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Unease lurks in the Utopia of a bygone era

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Gil Heitor Cortesao's works compel the viewer to question perceptions of the blissful, ideal world images that magazines typically portray

Portuguese artist Gil Heitor Cortesao's paintings are inspired by old photographs, magazines and picture postcards from the 1950s and 1960s.

In his last exhibition in Dubai the artist focused on the architecture of that period, with the presence of people in the romanticised spaces suggested only by their absence. But in his latest show, "Out of Season", he has focused on the figures in his paintings of glamorous people enjoying a lazy day on the beach, an invigorating swim in a pool or a vacation in a picturesque resort.

The scenes recreate an era and an atmosphere that the artist has never experienced; yet they seem familiar and evoke a sense of nostalgia. However, there is also something strange and disturbing about these images that compel us to question our perception of the blissful, ideal world they represent.

"The atmosphere created in these old pictures appeals to my imagination. I have not experienced that era, but these images have become a part of our collective consciousness through magazines and advertisements.

"My feelings about them are ambivalent. I feel nostalgic about something I have not directly experienced. But I also wonder if things were really so wonderful or whether this Utopia is just an idea that is being sold to us," Cortesao says. The artist has recreated the people, their fashionable clothes and accessories, the locales and landscapes in great detail. "These scenes are blissful, but also disquieting. For instance, in every image the women are simply watching while the men are involved in physical activities such as swimming and diving.

"I wonder if either the men or the women enjoyed their stereotypical roles. When you look at the painting of musicians playing for a group of inattentive hotel guests, the stark social divide is clearly visible in this idealistic depiction of life in the 1960s," he says.

A special feature of Cortesao's paintings is the technique he uses of reverse painting with oil paints on transparent acrylic sheets.

Each scene is built up layer by layer in reverse order and requires a lot of planning. The artist has made it more difficult for himself in this series by dividing many of the scenes into four, perfectly aligned acrylic panels.

"I wanted to explore the subtle tension between the organic feel of the aquatic scenes and the abstract arrangement of the panels. Also, by splitting the bodies and other touches such as the melting tables at a ski resort, I have emphasised the idea of the passing of time," he says.