

Zahidah in Perspective



Bernard Hoffert introduces 'Zahidah' in the context of Middle Eastern Art.

Art from the Middle East and Iran has made an impact on world visual culture in recent years. Participation in the 2009 and 2011 Venice Biennales by several Middle Eastern countries, the '*Fiendish*' exhibition of Contemporary Iranian art at Asia House London, Janet Rady Fine Art's regular exhibitions of artists from the Arab world and the Saatchi Gallery's, exhibition of Middle Eastern art, all testify to the growing interest in the creative output of a region more known for its politics than its art. But contemporary art practice has long been part of Arab artists' awareness.

For decades artists from the Middle East have wrestled with how to create a contemporary art which integrated their cultural traditions with Western developments. Loath to abandon their traditions, some as old as civilisation itself, and often limited by religious sensitivities, artists have explored the potential of their vast historic past, searching for meeting points with international styles, theoretical positions and value systems, attempting to find a suitable content to express the ideals and emotions of the Arab world. They have been searching for ways to express the feelings, perceptions, aspirations and sensitivities of peoples often forgotten in the dialogue of contemporary visual culture. It is from the vastness and depth of the Middle Eastern context that the '**Zahidah**' exhibition evolves.

Zahidah Zeytoun Millie confronts her context as part of the modern Arab world with both passion and reflection-passion in the intensity and emotion of her style, reflection in the thought provoking concepts of her content. Born in Syria and living in Dubai, her experience blends a vision of nature and an historic glory with images of post modernity, through the structures of a modern city. Emblems of faith and history, minarets, screens, domes and towers are matched by the symbols of contemporary power, the monolithic monuments of wealth and authority which stud the skyline in a modern secular city. Past and present unite in a contemplative yet critical vision of the role of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

Perhaps the most pervasive aspect of this work is its sensitivity to perception and the inner meaning we take from our vision of the world. At one level there is the recording of the land, the wadis and the mountains which recount the story of an

aged landscape with reference to the awakening of culture through text in its earliest cuneiform structure; the legacy of Sumerian identity is a bridging theme crossing from the zigurats of the Babylonian land between the rivers, to the Dubai Tower of today.

The evocation of what we see marks out how we respond to these paintings. The emblems of fear and destruction, of war and despair are set against the image of peace and salvation; growth and reconstruction amid the chaos of turmoil; culture and calm amid loss. There is also the inner vision which shapes so much within these works; the search for identity, the expression of need and the celebration of feeling. These paintings cannot be fully comprehended without some replication of the emotions which guided them and which these images express. There is the indignation of political upheaval, the anxiety at loss, the torment and distress which comes from an inability to save that which is dear. In contrast the calm and serenity of isolation, the being of a place remote from modern life, where the mind can drift through the hills and valleys of distant places, meandering across the thresholds of memory and desire, finding happiness in being who we are. This is the poetry of humanity, of finding identity amid the chaos.

Beyond the tangible and the intangible, there is the strongest evocation of all, the ephemeral emotions, so fleeting and so light they hardly leave a mark upon the senses, yet if we hold them, they are the life enhancing qualities of existence, the subtle yet triumphant experiences which make us human and help us to see the world, not in its material form, but its ethereal presence, the numinosity beyond form which hints at the sacred, but not of faith, which talks of the real, but not of permanence; that which blends perception and reality into a meaningful whole-the unified understanding of our experiences.

These images demonstrate a rich sense of painterliness; they are works which use the medium as a language to speak, to question and to reflect, at once posing and answering in the same image. Their content is shaped by line and colour, texture and tone, a dialogue of medium to communicate an idea, convey a feeling, reflect a thought. But what is represented on the canvas, be that land, place or person is only part of the message; each work holds its deeper meaning in the subtle allusions to what lies beyond, the shadow of a sensibility which the images shield and which ultimately give them a potency beyond that which they depict. This is interesting art which builds on a new emerging contribution to world culture spreading from the Middle East.

Bernard Hoffert

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