

KATHERINE BAKHOUM: DREAMS OF A HOMELAND

By Heba Elkayal / Daily News Egypt

First Published: November 24, 2009

Katherine Bakhoun is back once again exhibiting her latest art works in Safar Khan Gallery. Her work is quite popular among ardent art collectors in Egypt who wait patiently each year for her latest collection.

Many paintings from the collection were purchased before the exhibit's opening night earlier this month. And rightfully so; Bakhoun paints images that are so hauntingly nostalgic in a style neither cliché nor contrived, and it is perhaps this very subtle evocation of a shared memory that has fostered a deep adoration for her work by many collectors.

Born to an Egyptian father and a French mother, Bakhoun left Egypt at the young age of 12, yet her memories of her childhood and family life, although never centrally featured as subjects in her work, have often informed the spirit of her paintings. She paints images and subjects that are somewhat metaphorical of the Egypt of her childhood, yet never does she paint literal messages.

Sunday trips to the desert, summers camping by the Red Sea, and beach holidays spent in the Alexandrian beach Agamy — when no electricity was available and water was delivered to the few homes there by donkey carts — are points of inspiration for Bakhoun's work.

"I'm always looking at that sea. When I go to Greece or Corsica now, they don't measure up in my mind to Agamy's," she said.

She has left it up to the expansive sky on her canvases, or the far horizon of the sea, to explore her departure from Egypt. "My themes are always a little nostalgic, maybe because of my departure from Egypt. First I was painting figures, and I like to draw very academic things like drapery and people with dresses. So at first some of my subjects were Africans and then I started painting boats leaving and people staying. There is something special about my story. Now my theme is nostalgic Orientalist."

It's the question of departure, and the memories of that faraway place, that Bakhoun seems to heavily ponder in her current collection. Boats with long strong bows sitting low in the foreground with backgrounds of dappled sky and wide open sky are meant to elicit a concern with retaining memories of the past and paying homage to what once was, and what it means for one today.

"I don't know what to do with the green of landscapes, I like to make it more poetic and paint the sea. Everyone can have a mirror and imagine what he likes."

Having studied at the Atelier Met de Penninghen and at the Estienne school in Paris, Bakhoun's rigorous academic background has not thwarted her from painting with technical freedom or ease. There is something slightly off anatomically and facially about her subjects, but as gallery owner Cherwet Shafie points out, Bakhoun "is a painter of background first, and secondly of foreground."

Bakhoun's backgrounds are technically sophisticated. The colors are selected with remarkable meticulousness while the treatment of the canvas is thorough. Using mostly pastels for the subjects in the foreground, the real aspect of painting takes place here.

"Sometimes it's a surprise what is coming out on the canvas. Pastel is drawing, but the background is really painting because I put pigments, mix different textures, I wash it, put colors, it's like cooking...and then something appears be it clouds or form in the background. It's something of an accident before, but then I put something precise be it form or subject on the foreground. I think it's good painting when you can imagine something afterwards," she said.

The vague silhouettes of figures and ships, buildings and homes wavering in her backgrounds prove that what Bakhoun paints is magical in both appearance and spirit. Yet ultimately, even the figures which she paints so forcefully are outshined by the other pensive images on canvas: a series of cropped portraits; close-ups of subjects with the most beautiful almond eyes. The eyes have a softness and intelligence about them.

One man in red and white is painted onto a collage of paper collected by Bakhoun, a habit which she says has threatened to take over her studio. And somehow in the varying shades of red and the red of his fez, we are reminded that Bakhoun's memories are as vibrant as the colors which she chooses to paint with. And between the open spaces and visual treat of beautiful pastels that oftentimes clash together, we are invited to peacefully reflect.

Katherine Bakhoun's work will be exhibited until the end of November at Safar Khan.