

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Prehistoric Palimpsests and Pentimenti”

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Palimpsest: a parchment from which writing has been partially or completely erased to make room for another text

Pentimento: reemergence of an image that has been painted over

Annabel Daou's paintings resemble archeological digs. Archeology is even directly invoked in one of the titles, "Ritual Object of Unknown Use." Underneath the surface of a seemingly simple and even minimalist appearance are layers of references to previous states of culture, elusive clues to other realities, slight remnants of previous texts, ghosts of images, palimpsests and pentimenti. It is more than simply re-using the canvas. Daou's paintings have a life in history, they still bear their previous imagery, and that imagery whispers from under its layer of covering, much as artifacts at a dig exist just under the surface, to be uncovered only by the expert archeologist.

Daou was born in Beirut and grew up in Lebanon during the most devastating years of the Civil War. It was a time of destruction for a culture that had nurtured centuries of sophisticated civilization in one of the longest continuously inhabited sites on the earth. Daou left Beirut in 1985 to attend Columbia University in New York City and thence went on to live in Europe. Beirut is slowly being rebuilt now, over astonishing new archeological discoveries revealed from the destruction of the Civil War. The modernist and post-modernist world will soon bury these sites of ancient culture. Daou's paintings are also burying their own previous lives, as she covers one image with another, densely, painfully, sometimes even brutally.

"Dans le lit qu'on m'avait prepare" [In the bed which one has prepared for me] at first looks like a ravaged triptych on its side with a wandering pattern that eludes geometry behind a veil of blue paint. The scrapes and gouges grudgingly release scattered phrases. The title of the painting is a quote from a poem by the surrealist poet Rene Char. The surface bears a burden of half buried references much as a poem does. At the same time, the triptych itself is like a bed, almost a sodden blue mattress that is capable of suffocation. A prepared bed can be a torture or punishment or it can be a luxuriant place of rest.

All of Daou's works exist on several levels, behind their seeming simplicity and even austerity. "Toute vie qui doit poindre acheve un blesse," [Every life as it dawns kills one of the injured] is a powerful empty sarcophagus in somber greys that stands vertically, as though it is waiting for us to enter. At the same time this dark image is also personal. Daou's family has a sarcophagus outside of their home in Biblos, and excavations of sarcophagus in Lebanon are common. The reference to ancient culture in a sarcophagus is obvious. It is here though a site in its own right, a place not of death but of passage, through history, through time and space, linking us to Daou's native land in the Near East

and its ever present layers of historical cultures. The title, for an artist who has just completed a major life change from Switzerland to Texas, would seem to also refer to another type of history one that is bound to the cycle of birth and death. "Partire c'est mourir un peu" as the French say so concisely.

Other works are much more arcane, but equally combine history, place and personal references. "The Giant on the Other Side" displays in a seemingly impromptu way, a type of rusted chandelier, an archaic lighting device that has its own class based cultural history, beyond the usual functional archeological objects such as bowls or jars. The poetic quote is here from Emily Dickinson (it is buried in her poetry, not in a title) and the reference is to a previous painting of gargoyles invisible under the white surface. Another work "bottles with oil keep appearing" has seven small panels of bottles, with barely visible phrases such as "I coat myself with a potion I cannot control " This work is drawn from a book by Unica Zurn, Hans Bellmer's lover that refers to her hallucinations. But the titles are not to be taken as literal descriptions. They are as layered as the work. This image also refers to Daou's own associations with olive oil as a traditional product of Lebanon, a product that encompasses religion, sustenance and beauty.

The paintings of Annabel Daou are each of them dense with layers of meaning that can only be suggested here. Visually, they are neither seductive nor comfortable. They need to be lived with for a long time, and accepted on their own veiled terms, much as we begin to accept the layers of places, only after we have been in them for awhile. It is ironic that in Texas where life is so based in the present moment, Daou has produced these works with their own history that demand our patience and our imagination. While she is still a young artist, these works speak of ancient history and earlier eras. They are a refreshing change from our usual diet of post-modern media references and tired modernist clichés. There is something here that is prehistoric rather than postmodern. These paintings are the product of an ancient culture that is being presented only through a painstaking excavation in the late twentieth century.