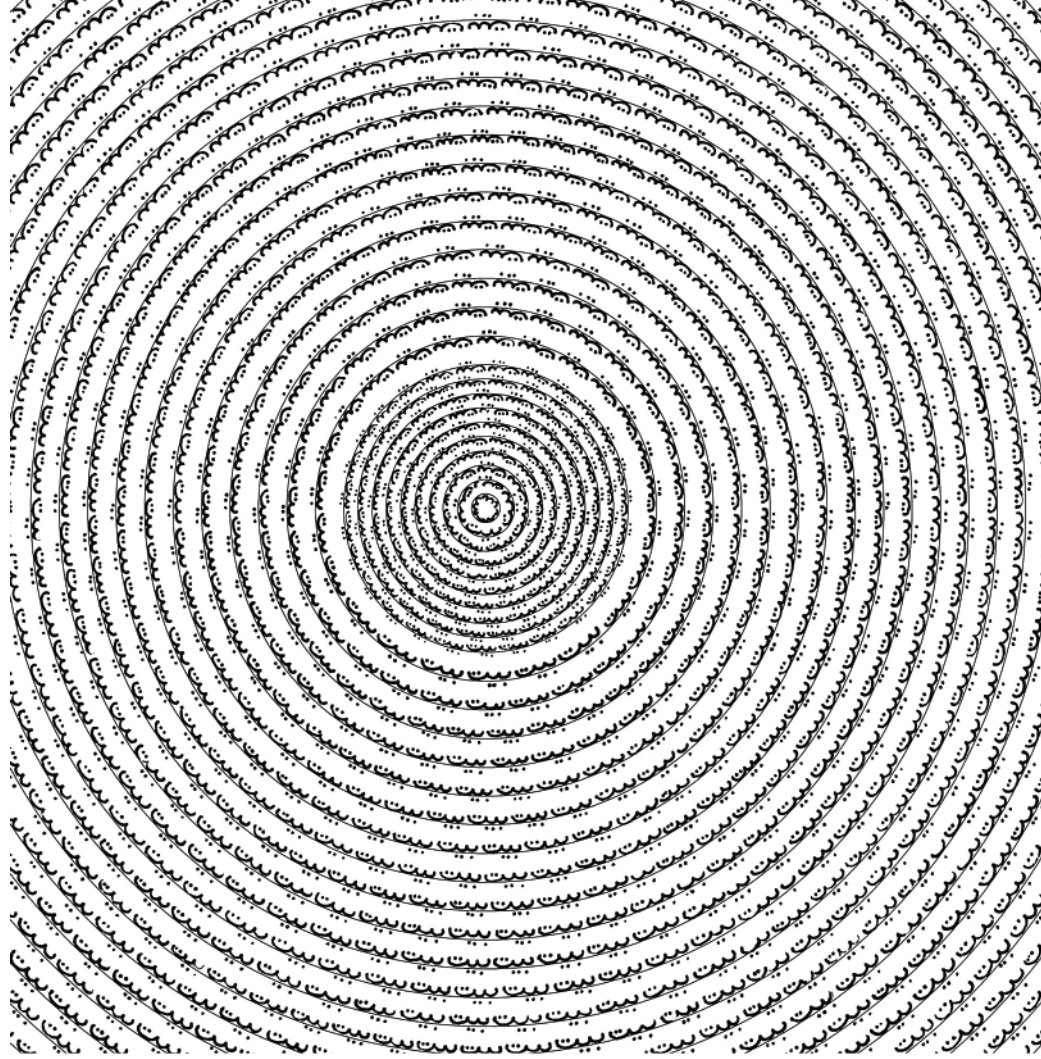


NOT MANY ARTISTS TAKE PLEASURE IN THE EXUBERANT USE OF COLOR. ANIME ARTISTS AND THEIR REIGNING POP ART KING **TAKASHI MURAKAMI** DO. AN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST, **FRANZ KLINE** DID NOT. **HELEN ZUGHAIB** DOES. A GOOD NUMBER OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS AND WRITERS HAVE EXPLORED THE THORNY ISSUE OF THE VEIL – FOR THE MOST PART POLARIZING IT. AUTHOR **MARJANE SATRAPI**'S CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED GRAPHIC NOVEL **PERSEPOLIS** MANAGES NOT TO. IN HER WRITINGS, THE LARGER THAN LIFE POET AND FEMINIST **NAWAL EL SAADAWI** USUALLY DOES, WHEREAS **HELEN ZUGHAIB** DOES NOT. FEW ARTISTS HAVE HAD THE FORTUNE TO APPEAL TO A BROAD SPECTRUM OF PEOPLE. **REMBRANDT** (HARMENSZOOM VAN RIJN) DID AND STILL DOES. **VINCENT VAN GOGH** COULD NOT SELL A SINGLE PAINTING IN THE COURSE OF HIS LIFE. **HELEN ZUGHAIB**, ON THE OTHER HAND, DOES.



# HOMECOMING QUEEN

## GOUACHE GODDESS HELEN ZUGHAIB RETURNS HOME AFTER 35-YEAR HIATUS

BY MAHA MAJZOUB

The works of Zughaib, an Arab American celebrated for her commanding, idyllic hues and for portraying scenes from Arabia in a hopeful light, are exchanged between political leaders for both their aesthetic dimension and diplomatic overtones. U.S. PRESIDENT **BARACK OBAMA** PRESENTED OUTGOING IRAQI PRIME MINISTER **NURI AL-MALIKI** IN 2009 WITH A **HELEN ZUGHAIB**. The painting, *Midnight Prayers*, was inspired by the Muslim call to prayer and symbolizes the prospects of peace the artist sees in faith. The move was not without precedent, as LEBANON'S PRIME MINISTER **SAAD AL-HARIRI**, then an

MP, ALSO GAVE OBAMA'S PREDECESSOR **GEORGE W. BUSH** A **HELEN ZUGHAIB** two years before that. It was an artwork of a mosque and a church huddling together in Downtown Beirut. Her visually striking strokes also score high marks with a lay audience for their naiveté, joyfulness, and comparatively decipherable messages.

Zughaib is not an emerging artist suddenly thrust in the spotlight and having a bit of a moment. THE TOILS OF HER LABOR HANG IN THE **WHITE HOUSE**, **WORLD BANK**, **LIBRARY OF CONGRESS**, AND IN **U.S. EMBASSIES** IN MANY CAPITALS. **THE ARAB AMERICAN NATIONAL MUSEUM**,

which also flaunts her canvases, refers to her as a "LEADING ARAB AMERICAN ARTIST". She has also served as U.S. cultural envoy to the West Bank. Her *Prayer Rug for America* is one example why she is worthy of such merit. The 2001 dated rendition of post-9/11 times in America made headlines in February 2002 for exploring the meanings of nationality and identity through a Muslim prayer rug. Zughaib uses Islamic mosaics and the colors of the American flag to challenge views of Islam, Arabism, and Americanism at the height of racial categorization frenzy.



UP:  
**MORNING PRAYERS** (2010)  
 37.5 x 75 cm  
 ARCHIVAL INK ON PAPER  
 RIGHT:  
**EID MAR ELIAS**(2010)  
 37.5 x 50 cm  
 ARCHIVAL INK ON CANVAS



## Creative comeback

Born in Beirut to a Lebanese father and American mother, Zughaib has lived most of her life between the Middle East, Europe, and the U.S., where she would seek an education and ultimately settle. Like many Lebanese, Zughaib finds it difficult to forget the year 1975 – the initial spark of civil strife – when remaining in Lebanon was simply not an option. With her mother and her sister, she was deported to Athens. **“MY FATHER TOLD ME WE WOULD BE BACK IN A WEEK. THIS IS MY 35-YEAR WEEK,”** she said, getting teary-eyed. She sat across from me at Agial Gallery in the bohemian Hamra Street where she was on display in the last weeks of spring. Four years back, she packed her suitcase for what was supposed to be her first trip home. But Lebanon, being the land of proxy wars that it is, was busy with a 33-day Israeli aggression that summer and had no room for artistic genius. Her show, a belated homecoming, was thus tactfully

called **“Journey Home and Back Again”**. Her retrospective-like 44-piece ensemble was as rich in themes as it is in color, blending seamlessly under broad ideas so close to heart: identity and nostalgia, but with spoonfuls of humor. It begins with the heykayh series of stories her father would tell her as a child, which captured something as mundane as daily rituals of village folk in the northern city of Zahleh pounding kibbeh and drinking arak, to scenes from Palm Sunday and other religious rites like Eid Mar Elias. As part of a two-piece painting that draws on her memories and longing for a home deserted too soon, a Baalbeck dance troupe does the dabkeh to the pipes and tambourines of traditionally clad musicians. We enter her teta’s (grandma’s) home in one painting: The traditional dwelling of an old lady who is waiting – her armchairs embroidered, an old kerosene lamp, her needlework, and a cat sitting on floor. A dab of poetic license went into that piece, **“AS GRANDMA DID NOT HAVE A CAT,”** ▶

**ZUGHAIB USES ISLAMIC MOSAICS AND THE COLORS OF THE AMERICAN FLAG TO CHALLENGE VIEWS OF ISLAM, ARABISM, AND AMERICANISM AT THE HEIGHT OF RACIAL CATEGORIZATION FRENZY.**



CHANGING PERCEPTIONS,  
ABAYA SERIES,  
GOUACHE & INK ON BOARD



**COVERED LADIES, WHO ARE OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH IMAGES OF OPPRESSION, VULNERABILITY, AND SADNESS, TAKE ON A WHOLE NEW LIFE WITH ZUGHAIB'S PLAYFUL BRUSHES.**

Zughaib chuckled, blaming the litter of felines in her work on her love of her “kitty cats” back in Washington, where she and her husband are based. Flamboyantly multihued in her paintings but not in attire, she sported a simple white shirt and a pair of jeans that flatter her petite figure. True to her American roots, her bling comprised four gold pendants, one with a butterfly, and lots of delicate rings. She gesticulated to another one of her favorite works, *Circle Home*, which stands in stark contrast to the style and composition of her other pieces on show. In a dizzying motion in black ink on white canvas, she writes the word “beit”, one of few words she knows of her native tongue, meaning home. **“THIS IS A CIRCLE OF HOME, OF LEBANON. I TRIED TO CLOSE THAT CIRCLE,”** Zughaib noted. Among other somber pieces was *Green Line*, which depicts a forlorn point that separated West and East Beirut during Lebanon’s

15 years of confessional infighting. With a conscious use of arabesque pattern, earthy colors, and a deliberate lack of distinction between one part of the painting and the next, she tries to demonstrate that all people are basically the same. **“I WANTED TO EXPRESS THE FACT THAT THAT LINE WAS SO ARTIFICIAL FOR THE PEOPLE OF THIS COUNTRY.”** Meanwhile, *Map of Home*, a self-portrait, shows the borders of Lebanon imprinted over the whole of Zughaib. In *Women against the Night*, Zughaib looks at the beauty, strength, and resilience of women, those whom she says usually **“PICK UP THE PIECES OF DESTRUCTION AND WAR”**. Similarly adding a visual punch to the show are select pieces from her abaya series, which she calls *Changing Perceptions*. Covered ladies, who are often associated with images of oppression, vulnerability, and sadness, take on a whole new

life with Zughaib’s playful brushes by resembling the posh pop heroines of Roy Lichtenstein. **“I STARTED WITH A LITTLE SENSE OF THE TWIST TO PAINT SOMETHING ELSE OF THE ABAYA BECAUSE IT HAS SUCH A NEGATIVE CONNOTATION,”** she explained. That, she added, was a very conscious **MIXING OF EAST AND WEST** IN A BID TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN THESE TWO OPPOSITES. She wants onlookers to stop viewing the abaya the same way after seeing this series. Not one to condone or condemn the Muslim attire, Zughaib argues that the abaya is not oppressive. **“IT’S TRADITION. IT’S A CHOICE.”** Reminiscent of a Henri Matisse for its generous colors using her signature gouache paint and of Grandma Moses for its folkloric themes and nuances, Zughaib’s work is reshaping the recording and understanding of Arab American art even though she would be too coy to admit it ■

Helen Zughaib  
www.hzughaib.com