

Art on 56th

Artist Wissam Melhem free the lines, free the colors.

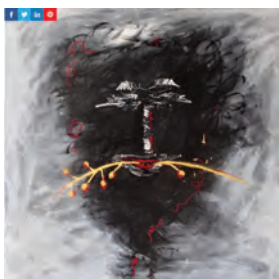


Article by: Maie El-Hage

In the quiet elegance of his Belle Vue apartment, Wissam Melhem opens up about his artistic journey. Recounting his early illustrations, this designer-turned-artist discusses how his work has always been about social and cultural commentary. Now at his artistic peak, Melhem is enjoying the expressiveness and artistic freedoms of his action-painting on large canvases. The gestural freedoms he enjoys are not without design; his work can be dubbed as "observational experimentation" or "improvisation," as he creates elegant sketches before translating them onto the larger canvases. In this studio visit, Wissam shares the evolution of his artistic process.



Wissam began exploring the themes of memes and political commentary in art in mid-2018 with his own series of "enta mesh sarsour." Starting out with 45 x 45cm illustrations, he held his first exhibition at Be Happy at Saifi, a store in the heart of Beirut. The shift to create art objects from these illustrations was Wissam's first step as an emerging artist. During the opening at Be Happy, the artist painted a large artwork on the wall live during the event.



He would eventually take his work further, after receiving positive feedback from his peers. Melhem reflected on his illustrations as a product of "clear lines" and "contained colors"; he approached his first canvas where he intended to "free the lines" and "free the colors." He succeeded and hasn't stopped painting since.

Melhem creates large scale paintings of 1 x 1m and 2 x 1m on both canvas and steel, launching his series "Emanicipation," which he began in 2019. He uses acrylics, oil, pastels and charcoal, and sometimes gold leaf. After creating many sketches, Wissam improvises on the canvas, experimenting with the materials, colors and textures. In many ways, Wissam is a storyteller, and the outcome of his artistic process is a piece that is the protagonist of his stories.

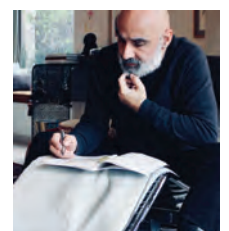
"Emanicipation" was born in Beirut in 2019. Eventually, the country was heading for a big change.

"I had something else on the canvas that day. It was a sketch, a croquis," the artist relates. "It was the 17th of October (2019), I was painting. I looked at the television and I saw the news." Images of burning fires and fires ubiquitous on the news and social media, eventually re-appeared on Wissam's canvas as a face emerging from smog. "This black image was always in front of me, until the first few days of the revolution passed. Eventually hope appeared, hope for a better future for Lebanon. Consequently, I added the gold line as a symbol for this hope."

Melhem continues to create works for "Emanicipation" in these challenging times. His experience as a Lebanese citizen, and as a designer and educator, finds a voice in his artwork. The main images that appears are figural (whether individuals or groups of people) and urban (the city). Melhem is commenting on both the individual and collective experiences, as well as the relations between the ruling class and the people. The work is multi-faceted; social and cultural references continue to emerge. The messages of the artworks are open to interpretation, and the viewer can either enjoy them on an intellectual level or appreciate the aesthetics of the design aspect. In this sense, the work is transcultural and can be appreciated beyond its local context.

Melhem has many sources of inspiration for his art. Immersing himself in research, he discovered the works of the American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960 - 1988). Basquiat also used his art to voice his thoughts and feelings towards his contemporary context, and his work has been described as inventive and impactful, and employing both design and gesture. Melhem also finds inspiration from his architectural training and practice. His style can be best described as Neo-Expressionist, but in a contemporary context. Additionally, there are tendencies towards Symbolism in his choices of recurrent imagery and archetypes.

Melhem's work sets out to appeal to the wider Lebanese public, at HOME and abroad. In addition to the global community. His is the story of an artist at HOME with a vision of hope.



Wissam Melhem will be exhibiting his series "Emanicipation" for the first time at Art on 56th Gallery in Gemmayze, Beirut. The opening is scheduled for June 19, 2020.