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A ghoulish address to the patriarchy



"Only Child," oil on canvas, 2019, 90 x 152 cm.

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BEIRUT: "In Memory of Patriarchy," the latest exhibition by Syrian artist Rita Adib, takes a firm stance on fragile masculinity, explored through the artist's own experiences and early memories. Curated by Dima Mikhayel Matta, the show, up at 392rmeil393, gathers paintings, sketches, installations and sculptures of patriarchal figures and turns them into monstrous figures of ridicule.

"It's celebrating the death of patriarchy but it's also me killing patriarchy for myself. It's firstly a celebration of that fight," Adib told The Daily Star. "I've been living in Montreal for the last five years and that distance [from my upbringing in Syria] gave me some clarity to look back at what happened and what I lived through.

"I had a little space out of that very intense oppression and as I looked back in my memories I was opening those cans of worms," she added. "I couldn't separate anything from the larger, intertwined problem, so I used my personal life as a way to condense it."

The show is split into three themes the political, social and intimate. While the political section targets policies favoring men, the intimate section looks at the dynamics between men and women. The social section delves into perceptions of women and ways that men display their masculinity for society.

In the political section, an installation titled "Order" shows rows of cement gas mask filters, laid under the gaze of a topless woman whose face is covered by a gas mask, also with a concrete filter. The installation is intended to comment on the children being raised under Syria's military regime.

"I was looking back into my childhood and every day at school we would stand like little soldiers and repeat this routine," Adib said. "I recreated that scene with the authoritative figure looking over us, watching us and it was always a [male] figure and I wanted to show how suffocating that was, the feeling of being silenced."

Adib's paintings, sketches and sculptures all depict people as bulbous, monstrous, twisted figures the men reflecting the grotesque nature of patriarchy, the women's

inner unhappiness made visible.

One such painting is "Only Child," a sarcastic reinterpretation of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," showing a male child as the central figure surrounded by his disciple sisters, all painted as monsters.

"This is how I feel about male figures that have this monstrosity in them, even if it is a bit exaggerated," Adib said. "I was looking at historical references and the dominance of men in the art scene and other areas of life ... and this painting looks at the personal status laws in Syria.

"An 'only child' is a guy who doesn't have to do military service, because he has no brothers," she added. "He could have seven sisters but still be called an 'only child,' so when I thought about this I was like, 'My whole life, I did not exist for the law,' and compared it to 'The Last Supper.'"

The show swings between amusing satirical pieces and darker, blunt artworks. In the social section a pair of headpieces sit in contrast. "Crown" evokes the comic notion of a donkey following a carrot tied in front of its face on a stick, by showing a headband with a dangling mustache for men to blindly follow.

Adib says that "in Syria ... a mustache is a symbol of a man's dignity and the larger the mustache the more of a 'man' he is."

Placed next to it is a replica of a 16th-century torture device used to punish women who gossiped or challenged their husband. The bridle features a metal insert that would sit in the mouth and gag the woman, who would then be paraded through town on a lead to shame her. Tied to the end of Adib's bridle is a carrot, representing how women had to drag the burden of toxic masculinity.

"It's a good time to make these points," Adib said, referring to the popular protests in Lebanon that are now nearing the end of their second month. "I hope men coming to see this learn something."

While the show ultimately portrays men in an unflattering light, Adib isn't worried about how men will receive her artwork. "I didn't really think about how they would receive it, it's their problem. If they're receiving it sensitively, then it's just fragile masculinity, which is the point, and if they don't then that's great," she said. "The purpose of all this is to poke a bit and stir the pot."

"In Memory of Patriarchy" is up at 392rmeil393, Gemmayzeh, until Dec. 31.

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