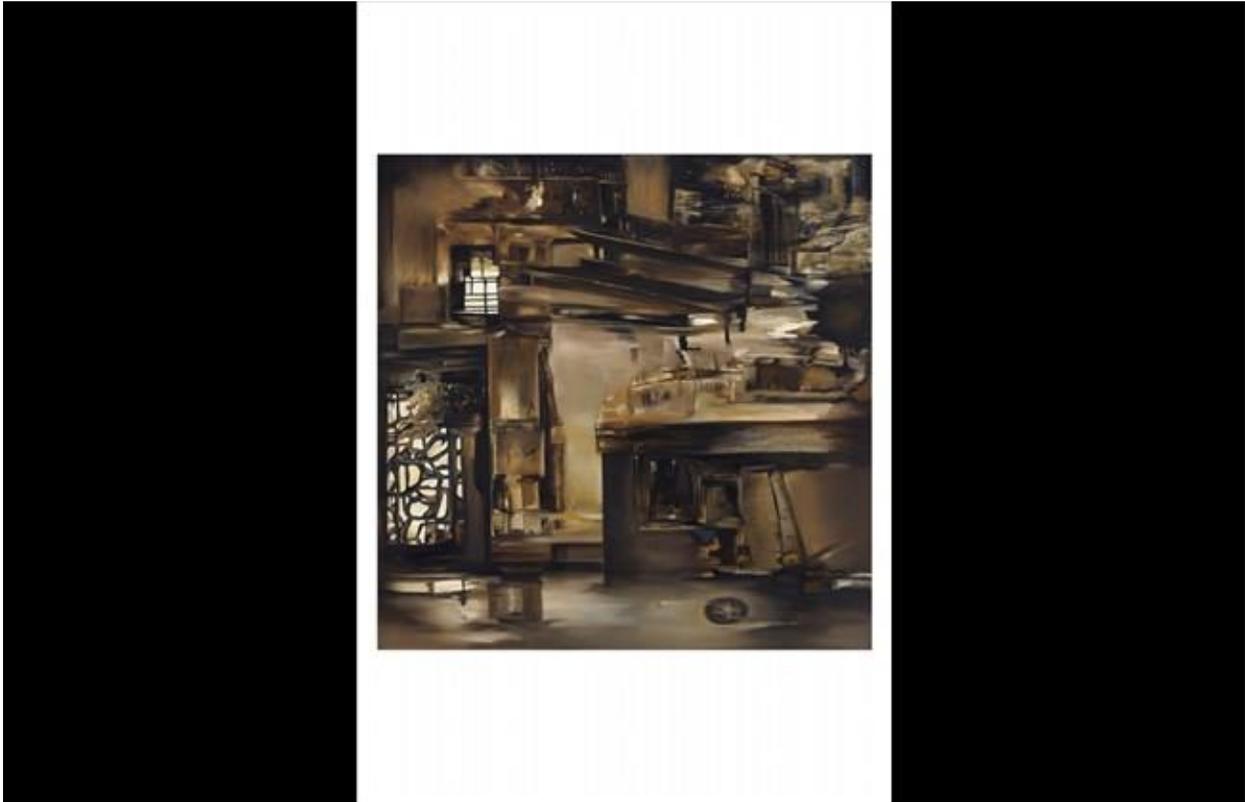


A lucid dream between light and shadow



[India Stoughton](#) | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: For a cognac to achieve the XO, or “extra old” label, it must be in cask for at least six years. In general it has been stored for upwards of 20. Beyond this, a cognac is seen fit to receive the elusive appellation “Age Inconnu” designating it as surpassing the official age scale.

As one would expect of an “Age Inconnu” brandy, Lebanese artist Arwa Seifeddine’s painting of the same name demonstrates subtlety and depth. The slightly nightmarish portrait depicts three Dali-esque faces, one yellow-tinted visage glimpsed between two grey ones who stare at each other as if about to fight or to embrace.

One figure wears a hood, one a helmet, while the third sports a kind of headdress which tumbles down about the shoulders in a mass of tiny black-and-white patterns, somehow reminiscent of nanotechnology.

The painting, one of the smallest in the exhibition, contains mind-boggling amounts of detail, which compel the viewer to peer closer in trying to make out each line and pattern. What is it – grinning skulls, childish masks – that’s really peering out from the folds of cloth?

Seifeddine says she chose the painting's title because she feels the faces have a medieval feel. "I see a knight, a soldier and a monk – three entities – yet they are all one," she explains. "Perhaps we're all made of more than one thing."

It quickly becomes clear that the artist's approach to painting is oriented more toward the spiritual than the technical. "I try to portray the hidden, the ineffable," she continues, "portraits of spaces, emotions, inner moments. My artwork is a bit mystical. Maybe the characters in 'Age Inconnu' are past lives."

Seifeddine studied interior design at Paris' L'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, and since 1984 she has worked at the Lebanese American University, where she is a professor of design.

Displayed to advantage in Hamra's Agial Gallery, her solo exhibition "Moments from Within" features 15 oil-on-canvas paintings – a medley of sober grays, blacks, creams and ochres. Happily, her talent for capturing light gives her paintings an otherworldly luminosity which prevents them becoming bleak or melancholy.

The paintings are almost as unconventional as their creator, ranging in style from studies of detail to broad impressionism to surrealism. All have in common hypnotic patterns of light and shade and an element of visual trickery that plays with space and dimension.

Seifeddine works entirely from her imagination, displaying an understanding of chiaroscuro without referring to still life or photographs. Many of her paintings feature interior architectural structures – perhaps a hangover from her study of interior design.

The objects in her paintings are not the main focus, however. "They are merely vehicles to paint the light," says Seifeddine. "There's no logic ... there is an ambiguity between the inner and outer space, between up and down"

"In-Sight" in particular is reminiscent of M. C. Escher in its visual complexity and spatial manipulation. Its crisp lines and understated tones depict a sharp-edged, vertical pillar bisecting the canvas. Behind it, a dull gray room is thrown into shadow by the brilliance of an open doorway, through which distant mountains and a featureless lake can be glimpsed.

Superficially simple, the composition is rendered complex by the artist's use of stairs, doorways and reflections.

One flight of stairs appears to lead out into the landscape, but climbs up, rather than down. A second staircase begins from beneath it and somehow leads back into the room and up to a tiny doorway embedded in the pillar. Cleverly shaded blocks create an impression of rooms within rooms and layered ceilings and walls, all within the central pillar.

The image bears a few minutes reflection and perhaps a return visit.

By contrast, “Cognac and Gray Tobacco” exemplifies Seifeddine’s unusual technique of contrasting patches of realistic detail – the reflected light in the puddle at the bottom left of the painting – with broad impressionistic brushstrokes, which hint at the subject like a blurred photograph.

The painting depicts what appears to be a couple of windows covered with wrought-iron grills on the left side of a room. This crisp, detailed portion of the painting contrasts with the right side, an impressionistic rendering of what might be a desk, a cupboard, or a tiny doorway to a second room. Above the desk, a flight of spiralling stairs enters the frame from above, stopping surreally three steps down.

The overall effect is much like looking at two overlapping photographs, but the sepia-toned oil strokes render it surprisingly beautiful.

Mystical or not, Seifeddine’s paintings do create an almost hypnotic atmosphere – walking among them is rather like undergoing a lucid dream.

They are certainly not a colorful addition to Beirut’s art scene, and may not appear immediately arresting. Their quiet beauty lies in their subtlety – the paintings may take a few minutes to process, but will remain with you long after you leave the room.

Arwa Seifeddine’s “Moments from Within” is on show at the Agial Gallery in Hamra until April 28. For more information call 03-634-244 or email info@agial.com.

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