

The Purpose of Abstraction *by John Yau*

It helps to understand Vian Sora's abstract paintings when you realize she does not separate art from life:

"I've been influenced by all the places I moved to, and in my landscapes you see there are no borders. Borders have messed up my life, so I try to break those borders in my work."

Borders, which in some cases were restrictive barriers, have played a part throughout Sora's life. The bordered landscapes that she has lived in include Baghdad, Iraq, where she was born into a Kurdish family in 1976; Istanbul, Turkey, where she studied printmaking at the Istanbul Museum of Graphic Art (IMOGA); London, where she met her husband, an American; Berlin, Germany, where she had a studio and worked because of a months' long travel grant she received from the Great Meadows Foundation; and Louisville, Kentucky, where she and her family currently live. In all of these places, she was an outsider.

The second largest ethnic group in Iraq, the Kurds are a separate minority with its own culture, language, and identity. Not yet having been officially recognized as a nation, the Kurds exist in a country that has long marginalized them. After Saddam Hussein, a Sunni, came into power in 1979, being born into a Kurdish family in Baghdad meant you were under constant surveillance and always suspected of illegal activities.

In addition to growing up as member of a persecuted minority, Sora's life was marked by violent upheaval, including the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Gulf War (1990-1991), the 2003 invasion of Iraq by America and its allies, and the ecological havoc wreaked by the wars. In his documentary film *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), with his camera moving between bird's eye views and close-ups, Werner Herzog gazes at the Kuwait oil fires, the destruction of the landscape, miles of destroyed vehicles left behind by Hussein's

retreating army, torture chambers, and the effect the war had on a number of children, including one whose traumatic experiences made him unable to speak. All this happened before Iraq became the fifth most polluted country in the world (2024).

Purposefully not separating art from life, as previous generations of abstract artists had done, Sora breaks down borders and dissolves categories, including the fixity of the figure-ground relationship, and restrictions on subject matter, which, as a woman, she faced in Iraq, all while expressing the desire to move beyond her memories into a collective consciousness where the "I" is not central. At the same time, evidence of Sora's defiance can be found everywhere in her work, beginning with its resistance to categories, such as whether her paintings are abstract or figurative. However, I feel there is a far larger context in which Sora's defiance and border breaking meld together, and that is her repurposing of painting practices long thought to have become moribund.

Sora works both on the floor and on the wall. She begins by splashing, pouring, and spraying paint on canvases laid out on the floor, processes which had their origins in Abstract Expressionists and Color Field painting. Working in acrylic and oil, she lays down many layers, allowing pools of paint to bleed into each other, accumulate, and collide. This chaos is what she responds to when she begins to affix the canvas to the wall. In this two-step process, Sora brings chance and order together, but does not allow one to overwhelm or suppress the other.

This is where Sora's imaginative genius comes to the forefront. She has reconfigured methods associated with Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting by making them capable of an expressiveness and receptivity that earlier generations did not consider important. Historically speaking, Clement Greenberg

and other critics who championed Abstract Expressionism (particularly Jackson Pollock) and Color Field painting (Helen Frankenthaler) emphasized that paint was paint, and that art should only be about art. At the same time, Donald Judd took a radically different position in his famous essay, *Specific Objects*: "The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall." While Judd and Greenberg held each other in contempt, both agreed that the artist's hand was obsolete in the making of a painting.

Working in the aftermath of these aesthetic positions and methods, which had devolved into mannerisms, Sora did something unexpected. She breathed new possibilities into these modernist practices by making them receptive to a wide range of subjects that earlier, orthodox generations had banished from their work. She understood that what you don't see is as important as what you do see, that making a purely optical painting essentially ignored the world. Further defining her position as a barrier breaker, Sora also rejected the widely agreed-upon postmodern practices of pastiche, parody, or citation. Sincerity has been one of



the hallmarks of Sora's practice since the beginning of her career. Irony has no place in her work.

In *Verdict* (2019-22; ill. 1), we see the blue outline of an eye in a large, rounded black form located on the lower right side. The black form can be read as the profile of a smooth, abstract head which has been cropped by the painting's right edge. Below it, another rounded black form suggests a shoulder, with a large pink stain spewing and spreading both up and down from the crevice made by where the two forms meet. The almond-shaped eye is looking back into the painting.

If we take the title as a guidepost suggesting how we should interpret this painting, we are likely to read the head as the origin of the "verdict," which, for this viewer, at least, raises a question. Is the bulbous head a witness or an authority with the power to make a verdict? Once I ask this question, I am led deeper into the fantastical world that Sora conjures up in her entwining of flat, solidly colored areas with abstract fields, scumbled and scraped patches, and brushy bands. The diversity of paint applications and materiality are part of the meaning of *Verdict*.

After I see the head and follow the gaze of the eye, I see on the painting's left side what might be a faceless female figure facing right, toward the eye. With a dark, large, pinkish-red stain between them, the contrast between the black spewing head and the faceless pink woman conveys imminent obliteration. By not telling viewers who and what they are, other than one appears to be female and the other male, Sora invites us to reflect upon the nature of their relationship to each other and to power. Is the dynamic between them one sided, and if so, can it be altered?

The figure-ground relationship in *Fecundity* (2024; ill. 2) oscillates between mottled floral forms and areas of solid maroon or blue. The floral forms, which take up much of the painting, consist of blotchy and smeared stalks, spotted

leaves, and stained petals, all rising upward from the painting's bottom edge. Along with defining the edges of the plants, the red ground perforates some of the yellow leaves and pink with curving linear slits that share something with Arabic script, but not in any literal way. That ambiguity compels us to see ourselves seeing, to consider what forces have shaped our seeing.

We are looking at a stylized, uncultivated garden. The smeared and spotted surfaces evoke time passing and irrevocable damage, the effects of nature and civilization upon its environs. The discolored yellow leaves and solid blue areas evoke 14th century Syrian pots that were decorated with a blue glaze. Sora's paintings are archaeological in this regard; her excavated images underscore the ancient trade of spices and other goods between the Middle East and Europe, as well as open up high modernist painting to a plethora of motifs that underscore the wonderful impurity of painting, its capacity to absorb anything and everything. While the processes Sora uses in *Fecundity* are similar to the ones she employed in *Verdict*, their different outcomes are an indication of the artist's mastery, her determination to not repeat herself.

Biomimicry is the emulation of nature to solve human problems. By titling two recent paintings, *Biomimicry I* (ill. 4) and *Biomimicry II* (ill. 3) (both dated 2024), Sora reminds us that we can learn by closely observing nature. For example, flexible backpacks were inspired by the pangolin's ability to curl into a ball when it is being attacked. By suggesting that humankind can learn a lot from observing nature, Sora invites viewers to see her work as not purely aesthetic objects.

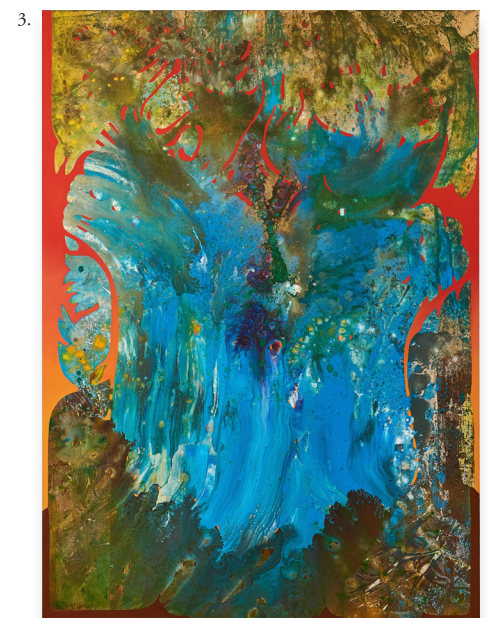
Decay, growth, and the bond between civilizations and nature are central concerns. A large shape along the bottom right of *Biomimicry I* looks corroded, as if it was a sheet of copper exposed to the weather. Above it, a flat, tree-like shape with deep blue liquid-like branches



(rivulets of paint) dominates the rectangle. This flattened, multi-hued, layered shape is set against a solid Royal Purple ground. In the Islamic world, purple can signify death and silence, while in Rome, Tyrian or Royal Purple was available only to the wealthy because of how expensive it was to make.

Just as the meaning of purple can radically shift because of context, I do not feel that the disjunctures in *Biomimicry I* are arbitrary. Sora recognizes that we live in a world where change is constant and cross-pollination of all kinds, from plants to civilizations, never stops. Her approach is maximalist; she wants to stir up a wide range of associations and conflicting feelings. There is something beautiful and unsettling about her paintings.

Biomimicry II is very different from *Biomimicry I*. The red lines scattered through the corroded brownish-yellow



shape above the blue, more thickly painted trunk-like form resembles Arabic. Or is it the sunset peering through the leaf-filled branches? Sora's ability to maintain ambiguities where it becomes impossible to read parts of her painting with any authority is one of her many strengths.

A dragoman is an interpreter, who speaks many languages; his multilingual skills helped play a role in diplomacy and business. This was particularly important when the Muslim Ottomans refused to learn the languages of non-Muslim countries and treaties had to be signed. By titling one of her paintings *Dragoman III* (2024; ill. 5), Sora invites us to become interpreters, while simultaneously conveying the opposite, that we are limited by the language we speak, even if that language is considered divine.

Where are we located and what is it that we are seeing when we gaze at Sora's large, recent painting, *The Sky from Below* (2024-25; ill. 6)? The frontal view suggests the we might be floating, possibly on water, while looking straight up at the sky. What time of night or day is it? The

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painting's rich, solid blue ground does not really tell us. It feels closer to the blue that Giotto used on the vaulted ceiling of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy, so that what we are looking at is not the sky but the tumultuous cosmos.

Set against the blue and expanding depths we can barely imagine – a mostly strawberry pink and sherbet red form spreads out from the center of the rectangular painting. The surface ranges from mottled to poured, all contained within the spreading wing-like form. The tips of the open wing-like form are directed toward the top right and left corners, while the top edge of the two wing-like shapes form a bowl-like declivity in which Sora has painted a blotched yellowish form. So many associations rise to the surface of our consciousness, starting with the Egyptian sun god Ra in the Horus form of the falcon. By evoking an ancient god that the Egyptians believed created the universe and was the source of life, while also making an abstract, non-representational form



that is in a state of dissolution, Sora reminds us that we keep trying to name that which is beyond our comprehension, and that this condition of constant change in ourselves and the world is both beautiful and terrifying.

In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Ludwig Wittgenstein famously states: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”¹ This sense of language’s limitation runs throughout all of Sora’s work. Are we able to name the forms in *Dragoman III* or say exactly where it is taking place? We are apt to read the blue as sky and the green as landscape, but what about the form that occupies much of the painting, or

the black stain? The temptation for a critic is to explain everything or, if that cannot be done, simplify everything. Sora pushes back against that reductive approach. Her rebellion is two-fold. By refusing to conform to the proscriptions and assumptions regarding the purpose of art, particularly abstraction, she equates her work with artistic freedom. And in doing so, Sora reminds us that the world and art require our constant and loving attention, and that nothing about them is simple.

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), ed. by C. K. Ogden, first English translation.

Illustrations

1. *Verdict*, 2019-22
oil on canvas with mixed media
85 x 60 in (215.9 x 152.4 cm)
2. *Fecundity*, 2024
mixed media, acrylic, and oil on canvas
60 x 72 in (152.4 x 182.9 cm)
3. *Biomimicry II*, 2024
oil on canvas with mixed media
84 x 60 in (213.4 x 152.4 cm)
4. *Biomimicry I*, 2024
oil on canvas with mixed media
72 x 65 in (182.9 x 165.1 cm)
5. *Dragoman III*, 2024
oil on canvas with mixed media
30 x 30 in (76.2 x 76.2 cm)
6. *The Sky from Below*, 2024-25
mixed media and oil on canvas
75 x 90 in (190.5 x 228.6 cm)