

'Flowers' for dad: A different kind of floral tribute

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Two years ago, Samia Osseiran Junblat exhibited paintings of somber lemons marked by melancholy and called the show "Bitter Lemons." In her current exhibition at Unesco Palace, the theme is "Flowers" all painted in memory of her father, who died last year at the age of 93.

Samia's father was the illustrious statesman, Adel Osseiran, one of the small band of fervent nationalists who in the early 1940s defied the French to win Lebanon's full independence. He was a member of its first Cabinet and remained politically active throughout his life, serving as a Member of Parliament, as a minister in several cabinets and as speaker of the House.

In conjunction with the exhibition, a 282-page book published in tribute to Osseiran is being distributed as a gift to the public. Written in Arabic, it contains a summary of his life, as well as the speeches, testimonials and eulogies delivered by Lebanon's dignitaries upon his death.

Samia painted the flowers because her father loved them. In the exhibition catalogue, which includes 18 full-color reproductions of her work, she describes her own feelings for flowers and how they relate to her father's life and death. She writes:

"I dedicate this exhibition to the memory of my father for his love of the earth, for nature and flowers and their symbolic meaning and importance in our lives. They touched me greatly after his death.

"The paintings are depicted in an expressionistic spirit of color contrast and interpretation, revealing the mystery of nature and flowers, their symbolic blooming and withering as in the eternal cycle of growth, life and death.

“Flowers revive, refresh the soul of the living and give reverence to the soul of the dead. The active spirit and deeds of my father for me symbolize a blooming spring, and I have chosen delicate and wild flowers of Lebanon that remind me of his spirit and his giving, which, in turn, have given me consolation. His love for flowers symbolizes the way he loved Lebanon: Free, blooming and beautiful.”

The first painting to meet the eye hangs at the entrance to the exhibition hall. It is entitled “My Father’s Chair” a dark blue velvet armchair, and next to it a low table with a white vase full of white roses. The vacant chair, the beseeching flowers, the counterpoint of quiet blues and whites, suggest the whisperings of a mournful requiem.

Except for the first painting, Samia’s flowers are not ordinary blooms bunched in a vase or scattered in a garden. Preferring to enter the “mystery” of flowers, she poses them as she would the portrait of a person, in which each becomes a face that is like no other. In size, they are magnified beyond reality. This endows them with an insistent new reality that pulls us into the heart of the flower.

Samia lives in a villa overlooking Sidon, surrounded by a garden full of flowers, both cultivated and wild. If she has a preference, it is for the delicate blooms the gardenias, cyclamens, roses, lilies and poppies she most often chooses to paint. These she approaches with soft colors and a tender, sensual brush.

With a somewhat surreal eye, she delineates the undulating flow of petals as they curve inward, and emphasizes the special variegations of color and form that characterize each flower. It is the life-giving stamen, however, that acts as the focal point in many of the paintings and on which she concentrates an almost microscopic attention to detail.

When Samia confronts cactus and thorns and other prickly plants of the wild, however, she departs from tenderness, intensifies color and sharpens

her brush. In these, she appears to be asserting the need for protection. The plants become people of potent strength, guarding their existence with piercing weapons of defense. To her, they also symbolize the meaning of her father's love and presence in her life.

Samia is an artist who finds equally valid avenues of expression in a diversity of style. She follows and explores what touches her sensibilities. What will come next, she doesn't know. But whatever it is, we know that she will paint it as always with authentic emotion and an uncompromising commitment to aesthetic considerations.

Trained in Lebanon, Italy and Japan, Samia has been exhibiting since 1966. This is her 19th solo exhibition. The exhibition ends Saturday.

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