



Farhad Ahrania blends cardboard from the streets with khatam art. Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and Farhad Ahrania

Review: Artist Farhad Ahrania refuses to be boxed in by modern concepts with UAE exhibition

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The poem from which Farhad Ahrania's latest exhibition takes its title is a somewhat jarring reference when compared with its content.

Something For The Touts, The Nuns, The Grocery Clerks, And You – which is at Lawrie Shabibi in Dubai until March 2 – is also the title of a 1974 poem by Charles Bukowski. It is a lament on modernity in which, through rather brilliant non-rhyming verse, the poet muses on how we live in a time where wealth is often surrounded by extreme poverty, and how it can be possible to simultaneously have everything and yet nothing.

It seems an odd choice of exhibition title for an artist who is mostly concerned with the ancient art of khatam – a delicate form of inlay with its roots in pre-Islamic Iran.

Yet Ahrania says his interest is in the effect and influence of 20th century modernism, and so the poem's meaning and inherent message is relevant to his concerns as a contemporary artist.

Though he uses the ancient technique of khatam – which involves making geometric compositions from filaments of dyed wood, brass and ivory substitutes and slicing them to reveal a densely patterned cross section that is then encased in resin – the designs he uses are based on 20th Century paintings by artists such as El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich.

These are constructivist artists from Russia who believed that art served a function and was socially relevant.

"It is my way of acknowledging an entanglement or engagement that exists between Iran and Russia," says Ahrania.

"After all, we are neighbours and there is much shared history and cultural influences that can be seen in architecture, music, dance and many other aspects."

Furthermore, in this exhibition, his second in Dubai, Ahrania has also chosen to juxtapose the beautiful and finely crafted pieces of khatam art with a new series consisting of large pieces of cardboard he found on the streets of Iran, which he has decorated with an ornamental style of painting.

The combination is another unexpected turn to this quite complex body of work and one that demands explanation.

"For me [the cardboard pieces] have their own poetry and beauty, and they refer to acts of making and construction as well as another level of Iran's engagement with modernity," he says.

"There was a commitment to producing consumable goods in Iran from the early 20th century, and the battle to maintain a self-sufficient economy comes out of that. It also taps into a sense of national pride."

He has elevated the status of these discarded pieces of packaging for products made in Iran by painting them with a type of Persian illuminatory painting called Shamse – the kind you find in Holy Scriptures or manuscripts. "I applied this as an act of agitation," he says. "It brings a different way of considering the surfaces and, for me, there is a harmony there, too."

The historical links are also present here, as Ahrania is exploring the influence of Russian constructivism on advertising that originated in America in the 1940s and 1950s. The myriad references and ways of looking at this exhibition make it fascinating and well worth a visit.

• Something for the Touts, the Nuns, the Grocery Clerks and You is at www.lawrieshabibi.com until March 2

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