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Hubert Fattal: Taking The Words Out Of The Painting

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By Tom Lewis

Special to Ya Libnan

Hubert Fattal's new show is a ten-year journey from the figurative to the decorative, that interprets the aesthetics of pattern, science and history in the liveliest terms.
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From the large windows of a former car showroom in Gemmayze, four glowing canvases weave their colorful presence into the humidity of the dark summer night outside.

A glimpse through the glass of Mar Mikhael's Kettaneh building reveals a canvas laden with large orange flowers, blooming through the sketchy letters of a disjointed alphabet while large purple petals wind their way through the luminescent blue background of another. Accented with streaks of ultraviolet paint, the four paintings bleed into the gloom of the gallery, drawing the eye to the compositions brooding in the shadows.

Hubert Fattal's new exhibition, Taking The Words Out Of The Painting, curated by Naila Kettaneh Kungik and Sandra Dagher, has been ten years in the making and it represents a decade of an evolving aesthetic for the Beirut-born artist and interior designer. Fattal's work toys with colour and pattern and explores order and chaos in a narrative that evolves backwards, from 2007 to the late 1990s.

The four paintings in the upper room represent Humbert's more recent work and reveal a reinvigorated interest in pattern; how its rhythms reveal elements of character, context and history, and an impression of innocence, in the colorful web it waves. Flowers are the vehicles that transport Fattal's preoccupation with pattern and form here. At first the four canvases suggest the hand of the interior designer at work; Spring Never Came evokes a fragment of flowery wallpaper, the diptych ordered through strong stripes of streaky color, but countered by the lively brushwork and the playful colouring of pink and red flower petals, while the title piece reveals an acute sympathy with colour and composition akin to the approach of designing a room.

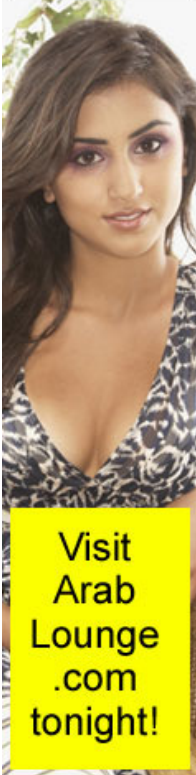
But Fattal's decorative canvases are far from frivolous; pattern is not a superficial subject here. The curve and flow of his petals and stems hark back to an older tradition of Islamic art, where the interconnecting elements are as crucial to the composition as the subjects themselves. At the heart of the large purple blooms in Taking The Red Out Of The Flag, small, metallic discs printed with the Arabic letter 'sah' are the pivot from which the luminous petals flourish; that is, the sustaining influence that allows the whole to be. Similarly Taking The Words Out Of The Painting interlocks the outward-pushing blooms with the letters of a sketchy, disjointed alphabet. This appears as some sort of code; a complex equation of letters and forms that hint at, in broad terms, the structures, and constraints, of evolution and organic development.

The artist plays with geometry and the connecting elements of a composition, the bedrock of Islamic art and architecture, through loosening the geometry and allowing its residue to flow freely across the picture plane. The influence of numerical order, clear in the Sombre Clarte diptych in which a black, jolting constellation of sorts hovers above the botanical



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creations below, is picked up in the second half of the exhibition.

The lower rooms contain Fattal's No Sex Please We're Lebanese series of paintings, the first time they have been shown in public together. From the start, the title evokes an identity crisis on two fronts, and the content of the paintings does little to soothe the tumult the title instigates.

On one hand, No Sex Please... suggests a pretense of decorum and formality, that human truths can only be allowed to simmer beneath the surface, rather than spoken of in public. The second front is the appropriation of a statement of another culture. Replacing the usual 'British' with 'Lebanese' reveals an inability to embrace local characteristics, the elements that sustain and color a given society. 'Geese latch onto the first things they see when they hatch' one of Fattal's subjects says, revealing an inherent need to attach to something for the sole purpose of security, belying a the fear of loneliness and isolation that colours much of human interaction.

There is plenty at play in these huge canvases; they at once resemble bright posters and the stream of thought of a pictorial diary. The profusion of words in these paintings suggest the significance of the title; words carry much of the burden of expressing what his paintings want to say in these earlier works, whereas patterns and forms are pretty much allowed to speak for themselves in the upper room.

A lone, silhouetted figure hovers in the centre of an explosion of splaying, concentric colored stripes in My Little Death Hole, a statement painted in naïve script in the lower section of the canvas, surrounded by playful pink and turquoise spots. Fattal creates a conflict between creation and death here, reminiscent, in theme, of the sex-doll sculptures of British artists the Chapman Brothers.

Fattal's playful relationship with science is clear in To Always Take More, Ask and A Queer Story, where the upper, introductory segments of each canvas suggests a process of construction and creation. Both resemble a pictorial demonstrative instruction in a science textbook; a clear, rectangular container with an amoebic form sprouting from it, surrounded by billowing clouds sits at the top of the former, and a bright white sun is delicately connected to a tiny red orb by a wavering whiter line at the head of the latter. Both are executed in cold blues and with simple, understated forms, suggesting a fragile inversion and manipulation of the creative process, and of creation itself.

The culmination of this is clearest in the small, untitled canvas in a far corner of the gallery. A lone, near-skeletal figure rests on his knees, in what resembles women's underwear, looks outwards, in an expression that disconcerts in its frantic, focus-less glare. An empty half-constructed tower-block soars behind him, reminiscent of much of the Lebanese skyline and Marwan Rechmaoui's sculptural interpretations of it.

Fattal is a master of composition and colour; his paintings evoke the compartmentalization of a comic book and the bright, exuberant colors weave a narrative of hues that leads the eyes through the composition. But the bright, vibrant hues are countered by an underlying sadness, expressed in words, silhouettes and other forms, in the interlocking subjects the artist creates.

The walk backwards through ten years of Hubert Fattal's artistic output is engaging in the veracity of its colourful aesthetic, but ultimately disconcerting in the conflicts it creates, and themes and subjects it articulates.

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