

An Interview with Kamal Boullata

by *Alexander Barakat*

Accomplished artist and art historian Kamal Boullata, an innovator of the genre within the hurufiya movement Shirbil Dagher labels as ‘Geometrical Hurufiya’, most recently wrote the groundbreaking book *Palestinian Art: from 1850 to the Present* which undoubtedly asserts itself as a magnum opus in contemporary Arab art history scholarship. Within the span of less than a year, his writings immensely inspired and established the criterion for all forthcoming writers and academics wishing to pursue research in contemporary Palestinian art. Through his calligraphic work deploying kufic script, Boullata concatenated an inimitable nexus coalescing the written word and abstracted design. Boullata’s aesthetic revisualization of unique personalized verbally communicated statements or single words, drawing upon widely regarded and occasionally provocative Christian and Muslim literary maxims and sentiments, become stripped of their religious connotations and placed within a contemporary universal and humanist context.

The abstract and geometric motifs definitive of his work’s distinctive idiom can be perceived as stylistically related to or reminiscent of abstract expressionism, rooting itself in geometric formations based upon the square as a fundamental reference point. His abstract geometric works devoid of calligraphy, all of which retain a tremendous conceptual subtext beyond mere decorative and colouristic value, display harmoniously conceived variegated compositions of seamless chromatic arrangements on canvas and silkscreen. These

compositions come into being through what Boullata deems as an innate ‘intuitive feeling’.

His capacity to function as both a prominent visual artist and contemporary art historian, also having written on poetry and Islamic art, attribute him the status of a consummate and profound artistic mind in his own right. After discussing various aspects of his artistic and academic pursuits, through our correspondence, I received tremendous insight regarding his general background, aspects pertaining to his book, his interests and future projects.

Alexander Barakat: As an esteemed art historian and painter, how do you balance both the creative and academic aspects of your career?

Kamal Boullata: I have always enjoyed writing as much as painting. The two modes of self-expression complete each other in my work. Throughout my life, the correspondence between verbal and visual expression always intrigued me. That is why along with my painting, I never ceased to conduct research on the relationship between verbal and visual expression. Critical inquiry and historical research were pursued with the same passion with which I cherished my painting. Over the decades, my writings were never confined to Palestinian art. In fact, it was my study of Islamic art that led me to explore the symbiotic relationship between words and images as it is magnificently manifested in our cultural heritage. With

the freedom I felt as an artist, I managed to step into territories that Islamic art academicians usually shunned from.

I recount once a Spanish scholar by the name of Jose Miguel Puerta Vilchez, professor of Arab Aesthetics at the University of Granada, wrote to ask me if he could translate two studies I had written in the Cuadernos de la Alhambra, a scholarly quarterly published by the museum of the Alhambra Palace in Granada. One study appeared in Arabic titled “On the Structure of the Arabic Language and the Grammar of the Arabesque” and the other entitled “Visual Thinking and the Arab Semantic Memory” which appeared in French. When I asked him why he was interested in translating those two studies, he answered that he had never seen an approach that sheds light on the role of the Arabic language in Islamic art in such an innovative way. I was particularly surprised when he added that since it was first published in 1965, this scholarly journal had never before published any study by an Arab scholar of Islamic art.



Photograph taken by Sueraya Shaheen at the opening of the Palestinian pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale

Though writing on Palestinian art was initially motivated by a sense of responsibility, my perseverance in conducting field research turned out to be a formidable challenge. The destruction of Palestinian society to make room for the state of Israel included the destruction of all traces of art before 1948. The challenge was further stimulated after I read Palestinian dilettantes writing on art from a nationalist perspective that contributed to creating false assumptions and mystifications that had nothing to do with art history or art criticism before or after 1948.

I would certainly like to spend more time painting than writing but thus far I have only been able to continue painting and writing at the same time.

AB: You have inhabited three different regions of the world during the length of your artistic career. How have these regional bases impacted and inspired both your artistic production and academic research directly?

KB: Over the last 40 years, I lived in Washington DC for 25 years, four years in Rabat, one year in Paris, and have spent over the last decade living in Menton. My choice to live in any of these cities was indirectly associated with what a place offered me during a specific period. The quality of light has often been a primal reason to attract me to a place. Washington for me was the beginning of the US South with all the sunlight that inspired the American Color School, while at the same time its Library of Congress had been a great resource that prompted me to launch my independent research, thanks to George Atiyeh who used to head the department of the Near East there. Rabat was the place where I could further pursue my research in Islamic art and continue working uninterruptedly on my own painting thanks to a Fulbright Senior Scholar fellowship lasting two consecutive years. As for my move to Paris, it was prompted by a grant that was offered by the French Ministry of Culture. There, I was able to paint full time before moving down south to Menton, which offers me the ideal place of living in between places. Here, I am literally within walking distance from Italy and from my windows overlooking the Mediterranean, I can imagine Beirut and Haifa on the other side.

Since having been stranded in Beirut following the 1967 War, I taught myself how to live in a place without being of it. This attitude helped me survive as a nomad and find joy wherever I came to rest. After being denied the right to live in my city of birth, anywhere in the world could serve as my base as long as my work continues to be my only veritable home.

AB: Upon completing "Palestinian Art", I was intrigued by the manner in which you placed the chapter pertaining to your work last. What was the purpose of this placement? Can you please elaborate upon your intention behind the book's chapter arrangement?

KB: Conceptualizing the structure of the narrative line initially posed some difficulties partly because the chapters have originally been written as independent essays, but also because I was considering the inclusion of text I wrote on my own work. In putting together this selection of essays into a meaningful sequence, I had to pick up only those texts that on one level can smoothly read chronologically if I put them in a certain order; at the same time, that permits readers to choose reading chapters in any order of their choice. Yet in both cases, I had to confine writings on my own work to the last section of the book as I thought that was the only way I could sum up the book's message, whereby it starts with documenting how Jerusalem functioned as Palestine's cultural center and concludes with how Jerusalem figured in the art of one of its contemporary natives. By confining writings on my own painting to the last section, I sought to leave the reader with the reflection as to how the historic transition between icon and secular painting left its own traces in my work.

In 2000 when I wrote a book in Arabic on Palestinian art, the book's structure was preconceived on the basis of an earlier study of mine that first appeared in French. The chapters were written in a chronological sequence in accordance with the geographic regions in which the artists lived. There, I left the discussion of artists living in exile to the last chapter to allow myself to conclude the book with a discussion of my own work.

AB: As both an artist and art historian, what occupies your critical interests?

KB: My critical interests lie in questions of correspondence, of symbiosis and overlapping or rather in the gray areas in between each two forms of expression in our culture.

AB: Is there an increase of various mediums being deployed aside from painting and photography in Palestinian art? As a painter, how do you examine the usage of such mediums in your writing?

KB: When I write on the new media employed by younger colleagues with the same intensity and interest as when I write on painting, it is because I do not see one form of art as more

important than the other or that one cancels out the other as many may think.

As you know, the death of painting was first claimed when photography came into being. Since then, painting was pronounced dead every time a new form of visual expression had been uncovered. I believe that painting will continue to live and flourish even in our world today that abounds us with myriads of instant images transmitted across the globe in lightning speed. Painting is the one language that continues to be instinctive in beings since their childhood as much as it continues to have its roots in the cave paintings of our ancestors.

AB: Can you please convey your point of view regarding the exceeding 'appropriation' and derivation of your work by Gannit Ankori. How did this mendacious gesture upon Ankori's behalf impact the publishing of your book?

KB: As I never ceased to be engaged in different art projects, the publication in book form of a selection of my essays on Palestinian art was left for a number of years simmering on the back burner. Over the last couple of years, however, after an Israeli art historian published a book on Palestinian art in which she had misrepresented my writings while using all my research, also avoiding to properly credit her source, friends urged me to bring out the book. Thanks to their insistence, I am pleased the book is finally behind me. Most importantly, any reader who happens to read both books should immediately be able to tell what will survive in art history writing and what will be disposed of and dismissed as irrelevant.

AB: Are there any current or future artistic or academic projects that are currently in the works that you would like to mention?

KB: My main writing occupation for the last few years has been focused on writing a book on contemporary and modern Arab art on the basis of studying works found in the Khalid Shoman Art Collection. Housed at Darat al Funun in Amman, it is a unique and exciting art collection that was gradually built over the years and that never ceased to grow since 1978. Being one of the earliest Arab art collections, if not the earliest to bring together such a wide spectrum of works by artists from different parts of the Arab world, I find that through its study one can capture the heartbeat of modern and contemporary Arab art over the last three decades.

Raised in Beverly Hills but based in London, Alexander Barakat is an art critic and arts and culture correspondent dealing primarily with contemporary Arab and Iranian art. He is currently completing his degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies pursuing art history and music, specialising in the art history of the Middle East from antiquity to the modern day and the art-music traditions of the Arab world. He has been published in Canvas and has contributed to various other publications including Oasis and Unfair, and authors the Dia Diwan art blog. Barakat is currently the editor-and-chief of Muraqqa, a periodical based on his own personal initiative launched in October 2009, and still continues to free-lance with other prominent arts related publications.