

Ayad Alkadhi

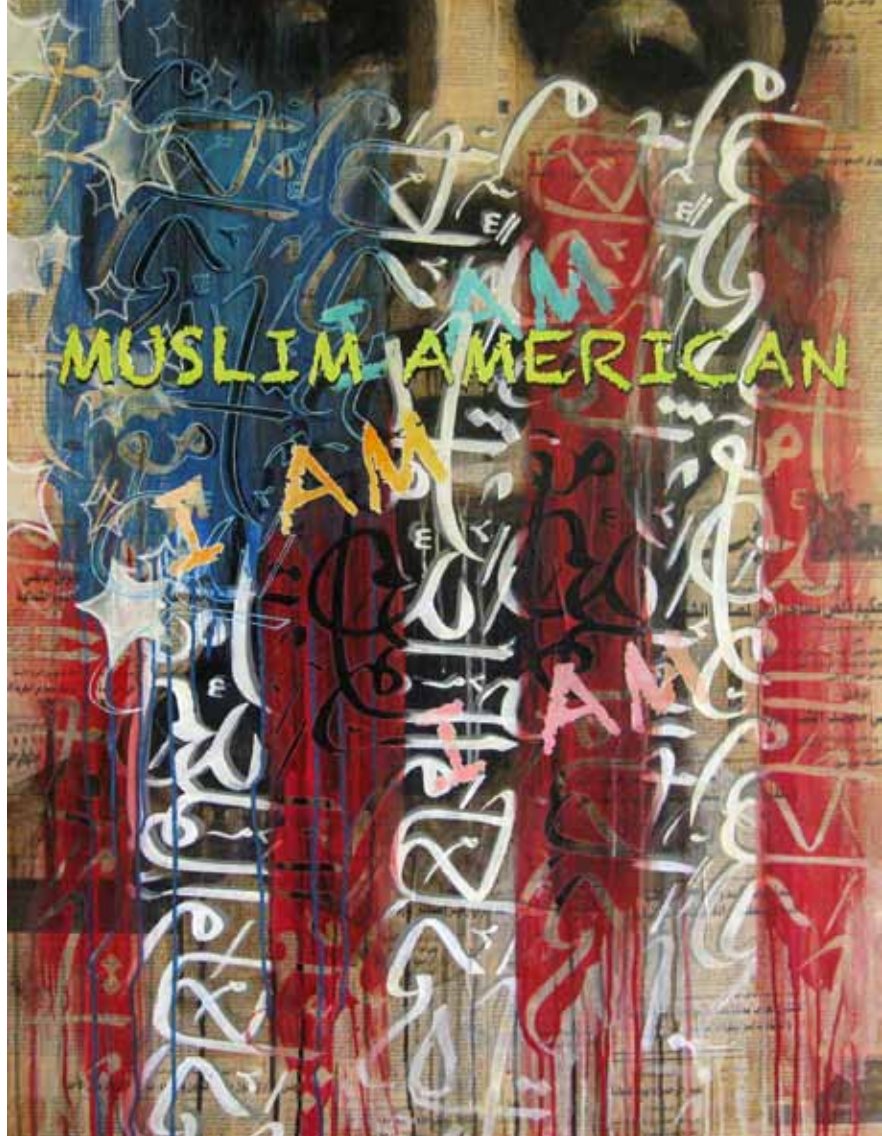
Personal profile and “Islam International” series

Painter Ayad Alkadhi’s latest work, “Islam International”, keys into the topical issue of Islam and Muslim migration to the West.

As in most of Alkadhi’s works, “Islam International” focuses attention on cultural and political topics of the Middle East. The artist is keenly interested in the major cultural juncture the world now faces: how the ever expanding Muslim world is perceived by the West, and moreover, the highly charged contact point between Muslim and Western beliefs. Once limited in geographical scope, Islam is no longer regional. Its increasing and explosive growth has made it truly international.

“As an Arab/Iraqi living in the West,” says Alkadhi who has exhibited in Europe, the US, New Zealand and the Middle East, “I feel an obligation to direct my themes to a target audience hungry for answers that mainstream media fail to fully satisfy.” After 9/11, Islam and the Middle East came into international focus as never before. Suddenly, a multitude of mixed emotions associated with the Middle East entered international debate. It was natural, says Alkadhi, to focus his work on the dual worlds of fear and fascination that these events created.

“Islam International” couples deep feelings concerning religion, society and politics with the West’s strong nationalistic symbols and icons, along with the abiding need to defend them against incursion. These icons include national



I am (us) - Mixed Media on canvas - 76x102 - 2010

flags and profiles of George Washington, Charles de-Gaulle, Winston Churchill and Queen Elizabeth II. Alkadhi also employs and juxtaposes pop culture and almost whimsical symbols in this series, including: Mickey Mouse, a profile of Sophia Loren, and a French croissant – all set against the traditional Muslim niqab or veil.

The paintings expose the heart of recent clashes between Muslim integration and Western society: the banning of the veil in France, the banning of minarets in Switzerland, and opposition to building mosques in the United States. In question is the adherence to Shari’ah

or Islamic law, its conflict with secular Western law and the limitations imposed by it. At issue is the basic right to practice one's religion freely and openly against Western society's desire to preserve its own cultural unity and integrity.

Alkadhi uses acrylic and oil paint on Arabic newspaper as background for the "Islam International" series and freely employs Arabic calligraphy, as he does in much of his work. He says his primary aim is to achieve a non-biased presentation. "I strive to look at both sides," says Alkadhi who lives and works in New York and California. "I place myself in the role of the Muslim immigrant living in these countries. The natural born and naturalized citizen will each have strong feelings about my work. I feel there are multiple layers of interpretation, the exact result any artist would strive for". "Pointing a finger of blame is often the result of ignorance and a lack of understanding. I strive to avoid doing that. I prefer that the viewer judge the message of my work by drawing his or her own conclusions from it."

The paintings blend various cultural, religious, national and political values into seemingly incongruous wholes. The result is the packaging of an explosive topic into powerful artistic statements. The paintings become potent symbols in themselves, which either side of the issue will interpret according to their fears, beliefs and indelible cultural backgrounds.

The "Islam International" series is a continuation of earlier works, specifically, "Held by a Thread", in which Alkadhi employs yarn pulled through canvas painted with faces. His intent is to illustrate that immigrants are pulled threads, drawn from motherland fabric and sewn onto the material life of their new homelands. In

these migrations, immigrants can exist in a state of purgatory - of not belonging. While they often strive to weave into the whole, they yet stand out. They are bold lines of yarn stitched into the fabric of their adopted culture in hope of maybe, once again, belonging.

"Regarding Muslim integration, I feel the boiling point is yet ahead of us," says Alkadhi. "Feelings need to be looked at from various angles since it is a very touchy topic. Muslim integration plays into race, bigotry, religion, power, politics and fears of cultural erosion – a cocktail, comprising the most intense of all controversial hotbeds". Alkadhi's work deals with religious belief as well as the right to exist in one's most comfortable and natural surroundings – true for both a French native and a French-Saudi clothed in a burqa and residing in Paris. An artist's rendering of such topics is often the best way to expose these hot and otherwise untouchable emotions. "I believe this work draws those emotions into succinct focus," says Alkadhi.

Born in Baghdad, Iraq, Alkadhi spent his childhood between England, the United Arab Emirates and Baghdad. At the age of 23, after the first Gulf War, Alkadhi left Iraq for a better future - first to Jordan and shortly thereafter to New Zealand. He moved to New York City where he graduated with an MFA from New York University's ITP Tisch School of The Arts. As the grandson of a professor of Islamic literature and poetry, Alkadhi grew up surrounded by the richness and beauty of the Arabic written word. This early immersion ignited a fascination with Arabic calligraphy, which later became the foundation of his visual message. "Arabic lettering/calligraphy is a direct visual link to our heritage, therefore it seems only natural to use it when telling a story on canvas," says Alkadhi.

Growing up in Baghdad during Saddam's regime and witnessing the havoc caused by two wars also left a deep impact on Alkadhi's work. The impact was first translated into denial and later into a conscious choice to block all political references from his work. After the invasion of Iraq, and especially the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal, a switch of consciousness occurred. The message of his work became increasingly keyed into a heightened understanding and awareness of his cultural heritage.

"The invasion of Iraq was difficult for me," says Alkadhi. "Experience has taught that little good can come from violence. Having one's homeland invaded is jolting in any situation. Without minimizing US casualties, the overall number of Iraqi civilians affected by this war is rather staggering. That said, I think it is important to look at the past and draw lessons from it rather than use it as fuel for anger. We

can spread awareness by focusing our message on the individual. That is what I do with each painting I create."

The "I Am Baghdad" series was created as a reaction to the invasion.

As an Iraqi living in the US, Alkadhi says he is often asked about his feelings regarding the war in Iraq. "My response, inevitably, is reflective of my own experience of growing up in Baghdad," he says. "I am aware that other Iraqis hold different feelings based on their backgrounds and socio-economical, religious and educational influences. In this series I attempt to convey those feelings by placing myself in their shoes and walking their path. I view the portraits as interviews, wherein Baghdad citizens express their feelings about post-occupation Iraq. The portraits are tightly shot and so close-up that you have no choice but to listen to what they have to tell you. The faces are the same, united in nationality and under the same umbrella of circumstance.

Yet, each is representative of different slices of Baghdad's social and political system. The layers of calligraphy that are imposed on the faces express the individual feelings of each person. It is up to the viewer to interpret those feelings."

This series was followed by others that dealt with the results of human suffering, such as Iraqi war refugees in Syria, which was addressed in the series "Slowly to Destruct" and "Casualty Unreported".



Mickey - Mixed Media on Canvas - 91x91 - 2010

“The most important message I have tried to convey through my work deals with awakening and questioning,” says Alkadhi. “Hopefully, my work awakens viewers to the realities of war, prompting them to question their ideals. The final question may be, is the price too high to pay for an ambiguous result?”



Muslim brit - Mixed Media on canvas - 76x102 - 2010



Io sono - Mixed Media on canvas - 76x102 - 2010