

Abdul Rauf Khalfan - The message is the muse

By Dr. Alka Raghuvanshi



Loving birds, 2010, Oil on canvas, 100x120cm - Courtesy of the artist & Swiss Art Gate.

It is said that the most beautiful things of life are the most simple and interestingly enough, simplicity is the most difficult to achieve!, that might seem like a contradiction in terms, but there is no better description of Abdul Rauf Khalfan's paintings. The brightest the reds, blues, yellows and greens rub shoulders with stark blacks and shiny purples but instead of jarring, have the ability to soothe with their seeming simplicity. Look a little closer and there is great sophistication of thought and elegance of form in the works.

The forms entice the onlooker to delve a little deeper and the depths capture the interest almost immediately for the connect is almost primeval as are the colors. A

self taught painter, Abdul Rauf's grandfather came from Zanzibar, which belonged once to Oman hence he is an Omani with African roots. The family moved to the UAE in the 20th century, bringing in his mindscape the heritage and sensibility rooted in the colors of Zanzibar, Africa. The journey that Abdul has undertaken in improving his technique began with a simple pencil; when he turned five, he asked his father for a drawing book, but got a notebook instead. He started to draw a big boat on the first page, and interestingly he continued to add something new to this boat drawing, as he was inspired by trips with his family to the port close by. Relentless in his quest of art at school, Abdul Rauf's

his teachers loved his drawings but not the fact that he came to school equipped with only one pencil.

He was fascinated by drawing with charcoal. He often used pieces of plywood, placing them on the floor and then drawing on them with charcoal. He drew inspiration from magazines and newspapers and the subject matter of his paintings at the time consisted of horses, sheikhs, traditional coffee pots and buildings of local tradition and heritage. At that stage, he was advised to join the Dubai International Arts Center and his father did take him there twice for art classes but eventually Abdul Rauf decided to work on his skill alone and stopped attending.

The sea is a recurring theme in his work almost like a silent muse. He has gone back to the large mass of water repeatedly to draw inspiration and perhaps find solace in it. Even now the forms that find place in his work have a whiff of the ocean, of jellyfish and the wax and wane of the tides that bring in their wake creatures of the sea in their waves. The artist traces this to a dream in which a woman collected sea shells at the beach when he was 22. Almost like a harbinger, the dream was the point when Abdul Rauf experimented with another medium and started painting in oil, which added variety to his previous works in charcoal and pencil. In addition, he tried his hand at acrylics to get a more vibrant color mix, but it wasn't his medium of choice so he went back to using oil paints. He preferred the vivid effect of oil painting which helped him perfect his work when used in abundance. The woman protagonist is recurring image in his paintings as she appears, almost unbidden to populate his paintings complete with a partial hijab covering her face to add an aura of mystery to his paintings. The woman's role is an ever changing one in Abdul Rauf's work. She beguiles, cajoles, beckons, allures with her look, the drapes she is covered in, unveil the thoughts that churn in her mind and heart. The eyes too are an intrinsic part of the woman's gaze that has the power to challenge one to go deeper into the depths of her being and all that she stands for. His women have an inherent strength that renders them attractive and also tells the tale. There are predominantly three main elements within three rectangles: a man, a girl and a bird that form the nucleus of his work. However, the subject matter of his paintings concentrates on the traditions

and symbols of his local culture, portrayed through its distinct architectural heritage, its natural environment of palms, flowers and birds and the familiar day-to-day objects. Dreams play a huge role in Abdul Rauf's work. For he often paints images that he sees in his dreams. This is perhaps one of the most telling indications of his Zanzibar origins. Like the Ongee and Jarwa tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar islands in India that trace their origins to African tribes, go by signs and dreams in their everyday lives. In fact there is a codified ritual practice to decode the signs of the dreams and the appropriate rituals that accompany it. There is quiet acceptance of this way of life as women protagonists are rarely agitated, but bestow peace in his works.

Artistic madness too is a part of his mental make up, for one day he just decided to burn all his paintings and drawings in an attempt to improve his talent and create better art in the future. Running parallel is a philosophical streak that peppers Abdul Rauf's thought process in no uncertain manner. He says: "You are born poor but you have to die rich in your heart, confident in your work and your achievements. Use your inner power and mind and if you lose, carry on with another venture. God says: if you work hard, you will get it, but you need to work hard for it!" Touché!

About the writer

Dr Alka Raghuvanshi is an Indian trained curator, having trained at Goldsmith's London and the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. As an internationally known art writer and author, she has been on the editorial teams of the Indian Express, the Times of India, Pioneer and the BBC and editor Swagat. She has nearly 20 books to her credit including the classic A Moment in Time with Legends of Indian Arts and Pathfinders. She launched two arts portals Pioneerarts.com, the first of its kind website on the performing and visual arts and Enkitaarts.com. She writes a weekly column in the international daily Asian Age. Dr. Alka is also an artist; she has held about seven solo shows and been part of about a hundred group shows all over the world. Her works were part of the Adana Biennale in Turkey.

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