

## The School of Obscure World: Hossein-Ali Zabehi

By Mahshid Modares

Published in Fasl-nameh Me'mari va Shahrsazi [Architecture and Urbanism Quarterly], Iran, No. 74-75, Winter 2004.

"Until now ... I have not seen any artist to be so at peace as you are. Calm like a breeze! Deep! Deep! Sometimes, I envy you for being that tranquil."<sup>1</sup> This comment was written by a visitor to Hossein-Ali Zabehi's exhibition in the Barg Gallery in Tehran, Iran, in 1998. It expressed the feeling I had experienced the first time I met the artist in 1992. Zabehi, an artist and an art professor, was indeed "calm like a breeze." Giving the impression of quiet depth and patience, he always politely responded to all questions students asked about his paintings. I had seen Mr. Zabehi's works earlier and I was impressed by the energy displayed in his vibrant compositions with constant motion, stimulating brushworks and provocative textures. Until then, nothing like his works was seen in Iran.

To learn more about the artist, whose outward calm behavior was in such great contrast to his canvases, I interviewed him in 1995. His responses convinced me that not only his name belonged high on the list of those who have contributed to Iranian culture, but also he should be considered the first artist who originated the interest in Expressionism in Iran. Moreover, Zabehi was able to unify this movement with Iranian philosophical traditions, specifically Sohrevardi's school.<sup>2</sup>

The Expressionism Zabehi introduced to Iran was based on European movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that affected a notable number of artists until 1960s. Sh. Behr, D. Fanning and D. Jarman define Expressionism in *Expressionism Reassessed*, 1993, as the style of "unreal colors, the distorted shapes, and the often primitive-seeming techniques", and "the expressive distortions of reality, the extent to which the external objective world is filtered through the internal subjective world of the artist's emotions in an attempt to express an inner reality, and the psychological reality behind appearance."<sup>3</sup> Following Expressionism style, Zabehi uses color, shape and his subject matter to indicate his internal world and psychological values. He titled his style as *The School of Obscure World* that conveys his definition of Expressionism and its relation to Sohrevardi's Eshraq philosophy.

Hossein-Ali Zabehi was born in Tehran in 1945 and graduated from the Fine Arts High School in 1968. In 1971, he moved to Paris to study painting at Beaux-arts University, where he received his B.F.A. in 1975. Zabehi went

back to Iran in 1979 and started teaching at the Fine Arts High School. He stopped teaching for about eight years due to the unstable condition of the schools during the first years of the Islamic Revolution. In 1988, Mr. Zabehi was invited to the Art University in Tehran and its extension in Isfahan, Pardis University. He worked as a visiting professor for Pardis University for one year. In 1992, the artist started teaching at the Azad University in Tehran and the Azad University in Khoraskan, Isfahan. He is still teaching at the Azad University and the Honar University in Tehran. As an active artist, Zabehi has had two solo art exhibitions in Paris (1975-1977) and several solo and group exhibitions in Iran (1987-2004).

According to Zabehi, his paintings were somewhat Expressionistic from the beginning although he did not attempt to follow any particular style. In 1999, the artist wrote: "...I have always followed my instincts while working on each canvas. ... It is the critic's job to categorize art as a style. Honestly, an artist is looking for something not really knowing what it is, which may be unreachable. But this exploration makes an artist extremely conversant and helps him/her to reach an enlightened stage."<sup>4</sup> Yet, he believes Expressionism is an acceptable term to define his artworks because of their spiritual and psychological themes, in which he intends to exhibit his inner world, and human being's values, strength, weaknesses, ill behaviors, despairs, potentials and complexes.

One year after Zabehi's return to Iran, the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 had started. According to the artist, the war acted like a spark in his life and made him grow into a higher level of wisdom and self-awareness.<sup>5</sup> In fact, what was overtly a disaster for Iranians and Iraqis, and therefore for Zabehi as an individual, became a fruitful influence for him as an artist. The canvases painted after this period such as *The Wonderer* (1991) show a lower degree of confusion and sadness.

Zabehi's choice of subject matter indicates his profound interest in social issues and people's life, especially those who suffer and do not receive the attention they deserve from the society; self ascertain and meditation, which is evident in his self-portraits; and his deep study of Persian mysticism and philosophy, seen in his still lifes and even landscape paintings. *The Shepherd* (1972) and *Miserable Woman* (1974) represent the artist's interest in social issues; *The Torch* (1973) is an example of him questioning Inner Self; and *The Symphony of Objects* (2001) tell of the influence of Sohrevardi's thoughts on his mystical journey.

From 1975, the artist's compositions are busier and his palate is darker with rich hues of black, blue and gray. Zabehi depends upon dark colors to indicate difficulties, disasters, social issues, and personal challenges. However, dark colors have also a deeper limitless meaning for him, which is based on the artist's beliefs and knowledge of Persian mysticism and philosophy. He explains: "From the time I started painting with dark hues, I knew there must be something inside me that drags me into use of these colors. For years, I studied Sheikh Sohrevardi's books. My studies of his school cleared the path for me. I learned darkness has a place in mysticism and mystics talk about black light. In Koran, too, The God swears to the

darkness of night. It was astonishing that before reading these books and learning about the meaning of darkness in mysticism and Sohrevardi's philosophy, this different persuasion of blackness was in me. This is the reason I titled my style *The School of Obscure World*. I use a French word *Obscur* that means dark, unclear, and murky. I can add one more meaning: doubt. When you are in darkness and are not able to see well, you always live in doubt and have this fear of being lost and going astray. For me, *Obscure* is not merely what we see in a dark color such as black; it is also about enlightenment. You can't honor light unless you experience darkness. When I find a source of light in the darkness, I try to live with that spark of light. For me as an artist, it is finding forms and colors with that slight light. Then this light becomes shinier and more substantial until I am able to prevail over darkness."<sup>6</sup> This belief is shown beautifully in Zabehi's still lifes, in which dark colors are dominant and the remote lines of light at the edge of objects demonstrate the artist's journey toward light. For Hossein Ali Zabehi *The School of Obscure World* is observing the inner world to discover weaknesses and strengths of the spirit and expressing it by forms and colors. The result is becoming free of limitations and understanding the darkness to reach enlightenment.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Guests Book, Barg Gallery, Tehran, Iran, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Shahaab-al-Din Yahyaa Sohrevardi also known as Shiekh Eshraagh is one the greatest philosophers of all times. He was born in northwest Iran in 1151 A.D. and studied philosophy under the supervision of Majd-al-Din Jalili in Maragheh, Azerbaijan province. Sohrevardi was executed by the order of Salah-al-Din Ayoobi in Aleppo (Halab), Syria in 1191 A.D./587 A.H. His deep insight into the origins of Zoroastrian, Platonic and Islamic philosophy, resulted in renewing Eshraq philosophy, in which he elucidates the meaning of spiritual light and wisdom in all creatures which is a successive outflow from the original supreme light of lights or Nur-al-Anvaar. He believes in pure immaterial light of which nothing is more manifest, and which unfolds from light of lights in emanations through the descending order of the light ever diminishing intensity; through complex interaction, then in turn give rise to horizontal arrays of lights. Many scholars believe that the idea of *Decisive Necessity* is one of the most important innovations of Sohrevardi in the history of logical philosophical speculation. Some of his writings include: *Ishraq School*, *Word of Sufism*, *Song on Gabriel*, *A Day with Sufis*, and *Epistle of Red Wisdom*. See "Sohrevardi Maqtul," *NationMaster.com*, <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Suhrawardi-Maqtul> (accessed on July 21, 2008), and, "Sohrevardi," *NationMaster.com*, <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Sohrevardi> (accessed on July 21, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> S. Behr and D. Fanning and D. Jarman, *Expressionism Reassessed*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Information in a letter to the author, from Hossein Ali Zabehe, June 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Information in a letter to the author, from Hossein Ali Zabehe, June 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Information in a letter to the author, from Hossein Ali Zabehe, June 1999.