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Exploring the portrait's evolution



A gallery shot from "Face Value," an exhibition of portraits that doesn't restrict itself to "dignitaries and members of the aristocracy." Photo courtesy of Saleh Barakat Gallery

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Nadege Justiniani | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Abu Shehab stares at the crowd with his crossed eyes, half-opened mouth and dark hair separated by a symmetrical line down the middle of his head. The portrait of this Hamra panhandler, the work of Iraqi artist Serwan Baran, is among the pieces on show in "Face Value: Portraiture," the exhibition now up at Clemenceau's Saleh Barakat Gallery. Such a portrait "was unthinkable just a century ago," Barakat said.

"Portraits were saved for high dignitaries and members of the aristocracy," the gallerist added.

To the right of Baran's painting is the drawing of a small Syrian girl who lives in a refugee camp in Aarsal, a village near Lebanon's eastern border with Syria.

To its left is a rendering of a young maid, apparently of African heritage. She wears the dress, and re-enacts the pose, of the woman who modeled for Johannes Vermeer for his painting "Girl With a Pearl Earring."

The gallerist's opening night exhibition tour begins with historic genre portraits and political portraits from the first decade of the 20th century. In this spacious and sleek space – accessed via an imposing dark staircase – a hundred artworks have been hung by theme.

"Here you have self-portraits," Barakat explained, "and here the more political ones."

The 49-year-old art expert strolls from one painting to the other, stopping from time to time to remark upon a detail, before moving on.

One of the "political" pieces, from Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki's series of 16 portraits of what appear to be fighters, provoked questions among the visitors attending during the exhibition opening.

"A lot of people asked me if they were Daesh [ISIS] fighters," Barakat explained, "but they aren't!"

As the exhibition curator explains it, back in 2011 Baalbaki wanted to explore the idea of radicalness that followed the 2008 financial crisis and its consequences.

"This is the youth fighting and destroying the political system, as hackers would do," Barakat added. "I guess it's inspired by Anonymous and these kinds of activists."

All the pieces on show in "Face Value," whether rendered by Syrians, Iraqis or Lebanese, have been conceived and realized in Lebanon, which brings a certain unity to this exhibition. Visitors are appreciative.

"I think it's a beautiful and original idea" said Mira, who came with her sister for the first time.

"We don't often see exhibitions devoted to portraits only."

Alejandro, a Spanish communications adviser living between Madrid and Beirut, immediately recognized Abu Shehab from Baran's painting. "I often pass by Hamra Street and see him," he said.

"The portrait's title, 'I am a number like you,' means for me that the artist wanted to erase the difference between the one he represented and the one watching," he added.

Barakat confirmed the shift.

"Before, portrait painters would receive commissions and that would determine their work agenda," he noted. "Today it's different. They produce firstly because they are touched, and they want to speak about a specific theme."

"Face Value" is up at Saleh Barakat Gallery through Feb. 28. For more, see www.agialart.com.

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