

## Luminous abstraction: Khal in miniature

By India Stoughton

BEIRUT: Artist, teacher, writer, gallerist, mother and longtime art critic for weekly magazine “Monday Morning,” as well as for The Daily Star, Helen Khal was a woman of many talents. She earned her living from her writing, charting the progress and monitoring the successes and failures of a generation of Lebanese artists in articles that were unfailingly perceptive, generous and encouraging. Yet her love of painting meant that the creation, as well as the discussion of, art remained central in her life, from the age of 22 – when she found herself suffused with a feeling of serenity while idly sketching a portrait of her brother – to her death in 2009. A glimmer of insight into her work can be gleaned from “Quiet Seduction,” a series of small format works currently on show at Mark Hachem Gallery.

The private collection of one of Khal’s two sons, the selection of work comprises a number of sketches, an array of colorful portraits and the luminous color field abstracts for which she is best known.

Curated by Fadia Antar and presided over by art critic, publisher and longtime friend of the artist Cesar Nammour, the show conveys a sense of Khal’s interests and talent as an artist, although the absence of larger canvasses requires that viewers exercise their imaginations.

“It is representative,” as Nammour says, “but it takes a connoisseur to look at these small things and see a huge painting.”

Grouped according to style and subject matter, rather than date, they showcase Khal’s versatility while conveying a strong sense of her fascination with light and color, which take precedence even in her portraits.

The sketches provide insight into the skills gleaned during her years at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA), where she was among the earliest batch of students, studying alongside artists who would go on to become some of Lebanon’s most famous modernists, including Shafic Abboud, Yvette Achkar and Youssef Basbous.

“The drawings in pencil and charcoal represent her work when she was at ALBA in 1947, ’48,” Nammour says. “They are mostly nudes, and mostly of Mariam. Mariam was the first nude model in Lebanon. She was discovered by Cesar Gemayel and modeled for him secretly. Then, when ALBA was established, he brought her to ALBA and she was the nude model at that time. ... Helen was fascinated by Mariam’s body. She said that all her life when she drew nudes, it was Mariam who was in her mind.”

Khal’s ably executed nudes show her technical skill as an artist, but it is the remainder of the work in the show that provides most insight into her oeuvre. The exhibition takes its name from the artist’s own words, which are emblazoned on one wall of the gallery: “Each color has its own climate, creates its own particular world: Inviolable, each color speaks with quiet seduction.”

In Khal’s abstracts, simple compositions made up of horizontal bars, basic geometric forms or floating ovals, her passion for pure color is evident. Tiny works, most executed on paper mounted on wood panels, they are remarkable not for their

composition but for their luminosity, possessing a subtle radiance that almost seems to emanate outward from the surface of the work.

As Khal once told Nammour, she believed that her abstracts and her work as a portrait artist went hand-in-hand. “For me, the two directions – abstract and figurative – have been a necessary complement, one to the other,” she wrote in a letter published in his 2004 monograph. “An abstract eye alone finally leads to creative sterility; by the same token, to deny the abstract neglects the presence of a significant, underlying structure in life.”

The selection of portraits on show includes photorealistic as well as more impressionistic work. Although accomplished, Khal’s portraits are not as pioneering or noteworthy as her abstracts. Again, the primary impression is one of rich colors and in certain instances – particularly in a minute, exquisite self-portrait hung apart from the rest – of a soft luminescence.

“Quiet Seduction” is an appropriate title for this exhibition. The lack of large canvasses means that the full scope of Khal’s work remains undisclosed, but the diminutive pieces on show promises to woo viewers with their unobtrusive beauty.

Helen Khal’s “Quiet Seduction” is on show at Mark Hachem Gallery in Downtown until Feb. 18. For more information, please call 01-999-313.