

# Images of Sari Khoury

By Jeffrey Ghannam

**S**ari Khoury, a Palestinian from Jerusalem, is an artist of mystic images. Indeed, his abstract works are an ethereal exaltation of emotion from his own life, both as an artist and as a Palestinian.

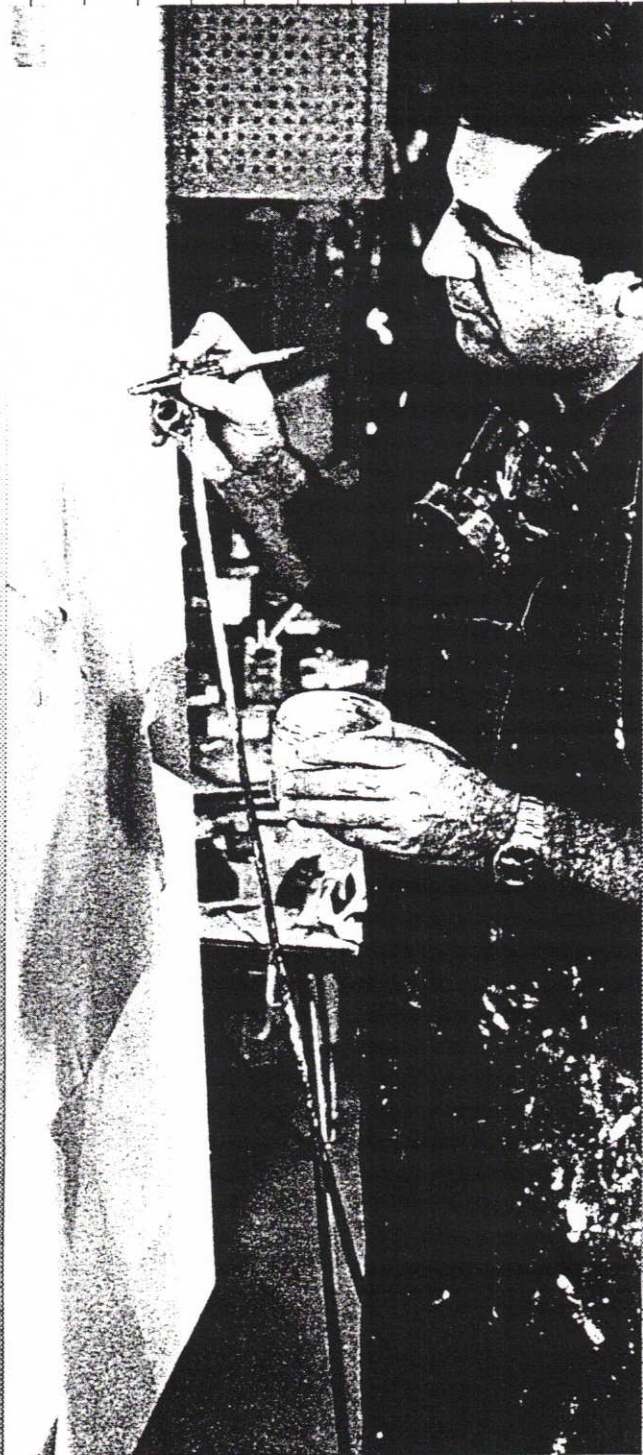
While growing up in the Holy City, Khoury was influenced by the myriad of religious art forms that surrounded him. He was also affected by the Palestinian tragedy, an experience reflected in his dark and thoughtful eyes, and in his character — quiet, pensive. The weight of the past is always present.

His paintings and drawings were exhibited recently at the Alif Gallery in Washington, D.C. Utilizing the air brush and other media, Khoury's collection of works includes oils, acrylics and charcoal drawings.

"I grew up in Jerusalem," Khoury says, "where icons and holy images constantly stared back at me from their ancient walls. Religious icons, with their spiritual and primitive appeal, retain a superb design quality of a timeless nature.

"While I make no conscious effort to revive ancient motifs, I remain interested in the magic of geometric shapes and pure color, rotating into orbital space or pulsating from within a static rectangle. If a shape bears a resemblance to a bird, it then becomes a possible allegorical statement about light, flight, freedom and captivity ... a mystical presence or some other wider meaning."

Khoury has been exhibiting in the United States since 1963. In 1982, his work was represented in a major exhibition at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum. Currently a professor of painting and drawing at Central Michigan University, where he has



been teaching since 1967, Khoury is the recipient of numerous art study grants. During sabbatical leave in 1974, he conducted extended research in Byzantine and Islamic art.

Khoury's art manages to delight the viewer with a symphony of images and colors. And there are graceful, sensual images that touch the depths of sublimated desires of freedom.

His work is visual poetry influenced by Byzantine, Islamic, pre-Renaissance and geometric art forms which offer Khoury a certain subjective sensibility to design without being tainted by formulas.

Discussing the exhibit in Washington, Khoury said: "The work shown at the Alif Gallery is a culmination of a series of projects completed within the past five years. The earlier paintings are done in acrylics using various spray techniques with the air brush. The more recent pieces are done in oils. Due to the change of media and technique, the recent works are relatively more expressive and somewhat personal, whereas the earlier pieces reflect greater control and precision.

"Most of the paintings are abstract, but often suggesting elements of the human figure, nature, biological forms, and sometimes interiors. Despite those allusions, I make no conscious effort to represent visual forms in a literal way. My work is primarily concerned with the interaction of shape, color, space, and contour combined into a cohesive whole.

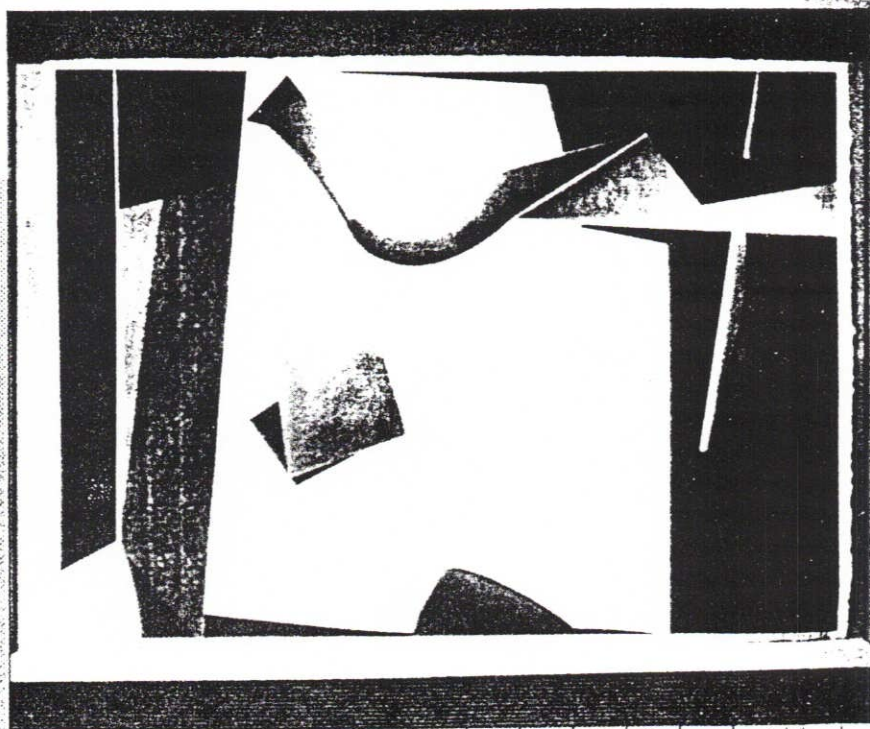
"Shapes are constantly subjected to the refinement of contour. Color is treated emotively, with light and pulsation being the constant energies. Space is a complex relationship of curved, as well as geometric, con-

figurations moving away or toward each other. At times they spiral upwards. Other times moving back and forth. Yet other times, suspended motionless in a vacant space. Depth is achieved with illusionistic gradations and through the overlapping of forms.

"Each work that I do must have some element of surprise in the imagery and in its design qualities. I create interest by introducing sudden color changes, by isolating shapes, or by adding a new point of emphasis. The unpredictable is always more interesting to me than

the predictable. Mystery and enigma without confusion is the key to good painting.

"I am conscious of what people see in my work. Symbols that occur are subjective and unintentional at first. If a person sees a bird or a figure, it is not intended as a specific symbol, but part of a larger allegorical statement about light, freedom, mystical presence, or about the spatial world we live in. In other words, symbols often emerge in spite of the artist and manifest themselves in a manner encompassing our life experiences.



"As an Arab artist I try to find something truly Arab—my art leans toward a highly abstract, non-representational exploration."

The mysticism in Khoury's art is influenced by the eastern understanding of human nature.

"For someone from the east, there's a wider concern about the depth of human nature," he said. "Western

soft and illusionistic. Their opacity, transparency and gradations contrast with hard, precisioned edges. "If you study forms of nature, it's a combination of the illusionistic and the concrete—I was trying to relate the two," he said.

The canvases—some covering walls, some smaller in size—appear calculated and planned, although

Ohio Wesleyan University in 1963 and went on to a master's degree in fine arts from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1965.

At his home in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, he may spend hours in his basement studio, clad in a paint-spotted apron, breathing life into a canvas from the spiritless hues of blue, red or green in vials everywhere.

Throughout the artist's home, shared with his wife Suheila and three children, the abstract canvases and drawings comprise a personal gallery.

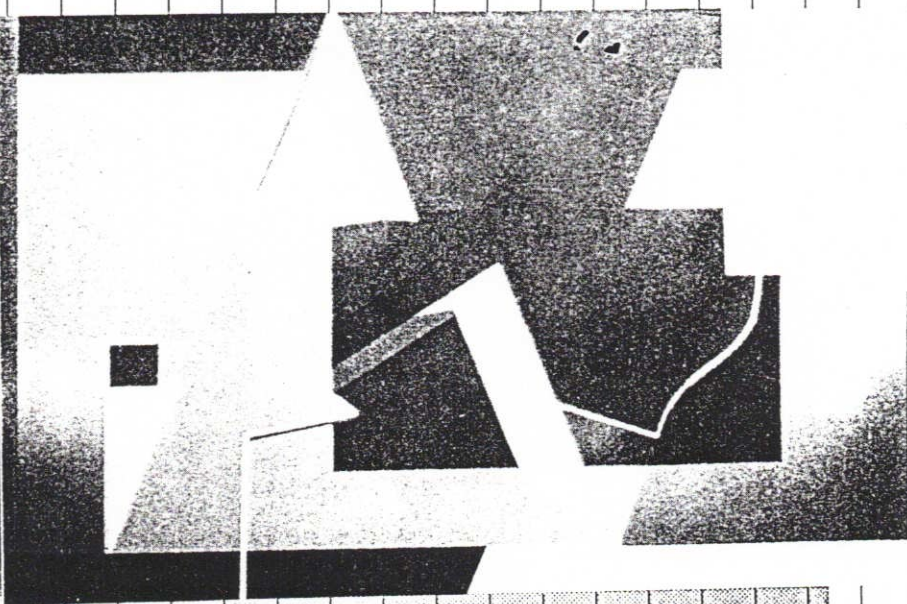
Khoury's works, many of them in a series, represent eras in the artist's life, style changes and constant refinement and growth. His styles have encompassed realism, impressionism, cubism and have gradually become abstract using forms of nature, specifically the human figure.

"My art is in a continuous process of evolution and I'm always trying to explore and create new forms," he said. "Any artist has to go through changes and I feel that's a primary obligation in my work that I continue to develop and update my style. I'm not totally preoccupied with the idea of being contemporary or current, but I feel the need to respond to the expectation of modern life.

"Anyone looking at my painting will not necessarily assume it is the work of an Arab artist, but it's there, I can see it."

"What concerns me is that as an artist I don't feel it's right to repeat the motifs of the past," Khoury said.

"As an artist away from my homeland, I try to assimilate the best of my two worlds. Being a part of a community of artists, I am more able to express myself in a universal lan-



artists seem to be preoccupied with physical reality."

His abstract canvases and drawings beg the spectator to look beyond the apparent. The shadows and the contours contain messages within themselves. "Even an abstract painting will hint or allude to an aspect of nature," Khoury said.

Khoury's air-brush canvases are

Khoury says the shapes and colors are spontaneous, revised and perhaps changed again, until the desired effect is created. "In spite of the hard-edged nature of the work, I still feel that spontaneity is very prevalent," he added.

After immigrating to the United States in 1959, Khoury received a bachelor of fine arts degree from

guage. The abstract style allows me to express myself universally and at the same time reinforce my cultural roots without imposing them upon others. Being in a state of cultural exile places me amongst many contradictions which I am always trying to resolve. As I observe and reflect upon the turn of events in my native land, I am affected by my distance

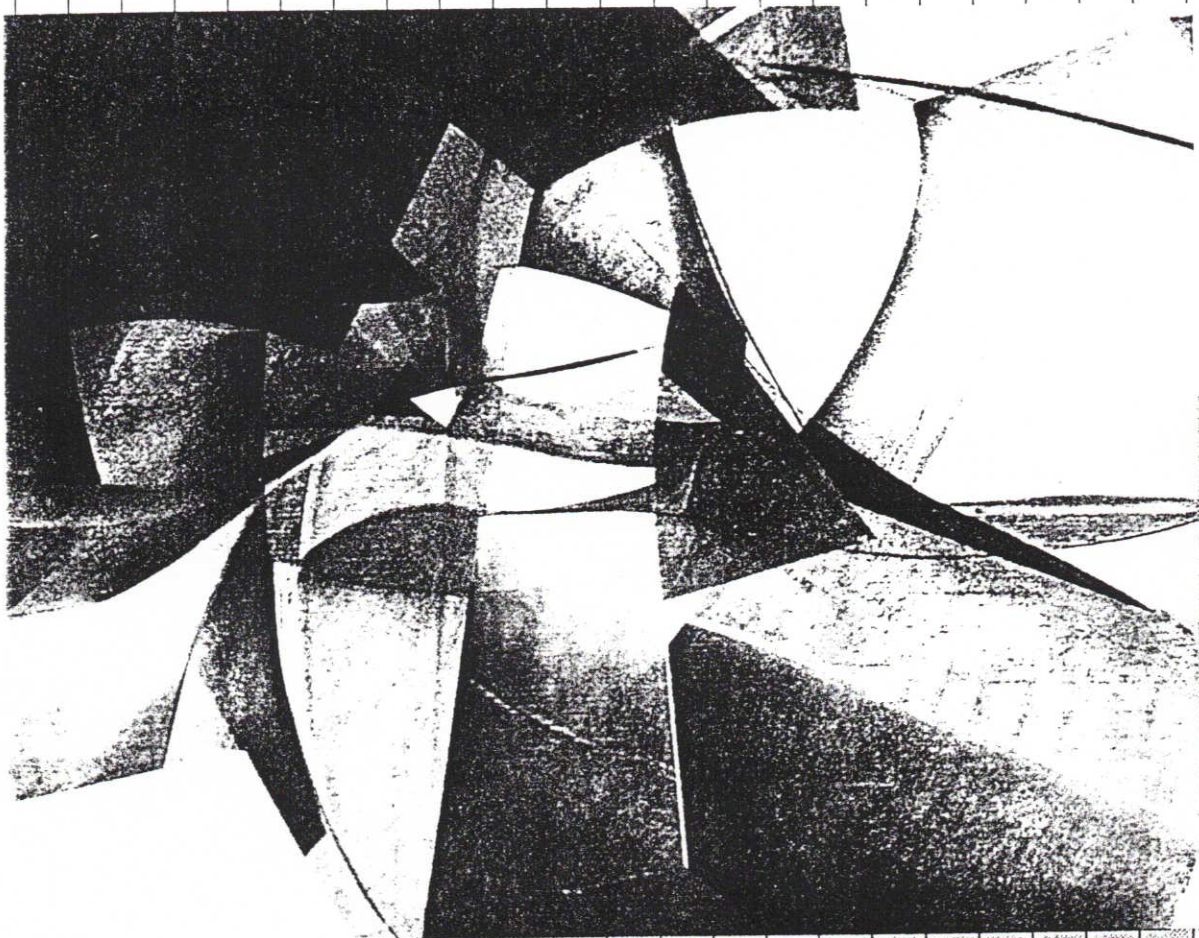
(captivity) which I translate into the creative act (freedom).

"In viewing my cultural heritage and the visual traditions of the Arab world, I attempt to explore the messages of the past with the constant elements within our culture."

His earlier mediums were traditional oil paints, brushes and charcoal. For the past eight years, he has

been using an air-brush as a fine arts tool rather than its use in commercial art, suggesting imagery to soften any mechanical appearance.

"I had to make quite an adjustment as I switched from painting with a bristle brush to painting with an air-brush," he said. "My ideas and images had to take on a new look with which I became quite



happy. I found myself capable of recreating all sorts of technical possibilities ranging from impressionism to illusionism to abstraction, while continuing with my preoccupation with color and structure," Khoury said.

Recurring themes in Khoury's art are the suspension of a shape in space, a red shape, or a blue shape

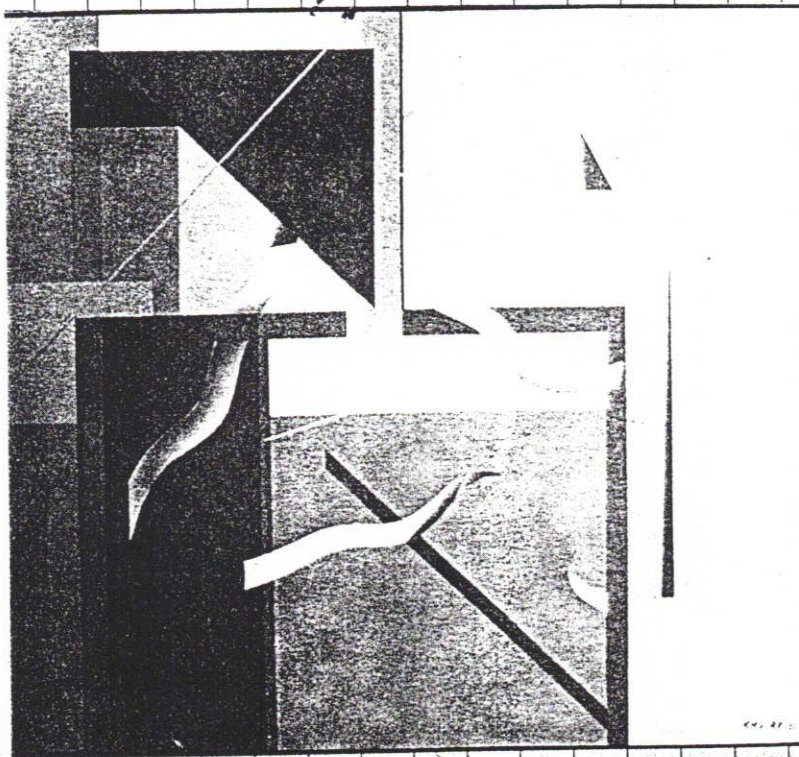
against a certain background, or the curve or character of a line derived from a theme in a series of earlier drawings.

The metaphors in Khoury's works have also changed.

"What started out as figures in space in my earlier work has developed into the themes of freedom and captivity, being inside a cell, see-

ing the world out there and not being able to reach it—maybe that's being Palestinian. I'm not going to talk about it but I am going to paint it. That's a part of my experience," he said.

"I consider myself a product of a period that produced a group of artists, writers and intellectuals with a question in mind, in reaction to



the 1948 tragedy, and you can't help but perpetuate that type of questioning in your own work. Your approach to art becomes very existential.

"When you are in a state of questioning, you no longer seek to find answers but you seek the affirmation of life, not to look for models or utopias but the affirmation of what you are," he said.

His rebellious and bitter approach to his painting as a young artist, evolved into a more positive approach—seeking a *raison d'être*, the creative act being the ultimate confirmation of oneself.

"As a Palestinian, I have learned to survive anywhere," Khoury noted. "As a Palestinian artist, you're always aware of your exile and, rather than deal with it negatively, you try to deal with it in the language of metaphor, something very beautiful."

Khoury's dream is to exhibit his work in a Palestinian museum—ideally in Jerusalem. For Palestinian artists to develop traditions, they need a museum where traditions can be displayed, he said. There are Palestinian traditions but only in fragments due to the Palestinian exile.

Individual artistic influences be-

long to French artist Paul Cezanne and Swiss-German artist Paul Klee, from whom Khoury acquired the formalist elements of art and the poetic which he has tried to converge into a certain harmony.

"The aspect that I relate to in Arab art is the rhythmical nature—there's a very strong rhythm that is derivative of the written script," he said. "Arab design and the written word are inseparable."

Khoury's art is also inseparable from words and emotion. His truth is formed by a sensitivity to life that yields life in images.

