

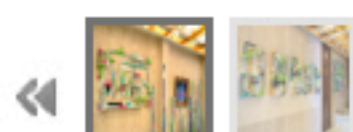
Art

Have you encountered the Odd ones?

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By Chirine Lahoud
The Daily Star



"Odditorium," left, and "Odd Family Portrait."



BEIT MERY, Lebanon: Stop by Beit Mery's Al-Bustan Hotel in the coming month, and you may find yourself face-to-face with some unusual installations, made out of wood and painted in vivid colors.

These artworks came straight out of Lebanese artist Nabil Helou's imagination. "Odditorium" consists of around 40 pieces, a result of the artist's study of emptiness and his new take on the arts.

"I wanted to create a special world," Helou told The Daily Star, "full of colors and communication, [while] changing the concept of modern or contemporary art."

Helou used to work mainly with stone and marble and his sculptures were reminiscent of the Basbous' legacy. His range of work is extensive and he has participated in multiple exhibitions, most recently the inaugural show of the MACAM museum in Atila, in which he presented his installation "Rainwash," which dwelt with how society casts and molds people.

He is also known for his busts in honor of figures such as Choukri Ghanem, Adib Seif, Omar Onsi and Gibran Khalil Gibran, among others.

Helou's latest work aims to supplement the classical program of the Al-Bustan festival with an approach to art that prizes innovation. His sculptural works, which consist of straight pieces of wood assembled into asymmetrical formations, are populated by tiny figures – tall, thin creatures Helou refers to as "Odds."

It is hard to categorize Helou's work as either contemporary or modern art, but some viewers may classify the three-dimensional works as installations. Several wall-mounted series aim to demonstrate how Helou uses space and emptiness to portray the malleability of frequencies. He aims to visually convey the rhythm of sound, whether music or speech.

Of course, for some viewers, it can be difficult to understand the true meaning of Helou's "Odds." Some may assume that the angular, geometrical forms are part of an architectural project; others infer some sort of contemporary vision of a philosophical concept.

Worthy of note is Helou's choice of title for the show, "Odditorium." A play on the word "auditorium," the name implies that the artist aims to create a world within a world at Al-Bustan, a sort of artistic microcosm reflecting that which can't be seen: emptiness.

Several series can be seen in the hall adjoining the hotel's auditorium. The first encapsulates the idea of the "Odditorium" in itself – a wooden sculpture inhabited by a number of Helou's "Odds." Although the piece is composed of straight lines, Helou's juxtaposing of vivid colors, adorning the work with vertical and horizontal stripes, lends the work movement and dynamism.

"Odd Family Portrait" is the only painting displayed at the venue. It portrays 12 "Odds" in front of a black-and-red background. According to the artist, several people have asked him why he chose an old frame for such an unusual piece. The choice was deliberate, he explains.

"Found in Bonn, 1770," the exhibition tag next to the tag reads. "Bonn is the town where Beethoven was born, and 1770 is his year of birth," Helou explained.

By mounting his painting in an old-fashioned frame, Helou aims to pay a silent tribute to Beethoven and to "all great musicians."

Some onlookers may assume that Helou's tall, stick-like characters are inspired by African art, more specifically totems, but Helou asserted that in fact his "Odds" have nothing to do with totems, which are mainly used for rituals. His elongated "Odds," by contrast, are here to introduce their world and to force viewers to notice a new presence in Al-Bustan's auditorium.

For his next project, Helou wants to continue working with his "Odds" and make them livelier. He intends on working more with space, he explained, in an attempt to immerse the onlooker in his artistic environment along with the "Odds" that inhabit it. "I want to make them interactive," he said, "so that people can touch them."

Nabil Helou's "Odditorium" is on display at Al-Bustan Hotel until March 23. For more information, please visit www.albustanfestival.com.

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