



LOUZLA DARABI ASTRIDE TWO WORLDS

Painter Louzla Darabi's work has a pair of extremely vibrant roots: she grew up in Paris, but nonetheless feels deeply connected to her native Algeria.

THOSE EYES. Peering from her self-portraits, they fix viewers with a gaze that is direct and unapologetic, staring out from a face that otherwise could be described as somewhat remote: full mouth closed, petite nose peeking forth, high forehead surmounting the whole. A neutral expression at best - then, abruptly, these two stunning brown windows opening wide to admit the world, curious yet resolute.

One sees the same thing sitting across the table from the 34-year-old painter. Her brown hair is longer and curlier than in the paintings, which show it cut short or piled high. But it's not so much her hairdo that grabs your attention when you talk to Louzla Darabi. It's those eyes.

FEMINITY means beholding others, maintains the artist. Many of the paintings in her still-nascent body of work deal with themes of femininity and sexuality. Most of the portraits of women and sexual images exude a sense of erotic abandon, some gleefully toy with porno clichés. Currently, Darabi is working on a series of 40 paintings of the skies over Bordeaux. She has brought three of them with her to our appointment in the wine mecca in southwestern France, where she lives with her husband and their young son.

THE SKY above the city on the Garonne River is mostly sunny, but often large cloud formations drift across the heavens, driven by winds off the nearby Atlantic. The artist is dedicating her new series of paintings solely to exploring the mutual interaction of space, color and light. And, as always, she is keenly interested in investigating the mysterious relationship between visible reality and the unseen, the spiritual.

DARABI FOUND herself deeply touched spiritually on a return visit to Oran, Algeria in 2004. Like a blind person suddenly blessed with vision, she completely rediscovered the North African country's second-largest city. Born there in 1974, she immigrated to Paris with her parents at the age of two, and apart from a few intervening visits to Algeria, she was raised in a Western environment. Early in 2004, she traveled to her native country for six months in order to establish a painting school for Algerian women.



BIOGRAPHY

Though she drew as a child, Louzla Darabi's artistic pathway has been anything but straight. For many years, the young woman denied her own artistic talent. She first took a degree in biology before deciding to follow an artistic career, and applied to the Ecole des beaux Arts in Paris. Just prior to that, she enrolled in two talent workshops. Because the sculpture class in the second workshop was full, she ended up in the painting class. Thanks to the instructor of that course, this promising young painter is now invigorating the art world with her vision. Many of her paintings are variations on the theme of eroticism.

SHE HEARD the Arabic language, sniffed well-known odors, saw familiar faces and gestures. "I took to it like a fish to water," explains Darabi. She was particularly affected by the spirituality of the language, which is saturated with religious concepts. Cultural aspects such as these were already familiar to her, but this time the returning native perceived them anew- through an artist's eyes. She had always possessed this vision. Even as a child, she was constantly drawing. But she never truly saw herself as an artist, at first completing a degree in biology before undertaking painting instruction and subsequently securing a place at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

TRIPTYCHS are particularly close to Darabi's heart. Generally, she likes to use these three-part works to establish a relationship between two people, with a particular landscape as the binding link. Darabi believes that each of us is always searching for a locale that reflects our innermost sense of self.

HER PREFERENCE for rich colors and two-dimensional painting style is something she shares with American artist Georgia O'Keefe, herself the subject of one of Darabi's triptychs. She is also inspired by sculptor Louise Bourgeois as well as the father of British pop art, Richard Hamilton.

DARABI'S LIGHTER SIDE is evident in her penguin sculptures: since June of 2006, an army of the 33-cm (13-in) plaster creatures has been marching on unsuspecting art institutions such as the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris and London's Tate Modern. A video of the performance at the Tate shows museum guards attempting to remove the penguin horde. Children rush to the birds' defense. "I see my penguins as warriors and witnesses. They watch what's happening and they have an effect on things," says Darabi. Her penguins' eyes are massive and wide-open.

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