

HOUDA TERJUMAN

An Interview with CARAVAN

CARAVAN Founding President, Bishop Paul-Gordon Chandler, had the privilege of interviewing the noted Syrian-Swiss artist Houda Terjuman, about her life and work, in association with her CARAVAN exhibition titled ROOTS.



Can you tell us a bit about your background and the influences that have shaped your work?

I am a visual artist, and I artistically explore identity, migration and exile, and the link between our homeland and host country. It is precisely in this fine space between the ideal that a new life can offer mixed with the regret of loss and nostalgia, that I have chosen to situate my practice.

My father is Syrian, my mother is Swiss, and I was born in Morocco. The transient nature of my evolution as a person and as an artist opened up fascinating ways of playing with representation in art.

Migration, displacement and identity are central themes in your work. I have even seen that you use the term “hybrid migrant” to describe yourself. How do you think the experience and perception of these areas have changed over the last fifty years?

The history of my practice is overwhelmingly informed by my status as “hybrid migrant”, a condition associated to second generation migrants. My father is Syrian, my mother Swiss, and I was born and live in Morocco. I am therefore North African. My father as a first generation migrant used to tell us we had no safety net and integration was necessary. However, I chose to refuse the concept of assimilation and instead cherished the status of hybridity which to me offers a rich mix of backgrounds, voices and belongings.

Roots is an artistic exploration of how we find identity through our connection with our land of heritage. Can you share with us a little about how you have maintained a connection with your heritage in the contemporary context you find yourself in?

Cultural heritage is a legacy and shapes who we are. Nowadays with globalization we are all multi-cultural. We are all somehow the "foreigner" of some land. Objects, images, memories, flavors, and sounds carry the stories that identify us and future generations. We are the custodians of memories that connect us to our past and helps us in our personal and cultural growth. I have maintained this connection with my different belongings through the stories, photographs, history and traditions. It helps me develop an awareness about myself, and defines who I am.

Your artwork often depicts a lone object, sometimes even seeming to be suspended in a vast landscape. Can you share with us what you are attempting to communicate with the viewers in this distinct visual?

When I was a child, I literally felt I was floating between my various identities. I was not rooted in any place and felt as if I did not belong to any community. While this made me feel afraid and unsettled, at the same time, it gave me sense of freedom and creativity.

When I started painting and sculpting, I felt compelled to reproduce these feelings which would allow viewers to understand that freedom comes at a cost. Being uprooted produces an underlayer of fear, loneliness and instability. But it also brings strength, the capacity for adaptation, open-mindedness, tolerance and an empathy for the unknown.

Nature and allusions to the natural world permeate your work. How important do you see the strength of this connection to the earth and nature as being at the core of our identity as humans?

Connecting with nature and earth and integrating them in my work has given me the so called "soft fascination" that distracts us from our spiraling thoughts. Nature and earth have a healing effect on my fears and embody rebirth. I believe one can be elevated if by being profoundly anchored to earth. Earth is the place in the world where one decides to take root and not necessarily just the place of birth.

How has the pandemic affected your mindset and creative process?

This pandemic brought an under-thread of fear, and I slowly started sheltering in place. Isolation ended up being a period of creativity and I started to appreciate having to confront stillness. Art has the power to reinstate aspiration. Concerning my practice, during the first months of the pandemic, as the world seemed to slow down, I felt the urge to process what was happening and the impact it was having on my art. I started taking notes on what I was observing and it led to new ideas for painting and sculpting, that emphasized fear, hope, resilience and isolation. I started adding lonely chairs and familiar objects in forests and countryside. Nature seemed to have a healing effect on my fears.

What are, in your view, some of the new frontiers and challenges that face us in our world?

As an artist I might not be qualified to answer to this question, which has social and political implications. However, I will give my opinion as a world citizen. Global migration brings prosperity. It is an effective way to reduce poverty. Periods of growth in history were always linked to movement of peoples between countries. The gain for immigrants was never at the expense of host countries. Citizens often fear the arrival of immigrants even if the economic benefits are irrefutable. I think sociologists and artists, among other members of society, should emphasize these arguments to give another vision of migration, and fight against xenophobia and fear of the "foreigner".

As we think about the younger generation, the future of our world. As your work is very imaginative, I wonder if you have some thoughts as to the role of imagination and creativity in shaping the future for our children?

Imagination, stories, and images are the best tools to educate young generations. I have often noticed children's interest on my paintings. The surreal and imaginative side of my art leads them to talk and ask questions. I have taken those occasions to explain what a foreigner or migrant might feel when far from home, and noticed empathy and tolerance growing in their mindset. Art is a great educator and we should develop encounters and interactions between the younger generation and artists.

Houda Terjuman was born in Tangier, Morocco to a Syrian father and Swiss mother, and she lives and works in Marrakech. Her artistic practice encompasses paintings and floating sculptures that recalls the language of Surrealism and takes us on a journey throughout the Middle East, Europe and Africa. Terjuman's work, a reflection of her own multicultural experience of the world, explores identity, displacement and a search for stability. Terjuman has exhibited widely and internationally since 2002, in solo exhibitions, group exhibitions, renowned international art fairs as well as prestigious museums and institutions. Her signature materials are sponge cardboard, wire and wood plaster for her delicate sculptures and oil on canvas for her paintings. For Terjuman, each piece is a little tale about the themes closest to her heart, be they of migration, resilience, open-mindedness, roots or a flip side of anxiety and insecurities.

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