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Painting Past Borders

Alana Y. Price

Tikkun

Duke University Press

Volume 24, Number 4, July/August 2009

pp. 26-27

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

When Salma Arastu began to fall in love, she prayed every day for divine help in ending the affair. Born into a Hindu family with bitter memories of the partition of British India, she knew someone in her family would frown on her marriage to a Muslim. "Every time I was praying, I said, 'Oh, my God, please help me ... take me away from him,'" she says. "But every day I was drawn toward him, so somehow my heart said my God wants me to marry him. And then I realized my God's coming with me—if I become a Muslim, my God's not leaving me: only my rituals will change, my way of prayer will change." She didn't yet realize that her art would change, too. More than thirty years after her marriage, Arastu now looks back and sees her religious conversion as foundational to her life work as an artist. Standing amid richly textured canvases in her Berkeley, California, art studio, she explains how she discovered

26 TIKKUN WWW.TIKKUN.ORG JULY/AUGUST 2009 Painting Past Borders by Alana Y. Price Alana Y. Price is the assistant editor of Tikkun. Above: Salma Arastu could not paint for a week following September 11. This piece, *The Tragedy* (2001), documents the shock and sadness she felt about the attack and the subsequent hate directed toward Muslims in the United States. SALMA ARASTU

To view a behind-the-scenes photo essay of Salma Arastu's studio and read about how Lord Krishna began to

dance his way back into her paintings, visit the new Tikkun Daily blog site: www.tikkun.org/daily. To view more of Salma Arastu's work and purchase her book, *The Lyrical Line*, visit www.salmaarastu.com.

Religion_1.qxd:Politics rev. 6/16/09 2:02 PM Page 26 the gorgeous flowing line of Arabic calligraphy in the mosques of Iran, where she and her husband moved from India in 1976. She continued to study Arabic after moving from Iran to Kuwait. "Slowly, slowly, the Arabic line started coming into my painting," she says, adding that her paintbrush grew freer as her hand began to learn and remember the arcs and curls of her new alphabet. "And then, I was learning Islam ... and the main message was that God is one and another message was we are all one." The ecstatic vision of unity that Arastu found in Islam is deeply apparent in her paintings. Abstract people dance across her giant canvasses, which hover and throb with rich colors and an aching sense of peace. Each figure flows into the next, just as each Arabic letter flows into the next. Layers of color and texture sometimes obstruct bits of Arastu's flowing line, but deep down a continuous thread runs through each painting. The Hindu gods of the artist's childhood are present, too, but only around the edges. A visit to India, with its dense crowds and flowing fabrics, inspired Arastu to start painting figures. Before that her work was wholly abstract—the playful path of a line. But when she returned to the United States (her home since 1987), "this line started forming people," she says, "and I realized these are continuous people: I'm doing a continuous line. I'm trying to connect them ... through love, compassion." In Arastu's new book, *The Lyrical Line*, the artist describes her work as a testament to human universality. By leaving her figures faceless, she seeks to show the unified "flow of humanity with its universal inspirations, faith, pain, and joy." The facelessness of the figures also makes her art acceptable within the Islamic art community, she says, which is wary of human representation, despite scholars' affirmation that human figures have appeared in Islamic art for years, and that figuration is technically prohibited only in mosques. The gravity with which Arastu approaches her social role as an artist is inspiring. She is no stranger to pain and fear, as is clear in her powerful painting about September 11, which some have compared to Picasso's "Guernica." Her yearning for harmony and kindness grew out of her sometimes painful experiences as a child born without fingers on her left hand, she says, and she endured a difficult time before her family came to accept her husband...



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