

Sameh Ismael And Calligraphy was the Entryway



Untitled, 2014, charcoal and pencil on paper, 70x100cm. Courtesy of the artist.

“I believe that destiny plays a certain role in your choices; you might make a choice to take a certain route and you don’t quite know where it would lead you to,” said artist Sameh Ismael. Fascinated by the handwriting of his calligrapher/Arabic teacher in the primary school, Sameh Ismael attracted the attention of the teacher who not only taught him the principal Arabic fonts but also helped him to enroll in the Calligraphy School in Bab El-Louk as soon as he had finished his preparatory stage – minimum requirement for the Calligraphy School. Over two years he was a very clever student and learned other Arabic fonts like thuluth, diwani and



Untitled, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 130x180cm. Courtesy of the artist.

farsi. However, his late mother thought that he needed to score high grades in the high school certificate (Thanaweya Amma) and this was not possible while he dedicated four hours a day for the study of calligraphy. Since Sameh joined the Faculty of Fine Arts, his experience started getting much diversified; he specialized in graphics with focus on book design, posters, printing materials, logos and identity creation. “I was challenged, just like many other colleagues, by the employment of Arabic text within the design. At that time computers were not at all common and we added text to the posters through copying and enlarging

the prototypes in the letterset collections. I realized then that I have an edge over my colleagues: I know calligraphy and I could work freehand,” says Sameh.

He started thinking of modifying, developing and playing with the Arabic fonts. At that time art student used to think that Arabic script was dead and static – especially the fonts most commonly used in typography – and if they use any of the more elaborate fonts like naskh, thuluth, farsi or diwani, this would impart a sacred touch upon the work. “This was a taboo: I could not make a poster to promote tourism in Sharm, for instance, and use the koufi font,” says Ismael.

He knew he had to work hard to promote the idea that the Arabic letter can be just another graphic element of design, just like a tree or a model, etc. And to break the main taboo, the ‘sacred’ aspect of the script, Ismael worked on the Arabic letters and their laws and aesthetics, trying to liberate them from the classic rules and make them more dynamic. To do so, he had to totally avoid the use of Qoranic verses; he worked rather on the Sufi inspiration, Sufi poetry: Ibn Arabi, El-Rumi, etc. A great turning point that put the ambitious artists on the right track was his work with great film director, Youssef Chahin on ‘El-Maseer’ or ‘The Destiny’ in 1996. He was about to graduate when he got this opportunity to work on all calligraphy and ornamental elements in this film whether in costumes or decoration, etc.

“Chahin and Khaled Youssef handed me a box with some 20 references on the arts of Andalusia; architecture, textile, fashion, jewelry, manuscripts, books, minor arts etc. He told me to study them for four months and meet again. This was a great learning experience; the Andalusian era was very rich and delightful; a very creative mix of European and Islamic arts. I saved it all in my mind and kept using it later on.”

From 1997 when Ismael graduated and till 2006 he focused on studying Latin typefaces in an attempt to make Arabic adaptation and create new and modern Arabic fonts. At the same time he had an eye on what the Iranians and Lebanese fellow artists were doing.

“The Arabic letter is intelligent, evolving and surprising – it changes form according to its position in the word – hence any program that would be developed to work on the Arabic typography has to give a variety of options to the artist. The Iranians were pioneers in

developing such a program,” says Ismael. At that time Ismael had moved from animation to graphic design in the Egyptian Television and there he started learning about the rules of the screen, 3D graphics, language of the motion picture, music, timing, messages etc., and he started learning to focus on a variety of dimensions.

In parallel he was still working with many advertising agencies as a freelance designer and calligrapher and working on his paintings. “In 2001, designing ‘El-Bait’ Magazine logo gave me some fame; I created the side titles of the magazine as well. I worked with them for several years and we used to revamp the image every three years. This attracted many advertising companies to me; they wondered who the guy who created the first Arabic logo in Egypt was?” says Ismael. Ismael who started exhibiting his paintings with two solo exhibitions in 2007, was able over the years to reintroduce the Arabic script to a large public. His works are characterized by free flowing, elegant Arabic letters, interwoven with abstract forms and bright spots of color from time to time. The letters in his work are so eye catching, dynamic and he succeeds in distracting the spectators from the attempts to read. In 2009, he participated in several group exhibitions and got a residency in Barcelona, Spain. Another important experience in Ismael’s career came about in 2008 when The Austrian Cultural Forum chose him to work on a joint Graffiti project with an Austrian artist. He got involved even in the choice of the location and for the first time in Egypt and maybe in the whole world, a legal Graffiti project gets carried out on a train carriage. The experience brought Ismael to believe that this vivid art needs to be legalized in Egypt to counter all the ugliness in our streets and to help ‘deliver’ art to the layman. He is fighting for this cause through an official position he now holds in a committee of the Ministry of Culture.

“‘Safe Way Out’ from myself: from what I’ve done before,” Ismael said referring to his last exhibition. He added, “Minimal details, abstraction and simplicity are not common in Egypt. It’s an abbreviation and abstraction of all what I’ve been through and the juice of my experience; 10 years of a advertizing, typography calligraphy, and ten years of graphic design in the TV and ten years of music and percussion. This is a new dimension to me.”