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Hybrid Vigor: The Art Of Emna Zghal

BY NAJWA ADRA

Emna Zghal's paintings are powerful: they dare to be beautifully crafted in a world tilted towards facile conceptual work, and they hang by themselves without gratuitous Oriental icons screaming their ethnicity. In fact they don't scream at all. They are as quiet as the traditional Arab mediator negotiating between warring factions, and as subtle as the work of Adonis, another Arab artist also influenced by Western training.

Emna received her B.A. from the Ecole Des Beaux Arts in Tunis, and the M.F.A. from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. She has held several prestigious residencies,

What Zghal wants most is that her art be seen "as contemporary Arab." Yet she is, at the same time, a global artist, not trapped in an ethnic gallery.

including one year at the Cité Internationale Des Arts in 1994-95 and a MacDowell Fellowship in 2002. In 1995, her work received First Prize of the City of Tunis. Her solo exhibitions include two in New York City. The first, at Scene Gallery in 2002, was reviewed by Roberta Smith in *The New York Times*. The second, "The Prophet of Black Folk," was held at the New York based ALWAN for the Arts in November 2003.

Like other successful artists, Zghal rebels against much of her training. At a time when the relevance of painting is being questioned, she insists that she is primarily a painter. Of her interest in beauty and craft, she writes, "I ... use those qualities to question today's trends about the alarming absence of beauty, craft and color beyond a superficial appropriation of imagery and empty reference to some distant practice or culture. I like for my images to be appreciated first and foremost for the emotions they convey. I like them be read as poems not as statements."

When Zghal's teachers in Tunisia discouraged the idea of infinite pattern in art but encouraged her to keep her content "Oriental," she pushed against artificial constraints to explore the potentials of the medium. When they advocated Western-style composition, she did not necessarily agree with the relationship they recommended between foreground and background. She finally found a satisfying model in Art Wolf's aerial photo of elk in the snow in Wyoming. As Zghal tells it, "This photograph defied Western principles of composition: the animals were all over; there was no focal point." Here was a way to incorporate the concept of infinity in interesting ways. She decided to explore organic pattern and its spread in her painting. Beginning with woodcut prints on paper followed by

Hybrid Vigor

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“rubbing, drawing, collage and painting,” she “meanders through knots and brush strokes” playing with the grain of wood, paint drippings and canvas. This results in abstract paintings which, like old Persian carpets, are full of unpredictable detail.

Emna’s most recent work is “The Prophet of Black Folk,” a series of 12 paintings acquired by the New York-based Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. These are highly crafted improvisations on the “Revolt of the Zanj,” a collection of poems by Adonis. Poetry and drawings celebrate the 9th century revolt of slaves brought from East Africa to clear salt from the marshes in southern Iraq. Under the leadership of the Arab poet, Ali Ibn Muhammad, the slaves revolted from their Abbasid owners, built their own capital, minted their own currency and controlled Basra for 10 years. The entire revolt lasted 14 years. It ended when the Caliph al-Muwaffaq ordered that Ali be killed and his severed head brought to him as proof. Adonis chooses to call Ali, *nabiyu l zanj* (prophet of the blacks), a title his contemporaries had tried to confer on him and which he rejected. He is known in history books as *qa’id al zanj* (leader of the blacks).

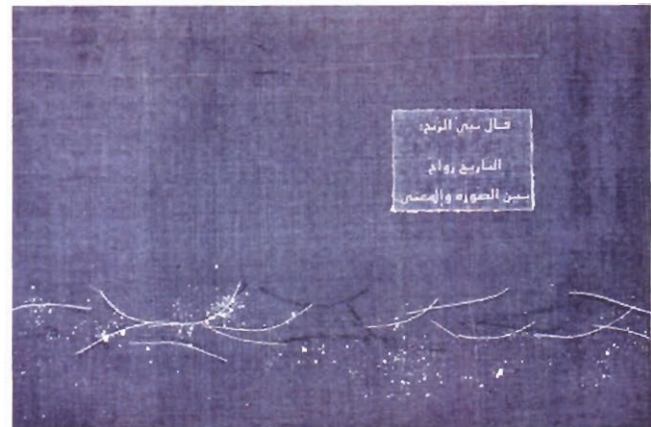
This collection brings together two important formative influences in the artist’s life. Zghal found the story of this revolt empowering when she first heard it as a secondary school student. She sees in it an alternative to “being stuck in a place of victimization.” The work is also a homage to a personal hero. In a recent interview, Zghal recounted her introduction to Adonis and his poetry: “As a teenager, all of the radical and modern readings I was exposed to were in French. So Adonis’ work that I discovered at age 20-21 was a revelation. I saw him on French television. I then found his books at a book fair in Tunis, and heard him read his poetry in person when he visited Tunisia.” The artist was pulled towards the poet’s comparison of sufism with surrealism and connected this with her artwork. “Adonis was reading Arabic without defensiveness or insecurity,” she continues. He was a source of inspiration.

The paintings combine etching, lithograph, monotype, and paint on wood and paper to create very emotive and highly textured work. Colors are muted, in contrast to Zghal’s other work. A verse from Adonis’ poetry is written in Arabic somewhere on each painting. It is inscribed simply, not in calligraphic style. Near each work is an English translation of the poetry. Not all of these translations are successful; however, they are not intrinsic to the work and are included only to aid audiences unfamiliar with written Arabic.

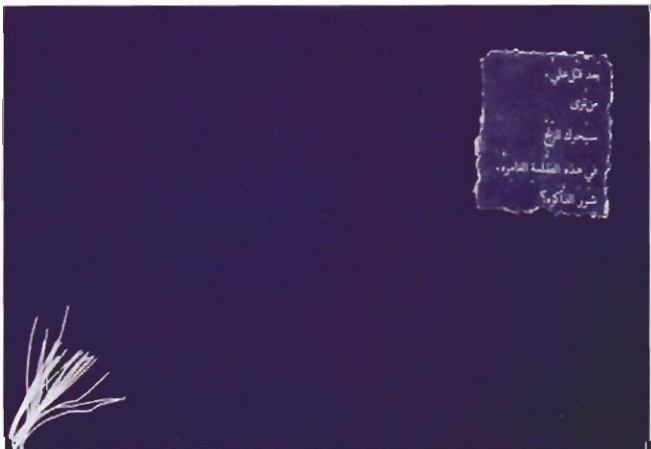
As Zghal describes it, this is the first time she has felt that she is creating work with Arabic content, and this contrasts with many Arab artists who “focus on confronting mainstream misunderstandings of Arab identity, but with little effort to dig into that identity and understand it. They are not focusing on the empowering aspects of Arab identity.” What Zghal wants most is that her art be seen “as contemporary Arab.” Yet she is, at the same time, a global artist, not trapped in an ethnic gallery. Her work demonstrates that it is possible, without overt confrontation, to create beautiful emotive art and still be highly innovative, setting new artistic standards. **AJ**



“Prophet 1” woodcut & etching. He/ is getting ready to reform the sky.



“Prophet 9” monotype. History is a marriage/between the image/ and the meaning.



“Prophet 12” monotype. Rekindle the flamme of memory.



“Prophet 3” etching-whitens cannot/ be unless it is/fertilized by/ Black luster.