

## Sameh Ismail



Acrylic & mixed media on canvas 120 cm x 280 cm

Sameh Ismail was born in Cairo in 1974 where he currently lives and works. He holds a BFA in painting and printmaking, and leads a dual professional career as a painter and musician.

His first solo exhibition project was a collaborative with fellow painter and photographer Hamdi Reda, who shares a similar interest in the Arab-Islamic aspect of the Egyptian identity. Subsequent projects evolved from paintings on canvas to mixed media works on paper and graffiti on train wagons—all incorporating his almost-obsessive exploration of Arabic alphabets. In all his projects involving the Arabic/Farsi letters, Ismail resorts to Sufi scripts and poems of quests for carnal love or for the esoteric divine.

His acrylic-on-canvas paintings are vibrant and dynamic. They are inspired—if not influenced—

by abstract expressionism, large drippy compositions, a fusion of the technical tradition of Jackson Pollock and Wilem de Kooning.

Ismail's paper works vary from large vertical Chinese influenced concertinas—where the script looks initially more Chinese than Arabic—to smaller pieces involving various elements and medias, including bleach, varnish, ink washes and a lo-fi printing techniques involving photocopies rolled around a bottle.

The versatility of form of the Arabic letter and its 1500 years of vocalized and painted history, plus the centuries old visual culture of “Khatt”—or Arabic Calligraphy—all complement his inspiration as a painter, and is reflected also in his graffiti work.

Ismail was one of the street graffiti artists as an

adolescent and in his early adulthood. In his own perception, he always believed that graffiti –for its ease and lack of need for formal training— was a democratic medium that is accessible to all: to do and to comprehend the message.

His work, assimilated and appreciated as contemporary painting, is inspired by the Arabic alphabet, which is the core of the Arab and Islamic cultures. His eight-year long research integrates his personal identity as an Arab artist who lives and works in Egypt, a country that has created painting as we know it today, and that hosted and developed --and still does-- a gigantic Islamic heritage. The canvases are authentic because the technique was developed as a studio practice over a long period of research in to the origins of the Arabic alphabet, styles of Khatt and its sound. Ismail's work aspires to extend the limits of standard contemporary painting by formulating and integrating elements of his own identity as an Arab artist into the painting medium.

For the past eight years the Arabic Alphabet has intrigued him and shaped his painting practice: the form of the letter, the symbol, the meaning and the phonetic. His dual practice as a professional painter --by rigorous formal fine art education-- and professional musician/ percussionist feed into each other. The sounds produced by music led him to try to transcend the simple visual aesthetics of standard abstract painting; he introduced visual elements that could be linked to sound. Arabic letters entered his surfaces as a recognized cultural form, a visual element that could be pronounced. Elements were introduced to be perceived and recognized in ways that could extend the simple visual legibility. For example, elements that could actually move with the brush strokes and be representative as equal energy to the energy by which his abstract painterly techniques

construct his canvases.

In his projects he uses surfaces cut in an extreme horizontal manner; the works are painted and displayed either vertically or horizontally like ancient Egyptian scrolls. He uses sepias and blacks to signify age. The Arabic letters are not used as decorative motifs, but rather to recount a phrase or a meaningful sentence. Through these surfaces and techniques, Ismail tries to represent his very multilayered culture: Arab, Egyptian, Mediterranean and African, where writing and painting were paramount tools for several renaissances throughout history.

ink on paper 100cm x 70cm

