"I have a theatrical background so I can't paint small. I have to have large canvases because that's where the theatre is for me," says the Syrian painter Ahmad Moualla.

A man of characters

Katie Boucher

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Take any exhibition of work by emerging Middle Eastern artists, and calligraphy is bound to feature somewhere. "It's used as a way of stamping Arab identity" says Ahmad Moualla, the Syrian artist, whose exhibition, New Works, at Dubai's Green Art Gallery, features plenty of the classical script in which he trained as a young man. His own reasons, though, are less about nationality than communication. "I could be from anywhere and still use it. It's a code like any other. Unfortunately, that's how a lot of the West reads work from this region, but not everyone who uses calligraphy is trying to form an identity. In my case, I did it from a philosophical angle."

In fact, this relatively recent development in his work, which previously consisted mainly of doom-laden figurative scenes, focuses not so much on the script as the texture he creates using inches of paint, through which lettering is etched - in one, right through to the raw mesh of the canvas. Some is legible; some is not. "I started playing around with it," he says, "and in some cases the figurative and the text converge; sometimes it's pure calligraphy; and sometimes it's abstract." Certainly, the Pollock-style layering and loose arrangement of the script differentiate these works from many of the other calligraphic homages that line the walls of the region's galleries.

It is a habit that has been building in stages, starting with the odd word two years ago, and graduating

into the swirling mass of script he has chosen to display in this pleasantly tired Dubai venue. Having built a career - he has won both the Lattakia Biennale and the Al Burda prize, and his works now sell for tens of thousands of dollars - out of his figurative work, Moualla began to feel that the potential of calligraphy in art had not yet been fully realised. "I wanted to push the boundary to see where it would take me," he says. "It was a big challenge for me to go back into calligraphy. Nobody had really ever tried calligraphy in this way before".

He sees its ubiquity among artists from the region as yielding mixed results. "Most of these artists are purely calligraphers, so they aren't able to integrate it into a painting but rather are trying to make a painting out of calligraphy, which is not possible because they are calligraphers by heart and not painters. For, me, it is the opposite, so what you see is not calligraphy - it's a painting."

Wearing a dark brown suit and with an unkempt mane of black hair curling over his collar, Moulla has the gently dishevelled bearing of a geography teacher. Yet these oversized canvases, with their elaborate use of colour and lavish scrawls, hint at an inner sense of drama. "I have a theatrical background so I can't paint small," he says, "I have to have large canvases because that's where the theatre is for me."

His figurative works, of which several feature in the exhibition, use theatrical staging to present people in intense philosophical discussion. "It's as if you have a building and you slice it in half to find this scene," he says. "So there's also layering in those works; the calligraphy and the figurative works are closely linked." While philosophically this may be the case, in fact they couldn't look more different - the intricate loops of the script are a far cry from the looming abstract shapes of his other work.

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