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In Conversation with Jihad Al Ameri- Tattoo on Water

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Jihad Al Ameri's latest exhibition 'Tattoo on Water' of paintings and prints opened at the Orient Gallery on the 4th of March, 2014. In his statement, Al Ameri describes the exhibition to be; "a new space for my contemplations about the effect of Andalusian beauty, which appears to move with the movement of the water; a movement that is more softly musical than anything else, all things are mirrored in the crystalline movement of rivers, fountains, valleys, and small water channels. Thus, my dream as an artist overwhelmed by the emotions of seeing Andalusia was to paint and to invoke the aesthetic heritage through letters and human forms, especially the female form." In a conversation with Nahla Tabbaa, Jihad articulates and reveals the many layers that contribute to these works of art.

Nahla : How long did you
spend in Andalusia, and what did you do during that time?

Jihad: I spent three years there whilst completing my PHD in Fine Arts. My thesis was particular to poetry and its presence in Jordanian art, more specifically in printmaking. The practical aspect of my thesis resulted in a project in where I extracted poetry from the masterminds of Mahmoud Darwish and the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca and this was displayed at the European Arab Institute in Granada. This project was a particular success amongst the Andalusian cultural society as who obtained some of my prints.

Nahla: How did you feel
when you first reached Andulsia, and how did that change or develop?

Jihad: My expectations were limited to the knowledge that I had previously obtained about the place, like any first visitor would. I didn't have the same in depth of knowledge of Andalusian heritage and life as I do today. However that quickly changed as I fell deeply in love with its beauty, and through my passion, I delved deeper into really knowing it. I had studied in Baghdad and was always drawn to ancient Arabic cities such as Damascus, Jerusalem and Cairo, but what I witnessed in Andalusia was beyond comparison.

Nahla: Is this because
they had preserved it, or due to the smaller size of the city?

Jihad: My theory is more to do with the fact that East met West through Andalusia, so the beautiful elements of what you would have seen in for example, Damascus, such as the courtyard fountains, the abundance of jasmine flowers, would then marry a European heritage. This in turn led to a preservation of the city, because it met half way, rather than imposed itself.

Nahla: So you didn't feel
homesick?



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Jehad: No, not at all, though I did feel a distance in another sense. I couldn't understand why the Middle East was so disconnected from the Moorish Spain. We have so much to discover and learn. Previous to Andalusia I had worked on a poetry/screen printing exhibition discovering and researching poetry and ancient architectural motifs of Jerusalem and because I come from a family of poets, the obsession and fascination with poetry is very deeply embedded into my practice.

When I had arrived in Andalusia I had discovered a common thread that linked Jerusalem to it. Both cities were described as the 'lost cities' of the heavens. And sadly, I felt that both cities were lost, even today, because their accessibility felt difficult.

Nahla: How did you gain access to these manuscripts?

Jehad: I gained access to the manuscripts through museums and libraries in Granada and Madrid. The exhibition was based on a yearlong worth of research into poetry, so I managed to gather a good amount of information. The poetry in my paintings and prints are old Andalusian poems that were screen-printed. I had an aesthetic decision to make about whether to write them myself by hand, however, in order to combine both eras, and for me to connect with the original poet, I left the poetry in its original form.

Nahla: How are the feminine figures connected to your work?

Jehad: I focused on the things that inspired me the most, whilst in Andalusia. As every artist does and should. I was blown away by water features in Andalusian architecture, and their abundance, but more so the reflections of the ornate and carved walls, which could be seen in the water, and then mirrored onto the floor. Add a third layer, the human layer, where passer-by's would add to this wonderfully organic canvas as their shadows melted into this added landscape. The presence of plants and organic elements in their designs represented life throughout their architecture, combine this with poetry themed around the female figure in an inspiring setting, I found a story to tell and layers to be revealed.

Nahla: Why do they look away?

Jehad: The female looks away, unable to be read or be read, the way we find it difficult to face ourselves or face each other. This has many meanings to contemplate, our own fear of self-reflection, where water can be used as a metaphor. Or our own difficulty in capturing and embodying a different era of time, parallel to ours. In the end, nothing is directly look at, but it is rather a subjective and challenging matter..