

Article Info:

Received Date: 07 June 2021

Accepted Date: 30 June 2021

Published Date: 30 June 2021

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Florescencism by Lida Sherfatmand in The Context of Floral Art History

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To cite this article (APA): Hajianfard, R. (2021). Florescencism by Lida Sherfatmand in The Context of Floral Art History. *KUPAS SENI: Jurnal Seni Dan Pendidikan Seni*, 9(1), 104-114. <https://doi.org/10.37134/kupasseni.vol9.1.10.2021>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.37134/kupasseni.vol9.1.10.2021>

ABSTRACT

Florescencism is a new 'ism' in contemporary art presented by Iranian-Maltese painter Lida Sherafatmand. Sherfatmand started her career with refined, simple to understand, and distinct concepts relating to global peace and human rights. Florescencism relates to blooms and flowers – to state the literal meaning – since “florescence” is typically defined as the process of flowering. Using interdisciplinary approaches, prior research has suggested the relevance of psychological, sociological, historical, symbolic, political, and even botanical aspects related to this artistic trend. However, the issue is more significant when the analysis aims to understand “Flower” as the primary subject matter, rather than just an ornamental element of a painting.

Keywords: Florescencism, floral painting, Lida Sherafatmand, intercultural aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

Across all civilizations and cultures, flowers have most often played a vital and positive role in conveying peace, both individually and socially. The flower has traditionally been used to manifest reproduction and rebirth and has served as a significant manifestation of beauty. Lida Sherafatmand has developed a new way for an artist to link “Flower” to the concepts of peace and intercultural aesthetics. She displays those concepts on her canvases through the abundant use of flowers. This concept would have heightened relevance when we consider Florescencism standing in contrast to the mainstream art market wherein post-Duchamp impressions of decomposition, ugliness, and distress are more prevalent than Sherafatmand's suggested serenity and hope. In art history, the flower has served mainly as an ornamental element or salient object defined as the subject matter, typically in contrast to other environmental objects. The uniqueness of Florescencism is the meaningful application of blossoms and flowers all around the painting. The artist presents a new world entirely made up of flowers as the essential element of her art. Investigating a new technique to incorporate such a popular natural element as flowers, which artists have represented in various forms throughout the long history of art, justifies an in-depth and detailed look at Lida Sherafatmand and her work. Looking at the role of “flower” in art history by considering both its direct and implicit meanings, we may better find Florescencism's purpose and stance. This approach will help us see how Florescencism developed in Lida Sherafatmand's work and how she has positioned her painting style as the core of an intertwined network of art, psychology, and social science.

Looking at Florescencism

To gain a good understanding of Florescencism and how it has become a new "ism," we should investigate Sherfatmand's work from the beginning of her painting career through the present. As an interdisciplinary research study, we must examine these flowers both formally and conceptually. Doing this will show that, regardless of their typical features as "flowers," they might have connotative meanings as well. We can achieve this goal with direct observation of the works themselves and by calling attention to subsidiary features, such as the works' titles and, in some cases, poems attached to them. To characterize an artistic "ism," there would be a need for substantial attention to the artist's manner and how she has employed distinctive formal elements. Her approach to applying various techniques, such as meditation, praying, and dancing before and in between creating the paintings, gives another perspective to her works worthy of consideration. In line with these techniques, she believes that they will provide the chance to experience the depth of beauty and strength in life (Culley, Derek, 2021). Using poems to accompany certain of her works adds another formal and conceptual perspective to them. When applying a formalistic view, we should consider Florescencism in the context of the history of Floral Painting. Thus, we could consider traces of realism, symbolism, conceptualism, and surrealism. Of course, we could also achieve this by calling attention to visual elements like line, color, and composition. In terms of concept, the title, the possible poem attached to it, the inspiration for, and what is stated by Florescencism's recent emergence, we must examine it within the broader context of art history.

Painting Flowers Throughout History

From ancient times in various cultures, flowers have borne metaphorical and symbolic meanings. An excellent and widespread example of this is the lotus flower, with its prominence in ancient civilizations from Egypt to East Asia. During the Middle Ages in Europe, it was common to use flowers and blossoms as patterns to accompany the main subject of paintings. We can see this approach—called millefleur—clearly in background ornamentation using flowers. The golden age of Dutch flower painting in the 17th and 18th Centuries had a close tie with the emergence of scientific investigation in botany and horticulture. The development of an international flower trade with the Netherlands at the center also played a role. Sophisticated technical performance based on naturalism was important for Dutch flower painters as well as highly symbolic motivations. For Dutch painters, the choice of the flowers was not necessarily of a particular season and showed an imaginary setting consist of blooms and flowers of different seasons (Hollingsworth. 2016). Regarding their symbolism, the concept of vanity known as vanitas was also significant. For instance, Van Beyeren added an open watch to his painting to show the transient nature of beauty and life (Ibid). The use of flowers to convey specific messages was a trend in Persia and the Middle East ("Floriography: The language of flowers in the Victorian era," 2016). This trend prevailed in England during the Victorian Era, conveying various secrets or more explicit messages of different kinds based on multiple flower species and arrangements. This practice paved the way for flourishing floriography dictionaries to explain these vast meanings in the realm of the language of flowers. Still, the meanings were diverse and sometimes different for the same flower, based on mythical, medical, traditional, and even individual conventions and perceptions. The book *Le Langage des fleurs*, written in 1818 by Madame Charlotte de Latour, is considered the first book published in France explaining the symbolic language of seasonal flowers. Another more significant book by Miss Carruthers of Inverness is *Flower Lore – The Teachings of Flowers – Historical, Legendary, Poetical, & Symbolical* was written in 1879 and became popular in England and the U.S. In impressionist and post-impressionist paintings, the presence of flowers is considerable. This phenomenon could be found mainly in the open air in impressionist works while in intimate space by post-impressionists. The focus of these late 19th and early 20th-Century painters was the formal aspects of flowers such as color and light. Here it is worth mentioning the role of Georgia O'Keeffe in the 20th Century in creating sensuous and symbolic flowers that have been a matter of debate and investigation for many art historians.

Floral painting in Western history mostly (though not always) have taken the representation of individual flower symbolizing specific meaning. It contrasts with the Florescencist approach, where

flowers proliferate all over the canvas with almost equal significance. Indeed, from the Fifteenth to Sixteenth Centuries, many European artists developed strong tendencies to portray nature by painting flowers. One connotation of flower in Western painting is "mother nature" and abundance. In this vein, blossoms indicate these meanings more powerfully because of their high potential to produce flowers and fruits. *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* is the title of a painting created by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun in 1780. In this allegoric painting, Vigée Le Brun depicted abundance dressed in roses, reminiscent on the concept of abundance accentuated in Florescencism. Talking about "abundance," which is a formal and conceptual feature of Florescencism, it's worth mentioning some works done by Dorothea Litzinger using bright and vivid colors again reminiscent of Florescencism. One common approach has been "Floral Female Painting," where women are placed in contexts involving flowers, thus connoting a resemblance to them--in terms of both appearance and emotional "delicateness." In a given setting, this beauty could refer primarily to a passive role for women in society as a means of aesthetic pleasure. In most cases, flowers symbolize innocence and purity, but, in less common cases, the meaning is the opposite, and flowers refer to moral laxity. In fact, in both cases, we are dealing directly with sexual qualities. There is one crucial point here we should mention here: the close and direct relationship between female naming and flowers in cultures that dates to ancient times. It is a sign and testimony of a close relationship between the female gender and flowers in humans' conscious and unconscious memory.

If we compare Florescencism with Floral Female Painting, we will find that Lida's works are beyond the passive attribution, and even her works are beyond Still Life Painting. She has had the status and characteristics of the flowers bestowed on her, evoking the concept of sublimity. The stress on delicacy is also Lida's way of calling for a concrete place of respect for what is delicate and soft, including the fineness of women. As a woman's rights advocate, she believes there is no need for a woman to turn herself into a man to be respected as an equal (Георгиевска, 2021). Dramatizing flowers in still life painting has been a common trend in Western history. For instance, in flowers painted by Emily Maria Scott, yellow and red flowers highlight the scene and surrounding area. They create the proper context or stage to stand bold and show themselves to the viewer. These are elegant representations of flowers for the sake of sheer floral beauty without external connotation. Even so, a similar tendency could be seen in floral paintings by other artists, adding more drama to still lifes by showing a few broken and scattered petals. For instance, fading flowers painted by Murrey Smith or Wilton Lockwood are reminiscent of the passing of life. They contrast with fresh flowers that convey youthful attributes. A common technique of many of these artists when adding more drama to their flowers is using a kind of tenebrism or contrast of light and dark colors. Light flowers against dark backgrounds can be seen easily in works by George Cochran Lambdin.

Florescencism and Intercultural Aesthetics

If not *the* first, the flower is *one of* the first and most meaningful objects to experience, signifying an intercultural aesthetics concept. As an object of everyday aesthetics, a flower's meaning is ubiquitous--beyond time and place. It directly or indirectly transcends feelings and emotions. Whether in sadness or enjoyment, it helps make the environment beautiful and lends elegance and serenity to its surroundings, a concept understandable by almost all people regardless of their time and place of origin. Delineating flowers can be considered as a bridge between every day and art-centered aesthetics. Artists are concerned also about environmental issues and have tried to reflect related matters in their works of art; thus their artworks shape our perception about these global issues (Ming, 2021). Depicting flowers can also have a connotation to environmental problems which itself is a global issue -common among all cultures. Sherfatmand's flowers, with their universally understood language of beauty produced by gentle brushstrokes, can find their way into every culture and in any situation. Flowers communicate directly with audiences from everywhere and every period. The artist's approach is stressed by what she calls "mixed civilizations" when speaking of artists trying to break boundaries. Whether these boundaries come from race, nation, home continent, or other attributes, the goal is to talk with whole human beings, beyond what traditional art institutions like museums and their exhibitions do when they draw divisions such as Asian art, African art, European art, and so on (Sherfatmand, L.2018 a). The universal language of Florescencism holds considerable power to unify and build understanding beyond

the barriers of "we" vs. "others." It is a direct and straightforward means of accessing an artistic form that unites beauty with intercultural dialogue to remove "otherness" from the larger picture. Florescencism is an intercultural tool for making a heart-to-heart connection (Hajianfard, Ramin, 2021). On her Humanitarian Art Manifesto (Sherafatmand, L, 2020), Sherafatmand asserts the oneness of the human family on a global level in general and transnational awakening amongst artists in specific, which are both direct indications of an intercultural aesthetic approach presented by the universal language of art. Adib-Moghaddam sees her work as speaking "a universalistic language of hope, seldom spoken in the heavy and unimaginative world of politics" (Adib-Moghaddam, Arshin, 2021, p. 215). Investigating about floral painting, Suyeong proposed that due to globalization in our age, the boundaries between Asian and European traditions have considerably been vanished and they are more connected than before (Joung, Suyeong, 2020). It is worth mentioning that the use of flower as a universal symbol to convey the message of peace can be seen in many works and activities. For instance, as a peace educator, Maria Montessori used principle of lotus flower with four petals representing self-awareness, community awareness, cultural awareness, and environmental awareness (Kotob Mazen & Antippa, Venice, 2020)

Florescencism Deciphered

Lida Sherafatmand first proposed the term Florescencism in 2016, and then in 2020, several other painters adopted and developed it further, creating a broader conceptual frame for facing today's crises. These artists are Milko Nestoroski, a painter based in Struga, Macedonia; Natalia Yuryeva, Paola Dias Silva, and Stanislava Malahovskaya, the latter three St. Petersburg, Russia. Their manifesto asserts the critical need for more balance globally, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic (Sherafatmand, L, 2020). These artists also emphasize how neuroaesthetics, energy psychology, and energy medicine, as new fields of science and knowledge for the development of human civilization, are reflected in Florescencism. (Ibid). Based on a natural context, they emphasize the connection between hearts: the artist's heart and that of the audience (Ibid). This concept of heart-to-heart connection is reminiscent of an Iranian proverb itself derived from one of Sa'adi's *ghazals* (Gazal 345), suggesting that what rises from deep in one's heart will find into the depths of another person's heart. These artists assert the influence of expressionism, surrealism, symbolism, Art Nouveau, and the Pre-Raphaelites in expressive brush strokes, the subconscious and imagination, archaic symbols, the collective psyche, nature and beauty, applied arts, and romantic beauty (Ibid).

In their manifesto, the Florescencists suggest the following principles:

1. **Repetition:** This suggests the concept of abundance and natural rhythm reflected in repeated buds and flowers.
2. **Overall organic forms:** Here, there is talk about internal/external beauty as well as symbolical and metaphorical similarities.
3. **Use of elements in harmony with nature:** This brings to mind a clean, productive, and non-harmful use of tools and elements in line with the harmony of nature and the need to protect it.
4. **Refreshing palette:** It evokes lightness and darkness in the context of a process and emphasizes the concept of renewal. That is why, whenever we face darkness, we move toward a lightness at the end. This, in turn, brings hope.
5. **Knowledge inspired:** As artists inhale inspiration from in-depth knowledge offered by literature, they are trying to fill the gap between technology and wisdom.
6. **Point of infinity:** Here, they stress non-physical space such as mental and emotional spaces which draw the eye toward infinity.
7. **Dancing brushstrokes:** They again "talk about" emotion, rhythm, and grace through the curvy and dancing movement of their brush strokes.
8. **Directionality and movement:** Although something might seem to no longer flow, it still has moving energy inside. Thus, the flows of buds appear to breathe in the whole painting, their breaths leading in a bright direction and passing that promising movement on to the audience.

Lida Sherafatmand is a painter, poet, and scholar. She is also active in the field of peace and intercultural dialogue. She has given speeches in different universities and institutions. Two of her works appear on the cover of two books published by Cambridge University Press, written by eminent international scholars, and stamps in China and Lichtenstein printed in 2019 and 2020 bear paintings of her. Besides, several printed versions of Lida's works are on display at Churchill Hospital in Oxford. With their positive vibes, the hospital administration hopes they give extra strength and support as well as reduce anxiety for patients waiting to undergo treatment ("Artwork donated to Oxford ward for patients undergoing cancer clinical trials," n.d.). Recently, one of Lida's works titled 'Emotional Calm' adorned the cover of "Art and Museum" magazine, spring issue 2021. A video of her works has been released recently in Macedonia – TVM2- showing her works and interview with her (Mirëmëngjesi. 2021). Sherafatmand also uses Flower Essence Remedies originally developed by the British doctor Edward Bach (1886-1936). She chooses each flower according to its healing quality and matches that quality with the meaning of the painting she is creating.

Formal Characteristics

In terms of the number and size of the flowers, Florescencism can be divided into two types. In the first, there is no central or focal "big" flower (Fig. 2), but almost all canvases are full of tiny buds (Fig. 3) like a textile full of patterns, which this latter can remind us of Persian carpets. In this type, we can mostly see a general compositional platform on which the pattern or rows are placed intentionally toward a symbolic or logical direction which sometimes shapes an outer shape made up of these smaller patterns. The second type shows a focal and central flower surrounded by smaller buds as its context. For Sherafatmand and her florescencist works, flowers are not separate objects taken out of context. They are part of the context and, in fact, both the object of focus and its construction form the whole work. This design is reminiscent of the "Unity of Existence" or "Oneness of Being" concept proposed in Sufi metaphysics. Viewing Sherafatmand's work and that of others, we can compare Florescencism with the pointillism practiced by neo-impressionist painters. While for neo-impressionists, the primary visual element was the dots. For a Florescencist painter, it is a small flower. Thus, for a Florescencist, the fundamental formal component of the work conveys a conceptual meaning that references the style as well. It is worthwhile to mention that a similar approach existed in some old Persian miniature paintings from Safavid and Qajar period called '*pardaz*'. Looking at Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers and making a comparison with those of Sherafatmand, we may find a close similarity in their respective color palettes. Compositionally speaking, O'Keeffe makes a flower big enough to occupy the whole scene. However, a similar flower in the hand of Sherafatmand becomes all but negligible as the main background. In some cases, Sherafatmand's flowers form a textile pattern or, in some, in ways more similar to O'Keeffe's, such as when they surround another more prominent flower that still comprises hundreds or thousands of smaller flowers.

CONCEPTUAL CHARACTERISTICS

These refreshing palettes and dancing brush strokes are somehow reminiscent of the rococo's vivid colors and curved lines, trying to invite joy if we look deeply and closely at the concept. The meaning of works done by Florescencists we will find that the so-called similarity if we accept it, would only exist in form. Unlike rococo, which in many cases tries to hide the dark side of social life with artificial elegance and pleasure, Florescencism tries to emphasize those social struggles by drawing a heartwarming perspective out of mental and social ambiguity. As Florescencism adherents mention in their manifesto, they are inspired by a symbolic attempt to make everything better influenced hearkens back to ancient alchemists and their attempts to change iron to gold (Sherafatmand, L, 2020). She says, "Feeding the ugly realities by more ugly art is not the only way forward. It has been a century since conceptual art has done that. Seeing that the ugly realities have not decreased, then we might as well move in some new directions." (Sherafatmand, L, 2018 b). Sherafatmand tries to reflect a beautiful world in her work, unlike the dominant mainstream artistic trend of portraying ugliness that has lasted nearly a century (Sherafatmand, L, 2018 a). In response to certain famous works of art produced in the 20th and 21st centuries, Sherafatmand has created works inspired by them, only according to a

Florescencist agenda. These series are responses to those works or, perhaps, a kind of criticism. For instance, one of her works is titled *Love Grow out of Bin* (Fig. 1). Here along with an imperative mode of the verb "to grow," she talks vividly in a positive mood to change something previously used in a dark and gloomy context into a brilliant and productive one. She tells us that these works are also a criticism of the mainstream art world, which encourages the shocking and offers alternatives emphasizing that the socio-political arena has always been the same. A new cheerful and bright landscape is badly needed in the realm of art. So, when she says: "Love Grow out of Bin," this is a connotation of the ancient symbolic concept of rising out of darkness, compared to a lotus flowering from mud.



Figure 1: *Lida Sherfatmand (2018), Love Grow out of Bin, 100 × 80 cm*

The classic text-and-image combination finds its way in some of Sherfatmand's works, where poems she has composed directly interrelate with her painting. This approach has been seen throughout art history in specific periods and among particular works by artists of different eras and places. As a common trend, we can see this approach in some Chinese paintings. The use of poetry beside a flower painting dates to the 12th century AD (Harrist, 1987). Many Chinese floral paintings carry high moral aspirations along with their mundane connotations, with or without accompanying poems. For our time, Sherfatmand's universal aspiration is highly reminiscent of such an approach. To investigate her works precisely in terms of both form and concept, we will study several of them that clearly show the style characteristics.

Coupled Ascension, A Caliber of Love

The painting (Fig. 2) is called "Coupled Ascension, A Caliber of Love." Among those works consisting of many small flowers, like works typically created in Florescencist style, the primary focus is still a larger flower. Here the two parts of the flower could be translated as two persons as a couple helping each other rise. It could translate as "yin and yang" pairs, but the work's title guides us to consider sexual coupling. In the touching surface of these two complementary parts, a bright light recalls a thunderstorm showing both the brightness of hope, already seen in many Florescencists' works and an indication of prosperity produced by the thunder to nourish the green context by providing rain.



Figure 2: *Lida Sherafatmand (2018), Coupled Ascension, A Caliber of Love, oil on canvas, 160 × 120 cm*

AFFINITY

This piece is among those with no single big flower yet filled with buds in a well-designed and symbolic composition. In the center, the vanishing point seems to open towards a light source. Curving rows of buds form a spiraling vortex as if an end to the light at the end of a long tunnel. The title of this work can help us speculate the meaning behind that better. Affinity in the form of collaboration among members of a society involved in the chaos of time and place trying to reach a bright and liberating end. These flowers are the main ingredient of a work that indicates an outer (transcendent) concept, not a work of art enlisting visual elements to represent flowers.



Figure 3: *Lida Sherafatmand. (2018), Affinity, oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm*

FLORINAL IMMORTALIS

Before examining the poem and the work itself, what catches our attention is the work's title, *Florinal Immortalis*. The first part of this title (Florinal) has two parts: "flor" and "inal." The first might be an indication of "flower" and "floral," directly suggesting Florescencism. The second part derives from "urinal" and directly indicates the ready-made urinal called Fountain by Marcell Duchamp. Here it is worth mentioning Lida's aim in this comparison which does not, in fact, oppose the Duchampian trend within its time context. Instead, it is a new and fresh vision based on a more benign sense according to the need of the time based on her view (Horses, 2018). In *Florinal Immortalis* (Fig. 4), a fountain inspired by Duchamp's work is placed in a Florescentist context. Thus, the sharp and biting meaning of such an object is completely changed here. The accompanying poem more stresses this optimistic view. In the poem, the artist elevates the status of this object, referring to its origin in the body of nature and accentuating its pivotal function for life, so puts it in a high level of respect in concept and placing it among fresh and green leaves. A viewer could see this work from another perspective: the sexual and reproductive angles of its form. The fountain has a foliaceous context-- the shape of a vagina (although it follows the general shape of the fountain), a male tool bearing flowing water. In this regard, the need for urination as a life necessity compares with the male orgasm as necessary for conception and starting life. Although this might be a male interpretation of Sherfatmand's works, she rejects its validation and connotation like O'Keeffe. The accompanying poem of this painting is as follows:

*“Our bodies from this earth,
Going back to this earth,
This fountain, this waterfall,
From nature's body,
A call for our cleansing,
A call for our renewal,
A call for our respect
For the flower of life.”*

Sherfatmand, L (2018, April 9). *Florinal Immortalis*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/feral-horses/duchamps-fountain-versus-a-florinal-2e95e575d073>

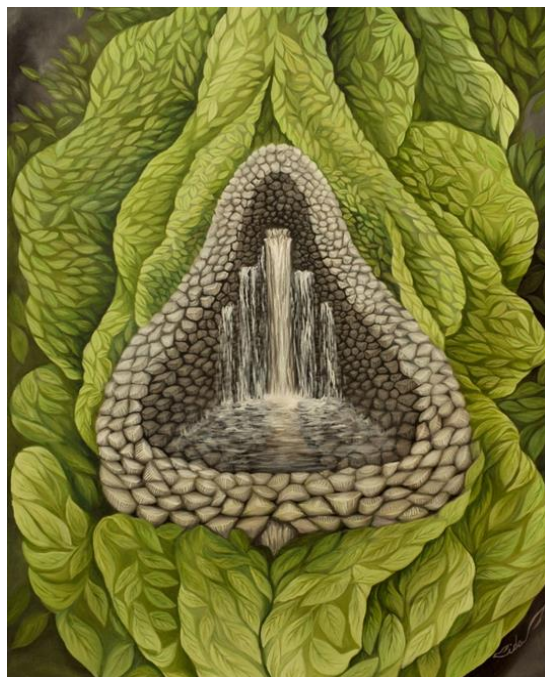


Figure 4: Lida Sherfatmand. (2018), *Florinal*, oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm

WHEN MIRACLES HAPPEN

In Fig. 5 (*When Miracles Happen*), we see something like a hole, window, or door opened toward a light. It seems that you are seated inside a cave, but interestingly, a door towards hope opens, and you are invited to join the light outside. This connotation of the concept of "door" is well indicated by Sherafatmand in this painting's accompanying poem when she says, "When you open the door to love, it's when miracles happen." Again, all parts of the painting, even the background, are full of tiny buds and lily of the valley leaves that in flower essence remedies brings out the sweetness in one's being. What is here to draw viewers' attention is the shape of the hole. It can be seen and interpreted from two different points of view. In one way, it looks like a vagina, which suggests rebirth and reproduction. In another way, it seems like the famous Persian pattern of paisley. The twisting and diagonal instability inside the cave (where we are seated) is a formal feature of this painting that contrasts with the calmness and serenity of the horizontal forms outside waiting for us.

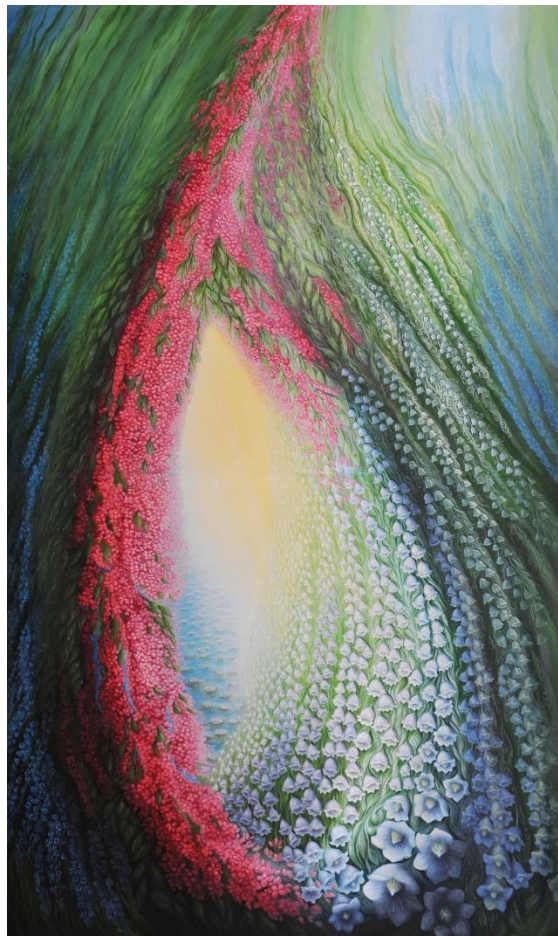


Figure 4: Lida Sherafatmand. (2014), *When Miracles Happen*, oil on canvas, 244×155 cm

CONCLUSION

Lida Sherafatmand's flowers do not stand out as beautiful objects on a stage for the sake of audience pleasure; they intertwine with their contexts which, in turn, are made up of smaller buds and flowers. This unified and intertwined world speaks of abundant resources, which naturally denies personal or national greed and invites sharing and generosity instead. It leads to people living more peacefully among others. Some scholars mention the artist's affinity with the ancient Iranian poet, Sa'adi, and his two magnificent literary works, *The Boostan* and *The Golestan*. In this context, Arshin Adib Moghaddam says: "To my mind, Lida sits in the same garden as Sa'adi; astounded by the same beautiful

symphony of flowers" (Adib-Moghaddam, Arshin, 2021, p. 216). A close look at her universal way of being an artist and how this approach shows traditional Iranian conventions. Could Florescencism be a better fit to investigate, realize, and regard in the context of post-national art or consider within a broader range of intercultural aesthetics? This exciting artist's work could be a natural fit for artistic activities related to the concept of peace. Sherafatmand has been considered an active participant from the start of her painting career—even before becoming involved with Florescencism. In her "Humanitarian Art Manifesto" (Humanitarian art manifesto," 2004-2011), she speaks audibly about peace and justice, raising the role and status of artists in promoting and developing the art of flowers, as opposed to war and injustice.

Of course, an intercultural aesthetic combined with a post-nationalist approach is attentive to native, local, racial, religious, gender, social, and other factors. These factors could be present in a work, even if the main message suggests a universal element beyond those limitations. We can compare this with differences in the appearances of two people from different parts of the world. Although they differ and come from distinct cultures, they could lean more toward the universal in their thinking than other members of their home cultures. Certain social groups representing different societies could show profound empathy as well as aesthetic judgment (Braembussche et al., 2008). With its universalistic language, Florescencism tries to touch audiences and inspire them to recall nature's beauty, harmony, love, and hope. It sends a message to join a grand journey toward a peaceful and better world.

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