

Hadi Hazavei: 'Art doesn't have a border'

The artist discusses freedom, growing up with cows and responsibilities that limit art

Tara Aghdashloo for the Tehran Bureau

Friday 14 February 2014 04.39 EST

An exhibition of 49 works by Hadi Hazavei at New York City's Shirin Gallery shows the artist's material range and conceptual progression. An array of colours, lines, and layers come together in his older series, while his fingertips and palms have left their imprints amid the chaotic aesthetics of his more recent pieces. One wall is filled with minimalist geometric sketches reminiscent of glassworks from his Iranian homeland.

Hazavei's oeuvre revolves around the duality of crude organisms and formal abstractions. This interplay is evident more confidently than ever in his new brick sculptures, a series both primal and prim. The bricks - some of them from around his current home in New Jersey - seem to hover, dancing in different directions. Some, around 150 years old, appear on the verge of crumbling, highlighting the artist's fascination with the tension between organic and inorganic processes. He describes them as self-portraits.

TA: So tell me about this exhibition and how the works were chosen.

HH: Some of the works you see in this exhibition are from 1982, but most are from 2005 onwards. The brick works are from 2011 and 2012.

TA: Where did these bricks come from?

HH: Historically brick was the most fundamental unit in Iranian and Middle Eastern architecture and buildings. At some point clay was heated and made into bricks. As early as the time of the Achaemenian dynasty, they used bricks that were 30cm or 50cm thick. These were glazed, had 3D designs on them, with abstract natural figures; you can see examples of this in Persepolis - such as [the carvings of] soldiers, which are a masterpiece in colour and execution ...

I wanted to get to the foundation of it. Like how the foundation of the rug is the knot, bricks are architecture's foundation.

TA: Have you had a deep interest in and attraction to architecture?

HH: Always. You know art doesn't have a border. Painting, architecture, music, poetry, literature, and visual arts in general ... they are all summarised in one concept and that is the spiritual expression of people, articulated through different forms and mediums. Yet architecture has an additional function, which is that we live in it. It's a space that we try to be happy yet also physically active in.

I took the purpose of the brick from that simple foundation of buildings and changed it to my own artistic expression. When I look at a brick, it is sitting there, all dignified, polite and proper, like

how our parents always ask us to be! And I hate all these words ... Some suggest the same words to describe works of art. They want art to follow certain national traditions or to be “honest.” These are stupid responsibilities that limit art.

TA: So how do you go against that in your work?

HH: When I bring the bricks to my studio and put them next to another, the visual narrative begins. They become alive. They gain a character, a human or divine identity. Just like how Giacometti carved and carved and kept going until he revealed a naked body, immersed in the misfortunes of life, alone and ill-fated. I discover the skeleton of a building, or a minaret, or skyscraper, standing with no other purpose than to stand.

Similarly, art has no responsibility or purpose [other] than to stand. Whoever says that art has a responsibility to do good is insulting art. Art is free and the artist is free.

TA: And I can see this freedom in your works. They're uninhibited; there's a sense of disobedience in them. Yet there is still a semblance of order. It's a duality present in all your works. Do you think your works have become more uninhibited over time?

HH: That's exactly right! In my day-to-day life, when I drive for example, I can't be disobedient. And disobedience means freedom, means nothing holding you back. That's what I'm moving towards - absolute freedom. The freedom to express each moment with the movement of my hands and fingers through the pigments I make.

People's spiritual nature is disobedience. We want to be free. Be free to write poems, dance, scream, sing. The more freedom is restricted, the more we are inclined towards pure geometric art. When visual arts are limited, for whatever reason, be it religious or other, formalist art becomes predominant.

TA: Where did you grow up and how did it nurture your work or influence the viewpoints you're describing?

HH: The stables! [He laughs.] In there, you have four walls and then a bunch of useful animals. The stable has a geometric shape and the animals in it are organic. Today we don't have that organic life. I remember in Arak [capital of Markazi province in central Iran] there was no milk, so families had to own a cow. Each morning, my classmates and I would take our cows to the shepherd in the city square and he'd return them at sunset. Within this reality, so many concepts would arise for us kids.

TA: Such as what?

HH: We used to paint them, for example. And the organic life of my childhood existed 3,000 years ago. Then all of a sudden, imagine that I'm transported here, sitting with you in a gallery in New York chatting. I'm lucky that this massive jump didn't make me go crazy or to crumble like a brick! If you put a cold glass in hot water it'll break. Yet these are the experiences that shaped me.

TA: Is this type of 'organic' and self-sufficient life that you lived as a young boy why you continue to make your own pigments?

HH: It's true. They're from a few plant essentials and substances that I've mixed and distilled.

TA: Where did you learn that?

HH: From my uncle, Hassan Farid, who was a poet and a calligraphist; his main profession was mathematics. The material is great. It takes a few seconds to dry but once it does, it lasts a very long time.

TA: These works seem to be pages from your own life and experiences as a kid in dusty Arak for an audience in Chelsea.

HH: I've actually spent most of my life outside of Iran. I experienced the 1960s and '70s in the US where all types of freedoms, of race, sexuality and women's rights, were spreading. You couldn't just sit there and be polite and proper. Of course that affected me. But my intuition comes from the streets of Arak. I'm from a generation that saw the Second World War. I saw the shah leave and be replaced by the Islamic republic. People moved to apartments, computers were invented. So much has happened! You can't even find a movie this exciting.

The exhibition runs until 27 February at New York's Shirin Gallery

Topics

Iran Alberto Giacometti Exhibitions Art

Save for later Article saved

Reuse this content