



The Arab Weekly ^(/)

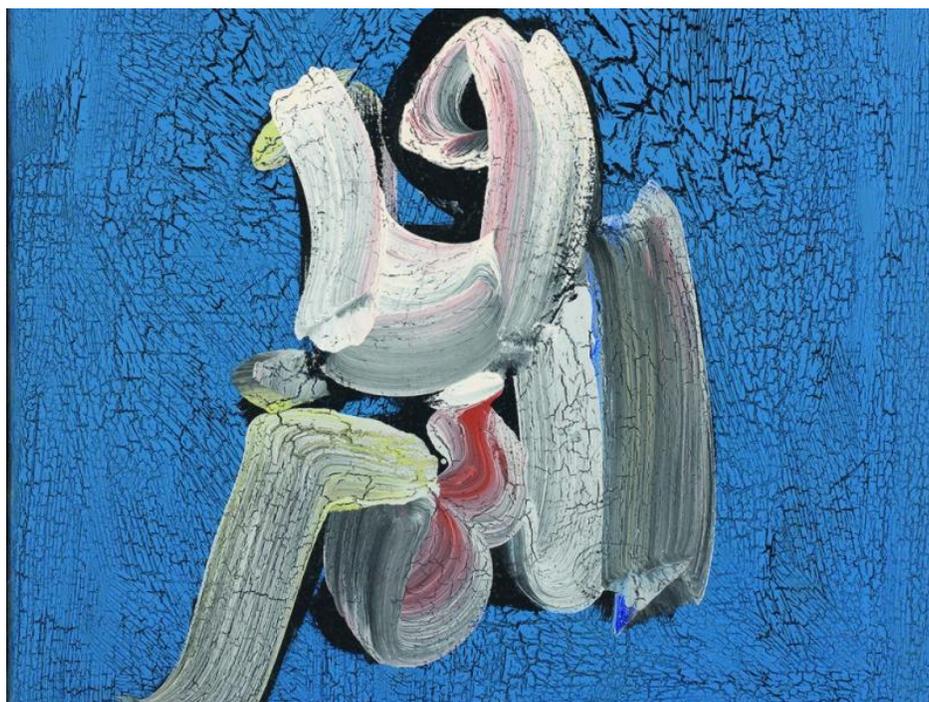
Calligraphy in spotlight at London's Mosaic Rooms

Two of the most striking paintings in the exhibition are "Revolution" ("Thowra") and "War" ("Harb").

Sunday 03/06/2018



Karen Dabrowska
(/karen-dabrowska)



Thought-provoking art. "Al Tamazouq" ("Torn") by Egyptian modernist painter Hamed Abdalla. (The Mosaic Rooms)



[\(/sites/default/files/2018-06/issue_159.pdf#page=](#)



LONDON - "Signs of our Times," a discussion at London's Mosaic rooms, examined calligraphy as an art that accounts for one-third of contemporary Arab art.

The discussion was a reference to "Signs of Our Times: From Calligraphy to Calligraffiti," a beautifully produced coffee table book by curator Rose Issa. It reviews an exhibition of the work of 50 artists who use Arabic or Persian script in their art.

Venetia Porter, British Museum curator responsible for the collection of Islamic art of the Arab world and Turkey, focused on Egyptian modernist painter Hamed Abdalla (1917-85) whose work is on display in the Mosaic Rooms until June 23.

Porter described Abdalla as a master of the "creative word" — written words expressed in paint, blending abstraction and human forms. The exhibition uses words significant to him such as "revolution" and "war."

The displayed works of the artist, who studied calligraphy in Cairo, are from the 1950s when Abdalla started to put words into his abstract art.

"This is part of a phase when Middle Eastern artists were placing words in their paintings," Porter said.

"In one of his works Abdalla has written two kilos of food per month per family. He was very politically engaged and concerned about poverty. Another amazing work is 'Al Harb' ('The War')."

Two of the most striking paintings in the exhibition are "Revolution" ("Thowra") and "War" ("Harb"). In a mixed media on canvas work the word "Thowra" is depicted in shades of brown, black and grey. The image is bold and dynamic implying the energy of revolutionary spirit that fills the canvas. It was painted in 1968, a year of protest and civil disobedience internationally, most famously in France where Abdalla lived.

"Harb," from 1963, depicts the word "war" as a bull or a God of war associated by Abdalla with capitalism, imperialism and Zionism. It is shown abandoned in an immense space of ashes and ruins, a reminder of the Nakba of 1948 and the Suez Canal crisis of 1956 in which Israel, followed by the United Kingdom and France, invaded Egypt.

"It is interesting to reflect on this moment in time when Abdalla was doing this kind of work. It fitted in with what is called 'letterism,' in which Arab artists were making gestures with script," Porter said.

Lebanese artist Dia Batal spoke about using the Arabic language to create artwork that echoes cultural and contemporary concerns. "I have tried aesthetically to develop one kind of calligraphy. My concerns are context based and socio political. I am interested in employing language and text to create artwork that translates metaphorically and sometimes physically the meaning of that story or that text," Batal said.

She described a project commissioned by London's Leighton House Museum to create a site-specific piece for the Arab Hall. It was one or two years into the Syrian uprising when she was obsessed with knowing the names of the people killed by the regime.

Showing a slide from her website, Batal explained that "Mourning Hall" is a reinterpretation of the Arab Hall.

“This work was a response to the lack of mourning spaces in Syria during the uprising. Temporary burial and mourning rituals were denied for the families of those killed by the regime. Funeral services were forcefully cancelled and people attempting to hold them outside churches and mosques would be arrested,” she said. “As a result, people resorted to midnight burials, often in orchards, public and private gardens and instead of the usually observed three days of mourning, acts of mourning would turn into protests.”

“Mourning Hall” is informed by both these emerging and missing practices. Each of the 15th- to-17th-century hand-painted Damascene tiles in the Arab Hall now holds a name written in Arabic calligraphy of a woman, man or child who was killed in the last two years,” she added.

Continuing the theme, Batal created a memorial piece for people killed in Gaza during the 2014 war. Thin sheets of muslin hang, tendril-like, from small wooden rods. Light from windows filters through the translucent material, illuminating intricate whorls of Arabic script embroidered onto the cloth. These are the names of 30 individuals killed during Israel’s offensive on Gaza.

Iranian artist Farhad Ahrarnia described his textile-based works that make use of embroidery. He said he was fascinated by the word "recite" — the first word of the Quran. All the stitching is done by hand. He digitally prints the image on canvas and painstakingly embroiders part of the surface with colourful silk thread.



Written By

Karen Dabrowska (/karen-dabrowska)

Karen Dabrowska is an Arab
Weekly contributor in London.