

# LIVING MEMORY: A PROFILE OF ARTIST LISE ALLAM

By: Contemporary Practics Art Journal

The paintings of Danish artist Lise Allam (b. 1945), read like carefully crafted stories. They capture a single moment of change, or transformation, from one stage in life to another. Her androgynous human figures are without any discernible features, suspended in a single breathless hiatus described by the artist as "that instance when one chooses to stay or to go, to join or not to join, to accept a role in life or to reject it." The emotional and psychological struggles of that moment fill the paintings. We imagine that, beyond her confines of the canvas, the linear imperatives of human existence will resume and carry her protagonists towards the final outcome of their choices. But for a brief instance, Lise invites us to contemplate that moment where decisions are made and the course of life shifts forever. "A lot of my work is autobiographical in some way," explains the artist. "I use my own moods as a starting point to lend energy and authenticity to the stories I tell...I see the role of the painter as being close to that of an actor. To deliver your part, you must tap into some aspect of yourself and go into your own dark spaces." Lise Allam lives and works in Egypt yet her paintings do not concern themselves with depicting her life in Cairo. Instead, she explores themes of childhood, youth, adulthood, love and loss, transcending differences of culture and geography to seek out the common experiences that underpin her own reality and the lives of those she encounters. A textile designer by training, Lise Allam graduated from the Manchester College of Art and Design in 1963, winning the Scandinavian award for design three years later. In the mid-1970s she moved to Egypt and continues to live in Cairo, working from a studio in the city. She turned to painting in the early

1990s, inspired by the rich painting traditions in Egypt and the artists she met there. For two decades she has sought, through a wide and prolific painting practice, to tell stories of human interest in her 'own words'. She has exhibited widely in Egypt, in the Arab region and in her native Denmark. As such, she is often compared to the Swiss-born painter Margot Veillon (1907-2003) who spent her life and prominent painting career in Egypt. Yet, unlike Veillon, Allam does not provide a narrative of the Egyptian street. Instead, her works move between the personal and the universal always probing the possibility and the tragedy inherent in the human condition.

In her work, choice is the catalyst of human history: "as humans, our lives are an intricate web of the choices we make and the consequences that we must learn to live," she explains. Her style has evolved from an early interest in the abstract form towards an expressive style of figure painting: "When I first moved into painting I began by painting myself asking: how do I actually see myself? Am I simply a form in the mirror or is there something hidden in me, something deep inside that I haven't seen before? I suppose that was the starting point for a painting career spent looking at the human beings around me". The artist's desire to work from memory - of people, places and stories - formed the bedrock of her works very early on. Her bold use of form and color reflects her background in design and is central to an understanding of her work, where meaning is conveyed by the position of figures on the canvas and the colors in which they are depicted.



I Was, Memories series, 1998-2003, oil on canvas, 150x200cm - Courtesy of the artist.

THE STORIES OF MEMORY

In the 1990s Allam's early paintings drew largely on mythology and fairy tales as a vehicle for recounting human stories. She recognizes that, in this period, she worked as though with a safety net: "If you want to paint you need to break down the safety barriers around yourself. The question becomes: am I prepared to open up and tell this story from my own perspective instead of reproducing a story that has been told many times before? Once I reached this personal milestone, my painting changing forever," she says. By 2000 the artist acknowledges that "her safety belt had come off". This resulted in powerful and haunting works such as **'Memories'** (2003), a series of large-scale paintings (oil on canvas) that first showed in Cairo in 2003 and were subsequently exhibited in Scandinavia and the Middle East.

In 'Memories', the artist reflects on the moment she became chief care-giver to her ageing mother who had passed away seven years earlier. In these works, the black and opaque silhouettes of a mother and daughter are set against the vibrant backdrop of a Danish garden. The blank featureless forms of the women contrast with the lush natural setting painted in intricate detail and vivid color. 'Memories' presents the conflict inherent in the mother-daughter relationship at the critical point when it is reversed and the ageing mother becomes dependent on the daughter for her physical and emotional wellbeing. The artists shows us a daughter, who in the very act of becoming a mother to her own parent, finds herself in a strange no-man's land where she must accept full responsibility for a mother whom she still needs. In the painting 'Seasons' a mother and daughter sit together on the garden bench; the daughter's pose seems relaxed yet also tense, her hand touching the old woman by her side while her face is turned away in recognition of the separation to come. In the background, the lush red autumn leaves signify the ebbing life of the older woman while the summer grass, and intricately rendered flowers, represent the daughter in her prime who will soon carry on her journey alone. In 'I Was' the younger woman sits on the bench with multiple silhouettes of the older lady crowding around her. The mother figure is seeking reassurance and instruction from the daughter who is torn, accepting her new role as caregiver but fearful of what it means. Finally, in 'I Am' the black silhouette of the daughter is represented alone; the bench beside her is empty. She faces us, a blank and featureless form, with her back to the sea and fallen petals at her feet. The 'Memories' series explores the inevitable passage of time, the cycles of life and the gradual loss of recollection itself. Against the dark contours of the human figures, it is the organic elements, such as plants, flowers and butterflies, that affirm life in the paintings: "My figures are rendered in silhouette - as if I want time to stand still or perhaps the relationship is now a shadow of what once was, already becoming unreal even as I remember it. Painting these works I experienced intense states of emotion. Only by retreating into the details of petals, or the intricate blades of grass, could I keep my footing."

DOLL

Perhaps the most important of Lise's works is the 2010 series **'Doll'**. Here, the artist takes the relationship of a girl with her doll as the starting point for a large body of works that explore notions of time, timelessness and that inevitable decline inherent in the cycle of life. Doll was inspired by a series of broken and discarded dolls found on the mounds of garbage dumps that dot the circumference of the city of Cairo. Created between 2004 and 2010, the series consists of more than four hundred oil painting and ink works and bears witness to a gradual evolution of the concept: from an early and straightforward depiction of the doll as an inanimate object to the artist's increasing identification with the doll that begins to take on the lifelike qualities of its young owner.

Central to the works is that dichotomy at the heart of society's attitude to dolls: in the very earliest years young girls are encouraged to connect emotionally with the doll. But as they grow older they are taught to discard these toys as objects of no worth. In this way, dolls are a manifestation of that process by which humans are gradually socialized towards adulthood - a process that, in the end, separates us from our deepest, inner most selves. Across a series of powerful paintings, the inanimate dolls seem to come to life. Driven by their yearning for life, the dolls transcend the boundaries of their plastic form to take on the sentiments of their young owners. In Allam's work, some dolls are broken and discarded. Other dolls are depicted as intact and cherished on the lap of young girls. Yet, even within their moment of glory there are intimations of their inevitable downfall when they will be outgrown and discarded. In 'Doll', the inanimate objects teeter on the verge of a life they will ultimately be denied.

The success of 'Doll' lies in its ability to capture, and embody, the very process of art creation: "For me, creativity is about living in reality, and observing it carefully, only to transform it into something else. To merely record reality is to engage in documentation, or illustration, not art," says the artist. Lise uses the dolls as a portrait of the real when it can only ever be an alternative to reality. She humanizes the dolls and creates make-believe histories around them; they become 'the other' which the artist embodies, gives form and invests with thoughts and feelings.

In an early work in the Doll series, 'Tenera' (2007) the artist is recording the doll in its plastic state. The subject has a life-like quality and yet she is rendered, faithfully as an inanimate object, hovering spectre-like in a distinctly human setting. "At this point," says the artist, "I haven't yet begun playing with the dolls. I haven't begun communicating with them and thinking of the possibility of life.. later I start entertaining their lifelessness as merely a stage, or temporary state, that proceeds their desiring of life". In the portraits of the dolls that follow, the artist begins to consider the stories



Butterfly II, Doll Series, 2004-2010, oil on canvas, 120x130cm - Courtesy of the artist.



1. Blue in Blue, 2000 (created for the Cairo International Biennale 2001), oil on canvas, 150x200cm - Courtesy of the artist.  
2. Lines, 2001 (created for the Cairo International Biennale, 2001), oil on canvas, 150x200cm - Courtesy of the artist.  
3. Merry-go-round I, Change series, 2000, oil on canvas, 100x145cm - Courtesy of the artist.  
4. Untitled, Contemplation series, 1998, emulsion paint on paper 70x100cm - Courtesy of the artist.  
5. Untitled, Contemplation series, 1998, oil on canvas, 100x150cm - Courtesy of the artist.  
6. Merry-go-round II, Change series, 2000, oil on canvas, 100x145cm - Courtesy of the artist.



Red and Green, Doll Series, 2004-2012, oil on canvas, 70x100cm - Courtesy of the artist.

behind each doll, and how she came to be so mutilated and discarded. In portraits, such as "One-eyed Suzie" the doll has become gradually humanized, her broken eye is balanced by the one-eyed Suzie flower that injects life into the image. In 'Stilettos' (2006) Lise captures the doll as a possible living being, an inanimate object coming to life through the feelings, desires and the life of its young owner: "The doll wishes to be alive, and she mimics her owner; conversely, the young owner uses her doll to act out the roles she will adopt as an adult. But for the doll there is nothing to prepare for: there is only this one ephemeral moment of living vicariously through the girl - then nothing."

In "Butterfly II" (2010) a broken doll is tossed against a vivid green background of foliage, her eyes lifeless and broken and a butterfly perching precariously on her motionless hand: "The butterfly has a short lifespan, it lasts a season and then it dies. The doll too is on borrowed time" says Lise. Again, in 'Red and Green' (2009) she explores the idea of metamorphosis and transmutation in a work that draws heavily on her training as a textile designer, injecting life into the inanimate dolls, while reducing the organic, living elements of dandelion seeds to a static pattern and form. Unlike the two inanimate dolls heads that imitate life, the dandelion seeds carry the promise of regeneration within them flying across the world and giving rise to new life. "A child would blow at the dandelion flower and send the seeds scattering. I have captured this motion, this idea, in a highly stylised form," says the artist. In 'Butterfly I', the dolls head is replaced by a butterfly hovering above the inanimate torso, injecting life into the deformed plastic body and carrying forward the artist's themes of metamorphosis and renewal.

BRIDGING REALITIES

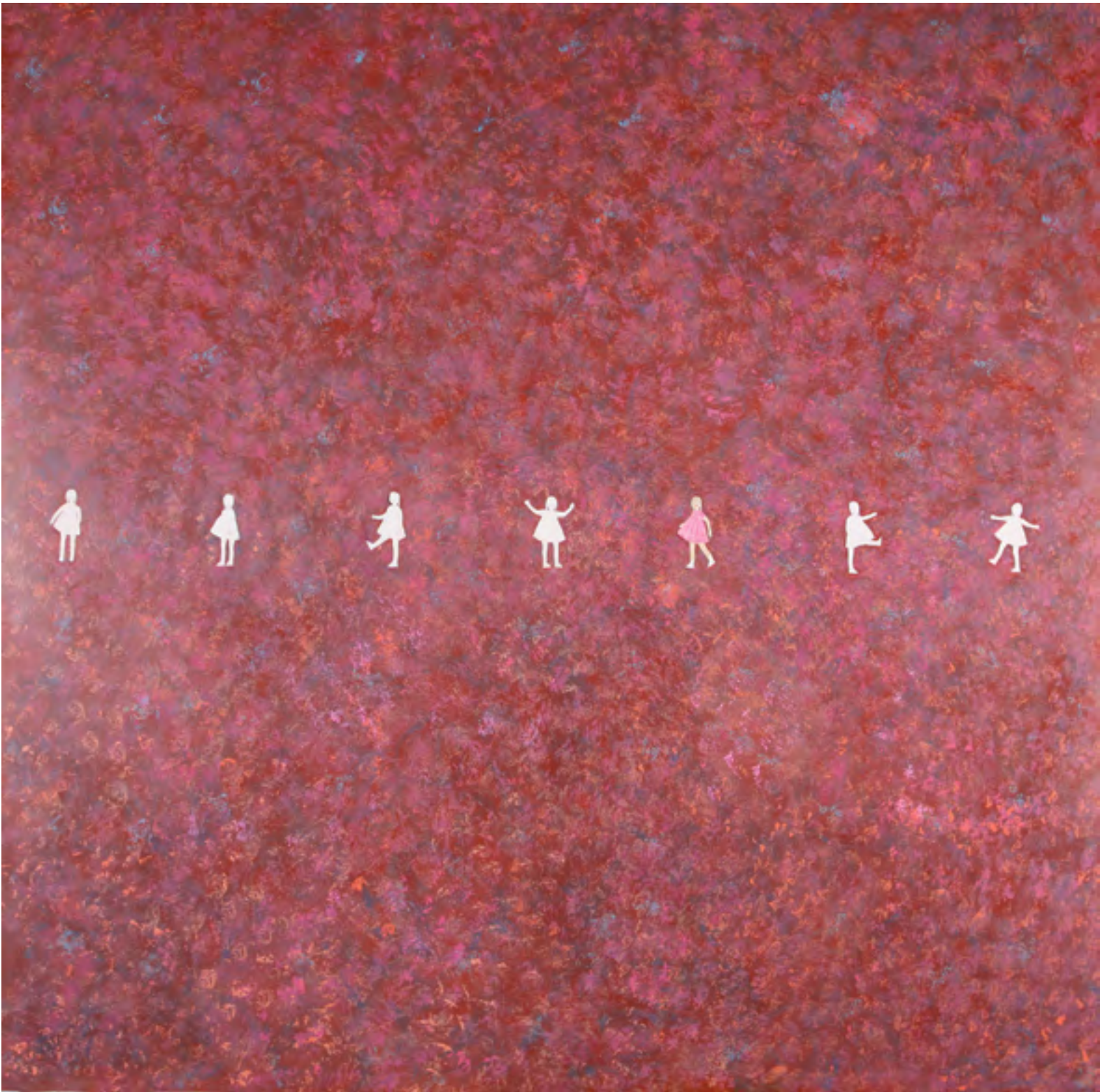
In **Doll**, as in earlier works, Lise plays with the concept of multiple realities and the porous boundaries that separate them. Herself a product of life in the East and life in the West, there is in her work a constant act of balancing or of moving between two states. For this reason, doorways, passages and windows form central elements in her work as her protagonists migrate between different states of being and are subtly altered in the process. Mirrors also feature prominently in her paintings, appearing in series such as 'Doll', where in the work, 'Mirror', the inanimate subject comes to life and peers into the mirror at its spectre-like reflection. In her work the mirror presents us with a crisis of perception: for the reflection that we see is never an exact copy of reality but a boundary that separates between two states of mind. In all her works, she draws on memory - recollected times and places - in order to join together disparate stories, and distant places, that would otherwise remain separated by time and space. In this context, it is worth nothing that while all her works are painted in her Cairo studio, in what she describes as 40 c of heat, yet they are depictions of landscapes and interiors in her native country, Denmark, drawn from personal memories of her homeland. According to the artist: "my works never seek to refer directly to my immediate experiences of living in the Middle East even if they are infused with that experience. Perhaps being an outsider has given me greater opportunity to observe humanity more objectively than had I stayed in my country. However, it is humanity in general and not any

particularly tradition that interests me. I am inspired by the human beings that I have met in Egypt and the way we tackle our lives. In my work, I pose open questions, I open up avenues of exploration. I create a dialogue with the viewer, rather than offering answers or closed statements."

Nevertheless, Lise works often feels like a direct and emotional response to her experience of migration and to a life spent moving between two realities. In her paintings there is a tension between memories nurtured like precious possessions that have survived the journey across time and distance; and the realization that these memories, like own her identity, have been irrevocably changed by that journey she has undertaken. In this way, her works do not simply bridge between two disparate cultures. For her the act of painting is also an ongoing act of excavation - of mining down through the strata of buried emotion and personal experience to reconnect with that hidden bedrock of the self that has remained insulated and intact, far from the daily sacrifices that inevitably come with change. In this way, she single act of relocation - her choice to live permanently as 'the other' - and the consequences of that life-changing decision envelope her works like a constant and pervasive energy, always present but never directly confronted. Perhaps in this way, her art produces a form of knowledge about her own personal experience of migration that might otherwise not exist.



Tamera, Doll Series, 2004-2012, oil on canvas, 100x100cm - Courtesy of the artist.



1. Untitled, Doll Series, 2004-2010, oil on canvas, 130x130cm - Courtesy of the artist.  
2. Untitled, Doll Series, 2004-2010, oil on paper, 24x34cm - Courtesy of the artist.  
3. untitled, Doll Series, 2004-2010, pastel and ink on paper, 25x35 - Courtesy of the artist.