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Complex issues traced by simple lines

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New York-based Swiss artist Olaf Breuning works with various media, including photography, films and installation. But his latest show in Dubai, "The Good Old Evolution", highlights a different aspect of his practice. It features a selection of pen on paper drawings created over the last decade, and a new series of miniature, hand painted ceramic sculptures. The artworks look quite simple and playful, but they deal with complex, socio-political issues, offering a subtle and witty critique of contemporary society.

Breuning prefers not to work from the confines of a studio. He likes to sit in his favourite café, watching people and drawing inspiration from everyday life to make quick sketches. Later, he scans selected sketches to make bigger monochromatic line drawings. Interestingly, his tiny ceramic sculptures are all based on his drawings, and thus three dimensional iterations of the same ideas.

"For me the medium of drawing is a tool to explain complex ideas very simply. When I stage a photograph or make a film, I have to deal with colour, a team of people, the site, the weather and many other things. The drawing is just so simple. Instead of long explanations of a situation, it is a precise and direct way of explaining something about the human condition," Breuning says.

His quirky humorous, drawings and their titles tap into personal and collective memories, pop culture and art history to speak about the dualities and ironies of human existence, about conflict, and about peace.

For instance, the artist talks about the global recession and its impact on people by turning a graph of the ups and downs of the stock market into smiley and sad faces with a few simple strokes of his pen. Another drawing, "We Are So Violent" depicts a bomb falling on a tank, which is targeting a person with a gun, who in turn is shooting a man who is killing a fly.

"This drawing confronts our daily existence through a violent story. We always try to use our intellect and morals to explain certain things and sometimes that just fails. When someone is killed by an axe wielding murderer on a train, we wonder why that person did it. I can try and analyse their motives, but sometimes the act is just beyond comprehension. In my drawing of this violent chain reaction I feel that I am not explaining why these situations happen; but I am putting down an anchor for myself into the situation and looking for some clarity," the artist says.

In the sculptures, the emoji-like, comical, and often grotesque characters from Breuning's drawings take on the playful look of play dough figures made by a child. But, like the drawings, these assemblages of miniature people and objects are also funny and profound. For instance, "Poor Cow", shows a cannon fired at a castle, missing its target and hitting a cow on the other side. The piece evokes a smile, while making a strong statement about collateral damage, and the impact of war on ordinary people.

It is easy to see the political connotations in "The Bear", showing a huge bear sneaking up on a man enjoying a snack under a tree in the forest; and "Followers", featuring people blindly following each other up a slope only to fall off a steep cliff.

In "We Are All in the Same Boat", the artist has put three human figures of different colours in a boat filled with water, conveying a warning about the consequences of conflict. "The Good Old Evolution", the sculpture after which the show is named, traces the course of evolution with a line-up of different creatures. The work questions the primitive behaviour of human beings, and speculates on the future of the human race.