

D U B A I

Reminiscences on the Silk Road

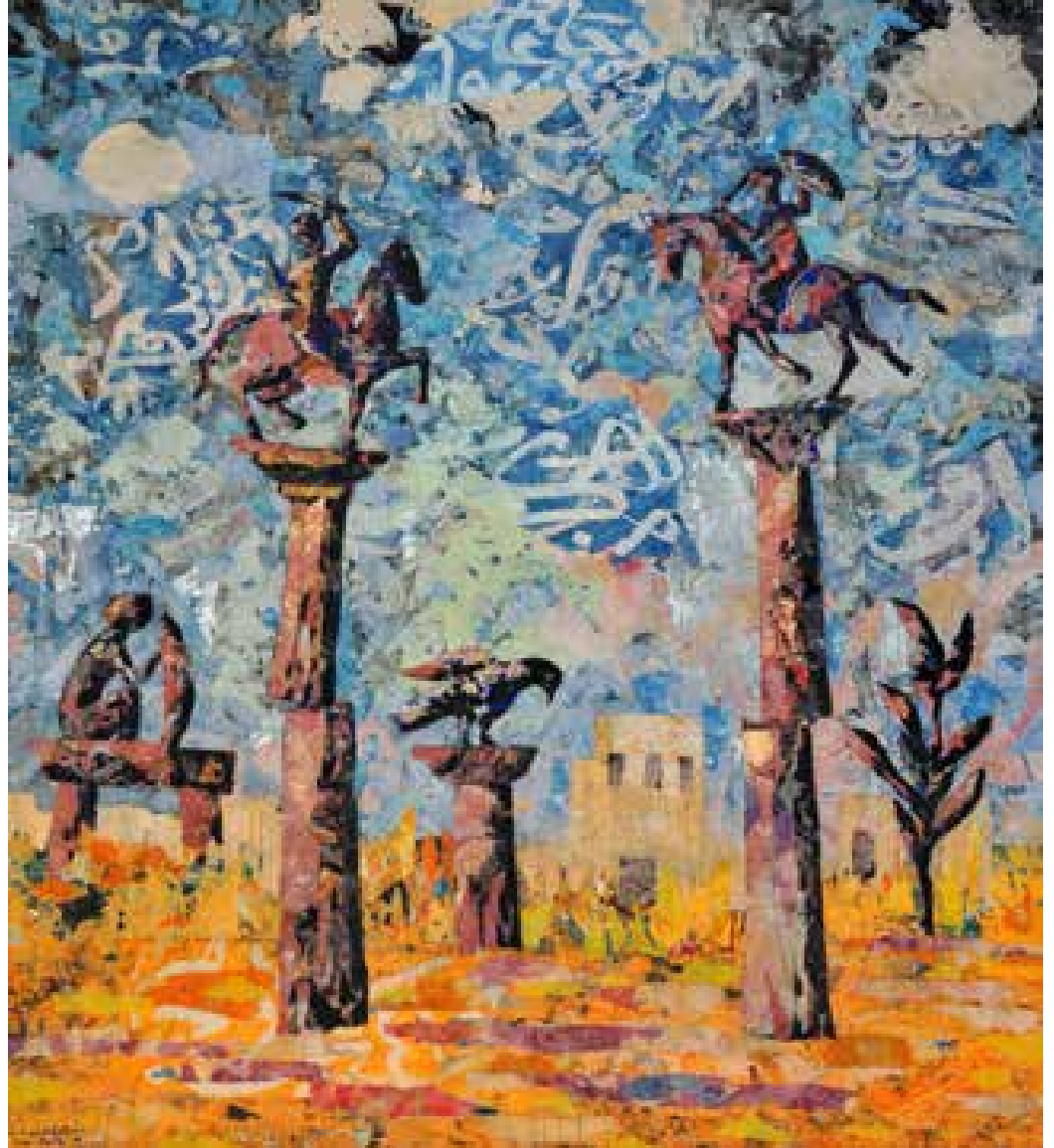
In a recent exhibition of works at **Tabari Artspace**, **Mohamed Abla** looks back to the fairytales and folklore depicting this famed trade route in its heyday

by Laura Egerton

Uplifting and jovial, an exhibition by Mohamed Abla at Tabari Artspace went some way to reaffirming the idea that an artist's personality can shine through his work.

Abla, of Egyptian origin, has been part of Maliha Tabari's programme since Artspace opened in 2003. Relocating to the Dubai International Financial Centre, Gate Village, in 2008, the gallery has recently re-launched with a new name and fresh approach to its exhibitions.

"It is important to me that the gallery space is activated and comes alive with art," Tabari tells Selections. When visitors enter the exhibition, they are greeted with artwork quite literally underfoot. Abla has made a colourful intervention on the black marble floor, featuring stickered fragments of animals, trees, flowers and figures that seem to have escaped the framed canvases on the walls behind. In their relationships with one another they come across like hieroglyphs; stylised pictures which have the potential to combine to create an articulated narrative but are still independently visually vibrant. Some of the canvases, such as *The Return of the Warrior*, are divided into distinct parts for separate moments of the story.



Mohamed Abla,
The Copper City,
mixed media
on canvas,
140 × 160 cm, 2016

Narrative has always been integral to Abla's paintings. The last show he held in Dubai in 2012 was *My Family*, a series of intimate group portraits. The ongoing repercussions of the 2011 revolutions had a profound effect on his practice and this new body of work is an attempt to escape by looking at fairytales and regional folklore from a time when the lands on the Silk Road fulfilled an important role as conduits of trade between the east and western worlds. The stories he illustrates are fairly obscure, but are connected by a universal appreciation of good triumphing over evil and love conquering all. *The Copper City* portrays a series of columns set at different heights, upon which figures on horseback, a bird and other forms stand, the composition dominated by a sky filled with clouds and calligraphy. It comes from a Pakistani fable in which

a city's population has been turned into copper and a prince from a distant land arrives and saves the day, much like *Sleeping Beauty* or *Rapunzel*.

What gives the works their special character is the marbled paper Abla has created using the Turkish Ebru technique, which he then cuts into shapes to create his collages. Patterns appear quite randomly on the paper, adding to the childlike, playful nature of the works and reflecting the convivial character of the artist himself. **AP**

Mohamed Abla, *The Silk Road*,
ran at Tabari Artspace,
DIFC, Gate Village Building
3, Dubai from October
10 to November 24