

# Lina Ogaily

## *Faces*

by Laura Trelford

Like many contemporary artists, Lina Ogaily's online presence is astonishing. She is very active on Facebook, where anyone can be an art critic. You can read people's opinions of her work on the guest page of her own website and on ArtSlant. In this virtual world an artist can develop quite a following without displaying their work physically. Can online viewers really appreciate a painting? How does such casual, immediate commentary affect the critical reception of an artist?

In the flesh, what initially hits you is the onslaught of colour, a disparate, chaotic and almost random concoction of hues often thickly applied with the finger or palette knife and standing up from the surface. Then follow the powerful, slightly disconcerting focus and intensity of an eye staring at you full face. All facial features are somewhat exaggerated – lips and nose along with the eye and eyebrow – but in the swirl of lines running in different directions they become abstract shapes. This is the effect of *Faces* by Lina Ogaily, who has been diligently painting in Dubai for the past ten years. Ogaily is quick to outline the challenges she has





had to overcome as an artist: firstly being an Arab, secondly being an Iraqi Arab and thirdly being a woman. Growing up in Kuwait as a daughter of two architects, she was well versed in the new Baghdad School of Modern Art. She cites three Iraqi artists as chief influences on her work, the sculptor Jawad Saleem (192061-), Dia Azzawi (b. 1939) and Ismail Fatah (19342004-), but also Western artists such as Jackson Pollock, Wassily Kandinsky and Francis Bacon, and is insistent that she has forged her own style. In 1990 she was in London with her immediate family when they realised they could not return to Kuwait due to the war. This was a significant moment; Ogaily went on to study at Chelsea College of Art and later gained a degree in interior design from Kingston University.

Her previous works are more closely affiliated to her design background; a stunning work now in Sultan Al Qassemi's Barjeel Art Foundation collection is reminiscent of Fernand Léger or early Piet Mondrian – constructivism in form. Her Faces series differs from this; there is greater warmth and personality in these paintings.

Her roots are apparent in many choices she makes in her painting – her palette is made up of green, red, black and white, the colours of the Iraqi & Kuwaiti flags, and blue, which is a very popular colour in Iraq. Quick brushstrokes occasionally form an illegible calligraphy – sometimes gold on black brings out specific Islamic symbols. She introduces the theme of the Burkha, depicting women veiled and in an Abaya. Women often from different generations are painted together, their forms so similar that a notion of togetherness and unity is evident. The overriding face shining through the works is however the artist's own.

The realm of self-portraiture has traditionally been dominated by the male artist – think of

*Two Heads*, 2010, Acrylic on Canvas, 100 x 100cm

Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt and Andy Warhol. Women have more often been presented as passive objects to be viewed, rarely as active subjects of self portraiture. There have been exceptions to this as far back as Artemisia Gentileschi in the 16th century, and in more immediate media such as photography, film and performance art women artists have taken centre stage – but there is still something rather brave about a female artist, especially one from the Arab world, confronting her viewers directly in a painting.

The eyes are traditionally the window to the soul. Curiously Ogaily focuses on just one eye, and where the second should be there is often another abstract, surreal element, such as an open doorway, perhaps symbolically creating access to her interior thoughts. Ogaily explains that ‘by removing an eye from a face, the figure automatically loses identity; hence it retains anonymity by becoming incomplete. This is a trait I find very important in my work, by making it impersonal and somewhat mysterious. It also leaves room for imagination.’ The work she claims to be her favourite in the series, *Twins*, is made from two figures, one upside down, both with one eye staring out at the viewer. The bodies are groundless, weightless and therefore give the eyes even more power. She informs me that the lines on your face are a map of your life, the roads and paths you have taken.

She makes no sketches in advance, has no fear of applying paint directly to the canvas. Acrylic is a new technique for her that suits her methods; lots of colours can be applied on top of others. Sometimes she covers the surface so it is drowning in black gesso, and then covers it in paint or alternatively has colour below the black that she scratches away to create contrast. Another way Ogaily likes to organise her compositions is by the use of compartments

or boxes. Each separate space may represent a distinctive memory or thought. She finds smaller works more challenging, *4 Seasons* took her over a year, inspired by a university professor who asked her “Aren’t you tired of using all the colours? Just use one!” Here we see a face taken from the same angle in yellow, green, red and blue with complementary backgrounds, and the textures in the features are made through the shades between each colour and black. This is improvisation at its most energising.

*Face Series*, 2010, Acrylic on Canvas, 80 x 100cm



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*Two Women, 2010, Acrylic on Canvas, 100 x 100cm*