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The mighty Rtoosh

Latifa College at Zayed University have taken over the Meem Gallery this week with a multimedia faculty/student exhibition. *Arsalan Mohammad* speaks to co-curator and participating artist, Assistant Professor of Art & Design, **Janet Bellotto**.

It's that time of year again, when art schools across the region get busy staging public exhibitions to show off what staff and students have been beavering away on all year. As ever, one of the highlights of the season comes from the Latifa College, the art school at Zayed University. If you caught their show, *Perceptions* at The Third Line last June, you'll remember the exceptional quality and resonance of the work on display – and *Rtoosh*, which launched this week at the Meem Gallery, is just as inventive and entertaining. Here we get a mixture of work, from the internationally-acclaimed staff faculty, balanced with some intriguing and adventurous pieces by the college's students. Curated by Lateefa Maktoum and Janet Bellotto, *Rtoosh* is a rich and diverse blend of new ideas and innovative strategies. Italian/Canadian Janet Bellotto, an artist, professor and curator, who recently arrived in the UAE, gives *Time Out* the lowdown on the show.

How did you and Lateefa Maktoum go about preparing 'Rtoosh'? Did you commission pieces specifically for it, or was it more a case of selecting completed works and shaping them into a whole?

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The exhibition came about when Lateefa was researching gallery spaces in Dubai. The exhibition at Meem was in one sense a shotgun approach. I basically encouraged faculty members who wanted to participate in an exhibition, to send work they would like to exhibit. It was also important to show some student work, to give a glimpse of what a few students are producing at Latifa College and Zayed University Dubai Campus. From there, a selection was made and the process started. But sometimes things don't really come together until you see the actual work in the space. In the future, I would love to commission works for this kind of exhibition, or create more of a 'call for submissions' – kind of what Lateefa has done for her [upcoming] show. I think this is what Dubai needs, not just bringing consultants from the outside and developing an exhibition, or implanting an exhibition. Between the multiplicity of talent of expats and the growing interest of young nationals, it is exciting at the potential of what can happen here.

Where did the theme of the show 'Rtoosh' (strokes) come from?

At times it's difficult to find the right title to capture the essence of a show, particularly when the work isn't commissioned for a particular theme. *Rtoosh*, in Arabic, refers to the final brush strokes put on a painting, or the refining strokes and the refined touches of a painting, before the *vermissage* – a term I love to use – before a painting is finished. The faculties' artwork in the show are all very different and really reflects the various artistic streams that professionally everyone is developing. But all these 'fine strokes' come together to make a whole – ultimately the fine strokes maintain what art is. Art is, or can be about, an exchange of ideas, a platform for expression and exchange of ideas, that always changes and develops, that is always in flux.

Could you give me a few words on each of the participants?

Karen Oremus creates an interesting body of prints – her artwork explores the unpredictability and fragility of life from both a universal and personal perspective. Todd DeVriese, the Art and Design Chair of Zayed University, has created a series of map collages – he's restructured maps, some based on mythical stories, through the use of collage. Julie Lugosi, also Canadian, is an Adjunct Professor at Zayed University teaching Interior Design and has worked on some design projects in the UAE. She comes from an architectural background. Colleen Quigley lived in Japan for many years and worked in sculpture and painting, but mainly continues to work in painting. Her images are intense and filmic – she has been influenced by Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns and Japanese Manga, as well as artists like Francis Bacon. Jennifer Theokary is an emerging jewellery designer, whose work is designed on the basis of the mechanism of embrace, how two parts make a whole, and one needs the other in order to function. Thomas Tucker is Assistant Professor of Motion Graphics, and has been working on this wonderful series of intricate images while using bioptic/microscopic glasses. Russell Hamilton, Assistant Professor in Abu Dhabi, creates some very interesting installations and sculptures that reflect on his relationship to his father, and also to Islamic life.

Did you feel the finished assembly of pieces lived up to your original idea for the show – do you feel there's a synergy of sorts between them?

There's definitely a synergy, and that comes from the work itself. The positioning of the work in the gallery also helps to create a dialogue between all the pieces. I always try to think about how the viewer will relate to the work, walking through the exhibition. It has to be like a slow rollercoaster, or maybe like a tango – quick, quick slow – that makes you stop and look, maybe look back, but doesn't overburden you with too much information. I think this exhibition has a good balance and diversity of work, for different tastes.

Your own submissions are very mysterious and still.

Thank you. This series, *Mira Mare* – mare, meaning sea, mira in Spanish is look – was developed last year for an exhibition entitled *Dormant*. It's funny you should say 'very still', because I do inspire to try to capture a moment in time, an in-between space or state, like a dreamscape, but something captured like a film still. I always use the film, *The Wizard Of Oz* to describe my work model, that instance of factual and dreamed encounters to represent the duality of lived experience. Most of my work is influenced by water, and the images or sculptures I produce reflect this through the medium, so that it is fluid and aqueous. I think of water, the sea, the ocean as that place that connects us all. We are moved by it – whether emotionally or for travel and trade. But water is translucent, waves flow into each other, creating their own fluidity, it makes up most of our body; water cleanses, washes away, it can be calm or ferocious, and it transcends boundaries and flows across borders. Just to give you background of the image, the woman is standing on the terrace of Maximilian's castle in Miramare, near Trieste, Italy, looking out onto a watery landscape. The water is overwhelming, the scene may be within the depths of the water, but there is a calmness, a looking-into, to see what may be revealed within this hidden place. I'm inspired by nature, especially looking at 17th century approaches to nature. Ultimately the images are both in fluid motion and a moment petrified.

Do you feel that there is enough provision for art education and exhibition in the UAE at the moment? Coming from Canada, what has struck you about Dubai's art scene?

The UAE is relatively young, and as we witness the rapid physical transition occurring in the Emirates, we also see the development of education. There is never enough provision, anywhere, for art education or art exhibitions. Education is always growing and developing, and truly we can always use more, and that goes across the board for education. However, it is extremely important to provide an outlet where interactions can occur for students to engage with the community at large and can help to provide the potential for a myriad of ideas and creativity to arise. For example, this exhibition at Meem, as well as galleries such as The Third Line, XVA, are succeeding in fostering this. We are living in a place whose history began less than 40 years ago, so it is expected that the art scene will be very young. I do believe that it will take some time for the art scene to grow significantly, and it needs some grass roots initiatives happening. You can't force art and culture to just become something – it takes time to develop and shouldn't or can't be something that is just designed and tomorrow constructed. I was surprised though how quickly things can happen. Since I moved to Dubai a lot has been happening, the fairs, new galleries, but a lot of it is heavily market driven.

Rtoosh is at Meem Gallery until May 24

By Arsalan Mohammad, May 2007

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