

Dreamscapes of the soul: the art of Rajaa Gharbi

By David Kennedy McCulloch*

In a world full of stress, pain, uncertainty, and injustice many people seek to soothe their soul from time to time by losing themselves in an escapist book; a story that transports them to have amazing adventures in fantastical places. For me the artwork of Rajaa Gharbi has the same effect. It is escapist art; paintings that shock and surprise, delight and confuse. She creates stories on canvas that draw you inside layers of complexity and take you on a journey inside your own stream of consciousness. Gharbi's paintings grab you and unsettle you. She paints in many different styles and moods. What unifies them for me is the confident bold strokes, the stunning use of color, and a sense that she has given herself up to the true purpose of the painting itself. Just as many authors feel that the fictional story and characters they create begin to take on a life of their own so it is with Gharbi's painting.

To fully enjoy one of Rajaa Gharbi's paintings I find it best to submit to my own emotional imagination and see where it takes me. When I first enter the room I am awestruck by the sheer beauty of the bold sweeping colors applied in startling combinations. As I move closer the abstract blocks of color begin to reveal recognizable shapes of birds, trees, boats, clouds, and plants, recognizable, and yet fantastical. Trees with spidery thin branches transform themselves into threads of tapestry or become the beaks of birds or tears falling from eyes suspended in the clouds. It is as though beneath the colored veil of the painting's surface there is a riot of magical adventures battling for attention. A sweeping sand dune becomes a sad woman's veil before flowing off into the distance as a horse's mane.

If I move closer still I see strange words and letters (whether Arabic, Cyrillic, or Martian, I know not). They are sprinkled across tree branches and wisps of clouds like decadent swirls of cinnamon and brown sugar on the surface of a foaming cappuccino. If I cup my hands to isolate small areas of the canvas I notice purple and brown clumps of heather that remind me of my native Scotland. But up above there are animal shapes in the clouds, next to lonely eyes, shooting stars, shoals of wriggling eels (or are they sperm?) that get pulled on the breeze to dance in the sky before becoming strands of moss hanging from the branches of spindly trees around a desert oasis. Dizzy and confused I step back from the painting gasping for breath and yet grinning from ear to ear.

Rajaa Gharbi's art is studded with imagery from her North African roots but the concepts of longing, despair, hope and goodness are universal themes that resonate across time, gender, and culture. I find myself returning to her paintings over and over again. Each time I discover new images and meanings. Or perhaps I invent them. Perhaps the light is different this day, or maybe it is my mood that has changed. Rajaa Gharbi creates stunning visual poetry within which we can explore our own psyche. For minutes or hours she allows us to escape from the stresses of everyday reality and invites us to lose ourselves in her vivid dreamscapes of the soul. I am honored to write this review.

*Dr. David Kennedy McCulloch is a fiction writer and MD. The Tunisian Assahafa newspaper published the Arabic version of this article in its November 11, 2010 print.

