

ARTS

Mara Oláh Omara: the Roma artist who turned her life into a canvas

Ahead of the thirteenth Berlin Biennale, which opens on June 14th and will also feature the works of Mara Oláh Omara, Selma Selman brings the story of the unconventional beginnings of this artist's career, the struggle and protest that never ends.

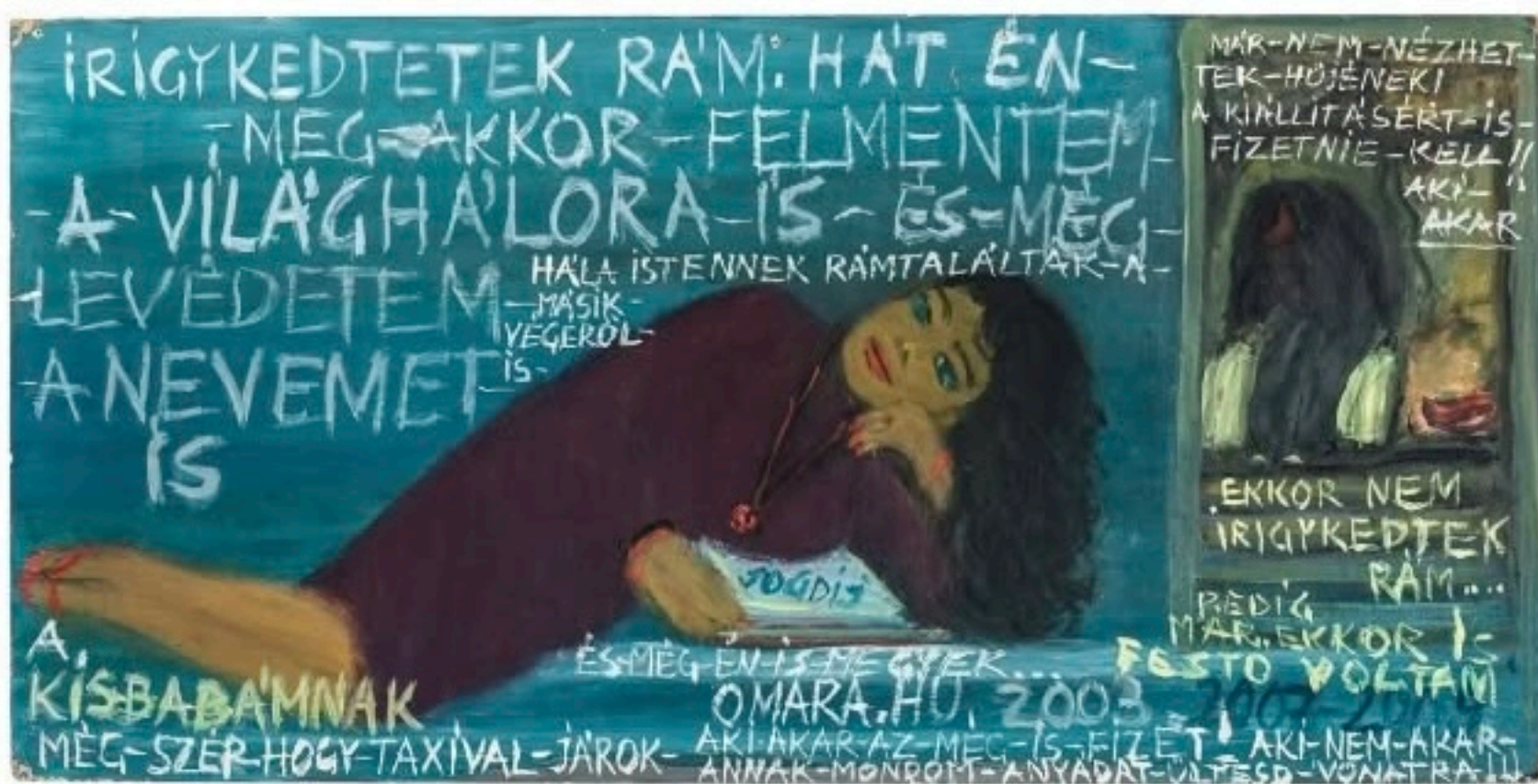
SELMA SELMA

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I'm sitting on a bench in Washington, D.C., looking out at the river as the wind blows. I'm waiting for the train to New York. Deep down, I can't wait to get back to Berlin because I'm not feeling well in America right now because of the political situation. There's a certain tension in the air. That tension reminded me of all those artists who gave up on America and, in a spirit of protest, gave up on the idea of even setting foot on this continent, and so did Omara, the artist, who the night before she was going to New York, because of a dream about cats and dogs, which are a bad sign for travel, decided not to go to New York just then, but never. It seems to me that Omara sensed this tension even then, which wouldn't suit her.

Mara Oláh Omara (1945-2020), born in Monor, Hungary, is of Roma origin. She has been called an icon, a lady, an artist, a businesswoman, a mahaluzza – and she performed all of these throughout her life. You know what they say, in life you never know when God will give you a million, you just have to find where to pick it. Mara picked it by starting her career as a cleaner and was proud of her craft because it allowed her to become independent. Although she only finished elementary school, her desire and will for autonomy were enormous, as strong and unpredictable as her glass eye, and her painting is not only proof of resilience, but also resistance to the system and escapism from everyday life and all the roles imposed on her – the life of a woman, a Roma woman, an artist, a lady, a mother.



DREAMS IN BLUE One of the longest phases that OMARA had in her work was the so-called blue phase, which, contrary to expectations, was not inspired by Picasso since OMARA did not know about him.

To learn more about Omara, I spoke to Peter Bencze, her gallery owner who lives and works in Budapest and whom I have known for years. When I asked him what he would say about Omara to someone who didn't know her, the first thing he sent me was a photo of Omara looking at his palm. My first reaction was: *how irrelevant that was to everything that Omara represents*. I was rude and quick to respond and said that I wasn't interested in him, only in her. Maybe I was even too rude, but in a world where stereotypes about Roma women still dominate, it's important to me to provoke this knowledge that is consumed in bourgeois circles. To move it.

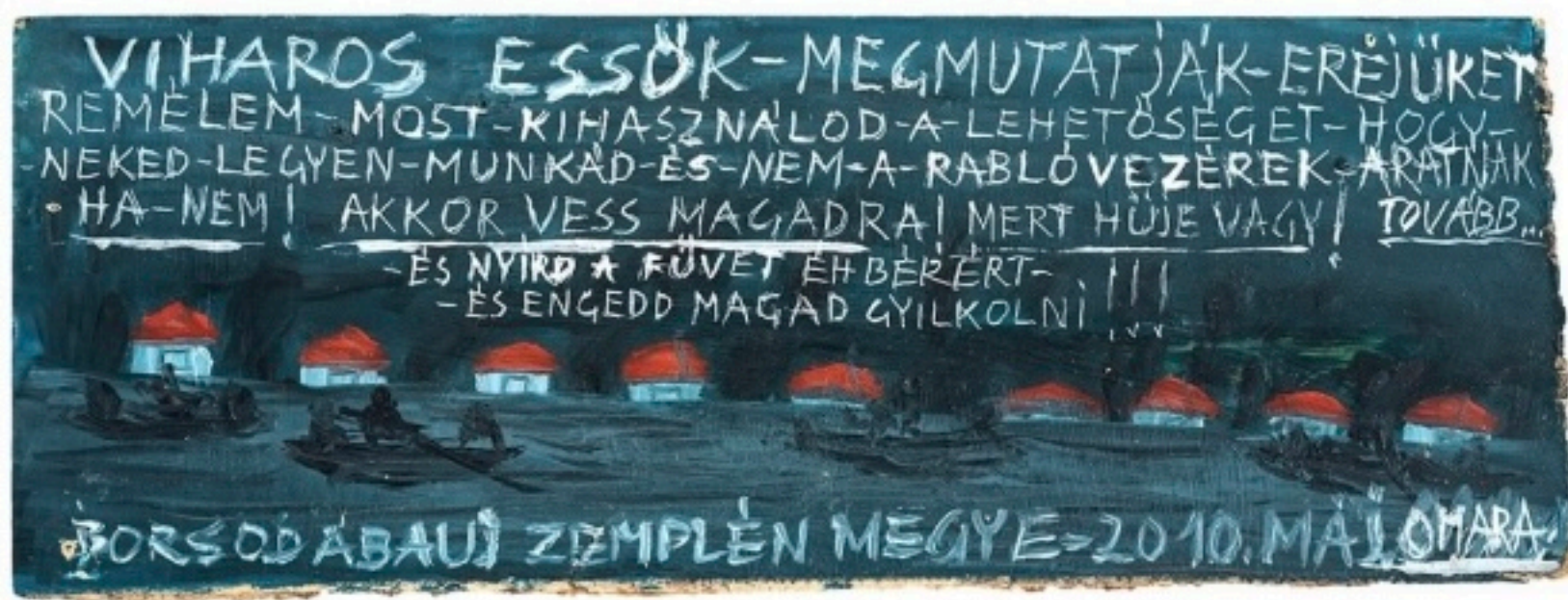
Peter understood what I was talking about and told me a beautiful story about a woman, an artist, who turned her life into a canvas. Omara did not finish her studies at the academy. She had eight grades of elementary school and, as Peter told me, she finished “only grammar, and she learned everything else herself”. I realized then that I respected her even more because in everyone’s life everything is a matter of decision – Mara became an artist because she decided for herself that, after being a cleaner and a businesswoman, she would also become a famous artist, and only at the age of 43 after her mother died. She used art as therapy, as a tool with which she could fight against the judgments of other people, but also to cope with her own life misfortunes such as cancer or the absence of her daughter. All these personal traumas became political themes for the artist for the next thirty years. Despite the fact that the world around her was not very kind or open to such changes of position, Omara was determined to realize what she had imagined and translate authentic experience into art. She began her career as an artist in the early 1990s by opening a gallery in her own apartment. According to Peter, it was the first Roma gallery, and Omara exhibited and sold her own work, as well as the work of students and other people who would give her their paintings.



One of the first works that Mara exhibited was a painting of her and her sister kneeling on the grass, searching for a glass eye. I find that scene funny and idyllic at the same time – because searching for that eye is a painful truth of her life. She had to have surgery for cancer, but with the glass eye comes a constant search for visibility. For herself. For the people she belongs to. This constant search, wearing an artificial eye – is a symbol of her resilience and ability to see further, clearer and more completely. Omara had several painting phases in her life. The first was the blue phase – she started painting everything in blue when she gave birth to her daughter, whose favorite color was that. Of course, everyone’s first reference is Picasso, but in Omara’s case this is pure coincidence. As Peter told me, Omara didn’t even know who Picasso was, nor was she much interested in the “stars” of art history. Another unconscious act of resistance, I thought.



In this blue series, Omara began to record episodes from her life: motherhood, childhood, hard work. All of this is toned in a gentle but resolute blue. In these works, she develops her own politics of representation – she goes beyond the figurative and begins to write words directly on her canvases. Messages, demands, protests – all of this is inscribed through compositions, as if to say: my paintings are not silent. Her words were not modest footnotes, they were manifestos, in which she used all available materials: wood, paper, canvas... Inspired by television, posters, protest signs, her works become scenarios for performances, for appearances, for revelations.



The second phase of Omara's work is paintings about the Holocaust, about Auschwitz. They usually have inscriptions on the canvas and figures of people – women, men, children. There is something enchanting about these paintings. They are the scream of all the people that Omara paints, they are the resilience and resistance of the people to which Omara belongs. Even when you don't see them live, but only as photographs, they are striking, because they evoke emotion – they take us back to a past that still hurts in the present. That's why Omara is so special. She paints the past in the present, combining segments of the states she was in. Her paintings have something avant-garde, naive, and yet honest, strong and very loud. They are like an all-seeing, glass eye that synthesizes time, like a subconscious in which there is no past, present and future, but everything happens now.



There is a story that at the first Roma Biennale in Venice, when she met Soros, she took off her glass eye to show it to him. At one point it fell out – and they looked for it together. That scene made me laugh and reminded me of Nam June Paik and George Bush meeting when his pants were burned because of the wheelchair that helped him walk. Protest. Accidental or performed, protest as resistance to those who have power and decide how much money will go to art and how much to the military.



Omara was alone in that protest. Her whole life is a performance of protest, and performance is one of the most difficult mediums because the line between reality and imagination is very thin. Omara dominates her medium, for her silence is not the language she speaks.

And just like I said – there is some tension in the air. In Omara's paintings. In the color blue. In the world. And in the glass eye. In the scream. Omara screams and says: “While the racists in Szarvasgede don't even want to give Omara a glass of water – not even for money!!! – My water pipe froze. – Omara, a Roma painter, receives visitors from all over the world: New York, Romania, Vienna, Bali, Chicago, Paris, London, Prague, Switzerland, Venice, the Netherlands, Denmark, Rome. – I love you all!!!! for being curious about me...”

I arrived in New York. Last night I had an exhibition opening at MOMI PS1 and the whole time I was wondering if Omara would like to exhibit here. I can't help but feel how much love, struggle, and resilience there is in her paintings, and how much tension there is in the American art scene, where most people are mostly looking for fame and don't understand what Omara has achieved with her work – proof that art can and should be much more than just fame. It is a tool for resistance, healing, and change.