

# Juliana Seraphim

## The Flower Woman

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55 Walker

Opening Reception: Thursday June 26th, 5-7pm

(55 Walker) is pleased to present *Juliana Seraphim: The Flower Woman*, opening Thursday, June 26.

Juliana Seraphim's singular surrealist style and embrace of desire and female subjectivity redefined the modern art landscape of the Middle East. Born in Jaffa, Palestine, Seraphim's early years were profoundly shaped by her family's arrival in Lebanon following the start of the Nakba in 1948. This early experience of displacement and exposure to a marred and discriminatory world indelibly informed her work. Through sensuous detail and phantasmatic figures, Seraphim built an iconography rooted in the perception of a "woman's world," exploring sensuality, selfhood, and spiritual longing.

Spanning four decades, the exhibition traces the evolution of Seraphim's oeuvre, beginning with her abstract cityscape paintings from the early 1960s. Works such as *Clear Winter Night under the Snow in Baalbek* (c. 1960s) exemplify her early engagement with architectural motifs. By the 1970s, Seraphim's surrealist style had fully emerged in works like *Untitled* (1978), where eyes, sea life, and ethereal female forms coalesce in scenes lush with myths and subconscious memory. These works reveal her inspiration from the Italian frescoes that adorned the ceilings of her grandfather's home in Jerusalem, as well as the seashore near Jaffa, where she often played as a child.

Changes in Lebanon's political situation – particularly the status of Lebanese women – are echoed in Seraphim's shift from impressionistic abstractions to intricate figurative works: "Lebanon today is not the same as Lebanon yesterday. Transformation was inevitable," the artist lamented in a 1992 interview in *Al Ousbouaa Al Aazi*. Despite tragedy, she looked to the steadfastness of Lebanese women, who "arm themselves with hope and faith – one of the secrets to Lebanon's survival." The 1990s demonstrated a period marked by increasingly detailed and dream-like compositions. In these works, branching black and metallic gold lines adorn forms at once figurative and botanical. *Dream of Samarkand* (1994) and *Orphée* (1998) burst with flowers, masks, and female figures rendered in sumptuous detail, merging erotic energy and mythic overtones with ghostly architectural forms that echo her earlier influences. Here, Seraphim's women are depicted winged and diaphanous, floating over cities in triumph and liberation.

Seraphim's candid articulation of female sexuality and agency positioned her as a true visionary, a worldbuilder in life and in art. Her work challenged the patriarchal norms of her time, presenting femininity as multifaceted, sensual, and emotionally complex.

**Juliana Seraphim** (b. 1934, Jaffa; d. 2005, Lebanon) was one of the first Lebanese women to gain international artistic acclaim. In her lifetime, Seraphim lived and worked in Florence, Madrid, Paris, and Beirut. Seraphim has recently been featured in *Arab Presence: Modern Art and Decolonisation* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (2024) and *The Golden Sixties* at the Biennale de Lyon (2022). Seraphim represented Lebanon at major biennials in Alexandria, Paris, and São Paulo throughout the 1960s, and her work is held in museum collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Musée du surréalisme, Paris; Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman; and the Sursock Museum, Beirut.

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