

## Impression of the city in blurred lines

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**Kelly Clarke/Staff Reporter / 22 December 2014**

***Algerian artist's second solo exhibition in Dubai features mostly abstracted architectural forms inspired by his impressions of the city.***



*Driss Ouadahi with one of his paintings. — Supplied photos*

With a talent for art spurting from a young age, Algeria-born Driss Ouadahi's fascination with hand-drawn illustrations allowed him to physically imprint his creative imagination onto paper.

Fresh from being awarded the Grand Prix Léopold Sédar Senghor Prize at the 11th edition of Dak'Art, in Senegal earlier this year, Ouadahi's second solo exhibition, *Inside Zenith*, is on display at AI Quoz-based gallery Lawrie Shabibi.

Inspired by the impressions Ouadahi has built up of Dubai during recent visits, *Inside Zenith*, blurs the lines between reality and imagination by working from photographs taken during his travels and meshing them with images from his memory.

**When did you first discover your talent/love for art?**

I started young. As a child I always wanted to draw. My drawing excited the other children and adults. I found that I was able to do something with my hands, that nobody else could do. Some children were able sing or play an instrument, but not me. This is the only way I could justify the term "talent".

**What's your strongest memory of your childhood in relation to art?**

I grew up in Algeria and have no memories of visiting museums with my parents or teachers. During that time, all books contained hand-drawn illustrations rather than photographs. These drawings fascinated me and through them I discovered the power of the pictorial language and its effect on my imagination. Later on, I got into comics.

**When did your passion turn into a serious career in art?**

When I went to study art at the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux Art (School of Fine Arts) in Algiers. That was in 1984.

**What jobs did you do before becoming a serious artist?**

Before I studied art, I had some preliminary training in architecture. I worked for two years as a technician in an architectural practice.

**Do you think people are born an artist or is it something you have to work at?**

To this question I cannot give an exact answer. Quite frankly, I do not know. What I can say is that everyone comes with many skills and talents into the world. In order to realise these talents, certain social conditions must be present, for example, freedom, education, culture, etc. If these conditions are not included, you have to work even harder at it.

**Do you have a favourite or most inspirational place when it comes to being inspired to work?**

I do not have a specific place. Constantly thoughts are running around my head and I find my studio the best place to record this creative thinking.

**You're a contemporary painter but have introduced photography into your latest exhibition, Inside Zenith. What are the benefits of mixing classical and contemporary methods?**

The painting "Inside Zenith" depicts an existing urban landscape I visited two years ago and which I recreated in my studio on the white of the canvas. The making of such a painting is a long and painstaking process, in which several different memories are interwoven in a structured composition. This was made possible by using the photos that I took during my stay in Dubai in 2012. Photography with its realistic views serves as a working basis and by using the photos I am able to "filter" my memories. My goal is to work with simple and reduced forms that can project us into a space of dialogue and engagement, where different perceptions can co-exist in an environment that involves constant change and movement.

**Your work often features abstracted architectural forms. Why do you focus on this particular subject?**

I would say that the aesthetic of these social buildings out of the 1960s and 1970s are telling a lot through their structures. Different cultural groups with several layers of memories who are passing them through the time gone by are the specific interest of me. Over the last ten years, I have painted urban landscapes, tower blocks, car parks, playgrounds, green spaces, all the elements that together make up the suburban space which we can see in every city. The suburbs (Dans-Cité, literally 'within the city') is a narrow space with a pictorial density that I reflect upon in the paintings. I feel there is a narrative density within the space that speaks to me and this is what I try to convey in my painting.

**What art do you most identify with?**

Despite the long history of art, painting can still surprise you. If one is aware as a painter of the significance of each brush stroke then this means to deal respectfully with the legacy of art history. I prefer the painters whose work shift between the combination of architecture and painting. Among them are Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich. And also the contribution of Islamic art including ornament, geometry and repetition are of great importance.

**You're now exhibiting in the UAE where art is still gaining momentum. How are people in the Middle East reacting to your work?**

I am happy to exhibit in a place where the art scene is not as saturated as in Europe. I hope to give a constructive contribution through my participation to the development of the art in this region as one of the first contemporary painters. So far, the reactions of the audience are positive. I hope in the future even more impetus is given to support the arts community through art institutions.

**Your method of practice for Inside Zenith involves working from photographs taken during your travels and meshing them with images from your memory to create a collage of different buildings and spaces. Do you always introduce personal experiences into your work? If so, why?**

This is what I always do. A picture can emerge only through physical and mental experience. This is the only way I can transfer the poetry of places into a visual language.

You can view Inside Zenith at Lawrie Shabibi till January 6. - [kelly@khaleejtimes.com](mailto:kelly@khaleejtimes.com)

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