



Yuri Leroux, Big Mat Noir, 2011, mixed media on canvas, 130 x 195 cm. Images: Courtesy of the Artist and Sin Sin Fine Art.

Leroux's art: walls, seascapes, skies, or landscapes? Part of the enjoyment of Leroux's art is that within the construction of each painting there is little to suggest a subject. And this is as it should be in abstraction. Let the viewer's imagination come alive, as the artist gives the viewer enough material with which to play in the mind's eye.

Big Mat Noir (2011) appears as a wall of multi-colored cans that are part of a larger construction project. Leroux's earlier career as an architect is easily suggested here by the manner in which he builds the surface of his works: he often constructs rather than paints. And although much in his art

suggests a penchant for free and spontaneous art making and coloring, it is clear on a closer look that Leroux works carefully to achieve that feeling of the spontaneous.

This notion of construction is also clear in works such as *Big Mat IX* (2010) and *Big Mat Y* (2011). The former can easily be seen as a turbulent sea with its rich blue water, while the later reveals itself as a beautiful landscape of the rich colors that one sees in spring and autumn.

Leroux is working within the flexible geometry of landscape in many of his pieces in the show. The mysteries of nature are slowly created by this



Yuri Leroux, Big Mat IX, 2010, mixed media on canvas, 130 x 89 cm.

random and exquisite geometry. It is not only the colors and rich layering that attracts the eye but also the sensual pleasure of the colors and the light. As an architect Leroux understood light's importance in lending a building character, and it is so with the best of his abstract landscape paintings.

Ian Findlay

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Written Images at Sundaram Tagore Gallery

When I mention calligraphy to most people, they tend to think only of Chinese calligraphy and its traditions. This is a narrow view of the rich and dynamic world of calligraphy that lives in a great range of ancient and modern cultures. Virtually every language has some form of calligraphic art attached to its literary and artistic cultures. Arabic calligraphy, however, with its ancient and illustrious history, is less well known to the wider world than the calligraphies of East Asia. The exhibition entitled *Written Images: Contemporary Calligraphy from the Middle East*, curated by Karin von Roques, takes an important step to altering perceptions. The show features the art of 15

important calligraphers working in a broad range of styles, both subtle and bold.

As Chinese calligraphers have struggled to find a place and an identity for their art and traditions at the start of the 21st century, so, too, have numerous Arab calligraphers from across the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, wherever Islamic culture is rooted, including Indonesia, Pakistan, parts of the Philippines, and India, for example, calligraphers have struggled to gain broad acceptance as artists in a contemporary context and not solely as writers.

Arabic calligraphers have worked for centuries within strict calligraphic rules and the mastery of these took years of dedicated practice. In recent decades, however, calligraphers have sought to break away from the rules so carefully studied and practiced. In any art form, when you fully understand the rules, only then can you break them to make something truly new. And so it is with the calligraphers whose works make up this beautiful exhibition: they have broken the rules to make new imagery that speaks to the contemporary art canon and ideas. At the same time, however, these artists do not shun their cultural identity, but rather they enrich it.

Although one might not understand written Arabic or the



Hassan Massoudy, (Iraq). **Untitled**, 1997, ink and pigment on paper, 29.5 x 11.7 inches. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

various aspects of the alphabet used by the artists, this does not prevent one from enjoying the dynamic lyrical forms and imagery that contemporary calligraphers have embraced. Their art speaks to broad private and cultural concerns that are part of the art dynamic in the region, from a calligrapher's devotion to Allah to the healing of the body and the soul, from the poetry of a line's form to the place of geometry, and from the aesthetic of calligraphy as painting to simple decoration.

The brooding works by Chaouki Chamoun, from Lebanon, have an aesthetic power and vitality that goes far beyond the written word. In his dark, circular *In the Beginning Was the Search for Word* (2011), for example, the turbulent earth explodes with great force as it gives up forms that will become words. Chamoun's sense of abstraction's vitality, raw emotion,

and poetry is also found in the works of the Qatari painter Yousef Ahmad, whose art's engaging warmth easily seduces the viewer.

There is a cooler kind of energy at work in the art of Iraqi painter Hassan Massoudy who alters the usual position of a character, placing it vertically rather than horizontally, lending his bold broad word a new meaning. This is refreshing, clear work—though one knows that it is of the Arabic alphabet, it speaks to a wide range of visual cultures. The same is true on many levels with the work of Nja Mahdaoui's art, which moves writing into the embrace of painting, an image in its own right, addressing a wide range of concerns. In *Jorf* (2009) Mahdaoui, from Tunisia, contemplates a broad geometric union of color, line, and writing. One may look for meaning in this beautifully decorative



Chaouki Chamoun (Lebanon), **In the Beginning was the Search for Word**, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 63 x 59 inches. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Sundaram Tagore Gallery.



Nja Mahdaoui (Tunisia), **Jorf**, 2009, India ink and acrylic on canvas, 78.7 x 39.4 inches.



Ahmed Mater (Saudi Arabia), **Tholoth Mashq Illumination**, 2011, gold leaf, tea, pomegranate, Dupont Chinese ink & offset x-ray film print on paper, 60 x 40 inches. Images: Courtesy of the Artists and Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

work, but in the end it is the juxtaposition of lines, colors, and imaginative calligraphy that captures the eye and the imagination. In the exhibition this is one of the works that most closely adheres to Arabic decorative traditions.

The art of Ahmed Mater, a Saudi medical doctor, is moving indeed. His *Tholoth Mashq Illumination* (2011) is a simple enough piece at first glance—X-ray film on which the image of a skeleton is reproduced and lines of text. Without thinking of any religious affiliation or knowing anything of the artist, one looks at this work and senses a person of great compassion. The skeleton has a dignity about

it in the way the artwork is lit and laid out: it is not merely a pile of bones but is seen as the remains of a person who one feels once lived. The manner in which Mater has lit this piece also lends it an ethereal quality, something which followers of most religions will relate to.

Although this exhibition is centrally about calligraphy in the Middle East today, it is also about the art of painting. The many fine images of writing and its variety in this exhibition bend our thoughts toward a pictorial dynamic that embraces many of the *isms* and *ists* of global art.

Ian Findlay

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