

Three outstanding Middle Eastern artists

Misunderstandings and threats are but mere catalysts that feed their creation; they create art that keeps the important conversations going, allowing discussion and exploration while keeping dialogue alive. By **Sheena Baharudin**.



(L–R): Ahmad Moualla, Shahzia Sikander, Rokni Haerizadeh

Ahmad Moualla

The great Syrian poet Adonis once visited the studio of Ahmad Moualla and was powerfully affected by the artist's works that were arranged everywhere. 'You look, meditate, explore: everything opens the doors of seduction to you. Each painting throws its net over you,' Adonis exclaims, as read on the artist's website.

'When you walk inside this studio you say to yourself: I like what contradicts me. It completes me and makes me different.'



Adonis clearly got what makes Moualla *Moualla*. Born in 1958 in Syria, he is today celebrated as one of the Arab world's leading postmodern expressionists. Following in the footsteps of other postmodernists, Moualla shuns conventions and boundaries; he still refuses to title his pieces, for example. The difficulties one might have when dealing with nameless paintings apparently don't affect him. In an interview with Jyoti Kalsi in *Gulf News*, he remarked that 'a title restricts the imagination of the viewers and ties the work

to a certain time, place or event that may become irrelevant'. His style is instead to translate current events into figurative paintings that respond to the mental process of the viewer. Moualla explained to Kalsi why he portrays most of his subjects and shadows with no distinguishing features:

I do not want them to be identified with any specific cultural group. I also never make any distinction between humans and animals. The shadowy part-human part-animal people in my work reflect the ambiguities in our minds and lives, and the fact that we are always in a state of change and uncertainty.

Aside from his poignant interpretations of the modern world's anxiety and lingering sense of displacement, Moualla is also famous for his calligraphy paintings. This is where the artist's true genius comes out. Sweeping and massive, his calligraphic artworks are designed to overwhelm. Using verses from literary works, they are also highly dramatic and vibrant.

In recent years, Moualla developed a new signature style that combines his figurative and calligraphic brands of art. Scripts are dispersed across massive canvases, the result of a series that succinctly balances the dark quality of his figurative pieces with the luminosity of his calligraphic paintings.

So it was surprising for some when his 2011 showcase, *Grey Ash*, did not feature the

usual voluminous chaos of colours. Instead, Moualla presented paintings that used only 'a palette of white and black'. He explains his decision in the same writeup, 'For me, grey is a colour that encompasses all colours. I wanted to play with black and white to create a super-transparent effect that conveys what happens just after a matchstick has been extinguished.' Calling himself a social commentator, this matchstick 'could', he says, be a response to the tumultuous events in the region that took the Middle East (Syria included) by surprise.

Shahzia Sikander

George Eliot, the pen name of a 19th-century female English novelist, once said: 'Great things are not done by impulse, but by a series of small things brought together.' When beholding the art of New York-based Shahzia Sikander, one's mind might turn to this thought.



There is an overwhelming sense of painstaking effort in Sikander's work. A far cry from the freewheeling chaos of the likes of Jackson Pollock, for instance, her pieces are instead a clear testimony to patience, attention to detail and the uncanny ability to see the bigger picture in small things. These characteristics may have been picked up during her earlier years studying miniature painting at the National College of Arts Lahore in Pakistan.

The art of miniature painting goes back centuries and is immensely popular in Iran and India. In Persia (present day Iran), these works of tiny art aided the understanding of epic poems, for example. Sikander, however, took the art form and deconstructed it. She made the art of miniature painting her own by using it to tackle contemporary themes and issues, as opposed to their romantic and exquisitely elaborate nature in the past. A great example is her piece entitled 'I am also not my own enemy' (pictured). The luminous appearance of a traditional miniature painting persists, though instead of the painting accompanying a narrative, this painting *becomes* one. The viewer is left to carefully infer his or her own meaning from the images within.

Sikander is almost fixated on layered compositions; the result adds another distinctive quality to her art. She treads the lines of tension that exist in the world of those who share her faith; especially concerning themes of women and sexuality. In her large-scale piece 'Chaman', Sikander applied layers of tissue, paper and drawings on top of her wall art. In an interview conducted by Art21, an organisation dedicated to making contemporary art more accessible, she explained the decision to prescribe layering as a symbol of personal space versus cultural space. Describing her work as 'deeply personal', this is her style of allowing the viewer to reveal and veil, as well as understand that even a simple thing can allude to a variety of meanings.

Looking at them, one wonders about messages or possible answers to questions pertaining to religion, culture and politics. Sikander made it clear in the book *Shahzia Sikander: Nemesis*, 'My work has always been in response to my lived experience, providing me with a space of concern, or a space of expression... I am never interested in providing a conclusion.'

Some of Sikander's work bears themes of conflicting symbols to create a new image that is open to interpretation. 'Fleshy Weapons' is an example of this amalgamation of symbolisms. Playing with the image of a Hindu goddess and the ideal of how certain Muslim circles believe a woman should look, Sikander explains on the Art21 website how she 'was stripping off the face and taking away the identity that defines the goddess and putting a veil on top of it.' She also told ARTnews magazine that this was about 'a form afloat and uprooted'.

The span of Sikander's treatment of imagery goes beyond small- and large-scale paintings. She is gradually gaining recognition for her use of multimedia in her art. Her latest such project is for the [Sharjah Biennial 2013](#), which runs through May 13 in the UAE. Called *Parallax*, it consists of a three-channel HD animation complete with surround music that runs for 15 minutes and 30 seconds.

Rokni Haerizadeh

Unlike Sikander who finds inspiration in old Persia, the rebellious Rokni Haerizadeh rejects the romantic nostalgia of his country. He instead embraces its current state of paradox, where socio-political, cultural and historical conflicts run so deep that they stretch into every facet of the lives of its people.



Haerizadeh acknowledges the opulence of the Persian Empire and how it continues to contrast with its current post-Islamic Revolution period, but any association he makes with his home country ends there. Since 2009 Haerizadeh and his brother Ramin have been living in Dubai as exiles. A return to their hometown of Tehran could mean imprisonment or worse, as Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has targeted them both for their artworks.

Haerizadeh's pieces often depict a strong presence of the grotesque. The extremes are present through his use of images, rich and thick colours, or exaggerated human features. Reviews have labelled his art as wild or savage, however in interviews the artist himself comes across as gentle and easy-going. This apparent contradiction is entirely appropriate, given his works' dominant theme of contradictory elements in Iranian society. His efforts to expose the cultural hypocrisy of his country have resonated with audiences around the world, who watch with delight as Haerizadeh precisely dissects social events, from weddings to funerals and almost everything in

between.

His portraits of Persian society are quietly charming, whereas 'Exchanging Phone Number on Jordan Street' depicts the inevitable failure to constrain the youth. Also revealing an altogether different style is 'Dagger Dance', a rich and vivid depiction of a traditional Middle Eastern custom with a feminist twist.

As someone who grew up in an Islamic republic, the strains of catching up with modernisation while staying rooted has created a wanderer in him; he is an artist in search of an identity. Attempts to communicate with the past have resulted in exaggerated humour or parody, seemingly to reveal extreme flaws. In an interview with *W* magazine, he described the mentalities of Iranian mullahs as 'very simple, like from the Middle Ages. They are not complicated at all.'

Resisting the very power that left the brothers stranded in a country not their own, Haerizadeh continues to immerse himself in the current state of disparity. It is through his sardonic pieces, from paintings to collages and sculptures, and his imagination that he is now recognised as one of the most successful artists of his generation.

Many of his opinions may be hard to swallow for some. 'I think the main problem of humanity is religion,' Haerizadeh told *W* magazine, 'The kind of mentality that wants to define everything as good or bad, angel or devil.' The fact that he continues to work on pieces that specifically deal with Iran's socio-political, historical and cultural complexities seems to pinpoint where his opinions are centred. 'The Anniversary of the Islamic Republic Revolution' presents a dark satirical view of the country's history while 'Shomal (Beach at the Caspian)' questions the double-standard dress code of the beach where women cover themselves in black burkas while men are stripped down to their swimming shorts.

This article originally appeared in the [May 2013 Arts issue](#) of Aquila Style magazine. For a superior and interactive reading experience, you can get the entire issue, free of charge, on your iPad or iPhone at the [Apple Newsstand](#), or on your Android tablet or smartphone at [Google Play](#)