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Globalisation and personal identities by Jyoti Kalsi

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Austrian artist Bernhard Buhmann studied art and sociology at university and his interest in social issues is reflected in his paintings. In his last show in Dubai, the artist used figures of clowns and imaginary creatures that he called the pretenders, to speak about how people constantly alter their identities on social media. In his latest show, Modern Times, the artist looks at the impact of globalisation on personal identity.

The show is named after the Charlie Chaplin film, Modern Times. In the film, Chaplin's character faces the consequences of industrialisation during the 1930s. In Buhmann's paintings, his characters are trying to find their identity in a globalised world and a pluralistic society.

"In the recent past, most people lived in a rather homogenous community and society. But globalisation and technology have changed that. Society is more pluralistic, and thanks to social media we are all connected and aware of what is happening across the world. This has changed the way people think about their lives. One big difference from the past is that people always have the thought in their mind that they could be somewhere else, and living a different life. I wanted to express this attitude of perpetually questioning what life could be like if they chose another direction," Buhmann says. The show includes figurative and abstract paintings done in pastel colours to give them the look of selfies taken with a retro filter. The artist began each painting with a grid of twelve squares, playing with layers of paint and geometric shapes to let the male and female figures emerge. With their eyes covered, the figures look mysterious and pensive, while their legs convey their desire for movement as they try to find their place in a changing world. The same geometric forms are also seen in the abstract paintings, as if inviting viewers to rearrange them to construct their own narratives.

"I want my paintings to reflect the endless possibilities available to people today, and the amalgamation of multiple identities in societies and individuals. The grid is a reference to a childhood game, where we would play around with twelve squares to come up with different configurations and arrangements every time. The squares are building blocks of a preliminary self-understanding. They invite viewers to question their own existence and identities, because deciding how you want to live while knowing that you can always become someone else is an integral part of identity construction. Using the grid was also a good way to create a link between the figurative and abstract paintings in this body of work," Buhmann says.