Writ large

Artists in the Middle East have proved creative in the face of Islam’s bar on depictions of the human body, as Fionnuala McHugh discovers

A lot of the artists have a classical education but they do something new with it. They work with non-image and the script is ornament but not just decoration – there is something behind it, and it’s fascinating to see how they choose ways to diversify that.”

So Qatar’s Al Waqif constantly reworks the Arabic letter “nun” (equivalent to the Latin N) and its connection to surah [section] 68 of the Koran, which is read “nun,” just as the Pen Ahmed Moustafig, born in Egypt and now living in London, has written a doctoral thesis on the proportional system of calligraphy and devoted much mathematical, as well as artistic, thought to the relationship between the shape of a cube (as exemplified by the Kaaba in Mecca) and 99, the number of names for Allah, Lubwah Al-Homoud, from Saudi Arabia, bases her work on the Indian multiplication table known as the Vedic square – not to box herself in but to find the possibilities of new space in geometry.

She’s one of two women in the exhibition. The other is Golnaz Fathi, from Iran, whose work – created, in the classical style, with a quill – looks, to this outsider’s untrained eye, strikingly sexual. “Erotic, in a way, right?” agrees von Roques. “But I think she is not having this idea in her mind. She has had an education in classical calligraphy and that takes years, you have to repeat and repeat. And doing this incredible thing, with the pen on canvas, is like an act of meditation, between the conscious and the subconscious.”

But wouldn’t Fathi, who’s 40, be horrified by such an interpretation? “It’s often what I am thinking,” admits von Roques, who speaks Arabic and Farsi but is not Muslim. “I go so deeply into this but still I have my Western-educated eye. I talk to the artists and sometimes they say, ‘No, no, no – how do you have this idea?’ But you still have the freedom to decide, it’s about the interesting relationship between the painter and the person looking.”

In a post-9/11 world, there has been no lack of genuine interest. “After what happened, prejudices and cliches were coming out,” says von Roques. “But a lot of intellectuals people said this cannot be the only side of the story.”

“Written Images” was displayed in Tangier’s New York gallery last autumn, his second exhibition curated by von Roques: “Signs – Contemporary Arab Art” had been shown in 2009 in New York and in 2010 in Beverly Hills. “And people said, ‘My God, we had no idea they have such fantastic art.’ They were overwhelmed, they wanted more of these exhibitions,” von Roques says. (One might also
point out, vulgarly, that since Christie’s held an auction in 2006, in Dubai, and Sotheby’s held one the following year in London, the market in contemporary art from Islamic countries has shown a healthy upsurge.

There is no reference, at least overtly, in the Hong Kong show to the Arab Spring. In January 2011, Ahmed Bassioni, a well-known artist von Roques had been working with on another project, was killed in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. (Her video work was chosen to represent Egypt at last summer’s Venice Biennale.)

Islam is itself a divided house although von Roques has little time for such sub-labels (“Sunni, Shia, Alawite – very, very often this whole thing is politically manipulated”) and neither do the artists.

“They all say, ‘in the first place we are human beings and we are artists, influenced by our culture. They feel unified, gathered together. To give that sense of perspective is why you do such shows.”

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Written Images – Contemporary Calligraphy from the Middle East, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, 57-59 Hollywood Road. Until Nov 4

At the Sundaram Tagore Gallery: Ahmed Moustafa’s Night Journey and Ascension (top); an untitled work by Gohinaz Fathi (above centre); Luwalh Al-Homoud’s The Infinite Cube (above); Ali Hassan’s Nuf I (left); and another work by Fathi (far left).