

L. Kent Wolgamott: Beautiful paintings explore the spiritual at Sheldon



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Basil Alkazzi paints landscapes, flowers and skies. But his brightly colored, oft-beautiful images aren't close to representational, nor are they intended to be.

Instead, as the title of his touring exhibition, "An Odyssey of Dreams," implies, Alkazzi's gouaches on handmade paper are ethereal reflections that blur the boundary between

abstraction and representation.

In doing so, Alkazzi explores the spiritual in art -- not religious, per se, but aimed at a deeper, more universal feeling that artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and especially Mark Rothko have tapped in the past.

In a Q&A in the catalog accompanying the exhibition that's now on view at the Sheldon Museum of Art, Alkazzi was asked what he wanted the viewer to recognize or come away with from the gouaches in the show. His answer:

"Awe at the sublime Soul within Life, and nature, and so, within themselves."

After paying a couple of visits to the exhibition, at least for me, Alkazzi accomplishes that goal. The paintings are captivating and mysterious and almost force thoughts on the nature of nature and of reality, physical and spiritual.

The most effective in that sense is "Ascension in Beatitude II." One of the exhibition's largest pieces, "Ascension in Beatitude II" contains its only human figure -- an outline drawing of a person between two vertical yellow forms, its arms outstretched over the top.

Whether the person is emerging from nature or trapped is an individual determination -- the interpretation of art is always only up to each viewer. But, without doubt, it raises the questions of what is the person doing there, where is there and what does it mean.

As its title indicates, Alkazzi, a native of Kuwait born in 1938 who studied and lived in London before making a home in New York, works in series. The exhibition, curated by Judith K. Brodsky of Rutgers University, covers "A Decade of Paintings, 2003-2012" and includes multiple examples from at least four series.

The most images -- and some of the most striking -- come from "Twilight of Whispering Dreams," a series of floral landscapes that appear to build on each other, peaking with number "VI," with its central depiction of a single flower with three yellow petals emerging from what appears to be a mushroom-covered ground with an echoed image of the flower floating in the sky above.

Those flowers are the simplest possible representation; others are more familiar, e.g., the purple blossoms of “Iris at Sunset” and “Iris and the Grasshopper That Flew Away.” But in every case, the images don’t depict nature -- the skies, for example, are rarely blue and often covered with round discs of colors that complement the background.

Some works are purely abstract with bright colored bands of color, often yellow, bisecting the fields of darker hues. And many blur those lines, ala “Twilight IV,” a series of concentric rings that appear to emanate from some organic origin.

The paintings themselves, and their presentation, complete Alkazzi’s mesmerizing odyssey.

Working in gouache, a medium similar to watercolor but designed to make the painting opaque, is a challenge, and Alkazzi is a master of the form, creating warm, slightly fuzzy images that maintain distinct lines and color.

Their placement on thick handmade paper gives the paintings physicality, an objectness that emphasizes their visual creation, especially when the paper “flies” away from the backing.

“An Odyssey of Dreams” ends its run at Sheldon on July 27. It is a show that deserves to be seen and contemplated.