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New York Gallery Displays Modern Middle Eastern Calligraphy

Peter Fedynsky | New York

Middle Eastern calligraphy on display at a New York City art gallery is being touted as a vehicle for dialogue between the Middle East and the West. The exhibit comprises works that roughly coincide with the Arab uprisings in the Middle East.

An ornate painting on linen entitled *Astrolabe* by Tunisian artist Nja Mahdaoui greets visitors [Sundaram Tagore Gallery](#). Saturated with what appears to be stylized Arabic writing known as calligraphy, the piece is actually pure design that bears no specific conventional alphabetic meaning. Tunisian diplomat Tarek Amri says meaning is determined by the viewer alone.

"We have the earth with the center, and from the center we are spreading through countries, through population, through different cultures," says Amri. "But all of them -- and this is of course my own meaning -- they join in the center."

Although Arabic calligraphy is traditionally associated with Quranic texts, most of the calligraphy on display conveys no literary or religious symbolism. One untitled canvas by Qatari artist Ali Hassan is a study in black featuring a single Arabic letter, while *Apocalypse III*, by Chaouki Chamoun of Lebanon, uses abstract calligraphy to separate figures from chaos hovering above.

Calligraphy is also woven into an untitled piece by another Qatari artist Youssef Ahmad.

"The word, the calligraphic quality is completely left behind," says Gallery owner

Sundaram Tagore. "It becomes this graffiti-like form, and the surface pattern that he creates is evocative of the desert of the Middle East."

Historically, Islamic societies generally prohibited depictions of humans and animals, so Middle Eastern artists perfected representations of words. But Tagore says they are now drawn to modernism, not unlike Western artists who derive abstract art from depictions of people and nature.

"Middle Eastern art went from the word to the image; word to image and abstraction," he says. "The image is these forms. These are the visual forms, so they are trying to abstract further and further."

Works by Golnaz Fathi, the show's only Iranian artist, arrived at the exhibit just hours before its scheduled opening on November 10. According to Tagore, the pieces were held for three weeks in U.S. customs.

All of the works, both Arabic and Persian, were created just before or during recent uprisings in the Middle East. Yousef Zada, Egypt's Consul General in New York, says the work of his countryman, Ahmed Moustafa, reflects the Arab drive for democracy and individual rights.

"This signifies somebody who is shouting, saying, 'I'm here, and this is my heritage; this is my Islamic heritage,' to be more clear of this," says Zada.

The exhibit, "[Written Images: Contemporary Calligraphy from the Middle East](#)," remains on display through early December and then travels to Los Angeles and then Hong Kong.