

FABLES OF FADED STONES

BRITISH PAINTER ALEXANDER CRESWELL CAPTURES THE MOODS AND MEMORIES OF ABANDONED BUILDINGS, SAYS MUHAMMAD YUSUF

It would need a thespian of no mean merit to play ace British water colourist Alexander Creswell, as and when his life hits the big screen. With a foot each in two hemispheres, travels in countries as different as Korea and the UK, lovable eccentricities that have friends trebled up with laughter and painterly desires set mainly in the UK and the Middle East, his life of half-a-century is simply waiting to be told on film.

Stately, deliberate and firmly spoken, he showed his paintings of Oman and the UAE at the Art, Antiques and Design exhibition at Madinat Arena, Jumeirah, Dubai, from Feb. 18 - 22.

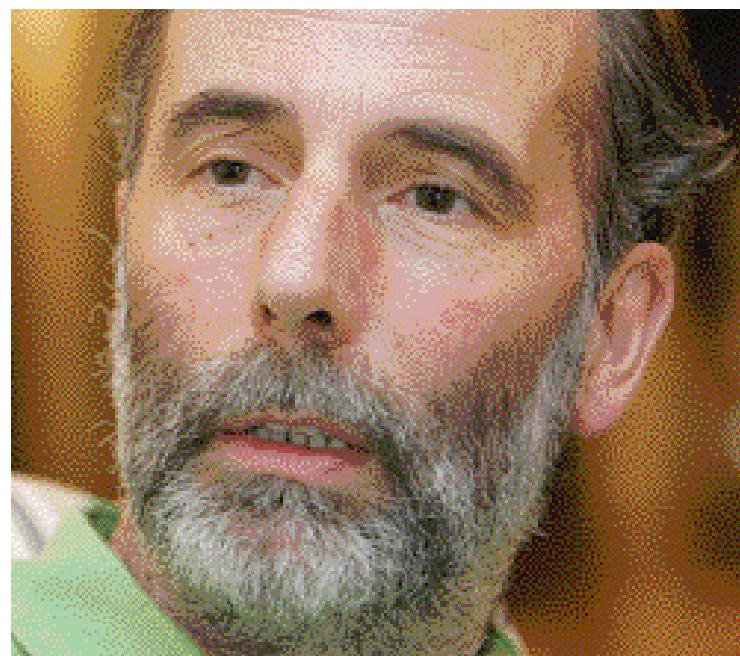
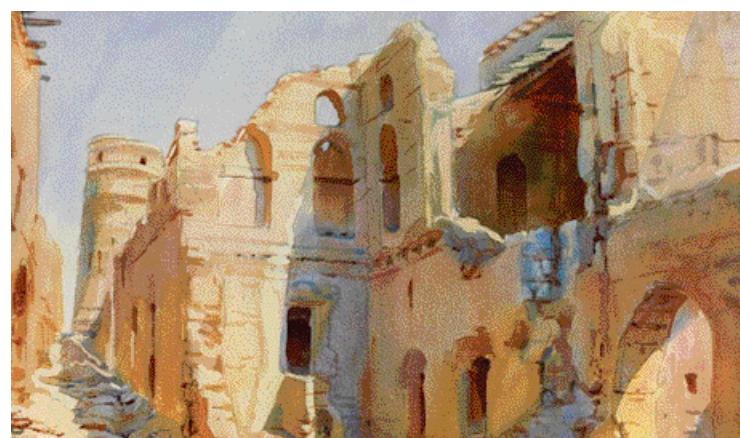
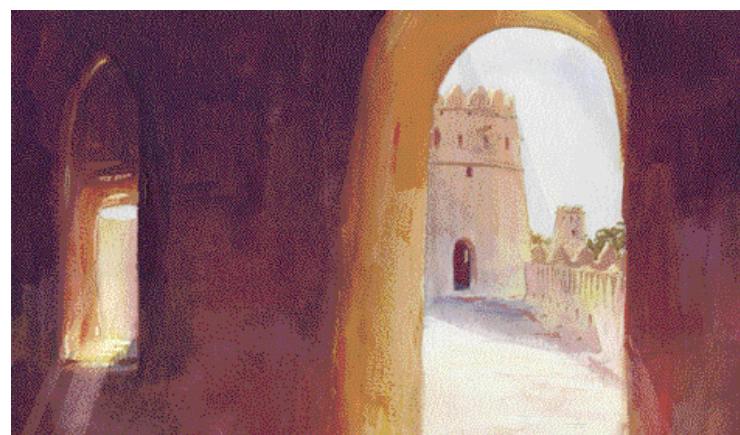
A global event presented by Haughton International Fairs in partnership with Dubai First, it was a blue-chip event that brought art aficionados by the dozen from all over the world, to see and buy. "It is the first time I have sat down in two days," Creswell said, as he took his seat for an interview, recalling the hectic time he had spent in mounting his works. Stretching his long legs he began answering the questions fired at him.

He is best known for the large set of watercolours he painted of Windsor Castle for the Royal Collection depicting the Fire and restoration in 1993 and 1997, published as a book *Out of the Ashes*. Before that, his book *The Silent Houses of Britain* had caught the public imagination and critical attention, and was followed by a series of major exhibitions at Spink & Son, London and Hong Kong. This established his career within the long tradition of British water colourists.

His theme at the Dubai show was empty buildings, both residential and fortified, of Oman and the UAE. A stickler for evoking what he calls the "spirit of a place," he explained why these buildings brought out his artistic instincts. "As soon as a human being is taken out of architecture," he said, "it produces a spirit of its own. It speaks of the past and you can imagine stories within its fabric, including ones of people's love for a place and why they left it."

Elaborating, he said that architecture is an important yardstick by which ancient civilisations can be judged. "When a civilisation is gone," he said, "its empty buildings will ask many questions. And also answer many of them." In the lonely buildings of this region, for example, he finds the evidence of a hostile environment where the human race "nevertheless existed."

He admires the "beautiful, inti-



Alexander Creswell

Photograph: Kamal Kassim

mate, protective and defensive citadels" at rocky foothills. "There is a great hunger for beautiful buildings here," he said. "This is seen in the way by which their beautiful curved doors fetch a good price in the market."

Creswell's watercolours could possibly rival oil colours in richness and detail. He paints at a crossroads: his love for architecture is seen in the way he paints every brick and brass stud, while his despair is seen in the way he

shows nature, in the form of trees and plants, starting to reclaim them.

He manages to tell stories of proud pasts through the crumbling facades of buildings. Their crests are erect, even as their foundations and walls collapse. He does not even spare the rubble that is strewn around, but carefully paints their condition. Even discarded furniture, like chairs and beds, are noted. He evokes a terrible sense of loss and a profound feeling of

nostalgia with his pictures.

A master of chiaroscuro or the art of playing with light and shade, he drowns dark corners in bright sunlight. He wants the viewer's soul to see them and be imprinted with the images of the past. He wants him to carry their imperishable impress as a cherished memory.

He is skilled in the use of luminosity, evanescence and radiance to highlight scenes of woe, desolation and withdrawal. He finds "surprising visual harmonies" in falling buildings and uses shimmering colours to highlight the ephemerality of things.

He is a painter of light in the truest sense of the term. "Light gives life," he said. "Life wouldn't exist without light! It animates every object since, when light moves, the objects too seem to move. A building without light is like a swimming pool without water."

Though in the beginning he painted in smaller formats, he is now doing large-scale — nearly life-size — pictures. (For example, the centrepiece of his Dubai show was the biggest watercolour ever painted of a Middle Eastern subject.

At 85 inches (215 cm) in length, it was one of the largest watercolours painted on a single sheet of paper). "I felt my subject deserved to be grander and bigger," he said. "Now, I would like to paint the Burj Al Dubai from a helicopter, life-size. I wonder how it will look like!"

He has painted extensively in Sicily, Venice and Turin as well as in Britain, the USA, Europe, Russia and the Middle East and has exhibited to high critical acclaim in New York and London.

His CV covers all bases of the art world. In him one can find a confluence of cultural, engineering, scientific, tourist and professional interests, which historically has been a happy combination that has made watercolour the English "national art."

Right now he is negotiating for authoring a book on the changing heritage of Arabia. "I am interested in transitions and this is something that is growing out of my explorations here," he said. He would also like to spend more time in the region, to steep himself ever deeply in the spirit of the place. He is credited for saying that "in the contemplation of ruins, one contemplates one's future, the fragility of the present, and the futility of the past." That should make him right at home in the Middle East, a place where many civilisations and ways of life have made a mark and are no more.

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Published by
Taryam Omran and Abdullah Omran

Editor
Aysha Taryam

Features Editor
Nutan Sheriff

Design
Ansar Saleem

Chief Sub-Editor / Reporter
Raghib Hassan
Zafar Iqbal

Senior Sub-Editor / Reporter
Riaz Ali Khan

Special Features Writer
Muhammad Yusuf

Editorial
Tel: 06-5777999
Fax: 06-5777737
E-mail:
gulf_today@alkhaleej.ae

Marketing
Tel: 06-5777888
Fax: 06-5777677

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