



JRB ART
AT THE ELMS
Paseo Arts District

BACK TO THE FUTURE

By Joy Reed Belt



Sohail Shehada, "Caballus," Soft Pastel, 28 1/2 x 34 1/2 in., Gift to JRB

While in graduate school I took a sociology course entitled "Futurism." I loved that course and was so inspired that I joined the World Future Society, whose members over the years have included Buckminster Fuller, Herman Kahn and Margaret Mead. The professor of my futurism course at the University of Oklahoma was Dr. John Pulliam, who also served on my doctoral committee. He insisted that we read all the provocative books of that era that dealt with the future: "The Gutenberg Galaxy," "The Medium is the Message," and "War and Peace in the Global Village," all written by the Canadian philosopher, Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980). Some of McLuhan's quotes that I remember are: "We drive into the future using our rear view mirror," and "Ads are the cave art of the 20th Century," and "There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth. We are all crew."

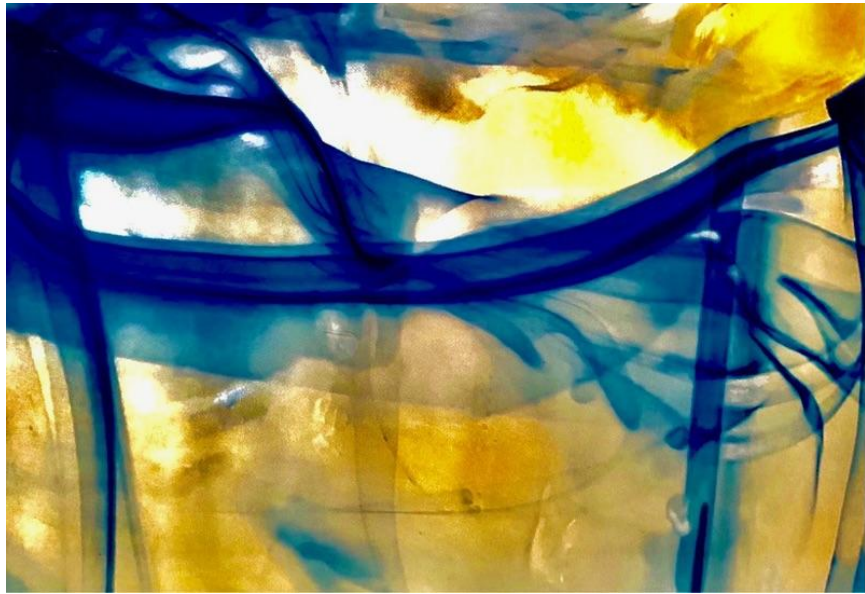
Another assigned author was Alvin Toffler, the America writer, futurist, businessman and winner of several Pulitzer Prizes. I inhaled his books: "Future Shock," "The Third Wave," and "Powershift." The takeaways from my course in futurism was that change is inevitable; change happens on all fronts at the same time all over the world; change moves with ever increasing speed; and to survive we all must become change skilled.

Almost everything that McLuhan, Toffler and other futurists have predicted has come true. The internet is ubiquitous. In fact, a few years ago I suggested to the President of the University of Oklahoma that those of us who graduated before the internet be allowed to add B.G. after our Ph.D. to signify we had done our research before the advent of Google. Driver-less cars are being manufactured. We wear mobile digital devices, own 3-D printers, and live in temperatures that are artificially controlled. Change, it seems, begets change. Currently as citizens of the world we are endeavoring to live through the global pandemic that futurists have been predicting for years. As such, we are literally fighting for our lives.



Shohail Shehada, "Luba (Man with Horns)." Iron, Not for Sale

Yet in many ways, even as global citizens, we have not changed at all. Every day the news feeds remind us that we are still intolerant to those who are different from us whether racially, physically, or by reason of contrasting belief systems. At best, our leadership in Washington is chaotic. As a result, unity and good will to one another and the recognition that we will live or die together is missing. This caustic intolerance erodes the sense of common purpose, rendering us less able "to fight the good fight." The artwork that is being created now in the studios I've visited reflect changes in the human spirit. This week I visited the studio of one of our artists, Sohail Shehada. He is an Assistant Professor of drawing and sculpture at the University of Oklahoma. Sohail has always been known for his incredibly detailed figurative work. Sohail took a sabbatical recently and went to Australia where his family lives, to conduct research on Aboriginal Art. He left Australia because the brush fires impeded his ability to travel and do his research. But while he was there, he felt compelled to do a series of abstract drawings and paintings. Since arriving in Norman he has continued to paint abstract work.



When I asked him about this shift in his work, he said, "Figures are not necessary for me anymore. When I was moving around Australia landscapes evolved. I became interested in textures and shades of colors. So that is what I am painting. Figures would impose." I think it is interesting that Sohail's art began dramatically changing due to an environmental disaster and the influence of Covid 19. But I think we will see dramatic shifts from a majority of artists as they attempt to record, interpret and document the world in which we are living. Artists are a distinct breed of futurists. So, in my role as a Gallery owner, as I experience art, I will be traveling back to the future with them.

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