

## The World of Qinza Najm

By Mark Bloch.

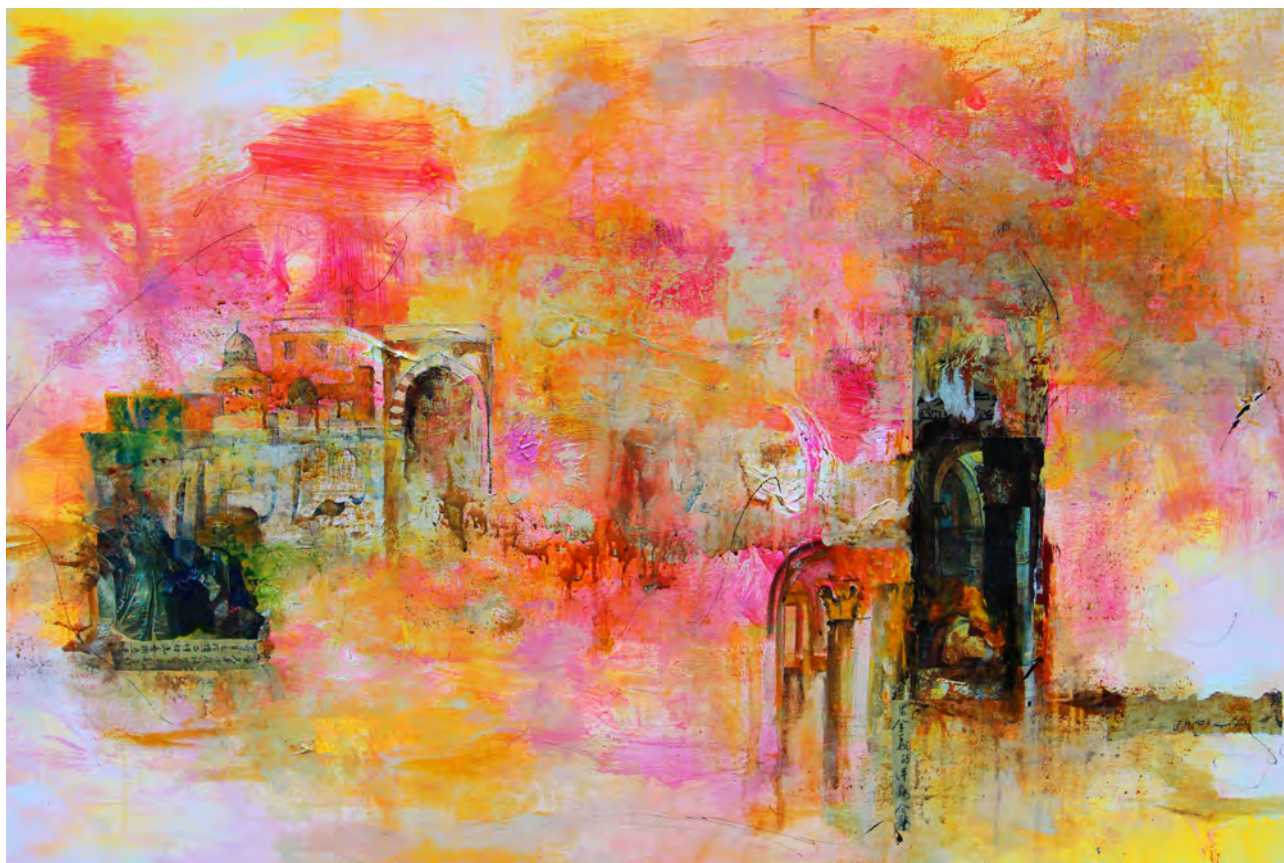
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Ego vs Empathy, 2013, mixed media on canvas, 150x540cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Qinza Najm, a Pakistani-American artist, completed her Ph.d in Psychology, apparently enabling access to a world of dreamy subconscious architectural spaces that hover between East and West, abstract and narrative, the ancient and the new. Foregrounds filled with grays and whites and blacks as well as rainy washes of color create dialogues with areas of collage and occasional thick antipasto or textural hunks of pigment. Her sometimes vivid, other times ghostly phantoms of color, as well as gestural marks, and semi-figurative representations are feminine the way the ocean is feminine – transformative and instinctive, and on a scale that draws us in and nurtures, but also crashes and slashes, more Mary Abbott than Helen Frankenthaler, though similar in effect to the latter's wispy, evanescent, Abstract Expressionism suggesting weather and seasons that was often compared, itself, to the turbulent, late work of JMW Turner. Ms. Najm will stay at it coaxing an important and relevant statement that is coming into view in these works. Featuring great eruptions of color shifting from soft to abrupt on large canvases, big and bold but not domineering, non-objective but with detail

and passion freeing them from emptiness or the clinical, they are free and lively and experimental but with an undercurrent of peaceful strength stated in a relaxed and confident manner. There is a conceptual element to this work but it is unmistakably stated in paint and collage. The artist studied painting & drawing at Bath University in England, Savannah College of Art and Design in the USA, and most recently at The Art Students League of New York with Bruce Dorfman, Frank O'Cain, Leonid Lerman and Larry Poons. While both are powerful, her subtle work in the world of black and white is more mysterious and beckoning than that in unapologetic color. Whether through a long rectangular hallway or a rotund dome-like space, we are repeatedly called toward gray chambers we have not yet reached and we soon suspect we may never get there. We are invited in, only to stall in mysterious black and white waiting rooms. The same could be said of this entire body of work, both deceptively monochromatic and in playful color, delivering while suggesting slyly that much, much more is possible. The world that Ms. Najm inhabits is always between the abstract and the architectural. In Untitled



Departure from Pain, 2012, mixed media on canvas, 120x75cm. Courtesy of the artist.

(A Study in Yellow), vertical stripes in the foreground merge with columns, elegantly blending her vision of the historical and suggestions of three dimensional space with the painterly. More color often means less illusion. The work becomes flatter. Whisks of color or white flung from the tube constantly smash the illusion that we are peering into a window creating a familiar, intriguing somnambulist environment. Similarly, an unstretched canvas across the north wall that lorded over the immense exhibition space created a backdrop to the comparatively smaller but more refined works lining the walls. In that 18 by 5 foot Ego vs. Empathy, blues and yellows highlighted by transparent turquoise fields and sepia collage elements create a 2013 model for Abstract Expressionism. Looking closer, parts of a collaged figure completed with paint drew my attention as if it had been quietly inhabiting the pure abstract chaos—mostly on the left and a little on the right of the giant canvas. But the figure was not alone. Upon

examination, four architectural scenes emerged, linking this large expansive opus to the tighter work in the rest of the room. This mad symphony of complete freedom with long globs of blue and yellow paint interweaved with collage elements placed almost as an afterthought but well-integrated, in a seemingly random fashion, occasionally even appearing sideways. These elements reminded me of a design one would see on a vase or maybe wallpaper and at other times Arab writing, but like all her work, it drew me into a mysterious nether world.

In the appropriately titled Dreaming Reality some turbulence featured on the left suggesting two stories of a building is juxtaposed with the right where a calmer, balanced Arabic interior scene with two figures morph into a canopied cave that seemed to be echoing the shape of a dominant, mysterious black hooded figure back to the left, one of seven figures in the work in all, interspersed with Chinese writing and other distractions



Good to Bad, 2013, mixed media on canvas, 150x120cm. Courtesy of the artist.

tugging at my attention and creating a sense of urgency. Good to Bad, an ungarbled, direct visual message, was my favorite of all the works. I felt drawn toward the top right corner past a lone abstract constellation on the top center by a lightning bolt or a laser beam under cloud cover reaching from a crystal clear collage in the foreground of two hallways, one symmetric and one not, grounded against a storm of black and white shapes with occasional suggestions of pinks or greenish browns further back. Finally, scratched into the thick white paint above the foreground arch in script is the word “ego.” Unburdened by the self, like a song by Jimmy Cliff or The Who, I could see clearly now; I could see for miles into a unique world the painter inhabits.

But as I moved through the show, I notice how Qianza Najm creates dichotomies while she unifies opposites. In *Persistence of Memories*, a title borrowed from Dali, surface fights depth creating chaos and tension when a shape suggestive of an arch and a figure in black interact among drips of paint that look flung. Extremes collide as do the right brain and the left brain as attractive, matter of fact English word lists with Arabic translations in one spot counter loaded proclamations like “I know myself” and “Seek not” elsewhere. In *Spirit of Dreams*, with a hot pink abstract center, two groups of men inhabit an interior space and a congregation huddles below an arch. The powerful and beautiful *Dark to Light*’s huge non-religious black and white arch accentuated writing scratched in an abstract “sky” area with pink and orange underpinnings. One dominant figure collaged into the exterior world of *Oscillating Reality* turned the other figures and paint globs into supporting characters. Finally, in *Untitled 2*, another calmer study in interior vs. exterior, a female figure beheaded by the artist dances visually in a cityscape with an image of mother and child.

The space was immense and it needed to be filled so we are treated to earlier works in the back southeast corner of the hall where, for example, a black and white scene in the middle fights pure, bold, day-glo color hot pinks that are more Toulouse-Lautrec than Ab Ex. We also see masks and orbs and other three-dimensional works scattered throughout the show, unnecessarily, in the form of little sculptures or temporary assemblages. These masks cut in half in shades of gold and black and gray popped up from time to time as did an installation of Arabic calligraphy on nine wood boards with day glow colors and other supplementary works. These additions, served the whole by populating the vast space with exciting stimuli and elsewhere might carry the day, but here they were superfluous, detracting from the “mixed medium” acrylic and oil compositions that spoke elegantly for themselves. Qianza uses both acrylic and oil and occasionally both--acrylic first, letting it completely dry and then finishing it with oil and varnish as well as the drawings, ink and collage we see in abundance but never front and center. Paint is at the center of this universe. Her work draws from a great swath of art historical references. *Departure from Pain* depicts



Spirit of Dreams, 2012, mixed media on canvas, 120X150cm. Courtesy of the artist.

a cityscape left behind. Drenched in cotton candy pinks and oranges, it is a half-stone, half-gingerbread construction suggestive of both Florine Stettheimer's High Modern series *The Cathedrals of Art* as well as Pozzo Andrea's 17th Century famous fresco depicting a wedding feast at Cana surrounded by painted marble arches, balustrades, pillars and columns—but with the wedding extracted and replaced by personal memories, mystical dreams and aspirations. It is as if Plato and Aristotle, the central figures in Raphael's *The School of Athens* in the Vatican, have been plucked away from their surroundings leaving only the brooding moods evoked by the haunted images of a Giorgio de Chirico cityscape. Here, de Chirico's Surrealist Italian piazzas and the bright daylight of Mediterranean cities have been replaced by Mughal and Ottoman motifs floating in the Gerhard Richter Abstracts that were created from black-and-white photographs during the 1960s and early 1970s. Richter's "blur" effect—with a soft brush and some aggression but not quite a squeegee—come

to mind here. Finally, perhaps most of all, these mixed media works are contemporary painterly extensions of early '50s and '60s Joan Mitchell Abstract Expressionism or the Impressionism of Claude Monet who gave the group its name with his painting *Sunrise* in 1872. As Monet sought to manifest the strong impressions he had of the spontaneity of nature, Qinza Najm seeks to capture the metaphysical relationship between dreams and identity with bicultural allusions stretching from Rumi to Shakespeare, from Persia to portico.

*About the Writer*

Mark Bloch is a writer, performer, videographer and multimedia artist living in Manhattan. In 1978, this native Ohioan founded the Post(al) Art Network a.k.a. PAN. NYU's Downtown Collection now houses an archive of many of Bloch's papers including a vast collection of mail art and related ephemera. For three decades Bloch has done performance art in the USA and internationally. In addition to his work as a writer and fine artist, he has also worked as a graphic designer for ABCNews.com, *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone* and elsewhere. [bloch.mark@gmail.com](mailto:bloch.mark@gmail.com)