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RE. SONITA SINGWI

An excerpt from Purvi Shah's interview of poet Eileen Tabios in an article to be featured in the Spring/Summer 1999 issue of *THE ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN JOURNAL*:

Purvi Shah: We've talked about abstract art and abstract poetry but can you talk more specifically about how your relationship with visual art has influenced the way you write your poems?

ET: It's partly a matter of discernment. Following contemporary art has trained my eye — an "eye" that's comprised of both the mind and the heart. Consequently, it helped my sense of how to look at or consider my own work. Whether my opinion is valid in terms of the poem being ready to leave the writing studio is, of course, up to each subsequent reader. But training my eye has helped me to articulate internally an approach to writing.

I just discovered **Sonita Singwi**, an artist in whose works I see an affinity for what I love about poetry. Her paintings move me to recall how Filipino poet-editor Ricardo De Ungria described the birth of poems as "passionate patience." Sonita's paintings reflect the various quests of a highly active intellect which, when matched with a rigorous technique, result in works of overwhelming beauty. For me, Sonita's paintings are akin to poems developed after much thought, perhaps after much revision, and ultimately manifesting beauty through a cerebral approach. Sonita is not prolific and requires from three months to a year to finish a single painting. She layers oil paint on canvas, sands the surface down and repeats the process until the surface becomes like that of hard candy. The surfaces are elegantly simple in their ivory, pale blue or cream shades, but are also incredibly lush with a glow one associates with burnished gold or mother-of-pearl. In fact, despite their single colors, the paintings' surfaces project an opulence comparable to the surface of multi-hued silk Persian carpets.

Atop her paintings' surfaces, Sonita may paint tiny objects or a string of them. In another example of her rigorous technique, Sonita uses a single-hair brush to paint these tiny forms (I wonder if this reflects her concern with identity given the tradition in some Indian miniatures for its artists to have used a single cat hair's brush). Intriguingly, these small objects are unidentifiable as animal, human or object, and yet project an inexplicable logic as to their shapes or forms. That is, the abstract forms evoke specific connotations, such as feathers, cells and molecules, tassels or the carved curls of hair on the *kouroi* statues — as in the right canvas of her 1998 work, "Untitled Diptych." The left-positioned canvas is sized nine inches X eight inches while the other is a ten-inch square. Also, the left work is dotted along the edges by four tiny forms while the right work displays a string of forms. One would think that the deliberate contrast between the diptych's two components in terms of scale and visual imagery would be dissonant. Instead, the result is logical — organic — a mis-matched combination that perversely results in beauty.

Interview With Eileen Tabios (cont'd.)

The surface of Sonita's paintings is so seductive that the viewer's eye follows the canvas as it folds behind the frame, thus questioning the boundaries of the painting; I empathize with what I see to be her disruption on boundaries, which is why I sometimes say I "paint" or "sculpt" versus "write" the poem. And in a work like "Untitled Diptych," she mismatches elements of the two canvases without disrupting the work's overall harmony. Sonita's visual imagery retains its focus on physically manifesting beauty despite referencing life's contradictions and paradoxes — which means Sonita is also challenging preconceived and/or mass-produced definitions of beauty. It is a thoughtful approach that engages the viewer's heart as well as mind. And it is an engagement that resonates like a lyric poem — as in these words from "The Genesis" by Odysseus Elytis, one of the first poets I recall reading from the days before I was interested in writing poetry (I also thought of "genesis" when I concluded Sonita's abstract objects persuade the viewer in believing in the *real*-ness of their existence):

*It was the sun, its axis in me
many-rayed, whole, that was calling And
the One I really was, the One of many centuries ago
the One still verdant in the midst of fire, the One still tied to heaven
I could feel coming to bend
over my cradle.*

end of excerpt

Eileen Tabios is the author of a poetry collection titled *BEYOND LIFE SENTENCES*. She also wrote a collection of poetry essays/interviews, *BLACK LIGHTNING*, for which she received a 1997 Witter Bynner Poetry Grant. Her poetry, fiction and essays have been published internationally. She is currently editing *THE ANCHORED ANGEL*, a volume of selected works by Philippine poet Jose Garcia Villa. She is also the poetry editor of a forthcoming anthology of prose, poetry and art revolving around racial incidents involving Asian America, *SCREAMING MONKIES* (Coffeehouse, 1999). A recipient of fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, Virginia Center of the Creative Arts, the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation and Fundacion Valparaiso (Spain), she currently serves as the Executive Director of the Board of Directors for Kaya Production/Muae Publishing, an award-winning press based in New York City.