

The National



Artist: Sharan Budhrani. Courtesy Showcase Gallery

Frida Kahlo-inspired art by students with special needs in Dubai

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"Frida is cool, she paints about her pain and I get that." These are the words scrawled across one of the many paintings of the late Mexican artist, who is best known for her self-portraits, hanging in Showcase Gallery this month.

It captures the essence of the show.

The painting is by Alex Loveday, who is one of about 20 students at Mawaheb from Beautiful People, an arts centre for adults (16 years and above) with special needs in Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood in Dubai. The students have painted Frida Kahlo's portraits in different styles to capture the emotion they feel for the artist, whose story touched them all.

"We all paint Frida because she is a really wonderful artist who has inspired us and she paints about her pain as well as adding her own fantasy," says Loveday, a 21-year-old American who has autism. Over the course of the last few years at Mawaheb, he has massively improved the way he paints.

"If I look back over the last three years, I am so proud of all the students. I'm not just talking about the paintings but who they are as a person today," says Wemmy De Maaker, the founder of the centre.

De Maaker introduced the subject of Kahlo to the students six months ago and they worked on individual pieces as well as some group collaborations.

Sharon Harvey, the owner of Showcase Gallery, explains why she is proud to be hosting the show.

"These artists are painting from within, it is healing them and it is teaching us, too. We have learnt so much that I want to keep on doing it."

Loveday focuses on Kahlo's eyes that stare out from the paintings. He has also added a cigarette in all his works because "she liked to smoke away her sorrows".

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All proceeds from the show will go towards funding the centre. Some of the pieces, such as a large outdoor mural, are being sold by silent auction.

"I think Frida is really talented," says Loveday. "She goes through a lot of pain but that doesn't stop her fulfilling her dreams and I think none of us should give up on our dreams because of our conditions."

"I want to say that to all the people who see this show – they shouldn't stop fulfilling their dreams, no matter what condition they have."

• Frida Kahlo by Mawaheb runs until January 31 at Showcase Gallery, Alserkal Avenue. For more information, call 04 379 0940

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