

AN ARTIST'S SEARCH FOR AN INTENSE SERENITY:

INTERVIEW

A Conversation with Painter Helen Khal

by Nada Awar



"Street boy", 1948, oil on canvas. Helen Khal.

From the large terrace at one end of Helen Khal's eighth-floor apartment is a view of the flat, blue lines of the Mediterranean, her muse. Though born to Lebanese parents in Allentown, Pennsylvania in the United States, it was only when she came to Lebanon as a young woman in the mid-1940s and discovered the remarkable quality of light here, its interplay with color and shape, that she decided to devote herself wholeheartedly to art.

I sit in her living room waiting for the cup of coffee she has kindly offered, and take the opportunity to examine the many paintings leaning against the walls, propped up on stands, or hanging, frameless, on one side of the room. The simple, horizontal blocks of color, as if growing out of one another on one canvas, are familiar, and represent the direction Helen Khal's work has taken for many years now. But one work in progress, a portrait, gives no hint

of any abstraction. It clearly depicts a man and a woman, blended into a background of myriad shades of blue, staring out at the viewer, seemingly timeless. I look from one canvas to the other and suddenly realize the similarities between them. There is a luminosity about both of them, visual as well as literal, expressed by the simplicity of their lines, that makes them appear light, almost weightless. At that moment, I see how abstract art, so often misunderstood by lay-people like myself, can contain representational meaning. It is just a question of looking intensely enough to find it. I first ask Helen whether she feels that the designation "women artists" is a valid one: is there so great a difference between women and men in the arts?

"In general," says Khal, "I don't believe this difference ought to be made. It is a kind of segregation. But it has been necessary because, historically, female artists have not received the recognition they deserve." Khal admits that biological differences between men and women could have an effect on the ways in which they approach their art. "Because of their basic, biological function, women are not psychologically and physically as free as men are to devote all of their time to art. They are also, as a result, more rooted in the earth than men, and they don't feel the need for transcendence through art as much as men do. Women can transcend themselves through child-bearing."

Helen Khal, the artist, is also a mother. Once married to the Lebanese poet Youssef Al-Khal, she has two grown sons, and asserts that if at any stage of their lives her relationship with them were compromised because of her art, she would drop the latter. "As a female artist, human relationships are more important to me than art," she says. "I don't think the same can be said for male artists." This is a point on which Khal may find disagreement with some young women artists in the West. For them, the struggle to make a living while devoting themselves to art usually precludes choosing a partner and having children while also actively pursuing a career in the arts.

The same does not seem to be true in Lebanon. In the introduction to her book, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (1987), Khal describes how, through research, she discovered that women artists in Lebanon, when compared with those in other Arab countries as well as the West, have played a leading role in terms of their numbers and the quality of their work. This might have something to do with the fact that, at least until recently, middle-class

women have not had to support themselves. Thus, Lebanese women could, quite literally, afford to spend their time drawing, painting, and sculpting. It is also true that the art arena in Lebanon exists on a much smaller scale than in Europe or North America. "Perhaps," says Khal, "if the competition became too stiff many of these young Lebanese women artists would drop out of the art world."

Like most Lebanese, Khal makes a distinction between Lebanon before the war and Lebanon now. She points out that just before the outbreak of the civil war, Lebanon had become an art center for the whole of the Middle East. It provided the forum for artists from all over the region to exhibit their work, as well as a setting in which to interact with one another. "Had things continued as they were, Lebanese artists could have had a much greater influence on the development of art in the Middle East. As things stand, however, I guess we will never know what the results of that influence might have been."

Does Khal feel that her work has had any effect on the work of other artists in Lebanon? "I think my work may have influenced some of them to an extent, in helping them move away from more complex compositions to a more simple approach," she says. Khal points out that Lebanese artists tend towards the expressionist style of painting, characterized by the use of lots of color and nervous energy in their work. This is characteristic of the abstract expressionist school of art in which the energy of the brush stroke and the quality of the color dominate shape and form.

"My work is different," says Khal. "I focus in on one solitary image, on the emotive power of color. I don't even want the brush stroke to show." The artist's choice, according to Khal, is between using a work of art as a means for self-expression, or using herself as the medium through which the different aspects of the work speak for themselves. "I dislike clutter and noise. I don't even like the wind." She shifts in her chair and looks closely at me. "I'm looking for serenity. Not calmness or dullness, but a serenity that is intense." She pauses for a moment. "There is a quotation from one of T.S. Eliot's poems that I love, it says 'at the still point of the turning world there is the dance'. I'm not sure exactly what those words mean, but it explains how I feel. I'm trying to find that still point where all the life and energy are, and I'm trying to find it through color."

Perhaps that lucidity has been arrived at through the synthesis of East and West, of complexity and simplicity, of what is dense and what is diaphanous, through the soul of an artist who is neither entirely Lebanese or entirely American. "I've lost my sense of national identity, or maybe I've gone beyond it," Khal muses. "This is one of

the inescapable truths of modern life," she continues. "People are moving out of strict notions of identity, and in doing so, they are having an effect on others. Artists who do this can encourage the freeing of society as a whole."

Although noting art's power to transcend social, national and cultural boundaries, Khal is quick to point out that attitudes in the West concerning Arab artists are still pre-



"Young girl", 1959, oil on plywood. Helen Khal.

dominantly patronizing and arrogant. Westerners expect artists from the Middle East to paint in an "Arab way", and they reserve notions concerning the universality of art as a language of expression for their own artists. That is why, explains Khal, it is very difficult for Arab artists to receive international recognition.

One gets the impression, however, that recognition, though it has been considerable, has never been a great priority in Helen Khal's life. She is the kind of artist whose work has represented only one of the many threads woven through a multi-faceted and rich life. She is also a woman who admits that it is only through time and experience that she has been able to understand the true meaning of her work. She describes this meaning as the ability "to create a presence that may be entered visually, and through that sense of sight, find respite from the jarring realities of a world in which serenity is hidden."