

SALAM (Peace) In Plastic Soldiers and HOURIYA (Freedom) In Chains – Into the minds and world of Amar & Lubna

By Omar Donia



Salam, 2012, Mixed media, plastic, wood & glass, edition of 3, 70x50cm - Courtesy of the artists.

For those who grew-up in Lebanon in the late Seventies and early Eighties, the memory of war is both vivid and encrypted into their subconscious, meaning it is a natural point for reflection in their mind-products and Art. For Amar Abou Zahr and Lubna Mobied it is a different case; they were both born after the war and live in diaspora, so why do they use images of war? To answer this question, I had to dig deep into the minds of these two emerging Lebanese & Syrian artists, who chose to work in collaboration to produce a very impressive body of works. Both artists have day jobs in the media field and at night they change their mode of thinking into the production of art. Usually artists in the early stages of their careers work alone (with the exception of individuals such as Gilbert & George), and they often try to follow the steps of other established artists. This two young artists discussed here did not follow this route, instead they embarked on a joint project that is

classified as 3D art. Leaving canvases, papers and colors aside, they worked instead with wood, plastic, metal and glass with the aim of reflecting their mental images into a body of works that represent war, imprisonment of ideas and freedom.

'Houriya' – the Arabic translation of Freedom – is a work made with chains and, as they mentioned, depicts the false freedom we live in; you switch on the TV and you are immediately bombarded with the same images that keep repeating on every channel. So where is the freedom? I believe they are questioning the freedom of choice. Journalist (especially in the Middle East) write their thoughts yet are censored at the end of the day. So where is the freedom of speech? The women who went into the streets in Egypt, Tunis, Libya, & Syria during the uprising against the autocratic systems were harassed and never got fair treatment. So where is the freedom of movement? The work, though very simple,



Hurriya, 2012, Mixed media, plastic, wood, chains & glass, edition of 3, 50x50cm - Courtesy of the artists.

has a lot to express... yet the questions remain unanswered. "The fact remains that we are all prisoners in one way or another," Amar mentions. "We wake up in the morning, directly go to our coffee, go to work, following the same route, dealing with the same issues day-in day-out, and at night, we follow another routine that stays the same. The fact is that 'imprisonment' is the system we live in. Very few dare brake this routine of being a cog in a system – we try to, and we represent this in our works" Lubna added.

'Salam' – the Arabic translation of peace – is another work with a different concept. A group of one hundred plastic soldiers carrying guns and ready to engage in a battle are set on a wooden board depicting the word "peace", as if the soldiers are the peace-keepers, or maybe the way to peace. They leave it to the viewer to interpret the work in their own way and leave us all wondering. Every soldier has a world of his own, his life and his longings, yet they all share one battlefield, and, in this case, they share the same wooden board. But where is the peace? There are more wars today than there were a century, or even few decades, ago, when

we didn't have the current technology. Although we live in a technologically advanced environment with efficient tools of communication, somehow we remain far apart; each person living on an island of their own. 'Facebooking' and 'twittering' become official English words (as of September 12th, 2012, these two words were added to the English dictionary) due to their extensive use, yet we are often apart from each other, many nations are verging on new wars, and conflicts are increasing by the day.

Questioning the artists about their inspiration for these works, I ask whether it was the media, the reality of living in an 'on-fire' region of the world, or their upbringing? They simply answered saying, "we live in a world where there are very limited, if any, boundaries. We can 'Google' any subject ('to Google' has also become a verb in modern English) and get all of the information we need from the digital world." With such possibilities at their fingertips, they do not need to be living in an era of war in their own homeland, or to experience an epoch of conflict, to be able to perfectly present ideas about the subject matter.