

A Blaze of Colours

By Karina Lazarraga

Perryhan El-Ashmawi's work captivates with playful imagery, enchanting abstractions and brightly coloured animated portraits.

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Perryhan El-Ashmawi

Photo by:
Hasan Al Khunaizi

Speaking to Egyptian artist Perryhan El-Ashmawi, you'll think, wow, this lady is something - so cheerful and bubbling with energy. A quick look at her art work and it's obvious that

her creations reflect her lively personality.

Bahrain-born 'Perry' as she likes to be called, whose family have lived here for 25 years, grew up surrounded with art. Her life as an artist would be carved out early, and from the age of six, she'd watch her grandmother, herself an artist, paint endlessly.

"She is my main inspiration and I would always watch her paint and learn from her. She and my mother noticed my talent at a young age. They both continued to motivate me to practice and pursue art," says Perry.

Her decision to become a visual artist became clearer when she was ten years old, after she submitted an artwork for a children's art competition. "I remember looking at my drawing with a huge smile on my face, as I felt my piece to be the strongest amongst the other drawings. I still believe that night to be one of my proudest moments," she recalls.

Considering her early artistic influences, it is perhaps not surprising that Perry formally trained in art and spent the last five years studying in Canada, at Concordia University in Montreal, where she obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts, majoring in Studio Arts in December of last year. She also took part in an exchange art course in Italy in 2007.

To further improve her work, Perry also finds time to research the creations of other contemporary artists, visit art exhibitions, and looking into a variety of art sources such as graphic designs, graffiti, illustrated posters, and even music. "I choose not to limit my source of creativity," she remarks.

Her detailed and decorous creations display exotic images. She mainly uses oil paints on canvas, preferring its texture, but also integrates spray paint and stencilling techniques. "Oil paints are considered a rich and traditional medium, and I combine it with spray painting to create a link between the urban and traditional influences," she explains.

Explaining the style she uses in her pieces, Perry says that her work "surrounds a postmodern approach by placing my subjects within an intensely coloured and intricately ornamented surface. I apply an unusually wide range of sources from art of the past and urban society, combining popular culture and



high art. Graphic illustrations, music album covers, and graffiti are a few urban inspirations that I incorporate into the traditional form and production of art."

Perry has earlier been commissioned by a lawyer in Montreal, who asked her to paint a reproduction of a Renoir masterpiece. "It was one of the most difficult commissioned works I produced. It took me about a month and a half to do, but it was worth it and I was thankful to see that he was happy with it."

If she had her wish and paint any celebrity in the world - who would it be?

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"Oprah Winfrey. I feel she would be very generous when it comes to price!" came her quick reply. With a more serious tone, "my ultimate goal, like any other artist, is to gain international recognition and address a global audience."

How does she feel when people compliment her work? "Receiving positive feedback from friends, family, and teachers is always truly appreciated, because it reassures me that my art is worth pursuing. To me, art keeps my imagination flowing and strengthens the mind. For that reason, I believe that the most essential quality of my identity is that I am an artist. Unfortunately, I don't handle criticism too well; I'm sometimes a little

sensitive towards people's comments."

You'll notice that some of Perry's works bear hints of playful imagery; her take on the four famous members of the Beatles is an example.

The surprise in her creations is the series of large-scale abstractions, brightly coloured and animated paintings that were recently on exhibit during the Elham Arts Festival last month.

One's appreciation of Perry's paintings is enriched all the more by her portraits of friends and family - personal creations

of disarming intimacy. She explains that "rather than aim only to portray the likeness and physical aspects of my subject, I present the 'self' within an intensely coloured and intricately ornamented surface. My art takes on a psychedelic perspective, inspired by insights derived from our urban culture. The use of vibrant colours and complex patterns leaves viewers with nothing but a beautifully rendered image. They are treated as a commercialised stereotype - an 'eye candy' that's aesthetically pleasing to the viewer."

Does she paint everyday? She says she tries to. "Art takes a great deal of time and patience. The best part about creating art is how easily you could lose track of time, because of how focused and involved you become in producing something beautiful. A problem I find with

many artists, including myself, is that sometimes we produce an art piece that doesn't quite turn out the way we expect, even after long hours of careful planning. It's a situation that always leaves me frustrated and very disappointed," expressed Perry.

We ask her about her opinion on Bahrain's art scene. "It's slowly growing with the aim of exposing people to art. It's no comparison yet to the Dubai or Abu Dhabi scene, but we're surely getting there one step at a time - with galleries like Albareh Gallery and Al Riwaq Art Space, art groups like Elham, and a variety of events under the patronage of Shaikha Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa."

Looking at the painting 'xxxx', it becomes clear that Perry powerfully makes a stab at self-expression: "I want to represent how great art often emerges when cultures cross boundaries. For me, the artistic style I developed reflects both Arabic and Western tendencies. I believe segregation and isolation only limits your creativity. A person needs to go beyond their comfort zone and open their eyes, in order to explore and learn new ideas."

Whether or not Perry's artistry rises to an international level of stardom as she envisions, she certainly has an artistic flamboyance that surely, is more than enough for Oprah to take notice? **SHOUT**

Contact the artist at
Tel. +973 3944 1082
or email: perryhan@perryhanart.com
or visit her website:
www.perryhanart.com

