

PARTOU ZIA

Portraits Beyond Self

The Late Works

9 January – 23 February 2013

Like a poem, a painting is a festival, a holiday. A painting is a pause that celebrates or makes a place for Remembrance. Memory in itself cannot be transforming or transfiguring. The act of poetic alchemy changes one thing - the real experience - into another thing, a new or unknown thing. It is the imagination that acts as the director of this Ceremony of Remembrance... For me that is how painting proceeds: slow, doubtful, strange to the mind's eye, and ever dictatorial in its demands that I remain alert to the sudden, and the not yet known.
– Partou Zia 2005

In the five years following her residency as the first recipient of Tate St Ives' pioneering programme at the historic Porthmeor Studios in 2003, Partou Zia's painting flourished into a new, expressive phase of maturity. *Entering the Visionary Zone* was a prescient title for the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue, which followed, at Tate. Nobody could have guessed however that within two years her exuberant life of writing, painting and reading would have to channel itself into a narrow passage of time, intense in its dedication, where every moment mattered as she fought to survive a life-threatening illness.

An innate storyteller, Partou evolved a personal mythology focusing on an astonishingly vivid series of self-portrait paintings. Set in luminous, shimmering landscapes, the predominant presence has an increasingly spiritual quality, suffusing the many guises in which she depicts herself with an otherworldly sensibility.

References to Italian Renaissance artists such as Andrea Mantegna, the Bellinis and Titian, enrich the late paintings (*My Flag 2008*), together with the abiding influence of William Blake, whose archives she studied during her Tate residency. Partou's Persian background with a love of the poetry and illuminated manuscripts of that Middle Eastern culture constantly nourished the visionary, dream-like quality of her art.



In her essay on Partou's work for *The Grey Syllable* exhibition in 2005, Penny Florence described the paintings as messengers: "Paintings are messengers in the sense that, like all art they bring understanding from the far greater realm into that of the senses."

Later, for the Memorial exhibition *In the Face of Wonder* at The Exchange in Penzance, Penny Florence expanded on the arresting quality of the figures in the strange and beautiful world of these paintings:

"Making paintings that lead us to the right questions is the achievement of the visionary artist. And with it comes the visionary's smile. For all their seriousness, for all that they deal with the great questions of life and death, these works, taken together, are not heavy. They may be weighty, even solemn sometimes, but that is as it should be in the face of wonder. But those little details – the floating slippers, the little pots of paintbrushes and artist's impedimenta... (as *In The Beginning*, 2008) anchor us in the here and now, gently alluding to the material conditions of even the most elevated persons."



Portraits Beyond Self seeks to present an artist who was a poet-painter and who was forced to lay down her brushes just as she reached the height of her powers towards her fiftieth Birthday, when the cancer she so nearly overcame, took her away. The eloquence of her work is inspirational, and it is time now for it to be seen by a wider audience. Partou's exquisite writing - from her *Extracts from The Notebooks of Eurydice* and beyond are also in the process of being brought to a wider readership, and the beginnings are present on the Art First website. Also viewable on the website are the paintings from the exhibition, and a new text by Penny Florence (Prof. Emerita, The Slade School of Fine Art, UCL).

Partou Zia (1958 – 2008) emigrated from Tehran to England in 1970. She studied Art History at the university of Warwick, Fine Art at the Slade and was awarded a PhD for her writing and painting by the University of Plymouth. Exhibitions include Tate St Ives, The Newlyn Gallery, the Exchange, Penzance and Art First. Her work is in the collection of the British Museum, and New Hall Art Collection, Cambridge University.

Illustrated works

Page 1: My Flag, 2006, oil on canvas, 153x183cm

Page 2: In the Beginning, 2008, oil on canvas, 153x183cm