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Introduction

In her La Crescenta studio, Seta Manoukian, appears calm and in peace. Inside the studio, canisters of paint fill the shelves on the walls and layers of paintings crowd the large drawers and corners of the room. The window on one side of the room showcases the beautiful Verdugo hills while the opposite window stares down the narrow road where houses appear to be sitting on top of one another.

Her excitement noticeably grows keener as she pulls one work after another from her new collection for my viewing. In minutes the oversized table in the middle of the room is covered with her paintings. At times, Seta, takes on the role of the spectator and comments on her works and then steps back to reminisce on the painstaking effort behind each work. My eyes jump from one painting to another trying to grasp on to every detail. I am overwhelmed by the bold beauty of each work and greedily ask Seta to see more pieces.

The paintings in *Embodiments of Light* collection share a common gesture which at a glance give the impression of exaggerated simplicity. The abstract shapes, lines and choice of colors are pleasantly simple to assimilate to the world around us. Though in each work, there is a struggle of a seed within the earth coming to life, as the artist describes, and its strive to unfold from the beginning to the eternity.

Edgar Allan Poe stated in *The Poetic Principle* "Inspired by an ecstatic presence of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle, by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of time, to attain a portion of that loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone'. Paul Gauguin's painting inspired by Poe's poetry describes the poets influence in his painting *Nevermore*, "...by arrangement of lines and colours, using as a pretext some subject borrowed from human life or nature, symphonies, harmonies which represent nothing real in the vulgar sense of the word and which expresses no idea directly, but which should provoke you to think as music does, without help of ideas or images, simply by the mysterious relationship which exists between our brains and such arrangements of colours and lines." Perhaps through similar intangible communication we can let ourselves experience and come to understand the underlying spirituality in *Embodiments of Light*

Mrs. S. Andreassian

Interview

S : The title *Embodiments of Light* is not only a captivating title but also one that suggests much deeper meaning. Could you tell us about this title?

Seta: You have come up with the hardest question first! This title brings forth my spiritual and philosophical convictions. Actually I am calling people *Embodiments of Light* and not my works. Despite the different periods in my work, my quest both my personal and artistic journey has remained unchanged. I have been seeking the answer to the basic questions, "Who am I, where do I come from?" This led me to the perennial philosophy, we are all one and are the embodiment of love, light and bliss. We are all coming from a higher consciousness which is light. This makes us also embodiments of light as well as love even when very often it is not so apparent.

S : So it is always in the light of this spirituality that you do your painting.

Seta: I am absolutely aware of this. I desire to be the instrument of consciousness and transpose his light through me and on to my paper. This requires a lot of focus and transformation inward. This requires complete focus and if I am distracted even for a moment I have to destroy that painting. My ultimate goal is to achieve total purity in my work.

S : When I look at your works in this series, the purity and simplicity that you refer to is strikingly apparent in this collection. However, another element that is equally striking in the series is the level of complexity you offer. How do you achieve this complexity within simplicity?

Seta: Well, I have had a long career. It has been more than a thirty-five years career in art. In the beginning, when I was in my early twenties, I was already aware of this idea of transformation inward, which helped me realize the concept of void. The silence of the white canvas became that void for me. The silence of the white canvas is so powerful yet so beautiful. From this point of silence everything grows much like nature. My paintings now consist of a vertical line (masculine) in the middle of the canvas or paper, with at the base the play of energy (feminine) representing the four elements, earth, air, water and fire. Those elements are superimposed on white space (the paper or the canvas). The void which is an inevitable reminder of stillness and silence. What I am seeking is non-duality through the dance and union of the masculine and feminine elements. In reality it is seeking union with God, Mysticism.

S : Did you always paint allowing your intuition to be your guide or is there a level of intellectualism?

Seta: I suppose I really became aware of my inner self after my return to Beirut from Italy where I studied in *The Fine Arts School* and received my diploma. It was during this period in my early twenties that I felt I needed to go deeper within myself to paint. Of course at that time I wasn't even aware of eastern philosophy or meditation. I heard of them but that was all. I started looking in the mirror like auto hypnotizing myself, going inside my eyes. Through my eyes I find a way looking into myself. After awhile I realized that I didn't need a mirror any longer. I only needed to stare at the ceiling and at its whiteness. Initially, reaching the vision of a white light through the "third eye" would take a half an hour or so but over time it continued to take less and less time and now it is only matter of focus to become in touch with my inner self. Of course, I was reading a lot of books and I was in the circle of intellectuals and artists. I was also drawn to European art and literature. I found myself taking the road to emptiness and despair by following European, ~~I started looking more~~ *and by doing so* and more to The Far East where I could relate and identify myself. *in 1970*

Interestingly, I found greater appreciation for my culture, Sayat Nova, Gomidas, Poroganoff and so on. *soon*

S : I know you spent your thirties in the civil war of Lebanon. How did you and your art survive during the war? Did your spirituality help you get through it?

Seta: Actually my spiritual quest started before the war but during the war I got involved with day to day life on the streets of Beirut. I remember once sitting at the beach in Beirut and I decided that I should focus not on the horizon, which for me represented stillness, calm and bliss. Instead I shifted my attention to the waves, which symbolizes our own ups and downs. The repetition of events happening in day to day life was much like the incoming waves which always ended up to nothingness. Despite their emptiness, I wanted to know more about the human drama and considered myself a ten-year-witness to that war. It wasn't until after the war that I realized how deeply I was involved with that war and how I needed time to heal my emotional wounds afterwards.

S : Many of the Armenian artists abroad restrict themselves with their own Armenian identity. Were you a part of the Arab art and artist's community at all?

Seta:

I could never be satisfied with just Armenian culture in

Lebanon. S.

it actually was very much involved with Arab ~~and considered~~ *culture* fascinating. Don't forget that my work also was not very well understood by the Armenian community as an Armenian artist. It was too avant-garde and Armenians, being too traditional then could not accept it. The easiest thing for them to do was to ignore it. This was the time of my white canvases, during which time I was painting everything with white color. These works were completely rejected by the Armenian community and they did not consider it worthwhile art. Where the very same works were praised by the Arab artists, journalists and the general community. So to answer your question, no, my work is not at all constrained by my Armenian background

S : Do you think your work was rejected because you are a woman?

Seta: I believe in this strongly. I know this for fact that a male Armenian artist could easily offer an Avant-garde style of works and would be more acceptable. But the expectations from an Armenian female artist by Armenians are not what I had to offer. Not only what I was expressing in my work was too anti-conventional but also my ideas and my life style was not acceptable. This year, with the positive reaction I received from the Armenian community, it became apparent to me that the simplicity of the series of "Embodiments of Light" is accessible to the general public unlike my previous work. *apparent*

S : Recently you broke your contract with one of the most prestigious galleries in Los Angeles and pulled all your works out. Knowing that so many artists are desperately waiting for such an opportunity, why did you feel compelled to take such a drastic measure?

Seta: I exhibited widely throughout the United States and Canada in numerous galleries and museums. In California, the Santa-Monica-based gallery Sherry Frumkin represented my work from 1990 to 2000. To tell the truth I never liked the gallery systems in Los Angeles. I never cared for its highly politicized and commercialized environment. I felt that it was better for me to get out of it. I do not care about fame and recognition

I also didn't need the income revenues that it had to offer. I work full time as an art teacher in the A.G.B.U. Marie Manoogian/Demirjian School and have financial security. At the time I came to the realization that the public's stamp of acceptance, playing the games of art galleries and all that, has nothing to do with art and creation of new works. They were always disturbing for me and I needed to get away from it all.

S : . I have seen many pieces from the *Embodiments of light* collection. Tell us about the reoccurring theme in each of these works.

Seta: I was actually thinking today about the flower and I was wondering why a flower is a symbol of spirituality. First, as it grows from the seed in the darkness of the earth and struggles against many obstacles. When it wins the underground battle and is able to push itself out of the earth to the light, it grows into this symbol of beauty and purity. The idea that I am working with now depicts this struggle.

S : . The reoccurring gesture in *Embodiments of Light* implies sexuality? Was it your intention to suggest that?

Seta: Many years ago when I started to work on "The Familiar Use of Desire" series many people thought that my work looks like feminist art artists. To the point that I even thought that I was implying feminism in my art. In this series you would find feminist symbols such as flowers, water-hoses which referred to sexuality among other things. So I thought maybe they are right. But when I really thought about it, I knew for sure that this was not the case. My art suggests femininity and sexuality because spirituality is our feminine side. This is the case both for men and women. So in fact I was using the organic shapes in my art which came from my deep oneness with nature. Thus sexuality was apparent in my work. As a matter of fact when you look at nature everything looks like a woman's womb. And with the baby in it it is much like a cocoon. Then look as any recreating organism with a shape much like the womb. Then you can see how much nature implies femininity and sexuality.

S : . Femininity in music or literature refers to the soft and weak aspects that appear in those disciplines. To me you have masterfully offered great elegance through your strokes and color usage, yet the overall work suggests a strong sense of masculine power. Again there is this dualism in your work just like our earlier discussion about creating complexity within the boundaries of simplicity; you have achieved strength and power within the elements of elegance and softness. Do you agree with this observation? Can you elaborate on that?

Seta: Thank you. I don't think I have any comments to add to that. It is important to mention here that femininity in art is not a sign of weakness and quite the opposite is true.

S : . You have recently announced that your entire collection of "Embodiments of Light" will be available at cost. What does this mean?

Seta: It means that I am free! I am free of all the galleries, free from any type of ambition and I am free to paint whatever I want

S : You said that you are getting out of "art as commodity". Yet the survival of art is attached to the very commodity that you are rejecting. How do you plan to survive without it?

Seta: O.K, how did the Armenian priests in their monasteries, during the Middle Ages through 17th and 18th centuries, who produced the miniatures, how did these priests survive? They were not thinking about selling or the public and definitely there were no cocktail parties that they needed to be concerned with. They took complete joy and pleasure from doing their artwork in silence.

S : . This announcement, however, gave a mixed feeling to the public who considered this as nothing but quick fundraising. How do you feel about such comments?

Seta: People are complicated and they see everything through their own values. My life has become so simple and I see my life as nothing but simplicity. However, complicated people create complicated issues and voice complicated opinions. And that is not my concern. I should mention that before I sold my works for thousands of dollars and now I sell them for a few dollars to pay for my paint and paper. I don't see how anyone can think of this as a moneymaking move. I really think they just don't understand art. And what about the integrity?

S : . In the past you have received great reviews for your exhibits in galleries and high recognition among the circles of artists in Los Angeles. Reaching this stage was not a small task. Having mentioned that, why did you, in the end, detach yourself from the Los Angeles galleries?

Seta: I will give you an example, once one of the gallery owners saw Arabic letters in my work and she was so horrified by this. She immediately wanted to know if I was a Muslim. This is because Islamic implication of any sort ~~the~~ art is not something that goes well, especially in Los Angeles. I would say New York, Canada and Europe are somewhat better. Los Angeles is a very curious city; on the surface it comes off as a very sophisticated, Art-loving city where in reality, deep down, it is nothing more than a village that is evolving. Their greatest objective is to sell and stay well connected politically. I came to the conclusion that Armenian artists in places like Los Angeles need the support of their community to establish their art, much like, for example, what Mexicans, African-Americans or American-Indians did to establish their own art and artists. We have now several Armenian art professionals, historians/patrons who are deeply devoted to promoting

Armenian artists. I would hope to see more of this in the future and see these individuals rise to decision-making levels in art museums and galleries and eventually sponsor and exhibit works by Armenian artists. But as you can imagine this will take a very long time. Neery Melkonian is a rare individual who has the experience, knowledge and the contacts needed but, of course, she needs the support of the Armenian community in order to be able to compete with the international artistic community and cultural institutions where all is validated.

S : Your desire to spread your work as much as possible could be considered as an egotistic action. How do you justify this?

Seta: It's a good question and I need to think about it a few seconds. It is my "Dharma" my duty to be an artist. In a way it doesn't make sense for me to hide what I am doing. Singers don't sing in the privacy of their home. They need to have their voices heard. There is a tremendous satisfaction to be able to show your art to others and make them happy and see the reflection of that happiness in yourself. When someone wants to keep my work, it makes me so happy and this happiness is so profound that the issues of money become secondary. It is like talking to someone and realizing that your words made sense to him or her and consequently made a difference too. So there is so much pleasure involved in sharing. Van Gough gave his ear as an offering since no one was caring for his art. If this is what is referred to as ego then I must accept it.

S : Are there artists that you have admired and perhaps been influenced by them?

Seta: I don't think I can say that a single artist influenced me because I love all of them. I haven't come across any artist where I wasn't moved by their work. But I like very much the Russian icon artist, Andrei Rublev. He lived through the invasions of the Tatars and Mongolians when they would swamp through the villages, burning and destroying everything to the ground. Andrei Rublev was a witness to those events for years and he became mute for five years he just refused to speak. He came out of this mute period completely transformed. As the result of this transformation his work was the purest, the simplest and the most daring. I suppose I see my life experience close to his and this creates a deep connection and understanding of his work.

S : During your long artistic career it seems that you have gone through several distinguishable periods. Do you foresee yet another period in the near future.

Seta: I work a lot and my work looks similar for a long time, sometimes for a few years but involves and looks different over time.

S : In other words we should wait patiently or impatiently to witness perhaps an even more spirited and inspired Seta.

Seta: We'll see. If God wishes.