

# Serene Velocity

## Nasser Soumi's paintings

[Jessica Hollows](#), July 27, 2011

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"Intuition is a reservoir much richer than knowledge," says Nasser Soumi. The Palestinian artist's recent exhibit of paintings at the **Agial Art Gallery** engages on an instinctive sensory level, plunging viewers into a vital labyrinth of light, color and form.

The eye ricochets around infinite tactile layers of splattered paint in utmost defiance of depth perspective. Specks and shards of earthy browns, blues, reds, whites and blacks shimmer in the ever-changing whirlwind of our untethered gaze. Soumi's paintings refuse static observation, compelling viewers to actively derive meaning from the visceral experience of raw materials.

Soumi's 16 paintings are composed of naturally occurring pigments mixed with acrylic, drizzled and splashed over wood panels. The artist describes his work as a dance, because "you use your whole body to dance." Swathes of paint track his fluid gestures, revealing his creative process. The viewer furthers the dance, generating boundless variations by approaching and receding from the panels.

Up close, charcoal cracks like hot tarmac perspiring under gallery lights. Ochre gleams glassily like glazed and baked clay. Indigo crumbles and cascades. The viscous paint seems to have never fully dried: it continues to transform, bubbling, dissipating and coagulating in time with our consciousness. Amidst flurries of color, visible grains of wood divulge the works' underlying base.

If you take a few steps back, infinitesimal fragments coalesce in coherent direction. Soumi's paintings induce a serene calm, qualifying vibrant movement with an assertive gravity that rivets the eyes.

This exhibit, entitled "Nebula," is the result of Soumi's first attempt at dripping and flinging paint in the vein of the Abstract Expressionists. Soumi chooses mediums on impulse, intuiting the means necessary to express his ideas. By embracing spontaneity, he gleans insight into his inner self.

Long after Soumi intuitively began using indigo 20 years ago, he realized the color's deep-rooted personal significance. Indigo portraits had adorned the walls of his childhood home, and, according to a British Museum exhibition he saw, indigo was "the first color of Palestine."

Indigo has since become Soumi's signature color. Uniting earth, sky and sea, the pigment emblemizes the interconnectedness communicated by his artwork. Soumi's paintings link our interior reality to the exterior universe by upholding the commonality of our contingent perceptual experience, in all its ambiguity, in each eternal moment.

The artist's abstract homages to the devastating massacre of Palestinians at Tel al-Zaatar and the displaced citizens of Nablus surpass conventional symbols of resistance by gripping us physically as well as intellectually, creating multi-sensory experiences that divulge human existence amidst political catastrophe.

Soumi loathes repetition, and constantly experiments with new forms. His past endeavors include etchings, dance performances, found object installations, and an elaborate staging of the disappearance of Beirut's Raouché rock. He pursues his passions with voracious curiosity, often undertaking meticulous research. His recent book *L'olivier et la Palestine: une passion charnelle* traces the vertical human and environmental history of Palestinian olive trees. He is planning a similar project focusing on the subject of wine.

Soumi suggests that human expression is a primal need rooted in our organic

relationship to the natural world. "I always try to imagine myself 50,000 years ago," he says, "how would I have expressed myself then?"

Soumi's consistently fragments the veneer of divisive linguistic preconceptions. The artist deplors the soulless standardization of "mass language," which stifles individual existence and fails to uphold the unique voice that each person possesses. He tirelessly searches for a new language, gorging the depths of the soul in a Rimbaud-esque effort to give our being a physical form.

Through his efforts to abstract sound and movement, Soumi has demonstrated that: "our deep expression can be similar." In preparation a 1999 performance in Paris, Soumi worked individually with various musicians and dancers to unlearn formal conventions and access their instinctive expression. When the artists came together for the first time on stage, the audience was astounded by the harmonious movements of a German opera singer and an Andalusian dancer. Superficial divisions of language, culture and background dissolved in a celebration of the underlying humanity we share.

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