

Urban journeys

Michael Sailstorfer talks about the rationale behind his latest urban-themed mixed-media artworks.
Words *Peter Feely*

A German sculptor and installation artist, Michael Sailstorfer's show is now on at Dubai's Carbon 12 gallery. Based in Berlin, his works are candid and imaginative mixed-media creations, taking the shape of mazes and urban objects, all inspired and influenced by his surroundings. We sat down for a chat in a bid to get a better understanding of the messages his work attempts to convey.

One of your pieces is a Mercedes car you've adapted into a catapult. Is it fair to say that there's an element of playfulness or mischief to your work?

I think you can say that.

Your work has been compared to the Wabi-sabi Japanese philosophy, where beauty is found in decay and impermanence. Is that something you're trying to do with your work and would you describe that as beautiful?

I didn't really study or read about Wabi-sabi before the exhibition so it's new to me. It's not really what I'm trying to do. Actually, the main pieces in the exhibition are the maze images and actually I started with those mazes in 2009. For me [the work] was to make the artistic process visible. It's about self-reflection. So I came up with the mazes.

So you're essentially making a pattern out of the chaotic nature of life and the way that you make different decisions and travelling in different directions?

I think that to be an artist and to be an artistic person it's always about making decisions. Actually it's about making this process visible. Every decision you make creates a trace on the canvas so the whole exhibition is about these tracks. I decided to show the steering wheel and the collages to be part of a journey.

When you start your artistic journeys, do you know roughly what the art is going to look like when it's finished?

It depends – it's different from piece to piece. With the maze paintings I only knew what they were going to be like when they were finished. With the



steering wheel, I already knew what it would look like when I started.

And how did you create the steering wheel and make it look really old and decayed?

I cut the steering wheel from Styrofoam and then casted it in aluminium and then spray painted it. It's actually quite easy – like a sculpture process – carving it, casting it and then painting it. I was also interested in the relationship between a steering wheel that was industrially made and the process of making the sculpture.

There's a large industrial economy in your native Germany. Did that inspire your work?

Not really – it's more about what surrounds you. When you go through

Paris you see similar things. The exhibition is about urban things: lampposts and cars. I've mostly lived in the city and the things that surround me, like cars and steering wheels – it's about playing with ideas from those things and using them to create my own language.

So it's quite relevant to Dubai...

Exactly. I think in truth it's more about urbanisation than where in particular you're living.

I read you said that, 'It's not your job as an artist to make the world a better place'.

As an artist you try to be as free as possible and maybe if your intention is to make the world a better place then you should probably work for Greenpeace or the Red Cross. Sometimes, being an artist is about provocation and confronting people. When you create art you want to make the best possible piece.

To try reach the goal without touching the walls – what do you mean by this exactly?

The mazes that are printed on the canvases are from the internet. There are lots of pages online where you can

find mazes – a pastime for children and on most of the pages it says 'try to reach the goal without touching the wall'. It's an instruction for what you have to do if you go through the maze.

Is it true that your art is influenced by Richard Serra, the American sculptor?

I always liked his work in terms of space and proportion and how it related to the human body but I'm not particularly influenced by him. In my work there are often references to classic contemporary artists like the reference to Andy Warhol in one of the maze paintings. I'm not even sure if I admire them. There are a lot of things around you like art history. I studied art history and I live in the city so I play around with the things that surround me.

Almost like a subconscious influence, then?

Of course – it's the same to play with steering wheels and Richard Serra. They are basically there in your life. **Is the exhibition a comment on consumerism in society?** Not really but I like it when there are several stories in the art for the viewer to discover – there's not just one door to open but maybe there are several doors. I'm pleased with all the reactions to my work. I'm happy to hear opinions about my work which I've never thought of before.



Michael Sailstorfer

THE LOWDOWN
Exhibition: 'Try to Reach the Goal Without Touching the Walls' at Carbon 12, Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz (04 340 6016).
Runs: Until January 17.
Artist: Michael Sailstorfer

For more Art & Culture stories, head to www.timeoutdubai.com