

The aesthetics of human suffering

By Jimmy Dabbagh

BEIRUT: Art market vagaries being what they are, some onlookers interested in this region's cultural production became exposed to the work of Syrian artists after their country's revolution collapsed into civil war. That conflict has had a profound impact on the work of many Syrian artists, provoking questions of what came before. One response to such questions is to stage well-curated retrospective exhibitions of the country's veteran artists.

One such opportunity seems to present itself with "Creatures," a retrospective of work by Syrian painter Leila Nseir (b. 1941), her first at Mark Hachem Gallery. The show is comprised of Nseir's experiments with painting, drawing and lithography, executed in a variety of styles over her long career. These pieces constitute the artist's life's work, which has been preoccupied with the depictions of human suffering.

Having traveled throughout the region, while living most of her life in Syria, Nseir is no stranger to turbulent times. Traces of political strife, civil war, state repression and the tragedies these visit on people's lives are evident in her work.

Such is the case with the 80x 80cm oil "Al Watan" (homeland or nation), which visitors encounter upon entering the gallery. The left portion of the painting depicts a slew of women with resigned expressions on their faces. Tightly packed together, each nude figure is further confined within a colorful rectangle, resembling a coffin.

The right portion of the painting presents similarly frail and distorted female figures, enclosed within the same colorful confines. The faces of these figures are, by contrast, devoid of defining features or expression.

Although most figures in Nseir's work appear feminine, she insists that she is more concerned with the portrayal of suffering from a humanistic standpoint rather than a gender-specific one.

Each wall of the gallery samples Nseir experiments with various schools of figuration and occasional abstraction. Regrettably – at least for those interested in tracking these works within the artist's decades of development – this show's exhibit tags provide no dates for individual works – only a reminder that Nseir was born in 1941.

One wall of the show is hung with a series of pencil sketches of individual male and female figures, naturalistically rendered. The figures' gender differs but their anguish is shared.

"Combattants de Nabatieh" (fighters of Nabatieh), depicts a disheveled-looking Phalangist militiaman that the artist met in the south Lebanese town during the 1975-90 Civil War. Sitting with his AK-47 casually resting on his lap, his eyes suggest a

subject severely damaged and withdrawn.

In the sketch “Enfants” (children), 10 barefoot boys appear to dance awkwardly in a circle, their arms extended but not touching. The figures’ dance-like pose is evocative of the dabke (a popular folk dance common in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine), but their distressed expressions lend the scene an ironic and unnerving air.

Distinguishing itself from the rest of “Creatuers” is the realistic oil “Madame Al-Rahib,” whose title refers to the wife of the late Syrian novelist Hani Al-Rahib. Her handsome but melancholic visage is deeply creased, her expression apparently suspended between inexplicable but extreme emotions.

Elsewhere in the show, the monoprint “Les Vierges” (the virgins) veers toward expressionism in the artist’s application of tinges of blue, red, yellow and purple to deformed-looking female figures, rendering them bruised and battered. The figures in other works’ tortured features – misshapen silhouettes, contorted cheekbones, malformed scalps sprouting with horns – suggest they inhabit one of the inner circles of hell.

The work in “Creatures” speaks to human suffering in multiple languages and forms, but with a consistently brutal sincerity. Though it will provoke more questions than it answers about the evolution of the artist’s practice, the exhibition will likely provoke a visceral reaction, whether off-putting or captivating.

Leila Nseir’s “Creatures” is on display at Mark Hachem Gallery until April 2. For more information, please call 01-999-313.