Going East: Newer Horizons of Traditions

By Margherita Dessanay

There is nothing past for which one may yearn,
there is only an eternal newness which is shaped by
the wider elements of the past, and true nostalgia
has always to be productive to create a new
excellence.
J.W. Goethe

In recent years, in step with the rise of the art market in the Middle East and the consequent expansion of critical discourse around the art produced in the area, categories such as 'traditional' and 'modern' have come under increased scrutiny. These twin concepts have become privileged tools for interpreting the geopolitics of that area of the world. Their intertwining in art is closely related to the dramatic contradiction brought about by modernization, secularization and democratization.

Negativity and dismissal are the most common reactions when the idea of 'tradition' is raised in relation to contemporary artistic practice. In fact, that adjective 'traditional' is commonly used to describe all the political, social and cultural forces perceived as opposed to contemporaneity. This kind of antagonistic cultural system produces discourses articulated through "either/or" propositions. The case for 'tradition vs modernity' is articulated around a series of other oppositional couplings: the old vs the new, the past vs the future, being old-fashioned vs being contemporary, being conservative vs being progressive. When applied to the geopolitical area of the Middlw East it also becomes dangerously clos to the East vs West discourse and the 'Clash of Civilizations' theory.

Medium: A False Dichotomy

An increasing number of Middle Eastern artists now choose to express themselves using media recognized as more contemporary (mainly video art and installations), and this face has generally been welcomed by the international artistic community as a sign of modernization in their in their artistic practice. These new media and

the new formal possibilities they offer are generally thought of as being more suitable to capturing and conveying the spirit of our times, and their adoption gives Middle Eastern art a kind of automatic 'contemporary' status. But traditional techniques and formal codes continue to make their presence felt.

Born in Pakistan and now based in the US, artist Simeen Farhat creates three-dimensional installations where Arabic calligraphy metamorphoses into graceful curves that expand into space. 'From drawing to printmaking and from painting to mixed-media sculptures and installations, I have worked with a variety of media.' For her current body of work she has focused on mixed-media installations and resin casts. As she explains, the medium she chooses to work with is the one that most effectively gives shape to what she wants to express. 'This is how I feel I can carry out my ideas best. I like the feel of the material and the freedom it allows me. I am curious and will be incorporating other materials as well in the future. Art is all about finding newer horizons.' Others share Farhat's flexible approach. Turkish artist Selma Gürbüz paints using different materials, as well as drawing and sculpting. She has experimented with tapestry. She thinks that medium and technique should be selected according to the creative needs of each work: 'You discover the medium when you know what effect you want to convey. For realizing my shadow figures, ink, brush and paper were needed. But to have these sharp images, I had to work like a calligrapher, holding my breath. Sometimes the figures need to come out of the paper. Then, I have to find other media, like iron, bronze or wood.'

Iranian Nazgol Ansarinia describes the process of finding the most suitable medium as having nothing to do with whether a material is perceived as being more or less contemporary: 'My medium has always been based on my approach to each project. Its selection follows a process of conceptualizing, experimenting with form and finally choosing a medium that fits the project. I almost never know what medium my final work will be in.'

Artists shift from one medium to another without losing their distinctive voices. Such is the case with Saudi Arabian artist Ahmed Mater, who creates artworks using both contemporary media and traditional techniques. He says: 'I do not believe in

particular medium in art. What is important is which meduym serves best the purpose of the particular artwork I am creating, be it painting, photography or video.' An artist and a doctor, Mater's artistic training is not rooted in artistic studies but in his life experiences. 'I first started drawing on paper old motifs from the Aseeri tradition of my region and later medical school.' About his series *Illumination*, where X-ray images are inserted into miniature-like compositions with elements of calligraphy and traditional geometric and decorative patterns, he says: 'The *Illumination* paintings are created using raw materials such as pomegranate, tea and gold leaf. They reflect the craft background I grew up with while helping my mother decorate our house. The X-ray photographs come from my experience as a medical doctor and my fascination with human anatomy.' The works composing the series are strongly inspired by everyday encounters and dramatic situations Mater has faced as a doctor. They translate the artist's doubts, concerns and meditations about the difficulties of contemporary existence and the loss of moral and spiritual certainties in his country and in the world.

Different materials and media also characterize the path of Afruz Amighi. The artist, born in Iran and now settles in the US, declares: 'I like to travel from material to material. I like to tinker with it until I feel that I have exhausted it and myself. Then I move on. It is often very abrupt but this is the way it happens.' She likes to work with non-traditional materials and tradtitional motifs: 'For the past six years I worked mainly with fabric, plastic and chain, and then three months ago it was over. I set up a welding shop in the garage of my studio and began working with steel. It is very brutal. I don't have a favourite subject or technique. I think the thread that runs through it all is that I try to find some internal elegance in the material.' Exploring the expressive potentialities of unusual materials has always interested Amighi: 'My themes change, as do the materials. For some time I was interested in recreating the experiences I had visiting churches, temples and mosques in Iran. I wanted to make work that would be experienced in the dark, so that one could be alone with it. I wanted to create the feeling of safety that I felt in what were public spaces. Although my work and materials have changed since then, I am still aiming for the same atmosphere. I don't think this atmosphere ever changes, just the sculptures that may evoke it.'

On Form: The Magic Carpet

Amighi's work gained special recognition when she was awarded the Jameel prize[1] in 2009 for her installation *1001 Pages*. Made of plastic sheets like the ones used for refugee shelters, the work consists of curtain-like veils minutely decorated with motifs resembling Islamic decorations and arabesques. The installation creates a quiet and meditative atmosphere, both intimate and spiritual. Only by paying close attention does one discover that while the effect as a whole suggests traditional compositions, each detailed incision represents a contemporary image or symbol. Traditional is only one element amongst many that the artist references. 'For my chain sculptures, I derived their forms from the shapes of American missiles, rockets and bullets. I think the atmosphere I am trying to create with my work is much older than the forms and motifs that referencing.' Amighi also stresses the fact that many formal elements perceived as traditional are still an integral part of our contemporary life: 'I don't necessarily think of the traditional motifs I reference as belonging exclusively to the past. I grew up in a house covered from top to bottom with Persian rugs. They were a living part of my visual reality.'

This familiarity with Persian rugs plays an important part in forming the aesthetic sensitivity of many Middle Eastern artists. Iranian artist Babak Kazemi used them as backgrounds or as blankets in scenes in his series *The Exits of Farhad and Shirin*, his contemporary visual translation of an ancient Persian legend symbolizing the impossibility of love in the face of the insurmountable obstacles of life. Kazemi sees this as a condition affecting young people in his country and uses the Persian carpet motif to link past to present.

The same familiarity inspired Nazgol Ansainia for her series *Patterns*: 'In all my practice the selection of a particular traditional object or form has been made both for the formal potential of that object and for its conceptual connotation. In *Patterns* I used the Persian carpet as my reference. What first caught my attention were the were the visual qualities of a carpet as an image. The Persian carpet is

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made up of so many small elements that are disparate yet interconnected. Using the potential of this compositional language gave me the opportunity to bring together many subjects from my daily experience in the city and connect them all in a single image. 'Digging deeper into the history of Persian carpets, I realized that carpets have always carried a symbolic imagery that went beyond decoration. To insert new imagery that refers to stories that form our everyday life made perfect sense.' The form and symbolic charge of Persian carpets have offered Ansarinia a powerful visual took by which to articulate the complex interweaving of heterogenous favtors and forces in contemporary everyday life.

As I write this, Azerbijani artist Faig Ahmed is finalizing his installation *Embroidered Space* for the Venice Biennale. 'It is a carpet woven right on the wall. It's partially destroyed and creates beautiful minimalist patterns which expand with colourful threads that pierce the surrounding space. I describe it as an emotional artwork that revives flat patterns, making them three-dimensional.' Throughout his career Faig Ahmen has experimented with the art of carpet design, offering a distorted reinterpretation of this perfected craft. 'What attracted me most was not the carpet itself but its rhythm and symbols. I have studied pre-Christian runes and discovered that they were also used in Central Asia. After this discovery I started seeing runes among the symbols in the carpets at home. The deeper I got with my studies, the more I wanted to stop studying and make work with it. And that is what I came up with: destroying the carpets. There is one more thing I love about this process and it's the fact that a habitual comfy object suddenly turns out to be something strange.' Ahmed's toying with this ancient art could be described as deconstructive. An important factor in his work is the estrangement effect caused by the use of a familiar form in an unfamiliar way. What is traditional is certainly also familiar to a culture. But the work of many contemporary artists demonstrates that centuries of use and familiarity have not exhausted the created potential of traditional styles and art forms.

Deconstructing Tradition

There are other 'traditional' visual elements that still play a vital role in contemporary artistic production in the Middle East. For her series

Reflection/Refractions, Nazgol Ansarinia used the geometric grid of a traditional mirror mosaics as a guide for her series of collages. Made with newspaper articles published about the same subject on the same days by two different sources, these are inspired by the artist's concern with the way the media report important events to the public. 'I use mirror mosaics because of the geometric design, often used to evoke beauty through order and symmetry. The very precision and care that go into crafting the structure of mirror mosaics will shatter, multiplying, displace and distort the reality of anything they confront. With no intention of staying true to their subject and in multiplying parts whilst obscuring others, the reflection in these mirrors follows a complex scheme that could make this familiar element of Iranian visual culture a metaphor for the complexities of reflecting on everyday reality.' A visual grammar coming from the past becomes for Ansarinia a powerful way of representing contemporary issues. When traditional forms, techniques and visual languages return in the work of contemporary artists and are adopted with a contemporary sensitivity, they blossom once again, releasing a new creative potential.

As mentioned above, Simeen Farhat identified in calligraphy a traditional Oriental form that was congenial to contemporary times. In explaining the creative process that underpins her work, she says: 'When I first started using text, I was inspired by ancient hieroglyphics, the story of the Tower of Babel, and also by the fact that writing represented at first a gesture. Calligraphic forms of writing especially the curvy and rounder shapes of Nastaleeq script, with which both the Farsi and Urdu languages are mainly written, influenced me heavily. But I do not consider myself to be a calligrapher or my work to be calligraphic.' For an artist like Farhat, who is particularly concerned with the expression of freedom and harmony through her art, the physical dance of words invading three-dimensional space represents the perfect visual embodiment of her artistic goal. 'My intention in creating works that incorporate texts is to visually deconstruct and transform great poetic works into visual compositions. While formally my work may seem to be inspired by calligraphy, conceptually I am trying to convey the value of freedom of thought, whether the text is borrowed from Sufi poetry or is my own words.' Farhat's work is a personal response to her condition as an artist of the diaspora in a contemporary

and globalized world. 'I take words out of their context and make them jumbled up and nonsensical. I layer and deconstruct them. In doing this, I conceptually express my observation and experience of the global chaos, with particular attention to the issue of empowerment for women.'