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Encounter at the heart of painting Helga Schuhr and Youssef Fatis

/ **Helga Schuhr**

Never before had I collaborated with another artist to paint a large-format diptych. This work was created in unison with a Libyan painter, Youssef Fatis. It was an extraordinary adventure that came to symbolize a shared language, despite distance and events. In 2009, I learned that one of my works was on display in the exhibition of the UNESCO art collection at the Château de Chenonceau and I went to see. It was very moving to stand before these two canvases, painted together in 1998 in my studio in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, on the occasion of the exhibition of four Libyan painters (Ali Abani, Youssef Fatis, Ramadan Nasser and Najila Shawkat) at a gallery in the region, owned by Marie-Louise Müller, in Cormondrèche. It was the beginning of a unique exchange.

It is the privilege of art to offer the opportunity for deep understanding, regardless of each individual's background. We both wanted to converse using our paintbrushes as the sole and best means of communication, in total understanding and a shared creative process. It was an unforgettable experience, somewhat like musical improvisation. One of us would indicate the theme on one of the canvases, the other, "attentive", would respond and follow their inspiration to expand upon the subject, without disturbing the developing harmony.

Art builds bridges for better communication between people. This fleeting link between the two countries owed nothing to any official will; it resulted from a mutual desire to share an irreplaceable value: that of painting, in this case. In return, an exhibition was organized for me at the Art House in Tripoli in 1998. I was accompanied by Laurence Carducci, an art critic in Neuchâtel.

This rare encounter could never have taken place without a cultural trip to Libya organized by the Zonta Club of Neuchâtel in the 1990s. I hoped to discover contemporary Libyan painters, as well as a woman artist. For them, it was a surprise and an opportunity for an opening towards Europe. This first contact generated the desire to come to exhibit works in Switzerland. In itself, this event was already a message of peace and hope.





/ Youssef Fatis

The best part of my stay in Neuchâtel was Helga's brilliant insight and her professional creative focus on mastery of the craft. I was lucky enough to meet Helga in Tripoli, Lebanon, in 1998, at the Art House, where I curated her exhibition. Furthermore, she told me that this process would be an important personal journey, which was right. I could not believe at that time that I could accomplish such a large painting. She invited me to Switzerland to join her in her big studio, where we were fortunate to work together on a 150x200 cm painting entitled, "*Working Together towards Equality*".

I had the unique privilege of working with Helga once a week, in animated, powerful discussions. I have always had the appetite to work on a large painting. She influenced me with her vision on the inside rather than on the outside; feeling the harmony embodied and the finer detail, creating the colours, inventing techniques using acrylic, transforming the experience into mystical truth and reflecting on the figuration.

In her studio, Helga and I agreed absolutely. Stunning images and ideas arrived as if from nowhere. When we started the first lines on the canvas in our workshop, we were committed to the task, but the cause of inspiration and the talent that stirred us to action were astonishing to me. So, although Helga and I may differ on the cause, we agree on the effect: when inspiration touches talent, it gives birth to truth and beauty.

Helga continually pushed me to share more of my experiences and emotions. I am grateful to her not just for her expertise and complete dedication, but for her friendship. I am indebted to her for giving me opportunities and guidance over the course of my career; her constant support as a professional and her emotional support as a dear friend became a spiritual resource that I came to depend on through every month of the journey towards the birth of this painting. I can never thank her enough. Her loving support as a friend, guide and professional is a constant inspiration to me.

Thank you, Helga





