

THE TEMPLE OF THE SOUL

The body is a sacred space, a "temple for the spirit." That is photographer Maimouna Guerresi's treatment of the human form. Her photographs, mostly embracing the myriad beauty of the female form, is vaguely disturbing and almost, well, religious, really, for lack of a better word. The figures are veiled and the enigma that surrounds what we cannot see only adds to the intrigue of what we actually can. As she says herself, the work is based on a style that recalls traditional Madonnas in classic art, from Piero della Francesca to Antonello da Messina. Guerresi is known for her larger-than-life sculptures and installations, as well as her photographs.

Deeply rooted in religion, Guerresi was born in Italy, in the Veneto region, into a pious Roman Catholic family. "My uncle was a missionary in Africa and one of my aunts was a nun," said Guerresi. "My parents often invited African clergy members to our home to watch films and look at photographs of their missions, it was a world that always fascinated me."

Guerresi's work draws from the classic art tradition of the veiled Madonna and is almost purely metaphysical in nature, rooting itself to the real world because the everyday dress of Muslim women is so reminiscent of this early form of the Madonna.

"At a certain point in my life, I began to feel an openness to a new spiritual understanding and that my spirit was ready for change," she said.

"Destiny led me to Islamic Africa." It was here that she joined the Muslim Murid community, taking on a new identity and even a new name — Maimouna, or as she says, "the name of my spiritual mother." This religious shift marked a milestone in her evolution as an artist, as her work began taking on the distinct hues of the gentle religion, Sufism.

Guerresi's reach into the depths of the divine comes through the female form, with the veil worn by her figures acting like 'a container.' It is, really, a pursuit of beauty that embraces in equal measure the vicissitudes of both the mundane and the metaphysical and serves as an expression of a fundamental belief — that all religions lead one to the same understanding.

Indian Spirits, her exhibition at Tasveer, is, in many ways, an extension of her work in west Africa, where the focus on religion becomes somewhat blurry, expressing the great hotchpotch of pontifical practices so peculiar to India. "Some figures could be Muslims or from any other religion," she explained. "I am attracted to cultural hybridisation, contamination and religious syncretism — the similarities between religions and not their differences."

Her work is an attempt, many philosophers have made before her. It is an endeavour to find the common thread of divine understanding that binds religion today — instead of drawing attention the differences that have long since been the covet of countless crusaders.



WHAT: *Indian Spirits*, a photography exhibition by Maimouna Guerresi

WHEN: January 5 to 25

WHERE: Tasveer, Sua house, 26/1 Kasturba Road

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