

## **Mohammad Rawwas: The Out of Frame Artist**



*Rawwas started out with a more conventional approach to painting. But he found himself growing tired of the impressionism of color and line, and becoming passionate about composition and technique.  
(Photo: Haytham al-Moussawi)*

**By: Hussein Bin Hamza**

Published Thursday, March 1, 2012

Mohammad Rawwas is way ahead of us. His works astound but do not offer up their components and meanings at once. There is a secret mix in the work of this artist, who has a unique place in the world of Lebanese and Arab visual art.

His works are exercises in visual and mental composition rather than coloring. His use of color is in any case meager, while employing in abundance media and elements that are alien to traditional painting.

Thus, Rawwas' pictures, which he describes as "visual texts," can incorporate timber, plaster, metals, screws, photographs, and Arabic and English script. The rough and obtrusive surfaces become miniature theaters, with different dimensions and levels. One is captivated by the artist's skill in combining and positioning these elements to convey an overall impression. This has been variously described as "fusion," "collage," "synthesis," and "visual surrealism."

Rawwas started out with a more conventional approach to painting. But he found himself growing tired of the impressionism of color and line, and becoming passionate about composition and technique.

This attracted him to American abstract expressionism and away from the Parisian school. He admires the works of Arshile Gorky, Robert Rauschenberg, and pop art artists. These figures sabotaged the historical purity of the portrait and transformed it into a space that addresses the practices and arts of contemporary life.

Muhammad Rawwas was born in Beirut in 1951. All he remembers about his childhood is that he used to draw. Art was his favorite lesson at school, and it was encouraged at home by his father, who was a musician and composer. While at high school, he was fortunate to be taught by Munir Abdo, a former senior lecturer at the then school of arts th Lebanese Atelier.

“War was a powerful shock, I began to wonder: What do I draw? What can art do? What is its function?”

He studied English literature for one year at university before deciding that drawing would not just remain a hobby. He joined Lebanon’s Institute of Arts in the early 1970s. Once again, he had distinguished teachers, including Yvette Ashkar, Halim Jarda, Rashid Wehbe, and Amin Basha.

Rawwas was top of his class in all four years of study. He graduated as the Lebanese Civil War was breaking out in 1975. The fighting made him feel that the climate of freedom and openness in the country had been a sham.

“War was a powerful shock,” he recalls, adding, “I began to wonder: What do I draw? What can art do? What is its function?”

Unable to find answers, Rawwas stopped drawing for two full years, before moving to Morocco to work as an art teacher.

“Away from war-torn Beirut, I began observing and comprehending the situation from a distance. I found myself drawing again, but in a

completely different way from my previous works,” says Rawwas.

His first picture afterward was titled “Freedom.” It still hangs in his apartment, alongside others from the same period.

It was as though the war vindicated his artistic concerns. He could no longer produce “candy art” or portray merely his own artistic ambitions. Rawwas needed to give complex expression to his daily life and the reality he was living through. He says that his “visual texts” became “less colorful and emotional, and more rational and disciplined in composition.”

These qualities were apparent in Rawwas’ first exhibition, which was highly acclaimed by both audiences and critics. He seemed to have found a mood or formula which he developed in his subsequent works and which prompted him to turn to printing techniques.

He went to London to study graphics on a masters’ scholarship he was awarded after graduating, but which the war had prevented him from taking up. There he re-immersed himself in the world of art.

“I used to spend the whole day at college visiting museums and galleries on weekends,” he recalls, adding, “I produced new works with more photographic and printing elements. I began to use several techniques in the same picture. I used lithography, in addition to silkscreen and photography.” His work was shown in joint exhibitions in Britain and Lebanon.

Upon returning to Lebanon, Rawwas taught at the institute from which he had graduated, and then became a graphics instructor for architecture students at the American University of Beirut.

In his large apartment in Beirut, which doubles as his studio, there are none of the usual smells of paints and solvents. It is more like a clean and organized workshop. He shows us an incomplete work, surrounded by small tools, pieces of wood, and paper cuttings. He explains that he spends two to three months working on one piece.

“I am very demanding...I do not add anything until I exhaust all the wrong possibilities. I am as concerned with the visual aesthetics of the

work as I am with its mental concept,” he explains.

the streets of Beirut are so filled with symbols that create group ghettos and eliminate my individuality.”

Rawwas is partial to composition, fusion, and variation. His works require longer contemplation than most. One is quickly struck by their beauty and intelligence, but it takes time to absorb their finer mathematical and artistic points. They sometimes evoke dream sequences or science fiction, and are not without poetic expression. They almost magically combine seemingly incompatible materials and techniques. They sometimes borrow details or symbols from works by other artists, or from illustrated stories, adapting them to different roles.

In his latest exhibition “Please Sit Down,” Rawwas added video to his repertoire.

Rawwas concedes that his work does not reach a wider public. He is considering adding descriptions to his compositions at future exhibitions to make them more accessible. But he does not exhibit much. He works slowly, and has only had ten solo exhibitions, though he has taken part in numerous collective showings.

“Exhibiting is not a goal, it’s an outcome of accumulating work,” he remarks.

“I do not care about the quantity or numbers. What is important is for me to be content with the work that I am accomplishing,” Rawwas adds.

He sees his work as representing a continuous path, developed through stylistic transformations within a single mood.

While identity does not seem to be an explicit issue in Rawwas’ works, the visual mix in his works could be interpreted as an identity mix as well.

Rawwas recalls an incident in 1990 when he held an exhibition at the Kufa Gallery in London: “Its owner, Muhammad Makkiyah, told me

that he usually displays Arab works. He admonished the director for hosting a Lebanese artist who exhibits American works.”

Two years ago, Rawwas gave up teaching to dedicate his time to his art. Al-Saqi Books published a monograph on his work titled “The Art of Rawwas,” and he is working on another book in which his compositions will appear alongside poems in French by the poet Antoine Boulad.

Rawwas spends most of his time at the studio. He speaks of the “violence inflicted on me in the streets of Beirut, which are so filled with symbols that create group ghettos and eliminate my individuality.”

The subject of violence leads us to the Arab revolutions. His exhibition last autumn exhibition featured a work titled “Fall of the Regime.” But he is not optimistic about what is happening.

He wonders: “What is the value of change if the alternative to dictatorship is fanaticism?”

*This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.*