

Through the

A unique study of how the light, colour and subject of the UAE have influenced French artists living here



(Clockwise from left) French artists Critch, Karine Roche, Benedicte Gimonnet and Virginie Troit

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Karine de Labouchere has been living in the UAE for the past seven years now and she loves it here. As a passionate art collector, she is watching with a great deal of interest the increasingly transforming art scene of Abu Dhabi. One day, Karine wondered how her fellow compatriot artists converted their muse to the new surroundings, climate and moods. So one day, Karine went to the French Embassy in Abu Dhabi and to the Ministry of Culture and Youth, and proposed an art exhibition about "UAE through the Eyes of French Artists".

"I wanted to show how these artists' work has changed since they came to live in the Emirates, how light, colour, subject influenced them," she said.

"The ministry and the embassy liked the idea, so two-and-a-half months ago I started to put together the exhibition, meeting the six French artists, curating their work."

"It wasn't easy, the time was very short, but we made it."

Indeed, all five painters and one photographer put not just thought, but full heart too into this project, and it shows.

Bénédicte Gimonnet spent 10 years in London, studying, working and breathing art. When she moved to Abu Dhabi in 2009 she was hit by the warm

and shiny sky. "All of a sudden, from grey to fantastic sun! I was amazed by the light!" she exclaimed.

Ever since her arrival, Bénédicte immersed herself in absorbing both the eternal summer and the Arabic culture, so it came natural to present for this exhibition a body of work on these lines, entitled "Shams" (Arabic for "sun").

"I wanted to celebrate the sun and Arabic culture in abstract, inner landscape, so I decided to use symbols like the circle, which is the sun, but also curves reminiscent of sand dunes, of Arabic calligraphy, of Oriental dancing."

Painted on canvas, metal, linen and even wood, the deep orange, golden, red or pale yellow "suns" are delicately laced with lines of poetry, song verse or other writings about the sun.

"They are secret messages, some in Arabic, some in French," smiled Bénédicte.

Chritch, who made up her name inspired by her Armenian-Egyptian/French belonging, has a completely different approach to painting. She never sketches, never draws, never plans. Instead, she takes a journey on her canvas.

"I begin by putting on some music in my studio. Then I start to put on some forms on the canvas, whatever comes to mind in that moment," explained Chritch.

"These forms suggest other forms and eventually the painting becomes

an abstract. At this point I study it and I find the story within and give it a title."

This is how "Wonderland", her main double canvas piece in the exhibition, came about. Starting with the construction aspect, small cubes in the centre, Chritch went on to paint the story of the UAE, both past and present. On one side, there are the modern times and on the other, the country's heritage. A young face representing the youth, is looking towards the "past", expressing the need of keeping one's cultural inheritance. Musical notes are dotted everywhere meaning that we might be in a crowded urban location, but it is not a noisy, but rather a harmonious one.

"This is what the UAE is for me: you can imagine, you can dream, you can even make your dreams come true. It is a wonderland. And this is my conclusion after eight years of living here," said Chritch.

Like everybody else in this exhibition, Karine Roche's works have been exhibited in France and elsewhere, the UAE included, and, at some point, she even made postcards for the UNESCO. What really touches Karine's artistic soul, are flowers and architecture.

Standing apart from her other artworks is a heavily "embroidered" canvas with oil colours of flowers, fabrics and beads, all beautifully connected.

"I took pictures of Abu Dhabi, placed them on the canvas and painted what I

French eye of art



with their work at the exhibition at Cultural Centre, Abu Dhabi. — KT photos by Shoaib Anwer

saw," explained Karine, pointing at her floral painting that has a feel of a building under flowers.

Back in France, she used to study urbanisation before finding fine arts her true calling. The fascination the geometry of architecture remained, though, defining her work.

"When I arrived in Abu Dhabi a year ago, I was amazed by all its flowers, shrubs and trees. We are in the desert, but Abu Dhabi is a garden. It's incredible," thought Karine.

Just as impressive as the flowers were towers — dense, colourful, modern or futuristic, shading delicate looking, small mosques — and this is what inspires much of her paintings.

"They are watercolour collages. Everything looks diffused because in a city everything is crowded, busy, and sometimes we lose perception, focus."

Isabelle Riou-Teisseire is passionate about details, contrasts, volumes; she is in love with the technical side of painting, with the preparations and the process of it.

"For this painting of cushions here I spent time with all my sofa cushions, arranging and re-arranging them until the composition looked perfect," she explained.

"For animals and faces, like this painting of camels here, I use photographs. I went to a camel farm at Al Hayer, near Swaihan, and took individual photos of the camels' faces — I loved them, they were so cute!"

"Back in my studio, I placed each photo in front of me and painted the camels together."

For Isabelle, who has now been living in the UAE for 11 years, painting is about the education of the eye, training it to see and transmit all details, lines, shapes and dots, so the ultimate challenge as the human face.

"A friend of mine, a military man who was in Afghanistan, gave me a photo of an old Afghani man. His facial expressions were so rich, so natural, I loved it, so I decided to paint it."

"It was something very new for me and technically challenging. Before I was very afraid of portraits; you have to be very experienced to do portraits."

If you expect snapshots of Abu Dhabi Cornich in Virginie Troit's artworks, you are in for a great surprise, as they are nowhere to be found. Her art photography, somewhere between conceptual and abstract, is well thought, perfectly composed images of night-lights in the two cities — Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

"When I was asked how do I see the UAE I thought of the desert, my neighbourhood, but what I see in the night is unique," she said.

So Virginie went out at night with her camera and her tripod and photographed the waterfront of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the metro, the boats, the cars, the buildings, all exposed slowly so that the lights became long colourful lines and everything else blurred

into darkness, making the photograph look like a sketch.

"You can tell, though, the photos of Abu Dhabi from the ones of Dubai. The movement in Dubai is quick, intense, while in Abu Dhabi is smoother, homogenous, a Zen ambience."

"This photograph here, called 'Steel Falcon', is of Burj Khalifa. I kept wondering how I could capture such a tall, iconic building, and I decided to close my eyes and feel it. What I felt was being so high that I want to touch the sky by my hand, that I want to just fly, be like an eagle."

The result was a spiral of lights, fast moving, blurred lines of lights, almost like a whirlwind taking you higher into the sky.

"If you look close, there is a velvet texture, like a bird's feather, and that is why I call it 'Steel Falcon'," explained Virginie.

Failing to come across his favourite aesthetic in any of the art galleries around him, Benoit Rondard took the brush himself in 2006 and began painting impulsively. A highly distorted world seen through a peephole, the black and white Emirati fashion barely suggested in human form lines, shaped out of the figurative into abstract concepts are the fine art ideas that Benoit finds worthy of his canvases!

The exhibition will go on until May 25 at the Ministry of Culture Centre (next to National Theatre) in Abu Dhabi. Entry is free. — silvia@khaleejtimes.com