

ELUSIVE RECOLLECTIONS

The Art of Mahmood Sabzi

Interpretatively speaking the teleology or the end result of Sabzi's work is abstraction. His paintings, while graphically objective and figurative, nevertheless, seek release from the narrow confines of reality. To carefully read his art is to decipher the ouroboros structure that begins as seemingly real and ends conceptually in abstraction. Thus, the implications of his works are broad, universal and metaphysical. His device for abstraction is subtle, for the means by which he structures and creates this abstraction is through the intermingling of disparate cultural *symbols* that bespeak the elusive narratives of transcendental identity and belief. To put it differently, as much as the symbols in his works are temporal and contextual, these symbols, by addressing the mythic-narrative signs rise above the daily experiences and the functionally known. Sabzi's images are often culled from the Western and Eastern artistic repertoire which, when conjoined, appear as distinctly alien outlooks, and thus not surprisingly, these designs allude to the interminable and unbounded possibilities of being. It is this quality more than any other that makes these recollections and reformulations in his art elusive and thus abstract.

His most recent work "The Edge" is an apt example to discuss. Here, a miniature painting, enclosing a Western abstract design, is superimposed upon an English dictionary's page. These Western and Eastern forms, implicit of separate grounds of interiority, undermine, deconstruct and subvert one another. The relation of these forms may only be understood as metalinguistic or metamorphic and as an abstract frame of reference. Moreover, here the text, often an indispensable facet of Sabzi's art (traditionally functioning as the object-language or as the designated key to elucidate and clarify) turns irrelevant, moot and therefore, furthers the sense of abstraction in this work. Moreover, practically in all of Sabzi's art the texts serve as a reminder that language, the so-called unifying principle, is itself an abstract device. That the ability of language to read forms and emotions across cultural zones is minimal if not altogether impossible.

The inviolability expressed through language and forms is quite touching as the separate and distinct spheres intermix without abandoning their original attributes and cultural integrity. It is as if the worlds may meet in a crucible but never integrate or unify. And here arises another interpretation. These are works of art based on works of art. Sabzi conflates the very artistic-mythic images of vastly disparate cultures and unites them, though they appear as odd

bedfellows. Thus these are the clash of visions and the clash of imaginations that lead to re-evaluations of all sorts. It seems, through a reading of his art, that for Sabzi myths, far more than “What Is Really There,” determine the shape of man’s fate and *Being*. Looking at these works one cannot help but feel the touch of lost worlds, surviving as symbols, and thus the feel of meanings whose concrete faces have long been effaced. In the words of Italo Calvino,

“...we measure ourselves against something else that is not present, something else that belongs to the immaterial, invisible world because it can only be thought, imagined, or because it was once and is no longer, past, lost unattainable in the land of the dead.” (from: *If on a winter’s night a traveller*, 1979).

For Sabzi, the intermix of signs and symbols is therefore a way of opting for art rather than life or concealing life beneath the mask of art. One must wonder if the selected symbols and his method do not hide something fundamental-- perhaps the pain of separation-- the kind of pain that he so skillfully depicted in “Metamorphoses.” This early painting is a masterpiece of amalgamated cultural signs depicting the agony of recreating oneself in a new world. In the later works the motifs fall onto the canvas remaining faithful to their origins. These images unable to merge and integrate, leave us wondering, if it is not the fear of the fiery intermixture that keeps them so coolly together.

On another level, one may assume that the interpretation of such works as “Mission Accomplished I” and “Mission Accomplished II” or the “Nuns at Play” is straight forward indictments of capitalism, colonialism and religious gamesmanship. But it would be wrong to see these works as mimetic and linear expressions. What comes across is the illogic of a world that mixes and intermixes random and wholly unrelated elements, as perhaps is also the way of the universe.

It is Sabzi’s recollections and reflections that often lead him to a culling of images from various grand styles. Thus, for example, the images of Warhol or the miniatures of various Iranian periods not only recall artistic periods and achievements but also evoke metaphysical sign-posts of cultural identity. These paintings essentially evoke discourses, be it directly or indirectly, about how the fate and the life of man is measured in art, and that history too is a construct of aesthetic preferences. The message in all of these assimilations is that there is no pure and comprehensive grasp of the real but selected viewpoints. Examples are images Marilyn Monroe juxtaposed with oriental signs, dollar signs, Disney cartoons, supersize hamburgers, and many more. These works are all reminders of how certain cultural forms coalesce with others just because they are imbued with new meanings in different settings or because they have become relevant as a result of the desires for acculturation within a cultural space.

Expatriated artists are often burdened by the persistence of memory. In fact, far more than their native compatriots. Sabzi is one of the artists in exile and his works are the lingering signs of an unshakable memory that constantly evokes a romantic vision of the past. His relation with his adopted land is just as mythopoeic and mythic based as his memory of his homeland. His images are the conflation of the various strata of linguistic and image recollections selected from a historical pile that not only drives his compulsion to paint but also expands the horizon of our view of cultural interactions. Ancient and modern run together and do so by random assimilations. Thus the works are polyphonic with distinct memory layers and distinct music of their own. And here our ability to separate the real and the imagined; the real and the art becomes at times almost impossible.

The question is what results from these random juxtapositions? Primarily it is an act of shattering the assumed unity and purity of life and asserting the unpredictable flow of energies across borders and time zones. The result, as in the works of a few others, is fact and fiction in the same space, reality and myths embodied as one. But above all his art is about a universe where unrelated strata merge and confrontations with reality and facts turn into literary exercises. Above all Sabzi's art liberates the image from the syntax that creates meaning within it. This liberation is ultimately the open-ended play of signs and symbols far beyond what is on the canvas.

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