

Dreamlands

By Rose Issa

Edited extract from the catalogue of Selma Gürbüz's solo exhibition at Leighton House Museum, Selma Gurbuz, Shadows of My Self, 2011 © Rose Issa Projects



AFTER HUNTING GOUACHE ON HANDMADE PAPER 99.5X174 CM, 2005

Selma Gürbüz is one of Turkey's most intriguing contemporary artists, whose work offers both an immediate appeal to the senses and a promise of hidden depths. Now Londoners have the opportunity to discover her enthusiasms and obsessions in a double bill of her first solo exhibitions here: at Leighton House Museum, where her large drawings will be shown.

It was in Paris, some twenty years ago, that I first met Selma Gürbüz. Since that meeting we have collaborated on several touring group exhibitions,

including two major shows in 2003: *Love Affairs*, produced by the IFA Galleries in Stuttgart, which travelled to Frankfurt, Bonn and Berlin, and *Harem Fantasies and the New Sheherazades*, which I co-curated with Fatima Mernissi at the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB).

In Gürbüz's early work, mostly on paper, the structures of the human or animal figures are often made with strong ink brush strokes, so their skeletons resemble the roots and branches of plants. She might do away with any sense of shadow, replacing it with

brush strokes and lines that outline the body of her characters, sometimes half human, half animal. At other times her figures are shaped from an assembly of circles, flowers, thorns, sea urchins, or other repeated motifs. Her predilection for undulating lines imparts a sensuality and a sense of movement to the whole picture.

Gürbüz's work explores themes from mythology, history, nature, universal archetypes and the subconscious. Her human figures are often solitary and sometimes share animal traits – such as a cat's whisker or a lion's tail – or are surrounded by hard-working ants, busy bees, and other creatures with which she identifies. At other times, the figures might lie on a bed of sea urchins, defying pain and suffering. One suspects that there is sometimes an analogy between the artist's own creative suffering and the agony of those bodies.

Gradually, she introduced color in her drawings and paintings – moving from strong black ink to nuances of brown and then to colors in oil – and from large, simple brush strokes to elaborate lines and details. Today, paper is replaced momentarily by canvas, and her once mischievous, carefree characters are now more meditative, mysterious and poetic.

TWO LIONS - GOUACHE ON HANDMADE PAPER 94X174 CM, 2005

Her recent large paintings of fairytale landscapes composed of delicate, thin brush strokes, lines, and exquisitely patterned images reveal the hidden forces of nature and its cross-cultural references. The result is haunting, recalling our own part-imagined, part-remembered landscapes intertwined with our own personal dramas. A moonlight scene in a garden has the qualities of a very large-scale Persian miniature of the kind that illustrated romances, histories and fables, and what came with that – pattern designs. Sometimes her large-scale patterns, of eyes, lips, plants, hands, bees, leaves, are repeated like Ottoman chintamani motifs or modern industrial designs.

Often, as in Persian miniatures, there is no attempt to show light and shade. Some motifs, figures and plants look as if they have been cut out and distributed over the page to make a perfect pattern, and one can almost read her paintings like a magical or mythological text. Of course the size differs as hers are large-scale canvases and the figures are not symmetrically distributed as in a Persian miniature, but the atmosphere is there.

Simplification is essential to Gürbüz's artistic expression as it accentuates what deserves to be highlighted. The use of minimal contrasting colors to



draw her fantasies reflects the paradox of something intimate and secret becoming public. Her work is remarkable in its kinship with the East and West, rich in references to her Ottoman cultural traditions as well as to her dazzling choices of Occidental art. Like Istanbul itself, the layers of world history and personal history are evident, captivating and unsettling. What is striking is the impact of shadow theatre, similar to the Karagoz shadow puppets for which Turkish theatres are famous.

Inviting the past into the present, her phantasmagoric work, with its fairytale creatures, demons and fairies, resembles the Thousand and One Nights. Repeated motifs such as the eye remind us of talismans,

while the lips remind us of chintamanis. The black shamanic drawings are reminiscent of the mysterious figures of Siyah Kalam (the 15th century Turkmen artist), while her mostly brown and black palette reflects the color of coffee and fortune-tellers.

Like traditional Chinese artists, who learnt their craft by a strange method of meditation and concentration, and by studying the works of renowned masters, Gürbüz has acquired a facility in the handling of brush and ink to paint her inspiration while it is still fresh in her mind, giving it a spontaneous quality.

Selma Gürbüz openly pays homage to many great masters from East and West, including Velasquez, Cranach, Manet and Gauguin. As in Gauguin's



THE NIGHT - GOUACHE ON HANDMADE PAPER 129.5X200 CM, 2005

paintings, her characters merge with the natural order and indulge in leisure. Like him, she values flatness, and often adapts three-dimensional sculptures to two-dimensional surfaces. The clear references to her masters, in the works themselves and the titles she gives them, are also a guide to her aesthetic quest.

Totally, the works are a kind of meditation, rethinking and redrawing of the same subject: man, woman, nature, wild and tame animals and creatures – all of life, in fact. She works in a spirit of reverence to nature, not merely as decoration, but as material for thought.

There are no moral or sentimental overtones, sensual and communicates directly with the viewer, opening our imagination. By laying bare her attractions, dreams, fears, angst, invaded by angels and demons, beasts that inhabit us all, Gürbüz captures their strength as well as their fragility to create a very personal mythology.

Drawing on her personal experiences, stubborn determination and a remarkable self-confidence, her work is conceived as a visual elegy based on this personal mythology and the universal themes of life and art. Like riding a magic carpet from a fairytale world, her works let our imagination wander through enchanted gardens of a lost Paradise.



WOMAN WITH THREE CATS - GOUACHE ON HANDMADE PAPER
169.5X112 CM, 2005