

The Messenger, the Medium and the Message

The sublimely transformative art of Atara London Grenadir.

By S. E. Klemes

ATARA LONDON GRENADIR lived most of her life in Oklahoma and Texas before moving to New York in 1982. She studied art at Carnegie-Mellon and the University of Oklahoma, where she received a Masters of Fine Arts.

In New York, her paintings appeared in the Artsforum Gallery, Pleiades Gallery, Synchronicity Space, Ceres Gallery, The Open Center, Neo Persona Gallery, Chuck Levitan Gallery, Trump Tower-Bonwit Teller Windows, Kwok Gallery, and The Chassidic Art Institute.

In the Southwest and nationally, her paintings appeared in Adams-Middleton Gallery, Dallas; Gallery II, Dallas; D.W. Gallery, Dallas; Laguna Gloria Gallery, Austin; Jewish Community Center, Houston; Tony Jones Gallery, Houston; Milaam Gallery, Houston; Roberto Molina Gallery, Houston; MJS Gallery, Fort Worth; University of Oklahoma Museum of Art, Norman; Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma City; State Capitol, Oklahoma City; Dart Industries, Inc., California; Wake Forest University, North Carolina; Spiva Art Center, Missouri; West Colorado Center for the Arts, Colorado.

D. F. Coleman, a New York art historian and critic, writes: "Grenadir's compassion, her knowingness, is devoid of rhetorical devices. It is for this reason the viewer is captivated by her artwork's evident authenticity. To put it another way, Atara Grenadir's moving pictures are not just artworks, they're heart-works of the highest order."

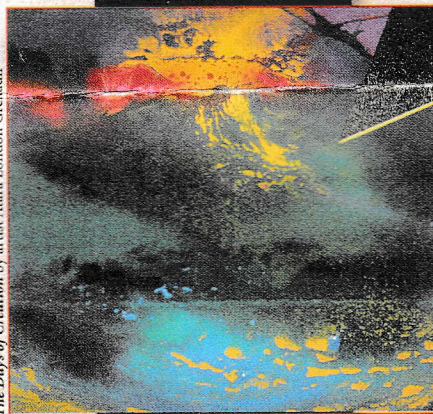
THE MESSENGER: Early Awakenings

SEK: When and how did you know you were going to be an artist?

ALG: Even as a small child, I realized that I could not draw. My mother was a graphic artist and I realized that I could not do what she was able to do. I got A's in art in school, but I did not think of myself as doing anything special.

The summer after I graduated from high school, I went to Carnegie Melon Summer School in Pittsburgh, and I discovered painting with acrylics. In painting, I discovered the medium that was to convey the messages

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The Days of Creation by artist Atara London Grenadir

of my heart. This was my initiation into the world of art, nature and expression. The artist was born. Something clicked and I understood and saw that this was me, an expression of my energy and creativity coming from inside me.

That summer, I took a brush and painted on every scrap of paper, cardboard, and tree bark I could find. I fell in love with life, color and paint. My art defined me and shaped me into a new being. I returned home to Oklahoma to go to college. In Oklahoma, my days were filled with fun and light—long afternoons of pouring and brushing acrylic paint over 5' x 7' canvases was all I wanted in life. I drew inspiration from the space and light in that region—it was a vastness that reflected a luxurious freedom and power. Nature's palette seemed infinite. Color has always been a priority in my paintings. I was excited by the meeting of vast sky and broad earth at the horizon line. This stimulated my artistic imagination and gave me a form into which I could pour the colors of my soul.

I started exhibiting in Houston and eventually moved there with my van, my paints, and a little Bible that had belonged to my grandfather. Although I did not grow up in a religious environment, every morning, before going to work at Nieman-Marcus, I started to read the Psalms.

SEK: What were the forces and struggles in your life that shaped and changed your art?

ALG: In the spring of '83, I made my first serious trip to New York. As I walked into the Judaica room of the Jewish Museum, I had a sense of déjà-vu from the sight of the Kiddush cups, Menorahs, Crowns, and Torah Mantels. I had no idea what some of these pieces were used for, but I was awed by their beauty and holiness. As I looked out of the window at the sky, my inner voice said, "My roots are here." Tears streamed down my face, and I realized that an important part of my life was about to unfold. The ancient ritual objects awakened in me a feeling, as if I had encountered an old, dear friend.

Veils by artist Atara London Grenadir



I moved to New York three months later. I settled in a Chinatown loft in a sixth floor walkup on East Broadway. Oklahoma was big, bright and vast and filled with potential. New York felt cramped and dark, and I could not see my precious sky. I began to forget just how it kissed the earth. I would go to the top of the World Trade Center to see sky and space, and connect with those forces that fed me and gave me my creativity. The energy and space felt compacted and concentrated. I was very homesick. Everything I painted was done in horizontal bands with a vivid, bold, Southwestern pallet. But in New York, no one understood or appreciated my message. I felt empty. But I was not forgotten.

In a little *shul* on the West Side, Rabbi Meir Fund was teaching a class in *Derech Hashem*, (The Way of G-d) by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, and I became his student. A dormant part of me began to awaken and I felt a shift in my soul's focus. From that shift, there emerged a new light by which I was now able to paint a brand new picture. The visual imagery emanated from a much deeper place. My paintings began to take on new life—the content and style reflecting a spiritual texture and a vertical motion, quite different from the horizontal motif of before. I began a series called *The Days of Creation* (see photo), using a technique which combined diluted oil and acrylic pigments. The effect was perfect for portraying that which has no form and exists primarily in spirit. Instead

of looking at nature on the surface, I was now submerged within the very forces that created it.

THE MEDIUM

SEK: How do you use color to express your art?

ALG: An artist is a light catcher. Color is a way of capturing light. I use color to create movement and emotion. I use vivid stains of diluted paint in transparencies that invite the emergence of hidden hues to reveal a soulful dynamism. The palette of my former Southwest environment is now joined with spiritual content to create a new synthesis—spiritual minimalism.

THE MESSAGE

SEK: What are you trying to convey with your work?

ALG: The eyes are a window to the soul. I want to fill the world's eyes and souls with sparks of joy and light that will accompany people on their journey through life.

I did a series of paintings called *Veils* (see photo) that was inspired by my recent trip to the Ukraine, during which I visited the places where the great Chassidic Rebbes taught their path of serving *Hashem* through joy and love. The dark blues and purple veils of color part to make way for the light that pierces through the center. These works are guided meditations: by resonating with the colors and dynamic motion in these paintings, a person can experience powerful visualizations of inner growth. Visualization can change a person's reality, projecting goals from the realm of thought into physical reality. The intense white light portrays clarity, insight, healing energy, and closeness to G-d. By visualizing the light penetrating the barriers on the surface of the canvas and extending beyond the limitations of the frame, the viewer can draw the light into his/her inner psyche, drawing forth life and vitality to all parts of the body and soul.

Another series was based on the Chassidic teachings in the book *Advice*, by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. He uses the symbol of the tree to represent a person relating to physical and emotional surroundings on his spiritual journey. The paintings depict the inner struggle involved in refining oneself, by identifying and acknowledging one's character defects and working to transform them into positive traits.

I have a show that will open, I"YH on May 12th in The New Art Center, 580 Eighth Avenue, NYC. In that show, my current series, called the New World, will be displayed. This series emerged after 9/11, when our physical and mental landscape dramatically shifted. To me, this shift reflects the birth pangs of the evolution to a higher sensibility. A new world is emerging—it is up to us. ■