



Swimming with Monsters

An enlightening glimpse into Maher Diab's deep dark world

What is your work all about?

My art is a reflection of what lies beneath, a description of reality illustrated in my own words through the language of the ancients. Since my childhood, I have lived in a world of my own. This is not a cliché but the most accurate description I can explain my views through. At times I used to believe that I am not from this earth and that I belong to the moon, swimming like a mermaid, side by side with the Loch Ness monster. I've always been under the impression that I am being followed by monsters. When I grew up and it was time for me to leave my childhood cocoon, I found myself metamorphosing into a butterfly, and that is when I entered the School of Fine Arts. It was probably then that I felt, for the first time, that I was safe from this world's ogres. It was only then that I realised a secret gate to the outside world exists and it actually had a key: art.

Like many artists I was fascinated by the greats before me. As I acquired a better understanding of the visual realm, my fascination developed into a mature appreciation of self-knowledge. I am a person who believes in constant development. I look at myself now and I see that there is still a vast space for me to develop and explore the virgin paths within me.

When did your creative instincts start and how did you nurture them?

Honestly, I don't recall a specific incident that helped me notice any hints of creativity. Modestly speaking, I felt creative from the day I was born. I remember when I was but a child I used to create puppets from scraps of leftovers around me, mainly paper. It was a continuous process of creating the puppets – tearing them apart and then creating them again, as if incarnated through another shape and form. Though it sounds like a tedious exercise for a child, it was the only past-time activity that helped me escape my greatest weakness – boredom. I get bored easily.

Where do you find inspiration?

I'm inspired by anything, from a flying bird to a dead man to an abstract placement of objects that I glance at randomly while walking to my work place. Recently I would say my muse has been music, but such an element can't be decided. It's as variable as a colour spectrum.

What mediums do you use? Do you have a favourite?

I don't have a favourite medium per se. In university, I preferred oil painting, but as I discovered other forms of expression I moved to pastels then swayed

over to acrylic and have been stuck there since. It is a medium that gives a powerful effect and is much faster to apply than oil-based painting. Usually, when I begin working on a piece I start with pencils. Later, after I've created a close image of my instantaneous inspiration, I scan it and this is when the real work starts on the computer. It is much faster and allows me to see my creation without having to wait for the oil to dry or the acrylic to solidify. I'm still discovering new ways to deliver my message, so I'm moving to Montréal in January 2009 to start a course in video art. So, I guess I'll really never stop discovering!

What artists do you like?

In our day and age, contemporary artists are doing such great and commendable jobs that it becomes easy for their talent and inspirations to rub off on me, amongst them are Mark Ryden, James Jean and Miss Van. Mainly I'm a fan of pop surrealism, but I would like to think of them as inspirations rather than influences on styles that I would like to create and christen as my own.

In which city do you find yourself doing your best work?

Beirut. I'm not saying this because I'm from Lebanon. This city really has a lot to offer. The diversity is overwhelming, in a positive way. Same with the vibes of London – to me it's like a huge museum!

What do you think about art in the Middle East today?

True and sad. Art in the region is an honest interpretation of the current situation in the Middle East.

How do you come up with titles for your work?

In the movie-making business, they have an approach whereby the name of the movie to be released is based upon the first element that the public sees, whether it is advertised online or in a magazine. It is almost the same in artwork, specifically in mine. My work tends to be too obscure for subjective criticism, so I feel I have to guide my viewer to the mental state that compelled me to create such a work.

If your art could talk, it would say:

Love. Love everything around you. This might sound cheesy, I know, but love really and truly is the best thing in this life.

Your work feels dark sometimes – why?

Dark... yes... but there is always light in my dark atmosphere. There is always hope. I'm not saying that life is totally dark, but yes – there is always an army of darkness waiting, watching the playground of happiness.

Do you work quickly?

Yes. And if I don't, I stop.



How do you approach the challenge of evolution in your work?

It is not a challenge at all. It is merely adjusting to my capability of embracing the current mental and physical state I am in.

What are you working on now?

I'm preparing for a highly ambitious piece that will be part of a mobile exhibition touring the world starting March 2009. It will feature globally renowned artists and filmmakers, all of whom are working on the theme of the individual's impact on society. I also continue to work on kids and youth books; I'm working on one called *Fartopia* in collaboration with Peter Vegas, which will be out in February 2009. I'm also designing a poster for a documentary about Iraq – and it's unlike anything we've ever seen before.

How did you decide upon your style of art?

One doesn't decide what one wants to be. So is the case with your taste in art. There is always a time when you find yourself amidst the winds of change, with your crest eroding with time's mighty blows, and your core slightly reveling with every breeze.



Have you exhibited?

I participated in the critically acclaimed exposition "Nafas Beirut", a multimedia venue that aimed to create a platform for artists, poets, writers and filmmakers to share their work produced during, or in reaction to, the Israeli siege of Lebanon during the summer of 2006. Later, I displayed my work in London under a charity organisation. The theme of the exhibition was "I Love Beirut".

I also participated in two campaigns with UNESCO – an environmental awareness competition and children awareness campaign against hydroflorocarbons and their influence on the ozone layer. My work has been featured in several print and online publications, including *Computer Arts Magazine*, *Juxtapoz*, *Xanadu Art*, and *Daydream Magazine*. ●

MISS.LESS