

THE WONDERLAND OF SUZAN BATU

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In Chapter 5 of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice carries on a conversation with yet another idiosyncratic creature inhabiting the enchanted universe of this writer's imagination – she talks with a blue, hookah smoking caterpillar sitting atop a very large mushroom. Greatly satisfied with its own three inch size (which Alice seems to disapprove of) the caterpillar dispenses much advice on how to grow or shrink with the help of a magic mushroom on which it so elaborately installed itself. A bit controversial, even in the midst of other phantasmagoric characters of the tale, the caterpillar assumes a role of an oracle whose presence brings a tinge of the exotic into the story. This might be the very element that made Suzan Batu decide to create a piece called *Caterpillar* (2007) based on this strange apparition. Not at all visibly descriptive of the subject, the painting is fully developed abstraction with intricate decorative swirls of pale colors abounding on the grayish background. Related works such as *Serif* and *Serifone* (both 2007) display similar preference for the complicated curves and allusions to calligraphy and to decorative elements derived from both, Eastern and Western tradition. In the *Serifone* the stylized segments of varied Middle Eastern scripts are juxtaposed with the allusions to lettering used in graffiti, and to the shapes of wiggly trees seen in cartoons, while the outlines of

cloud formations, befitting Chinese historical paintings, are present as well. The allusions to forms associated with the art of late Baroque and Rococo world of Europe are also detectable. And for those who remember the flowing, every changing imagery generated within the tall enclosures of lava lamps, another virtual universe comes to life. This work is a compendium of forms and shapes that will appear in subsequent pieces.

Batu, who was born and spent her early childhood in Istanbul, studied at the Oakland/California College of Arts and Crafts, maintained studio in New York City, always widely traveled, and presently lives and works in Istanbul, is uniquely qualified to fuse the varied cultural elements into a seamless whole. However, the road to Batu's singular brand of lyrical abstraction, characteristic for this artist's work of the past two years, led through exploration of other idioms. In a series of works created between 2002 and 2004 in response to the Iraq war, Batu employed discernable figurative elements. Described in extreme situations, the mutilated bodies and exploding skulls are enacting the horrors of the war all the while incorporating beautifully rendered but dangerously colored floral elements equipped with spikes and sharp claws. Batu's inherent need to bring the beauty into the most perilous situations heightens our recognition of dangers the world is currently facing.

After 2004 the work became calmer, partially revolving around Batu's research into the exquisite artistic heritage the late Ottoman Empire. In Tulip (2007) Batu created a work well in keeping with the best of that tradition. Tulip's large blossom, painstakingly detailed, looms above the intricately woven array of carnations and greenery. The diagonal arrangement, often employed in historical manuscripts, suggests inner energy and movement within the confinement of a given space.

Another of the 2007 works, Swirl, shows a colorful pinwheel dominating the composition full of complex ornamentation. The transition to abstraction, soon to take full command of Batu's, work is strongly suggested in this piece and it is further developed in Smoke where the colors are kept to shades of blue and the composition is vertically oriented to suggest the rising of the smoke column. Smoke, the seminal work of Batu's transitional period points toward the most recent series, called Flavors, executed in 2008 that comprise this exhibition.

Inspired by the observation of melting ice cream the theme could be seen as a comment on the culinary pleasures connected with consuming of the delicious substance, but also as an allusion to the melting pot of the current world where fusion is the order of the day.

In Apricot – Black Mulberry, a plum color element that assumed the likeness of a fantastic personage seems to be determined to move out from the pictorial field at the ever increasing speed. It is closely followed by a smaller shape that is morphing into yet another ghostlike being.

Chocolate – Peanut explores the mid 20th century canon of the all over composition with the light brown color fanning out through the expanse of the pistachio colored ground seemingly reaching past the work's boundaries.

In Slurpee, an explosion of bright red fills the upper portion of the canvas with the breaking segments of color falling through the pictorial field. The vivid dynamism of the hue, and its strategic placement, echo the compositional strategy introduced earlier in equally seductive Tulip.

The works' explosive dynamism would suggest the quick and spontaneous execution – the artist's chosen method is, however, slow and deliberate.

Every element is painstakingly hand painted and requires many coats of paint. The outlines are precisely delineated by thin brushes, no stencils or any other devices are used to keep sharp delineation of the hard-edged forms. Batu is a highly disciplined painter who observes the well-established techniques and rules of the medium – while doing so she is achieving exquisite results. She is also a keen observer of the earlier artistic traditions, such as already mentioned European Baroque and Rococo, Ottoman heritage or more recent styles of Op and Pop Art. Batu is not adverse to consider components associated with the popular culture and advertising, such as vibrant colors and clear definition of compositional elements. The resulting synergy of various ideas, carefully selected and intellectually transformed, creates a singular synergy in Batu's art. In her words the work is about "hope and positive energy. I feel that perhaps it is my small contribution". Looking at the exuberant pieces can truly bring respite from the pressures of the everyday and renew our appreciation of imaginative and well executed painting.



STRAWBERRY
2008
184 x 184 cm
acrylic on canvas



APRICOT - BLACK
MULBERRY
2008
184 x 184 cm
acrylic on canvas



SLURPEE
2008
184 x 184 cm
acrylic on canvas



CHOCOLATE -
PEANUT,
2008
184 x 184 cm
acrylic on canvas



MINT -
STRAWBERRY
2008
184 x 184 cm
acrylic on canvas



SUZAN BATU (1954,TR)

- 1974–78 Studied translation and interpretation in German, Russian and Turkish at the University of Graz, Austria
- 1981 BA at the Oakland/California College of Arts and Crafts, California
- 1990 MA in painting at the City University of New York, Brooklyn College
- 2000– Also the curator of several exhibitions such as *Mold in the Grand Bazaar*, Istanbul and Gent, Belgium in 2008.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 *Flavors*, Dirimart, Istanbul (solo)
- 2007 *Pleasure Principle*, The Phatory LLC, New York (solo)
- 2006 Dirimart, Istanbul (solo)
- 2005 *This is for You*, Istanbul Modern Arts Gallery, Istanbul
- 2004 Alpan Gallery, New York (solo)
Jan Colle Gallery, Gent, Belgium (solo)
War and Peace, Metaphor Gallery, New York
- 2003 OHT Gallery, Boston (solo)
Helen Day Art Center, Stowe, Vermont (with Shirin Neshat)
- 2002 White Box, New York
Parker Gallery, New Jersey
- 2001 Jeffrey Coploff Gallery, New York (solo)
- 2000 Shores Gallery, Amsterdam (solo)
Jon Turk: Export Revolution, 450 Broadway Gallery, New York (solo)
- 1999 Jeffrey Coploff Gallery, New York (solo)
Skin Tight, Workspace, New York
Outer Boroughs, White Columns, New York
Fashioned, White Box Gallery, Curators: Suzan Batu and Bill Doherty, Philadelphia, New York
- 1998 *Brite Magic*, Islip Art Museum, New York
Crest Hardware Show, Curator: Gene Brooklyn, New York
- 1997 Croxhapox Gallery, Gent, Belgium (solo)
- 1996 *Light & Color*, Jeffrey Coploff Gallery, New York
Living with It, # 1118, Curators: Suzan Batu, Gary Petersen, Paul Lembersky, New York
- 1993 Barbara Scott Gallery, Miami, Florida
Cartoonal Knowledge, Dooley Le Cappellaine Gallery, New York
- 1991 Artium Gallery, Simon's Rock of Bard College, Massachusetts (solo)
Three Artists, Westbeth Gallery, New York

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