

THE ART TRAVELLER

Gillian McIver writing about TRAVEL, ART & FILM

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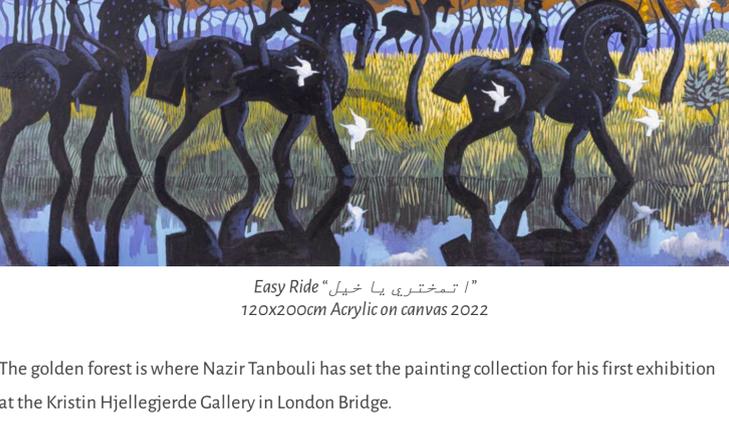
GILLIAN MCIVER

Autumnal Grace: Nazir Tanbouli's Golden Forest

"At no other time (than autumn) does the earth let itself be inhaled in one smell, the ripe earth; in a smell that is in no way inferior to the smell of the sea, bitter where it borders on taste, and more honeysweet where you feel it touching the first sounds."

— Rainer Maria Rilke

Although the air has become slightly crisp, the warm sun is golden in the sky, which retains its blue clarity. A slight breeze and you feel the first shakings of the leaves as they drift down from the trees. The trees are old, embedded in the mossy ground for many centuries; all around them, a carpet of wildflowers, grasses and other luxurious plants hangs on to their lush fecundity before the fingers of winter creep in and send them into hibernation.



"ا تمخترى يا خيل"
Easy Ride
120x200cm Acrylic on canvas 2022

The golden forest is where Nazir Tanbouli has set the painting collection for his first exhibition at the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London Bridge.

His [previous collection](#), shown at the Picasso Gallery in Cairo, was all about primordial beings and shapes, a symphony of every shade of blue, violet and green, a dreamlike world made of water and glass.

"Autumn came, with wind and gold."

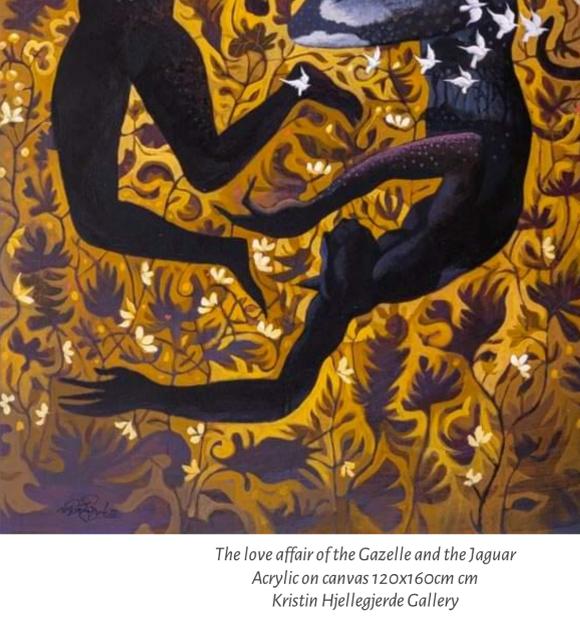
— Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: Life in the Woods*

The autumn collection, *Tales From the Golden Forest*, has a warmer palette, autumnal in tones. Simultaneously reminiscent of cosy wallpaper in traditional elegant homes and exquisite small painted Indian wooden boxes: Reds, yellows, oranges, and muted greens occasionally shot through with startling blues. The colours are luscious and tactile, enveloping the viewer in a warm yet light coat.

As might be expected from Tanbouli's mythic worlds, the inhabitants of the golden forest include a resplendent centaur, cats, dogs, crocodiles, frogs and many birds. A natural world that is simultaneously not realistic but dreamlike and archetypal, and we recognise it immediately. The paintings express pure longing, a longing that is mystical and mythic. In them, we see and feel the love of a most profound kind: sensual and spiritual. There is something alchemical in how the figures inhabit the canvas together, like a spiritual consummation. There is a meeting between matter and spirit, a union of dualities. The inner and outer worlds are not opposed nor even different but are reflections of each other.

'... each painting serves as a very personal portrait of the artist while also appealing to a shared emotional language that's rooted in the body and our connection to the world around us. 'I believe in the shamanic practice of art,' he says, 'that art can have a healing power for both the artist and anyone who encounters it.'

In my favourite, *The Love Affair of the Jaguar and the Gazelle*, the two figures writhe together in a sensual, spiral dance, a gyre of eternity, forever united but separate and whole. In this golden forest, the autumnal is not bound by *time*, not a decline into winter, but is instead a *space*—of ripeness, of love, of self-awareness. As the poet Rumi writes 'The garden of love is green without limit and yields many fruits other than sorrow or joy. Love is beyond either condition: without spring, without autumn, it is always fresh.'



The love affair of the Gazelle and the Jaguar
Acrylic on canvas 120x160cm cm
Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

Diana, the Huntress, aka the Greek goddess Artemis, is one of Tanbouli's favourite motifs and she is here, hunting in the forest. Tanbouli's nod to the great master Titian is evident here in his assured mastery of the palette, which shimmers with gold, yet eschews the trickery of gold leaf or paint. But *Diana* has something of the trickster about her, she is wearing Mercury's winged shoes—she is a free spirit, and does not always do what one might expect from her. (This painting belonged in the *Feminine Power* exhibition at the British Museum—what an expression of the Divine Feminine it is!)



Diana ل: ل: د
Acrylic on canvas 120x200cm Nazir Tanbouli 2022

In *A spot for playing the flute*, a couple relax in a meadow with a white dog, two white doves and a black bird, ancient motifs that have never ceased being resonant in Egyptian art. The Black skin of the couple shimmers and glows and their piercing eyes gaze deeply into one another's souls. In the background, the plants—could they be Egyptian cotton blossoms?—surround and protect the idyll.



A spot for playing the flute.
120x200cm Acrylic on canvas 2022

As you can see, Tanbouli's work is rich with Egyptian motifs and imagery that goes back in a direct line to the ancients. But he never resorts to copying or imitating or designing anything that resembles the art of the past. As a longtime follower of Jung and Joseph Campbell, the artist has learned to allow his unconscious mind to access the archetypes that live within, and to allow them to manifest on the canvas through his pure imagination.



The gate keeper
120x160cm Acrylic on canvas

The Gatekeeper is probably the most complex and compelling of the pictures and it is a real museum piece. I can imagine audiences over the next few centuries standing transfixed before it, as indeed they did during the three times I visited the exhibition here in London. In it, an Angel (a living being or a stone sculpture—it's not really certain) sits guarding a gateway to a place we can only glimpse, an Italianate landscape reminiscent of Renaissance painting. Though white doves fly in and out of the gateway, we cannot. How to pass? Persuade the angel to let us through, or seek the key that hangs nearby, on a cord. But look up, the cord is attached to the jaws of a sleeping crocodile. Do you really want to disturb him? Between the implacable angel and the crocodile, access to the gate seems pretty difficult. But not impossible maybe...

Tales From the Golden Forest stirs the imagination in so many ways. Each painting needs a contemplation of its own.



Tales From the Golden Forest is on at the Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery until October 29.

<https://kristinhjellegjerde.com/exhibitions/272/overview/>

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