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Kareem Risan's art of emigration

► The Iraqi artist Kareem Risan paints about his forced migration from his homeland to Canada and speaks of miscommunication and cultural integration.



Kareem Risan in his studio in Toronto. Courtesy of Meem Gallery

In Kareem Risan's painting *Entry To Paradise*, his characters are lined up, papers in hand, arms outstretched waiting for the ethereal figure in white to grant them entry. The figure and the painting's title clearly allude to a spiritual dimension. But, given the exhibition's title – *Steps in Migration* – it also has another meaning.

"Some people really believe that they will be entering paradise by emigrating to a certain country," says Risan. "But for myself, I did not choose it. I was forced and it was certainly not paradise for me."

Steps in Migration opened in early December in Dubai's Meem Gallery. It is Risan's first solo show with the gallery, although he has been working with them for a number of years. The artist, who has laboured over the works for more than a year, admits that it is a personal show, one that reveals his deepest struggles.

"All the show is my story. When I left my country and went to Canada, I struggled with many things: language, community, society and my health. I had many problems and my only form of expression was in painting."

Risan and his family left Iraq in 2006 during the war. They travelled to Syria and eventually, in 2008, settled in Canada.

Shocked by the climate and the culture, Risan says he had so many questions that urged him to explore them through his art. "The answers have not yet been decided but my questions have profoundly affected my artistic practice," he says.

The figures in *Entry to Paradise* are repeated across the show: men and women with blank faces and distorted limbs. In the centre of each is a figure of Risan himself – represented as a wooden mannequin or as a figure with glasses and a green hat.

In *Man is Not Made to Live Below Zero*, the mannequin is losing his limbs, and the head of a man with a green hat floats in the top right-hand corner.

"The snow and the freezing ice broke me," says Risan. "And the many question marks in the painting show my confusion."

But the message of his art goes beyond the issue of acclimatisation – there also is an overriding theme of miscommunication. In many of Risan's works, microphones and loose wires appear randomly, while light bulbs are drawn but remain unlit.

When he arrived in Canada, Risan's words went unheard, his talent unnoticed. His piece *No One Hears Me* exemplifies this perfectly. Risan's character sits in the centre of the frame talking into an unplugged microphone with an empty speech bubble next to his mouth. His character has two ears on one side of his head, to signify careful listening, but the voice is muted.

"The figure is very simple but the emotions are very present – the expressions show it all. I don't need details of the figure to show how I was feeling," he says.

Alongside the paintings hangs a collection of ink-on-paper artworks, collectively titled *Memories of Cold Nights*. The artist, who drew them "during sleepless nights," says working on paper gave him more freedom.

"The years I spent in Canada have changed my heart a little, they have pushed me to expressing myself more through my art," he says.

The distorted limbs and double-eared characters are recurring motifs in this series, too, and are somehow more magnified in black and white. The drawings help highlight Risan's struggle, while the paintings bring colour and scale.

The raw emotion in Risan's art make *Steps in Migration* an absorbing experience not only for those who have gone through displacement or forced migration, but also those who haven't.

- *Steps In Migration* is on till January 10 at Meem Gallery, Dubai

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