

STANZA OF ANOTHER LAND

By Osama Abu Sitta

In the third installment of the "Another Land" series, which will be exhibited at Orient Gallery in April, Mohammad Nasrallah takes the viewer on a trek through his expansive emotional realms where land, sea and sky do not conform to the natural order but rather to his own logic of longing to a land where he has not set foot but a land that nevertheless has shaped his persona and his work. Mohammad Nasrallah was born in 1963 in Al Wihdat Refugee Camp in Amman. He studied at the Institute of Fine Arts and received a diploma from the Cervantes Institute in Amman. He started exhibiting in 1989, and "Another Land 3" is his fifteenth exhibition.



simply, an odd black brushstroke on a vast ocean of blue may seem arbitrary at first but it indeed proves to be the subliminal note that, like meter in poetry, locks the work in its emotional rhythm.

There is an Arab proverb that says, “A poet has rights that others do not,” which means that poets are allowed to manipulate rules to suit their artistic purposes. But Nasrallah, who loves poetry and abhors rules, does not make use of this concession. He is rather disciplined in his compositions. There are no non-essential elements in his work; his palette has maintained its brilliance and his compositions have stuck to the rules, his rules not the establishment’s.

His compositions, in the most straightforward sense, are horizontal bands of color that run across the canvas mostly conjuring land, sea and sky but hardly in a literal sense. Skies could be a deep blue or bright yellow, land in green, yellow or earth tones and water in blue or whatever color he considers essential. These bands or bodies of earth, water and sky may be juxtaposed and may not be in the order one expects them to be. The juxtapositions and colors create otherworldly landscapes where terra firma may not be where one is standing but where one’s heart lies. Horizon upon Horizon, intercepted with a mirage of a town or village, an outline of a hill or building, a faint suggestion of ruins or a strong presence of an amorphous structure, chairs, a bow of a ship, a distant island, all add up to a coherent whole.

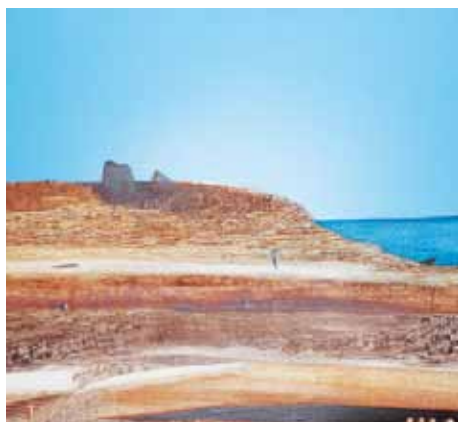
Adding depth to his colorful compositions, Nasrallah’s use of texture breathes life into his work. Using a palette knife, he squiggles, hatches and crosses the surfaces in a unique way to give each field of color the intended finish. These textures have given his work a distinctive identity. But it would diminish the artistic value of his work to say that his use of texture is its defining feature; it is one of several signatures. His use of color is another. He pairs brilliant primary colors with the earth tones that are so familiar in Jordan, Palestine and the rest of the Levant. At times he juggles colors to emphasize particular temperaments.

In one of his works, where a landscape turns to seascape then back to land and



Nasrallah’s inspiration and artistic language do not stem from academic training in the arts nor is he enamored by a certain artist or school of thought that he emulates. The source of his inspiration is his own personal experience of living as a refugee like millions of other people here and elsewhere, which he articulates in a language of his own. This language gives the humanist and universal appeal that exudes from his work in abundance. But it also gives him freedom. Early in his career Nasrallah realized that the “most effective way to deal with art is to be liberated from its rules.”

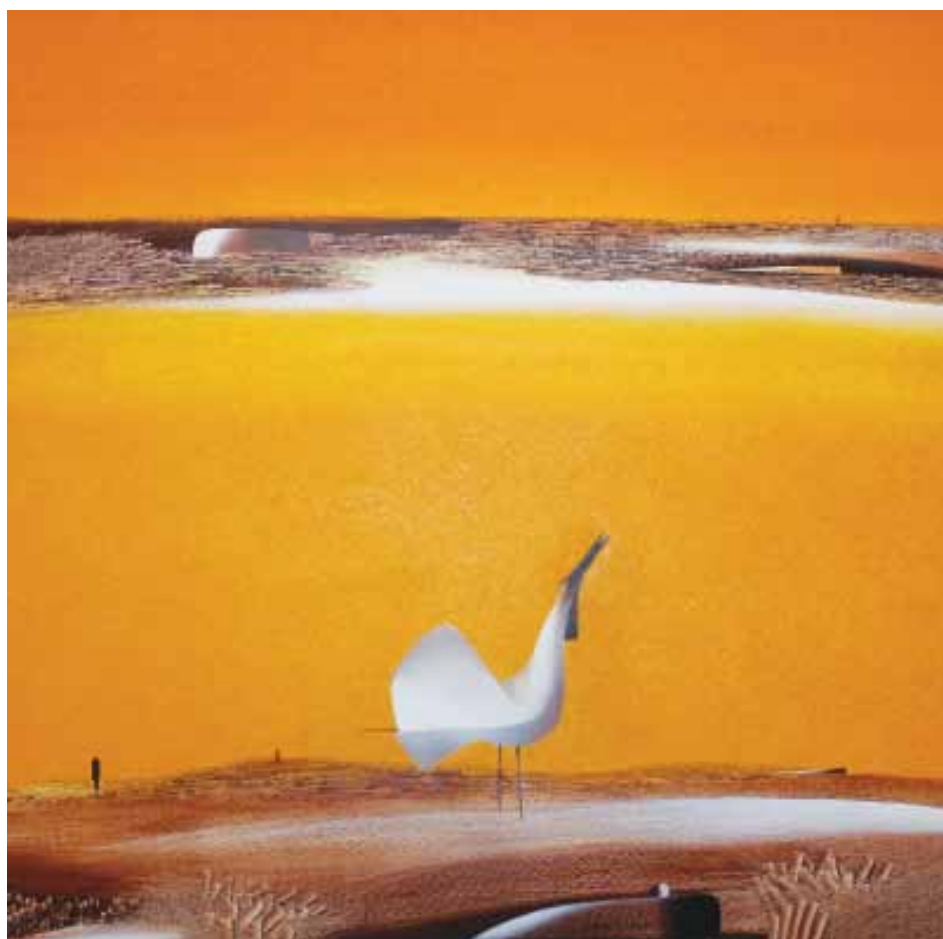
Poetry plays a pivotal but indirect role in his work. Being an avid reader and lover of poetry has given Nasrallah’s work a certain tempo that resonates across his oeuvre. Arabs have always had poetry as their primary form of artistic expression and inspiration. But Nasrallah, whose brother is the well-known poet and novelist Ibrahim Nasrallah, must have lived the experience of the poetic creative process and it has indelibly marked his work. He constructs his compositions with a structured approach. He punctuates his work with gestures and symbols with the precision of a poet. A barely visible silhouette of a man here, a bird there, or



finally sky, the color of the sea and sky is very similar if not the same, but here the artist renders the sky in densely textured paint that it looks more turbulent than the sea. In the band of earth that meets the sky, a vast swath of earth is entirely smooth; to its left are three rock-like protrusions rendered with yet another texture. Further down the painting the sea is calm apart from slight ripples. At the bottom, we go back to earth rendered again in smooth swathes and textured segments. Like a symphony in four movements, this work guides the viewer through emotional states that range from the austerity and majesty of sand dunes into the rhythmic hum of the surf and back to rocky terrain and finally through an enormously blue but not so serene sky. Floating within these movements are undertones, like soulful flutes, that manifest themselves in brushstrokes of black or in shrubs, a sail blown by the wind or simply a distant rock island.

In another work, two-thirds of the canvas is a pasture of spring green textured with a palette knife with a piano in the foreground. Beyond it, a rocky barren land with suggestions of a village, a bird, a column and what could be a tree. Above it there is a solidly yellow sky. This work, while drastically different in temperament, remains essentially true to the artist's syntax. A land so green and a sky so bright surround a strip of land with its sharp rocks, faint villages and cavernous cavities. At the bottom of the canvas sits the suggestively rendered piano. One can almost hear its notes reminding one of an old melody.

The artist is not telling a story as much as he is attempting to ignite segments of our unconsciousness to bring them to the



conscious side. The colors, the textures, the compositions and the punctuating gestures recreate realms that we individually find our way into, where we may well end up in places even beyond the artist's imagination.

Nasrallah's life has been marred by bittersweet experiences. From being born and growing up in a refugee camp to "discovering" Palestine, as he says, only to realize that it has been lost, then finding hope in the Intifada only for the tide to change again, Nasrallah does not lose hope. His work, while at times melancholy, is beaming with hope, the type of hope

that comes from the firm belief in the justice of his and our cause. He has found in the brushes and palette knife the tools to soar, and in his canvas, the locales to build his realms that define his experiences that somehow become ours too. Ibrahim Nasrallah, the artist's brother, in the first quatrain of his poem, *The Wings*, from the "Rain Inside" poetry collection, sums up Mohammad Nasrallah's flight every time he catches a canvas:

*Whenever I catch a poem
I've caught a wing that takes me to the steady
radiance
at the heart of the world, to the lifeblood
in the veins of all creatures* ■