

The Writing of Art showcased in London

Karen Dabrowska

London

The use of written words as an art form is beautifully displayed in *The Writing of Art* exhibition at London's Ismaili Centre, part of the *Nour Festival*, which highlights the best in contemporary arts and culture from the Middle East and North Africa.

The Writing of Art offers a glimpse into contemporary approaches influenced by traditional arts based on Arab and Persian scripts, bringing together the works of Arab, Iranian and British artists. Their creations range from small framed works to large pieces that hang from the top of the gallery walls and reach the floors.

"We wanted to provide a flavour of contemporary art that makes use of calligraphy and provide the artists with an opportunity to display their work in London," said Amin Abdullah Pardhan, chairman of Art and Cultural Activities at the Ismaili Centre.

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"The Ismaili Centre originally planned to display a selection of work by the Iranian film-maker and photographer Abbas Kiarostami but his sudden death prevented this. That was when London-based curator Rose Issa stepped in and provided us with a selection of works for *The Writing of Art* exhibition from her collection. Other artists also came forward to offer their work. Hanieh Delecroix brought her creations from Paris."

The exhibition venue, a space previously used by the Zamana Gallery, is a quiet contemplative area that creates the ideal environment for a moving poetic dialogue between art and letters weaving culture and history together.

The flowing, decorative designs of Tunisian studio potter and painter Khaled Ben Slimane contrast with the precise geometrics and logically inspired designs of British artist Graham Day. The allegorical visual poetry of Katayoun Rouhi and the versatile brushes of Farnaz Jahanbin are presented alongside Parastou Forouhar's challenging and zoomorphic calligraphic drawings to suggest a historical-cultural narrative that is continually processing cross-cultural influences.

"Two colours are predominant in my work: blue and black. The lines are the very core of the work of both: the artist and the clinician. I write my work," Delecroix explained.

A Paris-based artist who, in addition to studying at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, has a doctorate in psychology, Delecroix's practice in clinical psychology informs her work in sculpture and painting. The relationship between the mind and body, especially the mind of a damaged body, is central to her art. Shades of black and blue predominate in her paintings, particularly intense hues of cobalt, ultramarine and cerulean that she usually applies with a palette knife in sweeping strokes.

Describing the inspiration for his work, Ben Slimane, an instructor at the National Ceramics Centre in Tunis, said his artistic practice is founded in his quest for spirituality and is inspired by Andalusian themes and the Berber traditions of Sedjenane and Djerba. He choreographs letters, words and Quranic verses in an intimate and rhythmic dance.

However, Ben Slimane insisted he was not a calligrapher. "I was invited to the Idemitsu Museum of Arts



Tunisian artist Khaled Ben Slimane at work. He is one of the participants in *The Writing of Art* exhibition in London.

(ceramicstoday.com)

in Tokyo where I took courses with master Japanese calligraphers," he said. "I learned a lot about methods of concentration and manipulation of the brushes. Back in Tunis, I used Arabic letters with Japanese calligraphy techniques, which gives my writing more air, space and freedom and makes it more spatial."

Day said careful study of the calligraphic detail found in the 17th-century Shaykh Lutfallah mosque in Isfahan led him to realise that altering the mosaics from a regular square into an unfamiliar shape could reorient the play of surfaces and renew the experience of the text and its meaning.

"I produced a series of works that

took texts from the same mosque and arranged them into unfamiliar shapes to generate the same enhanced concentration thus allowing the reader to look with new eyes and re-appreciate familiar texts," Day said.

Persian for beginners is a series of calligraphic drawings that Forouhar made in 1997 when she was a member of the German-based artist collective Fahrrad Halle, during which she became "the Iranian" in the group. The enforced ethnic identification was a challenge for Forouhar that she turned into a source of creativity. "Looking back I would say that *Persian for beginners* instantly highlighted my desire for cordial

understanding," she reflected.

Issa, the exhibition's curator who also edited *Signs of Our Times: From Calligraphy to Calligraffiti*, said the usage of Arabic and Persian script is the main common language of the participating artists.

"They use words. They use the morphology of the letter because they want to express themselves in their own language or they think their language is beautiful or sacred or the morphology of it can transmit another visual culture," she wrote.

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Obituary

Yusuf al-Ani: An Iraqi artist in service of the people

Nazli Tarzi

London

Yusuf al-Ani, celebrated actor and doyen of Iraqi theatre, died in Jordan at the age of 89 after months of ill health. He belonged to the cream of Iraq's first generation of theatre pioneers, widely regarded as the founding father of the people's theatre. What captivated audiences was Ani's ability to flirt with controversy while capturing, on stage, the grief endured by the common masses across decades of wrenching change.

Ani was born in a once serene Faluja in 1927 on a rooftop terrace, surrounded by gardens of date palms and brought up in a working-class quarter of Baghdad. His passion for acting developed early, showcasing impersonations on the school playground, as he recounts in the essay *The Theatre Experience*. As a fresh-faced 17-year-old, Ani made his debut as a playwright with *Al-Muqamiroun (The Gamblers)* – a modest start to a series of dazzling plays that gained him lasting acclaim.

Despite earning a law degree from the University of Baghdad, Ani's passions would take him in another direction, as he also studied at the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts. He became involved in Iraq's burgeoning theatre scene, performing plays and touring with well-established troupes. His starring role in *Sa'id Effendi (1957)* propelled him into the limelight with a performance that



An image grab of Yusuf al-Ani during an interview with Al Sharqiya TV in 2013.

(YouTube)

reaffirmed the struggle of Iraq's working classes.

His earlier plays, *The End of the Thread (1951)*, *The Cost of Medicine (1952)* and *Six Dirhams (1954)* – in a similar vein to *Sa'id Effendi* – stood out for weaving together the personal and the political.

The style he cultivated was marked by critical realism, blended with satire and melodrama. It dared to criticise corrupt political practices, societal vices, class disparity and social and educational inequalities. The use of colloquial Iraqi Arabic in these plays not only challenged earlier theatrical norms but also

spoke to the masses. It transformed theatre into a public art form, committed to what Ani referred to as "simple folk". Like his subjects, he kept his scripts simple, producing one-act plays grounded in real-life situations.

The underdog was always placed at the centre, who, in the words of Salaam Yousif, always "triumphs in an unjust situation". Ani's repertoire unveiled to audiences a playwright politically committed not to the state but to the people, exercising cultural resistance in the face of obstinate challenges.

Lack of political tolerance for

the kind of dissent that Ani thrust into the public sphere forced him to adopt safety measures. His play *Shakir, I am Your Mother (1955)* could only be performed after the 1958 revolution, owing to its highly charged political content. When it eventually ran, it proved so popular that it went on for three consecutive weeks and was restaged in Denmark.

The political environment in which Ani's ideas took shape had an enormous bearing on his personal life as well as his profession. A year before the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy, Ani went into temporary exile after the regime revoked the licence of his theatre troupe. During this stint, he performed at the Stanislavsky Theatre in Moscow and wrote a handful of plays as he travelled between cities in Europe.

Twelve months later, he returned home, hungrier than ever to flaunt his new work. His earlier protagonist had evolved into the revolutionary intelligentsia, as his one-act plays also expanded into multi-act plays. It was also during this period that Ani published his first book, *Sha'abuna (Our People)*, and two-volume collections of his scripts.

As his career progressed, so did his themes. *Welcome to Life (1960)* makes no secret of its disapproval of forced marriage and marriage between cousins. It fleshes out themes as relevant to Iraq then as they are today – political blackmail, vengeance, patriarchy and unequal rights between men and women.

As theatre became institutionalised, Ani found himself occupying

important positions, most notably as the general director of the Cinema and Theatre Foundation. He wrote in popular journals on theatre and national consciousness. But as a new Ba'athist government rose to power, censorship grew and the content of Ani's plays became less political. Despite that, he remained in his native Iraq producing plays, combining storytelling and cultural tradition, refusing to succumb to the rules of the ruling elite.

His greatest success came in 1968 with *Al-Muftah (The Key)*, the first of his works to be translated into English. It was written against the backdrop of the six-day Arab-Israeli war and criticised Arab leaders for their deployment of the Palestinian cause as a diversionary tactic to further political ends.

■ The artist belonged to the cream of Iraq's first generation of theatre pioneers.

Ani dedicated his life to the common masses. He regarded theatre as a vehicle for self-expression and education, in spite of the efforts of state leaders to co-opt the field to enhance their self-image. The legacy he has left behind is impossible to repress. He was a true ambassador and educator of his people and will be greatly missed.

Nazli Tarzi is an independent journalist, whose writings and films focus on Iraq's ancient history and contemporary political scene.