



Khaled Al-Saa'i, **Elevated Spirit**, 2003–2009, mixed media and acrylic on canvas, 57 x 71". All images: Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

Elegance And Integrity

Any exhibition of contemporary Arab art is an important step in creating inter-cultural dialogue and understanding beyond the prejudices that prevail about Arabs and Muslims. Signs: Contemporary Arab Art, featuring the work of seven contemporary artists and curated by Karin Adrian von Roques, at New York's Sundaram Tagore Gallery, is one such show.

By Marius Kwint

“I thought: ‘This is perfection,’” recalls the German curator Karin Adrian von Roques of her aesthetic and intellectual epiphany during a visit to the mosque at Meknès in Morocco, which was the only mosque in the region that she, as a Christian, was allowed to enter. “I had seen calligraphy and ornaments already in books about Islamic art. But seeing it for real in this big space of the mosque was overwhelming. It was somehow so full of light. I wanted to know the concepts behind such a beauty. I worked to understand them.”

The child of a German cultural diplomat, Roques first trained as a painter at the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin, and went onto study the history of Islamic Art at the University of Bonn. She then wondered about what came after that well-established museological story. Speaking seven languages, she has dedicated the past two decades to helping to write the chapter on modernism in the Middle East, where she found thriving contemporary art scenes that had until recently almost no representation on the international art market. She has since produced exhibitions in Frankfurt, Bonn, Paris, and Abu Dhabi. She also serves as a consultant on contemporary Arab and Iranian art to Sotheby’s and Deutsche Bank. Now, working with the gallerist and art historian Sundaram Tagore, whose mission is to foster intercultural dialogue in the arts, she has furnished a show of seven Arab contemporary artists for New York’s fashionably semi-industrial Chelsea district. It will proceed to the Art Asia Miami fair between December 3rd and 6th, and then possibly to Tagore’s other two branches in Hong Kong and Beverly Hills.

The press release for this show claims that it is “the first of its kind in New York,” and that it is a “rare glimpse into the Arab art world,” which it is nevertheless keen not to single out as ‘other.’ Although there are other conduits of contemporary Middle Eastern art in the city, such as Oded Halahmy’s Pomegranate Gallery in Greene Street, SoHo, *Signs* is probably the most coherent recent essay in that direction, in the metropolis of

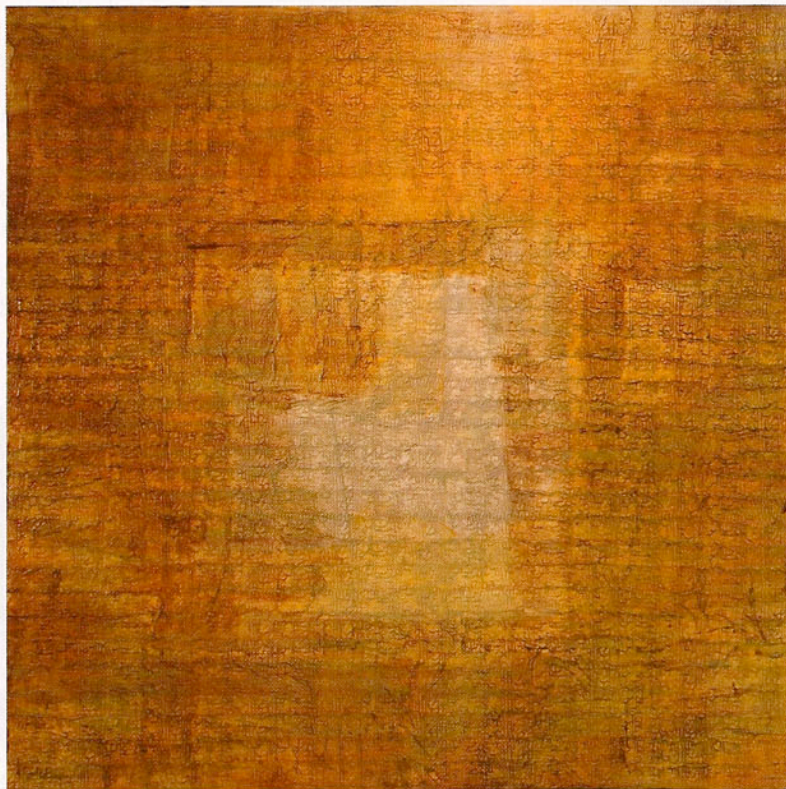


Ali Hassan, *Noon 1*, 2008, mixed media on canvas, 70.5 x 78.5".

a continent where the cultural presence of Arabs and Muslims is mostly cautious and muted. Ironically, at this of all times, the splendid Islamic galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York have also been closed for refurbishment for the past few years. Roques has vividly

encountered and empirically researched the colossal prejudices about Arabs and Muslims that prevail in the West, even—or perhaps especially—in supposedly educated circles.

Perhaps the most insidious and systematic of these is the distilling of Arabic cultures into a historic, traditionalist essence that produces no modernity of its own, save for what the European powers can impose by force or domination. The famous late Palestinian-American historian and critic Edward Said called this academically respectable form of ignorance ‘Orientalism’ in his 1975 book of the same title. His polemic has shifted the ground for any serious acts of cultural representation since, including this one, although Orientalist attitudes remain very much in the ascendant for obvious geopolitical reasons. In response, Roques has tried to ensure that the work of her friends is valued as art, afforded the same individualist criteria as an Andy Warhol or Anish Kapoor, not as ethnography or by way of corporate



Yousef Ahmad, *Untitled*, 2009, thread, varnish, paint and paper laid on canvas, 71 x 71".

regionalism. One of her artistic contacts indeed refused to be in any show whose title sports an ethnic, national, geographical, or cultural category.

Signs comprises around 20 paintings and two collages by seven artists, not all of them Muslim, hailing from Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Qatar: Ahmad Moualla, Ayman El Semary, Hassan Massoudy, Khaled Al-Saa'i, Ali Hassan, Georges Fikry Ibrahim, and Yusef Ahmad. Most of the works are somewhat abstractionist and play upon the primacy of calligraphy in Arabic civilization, where the real and the metaphysical are unified in the discipline of emulating divine perfection. The script is designed for recitation, not silent reading (hence the importance of poetry performance in many Arab countries). And recitation is a process that unifies life, breath, and the body with the divine. The *Signs* exhibition concentrates some of the more scriptural themes shown in the major *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* exhibition at the British Museum in London (2006) and at the Dubai International Financial Center in 2008, for which Massoudy provided the cover images. As Roques explains in her clear and informative essay for the exhibition: "Calligraphy was originally developed in order to transmit the word of God in written form. The perfect word of Allah should be written down in a commensurately perfect script. The basis for traditional calligraphy, which prescribes the rules for the script's proportions, was laid down in the 10th century by vizier Ibn Muqlah. Legibility of the text and line aesthetics required a method of proportioning. . . . [T]he *alif*, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, was designated as the scale unit, its length defined by points, and from then on used for every Arabic system of calligraphy. Mastering the art of calligraphy often



Ahmad Moualla, *Untitled*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 39.25 x 79".

required years of continuous training and years of practice. Learning the various writing styles demanded strict adherence to the established rules. Many of the artists who came from classical calligraphy soon freed themselves from its strict rules and found their own individual artistic expression or turned to freeform painting."

Arguably, the spirit of abstraction

was intrinsic to Arabic visual culture. This was not only because of the well-known Islamic proscription of mimetic images and its non-figurative doctrine of divine revelation, but also because of the sacred resemblance of certain Arabic letters to real objects, including the kneeling position of the body in prayer, which helps to open up the possibility of differing



From left: Hassan Massoudy, "Go forth on your path as it exists only through your walking" – Saint Augustine, 2005; "O ami ne va pas au jardin des fleurs, le jardin des fleurs est en toi" – Kabir, 2009; and "When you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb" – Gibran, 2008, all ink and pigment on paper, 29.5 x 21.7" each.



degrees of abstraction from appearances.

Tagore argues that abstraction is a common world heritage that Western art had to rediscover in order to break free of its own hegemony of classical naturalism. *Signs* very much fits Tagore's ethos of presenting modernism as a global resource; and in these respects it continues the work of Tagore's illustrious Bengali ancestors, including the great poet and painter Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), who breathed new life into classical Indian art and literature and connected it to the international avant-garde, partly as a strategy against British imperialism. As Roques's essay for the exhibition also states: "[w]ithout the influence of foreign cultures, above all of the Muslim East, Western modernism as it stands today would not be conceivable, in the same way that the development of Arab modernism is inconceivable without the various influences from the West."

This is not to pretend that modern art remains an easy path for many of the artists concerned. Roques is plain that there was little tradition of painting in Arab countries before the 20th century, and that educational and commercial infrastructure remain patchy. More important, many

Western forms and concepts have been regarded as suspiciously neo-colonialist in Arab countries, and modernistic secular nationalisms have suffered defeats from both without and within in recent decades. As a result, in Roques's words: "Arab artists who were experimenting with modernism soon fell between two stools. Their art was recognized neither in their own country, nor really in the West [because of accusations of imitation]. Even those who lived in the West had difficulty getting their art seen and accepted."

For these reasons, the calligraphic tradition seems to have provided an authentic path for many artists in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the seven artists in *Signs* are mostly well-established and regular international exhibitors, including, in Fikry's case, at the *Venice Biennale*. Unlike the much bigger *Word into Art*, there are no women artists, and those hoping for further reflections on the Palestinian plight or the invasion of Iraq are likely to be disappointed. However, Roques defends the autonomy of artists and rejects the expectation that all Arab artists should be political commentators or apologists. She says she now understands why her father said: "We are cultural, not political." Thanks to her

upbringing, when her father attempted to build bridges with the communist East, she is also aware of the dangers of repression that artists can face if they are crassly championed by Western liberals. "It is better to feed the cultural relationship," she concludes, "because this is a constant source of hope."

Seen together, the paintings in the *Sign* exhibition have an abiding beauty and a conceptual integrity that prompted one visitor, the art historian Edward Morris, to engage in some spontaneous conversation with the gallery director, Susan McCaffery, and the artist Ayman El Semary, about the Arabic idea of existential peace that the show encapsulated. Professor El Semary's large canvases, measuring up to 71 inches high, are among the most graphically bold, and at the gallery, he gregariously discussed his ideas with Roques and I before hurrying to Friday prayers. He is enthusiastically eclectic, and stresses that in his Egyptian milieu they are free to discuss sex, politics, and religion; and that his work engages the many narratives converging around him there. "There is a lot of mixing between my body, my life, private life, my country,

my history, my past, my future," he told me. "I use the body as a chalk board; the body can do that." His series of paintings, entitled *Sleepless*, enjoy large expanses of sun-tempered pinks, blues, browns, and chalky greens that very precisely evoke the washed stuccos and painted balconies of his Cairo neighborhood and his home village in the Nile delta, and which can also be seen in Naples. "There is no logic behind the coloring of these buildings," adds Roques. "Many of them are half-finished."

During bouts of insomnia, with his body pinned by fatigue to the bed, but his mind snatching fragments of thought, El Semary wondered what he would look like with a bird's-eye view, and so got an assistant to draw round his body in various

recumbent positions. The result is rather strange and striking outline renditions of the male nude, but in ways that he feels do not offend Islamic tradition. Yet ironically, because they are based on contact, they give a stronger sense of corporeality than many figures based on ocular observation and modeling. In one painting, *Watching Fun*, it is superimposed on characters that have only partial meanings as a text, but individually suggest the body's various positions. El Semary explains to me that in Arabic, the progress of the text from the top to the bottom of the page represents the passing of language from heaven to earth. "It's so complex, so rich," interjects Roques, "the concepts are already existing in the language."

Georges Fikry Ibrahim is also an Egyptian professor of art, and figurative and rural traditions are likewise apparent in his work. He works in many media, including video, installation, computer animation and performance. His huge, exuberant, partly tissue-paper collages, in deep fiery reds and fuschia, measure some 134 x 94 inches, and are entitled *The Farmer* and *The Carriage of the Farmer*. Like much of Matisse's later work, they have a spirit of joy and dance, but are built up of many signs and symbols with a strong acrylic impasto and *craquelure*. They are potlatches bursting with Egyptian history and civilization, marked out by shadowy profiles, possibly ghosts, but also with ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, Arabic letters,



Ahmad Moualla, *Untitled*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 118 x 69.5".



Ayman El Semary, *Watching Fun*, 2003, acrylic, prayton, natural oxides on canvas, 70.9 x 32.3".



Georges Fikry Ibrahim, *The Carriage of the Farmer*, 2006, mixed media on paper, 93.3 x 133.9".

pyramids, temples, pharaohs, tombs, icons, old Coptic monasteries, Islamic architecture, and folkloric elements. "My art is narration, expression, and the memory of visual shapes," Fikry says.

At least two of the other artists in the exhibition have strong landscape references: Yusef Ahmad, from Qatar, and Khaled Al Saa'i, from Syria, who paints fantastic clouds of intertwining, rhythmic Arabic letters that represent the sounds, emotions, colors, and architectures of the cities in Europe, North America, and the Middle East that he has visited. Like many of the artists present, both Khaled Al Saa'i and Yusef Ahmad were schooled in classical calligraphy but now use illegible script for their paintings. "Why is it unreadable?" I ask Yusef Ahmad. "Because when a text is read, its sense is finished," he replies. "It is possible to divine some of the letters, but the senses are not clear," agrees Roques. "In the end, the words disappear." Yusef Ahmad's exquisitely understated canvases use incised, closely written script in a viscous medium to build up a rich, textured, almost eroded surface in light browns and grays, which he then veils in the center with rough squares of hand-made Japanese paper. This evokes to me an aerial view

of the landscape; he and Roques suggest also the cuboidal Kaaba in Mecca, and also the peculiar environment of Qatar, with its simple, square mosques, its grayish colors, its coastal humidity, and its hazy desert. "There is no cloud in the sky," says Yusef Ahmad, "just a dusty blue. In Qatar we have our own sky, our own sea, our own desert. The desert is not empty. If you study it very deeply, you will see how the light, the colors change." Reflecting on this, he adds: "I try to carry forward my identity as an Arab, a Muslim, and an artist working internationally." We agree that the roots are specific, but the format is flexible and global.

The work of Hassan Massoudy (Iraq, based in Paris), Ali Hassan (Qatar), and Ahmad Moualla (Syria) makes equally distinctive interpretations of calligraphic tradition, taking it into dimensions beyond mere orthographic variation. Massoudy monumentally expands single letters within quotations from ecumenical poets and philosophers, making their meanings visible by communicating his innermost feelings in response to the texts, not through typographic cliché. Ali Hassan makes sweeping, variegated studies of a single letter, nūn, (approximating to 'n' in the Latin alphabet), working on paper often with pieces of cardboard as a writing-reed, and alluding by way of cabbalistic science to

the divine tablet on which all our destinies were written. And Ahmad Moualla's work, which has recently returned to calligraphy, is perhaps the most sensually appealing, with rhythmic, illegible 'texts' inscribed in lush, vivid acrylics on large canvases of up to 70 x 120 inches. The scripts, some of whose characters determine changes in the colors, are not bounded by the picture-edge because they are mere windows onto a universal continuum.

Tagore states that "this exhibition was developed with the prime motivation being connoisseurship rather than the more expected issues of religion or politics. I believe connoisseurship will be the defining factor in the post-recession art world." Whether or not his prediction proves true, the tag is accurate. *Signs: Contemporary Arab Art* selects artists whose painterly skills are mostly outstanding because they are based on rigorous apprenticeships, and who have perfectly balanced aesthetic elegance with conceptual integrity and intellectual potency. The work is desirable, complex, and deep. Religion is indeed fundamental to the exhibition, but as a basis for art, not as its end. Δ

Dr. Marius Kwint, art historian and writer, is senior lecturer at the University of Portsmouth, School of Art, Design and Media, England.