

## **Amine Elbasha by Joseph Fitchett**

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In his dream exhibition, Elbasha is working at a long panel, so long it vanishes into infinity. He paints away, sketching sudden eyefuls, overprinting an area to correspond with a later section of the panel. People drop in and out. He goes off to teach his pupils or grab a coffee, then comes back and extends his painting. Not as a show of his virtuosity, simply to make contact with people. It's part of a habit of mentally keeping open house, outwardly passive, secretly alert, like an artisan working away in a souk at a world crossroads.

Elbasha eludes people who try to get him interested in issues. It's a source of his strength. Questions like the validity of abstract or representational art, the importance of a card-carrying Arab art, the viability of Arab traditions – all these are theoretical problems. So they are not allowed to interfere with what of a canvas and retiring to his chess-board, Duchamp looks mannered in comparison. Elbasha has refined his tinkering, his playing around to a supple technique. Sketching at parties or cafes, he scrambles his subjects into surprising eyefuls, a cross between Saul Steinberg and Picasso. (Some of the ribald sketches refused by galleries are gradually finding their way into collections.) Back in the studio, other games take over. (He never paints outside his studio, and only gradually adds new colours to his personal Palette.) a pack of white cards has to be used up, so a separate subject is drawn on each one, then the series composed on a panel. Magazines are ransacked yielding sepia photographic images to round out the new composition. (The mutilated magazines will probably become the starting point for a series of papier-mâché sculptures.) used up, so a separate subject is drawn on each one, then the series composed on a panel. Magazines are ransacked yielding sepia photographic images to round out the new composition. (The mutilated magazines will probably become the starting point for a series of papier-mâché sculptures.) The small India-ink and photo panels immediately spark another project, for a collector: gigantic oil panels dramatizing the very problem of juxtaposition. (When workmen dismantle the

collector's dining room to install the panels, will new owner look at the debris and start something else from it, extending the chain reaction?)

In addition to tinkering with space, subject and his painting materials, Elbasha also wants to play around with the panet. Offered a chance to go to Baghdad, Ain-Mreisse or across the street, he is off. The last time we went to Damascus, the only thing he brought back was three pages of sketches. Of course, he filled the car with purchases, but all were perishables. Except the sketches themselves, gaping with white spaces where bright sunlight patches had wiped out his vision. Which is the real Damascus?

Elbasha studied painting, and won prizes, at Beirut's Academy of Fine Arts, was shown at AUB by Frick and Carswell, then went to Paris and stayed there until 1967, when he came back to live and work in Beirut.

He went to Paris expecting to meet other painters and fulfill the residence requirements for citizenship in the art world of Europe's well-organized, picturesque solitudes. Since Elbasha's return, the Middle East's teeming disorder and visual promiscuity have gradually transformed his drawings and watercolours.

People mingling, and people mingling with nature, have surged into a worldvien which used invariably to give way to the blue emptiness of the sea.

Now the sea it just a horizon framing a gaze riveted on the substance of a scene. Always, all is kept before the eye, the mind is never allowed to mutilate the scene into intellectual order. "In my mind's eye, I see a fish, a head and a clock; a leg. A tree and a bottle. I'm interested in putting these forms together, to arrive at a harmony. And that harmony is a story, a story without a subject without an end or a beginning."

Rom these exercises comes not a Elbasha can do when he sets about covering white space with colour or lines. Wary enough to survive on the intoxicating Mediterranean littoral, he refuses to indulge in theorizing or

stylishness. “I’m studying objects. You know, I think with my eye and my hand, not my head. It could be an idiot and it wouldn’t matter. My way of seeing is my language.” Every watercolour is an exercise, like a baby trying out a new work.

“Eventually I’ll work up to sentence,” he revealed in a momentary lapse before closing the door of the phone booth and changing back into his affable Clark Kent disguise.

“To understand painting, you have to like it. All the rest interpretation, evaluation, criticism – comes afterwards. If you don’t begin with a rush of feeling, none of the rest will ever make any sense or amount to anything other than chitchat at an overcrowded society preview.” Who is this man raising awkward questions, asking whether or not people respond sincerely to art? Is that all he learned in all those years in Paris, a worrying tendency to go around puzzling out the same old-fashioned questions, over and over?

Most bright people these days are only serious about spending money, and occasionally making some. Pitted against this earnest triviality, Elbasha’s insistence on playing around with people, places and painting is a strenuous vocation. Sending a urinal to be hung instead technique but a vision. Hence the poise, the density of even the simplest watercolour – whose spontaneity is the result of years of saying “no” to tempting easy successes. Instead, Elbasha has stubbornly worked at slowly acquiring a personal vocabulary.

Elbasha sees himself as a direct heir to the new tradition of modern art. He is fascinated by the careers of men like Mondrian, Klee and Kandinsky, who found sincerity the paramount problem. Because of their sincerity which the medium, Kandinsky and Mondrian became mystics of colour and line. Klee’s work while traveling in the Arab countries reflects his concern over sincerity with the physical world. These painters’ styles – as a reference, an historic development to be extended – are not what interests Elbasha, however.

The important point for him is that their work carries a conviction, an authority, which comes not from copying others but from a stubborn, determined effort make his art his what of relating himself to the world.

Increasingly there are no paintings, only painters. Elbashes' early paintings remain unfinished until he has painted his last.