

Transcending Forms: The Calligraphic Paintings of Pouran Jinchi

By Maryam Ekhtiar

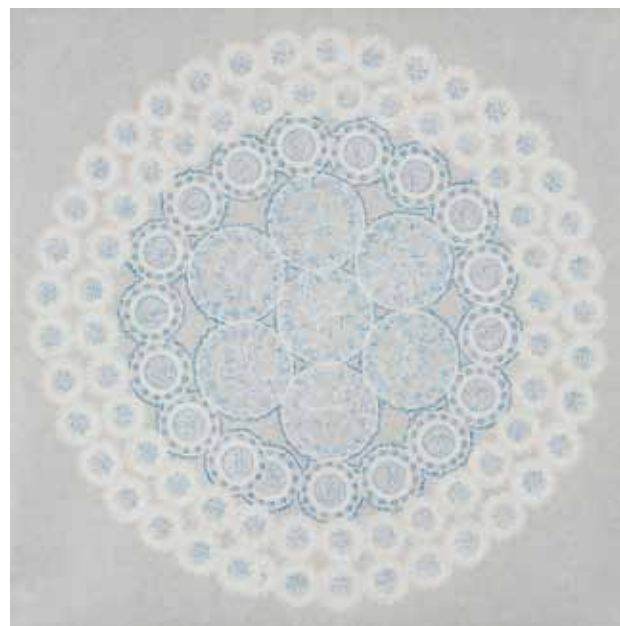
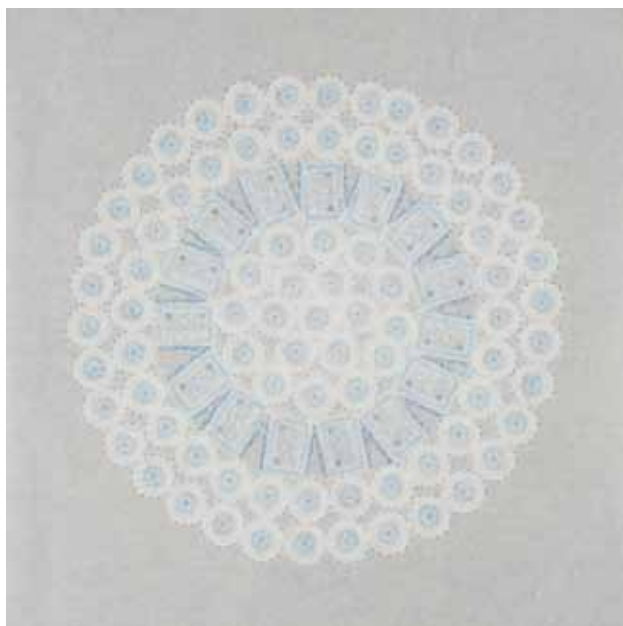


Triple Skullcaps - Headgear series, 2007, Gouache on paper, 114x147cm - Courtesy of the Artist and The Third Line gallery.

Pouran Jinchi's distinct contemporary approach to calligraphy and Persian poetry makes her unique among several visual artists working in this realm today. Born in Iran and based in New York, Jinchi's paintings are a blend of meticulously penned verses and words from such master poets as Omar Khayyam (12th century) and Hafez (14th century), religious texts, Minimalism and East Asian sensibilities. For as long as she remembers, the versatile shapes and forms of the letters of the Arabic alphabet have captured her imagination. To her each letter is not only a signifier of sound or meaning, but also a form with a life and energy of its own. Using calligraphy as a point of departure, her works take this medium to new levels and in new directions.

Her work presents an awareness of the continuity of past and present forms. Although the characters

are rendered with the precision and a sure-handed discipline of the traditional calligrapher, she transforms them beyond recognition using an ingenious method of layering, abstraction and juxtaposition of forms and colors. Her calligraphic compositions often push the boundaries of abstraction; they flirt gently with post-modern notions of space, fragmentation, repetition and "decentering." The ambiguity and fluidity of the forms engage the viewer on several levels and invite him/her to participate in an open dialogue. In this way, her paintings demystify the very same traditions from which she draws inspiration. One could read her works as a deconstruction of the verses and words she uses. She takes the verses, breaks them down and reduces them and subsequently re-presents them in a totally innovative way.



Morning (01)(09), 2009, Waxed charcoal and pencil on Rice paper, 46x46cm - Courtesy of the Artist and The Third Line gallery.

Visually recreating the spontaneity of emotions elicited by the verses of poetry is her main intention. Jinchi considers herself a painter for whom the words, verses and letters are just tools for creating an abstract language. She strongly believes in the importance of process over product. Her emphasis and complete immersion in the artistic process is revealed in the way she writes and rewrites, layers, inscribes, etches and engraves the letters and markings on the surface of the canvas.

The closest counterpart to Jinchi's calligraphic paintings in the traditional Persian calligraphic tradition is the "siyah mashq" or calligraphic preparatory practice sheets executed by traditional calligraphers or scribes. Such practice sheets consist of irregular, undulating and overlapping repetitions of individual letters or words. Siyah mashq pages were often prized as artworks in their own right and included in royal albums.

Nature is a pivotal force in her paintings. Her works embody an organic element that originates in natural forces and teeming energy. Whether repeating themselves in a rhythmic march, floating weightlessly on the surface of the canvas, or appearing superimposed in layers of rich texture, the letters resonate with nature's pulses in subtle and mysterious ways. The individual letters and diacritical marks are infused with life,

sometimes appearing to be pulled in by a central force. The works of East Asian modern artists inspire her paintings in an indirect way.

Several of her paintings echo the works of Abstract Expressionists such as Brice Marden (1938-) and Mark Tobey (b. 1890-1976), who have looked to Chinese and Japanese calligraphy as a source of energy and spirituality, like the works of these artists, elicit a response to the ephemeral qualities of nature.

Many are asymmetrical with large areas of empty space others compositions demonstrate letters clustered in one corner of the canvas and held together by a centripetal force with a few letters struggling to break free. Sometimes an isolated letter actually manages to break loose and survive as an individual entity. The letters function collectively; their compositions are amorphous, yet what speaks most directly to the viewer is their play as they continuously shift on the surface of the canvas. Her art is a reminder that nature flows through all things. They vary also, from a cyclone of letters steered by a circular movement resembling a whirlwind, to the letters erupting out of the corner of the canvas. Other paintings evoke a quieter airy quality wherein the letters resemble a pile of autumn leaves being blown around by a delicate breeze. Her paintings



Louis Vuitton Flower - Headgear series, 2007, Gouache on paper, 76x58cm - Courtesy of the Artist and The Third Line gallery.

also reveal a connection to the works of the second generation American Abstract Expressionists Joan Mitchell (1926-1992) and Philip Taffe. Joan Mitchell's lyrical atmospheric clusters of rich colors and Philip Taffe's ornamental approach to layering and repetitive patterns are reflected in her calligraphic compositions. Although Jinchi's methods of rendering the characters and words of the poetic verses mimic those of the traditional calligrapher or scribe, her methods, techniques and tools are quite different. The letters are penned in ink on the surface of the canvas with special metal pens of various widths. One of her exceptional artistic skills is her ability to work on both miniature and monumental scales. Because of the variable size of her paintings, the metal pens she uses are well suited to producing the fluid shapes of the nasta'liq letters in large and oversize formats. She frequently expresses binary opposites in her calligraphic compositions and in many of her works there is a clear distinction between



Christian Dior - Headgear series, 2007, Gouache on paper, 76x58cm - Courtesy of the Artist and The Third Line gallery.

foreground and background, high and popular culture, coarseness and refinement, and light and dark colors. For example, in the foreground of her paintings she precisely renders each letter, controlling the thickness and thinness of the line, while in the background, she scribbles uncontrollably the letters and markings, as if they were graffiti. In some cases, the individual letters in the foreground end in an accidental drip, a feature frequently seen in Abstract Expressionist painting. The way she etches the letters and markings on the background of her paintings using a twig is reminiscent of the work of Brice Marden, who used this technique as the basis of his early monochromatic paintings in the late 1960's and early 70's. In Jinchi's compositions, the wildly engraved letters of the background represent an antithesis to the refinement of the nasta'liq letters in the foreground. A number of her other works reflect her childhood fascination with ant colonies. Captivated by the distinct manner in which large numbers of ants

congregate, she uses the letters in the Persian word for ant, “murcheh,” to reconstruct this natural phenomenon. She draws on the resemblance of the actual body of the ant to the shape of the letters in the Persian word to create webbings that embody a slow-moving, restrained energy. Once again, the compositions originate in a colony of letters in one corner of the canvas and evolve into a variety of meandering forms and shapes as they slowly move away from the cluster. The ants appear to have no purpose as individual units, but function collectively. At the same time she is infusing forms with energy and movement, she is also experimenting with notions of time within nature. The ant formations appear to capture a finite or transitory moment within an infinite time frame.

Jinchi's expression of energy is distinct. It is directly drawn from natural forces and organic forms. Contemporary Iranian artist Muhammad Ehsaie also uses calligraphic forms as his main vehicle of expression. However, in his more recent works his rendering of energy is “gestural,” a characteristic feature of the Abstract Expressionist school, while Jinchi's letters are controlled and precise, with an undercurrent of energy steering the letters. There are clearly two disparate manifestations of energy at work in the compositions of these two artists.

Jinchi's fascination with energy is also apparent in her more recent Entropy Series (2010), which explores the relationship between matter and energy and its ultimate evolution into a state of inert uniformity. These works celebrate the sound and energy of calligraphic forms and color producing an entropy of unreadable text in a vibrant palette. Vacillating between chaos and order, the letters in these works either builds up towards a visual crescendo or dissolves randomly into the surface. Here, Jinchi remains true to her calligraphic and cultural background, yet utilizes an abstract language that is driven by the powerful forces of nature.

In other current works, Jinchi employs elements of Islamic religious ritual and meditation. She creates rubbings which seek to recreate the surface of a mohr, or Muslim prayer tablet made of baked clay. A mohr is placed on the spot where the worshipper's forehead meets the ground when praying. Translated literally from the Persian word for ‘stamp’, a mohr is typically embossed on one side with the word Allah, the names

of the Imams and other religious figures, as well as other Arabic phrases, geometric and vegetal patterns. Jinchi's rubbings are made by scratching charcoal on thin paper over prayer tablets in order to produce an imprint of the delicately textured surface. The forms are then outlined with pencil to delineate their detail and complexity of design. The repetition and rhythm of the forms endow these works with a distinct aesthetic. Her use of waxy charcoal on white or black paper creates contrasting patterns and calligraphic designs that are unique to each prayer tablet. This results in an intricate final image which embodies a meditative quality much like the act of prayer. Inspired by Persian and Far Eastern traditions, particularly Sufism and Zen philosophical attitudes toward nature mediated through Minimalism, Jinchi places nature and its infinite rhythms at the core of her art. Her use of such a multitude of artistic traditions, along with her ability to simultaneously draw inspiration from yet transcend them distinguishes her from other contemporary artists who use calligraphy as the language of their art.

About Pouran Jinchi

Pouran Jinchi was born in 1959 in Mashad, Iran, and currently lives and works in New York. Jinchi obtained a degree in Engineering at George Washington University, Washington D.C. in 1982 and then took up painting at the University of California, Los Angeles (1989), followed with studio painting at the Art Students League in New York (1993). Her work suggests a mixture of calligraphy and abstract expressionism. Ultimately, Jinchi succeeds in combining the achievements of her Persian heritage while simultaneously working through discussions of contemporary aesthetics. Jinchi has exhibited extensively and has had over ten solo exhibitions in New York alone. Her work has been exhibited internationally in shows in Japan, Germany, Qatar and the UAE and included in public collections including the Federal Reserve Bank, New York, The Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C, the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn and the Farjam Collection, Dubai, UAE.

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