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Saudi Arabian Painter Hayfa Abdullah Utilizes Imagination To Find Universal Truth

By Adam Lehrer



Hayfa Abdullah, 'Spray,' (2015)

Hayfa Abdullah is a Saudi Arabian painter focusing on surreal interpretations of Arabic culture. At the heart of her paintings seems to be a striving to understand the essence of what it truly means to be a woman in contemporary Arabic culture, as well as a human in the world at large. To seek answers, Abdullah finds herself painting from her own imagination, as if searching the depths of her own mind to gain a sense of deeper truth that cannot be found by simple observation of the outside world. Color is paramount to the work, and like her hero Frida Kahlo, Abdullah utilizes color to navigate her own emotions in relation to her own personal world.

Being a woman from Saudi Arabia, critics will be quick to project their own politics into their interpretations of her work. And though Abdullah does not paint from a specific political view point, she welcomes all interpretations of her work as valid and interesting in their own various ways. Her work will be on view at her first U.S. solo show at Stellan Holm Gallery until May 27. Abdullah believes these paintings to be the result of over a decade of honing her painting ability as well as her own emotional reckoning. Abdullah answered some of my questions about the exhibit via E-mail.

Adam Lehrer: This exhibit provides surrealist depictions of Arabic culture, growing up in Saudi Arabia do you think you always viewed Arabic culture in a more conceptual manner such as this?

Hayfa Abdullah: As a woman who has grown up in Arabic culture – objects, symbols, and identifiers of my life are inevitable, in the same way that an American would invariably include Western symbols and objects. But I would say that the heart of my work is not necessarily culturally specific, even if conveying certain cultural norms is an inevitable consequence of my work.

Lehrer: In your mission, you discuss how “the mind has no limits.” Have you always lived in your mind? Is it an escape from your surroundings?

Abdullah: As human beings we are asked to live inside a type of psychological box- to think in certain ways, to conform to the norms of society. But we are individuals. Living and thinking alike oppresses us. It is true that I want to erupt in ways and art allows me to get in touch with a more authentic version of myself. We are all much more than we are “allowed” to be.



Hayfa Abdullah, 'Cigar,' (2015)

Lehrer: When did you first become interested in art?

Abdullah: I was influenced by my late sister Noura, a great artist. Later on, my mentor Mona Al-Qasabi ignited my passion to paint. I will never forget the first time she mixed colors in front of me, when I was 19. She started mixing colors in front of me, and I can't explain it..... I awoke! The richness and vivacity of the oils touched something very deep in my spirit; I was hooked.

Lehrer: What was it about Frida Kahlo that connected to you so deeply?

Abdullah: I love her strong color choices that excite the viewer and bring us in. Second, I love her use of narrative. I feel that she is painting from her life experiences. At the same time, there is ample room for interpretation. I would say that I try to bring in these elements when I create.



Hayfah Abdullah, 'Ice Cube,' (2015)

Lehrer: Your work feels like it's sort of tapping into both dreams and memories and seeing them interact with one another, is that accurate? How did you develop that interplay?

Abdullah: My true form of painting stems from the imagination rather than observation. For my most recent series, I asked myself: what objects can I integrate with human forms in an unexpected and intriguing way? I began to envision ephemeral materials such as ice cubes, perfume, smoke, or fire and light, to be transformed into human portraits.

Lehrer: Are the faces in this exhibition people you know or recognize or do they come purely from your imagination?

Abdullah: Most of them come purely from my imagination. The only one in this exhibit that is not a creation is Mahjoub, who is my doorman back home. I find his face to have bold features that lend themselves to painting.

Lehrer: You also engage in portraiture, what do you tap into to try and illustrate what you are trying to say about the subject depicted in these portraits?

Abdullah: It's not so much what they look like realistically, although this is part of it. The deeper part is a spirit that I sense living inside of them. I watch their features, trying to get a clear sense of what expressions or subtle, overt moves I can make with my brush to bring out the depth of the person within them.

Lehrer: People are going to try and attach politics to your work due to where you are from and the Arabic culture you are depicting in the work, do you welcome political interpretations? Is there a message, political or otherwise, that is important to you?

Abdullah: I never tell the viewer what I want her to experience through my work. I believe that true art should be capable of creating its own feeling in the viewer, and it may often be quite different from what I intend.

Lehrer: It's interesting to me that your first solo exhibitions are in New York and Saudi Arabia, was that intentional to show at home the same time that you in a sense showing your work to the world?

Abdullah: It was completely intentional. The Saudi exhibition was meant to capture my artwork from the last 16 years (2000-2016). The New York exhibition is about my true voice and where I have arrived as an artist. In terms of the order of the shows, I felt it was principally important that I showcased my work first for my people in Saudi.

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