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MALIHEH AFNAN (1935–2016)

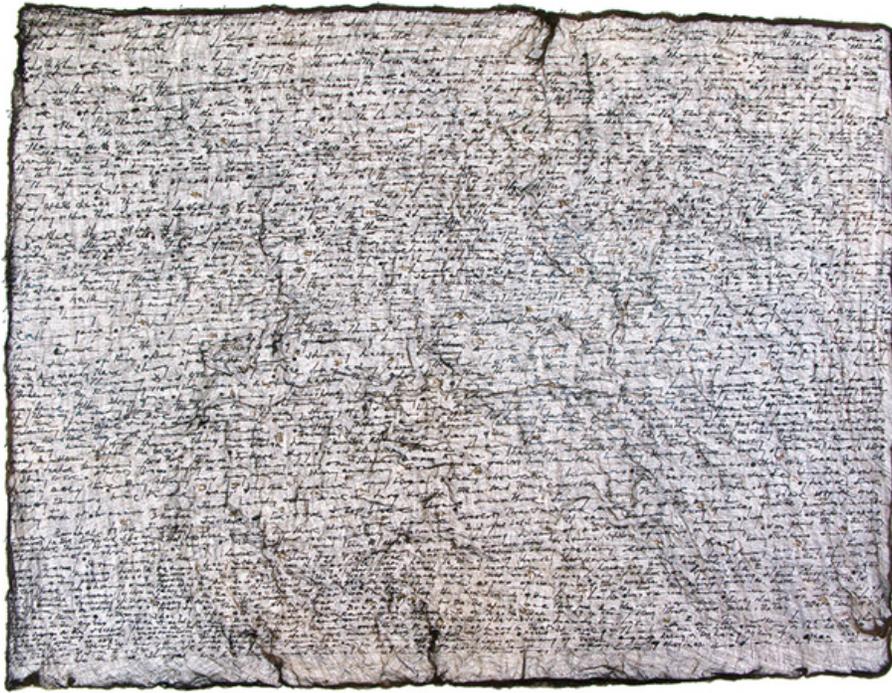
BY HG MASTERS



Palestine-born artist Maliheh Afnan, who died on January 6, 2016, at the age of 81. Courtesy Rose Issa Projects, London.

Rust was one of Maliheh Afnan's favorite colors. In works on paper made with layers of paint or gauze above ink-scratched, writing-like marks, or plaster reliefs inscribed with letter-like forms, Afnan created contemporary artworks with the appearance of ancient artifacts. As the late artist said in [video-recorded](#) interview from January 2014, "The basic colors in my work, especially in my landscapes, are earth colors. They almost look like they have been excavated [. . .] I come from a place where there are relics of old civilizations—layers and layers of old civilizations, whether it is Lebanon or Palestine. It is maybe inevitable that somehow I am drawn to this kind of thing."

In a career spanning five decades, Afnan exhibited primarily in France and then London, the two places where she had lived since the 1970s. Her life was peripatetic from the beginning. She was born in Haifa, Palestine, in 1935 to Persian parents of the [Baha'i faith](#). Afnan's family moved to Beirut in 1949, where she studied at the American University of Beirut, before relocating to Washington, DC, in 1956, where she received an MA in fine arts from the Corcoran School of Art in 1962. She returned to the region, living in Kuwait between 1963–66 and then Beirut until 1974 when she left for Paris. She resettled in London in 1997 and she passed away there on January 6, 2016.



MALIEH AFNAN, *Veiled Nonsense*, 2009, ink and gauze on paper, 61 × 81 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.

Her first solo exhibition, in 1971, at Galerie Claire Brambach in Basel, was organized by the American abstract painter **Mark Tobey**, whose own works incorporated calligraphic-like marks (and who, incidentally, had converted to the Baha'i faith in 1931). Afnan had admired his works since she first saw them and had sought out Tobey at his Switzerland studio, after which he became her mentor. While Tobey's paintings are covered in an **all-over manner** reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism, Afnan claimed to "write her paintings," as she scratched marks across the surfaces. In early works, such as *Full of Days* (1971) and *Sunkissed* (1978), tiny ink marks written in lines appear in bunches next to washes of color, as the surface is fractured like a collage. "I like the idea of palimpsests, of putting layers and layers on something."

By the 1980s, tiny numbers were appearing in an irregular manner, almost like formless apparitions across the page. In the 1990s, she began exploring the potential of plaster reliefs, carved with alphanumeric or hieroglyphic-like marks and painted in earthy-tones to resemble something excavated from antiquity. In her 2014 interview, Afnan said, "It all started with signs and letters [. . .] long ago, before I could write. I was always fascinated by *écriture* of every kind, every script, whether it was Arabic or Persian or English."

With every decade seeming to bring another formal innovation, Afnan began to use gauze to cover her written-forms in mixed-media compositions in the 2000s, particularly after 9/11, when issues of the veil became prevalent in European societies debating ideas of societal integration. And throughout her oeuvre, while her abstractions came to resemble historical objects, Afnan's portraits of anonymous figures appear haunted by the present. "The one I call the *Witness* was no one in particular," she commented, "However, I tried to put all the ravages of time, someone who has suffering, seen things they shouldn't have seen. They really are no one in particular, but a combination of people that I have known and seen and that I have imagined, too."

HG Masters is editor at large at ArtAsiaPacific.

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