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Lebanese landscapes from the past



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BEIRUT: Abdel-Aziz Street is dense three-dimensional collage of billboards, signage and ads, plastered on every wall of every structure. One display window, however, exhibits a more refined image. Something compels you to stop and take a second look. The movement of the seemingly abstract painting suggests foam, like Mediterranean spray crashing against the base of the rock of Raouche.

"Landscapes," the solo show of work by Lebanese artist Fadia Haddad, now up at Agjal Gallery, exudes an existential aura. Distinct figures are rare in Haddad's work, and she uses color very sparingly – her canvasses ruled by black and white and grey.

The Lebanese landscapes that resonate from Haddad's work are from her distant past.

In conversation, the artist struggles to express how she feels like to be a fish out of water. Having graduated from the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) in 1984, she got a scholarship from the French government to attend Paris' L'Ecole Superieure des Beaux Arts.

Her technique is as precise as her palette is monochrome. The most obvious feature of Haddad's landscapes is the absence of concrete figures. There are no people absorbed by technology, no new construction sites reaching skywards, no traffic-congested streets.

Her works depict infinitely sinuous waves, grainy surfaces, overcast skies and in the distance, perhaps, the subtle suggestion of a mountain.

As a child, Haddad lived in Baabdat with her family, and she says she was frequently entranced by the majesty of Mount Lebanon looming over her terrace. The mountain underwent distinct changes with each phase of the sun. The artist has internalized the magic she associates with these tableaux.

Haddad recalls the Lebanon of decades past as something regal, natural and strong. Then she saw something tragic happen, something she couldn't quite understand. The poison of war and ideology settled into the core of the country, undermining its past landscapes.

In her work, Haddad turns her gaze to the power of nature, to free it from the wretched present. To capture this image – primordial elements like earth, sea and sky

– she turned to acrylics.

“I had depicted birds, masks, and landscapes for 15 years,” Haddad tells The Daily Star. “But my landscapes were different then. There were more colors and were only sketched on paper. Three years ago, I started working with only black and white, and on a much more durable canvas. These two colors – white and black – are inexplicable. I wanted to define my frustration and grief at what had happened to my beautiful, soulful country.”

When she begins work on each new canvas, Haddad approaches it on her hands and knees, applying herself to her craft with a reckless abandon.

“Painting on the floor gives me a chance to move everything, to feel everything at once,” she says. “I become like liquid. It’s tremendously more engaging than painting on a canvas tripod, which limits my spirit. I try to incorporate my entire heart, body and mind into anything I portray.”

She often works on several pieces simultaneously. “It’s as though a metamorphosis takes place,” she says. “The textures and constituents inherent in each landscape take an incredible amount of time to dry, so I typically work on many pieces at one time.”

Eyes welling with tears, Haddad struggles to express her discontent with everything that’s been forgotten from her childhood. “I feel strange in this country when I return,” she says, describing how overwhelmed she feels at the way construction has alienated nature. “The beauty is gone. I can’t live to remember Lebanon the way it is now. There’s no substance inherent in it anymore.”

Haddad says she visits Beirut, then returns to Paris as quickly as possible. The ugliness, as she describes it, is too much to endure. It’s unrecognizable. This is why she calls her landscapes as “Land-escapes.” Through her paintings, the artist is able to escape the troubling atrocities inflicted upon her image of Lebanon. “It makes me cry,” she says, “because it’s my country and I can’t do more to liberate it. So I arrest the essence.”

At the break of dawn, and as twilight falls over Lebanon, even the lining on the trees and water are shades of black, grey and white. All that is distinguishable is a mass, a great shape of a tree, or a mountain, or a boulder out at sea. By beholding the charm intrinsic in the depths of time, the force is stronger than war, as illustrated by Haddad’s representations.

Fadia Haddad’s “Landscapes” is up at Agial Art Gallery through Nov. 21. For more information, please visit <http://www.agialart.com/exhibition.html>.

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