

Gillian Bartolo meets GOXWA who from a childhood in the steamy Strait Street of the sixties is now painting in Paris

Meeting Goxwa is an experience. Brimming with a mischievous vitality she manages with her long neck, willowy figure and saucer-shaped, laughing eyes to capture both the eternal Greek static beauty and the tough street-wise dynamism of modern women. She is a highly successful artist whose recent prestigious exhibition in a long line of successful exhibitions, sold out in New York.

Now happily settled in Paris for decades, Goxwa grew up in the steamy atmosphere of sixties Strait Street, its ancient peeling, decaying walls contrasting with the bustling vitality of thriving bars where jazz and brass bands blared, people danced, spilling into the narrow streets in inebriated abandon. Like a splash of paint, one memory stands out: a brawl in that historic street which ends in an explosion of red blood on the wall. Another memory has been revived for Goxwa by her father, who seeing her early works of ghost-like faces in black and white tells her that once, as a child, she disappeared in the basement of their bar and after swore she had seen ghosts with black and white faces. And mingled with all this the peaceful scene in a convent where Goxwa boarded for many years, of a nun half-hidden in her habit painting a beautiful Madonna, and a young Goxwa transfixed and then sitting with her painting and painting as if her life depended on it.

They are all there in her haunting paintings decades later: the ancient crumbling walls, the signature splash of red paint stamped on each



One of Goxwa's haunting paintings...
'Even the clothes must be deteriorating'

painting, the Madonna-like figures rising from the decaying walls, hovering, ephemeral, mysterious, in a tantalising play of past and present.

It was Goxwa's uncle Albert who encouraged Goxwa, aged 9 to go to art school, but the head-strong girl didn't last long there. "They wouldn't let me paint portraits." Fortunately, her interest in art was enough to persuade Goxwa's father to convert the room on the roof into an art studio. Meanwhile she had another passion: swimming, and encouraged by her father, was swimming regularly for the Valletta Club between 9 and 14, withstanding punishing hours of training with a self-discipline that would stand her in good stead in the difficult years that followed before she established herself as a painter.

Malta was too constricting for a rebellious Goxwa, and without sit-

ting a single O level she fled the island for London at 20. She found work as a clothes salesgirl and enrolled at the reputed St Martin's School of Art, where she specialized in clothes design. An auspicious meeting at an airport, and an instant and passionate attraction, with an American scientist Lyle, who was to become her first husband, brought a sudden change in her life. Soon Goxwa left for America and with Lyle's encouragement enrolled at Harvard to study Communication, theatre and film, specialising in acting and directing. But first she needed qualifications. She was 22 and for the first time she buckled down to studying. Meanwhile she began painting again seriously. She got her BA in theatre and a scholarship for Harvard to study directing which she loved. Should she forget about her painting? A professor saw her

painting and told her she should forget about directing and concentrate on her art. At first she tried to hold on to both, but a stint of two months in Virginia at a Residency for Artists decided her. "I discovered the wax medium and my painting changed. Suddenly light entered my pictures which had been sombre in Boston, and I introduced ochres and yellows", which she still uses today. Soon she decided she missed Europe and applied to the National Endowments for the Arts, winning a grant for a year, which she used to go to Paris. She set up a studio in the Cité des Arts close to the Marais, galleries and museums. One thing led to another and at the year's end she saw an advertisement for two art studios.

At the end of the six months, she was ready to start a professional career as a painter in Paris. She lived for a while in a cramped dark apartment, increasingly frustrated, till one day in a café she found an

advert for a studio that sounded right. It was a quarter where many artists had lived and when she reached the 103rd step of the staircase and caught a glimpse through the open door of the space and the flood of light through the sloping window, her eyes opened as wide as only an artist's eyes can do. "I will never forget those eyes," says Robert Wernick, the American writer who was then occupying the studios, and was coincidentally about to take off to write a major magazine article on the ancient monuments and modern vigour of Malta. "and I knew that she would eventually have to have that studio." In the course of time he moved to the studio next door, and she moved into the glorious space she occupies today, with all the roofs of Paris and the Eiffel Tower spread out at her feet."

Goxwa finds it difficult to talk about her paintings. An interesting phrase I picked from an earlier review of her paintings: "Walls are like masks" is met with flustered mumbles. But then Goxwa tells me she likes her paintings to create time past. So she paints old crumbling walls, and then though she uses a living model for her human figures, and real flowers, "I paint the figure, the flower and then destroy it, then I bring it back and destroy it again, till only a suggestion is left of it – even the clothes must be deteriorating." She is influenced by Russian icons, the frescoes in Pompei and the Egyptian F.

"I am not interested in the expression of a face, but more in the timeless human condition and the rapport between artist and model. I like my pictures to be recognizable but not realistic."

Still recently a new development has started emerging in Goxwa's art. "The first ten years I spent

exploring my own imagination, which if carried to an extreme can lead only to suicide. In the last eight years I have started observing reality more. I enjoy being with people more, so now my model emerges more clearly from the washed walls." But the washed walls are still there, and so is that fading of objects and people into those decaying walls.

One of the things that strikes you about Goxwa's painting is how remote it is from today's abstract works and often perplexing installations. Goxwa is no fan of modern art. "You see nothing alive. Everything is insulated. I thought I wouldn't survive as a painter, because I was classified by contemporary artists as a traditionalist. But I have."

She certainly has! It is a pleasure getting to know Goxwa, and inspiring to look at her paintings. She deserves to go far.

Goxwa

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