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Douglas Abdell's Punic Wars rediscovered in a London retrospective

► The American artist of Lebanese descent is being celebrated in a retrospective of his work in London



An installation view of Douglas Abdell's retrospective at Ab-Anbar Gallery, showing on the wall collaged paintings made in New York in the 1970s, and his later columns from the 1980s that responded to the Lebanese Civil War. Photo: Ab-Anbar Gallery



Melissa Gronlund

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“I represent the East,” says artist Douglas Abdell, 74, fashioning an “E” symbol with three fingers of his right hand. “New York City and the Middle East.”

The son of a Lebanese and Italian family, Abdell made his name in downtown New York in the late 1970s, incorporating kung-fu movie posters and graffiti into his collaged paintings; hanging around with Jean-Michel Basquiat; even installing [monumental sculptures on Park Avenue](#) in the dead of night.

“It was the great period of New York, like Paris with Picasso,” he says. “There were all these concerts – rap and hip-hop and Grandmaster Flash. The graffiti artists were getting into the art world. As we well know, the art world is upper-class, snobby, closed people – and all of a sudden you see these people from the street. It was so exciting, to see everything mix together. I worked for three, four years, and made over 400 works.”



Douglas Abdell's work from the 1970s collaged together movie posters from Chinatown in downtown New York City. Photo: Ab-Anbar Gallery

Then Abdell disappeared. He moved to Spain, first to Madrid and then to Malaga, and worked in relative obscurity for 30 years. His work has now been rediscovered by French curator Morad Montazami, who has put together a small retrospective of the pieces at Ab-Anbar Gallery in Cromwell Place, London.

Divided into three sections, *Reconstructed Trap House*, on view until Sunday, October 24, provides a semi-chronological overview of Abdell's concerns: his black-and-white, hieroglyphic-like work that he started making in the 1970s and continues today; the energetic paintings he made in New York in the 1980s – which Montazami terms Neo-Expressionist – and lastly, the somber, totemic sculptures he has made over the past 20 years, inspired by the Phoenicians.

Abdell grew up in the north-eastern US speaking Italian with his mother's family, Arabic with his father's Lebanese family, and now Spanish with his wife. Language, and in particular its shape on the page, is a constant throughout his work. He developed his own internal vocabulary to typify his paintings, drawings and sculptures, which he uses as liberally as if it were accepted terminology, for example, he refers to his hieroglyphic-like works, letterings that he scratched on carbon paper during his first period of seclusion, when he lived "like a hermit" in the New York and Vermont woods for six years, as his "Aekyads".



Douglas Abdell began making a series of works he calls 'Aekyids' while in Thoreau-like seclusion in the 1970s. He has continued making them until today. Photo: Ab-Anbar Gallery

"I didn't have television, I didn't have a radio, I didn't have a telephone," he says. "During the day I would make my sculptures. But I did have a record player and I would listen to soul music - rhythm and blues, a lot of James Brown. I put the record on that and would continue, continue, continue. Then at night when the sun went down, I made paintings and I read German Romanticism: Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, a lot of Novalis."

Afterwards, he moved to Boston for a while, spurning offers to teach. But he was constantly shuttling between Boston and New York and was eventually lured by the latter city's downtown art scene.

The energy in the city at the time suffused his practice. Just as hip-hop culture was then emerging through an aesthetic of sampling, he, too, mixed and matched from what he saw around him: Chinese film posters, the Art Brut of Basquiat; various material from the street. The works he made in this Neo-Expressionist period, not on canvas but on reclaimed wood boards, are some of the most striking in the show: the personal language and symbology that he had assiduously created in the Vermont woods has burst open to take in the world around him.

The Chinese characters, for example, taken from posters near his studio on the outskirts of Chinatown, appear like long-lost brothers to his own imagined "Aekyad" letters – and in retrospect act as harbingers of the further exploration of language that would continue in the next phase of his career.

In the 1980s, he switched tack again. He was energised by the antiwar politics of the time, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and grew angered by the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. By 1989 he had left the US for the Mediterranean, where he resurrected the Punic Wars as a means to understand the conflict between Israel, Palestine and Lebanon.

"The politics started to boil," he recalls. "To see the Lebanese people suffering – why? I made a declaration and said, I am the reincarnation of Hannibal, coming from Carthage over the Alps in the Second Punic War."



In the 1980s, Abdell started making tapestries, sculptures and prints inspired by the Phoenicians. Photo: Ab-Anbar Gallery

Like with his Aekyads, the Punic Wars furnished a new heuristic for his artwork. History officially records two Punic Wars, which took place from the 3rd to the 2nd century BC between Rome and Carthage (now in Tunisia). He drew on his own background, split between Italy and Lebanon, to frame the encounter between north and south of the Mediterranean: he proposed himself as a new Hannibal-like avenger, coming from the north to agitate for the south, in a fourth Punic War.

He made bright red, white and black columns, retaining the graffiti aesthetic of the New York works of the 1970s and '80s, but turning back to his enigmatic alphabet. They are festooned with numbers, symbols and letters invented from Phoenician, Etruscan and Roman forms. The columns appear freighted with meaning – as well as anger – but the messages they contain remain unknowable.

Abdell sought, he says, to celebrate the accomplishments of the Phoenicians, the forefathers of modern Lebanon, at a time when Lebanon was being pulled apart by the Civil War.

"My grandfather used to sit me on his knee and tell me about the Phoenicians," he recalls. "My grandmother would say, stop telling him that stuff about the old country. But he would go on. They sailed; they invented the first alphabet; all the things they did."

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He has maintained his focus on the Phoenicians since, building up a library around Phoenician history and visiting various archaeological sites. His works slowly lost the punk aesthetic of New York City and grew to resemble the remains he was researching: more sombre, sandy in colour and symmetrical in form. They are inscribed with geometric and animal symbols much like the Phoenicians used, but after 30 years of his project of fictionalising and reinventing language, some scepticism is in store. These are not Phoenician monuments, but Abdell's own take on them.

Where do the ideas come from? "Where does anything come from? My central nervous system," he says, with a laugh.

Douglas Abdell: Reconstructed Trap House is at Ab-Anbar Gallery in Cromwell Place, London, until Sunday, October 24