

Trying to Make Sense Out of Chaos

By SUSAN HODARA

HARTFORD — With their brightly colored jumbles of cartoonish forms, the six paintings in “Ahmed Alsoudani/Matrix 165,” the newest exhibition in the Matrix contemporary art series at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, at first seem cheery. But closer observation reveals content quite different. Broken pipes and tubes curl around thorny growths and disembodied limbs. Eyeballs pop from contorted faces with mouths agape as if howling. There are fleshless bones, shards of glass, bits of machinery, and in one image, something resembling a bloodied, bandaged stump. “I use a happy color palette for a hard subject,” Mr. Alsoudani said.

That hard subject encompasses the global effects of violence, corruption and the misuse of power, all of which the artist considers from a singular perspective. Born in Baghdad, Mr. Alsoudani was raised during the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War before leaving his country in 1995 and immigrating to the United States in 1999. With degrees from Maine College of Art and Yale School of Art, Mr. Alsoudani, now an American citizen, lives in SoHo, but his family remains in Iraq. “I belong to these two places,” he said. “It’s a unique and painful situation, but this is what allows me to see more clearly.”

On a recent morning, Mr. Alsoudani, 37, stood among his paintings wearing a cream-colored turtleneck and a black porkpie hat. The works here — all called “Untitled” and all created between 2010 and 2012 — signify a shift for the artist. “I used to capture the violence in a more direct way,” he said in his accented English. “Now I’m interested to go behind the scenes to the people who I think are responsible, the decision-makers who are in charge of the chaos we see.”



Courtesy of Ahmed Alsoudani and the Haunch of Venison Gallery

DISTURBING VISIONS A work by the artist Ahmed Alsoudani on display in Hartford.

One of the paintings is an abstracted portrait of such a decision-maker, an anonymous military leader shown from the chest up. Set against a carrot-colored background, the figure is a turbulent assembly of organic and inorganic objects, from light sockets, tacks and broken

blocks, to official-looking insignia and a trio of eyes. At the bottom of the composition, a Mickey Mouse-like gloved hand reaches up toward a microphone aimed at what might be the subject's lips. Nearby, a monkey sits, one paw lifted toward its mouth.

Mr. Alsoudani explained that the work's framing and its vertical rectangular format were intended to suggest a propaganda poster. As for the monkey, he said, "Monkeys imitate, the way this person does when he talks."

The largest painting in the show is a 6-by-9-foot scene of a decrepit dictator compiled from tubing, wheels and gears, with wires dangling from a disjointed hand and a patch of grass instead of hair. His mass is suspended from a harness on the right side of frame, while on the left is an array of machines, potions and other supplies necessary to sustain his facade, among them two bulky checkerboards.

"I'm amazed by how certain leaders manipulate their image to make them look young and healthy in order to maintain their power," Mr. Alsoudani said. "The whole thing is a game."

Mr. Alsoudani is the 165th artist in the Matrix series, which was established in 1975 to present single-artist exhibitions of contemporary art in the context of an encyclopedic museum. He joins a list of prior Matrix participants that reads like a compendium of seminal contemporary artists, including Willem de Kooning, Andy Warhol, Keith Haring and Sol LeWitt.

Patricia Hickson, the Atheneum's Emily Hall Tremaine curator of contemporary art, was drawn to Mr. Alsoudani's work at last year's Venice Biennale, where he was one of six artists representing Iraq, which was participating in the Biennale for the first time in 35 years. She recognized in his imagery a trenchant reflection of current events around the globe.

"There's a sense of anxiety in these paintings that's pervasive in our lives."

Mr. Alsoudani works on his canvases simultaneously with charcoal and paint. He said he rarely sketches out an entire composition in advance, starting instead with a small element that leads him into the painting. "I need an entry point," he said. "I cannot just go."

The human body inspires his color choices. "Our bodies are filled with hundreds of beautiful colors that are covered by skin," he said. "I peel back the layers and look inside."

In contrast, he often chooses charcoal to draw the human components in his work. "I like to capture the ghost of the figure, not the figure itself," he said.

The resulting paintings — with their chaotic intermingling of objects, their fragmented forms, their blend of black and white and color — overflow with detail that may seem impossible to absorb. But the works' critiques of the dangerous impact of misguided political agendas are clear. As Mr. Alsoudani put it, "I do make a complicated painting, but not a confusing one."

"Ahmed Alsoudani/Matrix 165" is on view through Jan. 6, 2013, in the Eleanor H. Bunce Gallery (aka the Matrix Gallery) at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 600 Main Street, Hartford. For more information: (860) 278-2670 or wadsworthatheneum.org.