

# the art of elias friedensohn

1924—1991



Tunisian Pastoral | Oil on canvas | 48" h x 60" w | 1980

## Tunisian Pastoral

*Text and images by Elias Friedensohn*

The three bulky women in *Tunisian Pastoral II* move along the road on splayed and toughened feet. On their backs are huge piles of saplings for cooking fires. Head shawls droop over their eyes, obstructing sight. The landscape is arid, the air still, and the sun too hot for comfort. The arabesque of their burdens is set off against the arcs of oil tanks, the circling ridges of sand and smoke curling from the chimney. The tanks behind the women locate the painting in the late 20th century.

We lived in Tunisia for nine months during 1978-79. While Doris was teaching at the University of Tunis, I set up an easel in the dining room and spread out my paints. From the terrace of our house we looked out on a clean broad beach facing the Mediterranean. On long weekends we drove along the seacoast or south into the Sahel.

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I remember, on one of our drives into the countryside, watching six young Tunisian women carrying piles of crooked saplings through the fields. Silver bracelets jangled from their slim wrists; their garments exploded with brilliant colors. That afternoon in the village of Sedjenane, they were light-footed and lovely. Sweet apricots. In my studio I imagined the older, tired women they would all too soon become: bent beneath heavy loads, their faces half hidden, their feet swollen. The beautiful tones of red and orange worn by Berber women were too gaudy and joyful for the burden of these paintings.

In *Berber Pastoral III*, inspired by Breugel, the woman in the lead has stumbled over the rocks and falls forward. The others will surely follow. What interests me here is blindness: not just the shawls and headscarves which obstruct vision but also ignorance, superstition and the harsh prison of female life. The figures, small here in proportion to the landscape, belong to the stony waste of the desert.

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*Berber Pastoral III* | Oil on canvas | 4'h x 5'w | 1984

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Encounter at Sidi Bou Said I | Oil on canvas | 20"h x 16"w | 1980

In the north where women often wear the white saf sari, two or three would appear on a street corner looking like biblical apparitions. Pillars of salt. The Three Marys. Pontormo's *Visitation*. The figures in *Encounter at Sidi Bou Said I*, with their bulky but weightless forms evoke those historical antecedents. Moody. Ghostly against the vivid reality of the mosque and the hillside. Trapped in their white or colored cover-ups. Free among sisters and female friends. Unknowable to strangers. To us. ■

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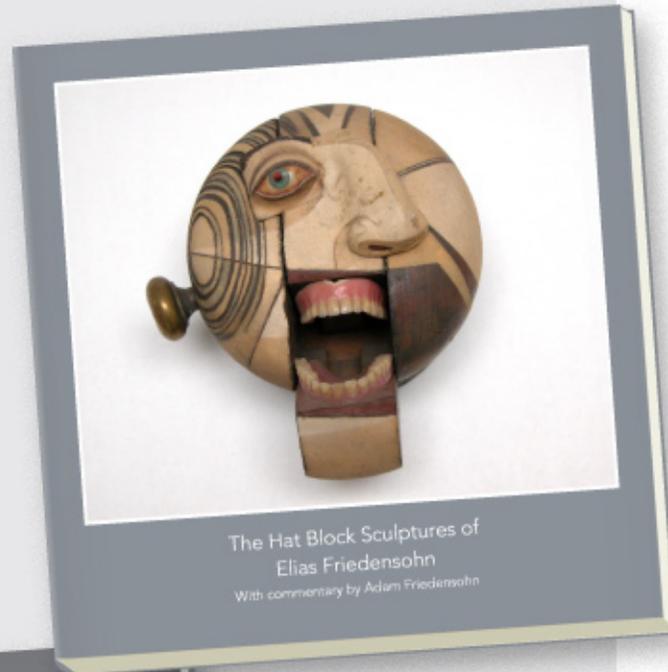
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