

Mysticism in the Works of Three Contemporary Middle Eastern Artists

By Siba Aldabbagh

Having attended Rachid Koraichi's very interesting talk at the Khalili Research Centre for the Material and Visual Cultures of the Middle East, I was very disappointed with the title 'Sufism in Contemporary Art'¹, which was not so much about Sufism in contemporary art, but was more focused on Sufi practices at work in his own creative enterprise. After a lengthy hour of numerous slides, and intermittences where Gerard Houghton very kindly acted as Koraichi's interpreter, I started to become quite fidgety. Doesn't 'Sufism in Contemporary Art', without using an article, and using the abstract noun 'art', indicate that several artists' works will be addressed? For although it was indeed an eye opener to learn about the various symbols which have meaning imbedded in Sufi mysticism, I felt that the discussion could have been made richer through a comparison of his work with other artists' angling of Sufism.

This is a question which bears even greater relevance in the academic arena where there have been insufficient studies locating the Sufi in contemporary Arab and Iranian art. I have thus taken it upon myself to bear the responsibility to begin traversing this undiscovered road, exploring the work of three artists who delve into the waterfalls of creativity through the mystical prism. Many questions are begged once we begin to approach this topic. Firstly, which artists, through their art, display Sufi affiliations? And in naming such artists, do we need to wait for their statements and biographies to tell us so? For this is indeed one of the most troubling epistemological issues of art criticism. How do we come to know and construct the meaning of an art work? Do we take artist statements and biographies literally; do we 'trust' those artist in conveying the meaning, influences and aims of their creativity? Do we take what Charles Sanders Peirce calls, the 'intended interpretum' as the only window allowing us to peep into the artistic

product? Or, alternatively, should we not see these statements as mere projections of what these artists want us to see, directing our vision and understanding of the pieces? As a literary critic through education, I am firmly convinced that these artist statements are to be read as creative 'texts' in their own right, intercepting with, but also deviating from, the art works.

More importantly, is it only a particularly Sufi order of mysticism that is explored by Arab and Iranian artists? Or are there artists who have indeed shown a degree of metaphysical and philosophical awareness less informed by Sufi thought per se, but who have exhibited a more complex comparative approach to mysticism?

It is for this reason that I will not wait for artists to label their works as Sufi, for this has recently become a powerful marketing tool, an exotic label tapping into Orientalist sentiments and romantic notions much demanded by uninitiated audiences. Preferably, I 'read' artworks on their own, and study whether or not they elicit a response to Sufi concerns and questions. Thus, the artists whose works which I have perceived to be informed by the imminent rays of mysticism, in whatever form, include Rachid Koraichi, Rafa' al-Nasiri and Parviz Tanavoli.

It must be noted that both Koraichi and Tanavoli are two artists who have discussed their own works in a specifically Sufi light. Koraichi, as will be shown later, employs motifs and symbols which are Sufi in a traditional sense, using geometry and calligraphy profusely to show his strong affiliation and genealogical attachment to a specifically Muslim branch of mysticism. Tanavoli, on the other hand, although critiquing his own work as bearing Sufi meanings, is less traditional than Koraichi, not using conventional symbols and signs that have, over time, been associated with Islamic art practices. The third artist who I wish to discuss, Rafa al-Nasiri, is mystical to a different extent;

having not made reference to any form of mysticism in the way of artist statements or other forms of intended interpretation, he has not been seen as an artist who is specifically Sufi. Having said that, Shakir Hasan Al-Sa'id had very early on related Al-Nasiri's oeuvre to his vision of Al-bu'd Al-wahid². As Al-Sa'id was an overtly Sufi painter, Al-Nasiri was unduly influenced by him. But Al-Nasiri, as the only Iraqi artist to have studied in China, further complicated the mystical dimension in his work by combining Sufism with Chinese Daoism. It is for this reason that I have chosen to title this article 'Mysticism in the Works of Three Contemporary Middle Eastern Artists' as opposed to 'Sufism' in their works. This interest in comparative mysticism is due to an attraction to the universal principles which tell us about the nature of God and of the nature of human 'being' common to all mystical traditions. This brief study will show how both Islamic and Daoist esoterism go beyond the exoteric religious frameworks of these two traditions and use metaphysics to show how the common language of universal spiritual principles enables us to understand diverse religious phenomena. For over three paragraphs I have rambled on about Sufism. But what is it? It must be admitted, although I had an inkling of an idea that Sufism was a spiritual theological aspect of Islam, I was never familiar with its primary texts, beliefs and practices until a friend mentioned the neo-Platonist Ishraqi school, founded by Shihab Al-Din Suhrawardi. Having incorporated aspects of Zoroastrian ideas in his angelology of lights, Suhrawardi is only one amongst a larger number of significant thinkers and writers who were to leave their watermark on Sufi thought to this day. Both for myself and the uninformed reader, I believe to outline briefly the main tenets of Sufi thought and influences on Sufism from various other traditions is crucial to a better informed understanding of how it is weaved into contemporary art from the Arab and Iranian regions. 'Sufism represents an ideal mode of worship derived from the Quranic Revelation and from the customs and sayings (sunna and hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad³. In testifying that 'there is no god if not God' the Sufi 'denies the reality of anything which does not possess its own sufficient reason; he is aware of the illusory character of contingent phenomena, of the



Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech in a cage*, 2005, Bronze, 118x49x42cm - Courtesy of the British Museum, London.

outer world, of individual existence; he empties himself from pretension, becomes 'poor' and 'submitted' to the soul Real existing by itself, whose supreme Name is Allah, literally: "the God," unique, infinite, and absolute. Thus, it is only by his own obliteration that man can attain to the consciousness of the Real, or Truth (Al-Haqq), which is one of 'the beautiful Names of God'; by realizing his own nothingness, fragility, and dependence, he perceives the Presence, the Power, and the other qualities of the self-sustaining Being.'

This paradox, of perceiving the Presence, the Power and the other qualities of the self-sustaining Being through 'obliteration' and 'realizing his own nothingness' is a crucial facet of mystical phenomena. Playing upon this notion in the Islamic Sufi context, Tanavoli titles one of his most ubiquitous sculpture series *Heech* to physically present this aspect of nothingness. '*Heech*' meaning nothing in Farsi is an important signifier of a signified which is invisible and unknown. Combined



Rachid Koraïchi, *Ibn El Arabi*, 2009 Lithograph, Edition of 5, 61x40cm - Courtesy of October gallery, London. Reproduced with artist's permission.

with the physical presence of the sculptures, the signifier Heech becomes an inversed signified insofar as it evokes that which it is not; the sculptures are things existing in real space, as opposed to nothing which is empty. Looking at one of many of these sculptures in the series, I will distinguish the structure of the word Heech by punctuating it. The italicized Heech refers to the whole structure, including the cage. Complicating the signification process is the cage which half imprisons the word-sculpture 'heech' or nothingness. 'Heech' exists in a cage which is a definite object, but with empty squares carved out. The cage is thus a hollow object, not with closed panels, but semipermeable walls which selectively allow things in and out. The structure of 'heech' itself is one of those objects which has been allowed to sit inside the cage, but also comfortably extending beyond the

confines of the cage too. Two other important things freely floating in and out are air and light. The paradox that holes and thus emptiness can be filled with light is related to Sufism as a way to enlightenment; one must submit the self to nothingness, for the one true self-sustaining Being is God. This is one way of being at one with God: in annihilating the self to the utmost point of non-existence. This is the Sufi quest and that which distinguishes it from normative-legislative Islam.

But the significance of light in Islamic mysticism is much deeper than explained above, for the centrality of light is present in virtually all religious traditions not to mention the mystical branches of these traditions. As in other religions, in Islam God is referred to as 'the light of the heavens and the earth'⁴, leading people from darkness to the light. What distinguishes the symbolism of light in the Islamic tradition is that Muhammad was seen as the medium through which Divine light radiates according to early Muslim scholars. Other myths grew where mystics said that Muhammad's light was the first thing God created. Most of these notions, save the last, are not specifically Sufi beliefs, rather they are more general to the wider Islamic faith. Yet a philosophy of light was developed later by Suhrawardi whose Philosophy of Illumination led to his death in 1191. Believing that 'during long ascetic preparations, [an individual] may grow into a true 'man of light' whose heart is an unstained mirror to reflect the Divine light and reveal it to others.'⁵ Out of nothingness, abstention and asceticism can one become a 'man of light' and can reveal God's light to others. Can we use this model to help us understand the heech sculpture better?

It is interesting to see how heech taken as a whole consists of a physical presence which is visualised and placed in real space. The visual expression that something denoting non-existence is concretized is explained according to Sufi terms by Tanavoli. He explains that, 'in Sufism, God created the world out of nothing and so nothingness is everywhere, in every part of the universe and within all of us.'⁶ Similar to the individual who abstains from all forms of worldliness, so does the cage, filled only with a structure which signifies nothingness or 'heech', transmit light through its cubic holes. Although the concept that God created the world out of nothing is not specific to Sufi, and not even Islamic

beliefs, it is interesting to see how Tanavoli has made direct reference to Sufi practices in his approach and works. According to Ibn Sina, the achievement of truth is based on the notion that 'all things are divided into two classes that stand to each other in a relation of exact mutual correspondence; everything is truly known after it has been known⁷. Thus, things are divided into what is known as the manifest, or *batin* and hidden, or *zahir*⁸. Sufi epistemology refers to cognition as 'making [the unseen] manifest' (*izhar*). Where Sufi epistemology and ontology departs from traditional Islamic thinking is that the cognition of truth is seen as 'confusion' instead of as 'fixed certainty', although both agree that truth itself is the hidden made manifest. How Sufism logically argues for this is that the cause and effect relation is an inner division of the same essence rather than an external division between two different essences, so they are the hidden and manifest, not of two different essences, or two different and definite aspect of things, but rather one and the same. Other schools of philosophy consider what occurs between differs from the notion of what is considered to be taking place inside in Sufi philosophy. Rational knowledge is acquired by moving from premises to a conclusion, by going along the stretched path according to Ibn 'Arabi. The intuitive witnessing of God as the inner essence of things spheres this line. Confusion comes only when the sphered line becomes equal to its centre and the person sees the hidden as manifest and the manifest as hidden. The way of seeing the truth becomes total oneness and sameness, the transcendence of any differentiation and the non-fixity of any definiteness and any limit. This is what makes the Sufi understanding of truth different: it undermines well-established stereotypes of dichotomizing divisions. The fundamental ontological sameness of God and His creation entails the sameness of any pair of opposed categories. Truth thus becomes a transcendence of dichotomic divisions—transcendence which, however presupposes that each of them is fixed—but only as a step in an unceasing movement, equal to any other of its infinite steps.'

It is this aspect of conflating binary oppositions which makes Heech speak most loudly to Sufi philosophy. To reach truth, Tanavoli has transcended the dichotomous division of hidden, *batin*, 'heech' or nothingness and

manifest, *zahir* or thingness. Heech is precisely a physical structure of the word 'heech' signifying nothingness, inside a cage which is filled with nothingness as well as itself. This act of transcending divisions is a 'step in an unceasing movement, equal to any other of its infinite steps'. In other words, this effort is one aspect of continuous movement on the journey to unity with God. The Sufi dimension at play in Rachid Koraichi's lithographs are much more explicit and require no artist statement as in the case of Tanavoli. The relationship of 'heech' to Sufism requires a deeper reading with an understanding of nothingness in Sufi thought. But Koraichi, in his several series of lithographs, which have been dedicated to certain Sufi Masters such as Ibn El 'Arabi and the great Sufi poet Rumi, no preliminary understanding of the intricate esotericism of Sufi thought is required. It is sufficient for one to read the title of the series for one to establish a connection between the great Sufi Masters and Koraichi's creativity. Yet it is important to be able to decipher the symbols within Koraichi's works which visually expand upon this connection.

His works are filled with great explosions of typically Islamic pictorial metaphors and often repeated inscriptions of Sufi poetry, or even the repetition of certain Masters' names. Looking at the lithograph below, part of the Ibn El-'Arabi series, there are repeated lines stating 'Ibn El-Arabi Muhyi Al-din' translating to 'Ibn El-'Arabi is the reviver of religion', as well as repetition of the word 'muhyi' or reviver, and 'Al-Din' or 'the religion'. In the middle of the bottom half of the work, the four right angled triangles are joined together to form a larger rectangle. The two triangles forming the left hand side of the rectangle contain mirror images of the words 'muhyi' and 'al-din'.

This duality of being able to read against a reversed ordering of letters symbolises the mystical allusion to the truth that 'God is one, but with creation, duality comes into existence, and from duality, multiplicity grows⁹'. From the duality of two triangles, another two triangles are born, giving rise to a larger triangle. Existing within each of the four triangles which make up the larger rectangle are words written in Arabic, to be read from right to left, as well as inversed words which require a mirror to be read. This polarity between legible



Rafa Alnasiri, *Beyond Time*, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 180x180cm - Courtesy of the artist.

and illegible writing is an artistic interpretation of the Sufi belief that ‘polarity is necessary for the existence of the universe, which, like a woven fabric, is capable of existence only thanks to the interplay of God’s *jalal* and *jamal* Heaven and Earth, *ghayb*, ‘unseen’, and *shahāda*, ‘the visible things’ (sf. Sura 9: 94), point to this dual aspect of the created universe’¹⁰. The duality is an important part of God’s created universe, making the piece a testament to God’s cosmological order.

The unintelligible part of the dual inscription in the square requiring a mirror to be read reminds one of the mystical notion that ‘the pure heart is a mirror

of God, those whose hearts are perfectly purified and polished can serve as mediators for God’s beauty.’¹¹ It could be a visual metaphor ‘to explain how the disciple learns to speak and to act: as a parrot is placed before a mirror behind which someone is talking whom the bird (thinking his mirror image to be another parrot) tries to imitate, the disciple is instructed by the words of the master, who serves as God’s mirror.’¹² Ibn El-‘Arabi, as a Sufi master, is serving as God’s mirror where the reflection of Ibn El-Arabi as the reviver of religion is read as ‘the religion’; the symbolic projection of ‘the religion’ is mysterious in its requirement of a mirror to be read

signifying the multi-layered and complex stages in order to ascend to God through invocation. These stages are not clear to the disciple, and take the form of dedicated devotion through remembering and invoking. Much like the artwork is filled with ambiguous symbols which may not bear a direct relationship with the symbols of Sufism that have been explained by Schimmel or Bakhtiar, the ascent to God is equally ambiguous, and the path towards God is never clearly known. But, it is still interesting to see how Koraichi's art converses with the discourse of Sufi symbolism. If we take another signification of the triangle in Sufi thought, we may not necessarily be suggesting that this is what Koraichi had in mind when he created the art work, but it definitely holds true that the use of the triangle in Islamic art, throughout its long history, may have been evoking Sufi symbolism, at least where Koraichi is influenced by that history. The triangle has been used to signify theological trinitities, which abound outside Sunni orthodoxy and are profuse in Sufi thought. As well as the Shi'a invocation of God, Muhammad and 'Ali together, the Shi'a prayer adds to the shahada the words 'Ali wali Allah, 'Ali is the friend of God.¹³ The path to serve God is again imbued in the significance of three: 'shari'a, the Highway of the Law, tariqa, the narrow path of the mystic, which leads in its end to haqiqa, 'Divine Truth', or to ma'rifa, 'intuitive gnosis'.¹⁴ It seems that this path to serving God, totalling three parts dependant on the other, is more closely related to Koraichi's use of the triangle. Having the triangle repeated several times could suggest the eternal search for God. The seven triangles at the uppermost part of the lithograph each contain a leaf, which may come to symbolise 'the perfect Muslim because of its submission (islam) to the wind'¹⁵ And being an important part of a tree, the leaves as a collective could be an indication of the Cosmic Tree, which Ibn 'Arabi describes in its macrocosmic form as that tree 'which grows at the uppermost limits of the universe' and 'in its macrocosmic form, its cultivation depends upon the mystic'¹⁶. The tree, or even nature, we could say has a dual symbolism: that which is subject to the laws of nature and that which represents the human soul which is cultivated by sincere and continual invocation of God. In the two examples shown above, the interpretation that mysticism, in its particular

Islamic branch, is related to contemporary art from the Middle East is not simply an actual interpretant, something that I, the critic, has pointed out, but is an intended one. The two artists, Koraichi and Tanavoli, have both established a link between the physical properties of their works, the concept of the works and their statements about their works which are intended to direct our reading of the art-texts. In contrast to this angling of mysticism, let us now turn our attention to a brief analysis of Rafa' Al-Nasiri's print from his Beyond Time series. Completed in 2010, the piece could be seen in the light of Al-Nasiri's wider project of resisting what he calls the U.S. led invasion of Iraq. Unlike the other two examples, we have no language system represented, neither in the form of visual symbols, such as in Koraichi's lithograph, nor in the use of words, as in the case of Koraichi and Tanavoli's 'heech'. Conveniently labelled 'Beyond Time', the work is outside a temporal framework; in being so, it is also, by implication, beyond space.

This notion of being beyond all concreteness evokes a sense that the self is in need of liberation from the limitations of thought and materiality. Considering that Al-Nasiri has not used words or explicit symbols relating to a thought system as related to a form of language, could Al-Nasiri be suggesting a break from language too as a form of materiality? I believe that Al-Nasiri's non-use of linguistic and pictorial symbolic languages (such as leaves, triangles and circles, like in the case of Koraichi) is an attempt to break free from tradition, for as we can see, even the use of pictorial symbols is an act of using an aspect of traditional Islamic art. To use literal language is to reify abstract and metaphysical notions as in the case of Tanavoli. This reification involves conformance to the conventions and traditions which inform the language. But in the print by Al-Nasiri, no such reification takes place. His work is more of an abstract expressionism, a form of resistance to the brutality of what he conceives to be the U.S led invasion of Iraq in 2003. More about metaphysical concepts, Al-Nasiri appropriates the effect of the 'invasion'. Instead of using paradigms encoded by structures of tradition and convention such as language, Al-Nasiri develops a complex intertwining of the Sufi notion of Al-fana' and the Daoist dialectic of 'being' and 'nonbeing'.

Lao Zi (ca. 571-471 BC) believed that “being (existence) derives from nonbeing (nonexistence).” In Daoist thought, nonbeing is the more truthful of the complementary pair because space is the basis of life, the root, without which nothing on the earth would grow.¹⁷ Emptiness and nonbeing as explained above are very similar to the Sufi Al-fana’ whereby enlightenment can only take place when the ego has been completely annihilated. Paradoxically, the empty space of the canvas is not empty at all; rather it is overlaid with yellow acrylic paint, which bears a symbolic relationship with the sun’s illuminative rays – in other words, the yellow paint symbolically indicates the sun as both are yellow. The relationship is not purely indexical as yellow could evoke several other things. But to create a signification that the sun’s yellowness is a visual metaphor or a symbol—in the Piercean sense—for a state of the soul’s annihilation and the enlightenment of the human ego complicates the signification process. Thus, meaning has been constructed, not through use of verbal language, or conventional use of pictorial symbols like in the case of Tanavoli and Koraichi, but is more accurately a building of meaning that is more closely related to existential philosophical concepts. The existential notion of illumination used here could also be related to Suhrawardi’s theory; for Suhrawardi, ‘the self is a light that is manifest to itself; the intelligibles are manifest to this light’. In other words, the function of the human self is to know oneself and to know others. This theory explains ‘the unity of the self. There is in a real sense only one mental faculty, the immaterial light/mind, which does all its knowing and perceiving in the same way, through presence.’¹⁸ The space here, or fana’, functions as that which reflects light, but is also ‘highly emotional’ as it allows for the individual artist to explore a different avenue of expression, unconfined by already existing textual and visual material. Lao Tzu says, ‘Being and nonbeing create each other,’ and ‘The wise follow the path of nonassertion and teach without words’ (Ch II).¹⁹ Al-Nasiri’s composition, which is intentionally void of thought structures, suggesting a ‘freedom of expression and revolutionary acts’²⁰ is one example of the evocation of how the mind knows and perceives, unhindered by sign systems which are deeply encoded in tradition.

Looking at Al-Nasiri’s work in this way helps us to appreciate the deeper, metaphysical and existential struggles which underlie a piece of art work, which bears an affiliation with others which may be more explicitly evoking a relationship to a mystical tradition. Carrying out this form of comparative analysis helps us to appreciate the intricate ways in which artists interact with traditional signifying devices. More importantly, looking at how esoteric mysticism is practiced differently by varying artists enables a richer understanding of cultural heterogeneity even within certain traditions such as that of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

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Endnotes :

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3. Jean-Louis Michon and Roger Gaetani, Sufism: Love and Wisdom (Bloomington, Ind: World Wisdom, 2006), p. xxi.
4. Sura 24, verse 35.
5. Annemarie Schimmel, Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), p. 13.
6. Sholeh Johnston, 'Heech Poems in Three Dimensions: Parviz Tanavoli's Sculptures of Nothingness', Sufi, Winter 2012, p. 35.
7. Andrey Smirnov, 'Truth and Islamic Thought', in A Companion to World Philosophies, Eliot Deutsch and Ronald Bontekoe (eds.), (Malden, Mass; Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 444.
8. Ibid., pp. 444-5.
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10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 31
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 77-78.
14. Schimmel, Deciphering, p. 78.
15. Laleh Bakhtiar, Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976) p. 68.
16. Bakhtiar, Sufi, p. 57.
17. Footnoted in Zhang, Brushed Voices p. 20, see Patrick E. Moran, Three Smaller Widsom Books (Lao Zi's Dao De Jing, the Great Learning [Da Xue], and Doctrine of the Mean [Zhong Yong]) (Lanham, Md., 1993), p. 87.
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20. May Muzaffar, 'Iraqi Contemporary Art' in Iraq: Its History, People, and Politics ed. Shams C. Inati (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2003), p. 79.

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