

ARTS & CULTURE

Sundaram Tagore Gallery New York to host artist Golnaz Fathi's works



SHARJAH: New abstract canvases by Golnaz Fathi, the renowned Iranian artist known for her highly expressive paintings rooted in the traditions of Persian calligraphy, are debuting at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York (Nov. 17 - Dec. 17). In the exhibition titled *Golnaz Fathi: The Road Forward*, the artist presents two new bodies of work in which she transforms language into pure form, exploring her complicated relationship with her homeland. She also will take part in an artist's talk on November 19.

She is one of the few women in Iran to excel at traditional Islamic calligraphy. Fascinated by the expressive nature of calligraphic forms, she spent years rigorously training up to eight hours daily, learning to control her breathing and writing poetry with a qalam (pen) to master traditional strokes. After becoming one of the country's most skilled practitioners, she left the world of Islamic calligraphy to pursue a career as a contemporary artist. Over time, she expanded

✦ *Golnaz Fathi is known for her expressive paintings rooted in Persian calligraphy traditions.*

her practice, developing a distinctive visual language derived from her reinterpretations of Persian calligraphy. It is gestural, abstract and layered with meaning.

The exhibition explores Fathi's complicated relationship with home. The works centre on the mountain ranges that surround Tehran, especially Mount Damavand, Iran's tallest peak. The mountains around Fathi are more than just familiar vistas. They are entwined in Persian culture, holding a special place in myth and folklore. They are also unchanging and ever-present — a symbol of power, resistance and standing firm. They are a reminder that when living under oppressive rules that control and silence women, one needs to continuously move

forward — to keep learning and searching for the next peak to scale.

For Fathi, the process of art-making is more than a means to an end — it is a refuge and space to foster hope. "I try to make a heaven for myself in my studio," she says. "I do what makes me feel better. I do what my heart tells me. I do what I wish. In Iran, I've had enough of NO. I have had enough of things dictated to me. I think I've been successful, because I feel happy. That's my weapon against the regime. I'm happy! I've had the courage to break the rules."

She creates her landscapes from thousands of inscribed marks, similar to the practice of *siah-mashq*, where a calligrapher draws one letter or word repeatedly until the paper is covered with black ink to warm up the hand. The densely textured areas play against a backdrop of bold colour and sweeping brushstrokes that convey movement in the sky above.

She also takes the gestural qualities of cal-

✦ *The Sun is Burning is the title of this work by Golnaz Fathi in acrylic, pen and varnish on canvas.*

igraphy to new heights, where the paintings are dominated by bold, improvised brushstrokes. Typically, Fathi does not title her works, preferring to let the viewer assign their own interpretations. For the works here, she immersed herself in the moment, tapping into the kind of creativity that arises from unconstrained movement, free of forethought or expectation.

They are action paintings. She set the canvases on the floor, spontaneously dripping and spilling paint across the surface, allowing chance to determine the forms.

"Despite the improvised approach," says the gallery, "the paintings are imbued with certainty and intention. The works demonstrate Fathi's masterful use of negative space, with which she creates balance within the composition. Her instinct to leave large areas of the canvas white amplifies the energy and power behind each brushstroke."

Pushing boundaries isn't new for the artist. Her work has always been subversive, from her embrace of American Abstract Expressionism to her innovative use of materials, such as the ballpoint pen, a tool strictly forbidden to students of traditional calligraphy. With the work presented in this show, she demonstrates once again that creatively she is at her very best when she's breaking the rules.

Born in 1972, she is part of a thriving generation of Iranian artists who grew up during the Islamic revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, a deeply isolated period of the country's history. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in graphic

design from Azad University, Tehran, and a diploma in Iranian calligraphy from the Iranian Society of Calligraphy.

She is widely recognised for expanding the tradition of calligraphy and pushing it to new heights. Her works are inspired by American Abstract Expressionists and Iranian and Middle Eastern modernists who pioneered the use of the written word as a pictorial element in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Technically brilliant, she has developed a new visual language, which reconciles the ancient with the contemporary. Her works are in permanent collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; British Museum, London; Denver Art Museum, Colorado; Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore; the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur; Museum of Contemporary Art, CAA, Hangzhou, China; the World Bank, Washington, DC; Brighton & Hove Museum, East Sussex, England; Carnegie Mellon University, Doha, Qatar and Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi, among others.

Fathi has been recognised with numerous awards and accolades. In 1995, she was named Best Woman Calligraphist by the Iranian Society of Calligraphy. In 2010, she was invited to be a member of the selection committee of the renowned Sharjah Calligraphy Biennial and in the following year was chosen to be a Young Global Leader Honoree by the World Economic Forum. Sundaram Tagore Gallery has been representing established and emerging artists from around the world since 2000. It has locations in New York, Singapore and London's Cromwell Place.

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