

Crossing ethnic lines

By Gil Goldfine

Asad Azi's sumptuously baroque mixed-media paintings simmer with a conflict of artistic interests. His major decorative chord, defined by his Druze heritage and local culture, is considerably adulterated by the injection of carefully orchestrated minor images and florid ornaments culled from western art.

Each of Azi's canvases follows a set composition. A same-size vertical format, symmetrically composed, is divided between an upper section containing a variety of images and textural materials and a lower predella housing colorful abstract designs. At the center of each composition Azi has placed a rectangular shape echoing a walled patio or temple plan which contains an illustrated tondo at its head and an enigmatic tabernacle (constructed in painted low relief) inserted into the base line. The latter is a curious amalgamation of horned sarcophagi from the Talmudic period, Shang bronze vessels from China and early Christian art. Embedded in each altar is a miniature gold cartouche embossed with birds, beasts, flowers or lovers.

The richness of Azi's surfaces are quite extraordinary, despite their flamboyant look. Complementary tones of deep viridian and damask red, ochre and turquoise, ultramarine and orange with scumbled white patches, are compressed into geometric shapes bordered by



Asad Azi: mixed-media painting (Artifact Gallery, Tel Aviv)

gilt-edged fabrics and hanging threads. Pigment is applied in both an expressive lyrical manner (Islamic calligraphy) and in a constructivist style echoing systemic formulae used in Arab embroidery and Moorish architectural decoration.

But ethnicity occupies only a portion of Azi's painterly mode. The inclusion of cropped figures from Rembrandt and Chardin and French tapestries depicting sexual frivolity and more serious still life, are balancing elements which symbolize Azi's need to respect cross-cultural influences without overtly diluting or abdicating his self-imposed artistic responsibilities. The inclusion of Rembrandt's "Jewish Bride" in one painting is an obvious reference to his desire to embrace and contain the duality of his cultural experience.

Although Azi's paintings are hung on a wall, their structural components could be equated with those of oriental carpets. There

are clearly defined markings (scale, symmetry and exotic palettes) which display an uncanny relationship to small, individually proportioned, geometric prayer rugs.

While looking at Azi's canvases the work of Reuven Berman-Kadim comes to mind. Both artists, each in their own manner, attempted light on the interactions of cultures as ethnic groups while investigating, in a contemporary fashion, the intrinsic artistic and architectural qualities that made them unique.

Azi is scoring points with each new exhibit. With this one he gets high marks. (Artifact Gallery, 12 Apeck, Tel Aviv). Till Apr. 24.

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