

Memories of Places which I have never Visited

I was never interested in stories and memories of my family about Iran and the people they left behind when they immigrated to Israel; neither the landscapes, nor the colors of the city; neither the market aromas nor the flavors. I had no desire, nor was I able to visit Iran. My family, too, never revisited the country in which they were born and raised.

Oddly enough, I symbolized the success of the move, the successful detachment. The immigration was motivated by a sense of vocation and a belief in making a new life in the Promised Land. Its success required, among others, cutting off all contact with the place from which they came; a dissociation intended to make room and free energy for the construction of a new life in the new land.

Atousa's paintings found me unprepared for the flood of memories that inundated me, memories of places I have never visited. I was dumbfounded as she spread them on the floor. Large colorful sheets from which lines arose, intertwining and winding

amidst figures, encircling ripe fruits and green hills. Mustached men and long-haired women alongside children playing in yards with colorful vegetation.

One painting depicted three figures, among them a young woman whose hair was wrapped in a kerchief, the spit and image of my grandmother in her young days. My grandmother wore the kerchief for modesty, when guests came to the house. It was a faded, used kerchief, just like the one in Atousa's painting. The depicted figures in the work are surrounded by chandeliers suspended in mid-air, as well as high-rises under construction, likewise floating in the air. The former derive from a glorious past while the latter hold the potential for a better future. Both are suspended in the air, waiting for the winds of memory to lead them to safety. Like them, the girl on the right rides her tricycle into an unknown future.

In another painting, the same girl—the artist's alter-ego or, perhaps, one of her daughters—hides in the branches of a tree, surrounded by a protective bubble of sorts. The twined branches bending under the weight of the lush fruits stirred a yearning in me for family gatherings in the yard, for a heated debate whether the fruits were ripe enough or should we wait a little longer.

Two men stare at us from the foreground, wearing robes and shoes of superheroes, as if they just returned from a mission and on the way to the next one. With sport mustache, like many men—the heroes which both Atousa and I knew in our childhoods.

All the paintings are centered on one or more figures that form the central axis around which the scene develops and twists. They are surrounded by ripe fruits and twining plants which hold the promise for heaven on earth. In every painting, at least one figure looks straight at the viewer, a demanding gaze, asking the viewer to focus primarily on the figure itself and its position on the axis, thereby rendering that figure the key to the entire scene.

Like manipulated photographs that undermine the boundaries of perspective and introduce the possibility of using multiple places and several times in one single image, the artist Atousa Bandeh deconstructs the strata of time in her large scale paintings: her childhood, her daughters today, imaginary superheroes, and family members who are pulled from old photo album. All these come together to form an intricate picture of a "double life," life in two places at the same time.

Iranian artist Shirin Neshat, who has resided in the United States for many years, once said that an artist who lives in exile always looks towards the country from which he hailed. Artists, she added, are those who carry the cultural heritage and later bequeath it. Atousa carries memories from her place of origin. Her paintings contain reflections of memories we both share.

It is often said that memories break free from reality, become independent, standing in their own right, to the extent that reality may lose its meaning. In her paintings, Atousa creates a whole universe, a reality which she knows and remembers. All the viewer has to do is take her word for it.

Ronit Eden, curator