MONIR FARMANFARMAIAN
A LIFE IN LIGHTS

FARHAD MOSHIRI
DESIGN IN BEIRUT

ABU DHABI ART

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AHMED ALSOUDANI
'I want to be part of the history of painting’
Iranian art star FARHAD MOSHIRI has installed four unique artworks in the windows of Vuitton stores across the UAE. He tells Arsalan Mohammad why—and how the process has brought his artistic practise 'full-circle'...
Working with Louis Vuitton is actually working with the master of branding, the fascination of working with the establishment. It’s highly regarded, in the upper echelons of branding, you kind of feel there are some possibilities that could lead to other ways to approach the process of artmaking or other ways to present art.

Farhad Moshiri knows, as all artists working in today’s fractured, febrile art world do, that patronage in its myriad forms is as essential as never before, in an era of dwindling economic health worldwide. And as any pragmatic creative knows, one has get what one can, where one can.

Moshiri is therefore understandably, pleased to be collaborating with Vuitton. The luxury travel brand has good form in its past collaborations worldwide, having linked up with luminaries ranging from Olafur Eliasson, Takashi Murakami and Rajeel Sethi. Today, it’s the turn of Iranian-born Moshiri, one of the most internationally-acclaimed contemporary artists of Middle Eastern origin of the past decade, to get down with the luxury label.

This November, he landed in Dubai on a mission. Armed with a series of tableaux fresh from his Tehran studio, his task was to install one in each of Louis Vuitton’s UAE storefronts, over the course of four covert night-time raids into the temporarily-stilled atmosphere of a UAE shopping mall. Execution had to be swift, exacting and perfect.

That Vuitton chose Moshiri for the commission says a great deal about the brand’s ongoing habit of selecting notably off-kilter characters to collaborate with. Moshiri came to international attention during the past decade, initially with a series of paintings in which traditional, cracked, weathered water jugs were augmented with ornately-executed swathes of Arabic calligraphy, melding ancient and contemporary sensibilities and profound pontifications on trans-national practices with dry, puckish wit. Since then, he’s found a visual language that abstracts recurring elements of everyday existence into a post-pop, daggyo sugar rush. From his opulently-layered cake paintings, (perfectly mimicking the obese seductive whorls and curlicues of icing sugar and cake decorations) to glittering outbursts of jewellery-encrusted motifs, beaded cherub figures and cartoonish characters, Moshiri channels a semi-ironic joie de vivre into his works that simultaneously attracts and unsettles in agreeable ratio.

He is also obsessed with the notion of documenting a post-Warhol narrative of mass-consumption and commodification by examining, with the lightest of touches, the implicit ironies and contradictions at play in today’s globalised mass-markets and the movement of goods, brand identities and consumers, through increasingly fluid borders and cultures. Little wonder then, when the French-based brand asked the Iranian-born artist to create works in their UAE mall outlets, Moshiri’s sense of the surreal and unexpected was tickled sufficiently to agree.

The idea of packaging and marketing is something that artists today are intrigued with’, says Moshiri when we meet inside Vuitton’s Mall of the Emirates branch, perhaps appropriately, perching in the colour-nest that is the children’s play area, or ‘family room’. ‘How art has come out of its naïve world and how artists are thinking of actually packing their ideas, it’s a more proactive, dynamic way to present art. You don’t have to be naïve and innocent locked up in your studio, hoping your art will have the effect you want. You have to go the extra mile and actually, in a very simple way, think of ways that can connect with the viewer. If you don’t connect with the viewer, then you might as well not do any art at all.

For his series of four installations, Moshiri rejected the clichés and tropes of commonplace ‘vitrine’ designs, realising that to emulate a classic Parisian window display would be pointless.
Instead, after some time pondering the commission ("I spent more time waiting for something to spark in my head than starting to work on art"!), buying up vintage Vuitton luggage, which ultimately didn’t figure in the final pieces ("Well, I live with them and love them") and considering various options, he hit upon the notion of tableaux, flat panels upon which characteristic Moshiri elements – ranging from collages of beaded cartoon characters, culled from vintage postcards to lush veils of crystals, glitter, glaze and embroidery - make up the four works installed at Vuitton stores at Marina Mall, Abu Dhabi ("Frosting Stories"), as well as Dubai’s Mall of the Emirates ("Once Upon A Time"), Burjuman ("Writing In Waterfalls") and Dubai Mall ("Top Of The World"). As we are meeting the morning following the final installation of "Once Upon A Time", at the Mall of the Emirates, we go outside and stand in front of it. Two beaming Japanese tourists are taking pictures of each other in front of it. It looks incongruous, amidst the panoply of merchandise in surrounding windows, yet quite at home, a cheery montage of embroidered picture postcard figures, lifted from vintage French postcards of the 70s and 80s. Surveying the work, Moshiri explains its make-up.

"It’s a scrapbook of postcards, an accumulation of a person’s life, of travels, reflecting back special moments that were travelled. Most of the cards I collect are used, so people’s letters are on the backs and this is overall a kind of comparison between the postcard idea and that Vuitton is all about travel and stuff. So I took this angle to develop this painting. They are mainly vintage, French. The kind of imagery and colour, the playfulness, was a mix of something I wanted to touch on. And I wanted to develop a linear narrative between the cake shop and my own style and the chequered look of Louis Vuitton.”

Moshiri is clearly pleased with the partnership, speaking with enthusiasm of the commission and even admitting to enjoying a childrens’ workshop he was asked to do, as part of the deal. We haven’t much more time to discuss his other projects and given our surroundings, flanked by friendly LV PR folk, there probably wasn’t too much point attempting to bring them up in any case. But Moshiri is a happy artist and after thirty years working ('in not always ideal situations') the challenge and novelty of bringing his work to a fresh context has clearly inspired him.

"Exactly. For me it was a challenge. Previously, it’s all been going in that direction. Work comes from experience, from the world, from reality into this disinfected area – the gallery space. Where it can be quarantined and looked at as art, otherwise it would fall apart. But this was an opportunity to go the other way back. It was a little disorientating at first, but now it’s that’s where it has to go, full-circle and back to where it all started. I don’t quite know what I did with that, but for me, the idea that it had to go full circle was quite fascinating. It was like, OK, it started there, it went all the way over to the art world, and now its coming back again. That’s the progression of this whole thing and it’s really fascinating to me."