



The art of painting a 'selfie'

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Self-portraits of Lebanese artist Christopher Rizkallah inspired by mobile phone selfies.

Beirut - It is safe to say that the internet has come of age. It is ingrained in our daily experience and has permeated contemporary culture. For some artists, it has even become a tool to experiment with new modes of expression.

"We have to realise that we're millennial," Lebanese artist Christopher Rizkallah said. "We have this opportunity to be employing all of these techniques and all these new ways of looking at life, which I think we don't fully understand yet."

Belonging to a generation of artists born after 1990,

Rizkallah's paintings echo the digital age in which he

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series of self-portraits, which in digital terms are referred to as "selfies".

BAR Director Amar Zahr said: "Christopher's work tackles the very classical subject of a self-portrait in a very non-classical approach. As part of a generation born after the universal availability of the internet, his approach holds a very strong relationship to technology."

Zahr posits that artists are finding modern methods to revisit more traditional media. "With today's commonplace acceptance of 'selfies' comes self-obsession, allowing a full circle to use technology as a means back to the ageless self-portrait," she said.

Close-ups of bloody gums, contorted body parts and odd erotic mouth gestures elicit a jarring first impression. Further inspection of the fervent brush strokes betrays an idiosyncratic quality to the work, one that Rizkallah said was initiated when he was brushing his teeth a little too hard and his gums began to bleed. He described it as "a moment of both disgust and intrigue". What is typically regarded as an ordinary occurrence served as an opportunity for self-examination.

"It is becoming more popular," he said of the shift that many artists have made towards integrating technology into their practices but Rizkallah is steadfast that more traditional media will remain just as relevant.

"To me there isn't an art that will ever become less relevant. This is something that is happening right now. It is current. It's the way to go for some people.

It's nice to be able to experiment with all these different mediums," he said.

The process involved Rizkallah taking pictures of himself with his phone and using the images as the foundation for the portraits, while working in sporadic spurts between 8pm and 4am.

"Had I sat in front of a mirror the outcome would have not been the same," he said. "The fact is that I had these pictures on my phone and I only looked at them on my phone. I never expanded or projected these images... It [helped] to get the feel of the images and then take that to the canvas.

"Having access to the internet, and [with] photography being so readily available, you're able to merge the older arts with the newer ones... It's an interesting way where you can come up with outcomes that are not seen before... It's a way to make more interesting art. I think it has become an option for artists to use technology in their practice."

Rather than shy away from haphazard lapses that can accompany the use of cell phone cameras, Rizkallah embraced the imperfect instances he encountered to construct his paintings. In doing so, he managed to illustrate the intricacies of how flawed technology can be. This attention to detail characterises the aesthetic of the work, as the slightest blur, glitch or discolouration is incorporated on canvas.

He emphasises what he calls "the in-between moments" as he fuses the mundane with the grotesque.

"That is just my art style I would say; it's always been a kind of identifier. Even back when I was studying, there was always this darker edge to my work. At the

same time, I'm very much aware that it shouldn't be too dark in a way. It's not just about portraying the grotesque. There's always a beauty behind it, which is very important to me, so with my work I merge both," Rizkallah said.

"Since all the paintings are portraits of myself it was very much about learning different aspects of your personality and seeing how my mood affected the outcomes of these paintings."

What emerges from Rizkallah's works extends beyond mere provocative visual accounts of cell phone pictures but rather a reflection on one's obsession to create a digital identity. His approach stands in contrast to the criticisms many have cast on his generation's propensity to document every trivial aspect of their lives, as his motivations appear less of an exercise in narcissism and more of a layered introspective exploration.

After completing a degree in studio arts at the American University of Beirut, Rizkallah was awarded the M&C Saatchi MENA Award, which is granted to the student displaying the most creative potential.



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