

# A Turmoil Under a Quiet Surface,

By: May Mudhaffar\*

A Turmoil Under a Quiet Surface By: May Mudhaffar\* The initial attempts of Ali Talib (b. 1944) while he was still a student at the College of Fine Arts, revealed the fact that he has always been trying to reach an appropriate language capable of reflecting his inner world, of capturing the turmoil underlying his quiet appearance, of assuming the shape of the drama taking place in there. No wonder then that Ali Talib found symbolic representation quite suitable for containing both his intellectual and visual aspirations.

In a special interview, the artist confided to me one of his little secrets that I believe casts much light on his entire experience in art. He said that drawing, to him, while still a young boy in the primary school, stemmed from his very need of expressing something within him. He took from the basement walls of the family house, a place on which to draw his images shaped informs and figures in order to inflict them thereafter such anger, fear and suppression, which he had suffered as a result of family hard restrictions. It was his uncle's and not his father's superiority that he suffered most. This explains the fact that the art of Ali Talib was originated from his very need for creating a balance between the external and the internal world. His paintings, therefore, grew out of such needs to express the unspeakable agonies and frustrated potential.

Born and grew up in Basra, Iraq, Ali Talib spent his studying years there until he finished the secondary school. By that time the Academy of Fine Arts (now called the College of Fine Arts) had just been opened and the artists found a new way of acquiring academic classes in art. Ali Talib was among the first group to join the Academy in the early 1960s.

The art milieu during the 1960s was undergoing a premonition of an outbreak, which resulted in a tremendous step towards modernism. It was due to the fact that in the sixties a new generation of artists had just returned home after studying abroad in various countries. In addition, the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad made contract with two Polish professors and one Yugoslav, who, at the same time, were competent painters devoted entirely to abstract painting. Therefore they were quite considerate with regards to orienting the interest of their students towards new trends in art.

Ali Talib was among those students who found himself extremely enthusiastic in breaking out with conventional means of expression. Therefore, he, with other colleagues formed a group called the "Innovators" and they held their first exhibition in Baghdad in 1965. In the following year (1966)(while they were still students) they held their second and last exhibition also in Baghdad. The works exhibited clearly indicated their adherence to modern styles. They were also concerned in developing their technicalities through finding a new media and delivering themselves from being confined to any particular media. Thus most of their composition were characterized with either symbolic contents or pure abstractions.

The early works of Ali Talib tended to reflect detailed elements of different nature referring more or less to his own conception of reality in its apparent and hidden aspects. The mystery that lied beneath his creatures, forms, and things was not simply reflected in the tonalities of his translucent monochromes but also in the skeptical quality characterizing them. This dreamlike representations which Ali Talib used to show in his paintings during the period that followed his graduation in 1966 lasted until the mid of the 1970s where he used to live in Basra.

In Basra he formed a group called "The Shadow" with other colleague artists there; the members of the group who believed that art is a reflection of reality; art is the shadow of reality, held their exhibition in Baghdad in 1970, but the group did not last long. Soon Ali Talib found himself out and held one man show in Baghdad in 1976 where a radical change in his style seemed to appear displaying a completely new approach towards performing his expressive language of symbolic nature. Although his painting maintained its basic character as

a work motivated from an inner world reflecting the intensity of his mind as well as emotions, his new work has shown there revealed a more organized setting quite economic in content as well as colour.

In his exhibition of 1976 the impact of drama seemed to assume theatrical form. Faces, masked or deformed were reflected in an atmosphere of stage design where the light allowed the spectator to get involved with the intriguing characters that emerged from the darkness of their surroundings. Such approach remained to be one of the basic characteristics in the art of Ali Talib and although his paintings vary in their degree of intensity, they always hold back their own mystery and it is in this ambiguity that the charm of his art lays.

In his recent works, his figures seem to be reflected otherwise, they appear in a spacious surrounding, where extensive plains infinitely move in the depth. Now a balance has been maintained between the volume, represented usually in the human figure, against an unlimited space. The theatrical scene moved outdoor and the colours assuming more eloquent nature, serve to ascertain the emotional intensity.

The young boy, who used to draw his fears and sufferings on the wall, is still performing the same act. His canvas holds his unspeakable agonies and intellectual concerns yet it maintains his secrets allowing simply a small part of it to reveal the rest is underlined deep in the conscious of both the artist and the spectator.

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