



REAL VS *SURREAL*

JEFFAR KHALDI

Some of his works challenge, while others trigger compassion. Nonetheless, Jeffar Khaldi's trajectory, as **Myrna Ayad** finds, is bound by a sense of ambiguity and an air of nostalgia.

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efore Dubai dealer Isabelle van den Eynde founded her eponymous gallery in March 2011, she ran an art space – B21 Progressive Art Gallery – named after the warehouse’s alphanumeric plot number in the industrial district of Al-Quoz. Through it, she curated and staged shows for emerging Iranian artists, some of whom have since become stellar names on the Contemporary Middle Eastern art rota. Though now a defunct commercial gallery, B21 was (and still is) owned by Jeffar Khaldi, who acquired and refurbished the warehouse in 2005 for the purpose of exhibiting his own art through a public studio of sorts. He insists that this was not an act of vanity on his part, but rather a conversation-starter. “The idea was to promote art because it didn’t really exist here,” explains Khaldi, who worked with an interior design firm before founding his own in 2002, which he has also called B21. He initially wanted to call the warehouse Ground Zero – a sensitive play on words, but one which was intended to reflect the very nascent Dubai art scene. Van den Eynde’s running of the space allowed the Palestinian-born artist more time to focus on his work and art, and it also widened the remit of art shown in the emirate. In a sense, Khaldi can be classified as an early catalyst on the city’s art circuit. “It did occur to me then that it would be cool for Al-Quoz to become Dubai’s art hub, which it has done,” he says.

This was Dubai in the early 2000s – a city on a touristic and economic ascent, inhabited by an art-starved community of aficionados and with less than a handful of galleries showing Contemporary art – clichéd or hotel lobby art notwithstanding. Khaldi had arrived in the neighbouring emirate of Sharjah in the late 1990s after several years in Texas where he pursued a degree in interior architecture and design, worked as a decorative painter, graffiti artist, waiter and barman. During a stint at a restaurant, he was known as Clyde – it was the eatery’s only available nametag, though Khaldi is particular about the enunciation of his original name, pronounced Jayfer, which takes after a Omani king’s namesake in the Islamic era. “It’s not Jafar like the character in *The Lion King*,” he laughs. A fire in his Dallas studio, a robbery and a subsequent “powerful” nightmare led Khaldi to take his mother’s advice to relocate to Sharjah, where some of his relatives reside. It was, he says, “like stepping back in time” vis-à-vis life in Texas where Khaldi enjoyed “an underground art and music scene.”



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Opening spread:
Cockroaches in Disguise, 2010. Oil on canvas. 230 x 180 cm.

This page, below:
(Detail) *Waiting Room*, 2010. Oil on canvas. 210 x 265 cm.



MENTAL ETCHINGS

Though he was born in Beirut to Palestinian parents, Khaldi's move to Texas was a result of his father's fear for his son's safety during the escalating violence and increased threat of security for Palestinians in particular during the Lebanese Civil War. At 16, Khaldi was sent to live with relatives in Texas and would remain there for 15 years. "There was nothing to miss in Beirut when I left, except for my family. I saw hell – corpses, bombings, snipers, bomb shelters, demonstrations," he adds. "What was bad about it all was the hatred between people." One memory, however, stayed with Khaldi long enough to surface on a canvas in the late 1990s and then again in a 2010 diptych: the assassination of Palestinian writer and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) member, Ghasan Kanafani who was also a family friend and who was killed a mere 100 metres away from Khaldi. Kanafani and other political figures, including Golda Meir, comprise a series of paintings which Khaldi

had randomly submitted to the 1997 Sharjah Biennial. "It was simply a matter of hearing about the Biennial and applying with no real expectations," he explains. Khaldi ended up winning the Biennial's Grand Prize for the neoexpressionist works, and Kanafani reappeared 13 years later in the diptych *Last Cigarette*, in *Remove the Invisible Blindfold*, Khaldi's fourth solo at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde in 2011. The show felt like a retrospective of major episodes in Khaldi's life – biographical incidents which were either directly personally relevant or which had oblique political consequence. It was as though he regressed in time and singled out experiences which begged to be processed. The works in the show are even painted like memories – they seem blurred but are in focus, much in the same way that unforgettable memories remain etched in our minds.

Khaldi went as far back as his grandfather, illustrating him alongside Israeli military leader Moshe Dayan. Both men served in the same Ottoman

Below: (Detail) *Last Cigarette*. 2010. Oil and spray paint on canvas. Diptych. 230 x 180 cm.

Facing page: *Beirut Glamour*. 2010. Oil on canvas. 180 x 230 cm.



police force unit and are seen clad in its uniform. The diptych is tinged with obvious irony – while these men were bound together as officers of the same law pertaining to a foreign country, they were to oppose each other for the same land decades later. In *Last Cigarette*, the diptych's left hand panel features Japanese Red Army terrorist Kozo Okamoto (wife included) who, along with the PFLP, was responsible for the 1972 Lod Airport (now Ben Gurion International Airport) massacre in Israel. Kanafani, who is believed to have been involved in the attack's planning, smokes a cigarette on the right hand panel and both boards share the slain writer's blue Alfa Romeo, which was allegedly booby-trapped by the Mossad. Then there is *Cockroaches in Disguise*, a diptych featuring Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, whispering to Menachem Begin, founder of the Israeli Likud party. Both men have Mr Spock-like ears and on Sadat's collar, a cockroach – not a good sign by any standards. However, the fact that these leaders' ears are altered to look like those of an alien's allows us, as viewers, to not only consider Khaldi's opinion of them, but also re-examine our own. "They're not real," Khaldi says of Sadat and Begin, a comment which ties itself directly to the show's title: *Remove the Invisible Blindfold*, a call to action to reassess perceptions, and urgently too.

VARIED IMPRESSIONS

Khaldi is a storyteller through and through. He attributes this quality to his father, a man of multiple professions and one whose experiences, says his son, were not only copious in amount and uncanny in nature, but otherworldly too. Khaldi Senior also documented his tales in a book. A teacher in Qatar in the 1950s, the family patriarch eventually relocated to Lebanon and settled in Ain Al-Helweh, the country's largest Palestinian refugee camp in Sidon. "He managed to make something of himself to leave Ain Al-Helweh and live in the city," says Khaldi of his father. "He didn't believe we'd get Palestine back like most in the camp did." Still, weekly visits to resident family members in Ain Al-Helweh were made; it was a place, says Khaldi, which was starkly different from its current status. "It had an intimate feel to it, a certain charm and was not crowded with armed men like it is today," he recalls. "I loved going there and felt like I was around my own people." Often, no sooner would Khaldi and his nuclear family leave



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the camp, then they would be met by Beirut’s numerous blackouts and air raid sirens. They were trying, threatening times but the Lebanese peoples’ propensity for resilience would always kick in. “No matter how much shelling or how many bombs were detonated or how long the blackouts lasted, life always went on,” adds Khaldi. This sentiment is perhaps expressed in his 2010 piece, *Beirut Glamour*, which depicts the Lebanese capital’s famed corniche, lined with Washingtonians and bustling with people from all walks of life. The viewer’s eye rests on the exploding TWA aircraft above, and on the esplanade below, a singer decked in a theatrical outfit seemingly sings to passersby. Jerusalem

isn’t geographically or emotionally far either – look to the left of the painting.

Khaldi Senior, who passed away eight years ago, wanted for his son the legitimacy and security of a degree and career in accounting, computer science or architecture – all fields which Khaldi attempted to pursue at university but “failed at miserably”. It was almost blasphemy to suggest art as a career to his father and so Khaldi found a happy medium in interior architecture and design at the University of North Texas. It would prove to his advantage, since his classes and those of the painting department’s took place in the same building, where Khaldi befriended and “bonded” with the

art students. In addition to his own coursework, he would complete painting assignments – minus the academic credits and it was almost a triple degree which he earned in 1990. “I learnt through my artist friends and their lectures essentially,” he says, citing Picasso, Gauguin, Cintoretto, Velasquez, Guston, Shwitters and German neo expressionism as a major influences to this day.

REAL AND REEL

Curiously, Khaldi does not consider himself a political artist despite the supporting figures and symbolism evident in many of his works. “I wouldn’t say



I'm politically driven," he explains. "I just vent and I tell these peoples' stories." One narrative he has recently taken to telling was through *Throw Your Symbols on the Wall*, his last show at Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, in which he exhibited series of mixed media works on paper in a grid-like format, featuring images taken from news reels, YouTube and films. The pieces diffuse contradiction: some are absurd, others realistic; some mock, others authenticate; some are humorous, others sinister. Confusion is intended – in *Mad Rebels*, for example, stills from the Hollywood blockbuster *Mad Max* are juxtaposed against TV footage of the Libyan uprising. One stands perplexed before the 16 pieces, unable to classify them. "Well, they look like the *Mad Max* guys!" says Khaldi matter-of-factly. "There's no difference between the movie and the reality."

As far as his own stories are concerned, some of Khaldi's works portray a surrealist and whimsi-

cal imagination through their style and the allegories found within. Just as his pieces in *Remove the Invisible Blindfold* impress a dream-like characteristic, so too do works such as *Go Where*, *The Infinite and Beyond* and *Sushi Dreams* – the latter two among four works acquired by the Saatchi Collection. The same arbitrariness which led Khaldi to submit pieces to the Sharjah Biennial recurred in 2008, when he sent his catalogue to dealer Thierry Goldberg, who not only gave Khaldi a solo show at his New York space, but also facilitated the sale of the four works to Saatchi, which were exhibited in the group show *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* in 2009. Khaldi says the attention surrounding being acquired by a *collector extraordinaire* didn't faze him. "I think I'm lucky," he humbly admits. "Something is looking after me." 

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Facing page: (Detail) *Go Where*, 2008. Oil on canvas. 220 x 240 cm.

Above: *Predators*, 2011. Nine mixed media works on paper. 29.5 x 42 cm each.

All images courtesy Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai.