The works entitled 'Fallen Angels I & II' were large canvas in which interiors and figures were combined in a morbid composition where the figures resumed a horizontal position diagonally across the canvas. The figures gave no impression of movement or life, their faces and expressions unrevealed. The juxtaposition of figures, who seemed larger than life in perspective of the interior space they inhabited, gave a sense of the surreal, and in some instances the figure blurred into the a sloping valley of a hillside. The air of ambiguity gave a sense of an untold narrative in the works.



Fallen Angels 2

In a conversation with the artist around these new subjects / experiments, not much was revealed other than the fact that the portraits were a 'happy accident' resulting from the artist cleaning his brushes on an empty (very large) canvas. While the 3D relief works as a result of the presence of these geometrically shaped surfaces in the artists' studio, which he explained are a natural continuation to his work as both architect and artist. As for the figures in interiors, no story was told to their becoming. Is it reading too much into the work, or is the artist not ready to discuss them?

Finally, on a curatorial note; keep in mind that the artist was not bound to one subject, it seemed that there was little consideration for the placement of the works throughout the 4 spaces of the exhibition halls. This ultimately broke any narrative or even the possible understanding / immersion in the variety of subjects matters.

Although it is open to question if the audience is aware or even concerned in reading artworks; yet it is arguably an important consideration that galleries can work towards in order to aid in art interpretation for audiences. Otherwise, it seems to point towards the problematic status of visual arts in Jordan, in that they are still simply regarded in the framework of mere aesthetical manifestations that do not offer deeper readings to their references on any level.



