

The Paintings of Maryam Javaheri - An impression

Maryam Javaheri's most recent paintings may, at first, seem small. They are, after all, of modest size. The latest ones, which she executed on paper, board, and canvas board, are no larger than twenty inches by twenty-five inches. But their inner scale, which is where you truly take the measure of an artist rather than physical dimensions such as length and width, is of another sort. This aspect of them belongs to the realm of the epic. Javaheri's paintings feel much bigger than they are. This occurs because this native of Persia knows how to be subtle and forceful simultaneously.

You may recall that one of the Abstract Expressionists declared, "I paint very large pictures . . . because I want to be very intimate". He obviously felt that if he could envelop viewers amid stacked blocks of color, he could engender the type of bodily response that sculptors take for granted and painters rarely achieve. And since the early nineteen fifties several generations of artists have followed the example he and his colleagues set and worked on canvases that verge on the gigantic.

Javaheri has gone in a different direction. Like Vuillard at the end of the last century, she appreciates the virtues of a more personal format. With her paintings she creates visual events you experience intellectually as well as emotionally. Your eyes respond; your mind enters a state of absorption.

Far from being physically intimidating, Javaheri's art engages, enraptures, ennobles. A luminous color, a quivering brushmark, a puddle of paint gets your attention. You become intrigued. You stop and pause. As you look further, you realize the picture is providing you with pleasure. In the best possible situations, you notice your perceptions change. All of this, it is important to remember, is being accomplished in a world predicated on imagination and intuition.

Javaheri relies on elements such as color, composition and texture the way a writer forms text from nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Her art, however, is neither representational nor concerned with the deconstruction of "language". It avoids being trendy and cutting edge, instead appealing to more universal concepts. Javaheri is an unabashed abstractionist who transmutes the ineffable and the ephemeral into something more lasting. Her paintings convey a variety of moods, emotions, feelings. Thus, they activate a host of associations.

Colors are intense and bold and combined in unlikely ways. "I come," Javaheri has noted, "from a country of sun and bright color". And her palette sets the tone of her work. It is not descriptive, but is intended to be evocative. Consider, for example, her use of blue. It tends to be atmospheric without referring to sky or sea. Although the artist has mentioned that she associates this hue with "calm", she prefers that you see what you want it to be. "I never describe my paintings to anyone", Javaheri said not too long ago. "You have to get your own idea." And color is only one among many qualities that convey visual richness. That is why, on occasion, adjustments may be made and the broadest area of these pictures may be painted last.

Composition, once one of the fundamentals of all art, plays a vital role in Javaheri's work. For one, it provides structure. It endows these abstractions with credibility, and is instrumental in freezing the moment. Then too, just as critically as color, it underscores the overall tone. Your response to these paintings depends on how forms are bunched together or spread apart. Is the mood harmonious or off-kilter? Is the character of the work pastoral or something less ideal and more domestic?

Texture, another property of art which is not as commonly encountered as it once was, also plays an important role in Javaheri's art. It is the vehicle that maintains luminosity. At times sumptuous light flows smoothly and serenely; at other moments its course feels choppy and blurred. A thrust of illumination may radiate through and along an alley of paint or it merely may bounce off a bald spot of a weave of canvas.

Texture sets up dynamic rhythms; and each brushmark fashions a unique personality for its particular color and shape. Variety and paint application become synonymous. And how. Note the animation of pigment, tint and tone; the surfaces on which they all have been placed; and even the interaction between line and wider swatches of hue.

As artists have worked on canvases that are larger and larger, it has taken viewers less and less time to look at them. Confronted by smooth surfaces with very little imagery on them, gallery-goers have become inured to MTV-ART. What you see at first glance is absolutely what you get at last glance. However, Javaheri's works are counter to this trend. Though her art is non-representational, it can be experienced the way you read a book or watch a movie or listen to a symphony. If you were to walk past her paintings quickly, you would miss their subtlety and nuance. When you draw close to what she has rendered, you find much to savor.

Javaheri has found the means to create abstractions that can be compared to Persian miniatures. Respecting tradition, she has been able to reinterpret the world around her in thoroughly modern terms. Some of the best aspects of American abstraction, such as colors and compositions that catch your eye, appear beside the refinements and the gentle narrative poetry of the art of Javaheri's native land. Acknowledging practices of the distant past as well as the recent past, her paintings reveal what is likely to be alive today.

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