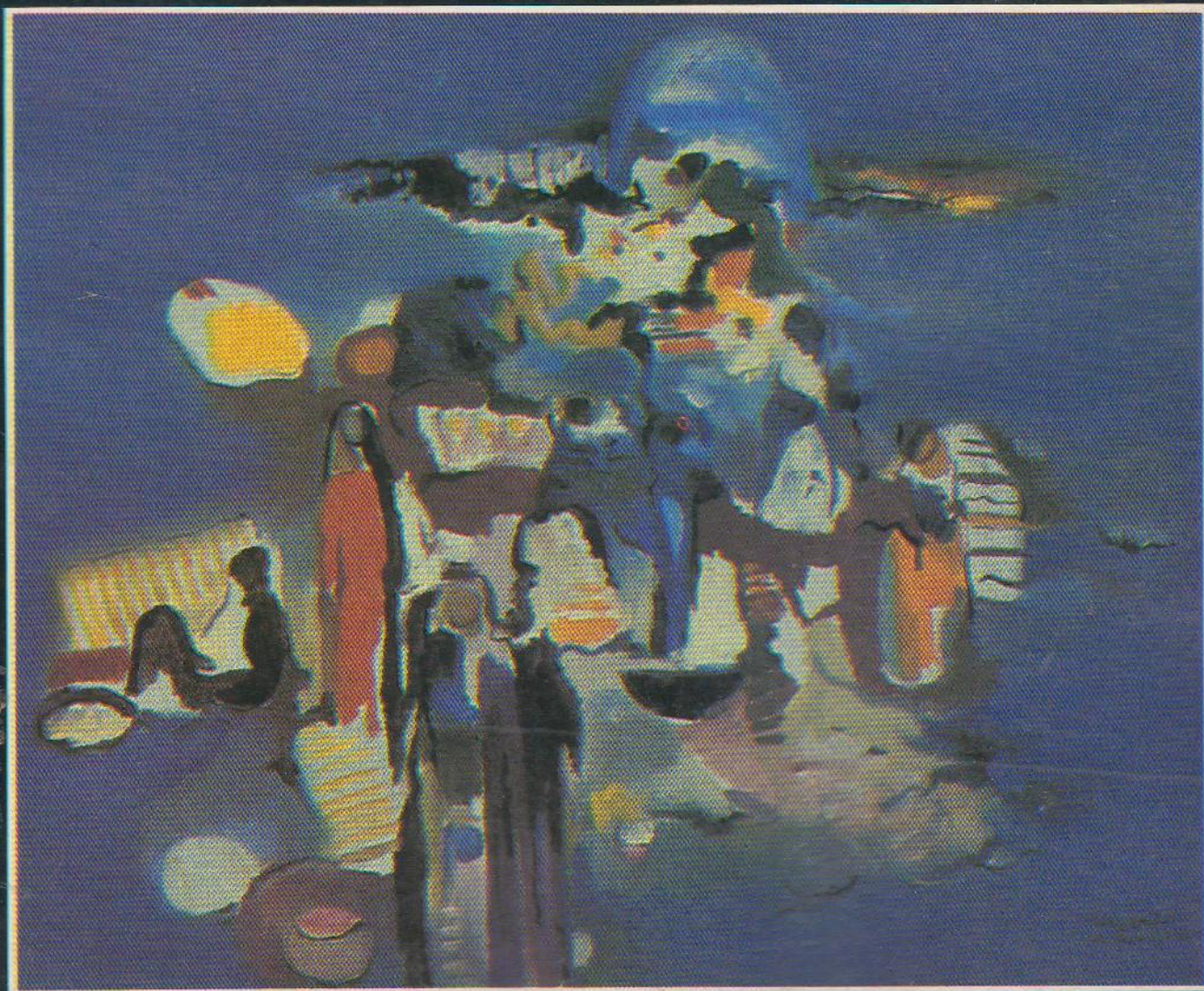


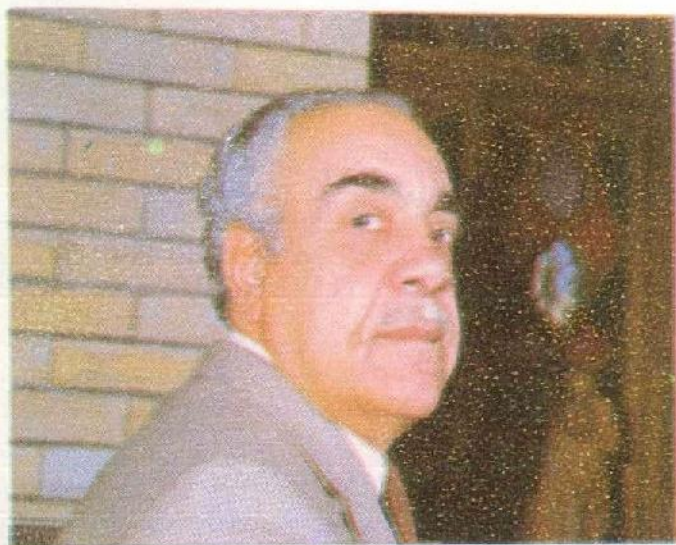
# GILGAMESHI

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## Renewed Adventures in Colour

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Jabra I. Jabra

On seeing Ismail al-Shaikhly's recent works, done mostly in 1987 and 1988, one is likely to forget that this artist so obsessed with colour is in fact one of the pioneers who since the early forties have worked hard in order to establish an Iraqi school of art. They were originally driven by a spontaneous love for nature as they saw it in the orchards and palmgroves and the endless flat country around Baghdad, which they were keen to portray on canvas.

The art movement thus established by their paintings then matured through their efforts, together with

those of their colleagues. It was soon to develop trends which they had not anticipated, leading them from the expression of an amateurish impulse to the adoption of certain stands towards life as well as visual experience and style, whereby a whole new school materialised, rich in concepts and methods. The movement gradually spread in the country with its effect finally spreading throughout the Arab world. It made it possible for contemporary Arab art to emerge as a counterpart to what was going on in the West; its visual expression, as in the West, became an

influential factor in the creative modes of daily living.

Ismail al-Shaikhly was born in Baghdad, the son of a carpenter. But he grew up in the countryside around the town of Naft-Khâna on the middle eastern border of Iraq. There the land stretches and undulates over long distances towards the far-away hills which left their indelible image on the mind of the boy. In later life, they seemed to provide him with a visual reference: whatever he sees around him, he tends to place it in some relationship, sensuous but at the same time almost geometrical, with an object manifesting itself to him from far away, rising through the sun or darkening with the clouds, while people seem constantly to move towards it or away from it.

Perhaps in his early youth he was not conscious of this relationship in any degree of clarity or strength. But his pursuit of painting in those days, in a community devoid of interest in visual art, may be a part of that deep-seated impulse which would reveal its more powerful effect in his maturer years, whose products we see today.

It happened that Shaikhly was one of the first students to enter The Institute of Fine Arts in 1939, where he studied under Faiq Hassan, who had studied in the mid-thirties in Paris and was the first art teacher to be appointed at the Institute. During the World War II years, art students were not numerous in Baghdad. Those who graduated together with Shaikhly in 1945 from the Department of Painting were very few, but they had the opportunity of studying, in their final year, also under Jewad Selim, a young man then aged 25. Jewad himself had spent only two years as an art student in Paris and Rome, and in 1944 he was transferred from his job at the Iraqi Antiquities Museum to teach sculpture and history of art at the Fine Arts Institute. Ismail al-Shaikhly, however, had closer links with Faiq Hassan: in fact, Faiq attracted a number of painters as members of his S.P. (Société Primitive) who counted among them, apart from Ismail, such young enthusiasts as Khalid al-Qassab, Zaid Saleh and others. Jewad also had some connection with them.

Officials in charge of education in those days had the foresight and the wisdom, as soon as the War was over, to resume sending talented art students to Paris and London on scholarships. Jewad Selim, Atta Sabri and Hafidh al-Duroobi were sent to London, whereas Ismail al-Shaikhly was one of the young men who were in 1947 sent for further study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. He completed his studies there in 1952.

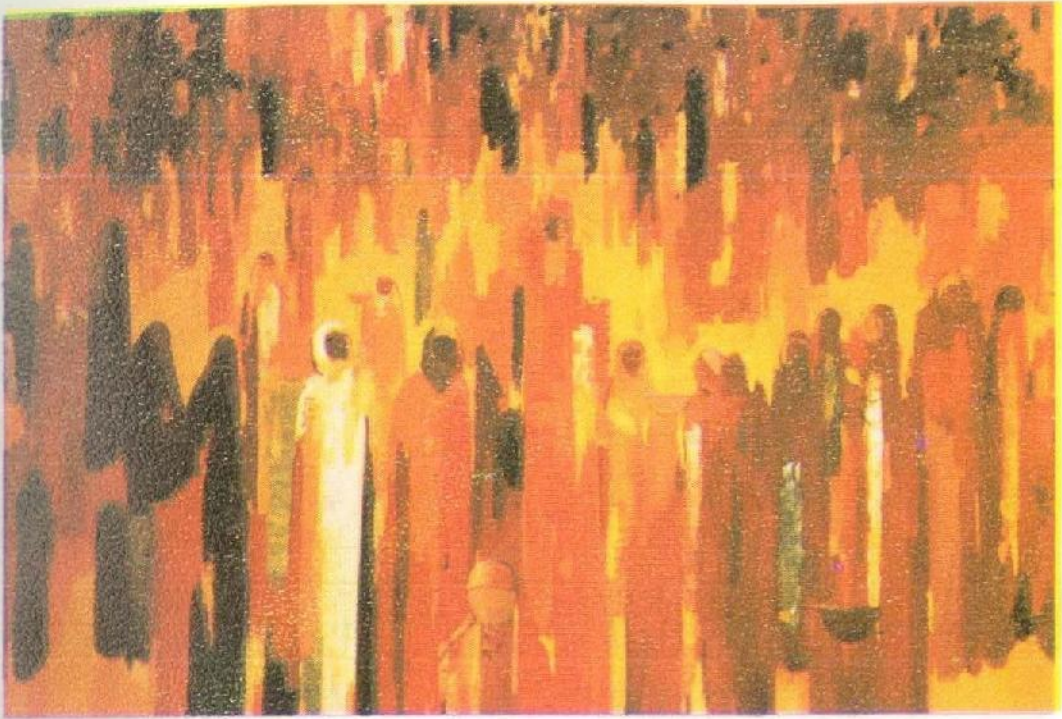
It is to be noted that this particular period, especially the three years from 1949 to 1951, was a significant formative period for the beginnings of the modern art movement in Baghdad. The S.P. became intensely active, despite the absence of Ismail, and held its first comprehensive exhibition under the Arabic name of Al-Ruwad (The Pioneers) at the residence of Dr.Kha-

lid al-Qassab in March, 1950. Jewad soon deserted and formed The Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1951 which held its first exhibition in April that year. Both groups were inclined to stress the need of the artist to hand on to what was local, traditional, and peculiar to Iraq, while stressing at the same time that all this should be tackled in a manner consonant with the spirit of the age and its modern styles. If this meant a contradiction in terms it was up to the artists to find the resolution which would give their work its specific distinction.

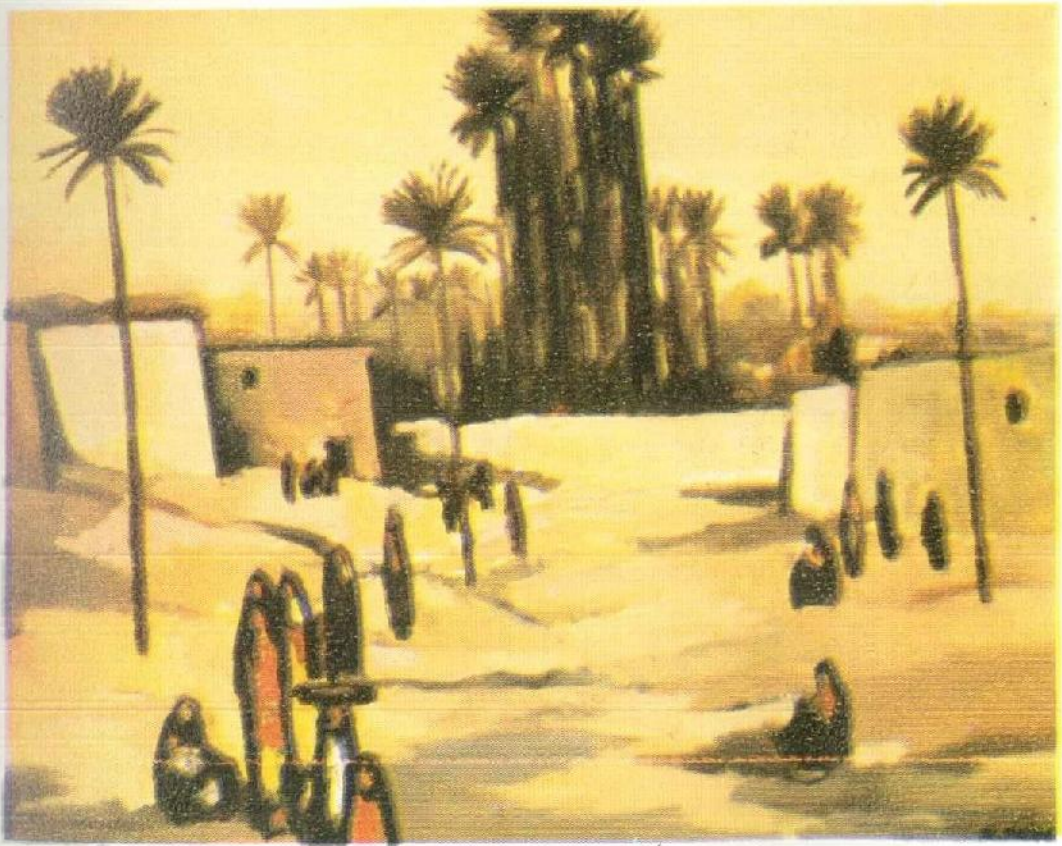
When Ismail al-Shaikhly returned to Baghdad in 1952 to work as teacher at the Fine Arts Institute, he had gone through all the unavoidable influences an art student would experience in Paris. They would enrich his knowledge and skill, just as they would enrich his questioning of what he should try to express as soon as he stood again on his national soil. In Paris he had worked under a number of masters, the most famous of whom was André Lhot, whose influence could be detected in the way a canvas would be divided with vertical lines: for André Lhot this was a development from Cubism in the direction of his own specificity: narrow but distinctive. Shaikhly's division of his canvas into colour planes, at this particular period on his return home, was one evidence of this influence.

In the Second S.P. Exhibition, in 1953, and indeed in all the exhibitions held regularly by them over the years, Shaikhly was a prominent participant. His preference was for populist themes which, in the fifties, were a major part of the Iraqi painter's search for his own distinctive characters, on the one hand, and a means of implicit political protest, on the other. Painters, sculptors, poets, fiction writers, all took part in this type of protest throughout this decade remarkable for its spirit of experimentation and adventure, as well as rebellion and innovation in all forms of expression almost in every part of the Arab world.

In 1954, in the paintings and lithographs (which he did in Paris, as lithography equipment did not exist then in Baghdad) Ismail al-Shaikhly pictured some of the disasters caused by the great Tigris flood which engulfed the greater part of Baghdad in that year. Men and women and children carried their miserable belongings on their shoulders and on their heads as they fled for safety to some dry spot. For an artist who had mastered Western techniques, especially those current in France, this was one way of expressing his clinging to a personal vision which was not to be submerged in the styles and techniques imposed on him by contemporary culture, regardless of their origin. This drove the artist with even greater force towards the popular motifs and traditional ways and manners of life in Iraq as a way out of the dilemma of expression which seemed to obsess most of the leading painters in those years. For an artist to paint a woman wearing a black *aba* with a minaret and a blue dome in the



*Return from Prayer 600 x 180cm, Oil, 1980*



*Buhruz, 80 x 60 cm, Oil, 1975*

background and a red section of an oval water-melon in the foreground was a declaration of his patriotic belonging, an emphasis on a "poetic" approach which the townsman related to an aesthetic of popular instinct — although most of that sort of thing was rapidly vanishing in the city itself.

As Shaikhly moved in this direction — and Jewad Selim was for some time one of the most prominent painters to move in it — he discovered that the female figure, wrapped in a voluminous black *aba* over a dress in red or blue, provided him with a purely visual material that brought out his chromatic skill and variety in an astounding richness. He set about looking at this figure from various angles, portrayed in his successive works. After it had symbolized mostly the country's poor, the meaning of which was stressed in the painting, it now came to express a special kind of feminine beauty, a mixture of lushness and pride. He thus concentrated on the female figure itself, doing away with most details in order to arrive at the essence of the flowing motion of the figure, and made good use of the rich compositions made possible by the configurations of women in endless positions.

It was only natural that the artist should then note the female face itself — framed within the headcloth and the *aba* together with that kind of veil which conceals a woman's charm and reveals it at once. And soon faces multiplied and kohl-rimméd eyes let forth their magic, which led to less interest in the body in favour of an almost exclusive concentration on the seduction emanating from faces and eyes and lips. Even in the presence of several figures, the faces retained their importance, and the whole thing would be done in compositions in which sharp lines were stressed as much as colour: it was a throwback to ancient Arab illuminations, especially those by the 13th century Abbasid artist, al-Wasiti.

And like ancient Arab painters, the artist sought no portraiture: a woman was all women, and a man — who was sometimes allowed into the female groupings — all man. Foregrounds and backgrounds merged together with a few household symbols, in order to stress the seductive sensuous presence of woman. This somehow turned Shaikhly's canvases into lyrical love poems, seemingly popular in content but modern in form and style, where the structure was basically geometrical, the vocabulary down to its minimum, and colour areas were absolute spaces.

The purely visual thereafter seemed to get hold of the artist. So much so that colour became his main concern, and every painting became an excuse for a renewed colour venture. This moved him away gradually from faces and took him back again to figures — but in a manner that made him regard the female figure as a medium not of sexual seduction but of aesthetic potency through its linear structure and colour expressiveness.

This stage, rooted as it was in the work of the sixties, crystallized in the early seventies as one of distinctive vision, which acquired further depth and complexity as the artist matured. In Shaikhly's imagination now merged the creative elements which harked back to his childhood, already enriched with his experience of popular traditions and practices in Naft-Khana and Baghdad and most of Iraq's towns and villages, together with his interest in the *aba*-dressed female figure, his intense predilection for colour, and his growing tendency to ignore the city in favour of the ways in which simple folks expressed their communal joys and innocent pleasures on religious and festive occasions. This mixture seems suddenly to have resulted in a revolution in the artist's vision — it led him to discover a fantastic world rich in excitement, movement, colour and suggestion.

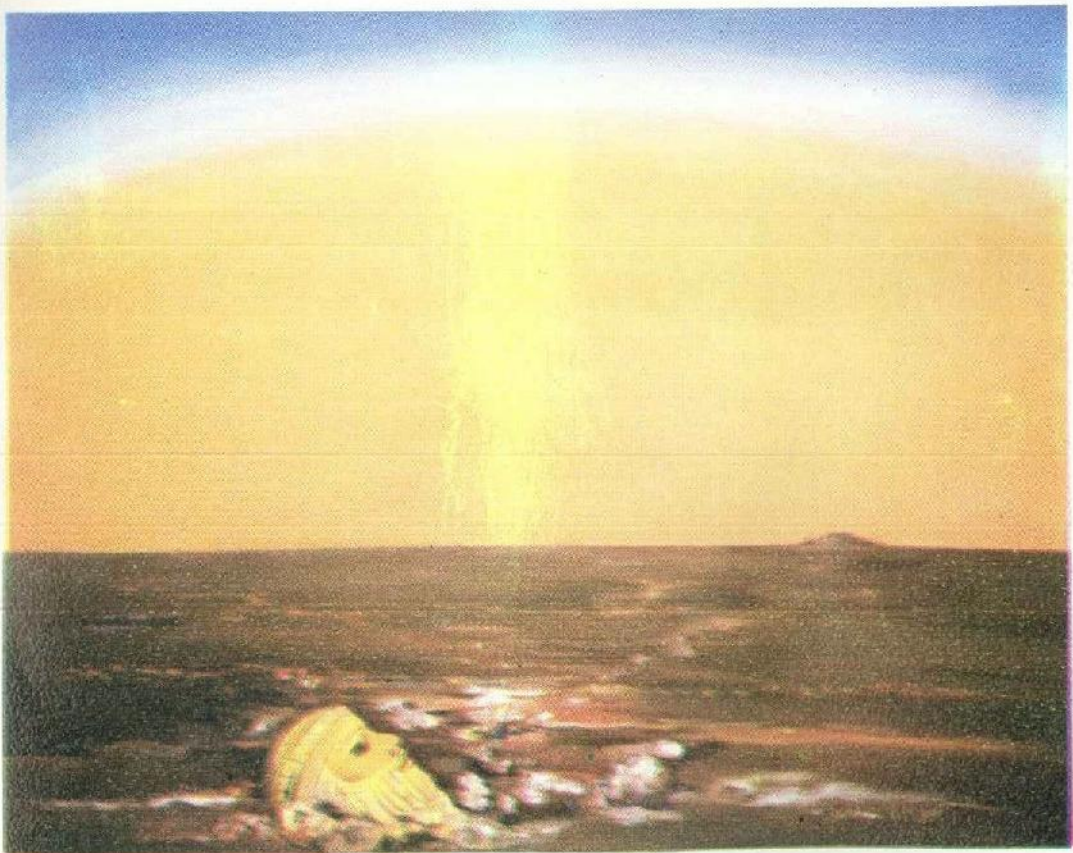
There is no doubt that the main driving force in all this is the artist's nostalgic return to the fountains of his childhood. It is a return to that pristine joy which has always haunted him. With the passage of time it has turned into an iridescent dream that brings to him its resplendent colours at a time when day to day living offers so little of them. This remembered joy comes up in colour eruptions which the artist now manipulates with his mature technical skill, as though to abandon himself further to its raptures. It has become an intense love which informs the artist's existence with mystic warmth and an impulse for articulation. Hence the tempestuous lines and the violent paint with its combined thickness and purity, as they stress the jubilation of that feast without end, of those visits and vowed offerings to mosques and holy-men shrines which have most probably fulfilled the longings of the women going to them in crowds and blessed their desire for fertility and birth. Through them, metaphorically, the artist suggests that the whole of mankind is blessed with the joy of an ever-renewed life.

In most of these canvases the mosque, or shrine, occupies a central point on the far-away horizon, from which the lines of the design and the group movements radiate. The land, with its endless extensions and distant hills is always the land of Iraq: a far-away Babylonian ziggurat may loom at the point where heaven meets earth. There is a strange continuity in which ages are telescoped, where the past seems to be present through those anonymous women who are always there despite time and change, eddying with the pleasure of an immemorial survival, more durable than all durations. The artist's return to the fountains of childhood is thus a return to the springs of human existence itself, the first springs of man's capacity for life and joy.

In his latest canvases the painter's feeling for colour and movement runs away with him: from the forms of things and people he extracts their purely chromatic and kinetic essence. In style, he verges on abstract ex-



*Horizon, 135 x 100 cm, Oil, 1988.*



*Sennacheribe, 140 x 110cm, Oil, 1988.*

pressionism were it not for the constant suggestion of human figures, in spite of their tendency to metamorphose into chromatic and linear tones spiralling in and out in all directions across the broad canvas.

An artist lives his dream, and is thus enabled to live more and to dream more, so long as he gives the dream some visible form. A painter like Toulouse-Lautrec or Degas may find in painting the airy movements of circus players or ballet dancers not only the visual beauty of movement, but a compensation for the artist's own psychological or physical incapacity to perform such wonderful lightness or impossible play. A Picasso or a Rouault would see the tragic contradiction between the misery of clowns and circus players in their actual life and the fun and laughter they exude to people in their movement and performance. But these artists, as they paint these subjects, articulate a profound longing for the possession of such throbbing magic, such sheer fascination of movement, regardless of the sorrow or tragedy that may go with it. They dream of the actual experience

with all its possible emotions and through their dream they actualize their unforgettable paintings, which are in themselves pointers to their creators' lives.

Something of this sort may be seen in Ismail al-Shaikhly's nostalgia for the playfields of childhood and the collective visits of women to holy places and this communal picnics in the open fields, all of which he paints with such keenness and love and concentration. It is lost innocence that the artist longs for as he seeks from life colour and joy and playful noise not so easily available now. In throwing the memory back amidst the primitive colourful pleasures of the past the artist seems to find a refreshment of the senses and a further sharpening of the eye's power of enjoyment — a sort of self-renewal.

Only an artist can live such a multiple life and so excitedly through his creations, and through them he communicates to others some of this multiple life and excitement. And this is a thing which a capable painter like Shaikhly knows and does extremely well.



*Picnic, 135 x 120cm, Oil, 1987.*