

VELVET UNDERGROUND

Yemen conjures up the image of velvet carpets, chew tobacco and cities that look like they are made of ginger bread, but it is also a place enduring troubled times. Artist Ibi Ibrahim talks about the underground art struggle in Sana'a.

FEATURE: LENA KASSICIEH. PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF IBI IBRAHIM

As an artist whose visual world has been profoundly affected by the world around him, Ibi Ibrahim has found a silver lining of sorts, producing a series of touching, corporeal images.

Growing up between Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq and Libya, Ibi benefited from an exceptional quilting of life in the Middle East.

It can be hard to imagine how the caged bird feels unless you have at one point been in his position. Due to its traditional values, being an artist in Yemen poses its own distinctive challenges. As Ibi had lived and studied in the Western world, he was not completely prepared for his return to Yemen, or the reality of being an “underground” artist in Sana'a.

Ibi describes himself as “a rebel against censorship”, and he aims to display the intimate parts of who we are; uncensored, undefined and unconstrained. For his efforts, he has received threatening emails about the openness and boundary-pushing qualities of his work. This is part of the experience, however, and he has accepted all that his self-described title implies. “My job is to break the censorship and bring those topics to the surface. Some find it beautiful, some find it a dialogue starter – and that’s what I



love most. Each viewer has a different experience,” he says.

All artists have distinct inspirations; particular stories and experiences that push them to express themselves. Ibi says: “I am inspired by love. Moments in love. Moments out of love. This has been the main subject of my most recent work – though I find myself leaning towards the sad aspect of love. Maybe because I believe love always ends, and obviously ends in a bad way. For my previous collection, *Social Codes*, my inspiration was my own upbringing in a conservative society. The challenges vis-a-vis issues of identity, and sexuality.” He also focuses on the multifarious relationship between partners. Many of his images display powerfully graphic, telling portraits of individuals in placid settings.

In one of his new 2013 experimental series, entitled *Sans Toi (Without You)*, Ibi explores his journey of love without the presence of another person as he roams the globe on a self-exploration journey. Many of these images are self-portraits, entwined with affectionate and telling expressions and the thoughtful use of character-imprinting garments. Another image featured, a photograph on a C-print taken in Goa, India, is named *La Vie M'est Insupportable (My Life Is Unbearable)*, and was inspired by the suicide note of Egypt-born Italian singer Dalida, most notably



Image from *La Vie M'est Insupportable*



La Vie M'est Insupportable, Ibi laying in traditional Yemeni attire on a beach



Aussi Que La Mer, a self-portrait from the artist's global self-exploration journey

famous for her song, *My Country*. The artist relates to Dalida's deeply melancholy existence, agreeing that death just might be the only solution to the end of the misery of love.

While this all sounds a bit morose, Ibi does not see it that way. Pain is a gateway to profound expression, and it allows you to discover hidden aspects of yourself.

Ibi's style and inspiration come from visual artists like Shirin Neshat, an Iranian who often photographs covered women with calligraphic style body tattoos. Ibi believes that, ideally, each artist has a goal. For him, he wants fiercely and loudly to proclaim: "I am here. I feel. I fall in love, out of love. In particular, being from Yemen, a country that has a bizarre reputation in the Middle East related to poverty and illiteracy, I feel that I have to show who we really are – so I live between conflict of being an artist, and then being a Yemeni artist."

One of his newer collections explores the condition of the Yemeni woman, as it transcends history and religion. In Yemen, the life of a woman is quite often held in the hands of her family, and when she gets married, it is her husband that controls her movements, choices and decisions. Ibi hoped to create a series that examined how the role of women has changed in a country once governed by the powerful Queen of Sheba herself. For this, Ibi takes portraits of an assortment of women in the Sitara, the traditional Yemeni female dress, seemingly yearning to express some hidden voice.

In the future, Ibi hopes to spend some time in Amman or Beirut, cities he believes have budding art scenes in which artists are encouraged and supported. "I'd like to learn more about the art community there. It looks exciting, and full of energy. My eye is on Mohamed Tammimi; a Jordanian artist who's showing his work in Russia this month. His work is unique, very cool."

Ibi is also optimistic about the fact that because collectors are paying more attention to the Middle East, people will be forced to accept the creativity that has been cultivated in the region's people, and that art will become a more accepted and respected way of life. He says: "There is one advantage of artists living in a conservative society. It makes the job of the artist in provoking his audience easier."

From February 28 until March 2, Ibi will be displaying a selection of his work at the Art41 Art Fair in the Olympia Grand Hall in London at the Jamm Art Gallery Booth.



One of Ibi's models posing powerfully in traditional attire