

ELIE KANAAN

The Simple Power of Color

Color is to painting as notes are to music, as words are to poetry. Vincent Van Gogh once said, "The painter of the future will be a colorist in a way no one has been before." He is right. For too many centuries, the human eye has been accustomed to reading a painting through its images, wanting to conceptualize its meaning in words and remaining blind to the intrinsic power of color alone to break through thought and ignite emotion.

I was thinking about this the other day when I stopped to see the exhibition of Elie Kanaan, veteran painter and a top name on the Lebanese art scene. A self-taught artist, who since 1949 has chalked up 50 one-man exhibitions in Lebanon and internationally, Kanaan is first and foremost a colorist. Ever since he began painting, he has been enamored of color – rich, succulent and vibrant hues ranging from one end of the rainbow spectrum to the other.



With uncommon virtuosity, he makes color bow to his bidding. Where normally, according to all visual principles of color activity, blue should recede and red bounce forward, he forces them to act otherwise. In the process, he produces a lively unusual perspective in which color alone, without the guidance of line, pulls the eye in and leads it along a seductive path of abstract expressionistic forms that bounce in and out of the picture.

Kanaan, however, is still somewhat concerned with figurative imagery. Often he introduces romantic elements of reality that tend to interfere with the emotive content of his color. Though many people welcome these nostalgic references to the real world, I am distracted. Considering the character of his potential, I would prefer that he divorce himself from obvious images and let the power of color speak for itself. Forget ideas and meaning, I would tell him. Lead us into the domain of pure sensual experience, where the eye may receive color as the ear receives music. Van Gogh would have liked that. ■

The Daily Star, December 19, 1998, exhibition at Gallery Épreuve d'Artiste



La prairie, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm, 1990



Naufrage, oil on canvas, 120 × 100 cm, 2009

Landscape painting, like the nude figure and still life, has always had a strong traditional attraction for the artist. Nature's world, its varying lights, moods and energies, provides a constant stimulation to recreate its forms and colors, and each painter seeks out his own interpretation of the scenes and sites around him. Sometimes he is provoked to reproduce faithfully with a photographic eye its awesome, changing beauty. Other times he is stirred by a certain dominating element of a land, sea or sky, and he tries to catch the one particular aspect that will express his own private vision-like Van Gogh's swirling trees and skies, or Turner's breathing, atmospheric light. Through classicism, to the impressionists' penetration of light into shadow, to Cezanne's involvement with nature's architectural structure and the subsequent present abstractions of its colors and forms, the world around us has spoken to each artist and age differently, and its expression continues to be one of endless variety.

My first look at Kanaan's paintings startled me into a pleasurable response, much like that afforded by a kaleidoscope's multicolored forms. His colors are clean and full; there is a strong plasticity in his work, and spontaneity of application that intrigues and draws the viewer towards the canvas.

On a second, slower go around, however, I began to doubt that first visual perspective; I began to have the sense of his pictures almost succeeding, but not quite. There was a missing link somewhere; an element lacking that lessened the potential vitality that his color and brush held. Except where the landscape was approached with a definite figuration, there was generally a disorganization and somewhat arbitrary use of color areas. An underlying significant form, necessary for any painting to succeed, was teasingly evasive.

Contrasting blues and yellows or pinks and oranges, all bold and hot, can be a danger-



Duo, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm, ca. 1985

ous feat. Kanaan controls these combinations extremely well, creating many new and stimulating counterpoints, yet I wished for some inter-areas of "no color" to pause in and lend a necessary relief of his high notes.

Kanaan's palette contains a wealth of color and texture, as the Arabic language does in

vocabulary and structure. However, there is a kind of Arabic poetry that only intoxicates with its rhythmic, sensual music, without profoundly exciting the listener. Kanaan's landscapes are still too much like that kind of poetry – beautiful words, yet lacking a vital imagery.

Monday Morning, December 19, 1998



Centre Ville, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm, 1983

Elie Kanaan was born in 1926 in Beirut. He started painting in his early twenties and was encouraged by the French painter Georges Cyr, who was impressed by Kanaan's use of colors. He began to exhibit in 1949, winning in 1957 the first prize in painting at the *Salon du Printemps* and UNESCO's prize in 1958. Awarded a scholarship to study in France, Kanaan went to Paris where he attended the *Académie de la Grande Chaumière* and was influenced

by the school of Paris. Between 1963 and 1974, he taught drawing and painting at the *Collège Notre-Dame de Jamhour*, the Lebanese University, and the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA). He travelled extensively, especially in Europe and exhibited both in Lebanon and abroad. Since 1949 he held regular yearly exhibitions, mainly in France, Germany, Italy, Kuwait, Egypt, Russia and the United States.

In his later years, he won a number of awards, notably the first prize for oil-painting offered by the Sursock Museum in Beirut and the Vendome prize in Paris in 1967. Villa Audi mounted a rich retrospective exhibition in 2011 in Beirut. Kanaan was a solitary artist, a colorist par excellence. His oil paintings have always an intricate combination of light and dark hues with various intensities; often a white patch

lightens surfaces of different dark colors.

