Interview with artist Kamal Boullata

You were born in Jerusalem and you grew up there during a critical period of its modern history; how do you see your city of birth and what role did it play in shaping you and in inspiring your art?

Jerusalem is the only city in the world that has been marked by an eternal bond between heaven and earth according to belief in all three monotheistic religions. As a child growing up within the walls of its Old City, I learnt that our hometown's *Bab al-Silsileh* or 'Gate of the Chain' is the site that commemorates this legendary link which, as a child, I always imagined seeing as a ray of light streaming through a crack in a vault next to the Gate.

Nowhere else do I know of where physical and metaphysical manifestations seem to coalesce, or in which myth and history have been so tightly woven together. All that mysterious aura of the place had its human toll, of course, as the soil and stones of the city have been drenched with human blood since the dawn of time. For centuries under Islam, however, during which my ancestors lived, their native city was known to have enjoyed multiethnic and multi-religious conviviality.

Soon after coming to the world, I witnessed how the city got ripped in two halves in 1948 and barbed wires were erected all along my way to school as its Western part fell under the military control of the newly-born Jewish state while the Old City where I continued living had fallen along with its Eastern environs under Jordan's jurisdiction until 1967. Though my generation of Muslim and Christian Arabs had been condemned to exile, we continue to cherish the memory of the city's Arab heritage which never ceased to be a source of inspiration to my art.

Before speaking of how it inspired your art, could you briefly indicate in what way Jerusalem is imprinted in your memory?

I do not remember how old I was when I was first taken to the esplanade of the Noble Sanctuary to visit Islam's foremost monument, the exquisite Dome of the Rock. That was the first time I experienced the splendour and sanctity of the place. I remember being barefoot when I was led down the steps into the cave underneath the rock believed to have been the

site from which the Arab prophet ascended into heaven. That visit, which filled me with deep awe, recalled a previous experience when I had been taken up the Mount of Olives where I touched the rock marked by what looked like a footprint that I was told is the spot from which Christ is believed to have ascended into heaven.

In time I realised that Jerusalem, whose every alleyway leads either to some church or a mosque, is not only the city in which I could see and touch the legendary link between heaven and earth as believed in both religions that formed the backbone of my cultural identity, but that it also is a city where saints and soldiers, sufis and statesmen lived and died. Their gravestones and funerary shrines punctuated the city's landscape. In spring these sites were the background of our family picnics outside the city walls.

As an adolescent, when I used to go out for walks in *Wadi al-Joz,* the valley on the foothills of the Mount of Olives, I often passed by the alleged tombs of Zachariah and Absalom. I could not help but think that these burial monuments, which go back to over a thousand years before Christ, must have surely been seen by the Nazarene's own eyes the day he went uphill to Gethsemane. In the meantime, outside the Jaffa Gate neighborhood in which I was raised, the Mamilla Cemetery honoured the remains of some of the Prophet's companions along with the bodies of hundreds of soldiers who joined Saladin's army to liberate Jerusalem from the Crusaders.

In brief, growing up in Jerusalem one cannot escape experiencing the palpability of how the city— foredoomed by all its tragic history— represented a perpetual wedding between time and place. This reality was to affect a whole way of thinking for me.

In what way the memory of your city of birth left its mark on your art?

Before Jerusalem became a personal memory in exile, growing up in it involved living through the city's own memory as recalled by my elders after its Western part was overtaken by Jewish forces and its Muslim and Christian Arab natives, who were forcibly expelled from it, ended up as refugees in the Old City. The Jerusalem I grew up in was certainly a city broken in two, but one in which the bond among its Arab population regardless of their religious affiliations remained intact. That is the spirit that kept me going wherever I ended up living in this world.

While living there, however, it was the general cityscapes of Jerusalem, its streets, souks, people and architectural monuments that were the subject of my earliest paintings whose sales allowed me to further my art studies in Rome. Exiled away from it since 1967 and deprived of its scents and sounds, its mundane everyday experiences, it was the Arab cultural heritage of the city once called 'the navel of the earth' which was to become the inexhaustible source of inspiration to my abstract paintings.

What was the art education you received at home in the aftermath of the 1948 national catastrophe that prepared you for studying abroad and making you the first Palestinian artist to graduate from a European art institution such as the Academy of Rome?

The prevalent principle is that all children love to dabble with paint. The majority who rush to join the adult world stop painting. The others who never stop become artists. Like all children I used to paint. As a young boy whose talent in drawing and colouring was noted by adults, my parents sent me during my summer school vacations to the workshop of Khalil Halabi, one of the last icon painters belonging to the post-Byzantine school of Jerusalem. As an apprentice at his workshop, which was situated in a Greek convent that was a few steps away from our home, I learnt all the basic rules of icon painting in addition to being introduced to the techniques of water-based colours and oil painting. As for self-expression, that was a matter that had no space in Halabi's workshop. A lifetime was needed to explore it following my academic studies in Italy, where I was not the first Palestinian to study. There were a couple of other artists who preceded me there before and after 1948 but it is true neither of them graduated from the academy after spending all four years there.

Looking at your work featured in this exhibition, what dictates your exclusive fascination with geometry as a tool? Why do you choose to render Arabic script using geometric compositions, rather than allowing the words to take fluid calligraphic forms?

To answer you on this important question, allow me to go back to the origin of key words used in this regard. The origin of the word 'calligraphy' comes from the two-word combination of *kalli* and *graphia* in Greek meaning 'beautiful writing'. In Arabic, the word *khat* simultaneously means 'line' and 'handwriting'. Similarly, the verb *khatta* means 'to draw a line' as well as 'to write.' As for *khattat,* it is confined to mean 'professional copyist' or 'practitioner of beautiful handwriting.'

During the period in which I made Arabic words the subject of my art, I never considered my profession as having turned into one of a *khattat*. My profession continued to be that of a *musawwir,* which literally translates to mean 'image-maker.' Naturally, here I use this term in its original sense in which the Greek word *eikon,* meaning image, is a word which the dictionary literally defines as a pictorial representation whose form suggests its meaning.

Here it is noteworthy to recall that in Greek, the painter of Byzantine icons had never been identified as a painter, but rather as a 'writer of images.' Thus, I like to think of my works featured in your exhibition, that they live up to having been the products of 'a writer of

images', whereby Arabic words assume the body of an icon, whose aesthetic components reflect a contemporary language of abstract expression.

As for confining what I call my 'word –images' to angular forms, it is because geometry is the primal visual language that long preceded the art of calligraphy. Originally meaning 'measurement of earth', geometry has always been associated with numbers and measurements. It is the language that makes connections between points in space and creates forms by means of drawing lines and angles to define surfaces. Since antiquity and throughout the Renaissance, geometry continued to play a pivotal role in the history of painting. Practising my profession as a painter is what instinctively brought me in close communion with geometry.

In contrast, calligraphy evolved as a form of art, which sought to refine and elaborate the flow and aesthetic quality of handwriting. It was only after the Arabs learnt papermaking from the Chinese around 750 that cursive scripts flourished to become the ultimate expression of the beauty of Arabic handwriting.

That is how my geometric word-images operate as a form of icon. Through them, I continued to practise my art as a *musawwir,* whose aesthetic aim belongs to a totally different realm than that we find in the virtuosity of a *khattat,* even though words are the same vehicle through which both arts are manifested.

How then do we differentiate between the artwork of a '*khattat*' from that of a 'musawwir'?

To determine the fundamental difference between the artistic productions of a *khattat* from that of a *musawwir*, we can start by identifying the tools traditionally used by each. Having always been an art associated with penmanship, the main tool of Arabic calligraphy has been the reed pen, which facilitated the flow of handwriting, giving full play to cursive styles due to the liquid consistency of ink.

The product of a *khattat* serves reading, and its useful evidence has traditionally been confined to the manuscript, the book, the archive and the library. In contrast, the work of a *musawwir* calls up images whose sole function is to court the sense of seeing in the spectator's privacy or in the public's environment at large. From the miniature and the icon to the monumental architectural setting, the being of a *musawwir's* art has always been indelibly associated with space.

As for geometric script, its primary tools have originally been the ruler and compass and a precision utensil like today's pencil. Unlike the cursive scripts, which were determined by the angle of the reed pen as it crawled across paper and papyrus, the major characteristics of geometric scripts, which preceded the invention of all cursive scripts, had been dictated by the

tip of a chisel on stone. The ruler and compass have been traditionally employed by artisans, architects and the earliest iconographers, as well as the Renaissance painters.

Could you please give me an example to explain what you mean when you speak of your word-image 'as a form of icon'?

Perhaps the most illustrative example is one of the earliest silkscreens I realised back in 1978. There, it was the first time I sought to explore the question of how the geometric composition of words could suggest their meaning. The words depicted were from the Qur'anic verse, '*Wa fi anfusikom afala tubsirun'* ('It is within your own soul can you not see?') Here, I never intended to illustrate the holy verse as calligraphers have perfectly done with refreshing vigor over the centuries. In my work, the image of these words represents a visual reading that extends an invitation to contemplate the transparency that exists between seeing and understanding.

As you know, the act of seeing has always been synonymous with understanding as when we say, 'I see' to mean 'I understand.' Thus, the boldness of the angular lettering of the verse repeated twice in a mirror-like reflection appears through the transparency of a lozenge. The colours operating as an analogue to the geometric structure are limited to two alternating shades of green, which offer a visual metaphor that alludes to the very question the verse poses in regard to the overlap between perception and conception.

Viewing this artwork based on the binary components of geometric forms and colour shades that are all woven together to suggest the meaning of the words is what makes of it an icon. That is how reading becomes interchangeable with the sensorial experience of seeing. In the process, the image-reading itself operates like a mirror, inviting one's own reflection to look within as the verse proposes.

On what level do you think a non-Arab viewer can connect to your work that makes use of Arabic script?

Just as much as I can enjoy listening to a cantata by Bach or a lied by Schubert even though I do not understand German, I can equally be moved by the spontaneity, flow and virtuosity of a Japanese or a Chinese piece of calligraphy, even though I read neither language.

Certainly, understanding the language and the cultural connotations of meaning, especially in words that constitute the heartbeat of an artwork, would enhance a fuller aesthetic appreciation and a deeper understanding of how space is conceived differently in each culture. But my illiteracy in these languages has never stood in my way to behold and be moved by what I hear and what I see.

Similarly, I trust that art connoisseurs with no knowledge of Arabic can appreciate the icon in my word-images as each of these works is visually endowed with contemporary aesthetic qualities that hold together over and above the semantic significance an Arab viewer can additionally discern.

As for this particular series of silkscreen prints, it is noteworthy to remember that they were all created thirty years ago when I used to live in the USA. It was in 1983 when they were first displayed at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC in conjunction with the exhibition *Islam Centennial Fourteenth.* At the time, it was non-Arabic speaking Americans who were their first viewing public, and it was non-Arabic speaking art-lovers who were the edition's earliest collectors.

After leaving word-images behind to explore geometric abstraction over a period of 25 years, what made you come back to their subject in 2009?

Returning to a subject matter that was explored at an earlier period has been a common practice among many writers, composers and visual artists. When it was not a sign of repetition and the drying up of a once-genuine talent, coming back to a subject matter, especially after spending years of serious work along the same trajectory, usually represented the maturation of a creative moment by which the artist seeks to penetrate the deeper levels of certain aesthetic questions raised earlier.

In my case, I see an unbroken continuity between the geometric word-images I created in the early 1980s and the geometric abstract paintings that followed over the following two decades. The square grid— which had been the fundamental framework upon which all pictorial arts were based since Byzantine iconography and the very grid that perpetuated the patterns of geometric abstraction in Islamic art—has been the same framework I employed in creating my word-images.

In my geometric paintings, all I did had been to extract the square unit itself from its nuclear network and turn it into the principle subject of my exploration. Thus, the square had been expanded, dissected, rotated and multiplied as it had begun to define the outer dimensions of different painting series. In the process, the square's fragmentations and reconfigurations generated a whole constellation of geometric forms that composed the skeleton of my abstract paintings.

As for the undercurrents that actually prompted me to return to word-images after all these years, they happened to be several coincidences that converged the year before I embarked on my painting series.

Early on in 2008, I have finished reading *Kitab al-Manazir* (Book of Optics) by the eleventh-century polymath al-Hasan Ibn al-Haytham better known in the West as Alhazen. That certainly was the most powerful incentive that triggered the urge to begin thinking of dedicating a series of works to Ibn al-Haytham's legacy, which had been frittered away and long forgotten in the West where I have been living for over four decades.

At the time, I was living in Menton, a little town on the Mediterranean Coast in the South of France and my geometric abstractions had been reflecting elements of my visual environment involving colour transparencies, light and its refractions in water. This was a subject that Ibn al-Haytham had thoroughly discussed in his treatise using an inventive employment of geometry to reach his conclusions on visual perception. Thus, I thought that only through the geometry of the language he spoke and in which he wrote and that continues to live on long after he was gone, could I best pay tribute to the legacy this man from Baghdad bequeathed to humanity.

But how could I return to word-images? Where to begin? What words could sum up Ibn al-Haytham's seven volumes? And how could the geometry of Arabic words reflect the transparencies he analysed with mathematical precision? All such questions continued to simmer in my mind. By the summer of that year, however, the nascent idea took wing when I happened to meet with Dr. Lamees Hamdan in Cannes. That was a full year before she was elected to act as the Commissioner of the UAE National Pavilion at the 53rd Biennale of Venice. I was struck by her memory of my word-images from over two decades earlier, and her enthusiasm for reconsidering a return to them was the enkindling spark I needed.

Here, it is important to note that in my return to the subject of word-images, the main change was not simply one of medium and dimension alterations but it was the very rendering of the spatial components of each individual composition of words.

During the early 1980s, the word-images created in a deluxe edition of silkscreen prints were all composed in boldly angular forms and solidly flat colour surfaces on archival paper. In contrast, the painting series realised in acrylic colours on canvas in 2009 were all composed of overlapping layers of transparent colours in which free-flowing brushstrokes were delineated by the razor-sharp edges of the angular words. Foreground and background often seemed to interchange, a factor that fused visibility with legibility. By the year's end, *Homage to al-Hasan Ibn al-Haytham* was the title of an exhibition that was displayed at Artspace Gallery in Dubai.

The singular coincidence in this regard that blew me away was the fact that the same year I earnestly started work on my painting series dedicated to Ibn al-Haytham, in Munich Hans Belting published his groundbreaking book *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science.* In this book, the German art historian, who is also a leading theorist of contemporary

art, discusses the role Ibn al-Haytham's scientific findings played in the evolvement of Renaissance painting, a fact that over the centuries had remained buried in writing the history of European art.

Unfortunately, I was able to read Belting's book only after its English edition appeared in 2011. Today I wonder whether or not my painting series in homage to Ibn al-Haytham would have been different, were I to have embarked on its realisation after reading Belting's book. I feel that in time, the impact of this work on the writing of the history of European art could prove to be equivalent to that of Edward Said's *Orientalism* on the field of critical theory and post-colonial studies.

Like Edward Said, Belting has had his share of critics for daring to step outside the academic perimeters of his field of specialisation. That is perhaps why, when he last visited me here in Berlin, he was very excited to announce that his publisher informed him that his book is finally being translated into Arabic and that it is scheduled to appear in Beirut.

Once in Arabic, would this magisterial work have its rightful place in the writing of the history of Arab art? What kind of critical inquiries would it provoke in re-reading the history of Western art? How would it impact today's art scene in the Arab world? These are some of the questions that may be raised by all those of us who believe that there is a whole world of untapped sources of inspiration in our cultural heritage that are most pertinent to the sharpening of our contemporary aesthetic sensibilities.