

Rising Talent Hoping to “Paint the Human Aura”

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When I first met Bayartsetseg Dashdondov it was in a trendy UB bar at a table surrounded by her circle of friends, the elite of Mongolia’s counter culture youth. As the night progressed this striking young woman quietly sat with a Mona Lisa smile on her lips, sketching portraits of the characters around the table on 4x6 cards. Deftly and with alluring poise, in a few moments she captured her unaware sitters perfectly; each in such a different style, it was hard to recognize that the same artist drew them. The joy, grace, and range I witnessed that night were all reflected in her recent art show, and mark her as one of Mongolian’s most exciting young, up-and-coming artists.

She studied for three years at the Institute of Fine Art in Ulaanbaatar where she switched her focus from fashion design to painting and then transferred to the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing, where she completed her degree in 2004. Reflecting on why she became an artist Bayra only said that perhaps she was an artist in a past life, a statement that reflects her desire to bring a “spirit” to her art. An enthusiast of Indian mysticism and shamanism, she confessed that she felt that there was a lack of soul to some of the art being produced around her. She understands that artists must make a living but is nervous about artists losing focus, worrying too much on the sale of their work. She feels artists have a responsibility to draw and give form to those things we all experience but few can articulate and express.

Her first show in Mongolia was the opening of the new Genghis Art gallery in joint exhibition with Tsolmonbat Enkhbat. This wonderful space on the second floor of the History Club will without a doubt become the premier place to sample contemporary Mongolian work, and her paintings were a wonderful inauguration. Her work, like much of the work coming out of Ulaanbaatar, is heavily symbolic with a touch of surrealism, or perhaps rather “magical realism.” However, her use of symbol has a refreshingly light touch, where other artists deliver it quite heavy-handedly. She hesitates before explaining what she intended with her symbols, because she wants to let the viewer react to the work on their own. While she is influenced by shape and color symbolism of Shamanism and Hinduism, she states very clearly that she wants it to be her symbolism, for her work she says is “searching my world, Bayra’s world.” The painting “Elope” is a wonderful example of this wonderful balance of symbolism. Dealing with the issue of UB’s rising divorce rates, a man and child sit in solemnity with their backs to the viewer as butterfly winged woman painted in a fantastically naïve style ascends to a yellow triangle, an ambiguous source of glowing light. However the artist remains quite tight lipped about what that triangle of yellow light represents, be it a better life away from the constraints of domesticity or, as the wings may suggest, the mother being drawn to some imagined better life that will destroy her, as insects drawn to the glow of a candle.

Her work has over the years changed drastically. Her painting titled “Beauty” which she completed in 2001 is a pregnant woman painted in a very cubist style, while she has alternated between more realistic depictions and abstractions, her current work uses stylized depictions that have a strong 70’s French graphic design sense to them. She endeavors not to be labeled a Mongolian artist, and when she does include details of Mongolian traditional forms it is in small details, a woman’s earring, intertwining

patterns recalling Mongolian traditional pattern designs, are the few hints of her cultural background. Her use of color is natural and appears effortless, using strong primaries in some pieces, while using contrasting neutrals in others. In “Birthmark Woman” the clash of the red orange of the woman’s flesh with the acidic greens of the background heighten the tension of the piece and slightly unnerves the viewer. Meanwhile “Snow” is a powerful exploration of primaries as bright yellow leaves in a forest amidst falling snow dance across the surface of the canvas. Inspired by Van Gogh, Bayra feels that “color has a very fresh emotional connection.”

Her show at the Genghis Art Gallery unfortunately comes down this week as it is to be exhibited in France. Bayra has big plans however as she is set to return to China to get her Masters and aims to explore mixed media work and sculpture. As she continues to attempt to “draw the human aura and soul” she shows great promise to become a powerful figure in the future of Mongolia’s art world and an artist to watch out for.