

Vian Sora: Her Presence Through Mythology, History, Conflict and Beauty

Ricki Morse



Vian Sora's life as a refugee and survivor is reflected in the colors and vibrancy of her abstract paintings, allowing us to experience

not only the anguish of loss but also the presence of history and mythology, from darkest black to flaming reds and yellows.

Born in Bagdad in 1976 to a Kurdish family, Vian was reared on stories of her ancestors' migrations through the Middle East since they were driven from their homeland of Kurdistan in eastern Turkey. When she was three, Saddam Hussein came into power, initiating years of dictatorship and human rights violations. In 2003 the United States invaded Iraq and on the night before the bombing began she fled Bagdad with her family to a distant village, thirty of them huddled in one room as B-52s flew overhead on their way to bomb the capital.



Vian Sora, "Biosphere II," 2022, mixed media on canvas. The writhing foliage reaching for life, captures Vian's concern for our natural environment and her belief in the power and joy of growth.

Sora's family were prominent gallery owners and art auctioneers, representing major modernists, many of whom she met as her interest in art grew. Describing herself a self-trained artist, she never took an art class, developing her skills as natural expressions of life as it happened and the evolution of her mythic history.

Vian's uncle, a health minister in Bagdad, had been kidnapped and later killed, the family home ravaged. Determined to bring her parents with her but unable to obtain visas, they moved to Dubai and Vian applied through the United Arab Emirates for humanitarian help, finally getting visas for her and her American husband. Exhausted by the ordeal, they settled in his hometown of Louisville, ultimately gaining visas for her parents, and settled in Kentucky in 2009 where she earned her MA in computer science at Bellarmine University while settling her parents in their new world.

Vian's paintings are re-experiencings of her personal history, enriched by a deep understanding of history and the mythologies it creates, begin-



Top image: Vian Sora at her 2022 exhibition in L.A. at the Luis de Jesus Gallery. Of her artwork she says, 'It was my way to resist'.



Dilman harbor buildings, World Heritage Site. Now a part of Bahrain, from 1250 B.C. Dilman was a major link in Persian Gulf trading.

ning in the cradle of civilization, Mesopotamia. The ancient city of Dilman on an island in the Persian Gulf was a trading crossroads in the Middle East, using the first script, the Sumerians' *cuneiform* language. Dilman, 2600 BC, flourished as a source of fresh spring water in a salty sea and was thought of as having once been the



Vian Sora, *Dilman*, 2022, oil and mixed media on canvas, SBMA.

Garden of Eden. Her 2022 painting of the city's ruins captures the rising green face of the island or a temple, the shore, sun, moon, sea rising out of a dark past, described in cuneiform script on the blue plaque below, giving Dilman life today. A quiet serenity pervades the surface, reflecting its ancient history and endurance through the ages.

The artist's process begins with the canvas spread on the studio floor. She first applies spray paint, acrylic, or pigments to her canvas or paper and then uses materials including Velcro and glass to strip away. She considers this process to be a metaphor for the residues of destroyed cities or woodlands. "I employ these atmospheric type surfaces and layer them with lattices whose optical ambiguities create illusions of light and movement, time and space. My intention is to suggest the turmoil that can disturb the thin surface of social order, and its effect of the human soul."



Vian Sora, *Forest Remains I*, 2022, oil and mixed media on canvas, SBMA

Vian finds a deep resonance between the destruction of war and the decay of our natural habitat through ecological destruction. Our painting, *Forest Remains I*, 2022, employs Vian's blending of abstract and figurative shapes, overlaying shapes as if seen through a forest, the gold of survival pushing upward into a bird's crown of feathers. The movement is grounded in the tunneling movement of a primitive lizard into the depths and observed by a skirted mythic goddess figure emblazoned with a scarlet scarf. The opposing forces competing, dark decay burrowing down and golden plumage rising. The overall movement is upward, rising, expressing Vian's joy in beauty and commitment to survival, her own and that of the universe.



Cuneiform receipt for traded goods, carved in stone, earliest written language originating around 3400 BC in Sumeria.

We look forward to our Vian Sora solo exhibition in March 2025,

developed by James Glisson, our contemporary art curator, with the collaboration of the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, and the Asia Society in Houston, Texas, where the exhibition will travel after opening here. ■

Vian Sora Bibliography

Annabel Keenan, "Vian Sora's Vibrant Paintings Shine In the Darkest of Times," **Cultbytes**, November 2022.

Rawaa Talass, "Iraqi-American painter Vian Sora's work finds the beauty in decay," **Arab News**, January 27, 2023.

Veronica Esposito, "it Was My Way to Resist, The Iraqi Born Artist Who Grew Up Under a Dictator," **The Guardian**, October 23, 2023.

Katie White, "Iraqi-American Artist Vian Sora Evokes the Splendor of Eden and Ancient Assyria in her Paintings," **artnet**, November 2023.

Amanda Randone, "Debut in New York," **Vogue Arabia**, December 13, 2023.

Gallery Browsing with Ricki



Freya Douglas-Morris (b.1980)
London, *Evening Sun*, 2021.
Imaginary landscapes.

(La Muse continues on the next page)