

Words in Painting and Painting in Words: Gilda Thebaud Mansour

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the poetry of Gilda Thebaud Mansour. Since she is a poet and painter, her words carry strokes of painting that makes her poetry vivid and colourful. *Glimpse* is a beautiful book written and illustrated by Gilda Thebaud Mansour. It portrays the world of innocence with several verbal and visual images of the child as much as of the world of adulthood. *Glimpse* offers much more than a poetry book or an album of pictures. Poetry mingled with painting makes it a different feel all together.

Key Words: Gilda Thebaud Mansour, Poetry, Painting

Its excellent contents apart, *Glimpse* by Gilda Thebaud Mansour has a rare quality of perfect production: its layouts, calligraphic offset printing on textured, high quality creamwove paper, spacing between words and lines and objects in illustrations in appropriate size give you a feeling of touching the most genuine, vibrant kind of poetry. A perceptive reader takes very little time in judging rightly – how much of thought and aesthetic insight must have gone into the making of this book.

Content wise, the reader confronts Gilda Thebaud Mansour, a Dominican artist of extraordinary accomplishments; in her role of a seeker and searcher, a humanist, a beloved, a wife, a mother, lover of her roots and a courageous woman defiantly setting aside taboos with her pen as well as brush. The tone of her twenty-one illustrated poems is determined by constant shifting from observation to introspection and from monologue to dialogue. Her process involves a variety of patterns of interrogatives and rhythmic drilling, now stressing her convictions and now lending a classical aura to her work.

Each poem in *Glimpse* is not just complementary to the illustration on the facing page, but contrasts with something in it or adds to the effects of Gilda Thebaud Mansour's visual medium. This is also conversely true of each illustration, which not only forms a part of the image, rhythm, idiom, mood and tonal quality of the poem, but also enhances its meaning. Each poem spills over the picture's image and creeps into its lines, shades and texture to gain in terms of an additional substance – be it an illuminating flash or depth or breadth lent to her pictorial composition.

Christ's portrait shows him in a pension agonized state – as an epitome of suffering: the poem speaks of him as “the essence of love,” “the incarnation of a classless raceless colorless/ ageless timeless boundless love.” He is contrasted in the poem with men down the centuries – each one giving him an air of its own: multiplicity of claims pressing on him in our own times include a diverse, amusing variety:

“Today the old wishes you traditional
the young wants you a superstar
the negro wants you black
the Chinese wants you a Chinaman”.

The poem beginning “I keep calling you/mine” faces the portrait of one of Gilda Thebaud Mansour's sons in his cherubic charm. One can see in him an image of the graceful artist mother, her love-brimming eyes and her questing soul elated at discovering a link between herself and her beloved offspring.

The poem about a “a wasp” and the accompanying illustration encompass much more than what is, by pen and brush, explicitly depicted. The poem has stemmed forth for the mother's observation of a child's experience of fear caused by a wasp getting into his lovely hair. The lower part of the picture most expressively shows the child's head, his fear squinted upward looking eyes, blownup nostrils and tautly structured facial contours – with the total exclusion of his lips (made to suggest a state of being dumb-stricken.)

Almost two-third of the illusion – the background in somber tint bespotted ingeniously – is intended to bring out the world of fear of complex and to give the child's image an eerie look. If this poem and accompanying illustration allude to the same child as the one depicted in earlier pages (“I keep calling you/mine” or “and rest in my rugged hands”) these pictures present a study in contrast, while the mother's role in these poems extends from that of the these poems extends from that of the “comforted” to the “comforter's”.

The last three poems in the book are accompanied by illustrations with nude/ partly nude female figures and at least two of them carry marked erotic overtones. “why don't you do some crazy things” is a warm-blooded hymn to life – an unabashed paean on the woman's body, mind and heart. The speaker in a neo-romantic mood at a certain moment, wishing fulfillment of a strong passionate urge, asks for some way-out things:

*Why don't you do some crazy things
like soaking my heart
into a batch of colours
and twisting guitar strings like rings
round my figures
why don't you wrap
my nude body
with spirals of blue smoke.....
why don't you to do some crazy things
like encrusting kisses
into my breasts
or pouring warm poems
over my cold shoulders*

The penultimate poem- "Men Often Wish" contrasts the passive male role in the previous poem with the perennial passionate delight man takes in staring all the bare-bodied woman. This is a puckish little poem poking fun at men as gazers at the topless. The pointed wings, tail and the beak of at the bird about to peek at the pointed breast of a topless in the accompanying illustration provide a good example of Gilda Thebaud Mansour's way of lending rhythm to her pictorial art. The bird's movement in the poem from top to roof top and then to topless is graphically aligned with the above-mentioned parts of the bird's body creating a cross-rhythm between the poem and the illustration. The rooftop and then down to the earth is only to stress his earthiness- his capacity to burn "the topless towers of Illium" for the sake of a Helen!

The last poem in *Glimpse* is about woman's role as a sufferer and that of the man a flier (deserter). The images of 'hollow heart', "begging hand" and "nakedness" are repeated twice to suggest two stands of the woman's being – before and after the man's lustful transaction in her life. She is left at the conclusion of the poem more pathetic than before – almost a tragic figure. The illustration shows her naked body- her head bowed in shame and her face covered by and between her arms. This naked figure is juxtaposed by an image of a palm much larger than the former – with four fingers in upward rising curves- in a grim visualization of her begging hand, her heart and her being.

and for peace sake
you wrapped me
with your arms
and then peacefully
you left
and I remained
naked and hollow
with my hand opened

The man's arms that wrapped her (in her poem) leave her (in the illustration) with her own arms hiding her face (-- another subtle example of cross-rhythm between the two media.

It is hard to leave out commenting upon a few more excellent illustrated poems in this book. But an appraisal of this kind cannot take in one and all. Three beautiful poems that deserve special mention begin with the following lines respectively:

*caribanman/you think of your race.
*who should be called/blacksister
*remove/birds and cats

The first two of these approaches their subjects most objectively and reveal the poet's social concern and awareness of history in very sensitive humane terms. The illustration of the caribman with slightly distorted nose, chin and lips shows in him the same cherubic feature that characterize most of the child images in the pictures. The poem on the caibman images in the pictures. The poem on the caribman pays a glowing tribute to this race, whose death "*will leave an indelible scar/ in the heart of man.*"

The woman in the illustration facing "who should be called/ blacksister" has such warmth and brilliance about her that she gives you an impression of an amazing fountain of life – against which the image of black (eight times repeated in the poem) starkly contrasts. The effect of drilling through interrogatives (where where... why why, why?) bring out the gravity of Gilda Thebaud Mansour's concern over the discrimination between black and white as the concluding part of the poem focuses the reader's attention upon the mystery of the life and death of the vivacious woman in the picture.

The poem beginning “remove/birds and cats”, a lyric of rare beauty with a flow of exuberant utterance, exchanges the concept of Tat Tvamasi- (THAT thou art) with that of Tadahmeva – (That only I am). Gilda Thebaud Mansour’s self-portrait (?) with a cat – though with a look of mystery – cannot convey all that the poem is intended to. The poem can serve as a self-introduction of everyman and everywoman.

Identification of the self with everything in nature, with all the elements of the universe, with the matter and the abstract concepts in the mind with the time and space has rarely assumed such lyrical intensity as in this poem. The picture has highly impressive – speaking – eyes contrasted with the static posture as well as the frozen moment depicted. The poem is extraordinary rich in its tonal content and visual quality both of which evoke an idea of swinging movements of a vivacious dance performance.

Glimpse is a book of the world of innocence (with several verbal and visual images of the child) as much as of the world of adulthood and mature thought (with recurrent motifs of quest and discovery of the self, of fellowmen and the world around). It is much more than a poetry book or an album of pictures. Much of the art of poetry, painting, music, sculpture and drama transforms from one another in the pages of *Glimpse*, which, alongwith the warm-hearted artist Gilda Thebaud Mansour, deserves attention of and applause from art lovers in the English-speaking world.

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