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Experience

r Sabrina Rowan-Hamilton paints the inanimate exteriors of our world as a means to represent and understand our interior feelings and motivations. Text and portrait by **Niko**.

Sabrina Rowan-Hamilton could have chosen a more conventional career path but became a painter almost by chance. "It kind of started by accident," she recalls. "I was living in Japan and I had to have a student visa, which meant that I had to study for at least twenty hours. So I chose art! Flower arranging initially, and I found that I had a natural ability. I decided to continue with it when I returned to London and went to study at the City and Guilds College in Kennington – I was twenty-five at the time – and being there really fired up my passion for painting. I think Kennington is the best art school in London!

"My paintings are semi-abstract. They have elements of reality running through them, so I think it falls short of being what is considered purely abstract. I get my inspiration out of living in the urban world, this is our living space, but you only ever see the façade. What I am interested in is what is behind all this – the emotional life. I will look at a tower block and think: three hundred people live there, but I know nothing about them! What I can see and capture is the externals and these can interpret and explain what lies beneath. My paintings often feature tower blocks and ladders and they are very much an emotional

response or reaction – a way of communicating without using language." Sabrina's work is striking for the variety of colours, always subtle shades, never primary colours, but where did this come from? She explains: "I came back from Morocco, where I had been for nearly three years and I went back to art school to do an MA. I had been going through a very difficult time personally and I needed to move forward, so I just wiped out the colour from all of my work. I think this act symbolised my desire to close a door – an attempt to erase the past. So I started to use colours reminiscent of both England and my mood – grey, black

avant-garde



Untitled oil on canvas 42 x 65 cm

“The function of art is to provide the experience that connects us with our souls”

and white. I am at a stage in my life where I want to start putting back some colour and, because of that, I am thinking of going to India and exposing myself to the vibrant colours that you find there. My painting will reflect this.

“Everything, I think, has a spiritual foundation – painting in particular is itself a very spiritual process. There is something magical and mysterious about it. People often go to an exhibition these days as they would have gone to church in the past. And it is for the same reason that they do so – there is an inextinguishable thirst for connecting with something ‘bigger’ and more meaningful than mere materialistic externals can provide.

“My life is based upon the spiritual life – I chant twice a day – I get inside my body – and my work is the external expression of that dedication. Because of this I am attracted to the notion that art has no real worth or purpose except that it lifts people’s spirits and pulls them out of their reality. Personally I am really learning at the moment about living in the real world and about turning my dreams into reality. Artists convey culture and have a message, and I am at a point in my life where I need to find and express my voice. I very much use my paintings like a visual diary – they are the externalisation of my thoughts and feelings. Now I find that I can look at a painting from a certain time in my life and remember exactly what I was feeling, just by looking at the colours and subject matter.

“People often tell me that I am a ‘painter’s painter’. Painters like my paintings! My work is often very revealing about the process of painting itself. Sometimes I worry that painters are very difficult to understand. In the past, I would put words in, just to make my ideas clearer, but I have now reached a point where I have the self-confidence that the paintings work just as well on their own without needing any words. I was reading Jeannette Winterson’s ‘Art Objects’ recently, and she wrote that ‘those who think that art is not important or that art is a luxury forget that, in a money culture, art stands for the genius of the human spirit... a spirit not contained by the need to buy or sell’. I really rather agree with that.”