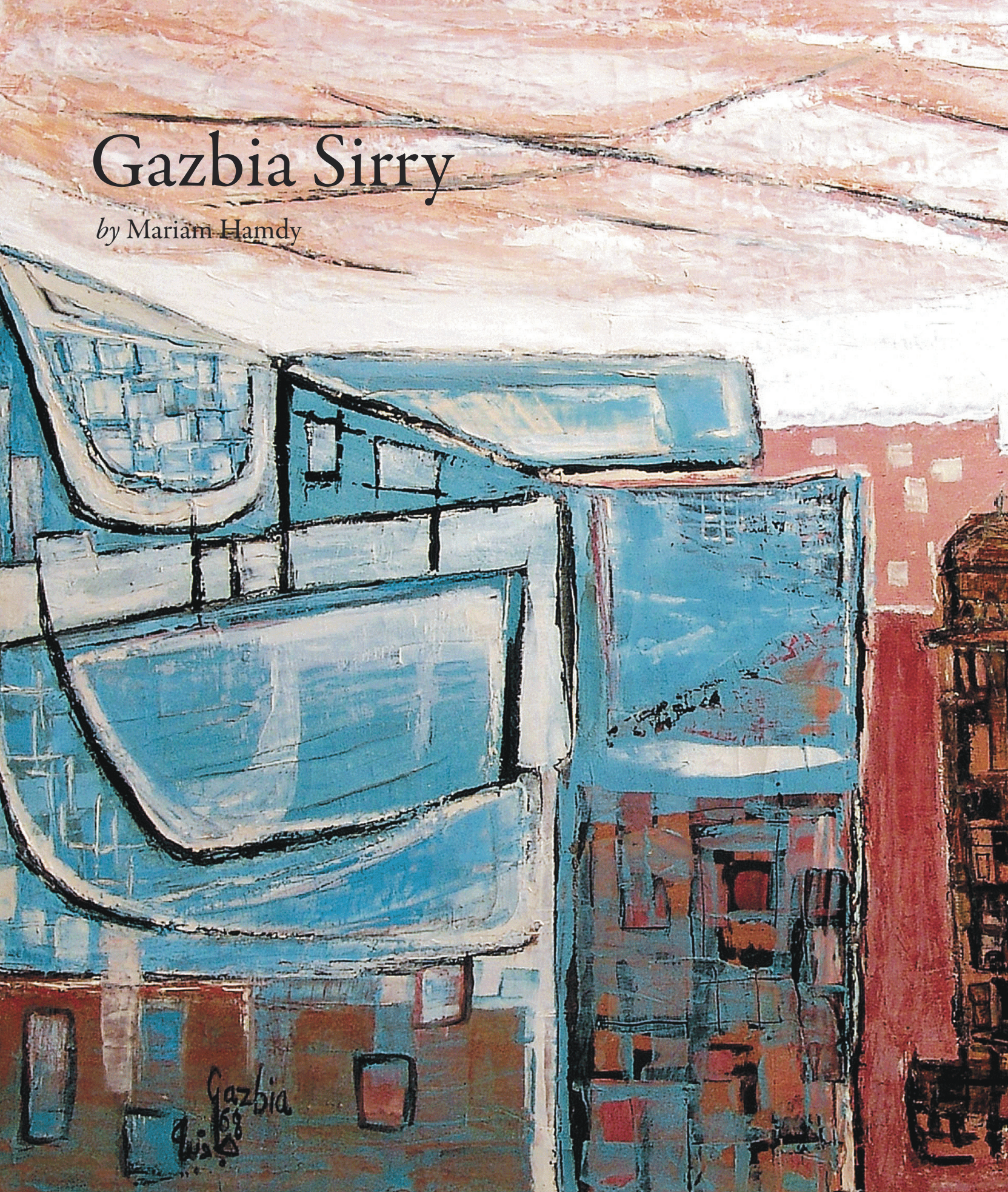


Gazbia Sirry

by Mariam Hamdy



Gazbia
1968



Gazbia Sirry is one of the pioneers of the Modern Art movement in Egypt and the Arab world. An active and vibrant painter of unmistakable presence, Sirry continues to produce avant garde paintings in our day and age as she has done during the tumultuous periods of the Nasserite 50's, the liberation of the 60's and Sadat's 70's. Born in 1925, Sirry graduated from the Higher Institute of Fine Arts in 1948 and has been on the receiving end of numerous international awards. Along with her record 70 one-woman shows (1), Sirry has exhibited across the globe from Paris to Washington, Venice to Sao Paulo and Kuwait to Tunis.

To categorize Gazbia Sirry in any one school would be limiting, as she has experimented with every school of thought, from her early figural representations to her later approaches to near abstraction and expressionism. The one common factor in all of her paintings, perhaps one that distinguishes her from all her peers, is her use of colour. Married to her brushstrokes, Sirry's style is urgent and feverish, characteristics more so evident in her later works but equally palpable in her earlier figurative paintings.

It was her early works that established her as the "Spokesperson of the People" (2), as she told colourful stories of the average Egyptian layman (and laywoman), in her paintings. Her heightened sense of awareness of her surroundings and a deep comprehension of her peoples' problems is a feature inherent in all of Gazbia Sirry's paintings to date, and what sets her apart.

Her productions produce a timeline to the many stages of her life. Avidly producing a new collection of works

(1) Information Courtesy of Zamalek Art Gallery. for an exhibition every two years (3), Sirry's work ethic allows her to be constantly recording her thoughts, experiences, reactions and even whimsies through her work; no biography required.

(2) Saad El Din, Mursi. *Gazbia Sirry, Lust for Colour*. The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, Egypt (1998)

(3) Information from an interview with Gazbia Sirry, dated Saturday 17th January 2009.

Gazbia Sirry started painting at a time where art was only just appreciated, mostly by other

artists and elite intellectuals: “At my time no one welcomed art or artists the way you believe they did. No one encouraged young artists or anything like that at all. We only had a few galleries which showed our work, and it was only the connoisseurs, the art collectors and the people who knew us personally who attended our shows. Now the galleries are crowded, people do attend these shows, whereas back in the day they were pretty empty (4)”. It took double the effort, will and determination to get noticed. Yet to quote Simon Schama, Professor of Art History at Columbia University in New York: “Great Art has dreadful manners. The hushed reverence of the gallery can fool you into believing masterpieces are quiet, polite things, visions that soothe, charm and beguile, but actually they are thugs. Merciless and wily, the greatest paintings grab you in a headlock, rough up your composure and then proceed in short order to rearrange your reality (5),” and that is precisely what Sirry’s paintings have done. To have reached international acclaim at a time when it was barely believable that one’s artwork can help one make a living, is a magnificent accomplishment. The beauty of Gazbia’s efforts lies in the fact that they do not reek of the arrogance of our modern day artist: Damien Hirst and his extravagant auctions being a notorious example. The two, as artists, are incomparable in terms of substance, yet their approaches of recognition are worthy of assessment.

Gazbia Sirry has been known to donate impossibly large amounts of her works to museums, national landmarks, and public institutions all over Egypt and the Arab World. It was her giving nature and love of Arts that led her to become so generous with her productions: “When I went to the states in 1965 on a fellowship that started in LA, I travelled all over the United States both during that trip and on several grants later on. I’ve seen most of the museums, and all of them had magnificent paintings by great artists, all of

(4) Quoted from an interview with Gazbia Sirry, dated Saturday 17th January 2009.

(5) Schama, Simon. *Power of Art*. BBC Books, London, UK. (2006).

(6) Akbar, Arifa. *Hockney donates biggest painting to Tate*. *The Independent Newspaper*. (8 April 2008).

(7) Quoted from an interview with Gazbia Sirry, dated Saturday 17th January 2009.

who donated their works to these institutions. I loved the idea that you can build a museum based on donations of the artists. It appealed to my personality as well as the sense of obligation I have as an artist.” Sirry believes that artists do, in fact, have an obligation towards the societies they live in, their viewers and to each other. They not only raise awareness of the issues they are interpreting in

their works, but they raise the level of intellectualism and perhaps mould taste.

David Hockney, who is credited as being the father of British pop Art at 70 and who has donated the largest of his works to the Tate Britain Museum, explained his take on artists’ donations of their work: “I think it’s the duty of artists, once they have become successful, to give... When people give, they will not only be thanked but remembered.” (6) Being remembered is what Gazbia is most concerned with, and it is based on that she has donated 15 of her most personal paintings to the American University in Cairo, and 30 pieces of various stages of her life to the Modern & Contemporary Art museum of Cairo, both in Egypt. She has many other donations to her name, both in Egypt as well as in several institutions in the Arab world, yet chief among those are her donations to museums in the United States.

In 1993, Gazbia had given three lectures at the National museum for Women in the Arts. The museum requested the purchase of two of the four paintings exhibited in a collective exhibition for women artists during her stay, to be put in their permanent collection. Gazbia, an artist with foresight and a genuine search of the essence of truth in the arts, refused to sell; she donated the pieces.

In a retrospective that the Metropolitan museum proposed about artists from the Muslim World, an exhibition that encompassed artists from Asia, the Far and Middle East, Gazbia was chosen as one of the 10 Contemporary painters to be hosted in the show. When she heard that they were in fact working towards a permanent collection, she offered them the painting featured on their website, *The Kite*: “I offered it in gratitude that they have chosen me, and they accepted it.” (7)

Similarly, albeit in a less gracious manner, Damien Hirst has reached a similar level of recognition with quite the different approach. An artist needs to be recognized in order to exist and for his/her work to be validated, yet a question arises in whether the process of how they go about achieving this recognition is important or indeed relevant. One is inclined to think that it shouldn’t be; yet when artists such as Gazbia Sirry and Hirst are put in a direct, and admittedly unusual, comparison, one begs to differ.

Damien Hirst has used marketing to turn his fertile imagination into an extraordinary business, more so than any other artist since Andy Warhol (8). He has turned his name into a brand, under which he is capable of selling anything. This is not to claim that Hirst’s work is void of substance,

yet the extravagance of his recent sales, such as the Sotheby's auction on September 15th 2008 (9) allows for considerable scepticism. One begins to question if "the price tag is the Art", in the words of British Journalist Nick Cohen (10) or if the work in fact does merit such success; it's seemingly impossible to tell in our current days' exceptionally malleable notion of taste.

Yet herein lies the difference between both of the artists in discussion: Despite the fact that Hirst has in fact donated 4 of his pieces; 11 to the Tate Collection in London. It is no secret that Hirst is more concerned with the sales of his work, hence the infamous bypassing of his dealers (The Gagosian Gallery in the US and the White Cube Gallery in London), the notorious multiple day auctions and the mass production of his work by his "assistants." Sirry on the other hand, views her work in an entirely different light. She stubbornly sets her prices as Hirst does, yet her intentions are different: Sirry is more concerned with who buys her work and how they'll treat or present it, rather than the pay check that the work results in. Most of Sirry's work has been donated or held hostage by the artist herself, too precious for her to sell. And there is such a thing - a notion that seems not to exist in Hirst's multi-million dollar fortune: Artwork too precious to sell.

(8) Riding, Alan. *Alas, Poor Art Market: A Multimillion Dollar Head Case.* The New York Times (June 13, 2007).

(9) Lacayo, Richard. *Bad Boy Makes Good.* Times Magazine. (September 15th 2008)

(10) Riding, Alan. *Alas, Poor Art Market: A Multimillion Dollar Head Case.* The New York Times (June 13, 2007).

(11) A cow and calf, each bisected and displayed in tanks of formaldehyde, a large glass display case containing, among other things cigarettes, lighter, ashtray & stubs and the first of his series of "Fly Paintings." Brown, Mark. *Have a Cow, Hirst tells Tate.* The Guardian. (December 13th 2007)

(12) Saad El Din, Mursi. *Gazbia Sirry, Lust for Color.* The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, Egypt (1998)

Hirst's work is infamous and will always be remembered, but art lovers, scholars and critics will forever remain doubtful as to whether it'll continue to touch them decades after they've all moved on or whether it's a sizzle in the pan. Sirry however believes that her work deserves to be revered and seen by all, and it is that belief that makes her work truly divine, and what makes Gazbia an artist never to be forgotten (12).

Mariam Hamdy is a trained artist, born and raised in the Middle East and currently residing in her home country, Egypt. Having completed her BA in 'Performing and Visual Arts' at the American University in Cairo, her MA in 'Contemporary



Umm Antar, 1953, oil on canvas

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Please view a second contribution by Mariam Hamdy on "Designer's and the Advertising World," pp.