

What blooms inside

By Robert Landon



There are no rules to Sylvia Martins' artwork. Just unadulterated passion

The canvas is almost as tall as Sylvia Martins herself. Its contents are still secret, but the way she is dragging it across the paint-splashed floor of her Soho studio, she is already revealing a great deal about herself as a painter – muscular, independent, reverent about the act of painting but unwilling to treat the results like some fragile, fetishized object.

And then she flips the vast canvas around.

Suddenly before me there hovers a gorgeous world of saturated colors in which fuchsia and blood orange and burning yellows have been corralled into unlikely harmonies. It's like I've just dived into some hidden corner of one of Odilon Redon's delirious bouquets. It's a wonderful, buzzing, totalizing sensation, and one that I don't want to end any time soon.

Though she's mostly a New Yorker, I first met Martins six months earlier in her Rio de Janeiro apartment, a wide-angle, modernist space perched just above one of the most privileged stretches of Ipanema Beach. As the

sky and sea turned many impossible shades of pink, she gave me a brief resume of her life. Despite the tabloid aspects – LTR with Richard Gere, marriage to tragic Greek scion Constantine Niarchos – Martins is first and last a painter. It did so happen that, when she first moved to the United States in 1979, New York was the disco capital of the world, and Martins was breathtaking with her smoky blue eyes, bee-stung lips and Brazilian breeziness. So it was inevitable that she ended up on more than one A list.

But no matter how late she stayed at Studio 54, her canvases were never neglected for long. Her natural glamour no doubt helped win her a stint at Andy Warhol's factory, producing silk-screens. Very soon, her friends were a Who's Who of the New York art scene, from Francesco Clemente to Jean-Michel Basquiat. She mentions them by first name only, as if everyone must have met them at some point along the way.

However, it was not these media darlings



but Richard Pousette-Dart – a humble worker among workers – whom she chose as her mentor while studying at the Art Students League. A painter who eschewed the limelight, he was the youngest and quietest member of the Abstract Expressionists, and was described by the *New York Times* as “the patron saint of American painting’s wide-ranging visionaries and eccentrics.”

Like Pousette-Dart, Martins’ work treads the fine line between figuration and abstraction. Are we looking at the evocation of water lilies or the intangible meeting of shape and color? The answer lies somewhere in between. “My paintings are near abstractions that evoke images from nature and organic forms,” says Martins.

And like Pousette-Dart, she refuses to align herself with a specific style or set of precepts. “My focus is simply on painting itself,” she says. To that end she has experimented widely with tools and techniques, relying not just on brushes but also rollers, palette knives, paper towels and even her own hands.

Though Martins travels regularly to her native Brazil and is wildly inspired by the daily transmutations of the sea outside her Ipanema window, she can really only paint when she’s in New York. The city, she says, focuses and disciplines her. It forces her inside, to find what blooms there. During my visit to her Soho studio, she was humming with energy, but focused too on the task at hand. It was nearly 2pm, the hour when she likes to start painting. With breezy Brazilian hospitality, she invited me to stay for a coffee. But inside, I knew she was itching to pick up a brush and start painting, so I politely declined so she could get on with the show.

