

Backstory on My Composition of *Glass Sky*, *The Owl House* & Helen Martins



Q. What was your inspiration for your composition, *Glass Sky*?

A. I had been studying Indian raga music, and one raga in particular, Multani. This intense, majestic raga comes from the region of Multan, now Pakistan, where it is very hot and desert-dry. Given Helen Martins love of exoticism, and the landscape of the Karoo, Multani seemed like a natural fit. Not only because of the desert and Martin's numerous references to the East in her work, but also because of her emotional intensity, and her sense of isolation. I didn't want to stereotype her life as just sad, or wretched, despite the tragedies she suffered. In fact I felt she celebrated life, with her wry sense of humor, taking the lemons she had received and making lemonade.

The title "Glass Sky" comes from when I was traveling to the Owl House, and stopped at a desolate place. It was a rest stop, with one tree, a fence, and a few plastic bags blowing about in the wind. Then I

noticed a swarm of small birds, far away, flying in graceful formation in the big sky. The sky has a distant glassy look to it, a winter sky in the Karoo. It was a perfect nexus of solitude, pathos and love. The Owl House itself is full of glass objects and textures, from floor to ceiling, and in the yard. The title also refers to the feeling of compression and reflection that Martins experienced (as in “glass ceiling”) since she was not free, externally or internally.

Q. How did you find out about the Owl House in Nieu Bethesda?

A. I had a Let’s Go guidebook to South Africa that described a house of glass in the desert created by Outsider artist, Helen Martins. Glass and deserts are some of my favourite things, so I rented a car. It was the first time I had either rented a car or driven on the left, so I drove straight from Grahamstown to Nieu Bethesda in a pool of sweat. And fell in love.





Q. You talk in the Inner Landscapes film about creativity and Helen Martins - can you say more about that?

A. In the creative process you merge with what's around you, good or bad. It's all useful, even if the experience ends up being loathsome and not to be repeated. It seems to me that we are here to arrive, experience, enact our deepest selves, then disappear into the dust. Martins was an untraditional woman, trapped in an unforgiving country that marginalized most people. She didn't fit the mould and she couldn't if she tried. At the same time she wanted to connect, and making art made her feel loved and loveable. She merged herself with the natural world, the desert, the exotica that she found in everyday

objects, and distilled what needed to be expressed. This is what great artists do. They hook into the collective unconscious, select what needs to be said at that moment, and realize it.

Q. Can you comment on Helen Martin's status as an artist?

A. I have my own definitions about this, distinguishing between being an artist or a maker of art.

Being an artist means you have a public. Having a public changes you, whether you like it or not. You might feed off of it, or resist it, but it still shapes who you are. Artists are responsible to their audiences, and good artists know how much to challenge and how much to nurture.

Being a maker of art means not having a public. You make art in private, in complete artistic freedom, and it's not up for public scrutiny.

Helen Martins worked as a maker of art for a long time. That defines her as an Outsider Artist. Eventually when she had a public, she was an artist. Neither label comments on the quality of the work. You can be a bad artist and have a public. Or you can make art, with your work not being seen by anyone, and be brilliant.

I love Martins' work. Typical of many Outsider artists, she longed for the kind of recognition that formally trained artists feel is their due. She did have some recognition towards the end of her life, and she hoped that her house would become a museum. Helen Martins inspired Athol Fugard's play, "Road to Mecca".



Q. Whom did Helen Martins work with?

A. The men who worked under Helen Martins' direction at various times - Koos Malgas, Jonas Adams and Piet Van Der Merwe - were not visible under the apartheid regime. They were coloured, and Martins was white.

We're never going to know the true depth of their relationship with her, apart from surviving anecdotes. There has been some controversy in recent years about the authorship, and therefore financial legacies, of the Owl House. Virtually all the work is identified as that of Helen Martins, which makes it sound like the traditional Western studio relationship of master artist to assistants. Martins was prolific. Grinding glass, and working with concrete and wire is hard labour, so assistance was necessary. My own feeling is that it was more of a partnership than just employment. This is how collaboration is, often subtle and unspoken. You'll never create the same thing by yourself. Something enters your group, a kind of spirit that is specific to a group's creativity, and goes away when that group changes.