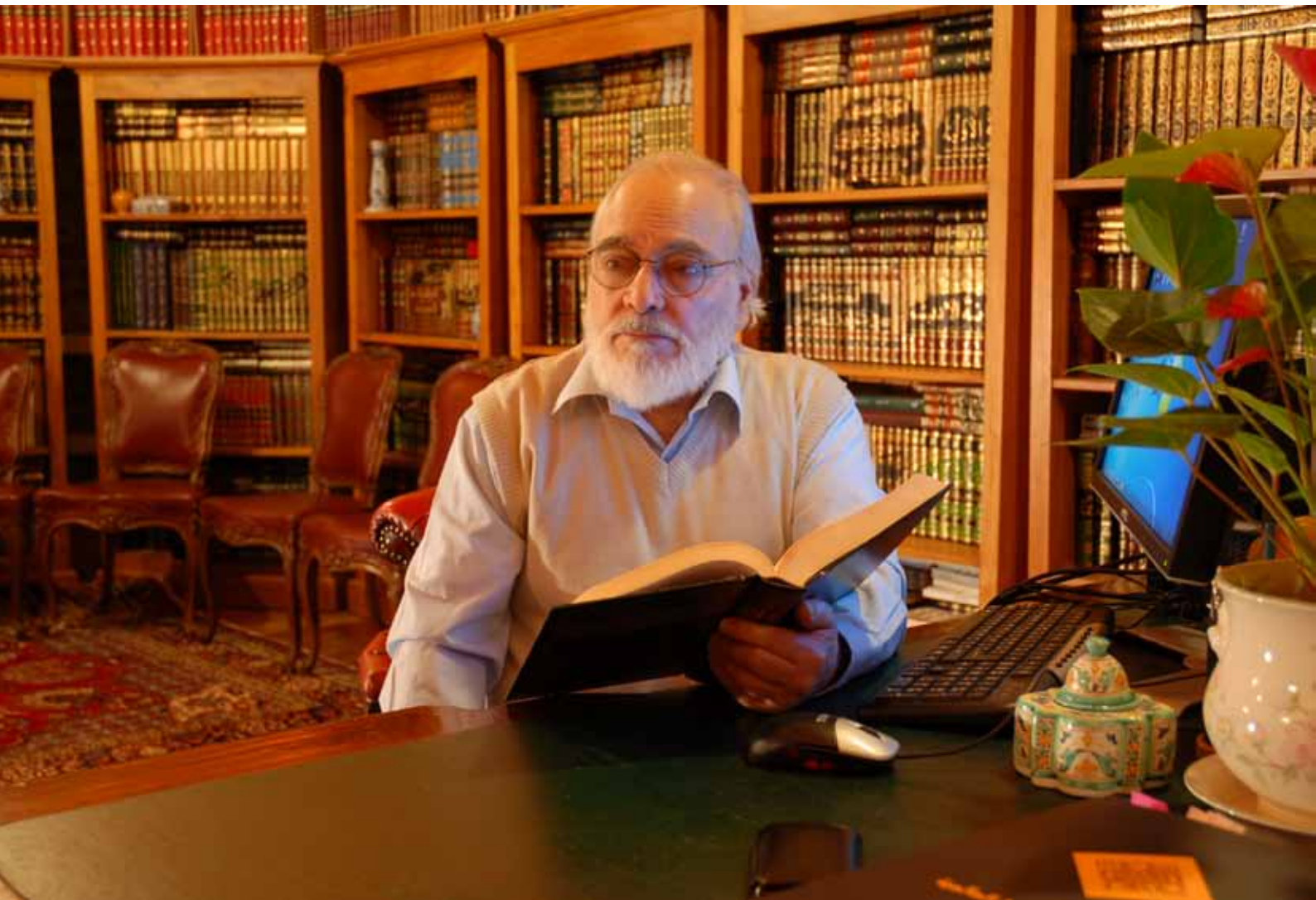


An interview with ALI OMAR ERMES

By: Samar Faruqi, Director of Research, Meem Gallery.



ERMES PHOTO

Ali Omar Ermes is internationally renowned for his paintings based on Arabic literature and letterforms. He has held over sixty exhibitions worldwide, including a recent exhibition at Meem Gallery, and has work displayed or housed in the collections of institutions such as the British Museum and Tate Britain, London; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg; State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow; Wereld Museum,

Rotterdam; National Gallery of Jordan, Amman; State National Gallery, Malaysia; Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C.; and LACMA, Los Angeles, among others in international public and private collections. Interview with Samar Faruqi.

S.F: You have been painting works based on the Arabic letter for many decades now – since 1968 – what is it about the letterform that inspires you so much?

A.E: There are two main aspects in the development of language: the aesthetic and the linguistic. Script was, through history, developed in different ways as a means to accommodate ideas and the ability to communicate more freely and more easily. As a result, there is so much that has been established with regard to visual script. Therefore it is not only that it inspires me, but that it brings so much power of expression when it comes to its visual beauty. I also feel that it is important for us Arabs in general, and artists who use Arabic in particular, to provide the main space for Arabic in art as opposed to just following other schools of art. We have our own sources which we can develop, and this is how that inspiration came about for me.

S.F: Many artists, particularly those who are recognised as a part of the Huroufiyah trend, use the letterword in its abstract form. In your work, the letters and words rendered are legible, can you explain why you have chosen to do this?

A.E: Firstly, I do not agree with the label

Huroufiyah, it feels like it is something that has just been created by somebody who somehow off the cuff coined the term. To give a name to a movement like this we need to conduct more research and consultation to come up with further ideas of how to describe it.

S.F: Do you consider it one movement? Because using the letterword in contemporary art is something that has occurred throughout the Middle East.

A.E: It is not one movement of course, but a big current of movements together, now what you may

call a school of thought. Artists started this a long time ago without thinking of it as it is now. Part of my contention is that if people are going to call using Arabic letterforms 'Huroufiyah' then what are we going to say about the writers who are, for their own work, using Arabic letters? They – the writers and the thinkers among others - will end up losing their name. Aside from that it also feels shallow and careless, so I don't think it is the best idea to call it Huroufiyah, we have to find some other name which reflects the concept and reveals the thinking behind

it and not just to focus on the first glimpses of a brushstroke. When I started using Arabic script in my work in 1968/69, there was hardly anyone doing it. Later on, after a few years, I learned that a lady called Madiha Omar used it in her art work. Despite the stark differences between us in matters of approach, style or reasons for using Arabic, I appreciate her greatly for her ideas which she developed during the forties and fifties. Later on using the letterform

became more popular

in the late seventies and eighties, a time when more work started to be seen and artists started to feel it was something that was new. For me, personally, among what I wanted to explore was the static power of the letter; sometimes the single letter has such a powerful impact on its own that you don't actually need to put hundreds of tiny letters around it, or create a patchwork or pattern out of letters. In my earlier work, I tried this approach, and others, that doesn't mean however that I would not tackle other areas of static zones in Arabic script in days



The Seventh Ode (1993) 250 x 225 cm Acrylic and ink on art paper



Peace Means Justice (2010) 150 x 200 Acrylic and ink on art paper

to come but I maintained this approach to help put it and the Arabic language on the modern art map. And of course there are other people doing other things: some use a whole mix of dying European art schools or touristic fantasies, and there are those who practice calligraphy (khatt). Now, since there are millions of other people who know calligraphy better than myself, I do not claim to be a calligrapher or in competition with any artist in any field, and I also think that it is important to discover new ways to use the Arabic script in the visual language of technology, art or science. Coming back to my work, each art work has its individuality, its own focus. At the same time, a painting is very much like a theatre performance on a stage, many elements can work together within that space, and every aspect plays a part in a larger context. They don't necessarily have

to relate to each other all the time, the commonality and binding relationship they have is that they are on the same stage, together in one work. This can relate to various aspects of the work such as poetry, colour, composition, form and, of course, the evocation of the script's 'silent music.'

S.F: In one of your recent works *Peace Means Justice* you use the script of twenty-three different languages stating 'Implement justice in the world and you gain peace on earth.' What was the experience of painting the script of other languages like?

A.E: When it comes to the execution of different scripts, there are certain kinds of skills required. If you are using, for example, what people refer to as 'Eastern scripts'- Chinese, Japanese, Cambodian or Korean, Gujarati, Hindi or Bengali – you utilise a different set of techniques. Now, I'm not going to

pretend that I know the various techniques, but the basic idea for this work was that I would attempt to imitate some of the different scripts I had seen. For a viewer who is fluent in one or more of the languages I used in this piece, it will be easy to see major or minor errors. In comparison to the elegant skill of calligraphers of those scripts it might look horrendous, but my intention was to emphasise the concept of justice and human rights and to expose some of the overwhelming hypocrisies of the world as opposed to demonstrating my ability to recreate the script of various languages perfectly. I cannot of course claim that all the words or letters will be perfectly rendered, and for this I apologise. The concept I explore with this work highlights, I believe, a universal concern and I therefore wanted to express this through the universality of language. Of course, I also had limitations with regard to the number of languages used, since this was a project where I could not utilise every existing script as that might take more than one lifetime to achieve. What I wanted to emphasise through this work is that as long as we claim to be human and claim to be fair and just and to encourage love and peace, the first thing we need to do is to implement justice in what we do. This includes everyone in every context, but is more obviously applicable to painful and traumatic situations that afflict large numbers of people such as international conflicts like those of Palestine, Sudan, Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, etc. This applies to men and women, rich and poor, East or West, as it applies at home, work or on the street. In Islam, we say that the earth and heavens are built on justice, that is, without justice humankind cannot help but destroy itself and all that humanity has worked so hard to achieve. So, 'implement justice in the world and you gain peace on earth,' is a vital issue, and one which none of us can run away from, and that includes everyone, any time and anywhere.

S.F: You are known for citing the words of both traditional and contemporary poets - can you name some of the poets whose works resonate most with you? Do you think there is a link between the ideas of traditional and contemporary poets?

A.E: This is a difficult question, because it is difficult

to know where to begin, and where to end. First of all, there are a huge number of very powerful, exquisite, influential, beautiful writers in Arabic. A group of large works I created, which have a direct reference to my interest in Arabic poetry, are 'The Seven Odes'. The odes were, in those days before Islam, poems - this can be up to one hundred lines or more and recited by the poet in the presence of other major poets - deemed the greatest by other poets and selected to be written in gold on silk to be hung on the Ka'ba. Together the selected poems are called Al Mullaqat, also known as 'The Hanged Pieces' or 'Prize Poems,' and throughout the five hundred years or so before Islam, only seven pieces were hung, although some say it was ten pieces. So if we assume that there were thousands of poets in all of Arabia say in a span of one thousand years that shows us how important these seven to ten pieces are, that is how competitive it was then. So, I use these works as examples of beautiful poetry, powerful expressions and ideas, and high moralities, ideas related to history, humanity and so forth.

If I were to list some very well known and very important 'Prize Poems' poets I would include: Zuhair Ibn Abi Sulma, Amr Ibn Kulthoom, Labeed Ibn Abi Rabeeah, Al Nabegha, Al Ashaa, Tarafah, Antarah. Later, newer generations included greats such as: Abi Firass, Abi Tammam, Ashareef Al Radiy, Ali Ibni Al Rumi, Bashar and hundreds of other greats, and then of course the main icon of Arabic poetry is Al Mutanabbi. In fact, when you say poetry in Arabic, people refer to Al Mutanabbi, this is how influential he has been. Al Mutanabbi was able to bring a certain kind of psychological understanding to his words, which he formed in very powerful, wise sayings and proverbs, so when it comes to discussing any aspect of the human condition, in one way or the other you find something relevant that Al Mutanabbi said.

S.F: What about contemporary poets?

A.E: Contemporary poets, there are quite a few in the last century who are particularly noteworthy: Ahmed Shawqi, Hafez Ibrahim, Zahawi and Mohammed Jawahiri, who passed away a few years ago, and a few others. There are also thousands today

who are good and others who are famous, yes, but I don't use them because I don't feel as inspired by their work. That doesn't mean I never use any of them as their work might change and their new stuff might be more mature, more powerful, more relevant and might suddenly shine. There are so many current movements and trends and some contemporary poets want to separate themselves from traditional poetry mainly because of international influences, that is, they don't want to follow a similar poetic rhythm. Some write the words and it is up to the reader to find its rhythm or logic. Somehow, it all seems to have become easier, just like franchising in fast food outlets, anything goes. Now everyone can say that he or she is a poet by putting a few words here and there and then accuse the reader of not being intelligent enough to understand them, when, in actual fact, the problem resides with them.

S.F: The only religious work you created was for the Beit Al Qur'an Museum in Bahrain. Can you tell me a bit about that project?

A.E: In the late 1980s, Dr Abdul Latif Kanoo, the founder of Beit Al Qur'an Museum, asked me, as well as others, to submit an art work for the collection, which includes some of the finest historical Qur'ans and extraordinary examples of calligraphy. I created a work centred around the idea of the holy book itself, and used Qur'anic verses about the Qur'an and hadiths which refer to the Qur'an. Now, because I do not agree with the idea of commercialising the Qur'an through art, this was the only project I have done which uses Qur'anic verses for that matter, apart from one or two small pieces or trials. When it comes to the marketable aspect of my work, I want people to buy and appreciate my art work because of the art and because of the ideas presented. The Qur'an has to be respected and has to be implemented, and so I believe that instead of just serving the Qur'an by using the selling power in it, implement its morals instead and by that you do the best services to the Qur'an and to all mankind.

S.F: Can you take me through your working process? Do you plan your work ahead of time or paint spontaneously?

A.E: It's a combination of the two. You cannot do

anything without planning; that is the first thing you do. But what is planning? It doesn't mean you stop the rest of your life. Planning is knowing what you want to do and how you want to do it. My work is composed of so many different elements, concepts, ideas and messages, the research of poetry and then the expression through the exploration of Arabic script and the composition's general appeal. So the moment you decide what you want to start working on, you need to somehow focus your ideas until it all starts to become clear. Any work is composed of so many different elements but at the same time, everything has to work together as one unit, as one art work. But when we're talking about the fluency of expression, that is, the ability of creating a work spontaneously, that is also important. Without spontaneity, a work becomes timid and limited and not really very inspiring, so all approaches must be combined.

S.F: In 1981 you left Tripoli to live in the UK, what was the modern art scene in Libya like when you left and what is it like today?

A.E: Today I wouldn't be able to tell you much about it. I haven't been to Libya for nearly thirty years, and there isn't very much international coverage on the country so I haven't heard much about what is going on there either. I used to know many capable artists with great talent. I might not necessarily have agreed with their approach but they were tremendously talented. The problem is that either because of choice or circumstance, social or financial conditions, it was difficult for them to flourish and alas this great potential was either lost or confined. I really hope that in the near future more people can see and enjoy all that talent.

S.F: You studied in the UK and have lived there for many years now, has this altered your approach to painting?

A.E: Yes, particularly with the way I use colour. In a country like Libya, you don't have to use very strong, solid, immediate, brilliant colours like reds and yellows, blues and greens. You don't need to have that because the light is so strong that you can see the subtle variations of muted tones, like the

different metallic or sandy colours, or subtle degrees of sky and sea blues; you can see the finest and the smallest alteration between one colour to the next. In places like Britain and northern Europe, you have to be hit by a hammer to understand the colour – pardon the expression - so I had to approach it in a new way when I moved to the UK. In my work now, you see lots of yellows and reds, greens and blues, although I do still use muted tones as you need the whole vocabulary if you want to speak a language. Also, especially in this environment, sunny colours bring some kind of happiness to the soul. So, yes, my use of colour has definitely changed. But when it comes to using Arabic and creating a platform for Arabic to be widely appreciated and exhibited in different parts of the world, and to be understood by people who read or don't read Arabic, or highlight important issues, that has always been and remains an integral part of my work.

S.F: Modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art has received a lot of international attention over the past few years. Since many artists from many different countries in the region seem to have been almost arbitrarily thrown together, how do you think your work fits into this new grouping?

A.E: I don't know if it fits at all. As I mentioned before, I think that we need to do much better than just imitate the European/Western schools of art, and most of what we are talking about in this point here are often followers of these schools. Some of them are greatly talented, of course, but we don't have to follow everything that is thrown to us, from the West or East. While we should be happy to learn from others, we only need to learn what is good for us, and we have our own sources and ideas which I feel need to come to the forefront. Also I might differ with others in some aspects such as intentions, applications, attitudes, goals, and of course I hope that people collectively or individually will see that difference and appreciate it. Nevertheless, my firm commitment is to what is genuine, moral and positive.

Samar Faruqi, Director of Research, Meem Gallery. Since joining Meem in March 2009, Samar has edited Meem Editions publications including Dia Al-Azzawi: Retrospective and Parviz Tanavoli: Monograph. She is currently working on the forthcoming publication Art in Iraq Today, which is being produced in conjunction with the Iraqi art exhibition series held at Meem Gallery. She has a BA Honors in Art History from Goldsmiths College, University of London and is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, where she received a distinction for her MPhil dissertation on John Frederick Lewis' harem paintings. Her research interests include modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art and representations of women in British Orientalist paintings.



Sultanul Asseen (2010) 150 x 150 cm Acrylic and ink on art paper