

zubeida agha

A Pioneer of Modern Art in Pakistan

Musarrat Hasan

Zubeida Agha

1922 - 1997

Zubeida Agha is recognised and lauded as a pioneer painter of Pakistan. In the changing ethos of the thirties and the forties, she had the courage and determination to launch a modern idiom of painting, which first baffled and later overwhelmed art critics and viewers. Her work spans a period of almost fifty years in which she is seen relentlessly at work to investigate new techniques in order to reveal her aesthetic and inner worldly concerns. She is one of the great colourists in Pakistani painting. She employs colour not only for itself, but to lend veracity and meaning to her images, culled from life and restructured by her amazing imagination to provoke the viewer into thought. The presence of so many people who identify with the modern art movement in Pakistan today is a result of her patience and ability to explain a new concept. She was the first Director of the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Rawalpindi and part of the Committees that created the Pakistan National Council of the Arts and started the campaign for a National Art Gallery.



zubeida agha

A Pioneer of Modern Art in Pakistan

For my loving son
Mian Mohammad Tariq Hassan
With prayers and good wishes

Musarrat Hasan
4-12-2003

(First copy that I have signed)

Musarrat Hasan

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Inquiries should be addressed to Foundation for Museum of Modern Art
at the above address.

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1. Zubeida
Photograph of the Artist, 1960

Acknowledgement

This volume on the late Zubeida Agha, who pioneered the modern art movement in the early years of Pakistan and contributed to it throughout the second half of the last century, is a joint publication of the **PNCA - Pakistan National Council of the Arts** - and the London journal *AIW - Arts & The Islamic World*. Its planning and production in Pakistan has been undertaken by Fomma - Foundation for Museum of Modern Art, as the second in the Foundation's current series of monographs aimed at profiling the country's outstanding contemporary artists and architects.

The initiative for this publication came from *AIW* in the wake of the journal's special volume devoted to "50 Years of Art in Pakistan", which was subsequently followed up with an invitation to the author, **Dr. Musarrat Hasan**, to undertake this first full length study of one of the leading women painters of our time. From its very inception, the project was accorded enthusiastic welcome by **Raja Changez Sultan**, himself a practising painter and Director General of PNCA; and work on it progressed with heart warming collaboration from the artist's sole surviving brother, **Agha Arshad Ali**, and other family members, friends and admirers in locating, identifying and permitting the reproduction of the works included in this volume. The Trustees of Fomma wish to thank them and a number of other individuals and institutions whose advice and assistance at various levels has made the planning and production of this volume possible. Among them, **Mr. Imran Mir** for conceptualizing and designing the current series of monographs; **Ms. Aameena Saiyid** for valuable editorial advice; **Mr. Farhan Ihsan** for typography and layout; **Mr. Naseer Ahmad Baluch** for printing it in a record time; and **Mian Ijaz ul Hassan** whose infinite optimism kept the team in good cheer at all times!

2. Zubeida Agha, 1980



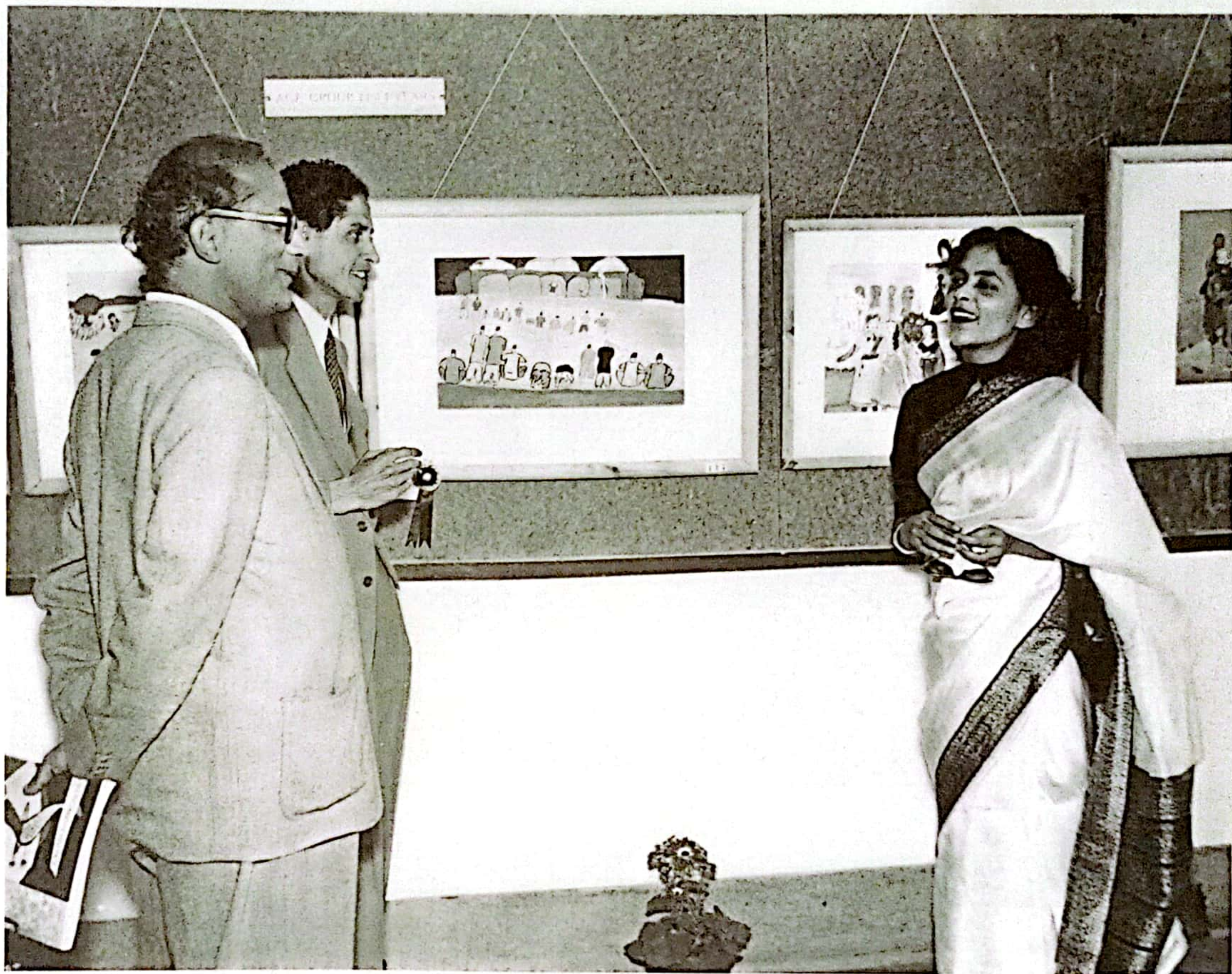
ZUBEIDA AGHA

Zubeida Agha

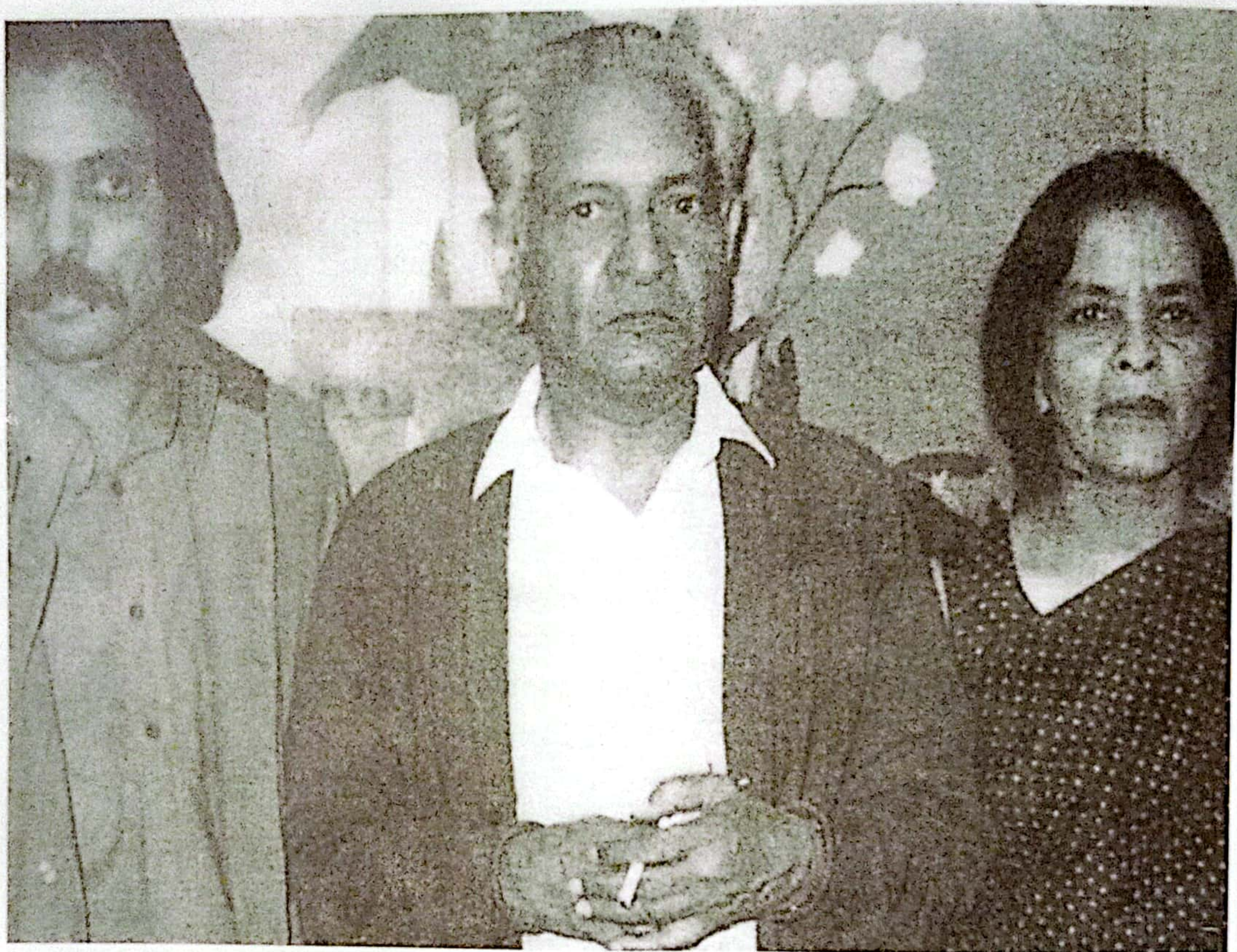
- 1922 Born at Lyallpur
- 1944 Graduated in Philosophy from Kinnaird College, Lahore.
Started working in studio of B.C. Sanyal.
- 1946 Started taking lessons from Mario Perlingieri, an Italian Prisoner of War.
Exhibited four oil paintings and two pieces of sculpture in the 20th Exhibition of Punjab Fine Arts Society, Lahore. Adjudged best in both painting and sculpture, and awarded prize for painting.
- 1949 First solo exhibition in Karachi.
- 1950 Joined St. Martin's School, London.
- 1951 Solo exhibition at Trafford Gallery London. Joined Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris.
- 1952 Solo exhibition at Galerie Henri Tronché in Paris.
- 1953 Returned to Pakistan. Worked in Karachi.
- 1955 Solo exhibition in Karachi.
- 1960 Solo exhibition in Karachi.
- 1961 Appointed Executive Director of Contemporary Art Galleries, Rawalpindi.
- 1965 Awarded President's Medal for Pride of Performance.
- 1973 Solo exhibition in Rawalpindi.
- 1977 Left Contemporary Art Galleries.
- 1978 Solo exhibition at home in Islamabad.
- 1979 Solo exhibition at home in Islamabad.
- 1983 Solo exhibition at Rohtas Gallery, Rawalpindi.
- 1985 Solo exhibition at Rohtas Gallery, Rawalpindi.
- 1993 Solo exhibition at the National Art Gallery, Islamabad.
- 1996 National Award for Life Time Achievement in Art.
- 1997 Died in Islamabad on 31st October.



3. Zubeida Agha
(seated in front) in England 1950



4. Zubeida Agha with artists Shakir Ali & Ali Imam at the inauguration of Asian Child Art Exhibition held at Aitchison College Lahore in 1955.



5. Zubeida Agha with brother
Agha Abdul Hamid and artist
Jamil Naqsh



6. Self Portrait, 1947,
oil on board (16" x 10")



7. Zubeida Agha in her studio
in the 1990s

THE CHANGING WORLD

In a festering world of devastating global and regional uncertainties just after the first world confrontation and before the second war, Zubeida Agha lead a lonely secluded life. She chose a career for herself and pursued it, with a courage that faced scathing criticism, with undaunted composure. Zubeida was the first painter in Pakistan who presented the conceptual aspects of modernism, which were based on her inward journey in pursuit of greater awareness and self-realisation.

She gave us the joy that genuine abstract art can create. She pioneered a legacy that has been built upon over the years. She was one of those artists for whom painting was not a profession in the commercial sense, but a passion that gave meaning to her life. She shut herself out from the turmoil around her and devoted herself completely to painting with energy, introversion and a single-minded focus till the end of her life.

She was born at a time when the world was still trying to sort out the intellectual traumas that had raised their head in Europe towards the end of the 20th century. This was a time when every norm was being questioned and every tradition was confronted, shaken up and reassessed, in such a way that the world has not been and will never be the same again.

The two World Wars brought forth far-reaching social and political movements that destroyed the old material infrastructures and eroded the sanctity of the ideological super structure. The cultural upheaval was equally drastic and the confrontations in the artistic world had a great impact and resulted in consequences that have even lasted into the twenty first century and have altered our way of feeling and thinking. That was the time when the term 'modern' started liberating art from its entrenchment in tradition and leading it towards trivial as well as breathtaking new possibilities. Octavio Paz the Mexican writer, sums it up neatly when he writes 'Modernity represents the rule of criticism: not a system, but the negation and the confrontation of all systems. Criticism has been the staple nourishment of all modern artists'.¹

Art criticism was a double-edged weapon that was used from both sides of a huge chasm that separated two staunch points of view about painting. Initially it was a barely whispered disgruntlement against the strict regimen imposed by the academicians, in Paris. But very quickly it became a full-fledged rebellion against the academic restrictions that slowly unfolded one of the most exciting chapters in the history of painting. This revolt also faced the most scathing criticism that has ever been heard and, had it not been for the steady support expressed in the critical appraisals of people like Baudelaire, the rebels would have faced a daunting task.

The thought process among painters was varied and adventurous. It questioned the existing norms in some matters but adhered to others, which were important and prized by them. What seemed to matter was the artists' ability to make a free choice, to adhere to conventional values or reject them. In the context of subject matter the artist adopted a more liberal and pluralistic stance. The mundane and the real ordinary people replaced historical and classical characters. A pair of old shoes was considered a more suitable and significant subject than a nymph bathing in a pool of crystal water and even a common candle was regarded as elegant and paint worthy as a Doric column. Similarly the use of colour was not merely a means to describe surfaces but to express emotions and ideas. Establishing a new composition was a means of structuring of objects on the surface of the canvas, without necessarily grouping them onto a stage in the centre of the picture frame.

Later in the century some artists rejected the subject matter itself. But some modern painters like Mark Rothko, who has in fact discarded recognisable subject matter in his painting, disagreed. He writes: 'It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academicism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless'.²

EARLY YEARS

These then were some of the concerns that the art world was facing when Zubeida was born in

1922. Travellers and artists, many of whom came back home from London and Paris, brought these debates and diverse viewpoints were brought to the Punjab by travellers and artists. Some of them came back from other parts of the subcontinent like Bombay and Calcutta, where European influences had begun to arrive much earlier than in North-Western part of the country.

From all accounts of her upbringing and education we realise that hers was an uncomplicated simple existence without the daily traumas of having to fight for her rights and privileges. Even though she was born in a conventional society she did not have to tackle any of the major problems that faced the girls of that time in her particular environment. For one, she was born in a family that believed in promoting quality education for the daughters as well as the sons. This was an unusual feature especially in the middle class Muslim families that lived in pre-partition urban Punjab.

During those times any normal girl from Lahore would, if she received any education at all, rest on her laurels after a degree from Kinnaird College and quietly wait for her parents to arrange a suitable marriage for her. That seemed to be the general expectation, for Zubeida had till then not displayed any interest in a career. The fact that she joined a college which did not offer Fine Arts as one of the subjects for study is indicative of the fact that until that time she had not realised the extent of her own commitment. She might have been fascinated by colour but had not seriously contemplated adopting painting as her all encompassing employment, to the exclusion of every other concern in life.

In the social and political upheavals in the region closely following the two World Wars there was a profound insecurity of existence particularly for women. Zubeida saw around her a shattered established ethos and the eruption of religious violence, death and destruction in the Punjab, during the Partition of Indo-Pak subcontinent. The result after all the fury and hatred had been spent, was uncertainty and a strange sense of loss, which usually comes when nations go through huge upheavals in their social and political evolution. This atmosphere created an estrangement in Zubeida and she began to find the study of Philosophy and other subjects in her college strangely devoid of all meaning in her life.

Marjorie Hussain who talked to Zubeida just before she died remembers Zubeida talking about the partition, 'Speaking of the turmoil that accompanied partition in 1947, Zubeida recalled the confusion and uncertainty...aware and compassionate, she deployed her energies to the need of the time, gradually becoming suffused with the desire to create from chaos'.³ 'The Horses' is one of the few paintings she did in the year of partition.

In the solemn and restrictive background that existed outside her home, Zubeida grew up in an oasis of a cultured progressive environment, where her intellectual upbringing was greatly nurtured and given its true importance. Her graduation from one of the premier colleges for women in Lahore gave her a pensive philosophical background and encouraged her to look around for a personal interest in life. Her class fellows recall her constant need to wash her hands during her stay in the college, which was perhaps a psychological manifestation of her dissatisfaction with what she was doing.

At around this time her family members recount her state of restlessness, which might have been caused by a recurring dream about colours, in which day after day she saw herself painting. She saw herself playing with vivid colours that stayed with her even during her waking moments. She recounted this dream to her parents and her elder brother Agha Abdul Hamid, who was an enlightened civil servant with a great deal of understanding and knowledge about art and literature. There must have been serious discussions among the family, which was gradually waking up to the realisation that the slip of a girl with strange dreams was no ordinary person.

INFLUENCES

The liberal arts education equipped her with an analytical honesty that taught her to recognise in herself the inadequacy of all thought process that did not culminate in expression through the use of the paintbrush. Her vivid dreams about colour led her to realise that her interest was more than the layman's passing fancy for beautiful colours and induced her to seek tutelage for something which, more than anything else had fascinated her all her life. The works of Amrita

Sher Gill had kindled an admiration and her paintings were a source of inspiration for Zubeida. Zubeida was fortunate to have a learned and supportive family who gave her a good education. They readily agreed to support her urge to explore a new career in art and wholeheartedly endorsed her every effort to acquire training from the best teachers available at that time in Lahore and then later even abroad in England and France.

Her brother Agha Hamid's wide circle of friends included artists and writers. In 1944 he was able to arrange art lessons for her. Zubeida joined B C Sanyal's studio, which was situated above the Regal cinema house on the Mall in Lahore. Sanyal was a maverick, whose unwillingness to conform had resulted in his ouster from the Mayo School of Art. He had refused to let this stop him from teaching art and had started his own studio, where he taught painting and drawing and held regular art exhibitions. Sanyal's studio was a very popular place, frequented by artists, writers and art connoisseurs. There Zubeida, among other things, was introduced to the techniques of the old masters whose work she learnt to copy.

Zubeida expected to devote a short period of time to her lessons and told Mr Sanyal that she would be coming to attend his class only once a week. He did not argue with that and gave her enough assignments, so that she could keep practising during the week, even at the time when she was away from the studio. Zubeida however would finish her assignment in one evening and was back the very next day. Sanyal made her draw rigorously from plaster casts and initiated her to watercolours after fifteen days. Very soon she was painting in oils. She worked with Sanyal for almost a year, but found her sense of restlessness coming back to her.

At that time, as in the past, Lahore was a culturally pivotal place in North India. It was always buzzing with exciting art activities, which had been carried on at its own leisurely pace, so characteristic of the city. Lahore was the only city in the area of Pakistan, where the British had established a college for the teaching of Arts and Crafts in 1875. Painting at Lahore had temporarily lost its will and sense of direction during the early part of the colonial period. But the dawn of the twentieth century saw its rejuvenation and it seemed that the revival of its full stature was round the corner.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the revival of appreciation for indigenous traditions of painting all over South Asia. This was primarily due to archaeological excavations in the region that gave credibility to the continuity and quality of the heritage of the region. An energetic movement for information gathering about national as well as international art traditions and active participation in all art activity was slowly gathering momentum. This revived interest in art and culture that had been in abeyance for almost a hundred years was like a tonic for the artists, art lovers and intellectuals. The University of the Punjab established an Art Department for the teaching of Fine Arts in 1940. This department was instrumental in popularizing the appreciation and knowledge of painting throughout the country.

Lahore in those days, being the great cultural city and seat of learning, exercised a gravitational effect on artists and men of letters, who were drawn to the city throughout the forties, fifties and sixties. Many painters found a stimulating environment where paintings were frequently exhibited and new ideas and issues pertaining to art were liberally discussed at seminars, meetings and daily evening gatherings of intellectuals at different venues.

It was partly for this reason that people like Amrita Sher Gill came to Lahore. Artists like Hussain Buksh, Mohammad Alam, Ustad Allah Buksh and his pupil Abdul Aziz, who had gone to Bombay in the late 19th century in search of work, came back with varied and rich international influences, which many of them picked up while painting for theatrical companies in Bombay. Allah Buksh taught at the JJ School of Art, which had a rich cross-cultural environment. All the artists who went to Bombay picked up influences of western painting from the JJ School, which they transmitted to Lahore on their return.

There were other artists and travellers like Sheikh Ahmad, Anna Molka Ahmad, Roop Krishna, Mary Roop Krishna and Razia Sirajuddin who introduced an international perspective to painting when they arrived in Lahore. They also brought richly illustrated books on Classical and Modern European Painting which created among the young artists an insatiable desire to paint and experiment with so many new techniques that were crossing their horizons. Most painters were inspired by modern western painters through illustration of their works in

books and journals.

The older generation of artists like A. R. Chughtai, S. N. Gupta, B. C. Sanyal, Mian Mohammad Hussain Qadri, A. R. Ijaz and Mian Inayatullah continued to work within the tradition according to their particular vision. The new generation formed part of a new and charged active art culture that made this city a vibrant place, attractive for the visitors, the artists as well as the lovers of art. Young bohemians on the fringes of debut in the art world formed part of the scene. They had picked up influences and adopted styles that articulated their profound personal bias and vision. We can count people like Moyene Najmi, Shemza, S Safdar and Ahmed Pervez, who grouped themselves into the 'Lahore Art Circle', all keen, eager and enthusiastic, full of themselves, their worlds revolving around the paint and brush, vociferously participating in debates and angrily brushing aside anyone who disagreed with their artistic beliefs and contentions.

EXPOSURE

In this world of unsteady and virulent contemporary environment and atmosphere Zubeida's instinctive approach to painting could not for long be confined and harnessed by mechanical academic renderings from old masters. In 1946, through her brother Agha Abdul Hamid, she had the good fortune to meet Mario Perlingieri. Perlingieri was an Italian prisoner of war, based in Walton, a Lahore suburb, who had at one time been a student of Pablo Picasso. He was able to interpret, guide and address many of Zubeida's concerns regarding form and structure and the need to impart deeper meaning to objects without necessarily trying to capture their natural appearance. He introduced her to the concept of painting ideas instead of objects and as Nasir Shamsie put it, 'Perlingieri liberated her from the academic discipline and gave her the confidence to pursue her own inspiration'.⁴

Zubeida's paintings of that time have uncomplicated stylised forms which are at times reminiscent and reflective of her admiration for Amrita Sher Gill. They have abstract themes like 'Wisdom', 'Wind', 'Future', 'Youth' which she painted between 1945 – 46. Her evolution as a colourist can be seen in 'The Cotton Pickers', 'In the Forest', 'Landscape with Horses' and 'Intruder', which

were painted in 1949. The simplification of these paintings looks deceptively easy, but the fact as related by Zubeida is, that she had to paint and draw each figure several times, some of them she recalls drawing eighteen times before she arrived at a satisfactory shape that met with her requirement: a shape that was simple yet captured the rhythm of the movements and the mood of her subject. The 'Cotton Pickers' was executed when Perlingieri, her tutor was working on a mural and discussing the specific problems of mural design with her. Later she also made and cast a relief in bronze based on the same theme.

These paintings established her as a discerning accomplished colourist, but the complexity of her expression was yet to be realised. Her vision of life and the spiritual presence of objects haunted her and were perpetually at variance with the objective reality, which she was painting. The urge to create 'a reality independent of the organic world'⁵ became irrepressible. It became too strong to be ignored. In 1946, Dr. Charles Fabri, who was the curator of the Lahore Museum, advised her to enter her work in a group exhibition to be held in Lahore. Zubeida displayed four oil paintings including 'The Wind' and two pieces of sculpture in this twentieth Exhibition of the Punjab Fine Arts Society, Lahore and was awarded prizes in both painting and Sculpture. Although most of her work later demonstrated a predilection for radiant colour, in her early work she played around with dull earthy pigments, which prompted Hasan Habib, a distinguished civil servant and an art critic to write 'she has thought too much and laughed too little'.⁶

THE FIRST EXHIBITION

In 1949 she had her first solo exhibition in Karachi. There was a storm of protest and appreciation from writers and art critics. It is a fact that Zubeida shook up the very basis of art perception. She was in cognizance of the fact that people, inspite of new awareness, were still bogged down with a conservative perception of art, yet she had the courage to defy them, knowing that very few voices would be raised in her defence. In her own quiet introverted expression she rejected the prevailing art idiom and pioneered a movement that was later nurtured, supported and strengthened by many other modern painters like Shakir Ali and others who came later. The scenario of her first solo exhibition can be vividly imagined. A different point of view invited

all and sundry to come and air their very definite views on tradition and painting in our part of the world and how it was wrong to change these sacred values. One can picture baffled viewers and angry critics determined to tear her work to bits purposefully bearing down on her in a bid to browbeat her. Pausing only to let her have her say before starting on their tirade, slowly being subdued by her obvious sincerity and continue listening almost open mouthed in wonder at her strange explanation of the time and effort she had spent on each and every detail.

Even after talking to her, many protests and abuses were hurled at her. However, a few voices were also raised in her favour and many people came back humbly to her in order to better understand her point of view. She was patient and forthcoming and was able to create a whole following of art lovers and art critics who believed in the sincerity of her work and were able to relate to and understand the enigma that was faced by the modern artist. This was the edifice of an abstract art movement in the country.

Hasan Habib writes: 'Miss Agha explained several pictures to me. Every detail seemed to have meaning for her and whatever my own confusion, her sense of "spiritual harmony" was unmistakable...Miss Agha has depth and sincerity - essential qualities for a philosophical abstractionist. Punjab has witnessed a social upheaval more drastic than Europe has experienced during the last two wars. Deep thought (as in Zubeida's paintings) would truly make us wiser but sadder. Anything else but pessimism might be hypocritical'.⁷ Jalal Uddin Ahmad says, 'ideas, Zubeida Agha believes, are as real as things. She insists that her paintings do not consist of symbols, which are creations of individual imagination, but of Ideas, which because they are real are universally understood'.⁸ Ijaz ul Hassan writes, 'Zubeida paints not the embodiment but the idea of beauty, love and hate, youth and creation, motion and change'.⁹

While some people were highly appreciative of her work and even went so far as to say that Zubeida taught them a new way of looking at life and things around them; others were openly critical. It is quite unusual that Zubeida's talent should have been so staunchly recognised by her own family. They appreciated her spirit and talent and took the necessary steps they thought were required to further her career. Many of her family members were great admirers of her

paintings and spent their money to become ardent and appreciative collectors of her work throughout her life. She competed for a scholarship that enabled her to join St Martin's School of Art, London, in 1950. After six months she had two solo exhibitions, one in the Trafford Gallery in London and the other at the Gallery Henri Tronche in Paris. This was just before she transferred to Ecole de Beaux Art in Paris where she was a student of Professor Nar Bonne.

About her exhibition at the Trafford Gallery, in London, the critic, Maurice Collis wrote: 'This Moslim girl's painting gives us an idea of what is happening at Lahore in artistic circles. While the general public in India has not the smallest interest in painting, there evidently exists in the capital of the Punjab, a set, which is as up-to-date as any art set in Europe or America. Miss Agha must be one of its leading members'.¹⁰

On her return to Pakistan in 1953, she lived in Karachi for a while and put up two solo exhibitions. In 1954 she painted the well known, 'The Clifton Lights', 'Karachi by night' and 'Still life with Dancing Girls'.

GALLERY OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Zubeida had a large following of admirers and supporters who in 1961, prevailed upon her to accept the offer to become the Director of the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Rawalpindi, which she administered and ran for over sixteen years. This art gallery was located in a bangallow. The major part of the spacious place was used as the gallery and a few adjoining rooms were her living quarters. The gallery could not have found a more able and dedicated director. Many people feel that these sixteen years were the foundations on which the nucleus of the idea of a National Art Gallery was conceived and around which an art council in Islamabad was later constituted. She was part of many committees and debates that weighed the pros and cons of the feasibility of establishing a National Art Gallery.

Her associates of that time recall that during those years the gates of the gallery were never closed to artists and art lovers. She administered it with a lot of responsibility, through hard work and

thrift and was ever mindful of the meagre resources that were available to her, which had to be stretched as far as possible. In the absence of a typewriter, Zubeida wrote hundreds of letters by hand to artists and citizens interested in art and painting, to solicit their support for the cause of modern art in Pakistan. The gallery held numerous successful exhibitions, hosted lectures on art and organised film shows and seminars. It made arrangements for exhibition of local artwork and also made efforts to procure and display artwork from abroad.

If she was thrifty with government resources, she was generous with her own and was able to help many struggling artists in the furtherance of their career. She never talked about setting any principles for herself but relied on her sincerity of purpose to achieve her goals. She was awarded several government awards as recognition of her achievements in painting and her contribution to the cause of modern art in Pakistan. She won the President's Pride of Performance Medal in 1962, the Quaid-e-Azam award in 1982 and the National Award for Lifetime Achievement in Art in 1996.

Zubeida's preoccupation with the gallery was not allowed to interfere with her painting. She was not always a pessimist. The negation of form, which she now sought, was a perfect interpretation of her formless abstract ideas that refused to be subservient to the tyranny of form. R M Ikram, a lifelong friend from her neighbourhood, writes, 'For her the distinction between life and art does not exist. She believes in art for life's sake, rather than art for art's sake... art for art sake has not much depth in it... for it has no essential link with life nor a higher purpose and philosophy enveloping it. This is the attitude that brings out the thinker in Zubeida. She not only looks around herself, she looks within herself and things to discover their purpose, meaning and message'.¹¹

PAINTINGS OF THE LATE '70s AND 80s

After her years with the gallery, she seemed to gather her resources within herself and sought peace and privacy that she had missed during her gallery days. She displayed her paintings at home in exclusive exhibitions which were sought after by her many admirers and friends. She

had a special affinity with Shakir Ali, whose work was so different from her own, but whose intellectual ambience and vision about art had many meeting points with the beliefs that Zubeida held.

But her work seems to reflect many moods. There is the lyrical abandon and the sheer joy of painting a myriad of shapes in colours that vibrate and glow like jewels against a darkened sky. She seems to have had an instinctive awareness about how a colour would react in association and upon its juxtaposition with other colours, which enables some of her hues to take on a radiance that shimmers according to the tempo and mood of her painting.

On occasions she seems to aspire for serenity, to reflect a restful mood with the nuances and shades of the same colour subtly blending into each other with an accomplishment and an expertise that reminds one of the colour blending that Chughtai accomplished. Except that Chughtai achieved his results through innumerable washes, after which he separated and delineated each shade or tone of colour and the different form with a beautiful delicate outline. Zubeida achieved her colour gradations through the stroke of a thick bristle brush, which allows us to feel the texture of the pigment, as one colour so subtly different from the next one, melts with such a mellow gentleness into each other. Some of these paintings have purely abstract shapes while others have rows upon rows of flowers gently blending their colours and coalescing to create a most pleasing effect.

Then there are the paintings which are finished off with a stroke of such liquid flow that meanders here and there to make a form or configuration or a disdainfully drawn shape that is nothing more than a light coloured line that stands out against a dark background. These lines made by Zubeida are not contours devised to delineate form but an expression of freedom, a random stroke to highlight a mood. Many of these lines have an abandon and a casualness that one associates with spontaneity of thought while others in many paintings have been meticulously worked out like a miniature and have in fact a mosaic like quality about them. In most cases these lines are made with a dark pigment and have a decorative effect on the abstract shapes. Yet another sort of stroke is the dark decisive line that outlines the most playful daubs and dots.

These little shapes sometimes seem to lift and lilt in ecstasy and at other times seem to staccato a pile of sombre thoughts that have no clear direction but are wavering in uncertainty probably mustering up strength for a further flight of fancy. These are paintings that she conceived with the sound of music soothing yet stimulating her sensations. Her rendering of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony remained a landmark for her throughout her life, even though in her own inimitable way she was able to joke about it. "I wanted to paint the ninth symphony," she said, "but I could only get a gramophone record of the fifth".

She was candid when she discussed her work. "People said I was crazy to want to paint ideas, which is much more difficult than painting something from life. It is very difficult to create something from your mind," she said. "Someone said that I must enjoy my work. I replied that on the contrary, I am in agony when I paint. It is a total mental experience for me".¹² According to Zubeida, "The creative act is not only an emotional activity. It is only when the emotion is seized by the intellect that the painting starts taking an artistic shape".

In the 1978 exhibition, critics hailed her as a new Zubeida Agha who has muted colours and has woven them into complicated patterns like branches intertwined or the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle scattered all over, "I call it a flower show," she said about her painting, "but you can call it whatever you like".

Discussing the domination of the use of blue in so many of her paintings in the 1983 exhibition, she recalled that, this experimentation with blue started with her painting 'Red poppies in the Storm', which she painted in 1970. "You can walk into it", she said of the multi-dimensional illusion she had created, "all physical dimensions melt here into the mysterious blue signifying time and space".

Zubeida expressed surprise that sometimes when she set out to capture a certain elusive sentiment, she would work at a painting for hours, but the next day the mood of the painting would not reflect what she had set out to capture. Yet sometimes she would feel frustrated by her painting, working at it again and again without getting that certain feeling of satisfaction that is associated

with self realisation or a sense of fulfillment. But the next day on seeing the same painting she would experience that feeling of exhilaration, which comes only when a work of sincerity and merit is completed.

Zubeida lived in several large cities during her life and made a number of paintings that were reminiscent of metropolitan surroundings. Many of her paintings show dark rectangular shapes filled up with little yellow squares of which seems to suggest endless rows of lit up windows in a jungle of dark skyscrapers. Each of these skyscrapers and their little squares of light create a provocative pleasing effect on the viewer, but are as remote and mysterious for each other as only the inhabitants of a large cosmopolitan city can become. These paintings might have a cheerful aspect yet the alienation and loneliness and a sense of estrangement that surrounds individuals in the midst of all the activity and hustle and bustle of a big modern city somehow comes through. One is forced to look a little closer and question the automatic assumption of gaiety in such a situation. Perhaps we can presume to delve deeper into Zubeida's mindset, and try and uncover loneliness within herself and an emptiness, towards the later part of her life that could not be totally filled by painting. This loneliness seems to have increased towards the last years of her life when close family members especially her brother Agha Abdul Hamid died.

Many writers have tried to link her style to painters in the West whose work has distinct similarities to her painting. Marcella Nesom Sirhindi writes, 'Zubeida's predilection for discordant shapes and forces in tension and mysterious and irrational juxtapositions link her art to that of Marc Chagall and Edward Munch'¹³. The fact is that these painters, including many others like Matisse as well as the German Expressionists, were attracted to various forms and patterns of Oriental and African Art. It is evident that in many of Zubeida's paintings, particularly the early ones, there are objects, which like in a Chagall canvas, float on the picture surface, without any sense of gravity, outside the sequential limits of time and space. However these similarities are coincidental. These are partly expressions of her concern to let her subconscious, like the Surrealists, spontaneously reveal itself, but mostly they are an outcome of Zubeida's journey into her inner metaphysical self.

Zubeida did not allow any fetish about style to interfere with her creative abilities. After her meeting with Perlingieri we find her breaking away the fetters of conventionality and exploring and experimenting to arrive at her own personal idiom. Her paintings of that time between 1946-49 address abstract values like 'Wind', 'Wisdom' and 'Metamorphosis' and consciously veer away from the recognisable forms. But that does not mean that she was painting purely abstract form all her life. Whenever the need arose she borrowed and reassembled shapes from her surroundings and built her fantasies around them. She is as perfectly well able to construct a painting around a horse, a vase of flowers or a wall of bricks, as she is around abstract shapes and contours. Matisse summed it up beautifully when he said, 'A work of art must carry in itself its complete significance and impose it upon the beholder even before he can identify the subject matter'.¹⁴ That is exactly what happens when you look at Zubeida's paintings. They reach out to the viewer even before the subject matter has been able to assert itself, and the viewer has been able to comprehend them in a verbal context.

She dedicated her whole life to her work and other art concerns and remained a single woman all her life. Her work today gives us cause to ponder, not only about her paintings but about ourselves, our inner life and our relationship to animate and inanimate things, colours, hues and cosmic implications of where we have come from and where we stand today. We might even take inspiration from her and start dreaming about where we would like to go tomorrow.

Zubeida's life went through several departures. Her departure from this world was mourned and lamented by many friends and admirers, but her departure from the real to the abstract world of representation in art is celebrated and enjoyed by thousands. And as Baudelaire so nostalgically put it, 'But the true voyagers are those who depart for the sake of departure; hearts light as balloons, they never refuse their fate and, without knowing why always say, let's go'.¹⁵

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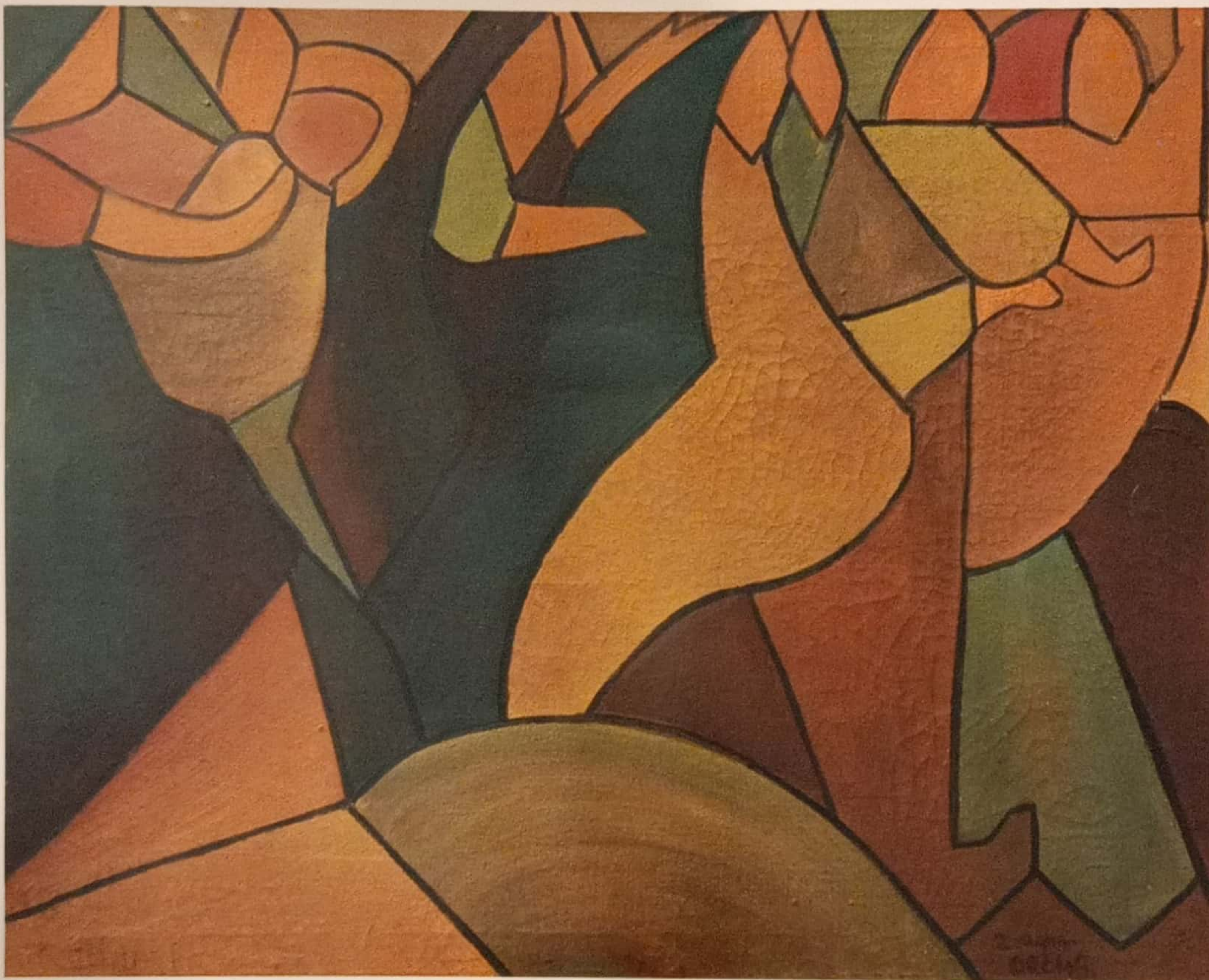
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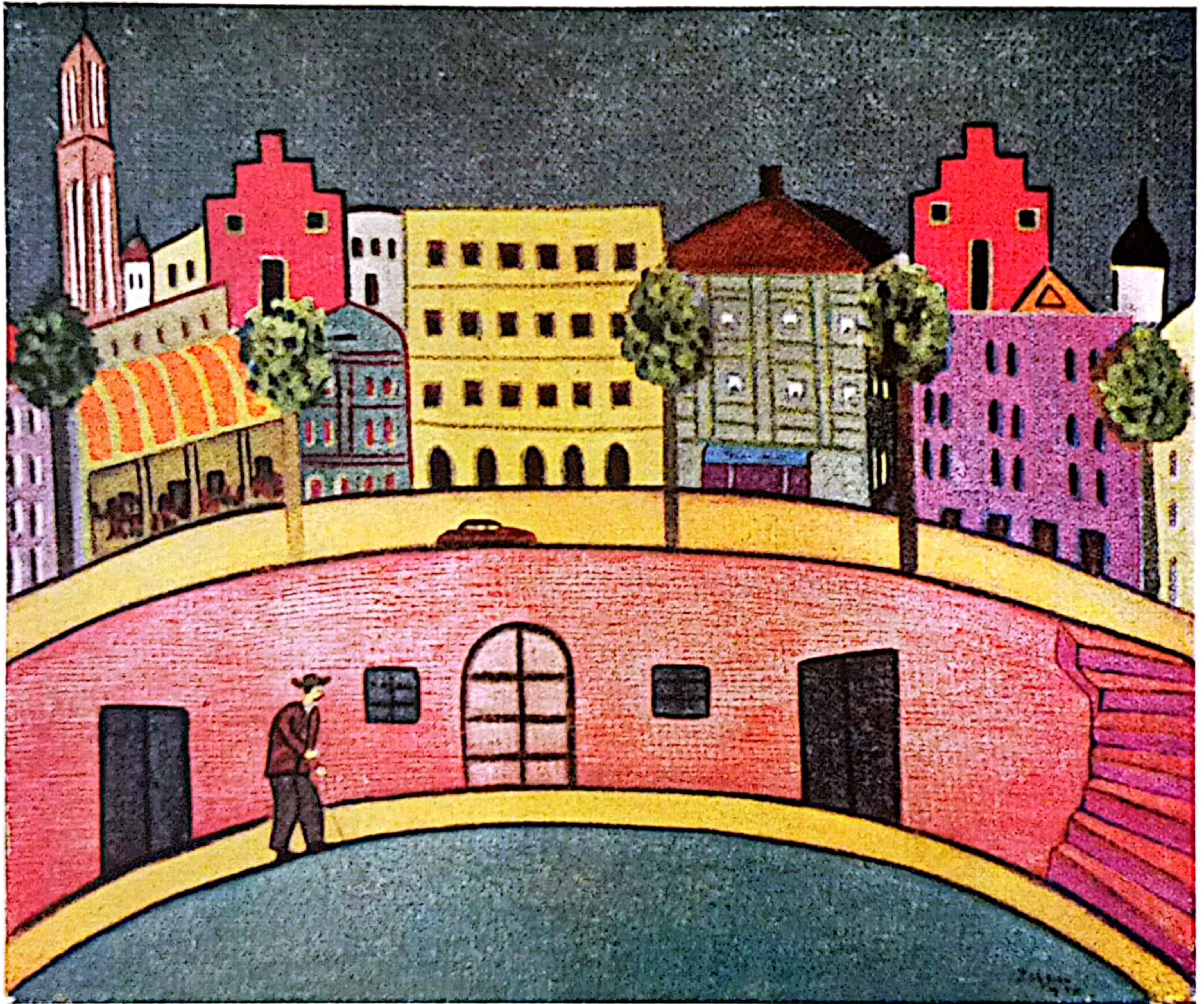
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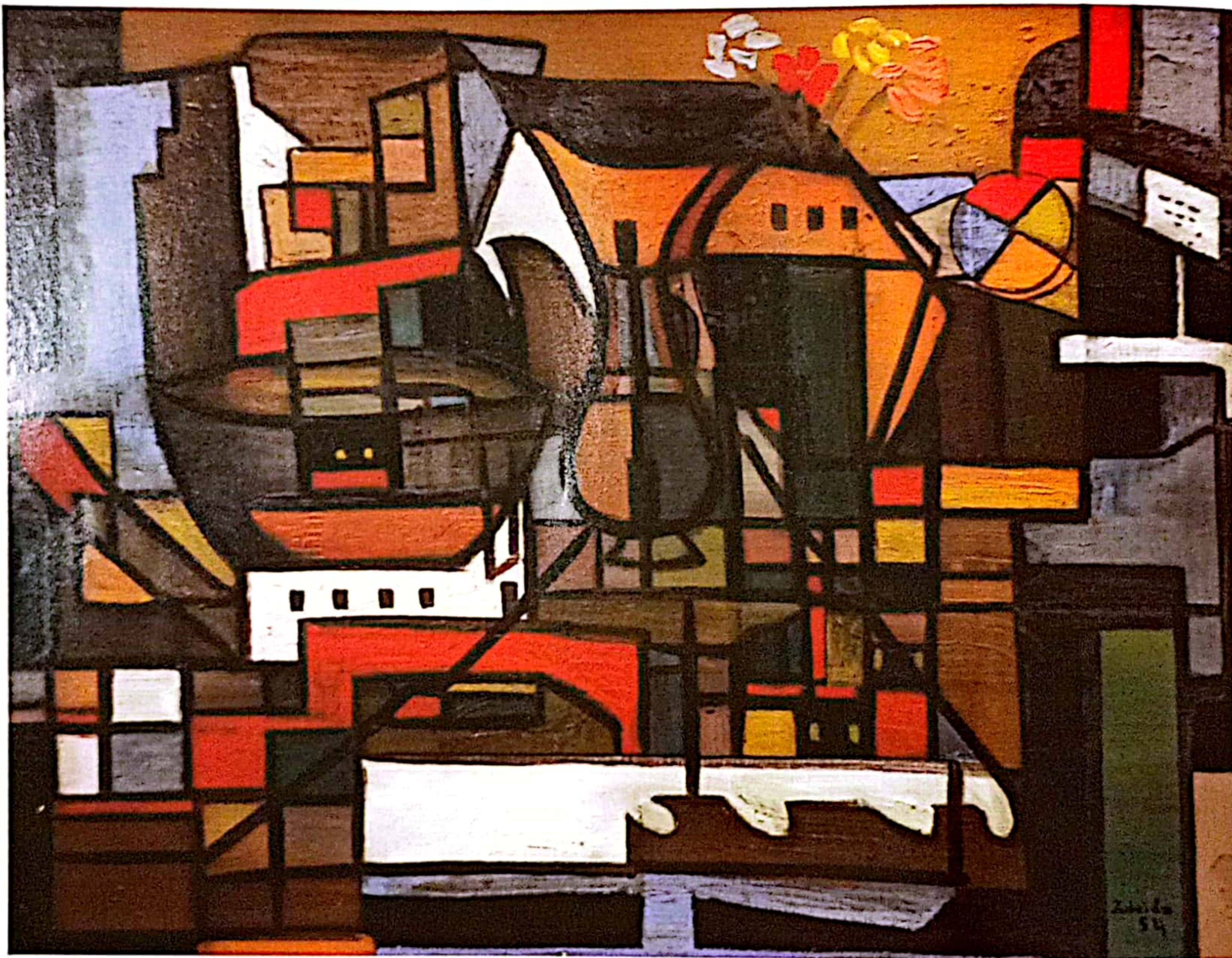
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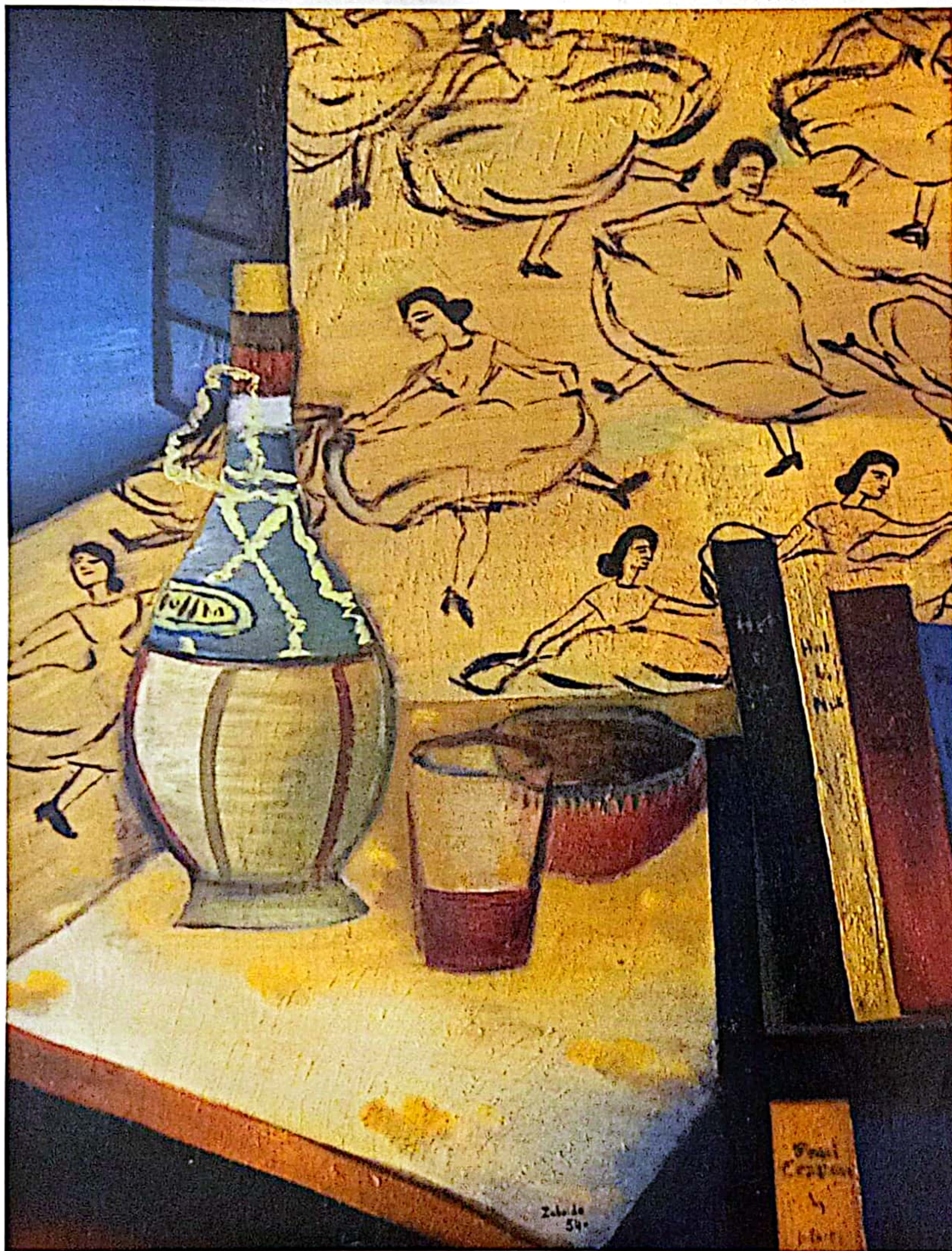
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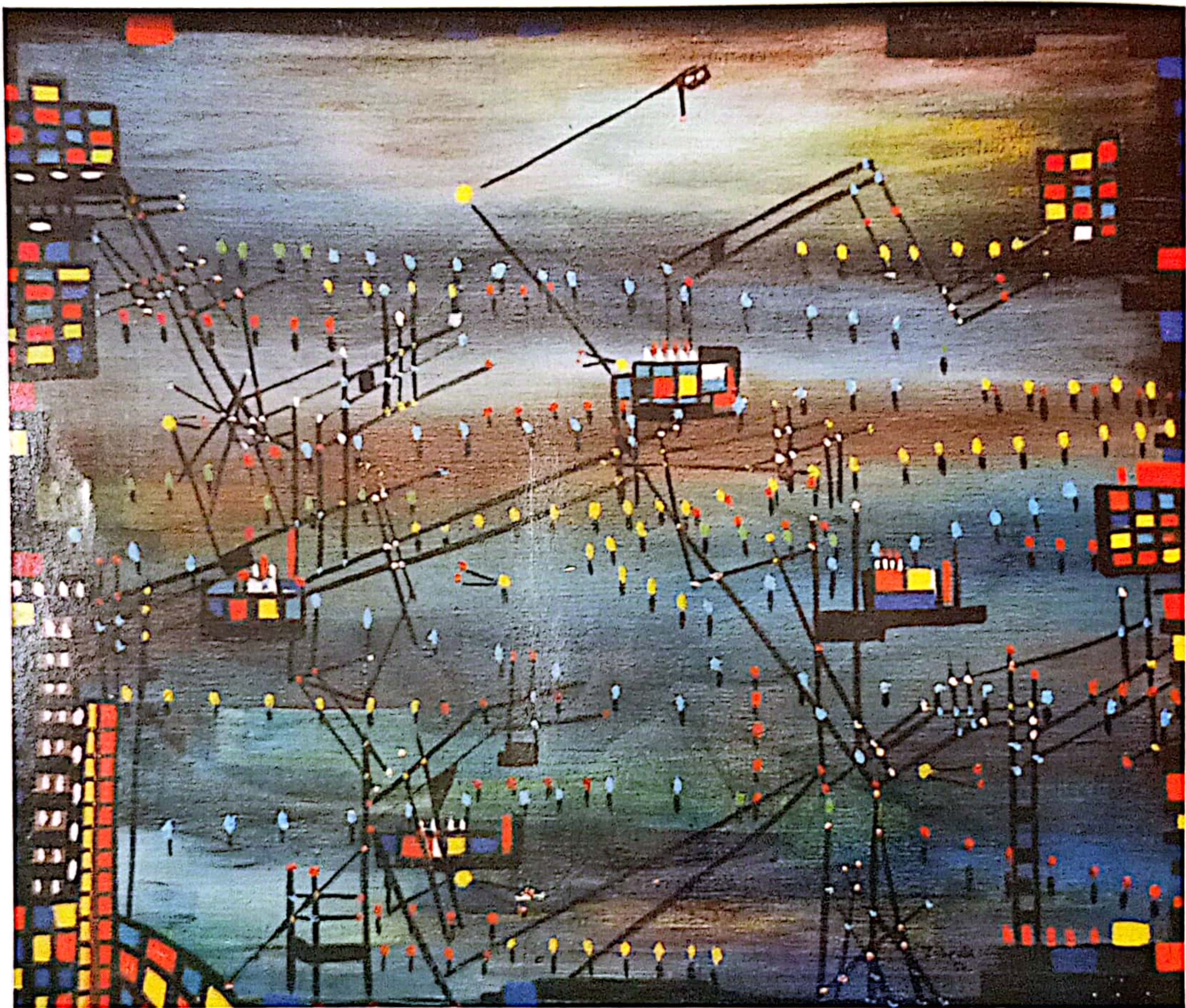
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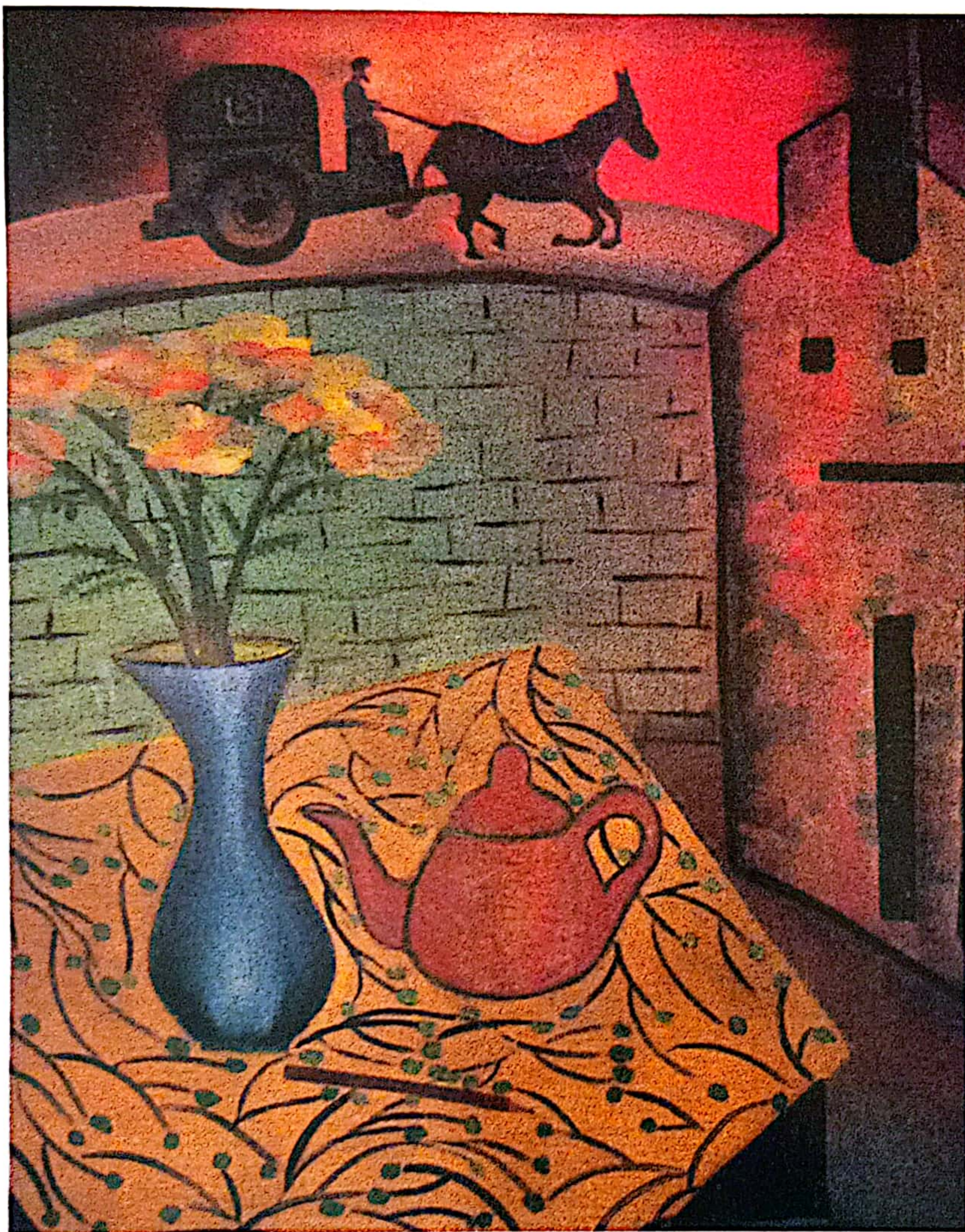
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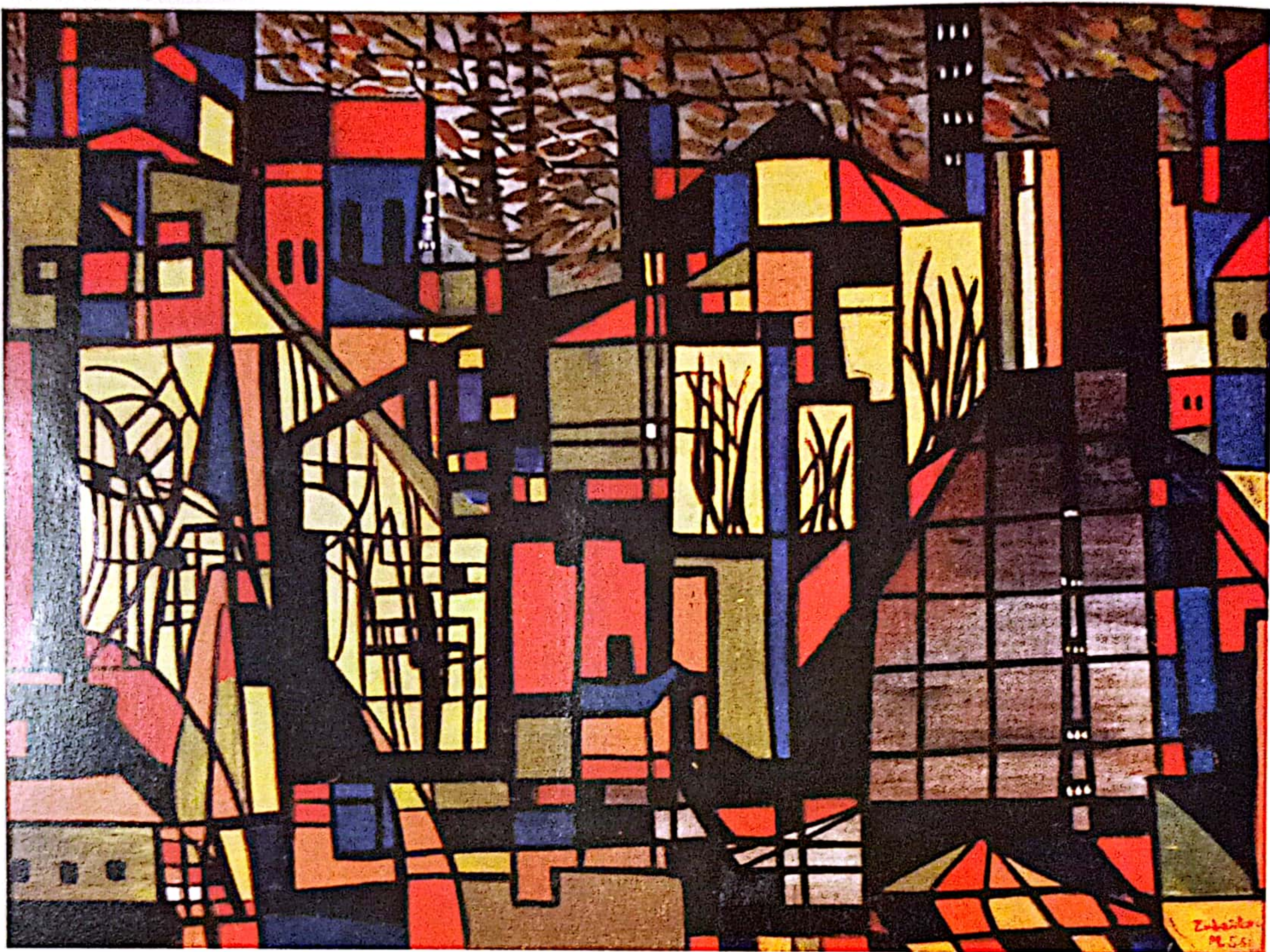
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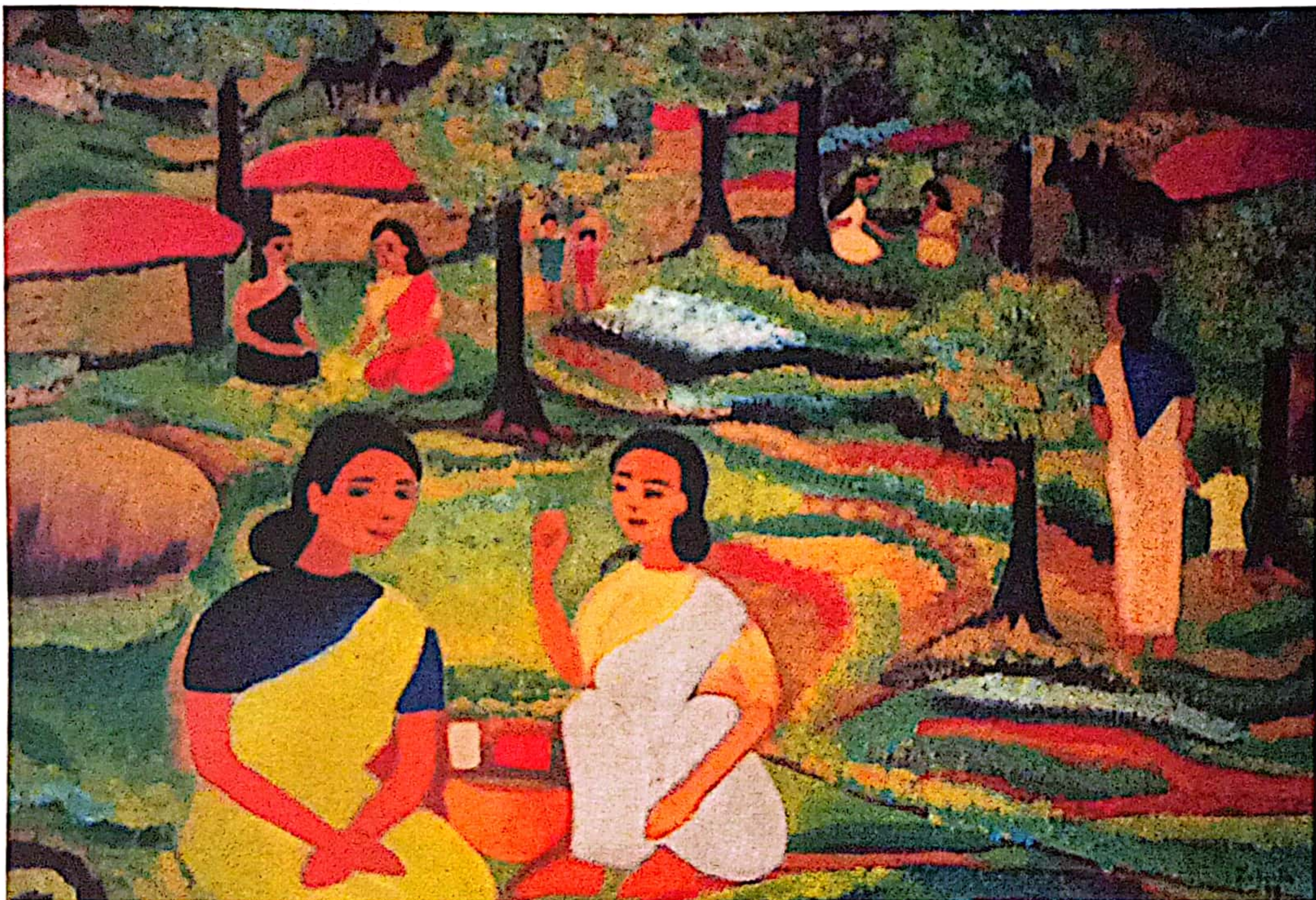
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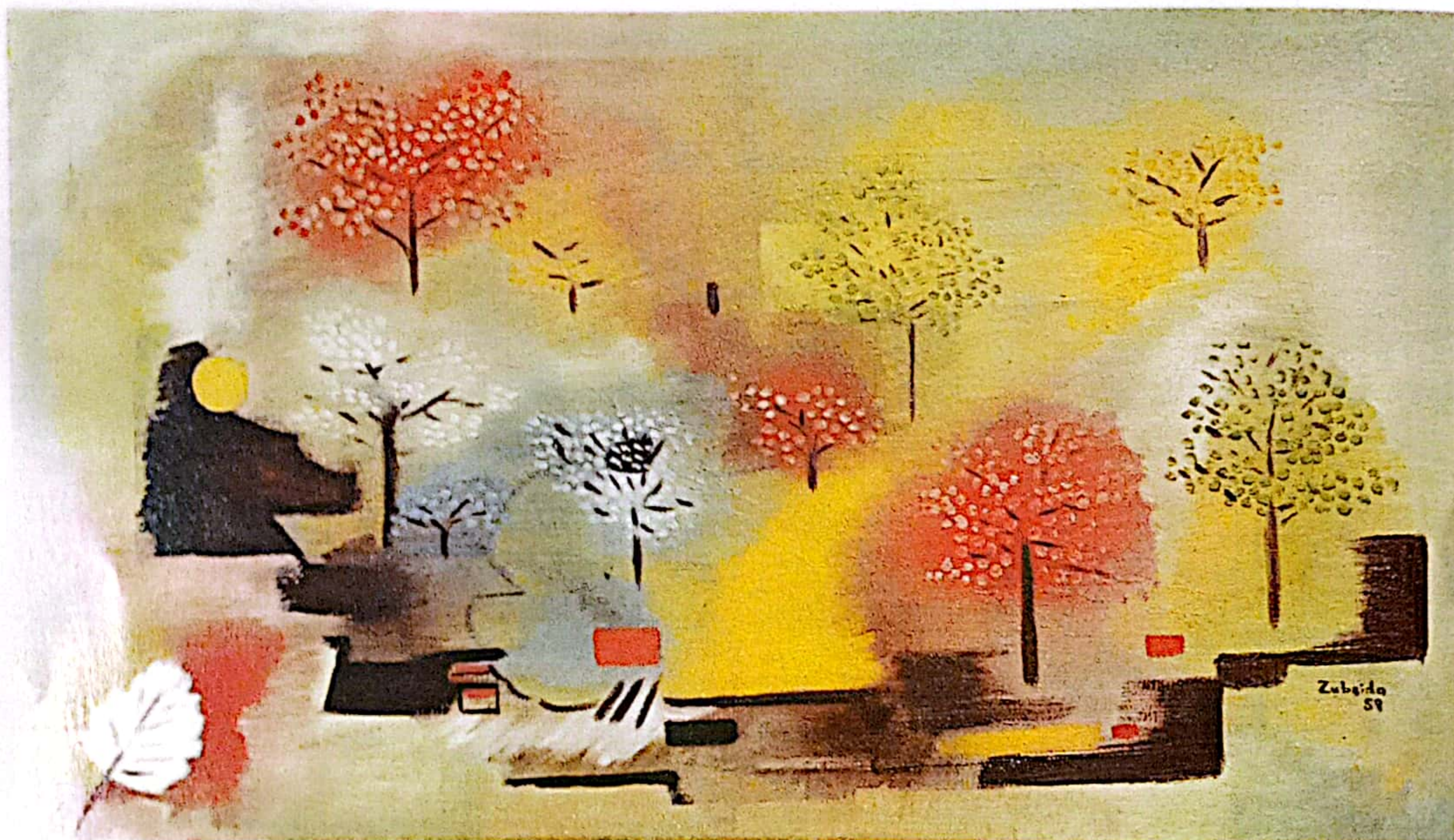
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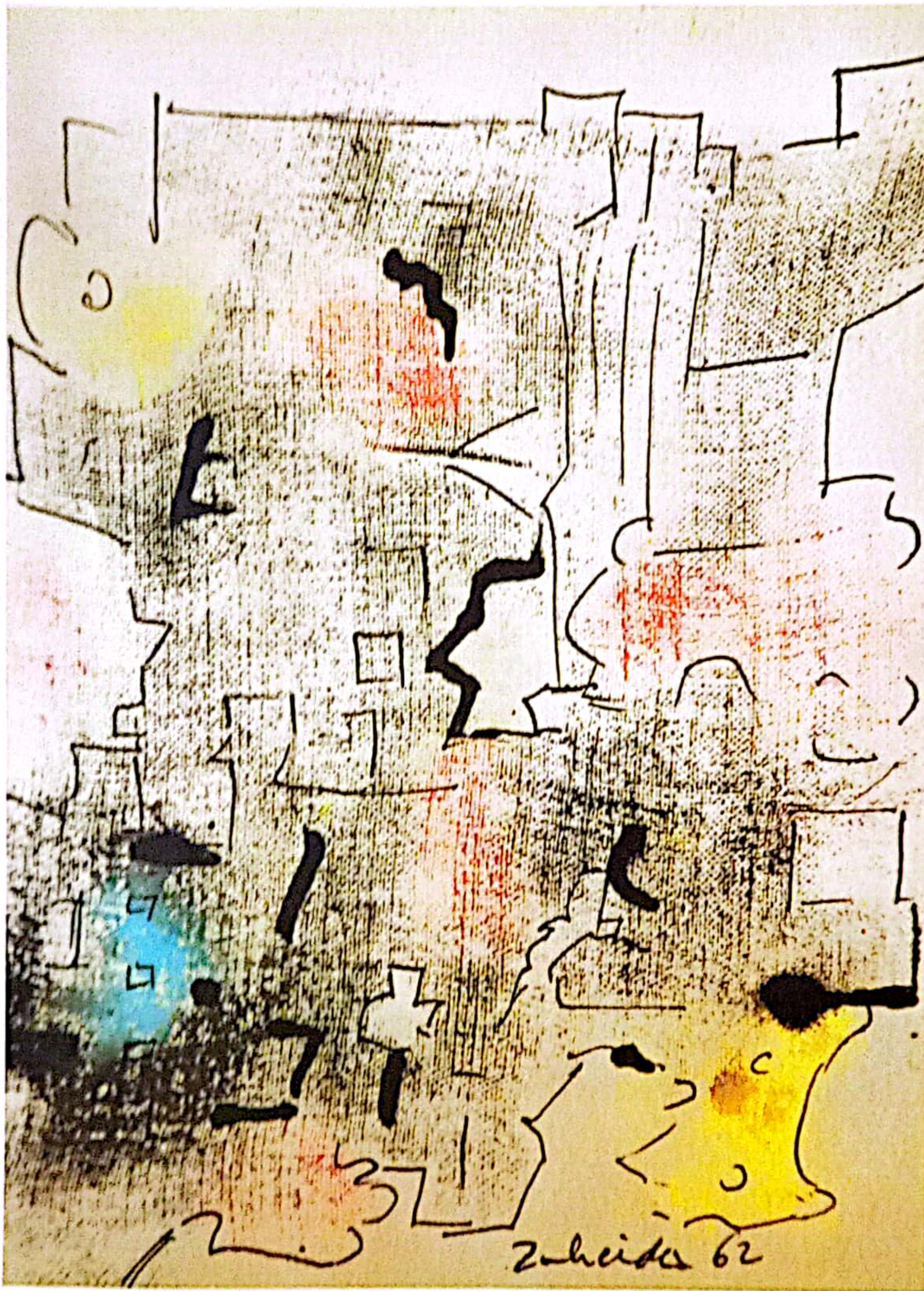
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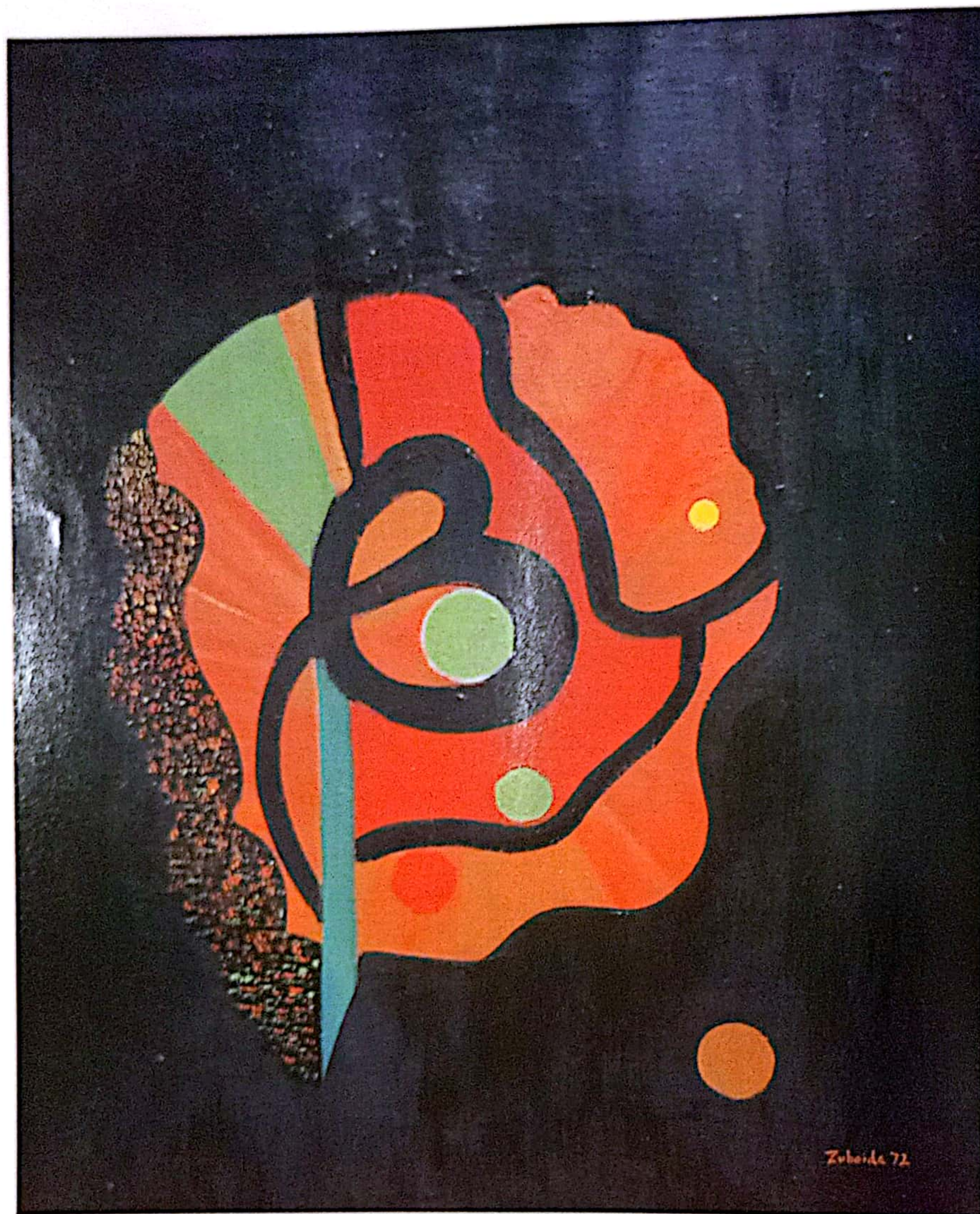


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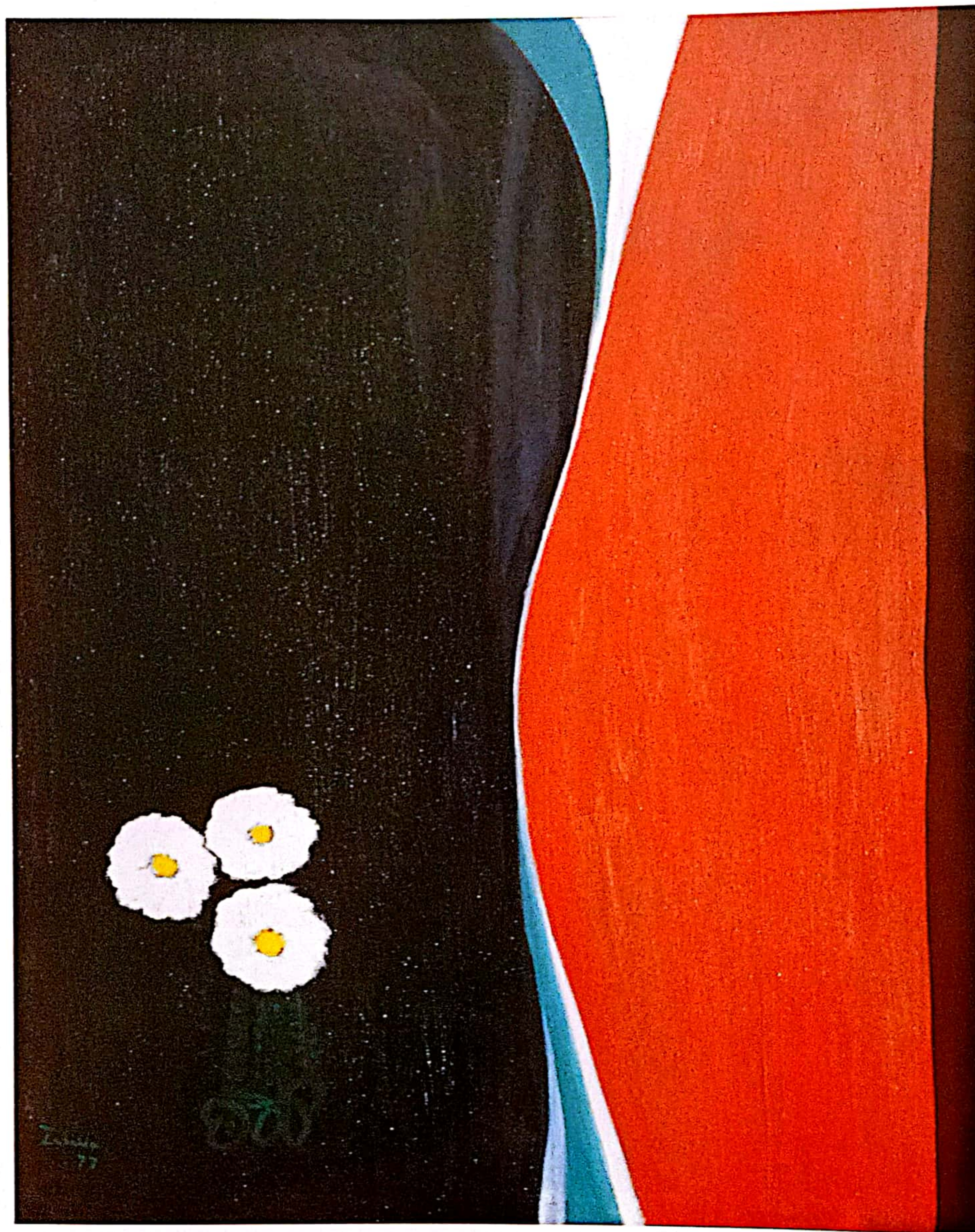
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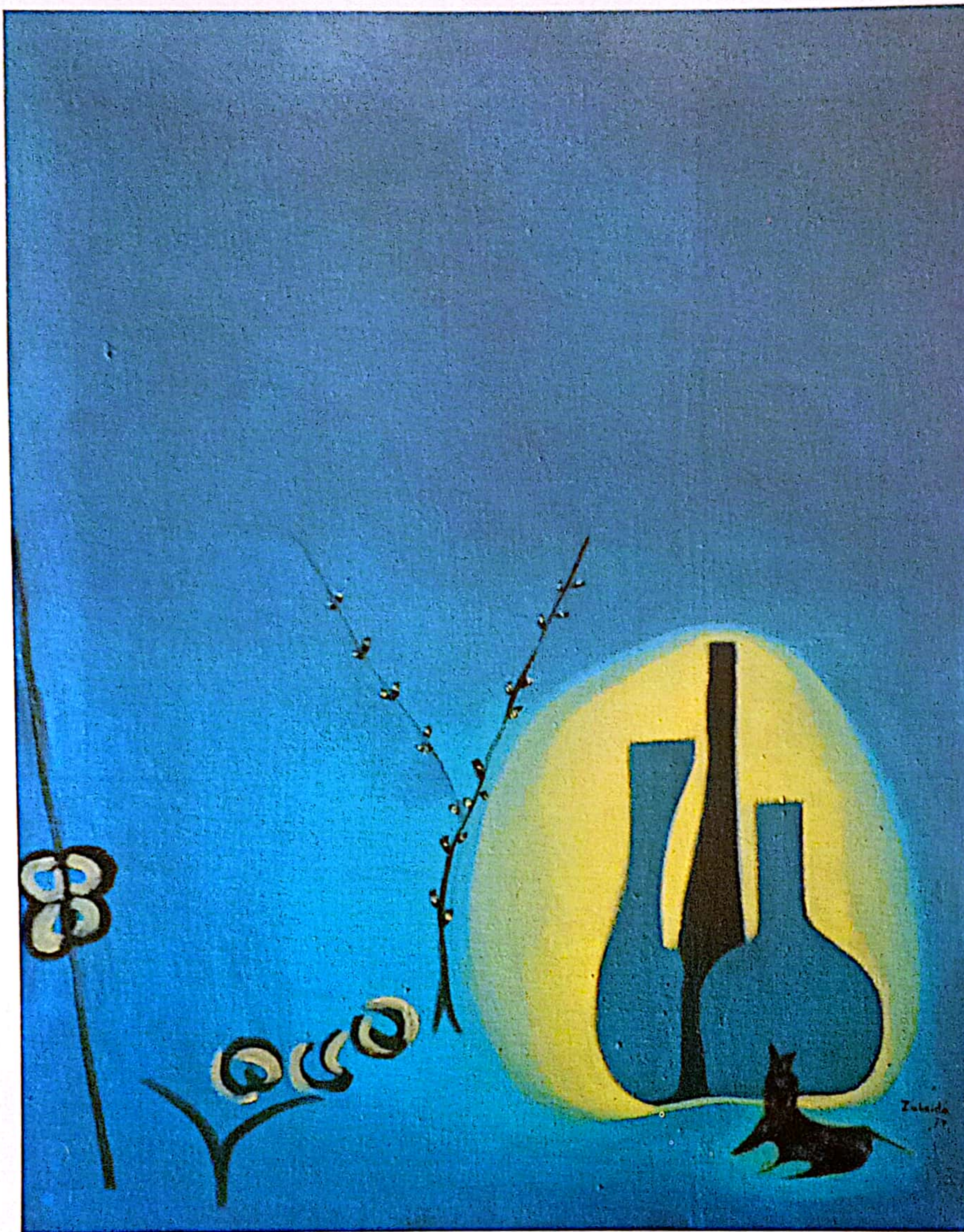


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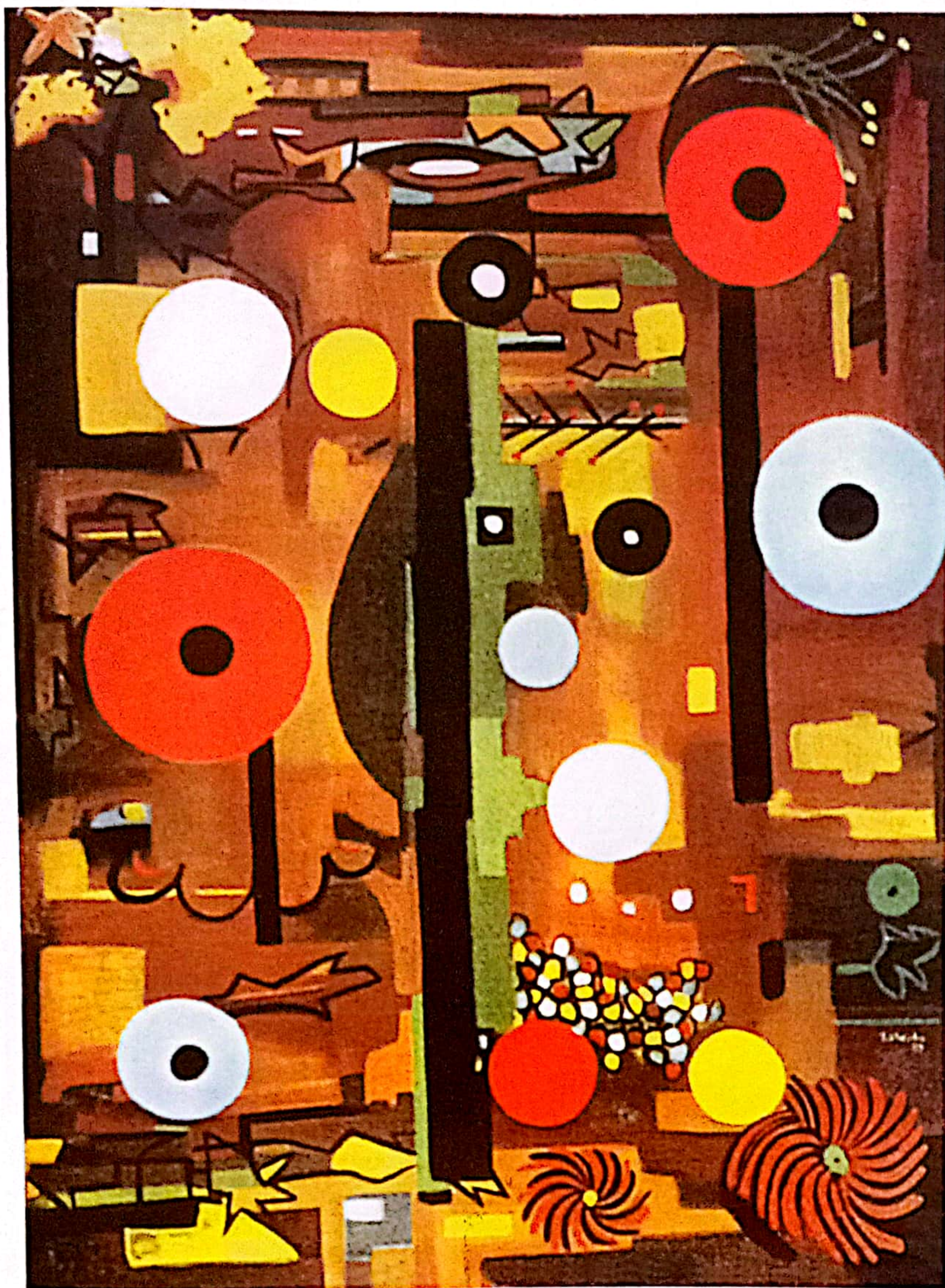




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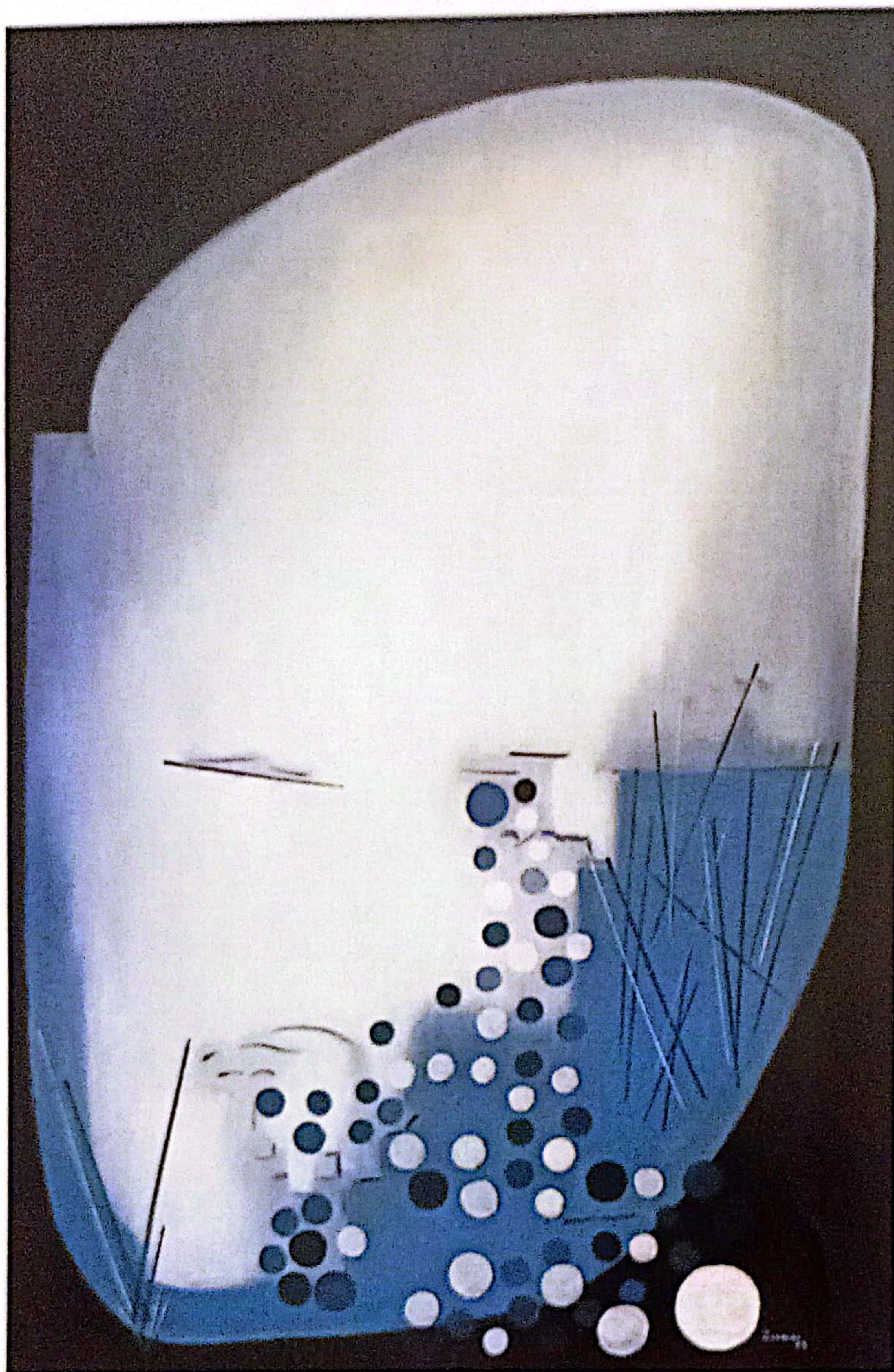


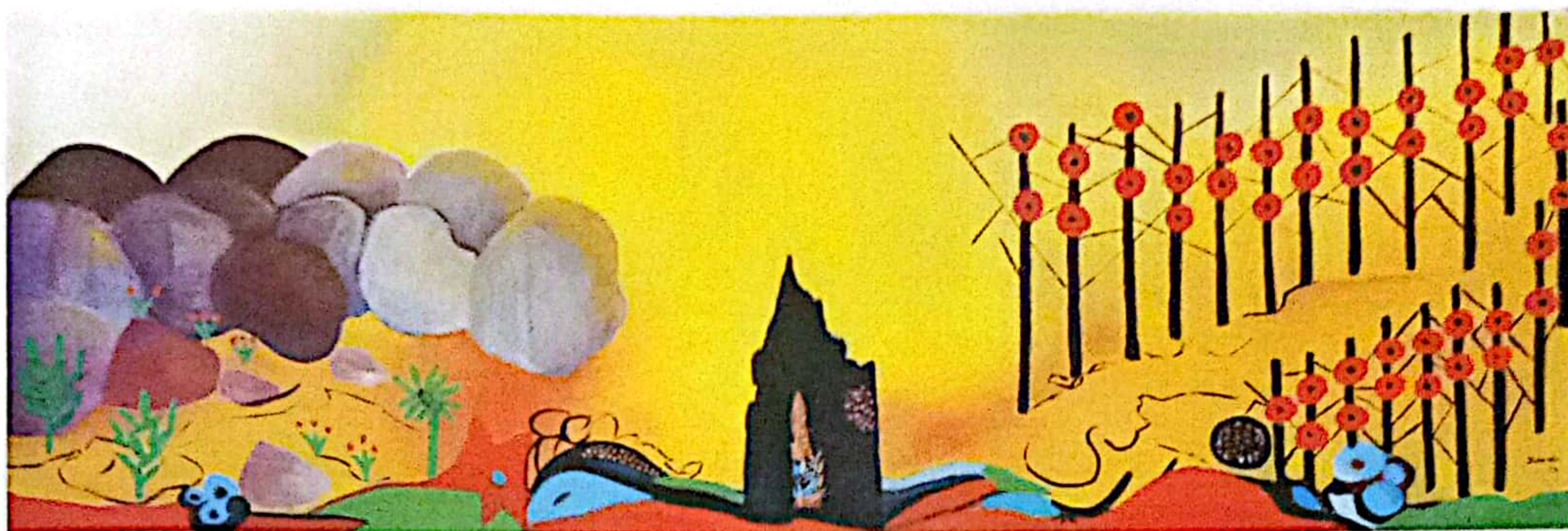
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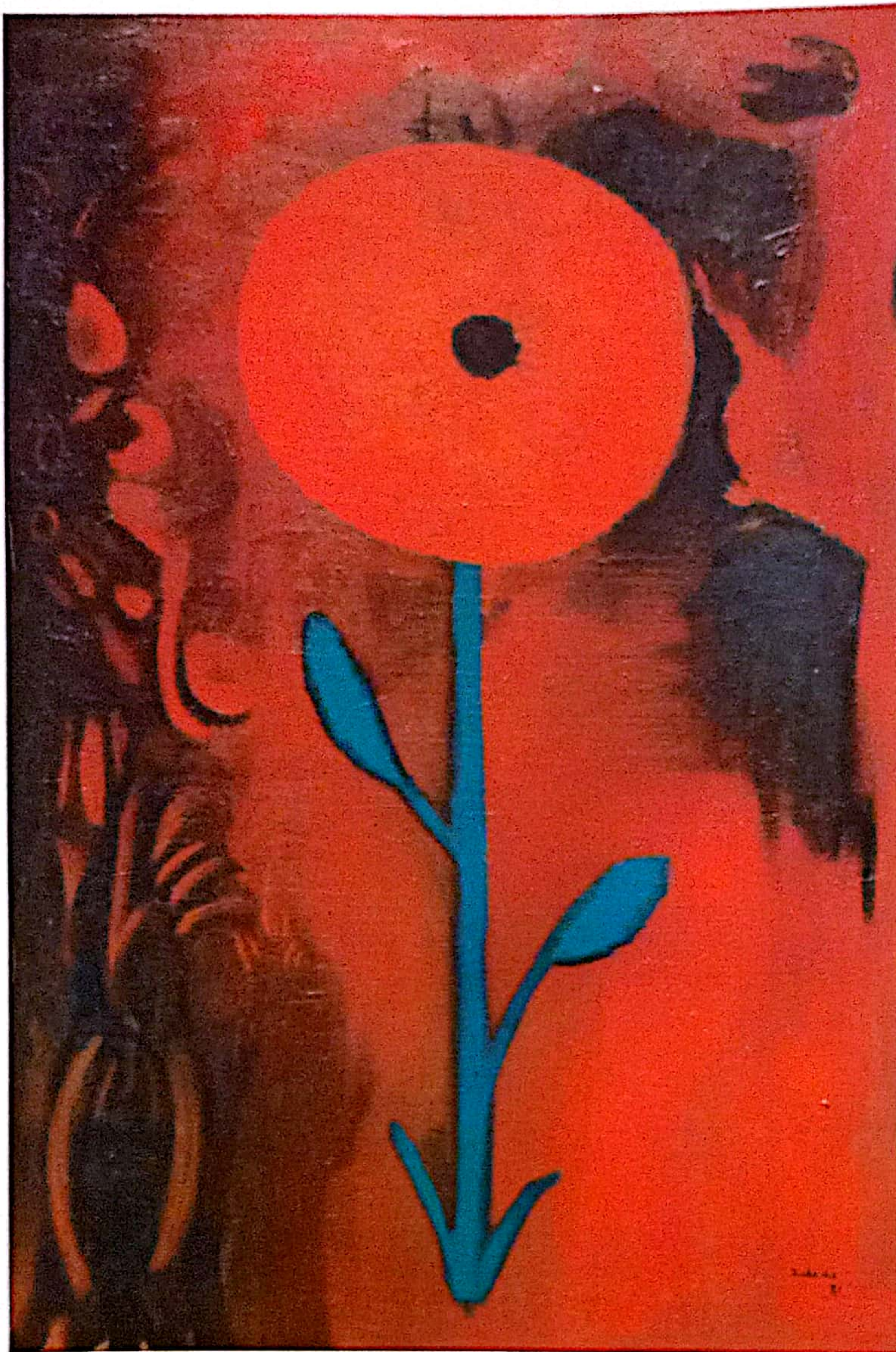


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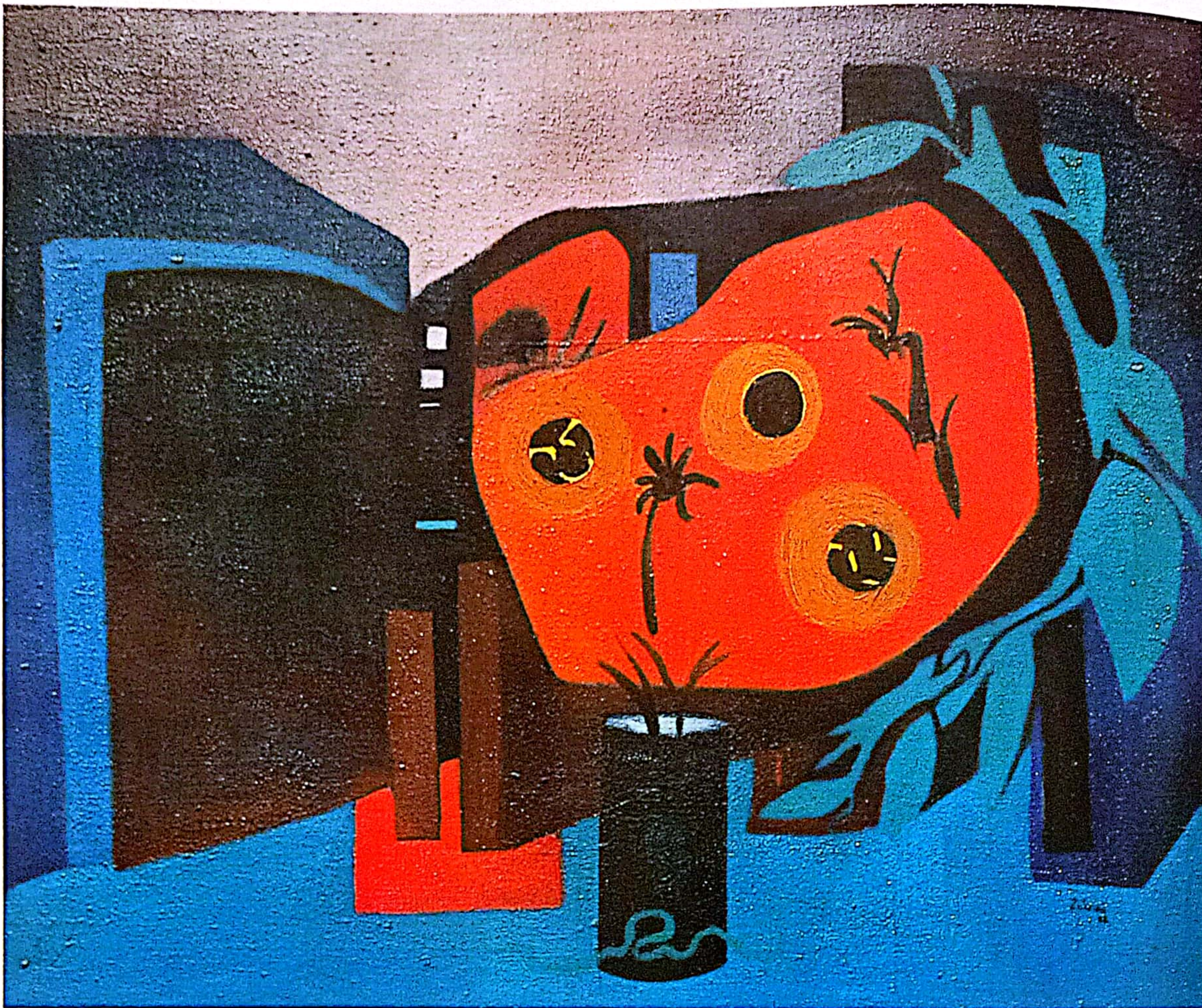
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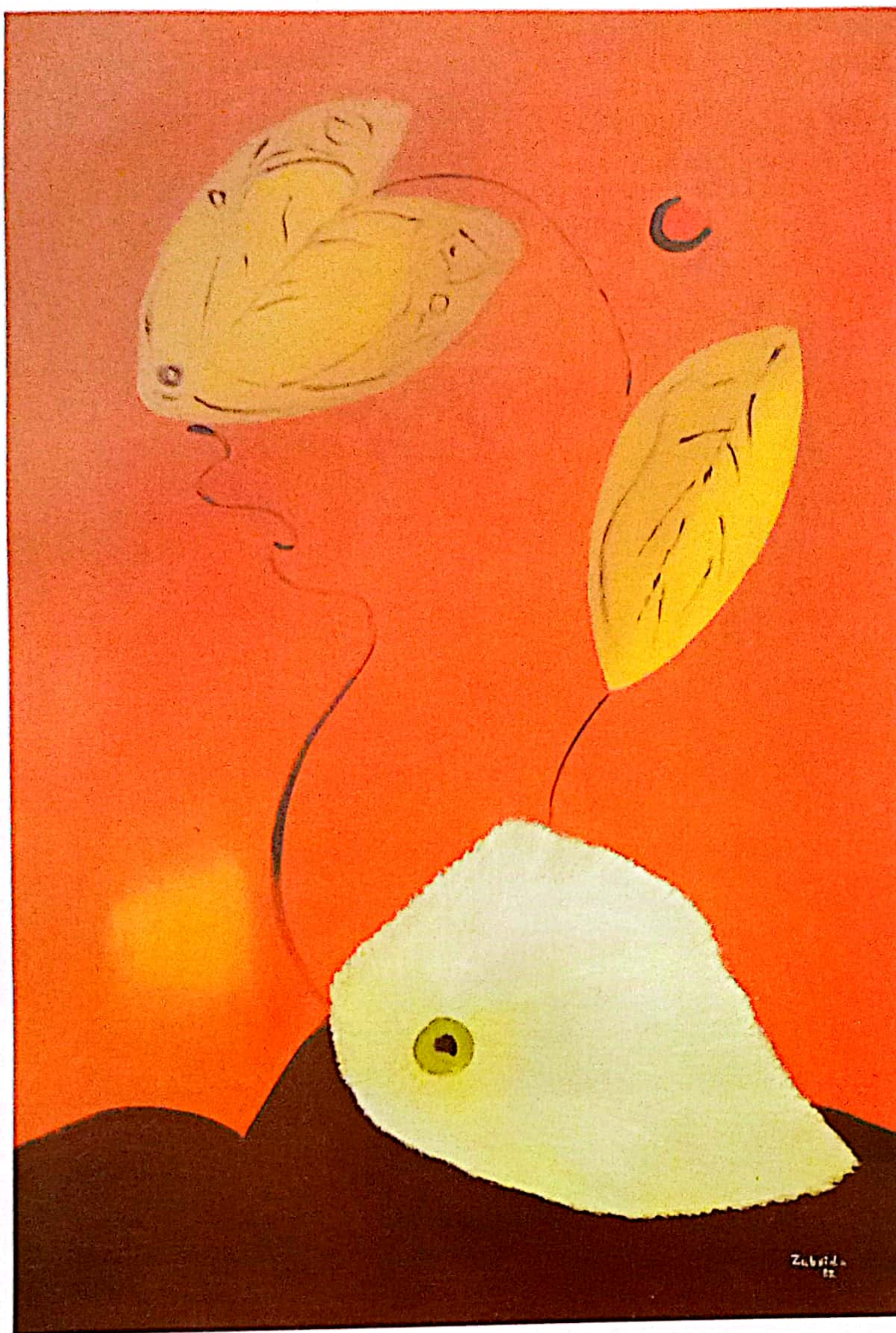


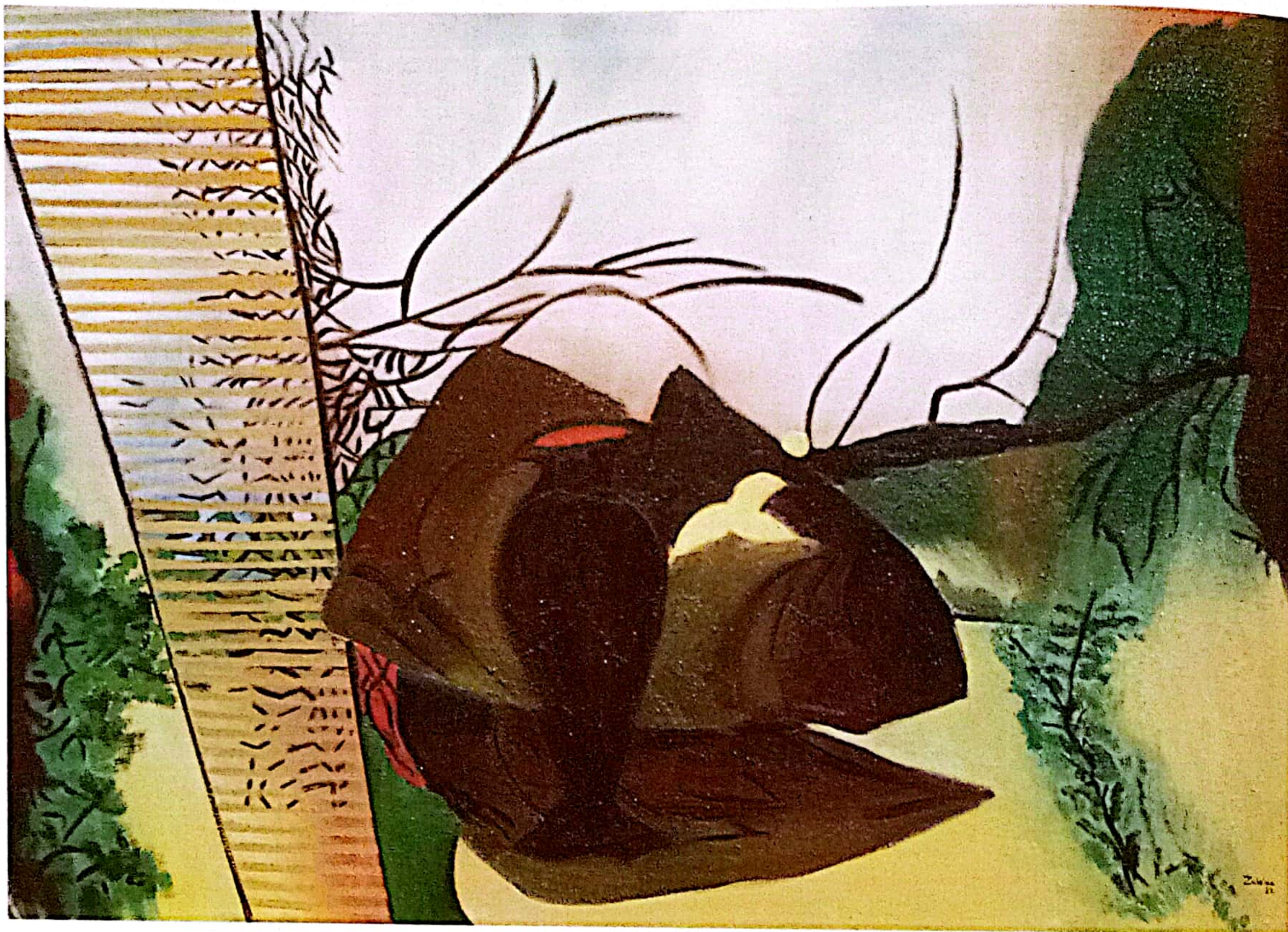
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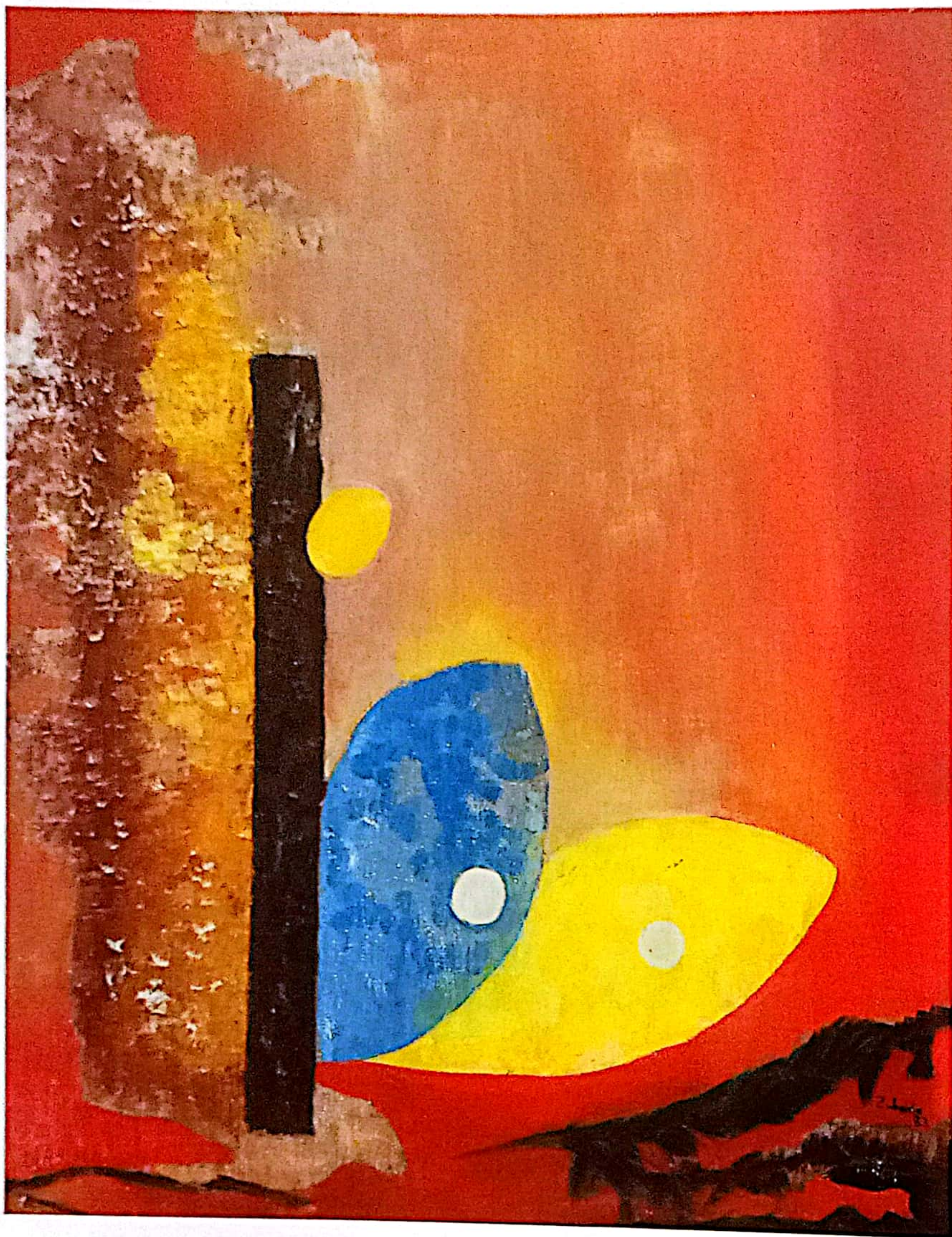


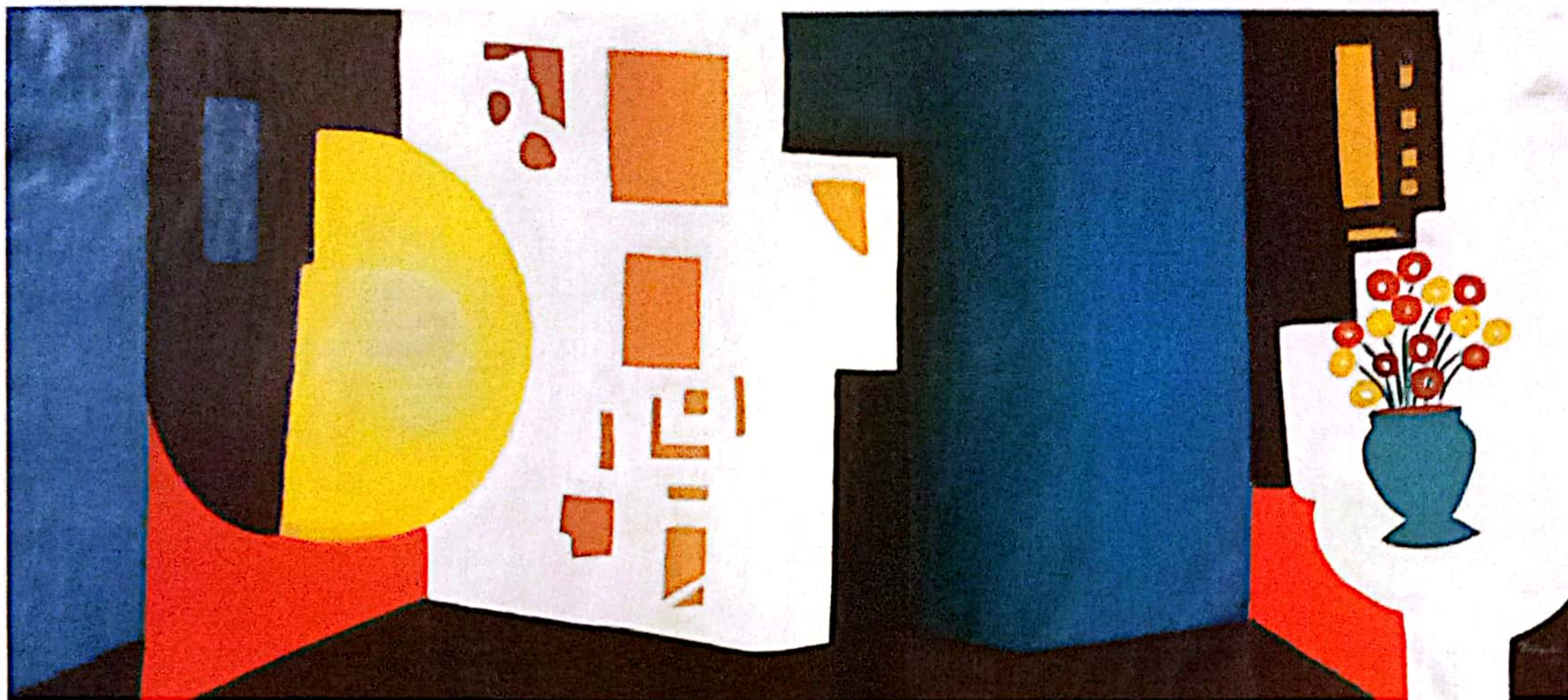
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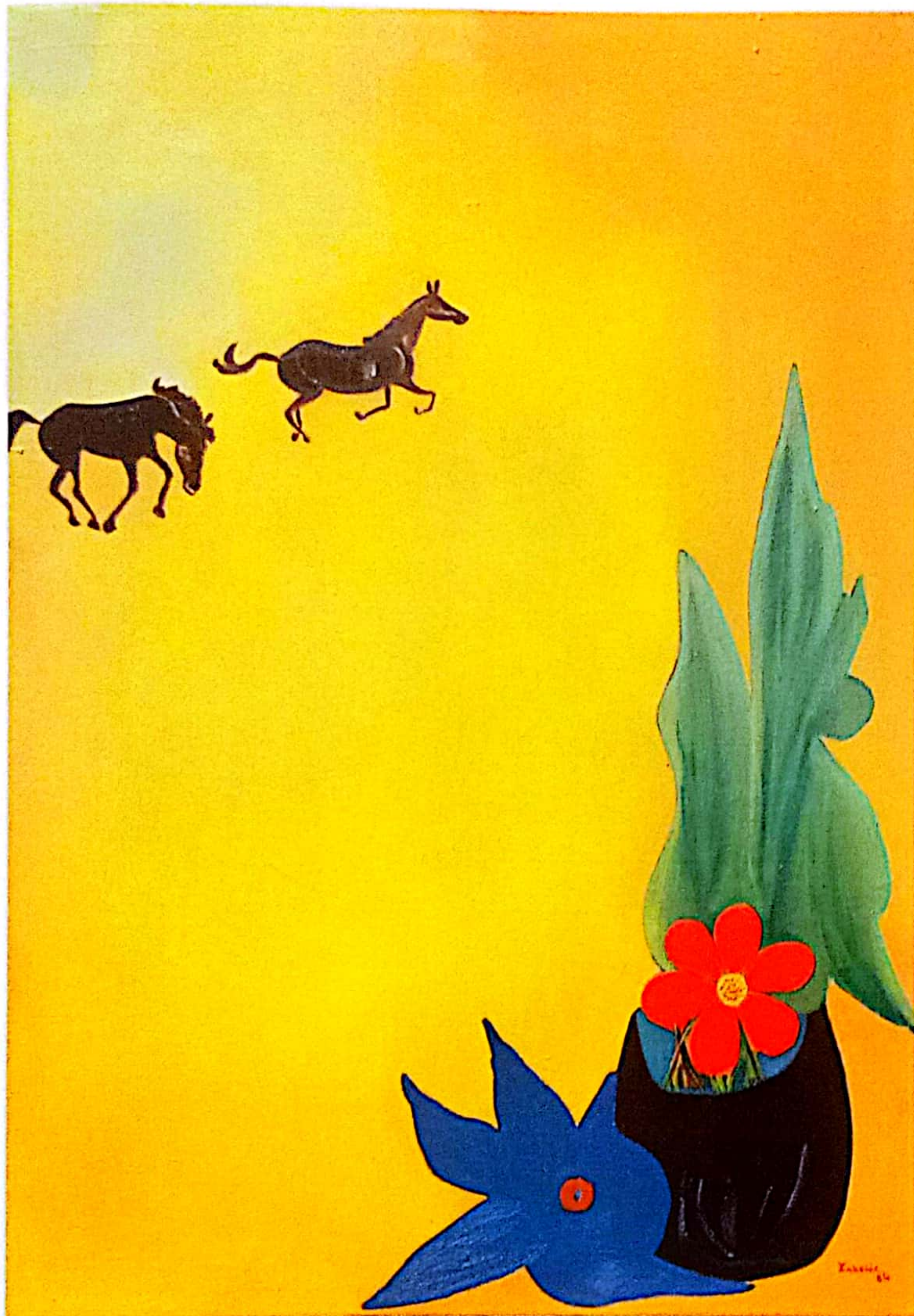


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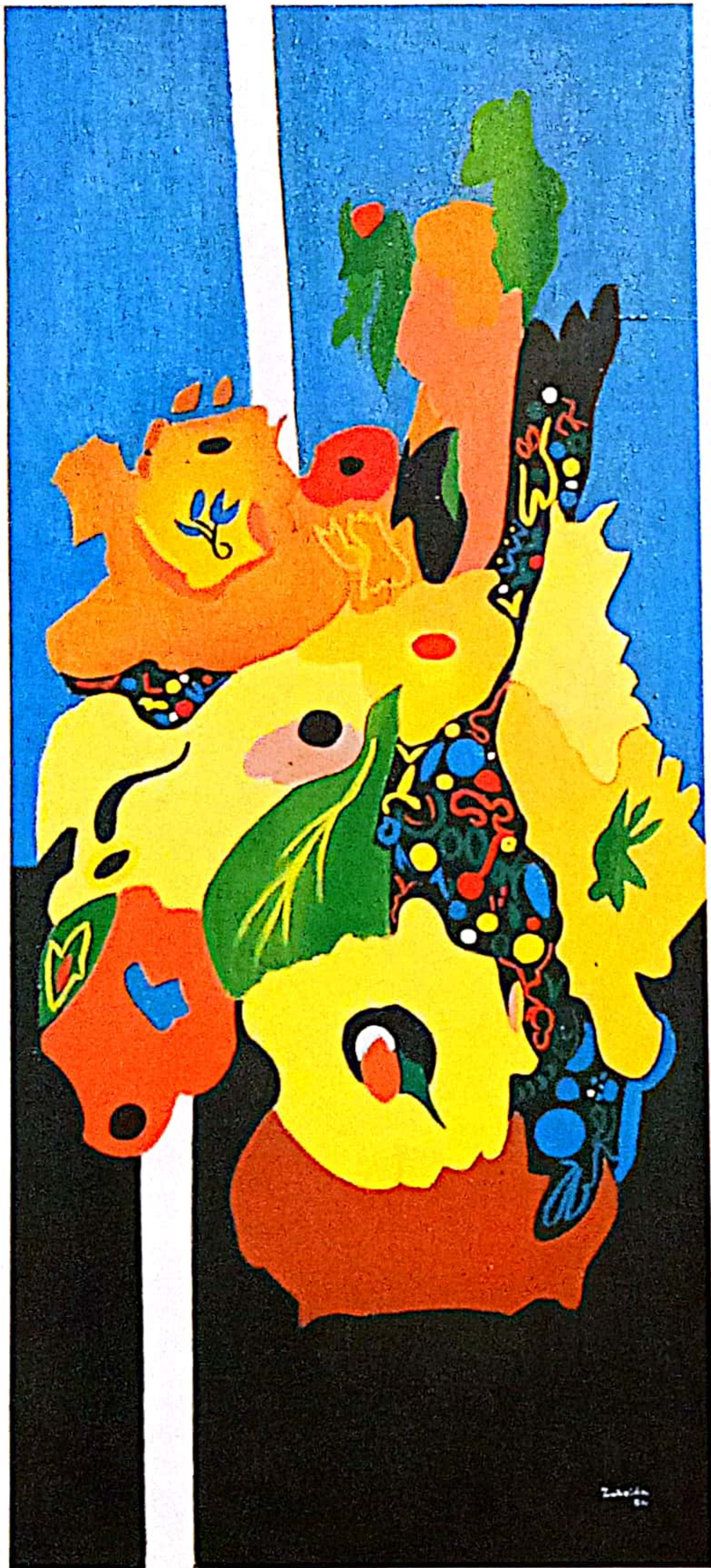


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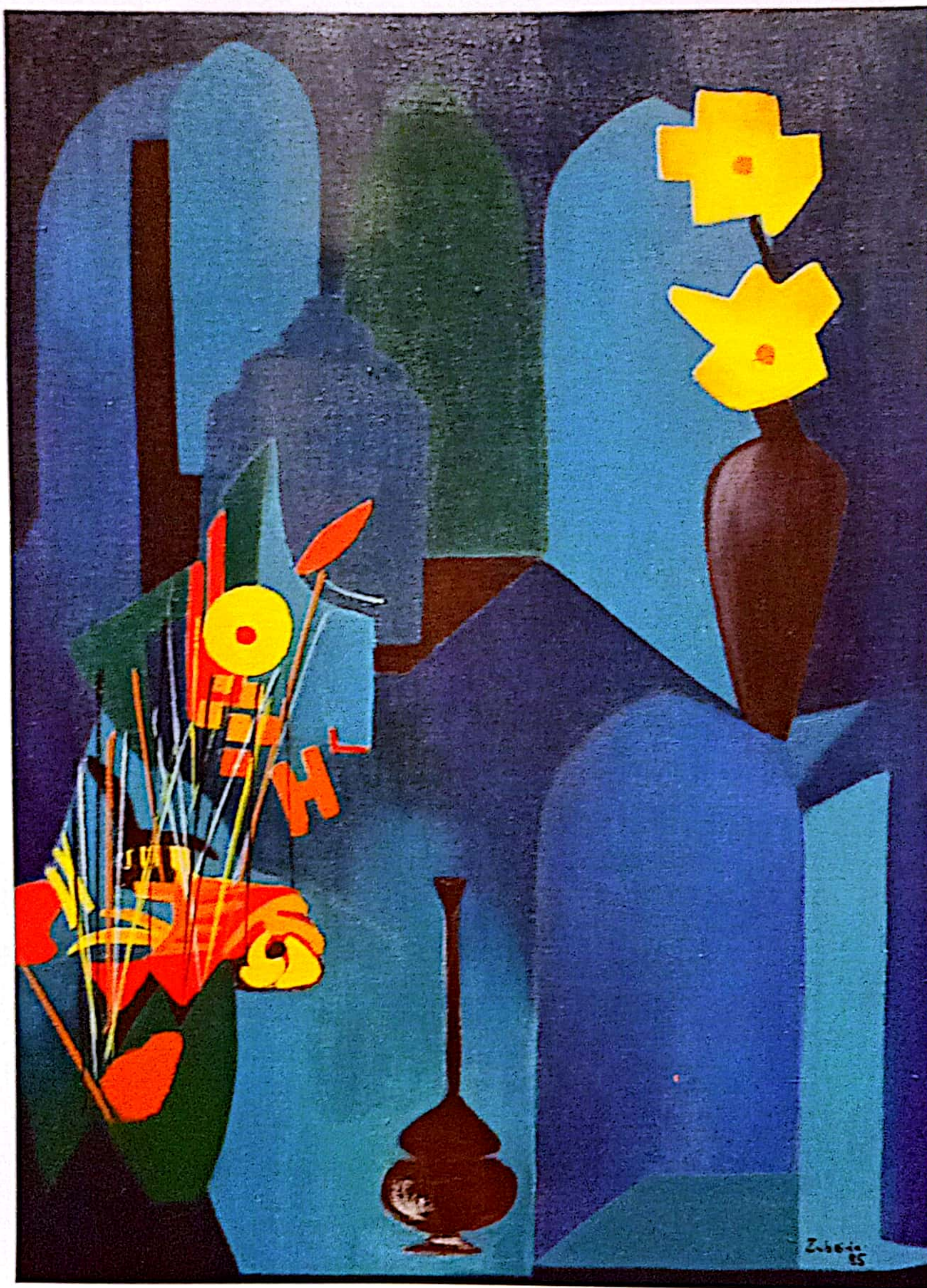
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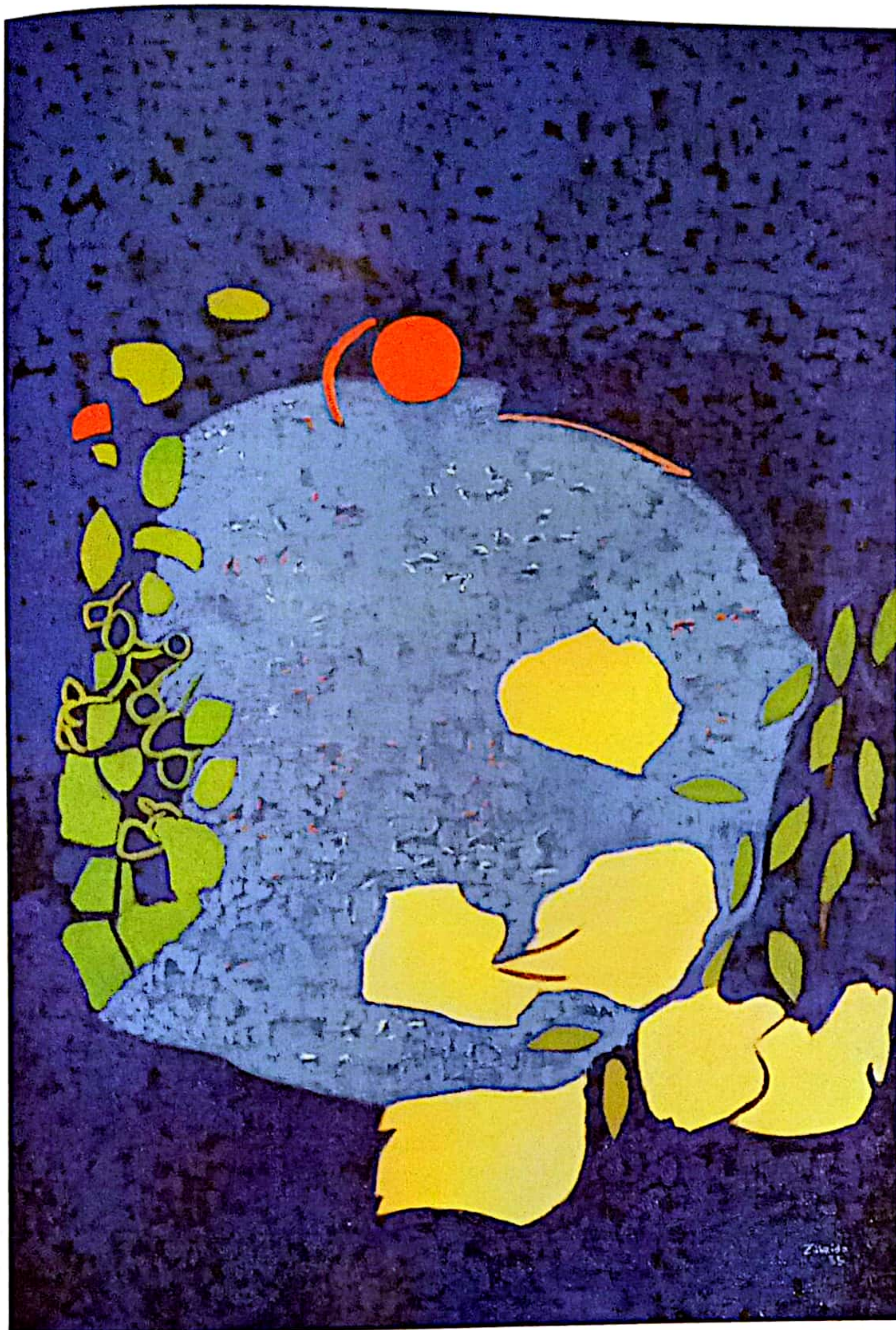


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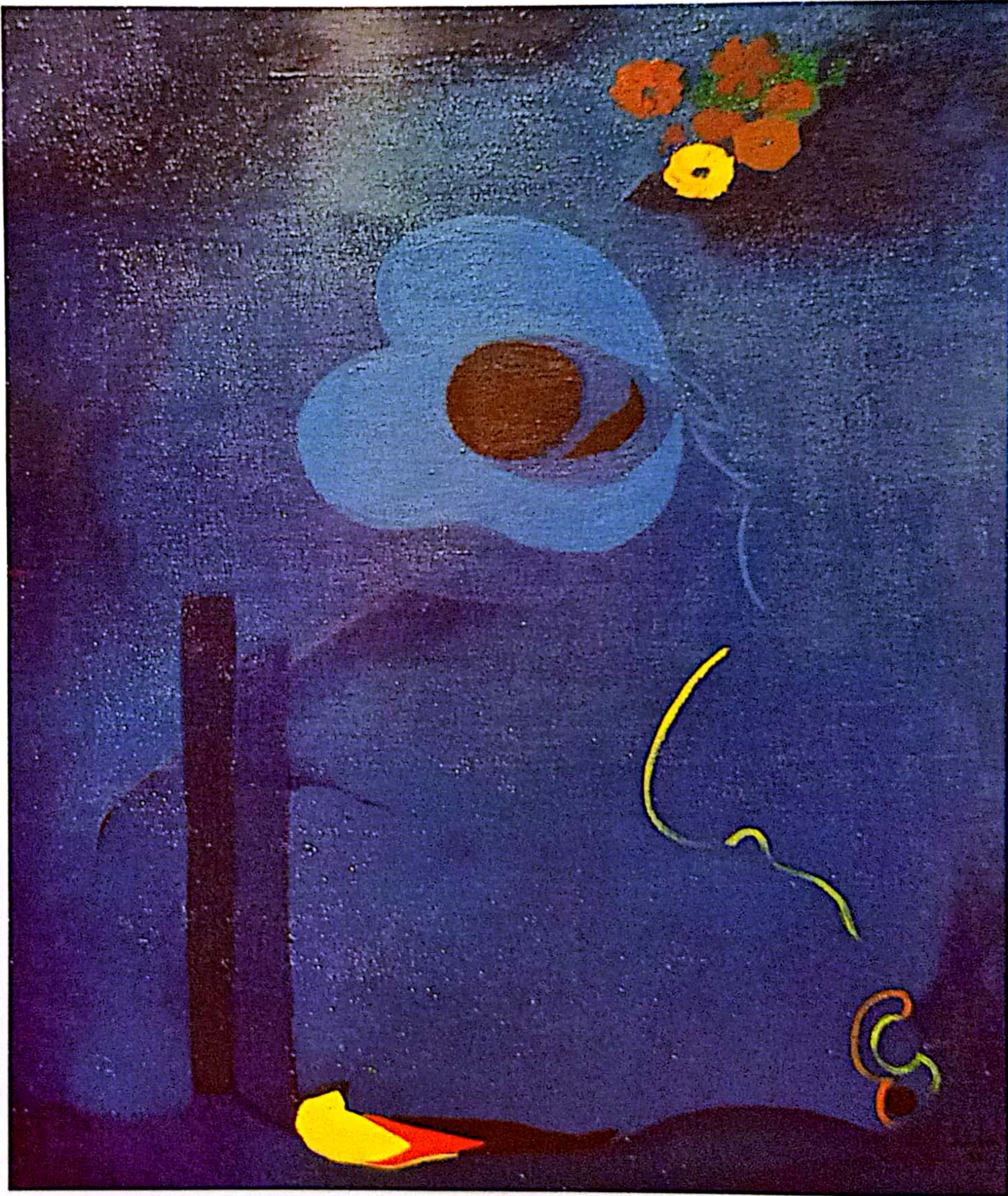


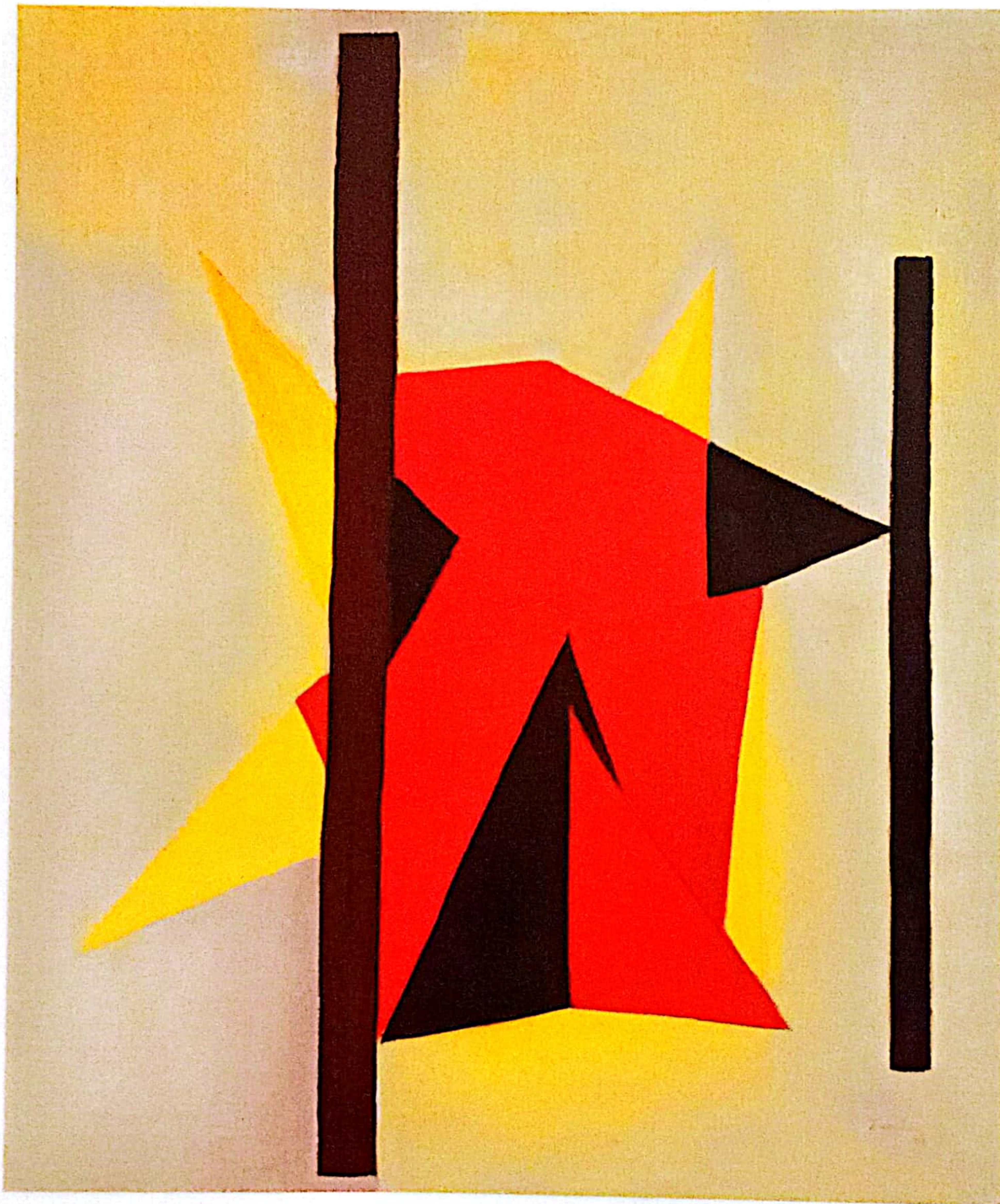
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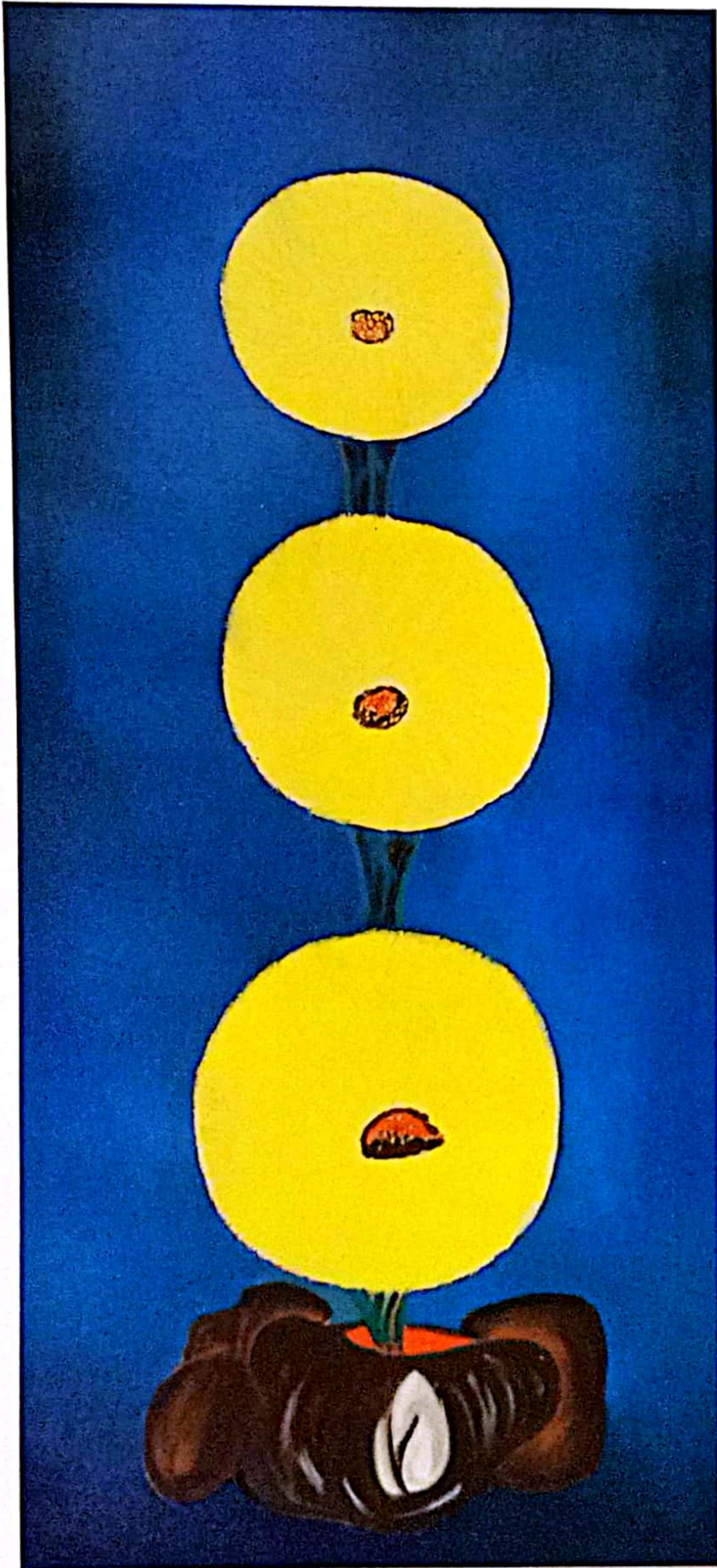
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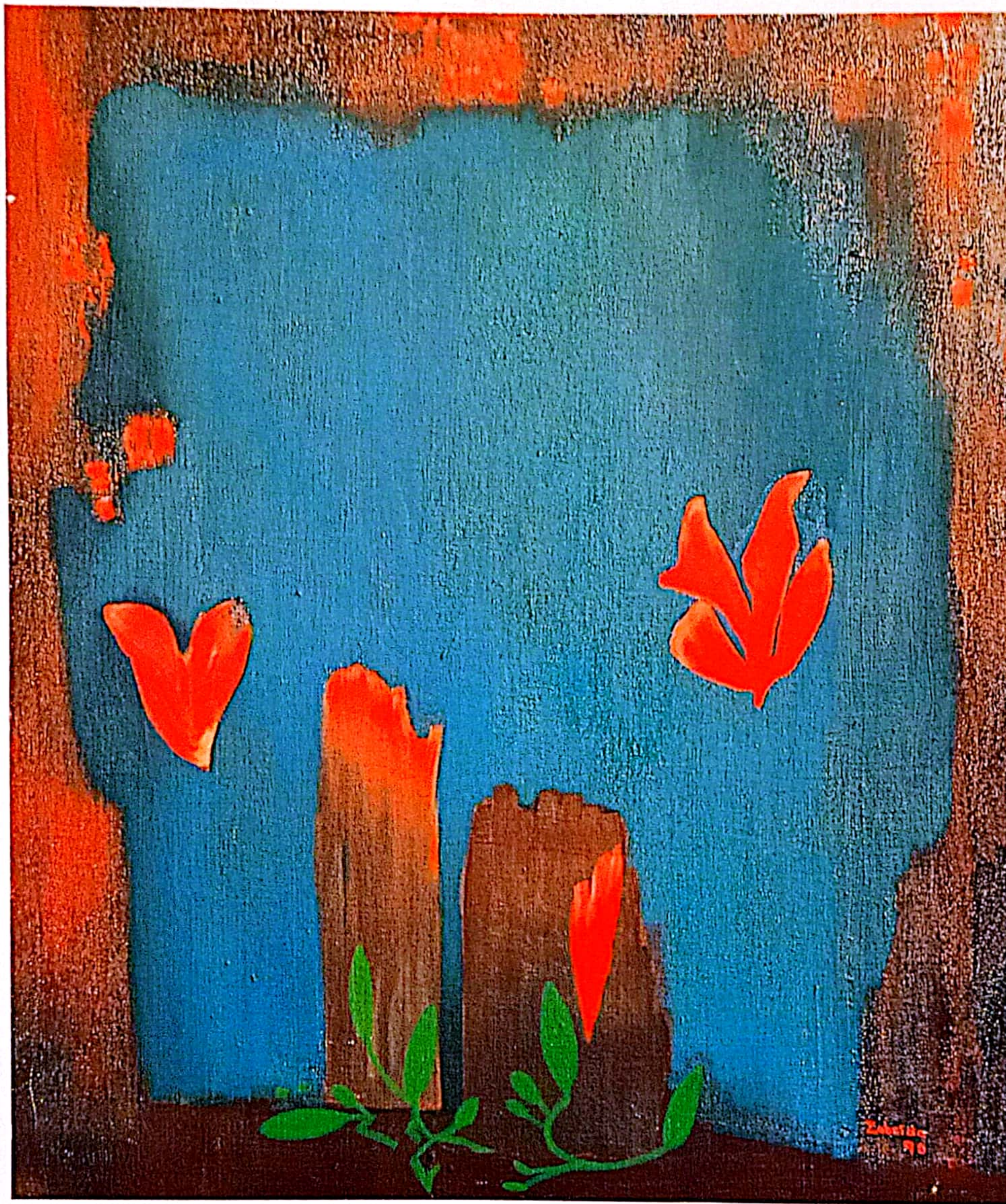
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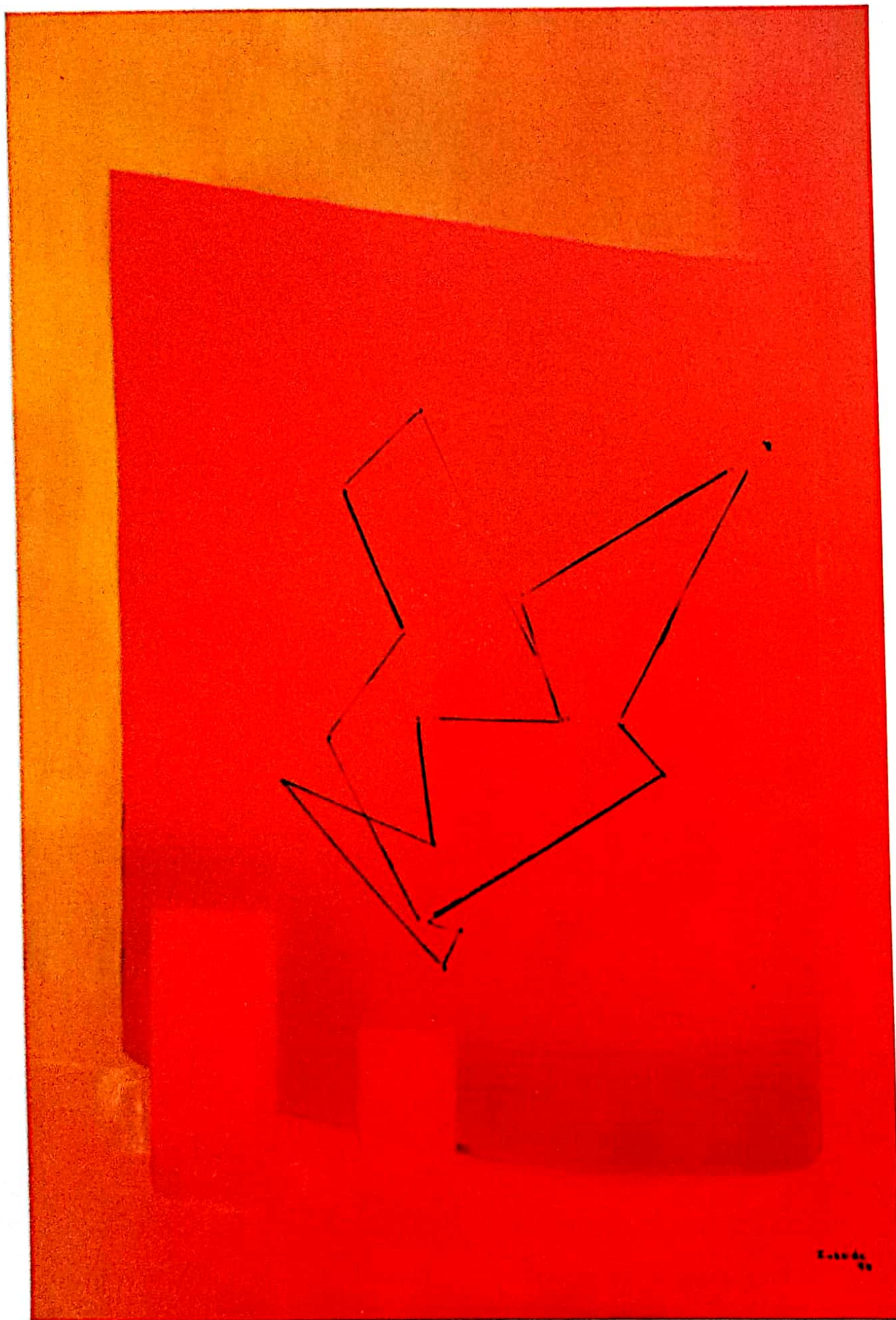


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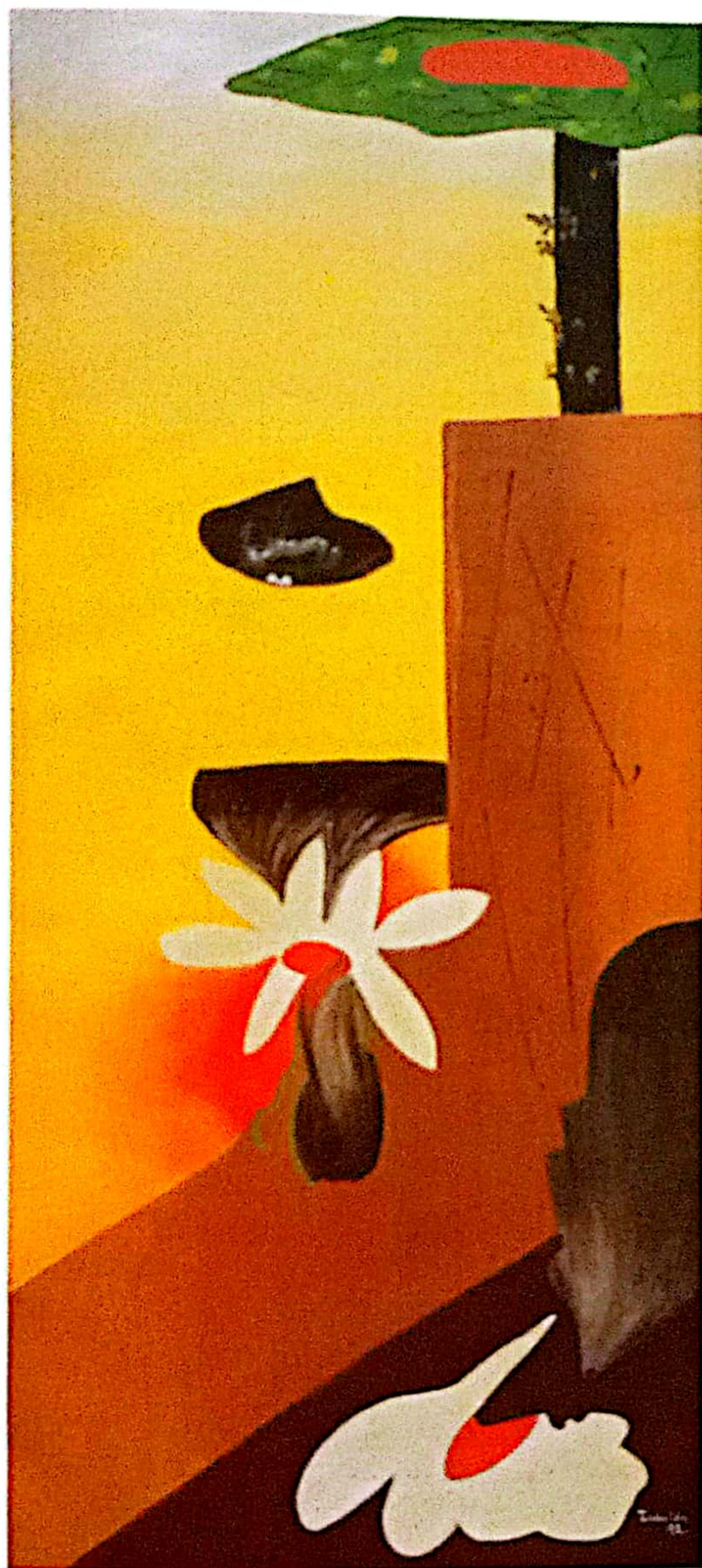


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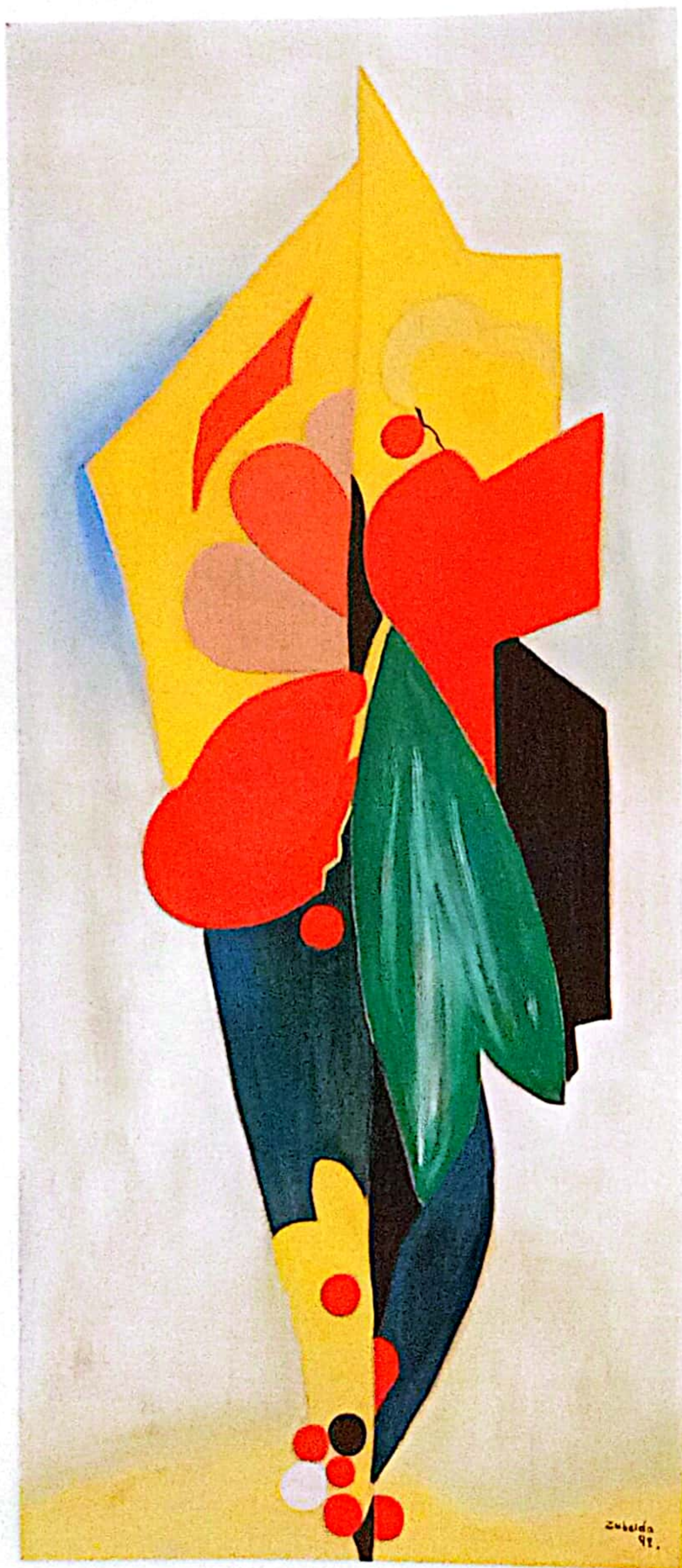


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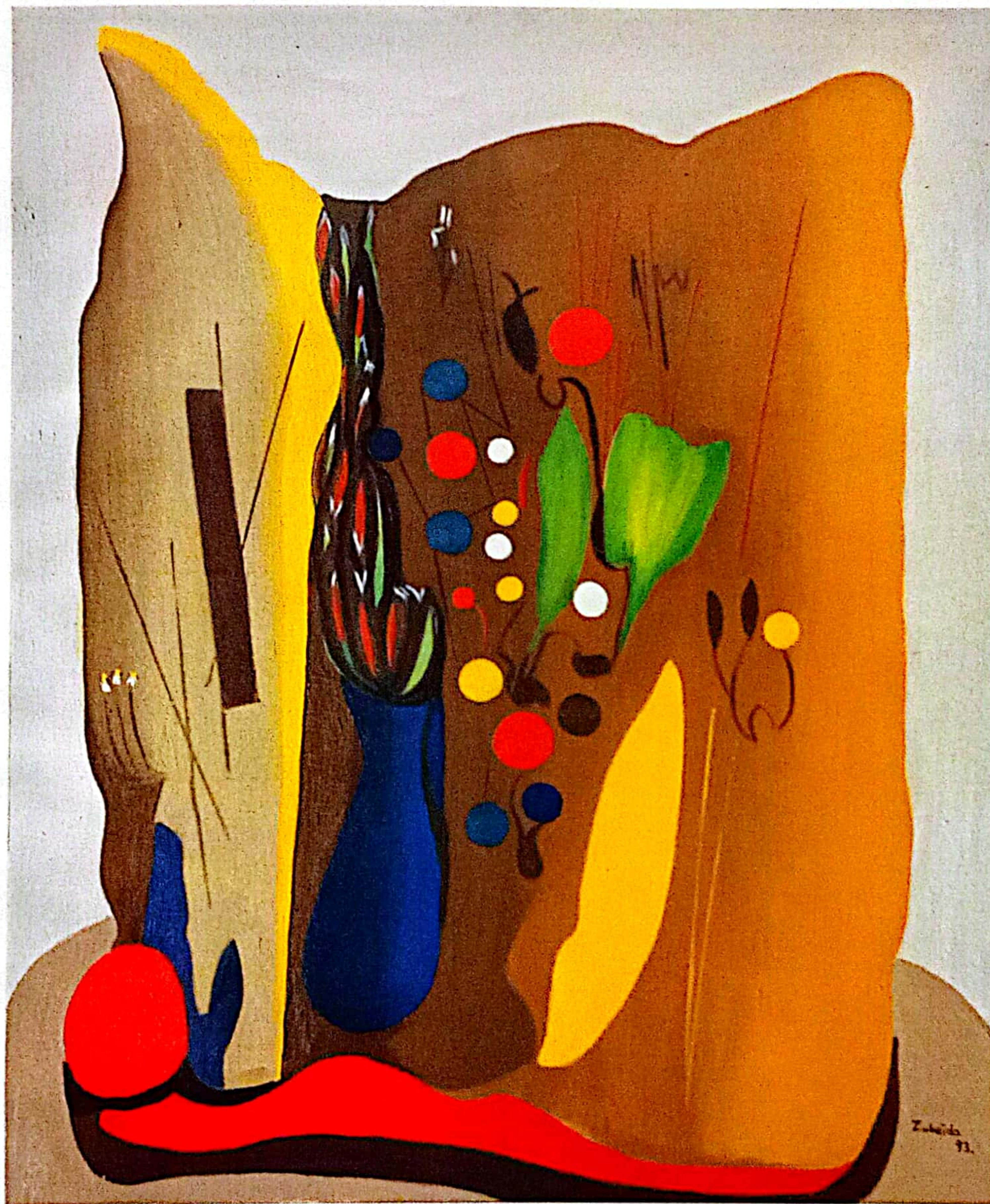


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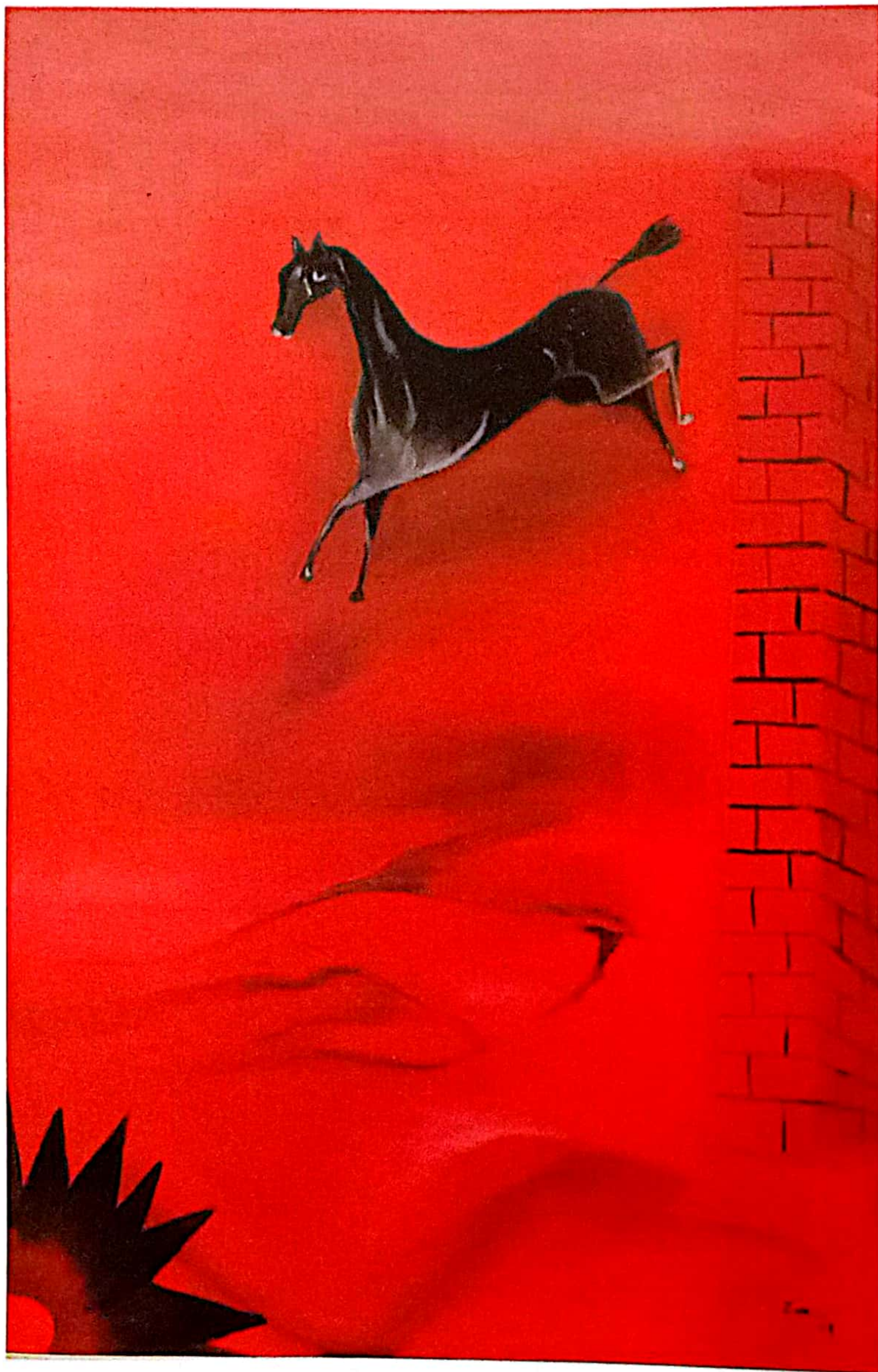


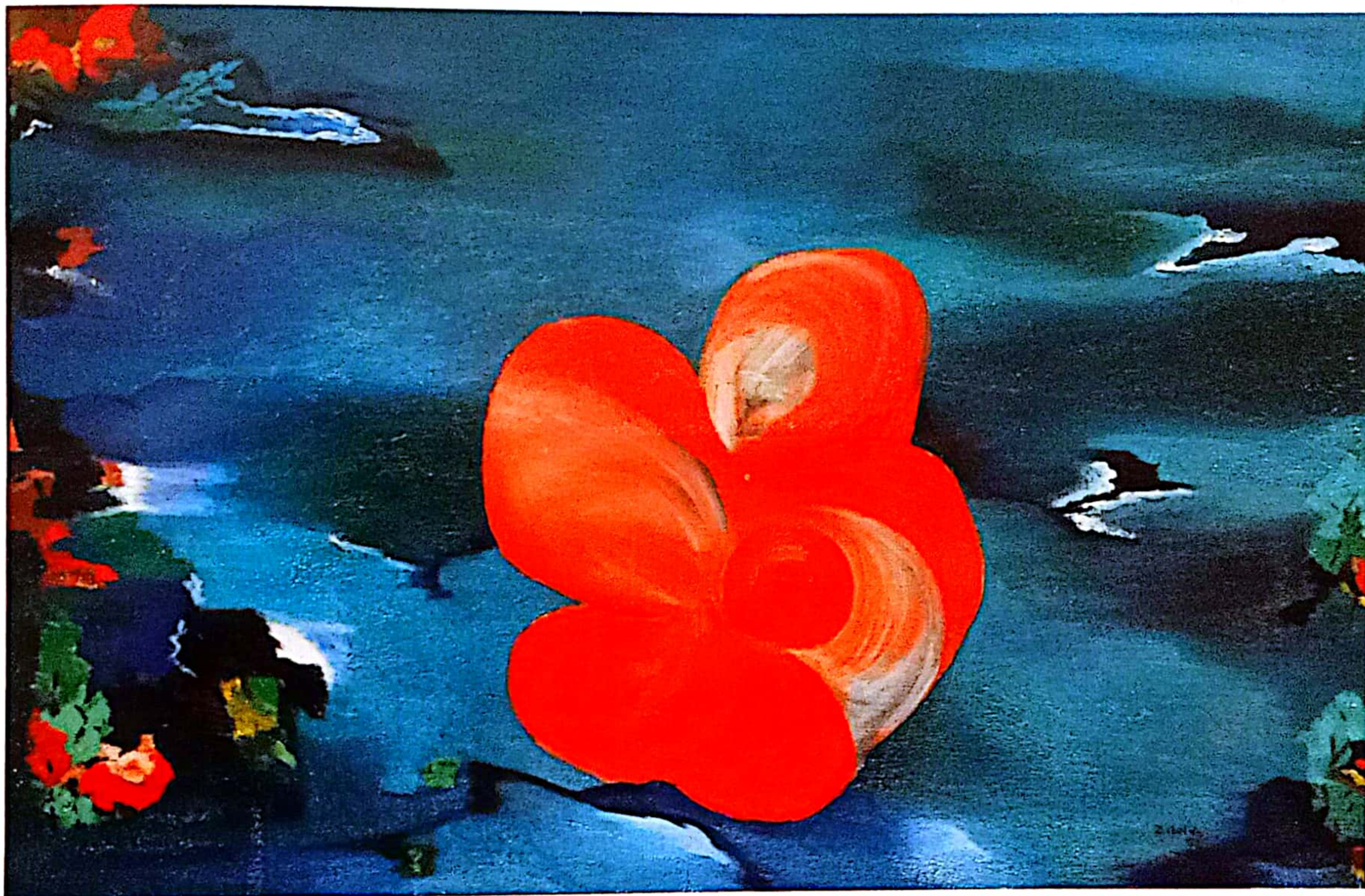
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About the Author

Dr Musarrat Hasan is an art historian, a teacher with a vast experience and a painter of distinction. She obtained her Master's degree from the Punjab University in 1961, and her PhD in Art History in 1996. She is currently Professor for PhD Studies at the Institute of Art and Design, University of the Punjab, 2003. She is Supervising Professor for Doctoral Thesis in Fine Arts Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, 2003. Her publications include:

- *Painting in the Punjab Plains - during hundred years of British Rule (1849 – 1949)*, published by Ferozesons, Ltd., Lahore, 1998.
- *Ancient Man and the Art of Painting*, published in Urdu by Polymar, Lahore, 1996.
- *Khalid Iqbal, a Modern Realist*, currently under print, published by National College of Arts and Ferozesons Ltd., Lahore, 2003.

About this Book

This volume on the late Zubeida Agha, who pioneered the modern art movement in the early years of Pakistan and contributed to it throughout the second half of the last century, is a joint publication of the PNCA - Pakistan National Council of the Arts - and the London journal *AIW - Arts & The Islamic World*. Its planning and production in Pakistan has been undertaken by Fomma - Foundation for Museum of Modern Art - as the second in the Foundation's current series of monographs aimed at profiling the country's outstanding contemporary artists and architects.