

The Canvas Speaks in Silence

Seta Manoukian, a Buddhist nun, a practitioner of meditation, and a fearless artist, who is unafraid to express her inner spirituality on canvas, infuses happiness and positive energy around her, with her infectious laughter.

Text Nare Garibyan | Photo Armen Poghosyan



Seta Manoukian was 12 years old, in Beirut, Lebanon, when she found a copy of the Reader's Digest where she read an article about the Dalai Lama and the Potala Palace in Tibet. A seed was unconsciously planted that day, a seed that would grow to be a life of meditation. The seedling began to blossom a few years later when Seta discovered an internal power within herself, "I could witness my outwardly movements from within. I could witness my laughter from within. I could witness my voice from within. I went inside myself." One year, when Seta was just shy of 18, her parents without hesitation sent their eldest daughter to Italy where she studied art for four years. On her return to Lebanon, she began to ponder, "How can I paint without going to the internal depths?" She wanted to find her internal self before she dared to paint. At the time, she did not know what meditation entailed; she began her path of spirituality based on intuition. She started by sitting in front of a bare wall and staring at the wall until the wall lost concreteness and became space. She had reached a place of total silence. Seta had found her internal depth from which she could paint. She would sit in the sand and stare at the ocean waves along the horizon, repeating to herself "I want to go beyond life and death." In the waves she saw life's impermanence and suffering. Seta was witness to the suffering during the Lebanese Civil War and felt weighed down by the horrible reality of war. During these difficult times, she experienced three days where everywhere she saw light. After the three days, she felt like the weight had been lifted. "My personal war had ended for the time being, this was an external war." This allowed her to help others without heaviness and with great enthusiasm. Throughout the war, she voluntarily gave art lessons to the children to ease the pain and suffering they lived through. During the conflict, two books featuring the art these children created were published. In 1984, weary from war, Seta Manoukian journeyed to America, where she meet her meditation teacher



↑ Vertical Series, 2003
Acrylic on Paper, 24x18 inches

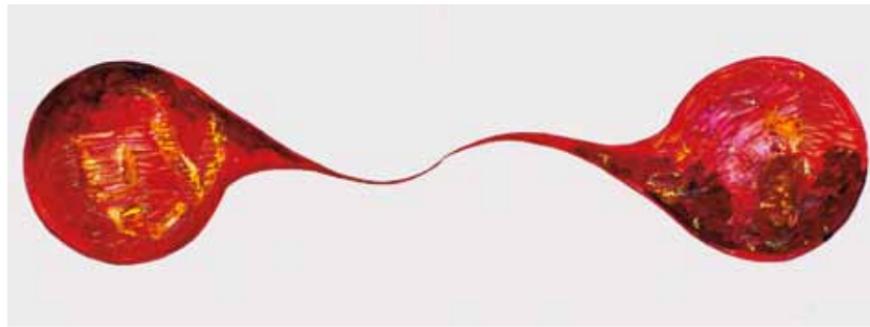
↓ Vertical Series, 2003
Acrylic on Paper, 24x18 inches



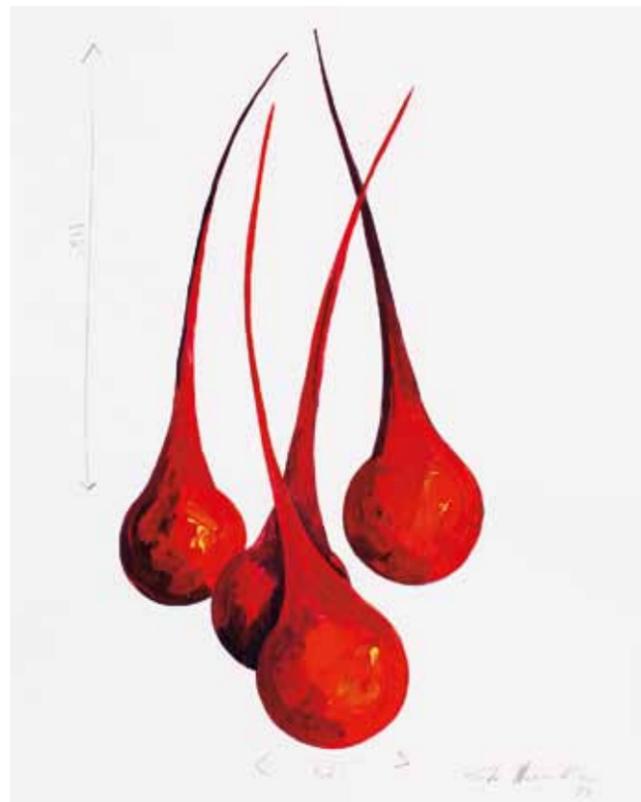


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Organic Shape, 1993
Acrylic on Paper, 18x14 inches

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Acrylic on Paper
18x14 inches



Bhante Nawala Lakkana, a Sri Lankan monk from the Theravada school of Buddhism. Simultaneously, Seta joined the Sherry Frumkin Gallery in Santa Monica, California, where she showcased her work for 10 years. Five years into her study of meditation, Seta had hit a threshold and could not progress to the next level. She had to “break away from her routine for three months, away from people and distractions.” Her teacher sent her to Sri Lanka to study with Bhante Pemasiri Hamdruo.

She arrived in Delgoda, Sri Lanka in October 2005 and studied in the retreat center until July 2006. Seta was ordained a Buddhist nun in three months, instead of the usual two years because she had prior experience with meditation. Her next step involved self-guided practice. She chose to go to Southern India and where she practiced Vipassana meditation. Returning to America, Seta’s spiritual journey continued with the study of Tibetan Buddhism under the guidance of Venerable Khempo Chodak Gyatso Nubpa Rimpoche from the Nyingma tradition. Seta Manoukian’s experience in mediation helped her come to the realization that “when your mind goes into the past, it is suffering, when the mind goes to the future, it is suffering. Only by witnessing the movement of the mind I have come to understand the impermanence, the suffering and the non-self of all phenomena.”

Ani Padma Tsult’hrim Drolma is Seta Manoukian, the Buddhist nun, adorned in a maroon robe, a short hair cut, and a calm countenance. The Buddhist maroon robe she wears originated as a request

from Buddha to find discarded fabrics in the carnal grounds, in order to attire the monks. The fabric that was found was white and soiled, therefore the monks dyed the fabric with bark, hence the maroon, yellow or ochre colors. She explains the meaning of her name, “Ani means nun, Padma means from the Lotus Family, Tsult’hrim means ethical conduct, and Drolma, which in Sanskrit is Tara, the female Buddha.” Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism consists

of four poisons: anger, jealousy, greed, and ignorance which are transformed and purified into compassion. A peacock comes to mind, which is one of the animal symbols in Buddhism that eats poisonous plants and transforms the poison into beautiful colors spreads along its feathers. Seta Manoukian spread this meditative transformation with her art, which encompasses four major series, the War Period, the T-Shape Period of the early 90’s, the Organic Series, and the

Buddhism

Buddhism began in India during the 6th century B.C. and spread to different countries. In Buddhism, there are two schools: Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada in Sanskrit means the “Teaching of the Elders.” Mahayana in Sanskrit means “Great Vehicle.” The main difference between the two schools is the connection between the self and enlightenment. The Theravada school states that when you arrive at the arahat level you become selfless, in order to find a personal level of peace in the mind and body. The Mahayana or Vajrayana School states that a Buddhist must take the ultimate vow, the Bodhisattva, liberating all sentient beings before liberating yourself.

Japan: Zen Buddhism is centered on the Mahayana School, focused on enlightenment by letting go of all attachments and reaching a state where suffering is non-existent. The influences of Zen Buddhism is expressed through Japanese calligraphy, poetry, and gardens.

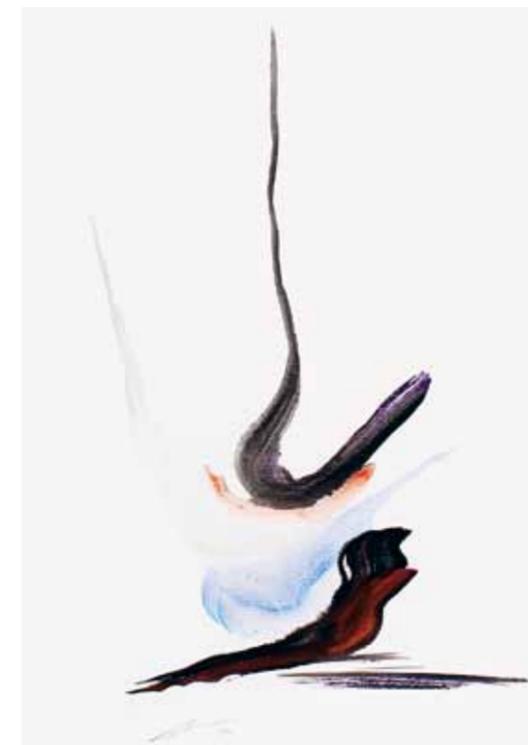
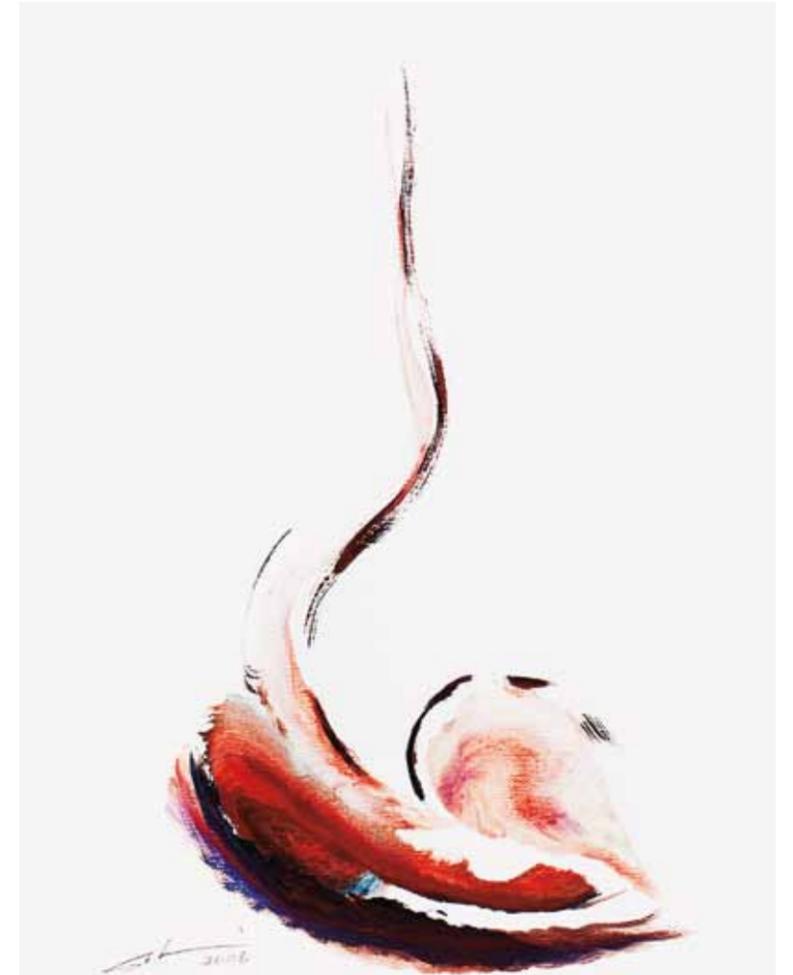
China: Buddhism centered on the Mahayana School. When the Han Dynasty fell, China was in turmoil as different groups fought for control of China. Therefore the people sought collective enlightenment in order to relieve some of the suffering.

Tibet: In Tibetan Buddhism, four different schools were created. Nyingma is the oldest based on the teachings of the Guru Rimpoche, “Beloved Master.” Nyingma encompasses all the schools. The Kagyu School is the sovereign holder of the teachings of Buddha. The Sakya School focuses on the philosophy of the teachings of the Buddha. The Dalai Lamas, the spiritual leaders of Tibet, are from the Gelug School which focuses on individual study of meditation in monasteries.

Southeast Asia (Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka): Based on the Theravada School, which is purely about internal meditation. The main aspect of Theravada Buddhism is that each person must take ownership for his or her liberation, which requires mindfulness and careful study.

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Vertical Series, 2003
Acrylic on Paper
24x18 inches

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Vertical Series, 2004
Acrylic on Paper
24x18 inches



most recent, Vertical Series. In the last 10 years of her art work, the lines and images on her canvas symbolized many of the vital bodily fluids, such as milk, blood, and water. From the heaviness of the world’s turmoil in the 70’s, horizontality came about on her canvas. This was then transformed to verticality when she “understood that taking action is not necessarily meant to be politically or socially involved.” In Buddhism, practicing compassion is taking action by acting altruistically to benefit others. The concept that “horizontality is passivity and verticality is action with a centralized core of energy,” explodes on the canvas, yet with a sense of calmness and equilibrium. The influence of verticality and movement is also seen in the T-Shape series, which features people in the shape of “T’s” who have “become a part of the circle, a mandala, in Sanskrit and seem to be floating in space. For Seta a “white canvas is silence, a white space where everything stems from and then returns back to that initial space.” ■