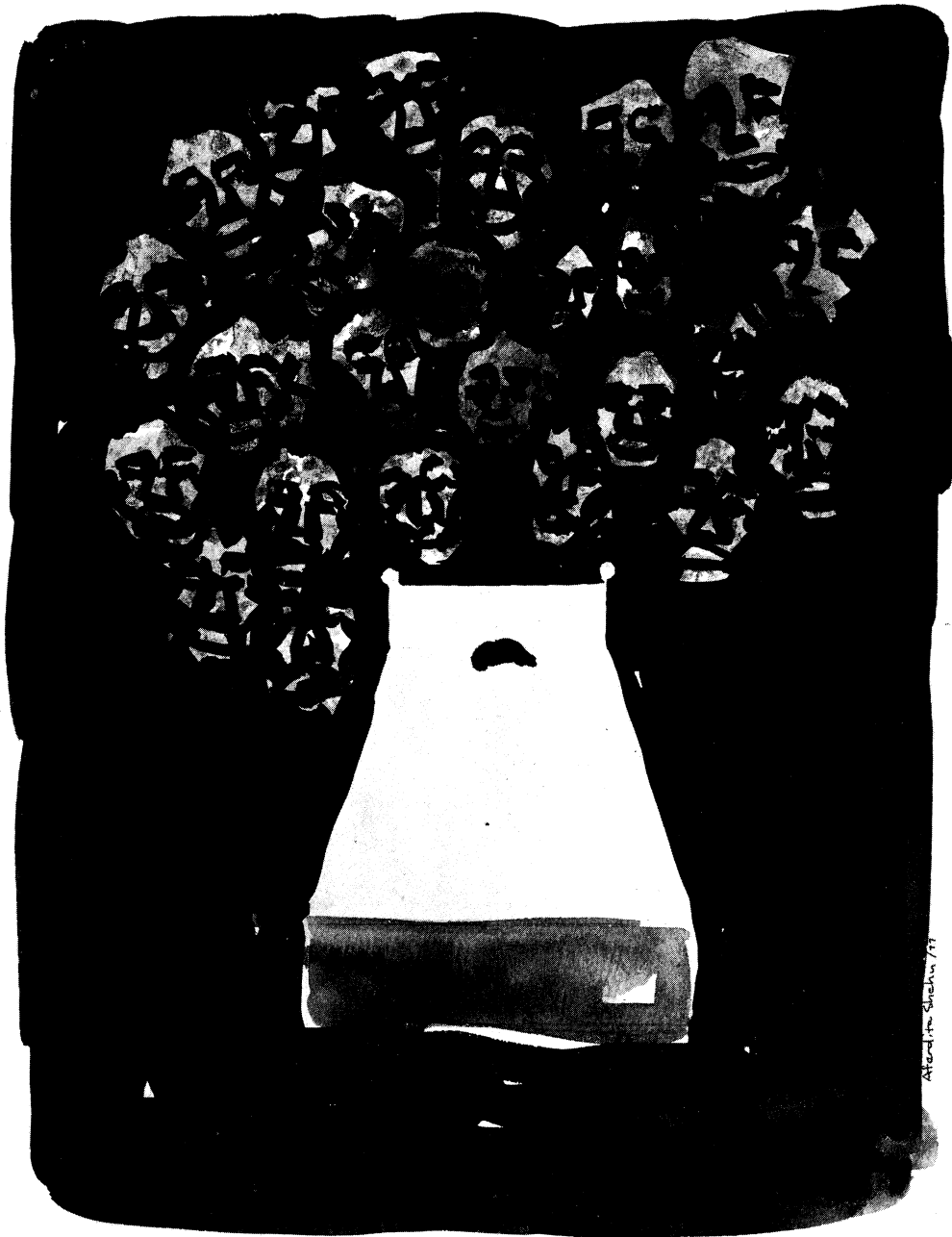


Aferdita Shehu

Georgia Watterson



Shehu means sheik or head of a tribe, owner of many sheep. Aferdita is a name her father created for her. Dita has been creating ever since.

We sat talking quietly, shielded by a bamboo canopy in the living room of Dita's small flat above an Eglinton Avenue store. Her living space crammed with books, pictures, hangings and the toys of Khalihah, her ten month old daughter, reflects the pressures and contradictions inherent in city living. As a centre for Dita's various pursuits as commercial artist, photographer, painter, mate and mother, it is a studio, an office and a home. Apparently simple, Dita's surroundings represent a highly sophisticated, tightly pulled together confusion that is controlled yet overflowing, busy yet serene and welcoming, disciplined, rich, textured...At the same time, it is a cocoon, containing quiet corners and providing a retreat from the pressures of life outside.

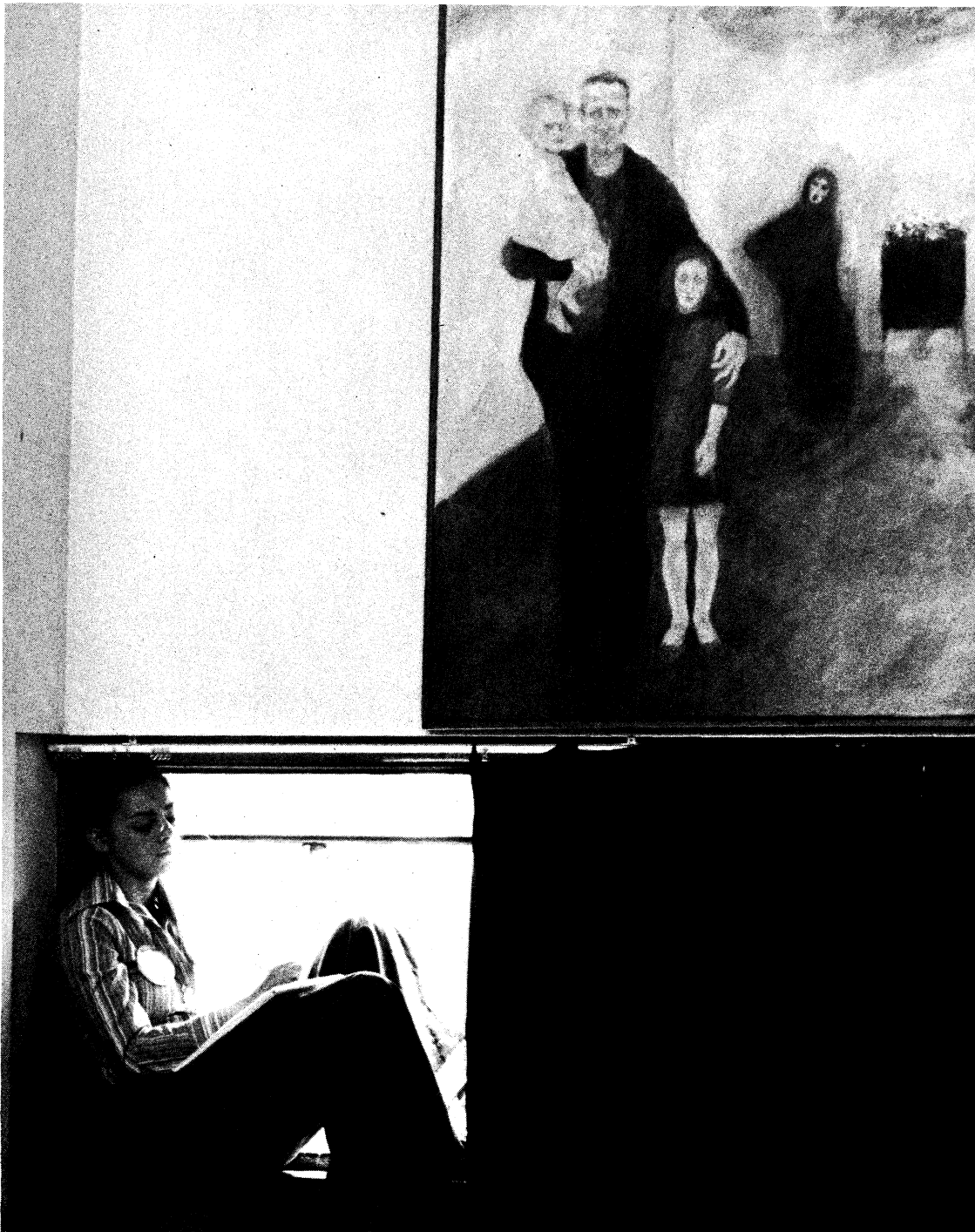
Dita talks with subdued intensity about her art, her work and

her family—how she deals with them in practical and emotional terms, and how she manages to integrate one with the other.

It is critical for Dita to get in touch with her feelings about what she sees, and then, very quickly on recognizing them, to bring them out immediately and express them. 'I really have to tune in to myself.'

A woman came to the studio to have pictures taken. She was nervous, apprehensive about being photographed in the nude. Dita admits, 'I was also nervous, partly in response to the challenge and partly in response to the woman's nervousness. We played one of her favorite record albums (which I had asked her to bring), and while we talked, I literally bombarded her with the camera, frame after frame, without relief until gradually she eased into the situation.'

All Dita's subjects like her to talk to them while she takes



Aferdita Shehu

pictures. It puts them at their ease. The camera disconcerts them by hiding Dita's eyes and most of her face. 'The camera lens has no expression. They rely on my voice to make contact but I hate talking while taking pictures.'

In the case of the woman subject, Dita's calming tactics worked. Freed of her awareness of the woman's feelings and of her own sympathetic reaction, Dita became more concerned with what she was going to produce. 'The woman came to me because she wanted my interpretation of her. She wanted to see how I perceived her and the world through her eyes. And always, when I am taking photographs, I am trying to capture images, atmospheres, expressions, which help express my way of perceiving things. This dual challenge took over at one point with a quiet, growing creative excitement.'

Dita has been painting for much longer than she has been taking photographs. 'Painting is isolating and reinforces my tendency

to withdraw. While painting, I am relatively independent of the physical process, of the environment.' By using black poster paint and inexpensive paper, she feels free to experiment because cost doesn't inhibit her creativity.

Wondering about the difference between her photography and her painting, I asked what provides her inspiration. 'I draw on shapes, spaces, light, shadows, textures, relationships, dreams. I usually remember my dreams. Sometimes I sketch them in the morning; sometimes I don't remember them until later in the day. My dreams usually symbolize feelings. Generally, I express them in my drawings. I can do drawings more immediately; in photography it may be years before I can incorporate an idea from a dream.'

'Dreams often answer questions for me, even in terms of everyday things—things I haven't been able to accept in working hours. My friends can always tell when I have had a night of

sleep in which I have travelled or wandered. That's when I appear spacey to other people. I stumble over things, can't hold words together, feel terribly awkward in social situations. Then I only want to be at home. That's my most creative time.'

Although her photography and her painting are distinct forms, they are related. The photographs stimulate the drawings; the drawings, the photographs. Both forms constantly overlap, interchange and flow with Dita's experience.

Artists are often perceived by others as romantic dreamers, totally impractical, and enchanted by the image of struggling in some badly lit, unheated garret trying to ignore their hunger pangs. Dita debunks that myth. 'I don't believe in being a starving artist.' Drinking in the lounge of 21 McGill, surrounded by the bustle of business lunches and professional competitiveness cloaked in elegance, Dita remarks, 'Some part of me likes the competition, enjoys being out there with the wolves. But then, I love the retreat. It has to be there.'

For years Dita has worked in a series of commercial art jobs. Of these jobs she says, 'All those years to me are one complete blank. The blank ended when I started to freelance. Then I experienced the difference between 'dead end commercial art' and 'open end commercial art'.

By freelancing she is relieved of the tedium of working in the same place on the same things every day, and is free to set her own pace. She has no obligation to involve herself in a work situation which doesn't suit her—she can simply look for another work relationship. 'Freelancing makes a tremendous difference to my general spirits.'

As a woman and an artist, Dita must struggle with the problem of organizing her time to accommodate all the demands on her. 'Only fragments of time rather than spaces of consecutive time are available to me. I'm always having to stop to wipe a runny nose.' As Dita tries to explain the difficulties of integrating the role of artist and mother, each problem she introduces gradually begins to sound like an advantage: 'I usually do my best work when I'm in an intimate surrounding with someone. A lot of my creative energy comes through my relationship with my family, in fact through all different kinds of relationships. Being with people gives me ideas.'

'Even though the demands of my friends and family fragment my time, they also enrich the way I see things. The fabric of my professional and personal life may seem quite disrupted and confusing, but in fact they play off each other—much as my photography feeds my painting and vice versa. Personal relationships nurture my creativity; and my creative work validates my life.'

