

A brilliant canvas of colors

For Iranian artist Mohseni Kermanshahi, art is 'a spiritual journey of finding myself'

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Mohseni Kermanshahi's compositions are so real that one can almost feel the texture of the beads and hear the tinkling of the silver chains in his latest works Image Credit: Supplied

Mohseni Kermanshahi's beautiful paintings are a treat for the eyes. And his simple themes, refreshingly devoid of political undertones, provide a respite from the complexity of our times.

The Tehran-based artist is well known for his stunning landscapes of the Iranian countryside.

He briefly lived in the UAE and has also captured the beauty of the local scenery in his paintings of the abras on the creek, the traditional architecture and the desert. But in his latest work the artist has explored a new subject.

Titled Beads, Stones and Necklaces, the series features still life paintings in oil and acrylic of traditional Arabian jewelry depicted in the artist's classical realistic style.

Kermanshahi became interested in this subject six years ago when he traveled to Muscat while living in the UAE. He was enchanted by the strings of colorful beads and precious stones and the traditional Omani silver ornaments that he saw in the old souks there. This led him to also visit jewelry shops in the souks of Dubai, Sharjah and Isfahan.

He spent hours in these shops taking photographs, making sketches, observing the shopkeepers and buyers and soaking in the atmosphere of the souks. He recently went back to those sketches and his memories of the bustling souks to begin working on this series.

The result is a set of paintings that is as dazzling as the jewelry itself. The artist has captured every minute detail — the myriad shapes of the beads, the vibrant shades of turquoise, coral and other stones, the sparkle of the silver as it catches the light, the intricate carving on the pendants, the movement of the colorful tassels and even the delicate knots at the ends of the strings.

His compositions are so real that you can literally feel the texture of the beads, hear the tinkling of the silver chains, sense the explosion of colors in the shops and experience the ambiance of the souks in these canvases.

Different textures

Explaining his choice of subject, the artist says, "I loved the different textures, colors and forms of the beads and stones and I could sense a rhythm in the way they were displayed on the walls of the shops. But what I found even more interesting was to observe how the jewelry that people select expresses their attitudes, their personalities, their feelings and their aspirations. These ornaments are important and are so carefully chosen because they adorn the most important areas of a woman's body such as the face and the neck. Through my paintings, I wanted to convey the beauty and the significance of these pieces and the emotions associated with them. But at the same time, my compositions also reflect my own emotions. They capture the soul of the traditional souks and convey my feelings when I was in that particular space."

Kermanshahi's mastery of composition and technique is all the more impressive because he has no formal training in art. His journey as an artist has been long and difficult.

He was born in 1960 in a poor nomadic family in Zohab, near Kermanshah in west Iran. He was sent to the village school, but soon dropped out because he used to spend all his time drawing and painting.

His passion for art was such that he worked with whatever materials he could find and often drew with charcoal on rocks. Two years in the army brought some discipline into his life and he later got a job as an art instructor with the Kermanshah office of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

A trip to Tehran, where he visited many galleries and met several artists, opened his eyes to a whole new world and to his own shortcomings as an artist.

He had a burning desire to get some training in art but could not afford to do so. A close friend from the village understood his passion and sold his motorbike to raise the money for Kermanshahi to live and train in Tehran.

The artist took three months' leave from his job to apprentice with contemporary master Rahim Navesi. That was the turning point in his life, when he realized that all he wanted to do was to be an artist. And he never went back to work.

"For me art is a spiritual journey of finding myself. As a child I did not know what it meant to me, but like a mystic I followed my heart and a door opened and I realized that this is where everything I want is and nowhere else. Art is my life and I feel alive only when I am in my studio with a brush in my hand. If it was physically possible, I would paint all day without stopping to eat or sleep. And I never accept commissions because I cannot paint according to other people's wishes. My work is an expression of my thoughts and feelings and I have to be true to myself in my art," he says.

Kermanshahi is now a well known artist and has won awards such as the Golden Brush Prize at the Biannual exhibition at Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art. The school drop-out is now the author of several books on painting and his work has been commemorated through various publications. He has also exhibited his work abroad. But unlike many of his compatriots, he does not like to mix politics with his art.

"I have been through many ups and downs in life. My experiences and the people I have met as I moved from my village to a town and then a city have shaped my thoughts and ideology. And these do reflect in my work. But I believe that as an artist I should do what I do best and contribute positively to my society by producing good work and leaving a legacy," he says

Kermanshahi aims to transmit the beauty he sees. "When I paint landscapes, I hope people can hear the sound of the birds, smell the flowers and feel the beauty of nature through my paintings.

"In this series I have tried to make the jewelry come alive as it does when it is worn by a woman. And I hope people enjoy seeing these paintings as much as I enjoyed creating them and that they may find things in them that I did not see," he says.

Jyoti Kalsi is a UAE-based arts enthusiast.