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'The purely physical does not interest me': Egyptian painter Riham El-Sadany on her new exhibition

Najet Belhatem, Thursday 22 Dec 2016

Artist Riham El-Sadany is both an archaeologist and energy hunter in her new exhibition, *Scent of Egypt*, currently on display at Cairo's Gallery Misr



"My goal was not to paint the places as they are. I paint the energy that emerges from them," Riham El-Sadany comments on *Scent of Egypt*, her latest exhibition taking place at Gallery Misr, between 18 December 2016 and 4 January 2017.

The display is distant in content to the artist we know from previous exhibitions, where her brush strokes explore the souls of women in the world they reign. Suffering, happy, aggressive, or wearing rams' horns, women depicted in many of El-Sadany's works always keep their femininity and above all their force.

In *Scent of Egypt*, El-Sadany remains faithful to the main framework of her conceptual development, but diverts from her usual approach to her subjects.

"I did not live in Egypt except during my studies and I have never had an opportunity to know my country. Then I was invited to the Luxor International Painting Symposium and this is where it kicked off. I also experienced a shock. Hearing all the talk about tourism slowing down, I found in those voices a different dimension for my work and I turned to the energy that emanates from the stones. It could see a sort of presence in them."

This is how El-Sadany became a hunter of energy which she captures in her exhibition. The display also includes two lions of Kasr El-Nil Bridge in Cairo, as they hover in the middle of the squares and streets that surround them. While the lions we know, in a way they are also different.

"These lions are unique to me. They do not look like anything I have ever seen so far. They are silent, they seem to express nothing, they are neither attacker nor in a state of anger, yet their presence is so obvious. They are guardians, just like the Sphinx," El-Sadany comments.

Still, in El-Sadany's works women are all around and bursting with femininity and elegance. "The world of women is the world I know the best. I cannot paint the the world of men whose depths I still do not know."

But this time, El-Sadany's women are calmer and more serene. "They have more confidence in themselves. They depict my own state, as I feel more stable. Maybe, the fact that I'm pregnant also plays a role here," she adds.

Even if some subjects are wounded and bleed from the mouth or knee, they are strong and much less defensive than those she used to paint so far. They no longer have ram horns.

"The horns were a self-defence against society. It was a phase of my life."

In Scent of Egypt, women are in control. "They portray their own lives and lives of others and smile. They are happy to do so. For me, woman is humanity; she is the source of life. My women are always beautiful. Even when I paint an old lady, she is full of life. I do not aim at painting the physique but rather capture the soul, which always has those luminous aspects."

"I always look at a parallel time"

El-Sadany portrays women who display and live their femininity without being overly convoluted. "The woman who has a physical problem is subject to the gaze of the other. But if you do not submit to the eyes of others, the problem can disappear, as submitting conceals the femininity or turns it into merchandise, a product for sale." El-Sadany underlines that her subjects are "always beautiful and confident."

A sense of buoyancy emerges from all the paintings. "I still feel that there are people hovering over the places. People who were there and continue to be there. "

Sometimes the clouds hang in place above the skies, at other times they are thrown under the voluptuous figures of women. Those same women float above the palace of the Baron Empain.

"What interests me is the psychology of being. Its relation to the body and its vibrations. I feel other people's energy. As I have said, the purely physical does not interest me. I want to perceive the emotions we do not see. This is how I felt the Baron's Palace. People are frightened and stories have been made up about crimes that are said to have happened there, but I felt it as something beautiful."

El-Sadany proceeds in the same manner as an archaeologist, brushing the dust off ancient findings, which she then restores. "I paint places as I feel them, how I perceive them to be on the inside. I can restore a missing piece which I will find in the archives. My time does not exist, I always live in a parallel time."

“Hatchepsout is painted on the walls of the temple, wearing a beard, stripped of her breasts. I drew her in a mirror, in which her femininity is reflected.”

The Scent of Egypt paintings overflow with life and detail. “I am very talkative in my paintings. I can make use of the centre of attraction. It is a true pleasure for me. I do not paint an idea, I paint worlds. I aim to lead spectators into the world of the painting, in which they shall remain. My challenge is to bring them in, and prevent them from ever leaving.”

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