

contour
ART

a vision of

Doris Bittar has become one of the West's most popular contemporary abstract artists. *Amal Sorany* caught up with the Lebanese American painter at the Arab American National Museum as a prelude to her regional exhibition tour.

intertwined

cultures



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Doris Bittar's paintings demand attention. The images are a labour of love for the artist as the amount of time and effort that took to produce them is evident. She conserves the recurrent motif of carefully rendered fabric throughout her collection.

Utilizing varied textures from silky to embossed, her paintings display colours blending from divine turquoise to rich ivory allowing light to ripple and bounce right off the surface of her work of art.

Inspired by the richness of her surroundings, Doris's childhood memories of Lebanon focus on the intricate patterns that range from rich oriental rugs to her mother's fine embroidery. At an early age, she immigrated to America. In 1993, she earned a Master's Degree in Fine Arts from the University of California.

Doris has been exhibiting her collections across North America and Europe for more than a decade. Her vision of an intertwined version of cultures, East and West is vividly displayed through her numerous paintings, which explore the Middle Eastern diasporic identities and the legacy of colonialism.

"Initially, I was interested in combining broad culturally specific patterns to see what kinds of hybrids could result," she explained. "The events of 9/11 prompted

me to narrow my focus to iconic images." Doris describes her collection of paintings as "essentially a blend between the Arab and American worlds."

"The Islamic design is a filter, a window or a screen with which to contextualize my view and experience of being an Arab American," she explained.

Her artwork is rich with her perception of a hybridized tangle of the cross-pollination between the two cultures and is played out in her use of colours, icons and faces. Among her numerous exhibitions, Doris >



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has portrayed the Arab contribution to American society through paintings in many of her collections, notably *The Wandering Ishmael*, *Lebanese Linen*, *Semites*, *People of the Book*, and *Orientalism*.

Doris's paintings revolve around specific themes, such as the legacy of colonialism, Jewish-Arab relations, and the experience of the Diaspora and immigration. She also describes the patterns that she uses as veils between the viewers and the images to emphasize the human inability to

completely know or grasp the past. As her patterns tie all the parts together, they also metamorphose from solid objects to meditative colours and from wrought iron to lacy arabesque.

I was thoroughly moved while viewing her work, which is on display in the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn in the US state of Michigan.

One of her collections, *Lebanese Linen*, originated from slides that her grandfather kept. It reminded me of my own personal life, capturing a close-knit family at the end of the 1960s, a "golden" period in Lebanon's history. The artist saw her kin as harbingers of the impending war and emigration, yet also as loving reminders of the complexities within all families.

Another exquisite collection is the *Semites*, a compilation of narrative portraits of Jews and Arabs hung in an installation setting. The life-sized portraits are done in pastels and charcoal that sit on scrolls against the wall. The figures appear as ghosts speaking through a veil.

When moving side to side, I caught a glimpse of the figure without the veil. The text acted as an ambiguous barrier that shrouded the figures, creating a sort of

visual dance between the text and figure. As I moved back and forth, I saw from the position of the questioning concealment to the position of revealed intimacy.

Doris says the paintings carry the traces and residues of the ancient past, the colonial past and the recent past.

She elaborated: "They speak of Roman ruins, of Islamic mosaics embedded into Phoenician history of the French decorative style so much embraced by the Lebanese culture and of the layered, intertwined lives of a family on the precipice of a civil war."

While Doris makes every attempt to remain politically neutral in these troubled times, her work has become a strong voice in Arab American culture.

She remains a popular speaker on the American lecture circuit, educating Americans about the Middle East, which she describes as being "a daunting experience since 9/11" ♦

The author, who is the lead news presenter for Radio Bahrain, is originally from Lebanon. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English literature and now lives in Riffa with her Bahraini husband and their two children.



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