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## A Painter Finds Far-Flung Influences



Sheila Isham, the painter. "There are mini-changes every six months in my art"

By BARBARA DELA FINER

**S**INCE 1967, when she first stood on a friend's roof and "looked out on the fields that stretched as far as the eye could see," the East End has been a point of departure and a place "to come home to" for the painter Sheila Isham.

As far back as 1950, when Mrs. Isham became the first foreigner after World War II admitted to the (West) Berlin Academy of Fine Arts, her professional life has been shaped by her wide-ranging personal life. That life took her, as the wife of an American Foreign Service officer and the mother of three children, from Paris to West Berlin to Moscow to Washington to Hong Kong back to Paris, then to Haiti and finally on a pilgrimage to India.

These days, the external influences are confined to the South Fork and Manhattan. She divides her time among a studio attached to her Sagaponack house, one of several studios and two art-filled homes that will be toured next Sunday in a benefit for the Jimmy Ernst Artists Alliance; a warehouse studio in Southampton, where she does her larger canvases and a Greenwich Village loft.

"Perhaps I've spent more time working in that context with less sweat than had I hung out in New York," Mrs. Isham said in an interview in her Sagaponack studio. "But we all have our own strange destinies. And each of us is sort of responsible for our own path and choosing it."

That path has been marked by major exhibitions at such museums as the Smithsonian Institution and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo. She has also been included in their permanent collections as well as those of the Hirshhorn Museum, the High Museum in Atlanta and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Last month, she returned to West Berlin where, as part of its "Cultural City of Europe" festivities, she was honored with retrospectives at both the Springer Galerie, the site of her first one-person show in 1954, and Amerika Haus.

"Things run in seven-year cycles," she said, explaining why 1988 is significant. Along with the events in Berlin, a television documentary titled "An Artist's Odyssey" has been shown on public broadcasting, and there are a spate of forthcoming shows on Long Island, including one at the Benson Gallery in Bridgehampton starting June 25.

"I showed at the Albright-Knox in 1981," she said. "And there and at the Corcoran in '74. Every seven years there is a major transition in my spiritual and life growth. There are mini changes every six months in my art that I'm never quite ready for, but mega changes in those cycles."

The New York-born, Cedarhurst-reared artist began as an abstract painter, acquiring the techniques and the tools in West Berlin in the mid-1950's. In Moscow, where, she said, "I was totally alone, with nobody to talk to," she learned "to be self-reliant, to do the best you can with whatever you have," and soaked up the "passion and humor" she saw around her.

Next were Washington, Paris and, in 1962, Hong Kong and a startling encounter. "I was at sea, rocky for six months," she said. "I thought I had a fairly sound intellectual base, a marvelous Western education, but nothing had prepared me for Eastern culture. Nothing made sense."

That is, until she began studying calligraphy and started integrating its "dynamism and energy" and the Eastern philosophy that "sees man existing, flowing with nature, instead of fighting it," into her work.

In Haiti, the last extended Isham post, from 1973 through 1977, there

was the impact of "an earth culture that threw me into animalistic symbols and myth," a search, she said, later intensified by a visit to India.

Each new experience has had impact on how she paints. The abstraction so finely honed into minimalist color-field paintings eventually gave way to a more recent figurative approach.

"For four years I had been doing animals," she said. "Then recently, I realized that it was the best painting I'd done in those four years. It became clear that I needed to pursue collages."

"In my morning studio, here in Sagaponack, I was doing birds in flight. Flight leads back to abstraction. I'm the case of an artist working both abstractly and figuratively and not afraid to dance back and forth. Modernist art can and could be and should be in the service of saying something spiritual in its age."

There is no inconsistency in her work, she said, but a "quiet evolution." An artist "can't work in conflicts," she said. "You have to be true to what comes from the inner source. Is that being mystical? Mysticism is a misunderstood word in a way. Perhaps, if I could really define it, I wouldn't paint."

"I've integrated the shocks of different cultures through the process of living with them, assimilating them, unifying them through the work process. A critic recently compared my work with the way a snake sheds skins, and it's an apt way of putting it."

Along with the studios of Robert Dash, David Porter, Bill King, Connie Fox, Hans Kline and Priscilla Bowden and the "art-filled homes" of the late Jimmy Ernst and the painter Susan Tepper, Mrs. Isham's studio and home can be seen from 3 to 7 P.M. next Sunday. Reservations may be made by calling 324-5324.