

# Cutting Edge Innovations: Abstraction

Exiled artists in the West are, now more than ever, relevant to contemporary expressions and the creative *zeitgeist*. In an era of multicultural expressions and cross cultural references what was once considered alien is now a vista into new visions and ultimately release from the confines of our rigid historical logic and its myopia. Postmodernism is about assimilations of postmodernism as witnessed in the architecture of Robert Venturi and the photographs of Cindy Sherman. And yet, its most liberating moment is realized in cross cultural juxtapositions and perceptions. In these types of works there is a continuous battle between the emotional and the intellectual. The artist while impelled by recondite and inexplicable inner forces is nevertheless also conscious of a history that demands reference to its labors and past formulations.

To begin with his earliest of paintings the images are formed in the crucible of Western sensibilities and are devoid of any references either to art history or to a specific tradition or locality. What comes into play, through various assimilations of forms, that individually maintain their sense of integrity and collectivity evoke a wholly different syntax, is a flight of fantasies rarely tied to physical experience, and almost always awakening spiritual peregrinations. This sets him apart from the many contemporary artists whose creations is a balancing act of juxtaposing Western art history with their native traditions and soul- despite of the historical trappings and often inexplicable affiliations of their native and indigenous origins. For most exiled artists the West is such a powerful guide that their expressions are always colored and affected by the history of Western art rather than a real and meaningful connection to it. Recent works by Shirin Neshat and a number of other Eastern artists bespeaks eloquently of these East-West fusions that have become so meaningful an aspect of postmodern art and visions. As in Neshat, the Eastern soul often dreams of resurrecting itself through the voices and sounds of an alien West, admired more because of the East's failings rather than the West's achievements. Perhaps one of the main problems with non-Western art for the last one hundred years is European art history, rather than European art. The impact of this well structured and long honored textual tradition has been a series of confluences, often culled from the extremes of the cultural and artistic spectrums. One can travel far and wide and hardly find an artist who is not suspended

between the demands of Western aesthetics and his or her own soul's formulations of Eastern traditions. Sabzi fuses seamlessly and reveals the meeting ground of so many diverse and seemingly antipodal forces.

For example, in Sabzi's figurative paintings a kind of Eastern romanticism is at play. The images yearn to be more than nature can ever constitute or allow them to be. A mannerist sensibility governs their proportions and the mood evokes a wistfulness for a chimerical world filled with a kind of prelapsarian innocence. Almost all the faces are masked, save their reflections in mirrors. One is reminded of a Hart Crane line, "As silent as the mirror is believed images plunge in silence by."

Sabzi's abstract paintings are in one sense an exploration of the unknown. They evoke a desire to rediscover or even to resurrect oneself in a new light. His sense of ambiguity and dissolution of forms can be likened to Monet at his moment of conversion from romanticism-realism to impressionism. All forms and patterns are evanescent and perform their roles within an indeterminate abstract space. Sabzi's early paintings represent the last vestiges of their cultural origins and formative aesthetic impulses before they rise at the horizon of contemporary art. His early figurative paintings display a profound relation to abstract perceptions of the world. The figures hover above the physical world and transcend all references to signs and tangible phenomena. He reworks the abstractions and gives rise to a new type of figuration where one is suspended between experience and dream, reality and music.

They also exemplify some of the cutting edge innovations in painting of the 1980's where the figure / ground relationship was redefined. Abstract shapes and *trompe l'oeil* flourishes are given new life within the formal constructions of abstract expressionism, fused with painterly elements from color field painting. In works like *Nightriders* and *Bluesquare*, Sabzi demonstrates a highly developed control of composition, orchestrating disparate shapes and scales into harmonious yet provocative explorations of abstract space and time. Squares, rectangles, arcs and fleeting referents to the "real" hover and intersect in their own moment, seemingly ready to move and shift when the viewer looks away. Each painting's elements exist in a perfect tension, held together through a formal yet elastic structure that allows for imaginative interjections that surprise and delight the viewer. Sabzi's sophisticated approach to color and use of a dazzling array of painterly effects is clear evidence of his mastery of the medium.

Interestingly enough, these works are both an acknowledgement of Iranian traditions and also a rejection of them. They powerfully point out that one cannot escape oneself unless one undermines oneself, as Sabzi does with his Janus-like ability to forge a strong personal approach to both figuration and abstraction. Here is a clash and the conflation of two cultures. And here is where the psychological unrest of these eclectic and also learned works emerges. They are learned in the sense that they are deeply tied to an understanding of another structuring. Just as the works of most of the early moderns were deeply aware of the African, Oceanic and other non-Western influences, these early paintings are likewise formed in the language of modernity. These paintings manifest the complicities between past and present, the external and the internal and, above all, language and desire.

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