

Through the looking glass

Portuguese artist Gil Heitor Cortesao evokes a lost or forgotten world in his images of largely empty interiors. Intrigued, we caught up with him prior to the opening of his first solo UAE show

You have an interesting technique – painting ‘backwards’ onto Perspex. That can’t be easy?

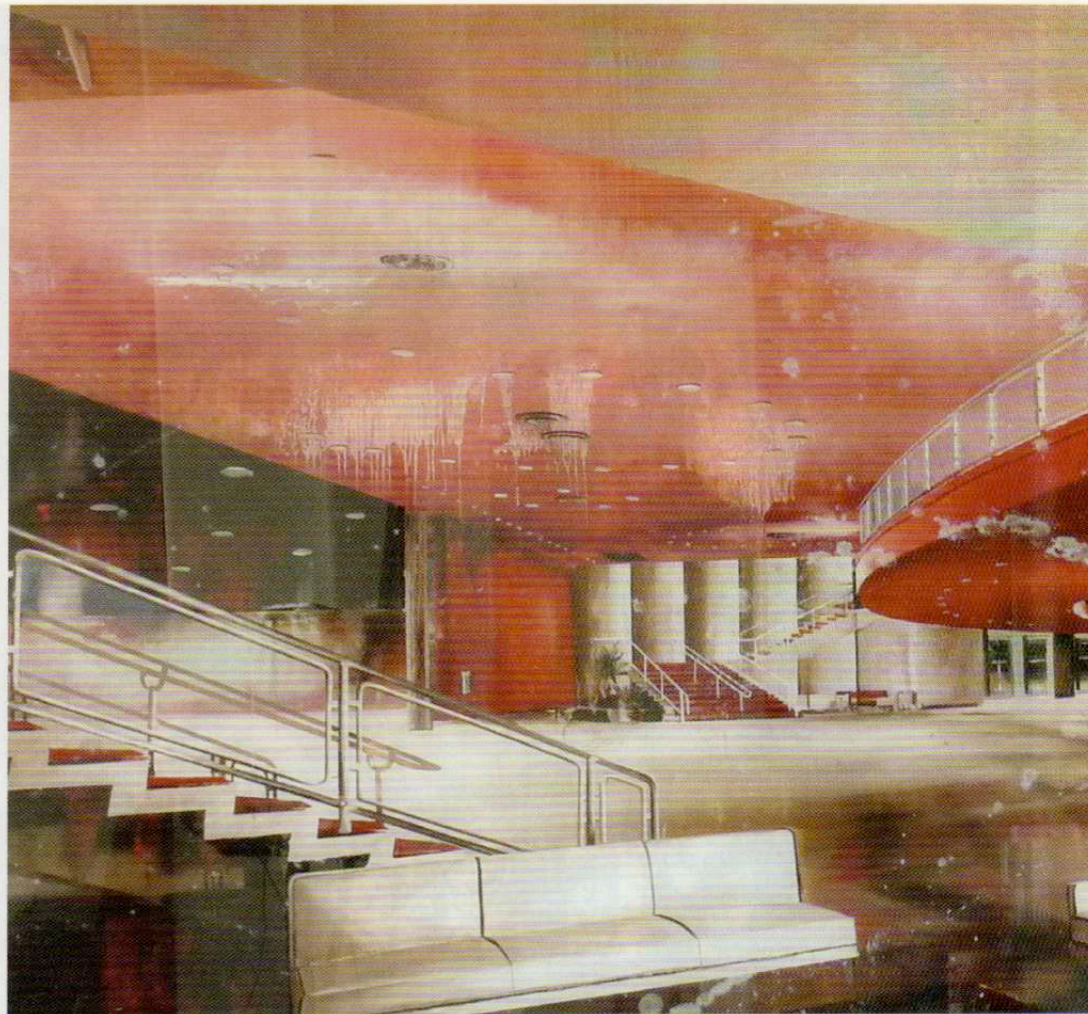
I paint on one side of the Perspex and show the other. Even if my sources are photographs, I’m not really interested in realism of any sort, and the use of glass and Perspex allows me also to get away from it. It removes the weight and the density of the painting; they become almost immaterial, dreamy. The glass acts the same way that dreams alter the weight of our own bodies. When I’m painting, turning the glass over is like crossing through a mirror – it’s like Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Through The Looking-Glass*.

Using this technique is, as you say, like ‘painting backwards’: I start with the details and the background comes in the end. It’s no longer difficult for me, but perhaps returning to the ‘normal’ process would be a challenge, after all those years painting backwards!

Why do you work that way?

Transparency has always fascinated me. When I was a fine arts student I used to paint on canvas, but wasn’t satisfied with the results – at the same time I was also drawing on translucent sheets of paper, and that work stood much more for what I was trying to achieve.

I also studied painting in Turin, Italy, and that city had



a very strong link with Arte Povera, a 1960s art movement that abandoned traditional painting and sculpture and started using common, everyday materials. Unlike the Poverists, I didn’t feel that painting was ‘dead’, but I also realised that, in order to keep on painting and achieve something meaningful and new, I would probably have to adopt other techniques and media. Painting on Perspex, as I have been doing for several years now, seems a natural development of this process. **Many of your works seem rather haunting – these are places built to entertain people but you depict them as almost derelict.**

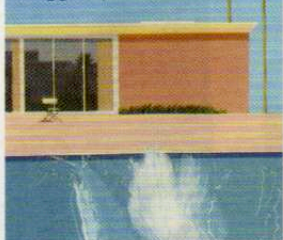
I think that the haunting quality has a lot to do with the fact that these spaces are mostly empty. I use a lot of photos from the 1950s, 60s and 70s as source material. A lot of them are unsettling for me because they show something – a building, for

example – that was futuristic in its day, but that now is ‘retro-futuristic’ or even just plainly obsolete. They are haunting because it is difficult to locate them – do they belong to the future, or to the past? I’m very much interested in these kinds

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David who?

David Hockney –
A Bigger Splash



English artist David Hockney is one of the most influential painters of his generation. An early proponent of British Pop Art, he moved to the USA in the late 1960s, where the sunshine and good times of California inspired him to create some of his most celebrated works – a series of vibrant, highly stylised acrylic paintings of swimming pools. The most famous of these is *A Bigger Splash*, which Gil Heitor Cortesao agrees he has 'consciously evoked' in his own work, *Memories From The Future #7*, part of his current Dubai show.

New world of interiors

Cortesao isn't the only artist to be intrigued by rooms and buildings. Celebrated homegrown photographer Layma Gargash was widely acclaimed for her series *Presence*, for which the young photographer shot abandoned domestic interiors across the UAE. Her most recent body of work, *Familial*, follows a similar theme. Currently showing in the UAE pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the series looks at notions of Emirati hospitality in images that depict the interiors of local homes. Like Cortesao, Gargash depicts rooms mostly without a human presence and, while their approaches and aesthetics may be very different, both artists have an unerring knack of revealing fragile humanity in this interior emptiness.

Until 2010, *Presence*, The Third Line, Al Quoz, Dubai, Dhs150. Tel: (04) 3411367. Metro: Al Quoz. www.thethirdline.com



Layma Gargash – Pink Presence



of situations, on exploring this disquieting space between what is familiar and the unknown. And, of course, the process of painting that accentuates this even further, enhancing the washed out and

disused feel of the spaces.

And there are a lot of 1970s-style swimming pools. Are we detecting shades of British painter David Hockney in your work?

I like some of Hockney's work. His pools and splashes are my favourites – I associate them with an idea of hedonism and the good life. But my pools seem to me much less pleasurable, and I think that in some cases they can seem disquieting. One of this series is even empty. The swimming pool has been a recurrent theme of my painting. I guess it almost functions like a metaphor: both pools and paintings are circumscribed things in which you can immerse yourself.

Oct 15 to November 26, Carbon 12, Warehouse D 37, Al Serkal Avenue, Al Quoz 1. Tel: (050) 4644392. Free. Metro: Dubai Marina. www.carbon12dubai.com

Moving on up

Carbon 12 have been impressing Dubai's art lovers with their cool, bunker-like space in the heart of the Marina but the call of the city's art heartland has obviously proved too much – the gallery is moving lock, stock and picture frame to new premises in Al Quoz this month. And come opening day, we'll be first over the threshold.

www.carbon12dubai.com