

SKIPPING THE LINE FANDANGO

By: Anna Wallace-Thompson

"A symphony must be like the world. It must contain everything."

Gustav Mahler

We are in Paris. The year is 1985, and the late great American Abstract Expressionist artist Cy Twombly is standing in front of a painting with his one-time student and long-time friend, Iranian artist Fereydoun Ave. The work, by one of Ave's Iranian contemporaries, is full of lines and washes of acrylic paint, an abstract calligraphic symphony of color and form. In Farsi, explains Ave, the word for 'line' and 'calligraphy' is one and the same - *khatt* - and so the two are intrinsically linked and intertwined in the nation's visual consciousness. Line and calligraphy? "But that's what I do!" exclaims a delighted Twombly, whose instantly recognisable works embody a unique artistic language, an alphabet of looping forms, sometimes abstract in their totality, at other times forming words and phrases, whether in swathes of dripping acrylic paint, or scribbled on with wax crayon and pencil. How wonderful, thought Ave, to one day stage an exhibition that would place Twombly's work in dialogue with those by Iranian artists, to create something that would embody and celebrate Twombly's spirit.

The resulting exhibition, some 30 years later, brought together nearly 100 works by 23 artists - including Twombly and Ave - and harked directly back to that initial moment of revelation, in which *khatt* and Twombly first met. The result was an utterly immersive experience, as Total Arts at the Courtyard transformed its In-between Space (dedicated to its non-profit exhibition programming) into something more akin to Pamuk's famous Museum of Innocence

than a traditional gallery show. Certainly, it was worlds away from the concurrent Twombly solo exhibition at London's Gagosian Gallery (10 October-12 December 2015), in which large canvases floated on equally expansive walls in the gallery's impressively vast new Mayfair premises. Now, *Cy Twombly and the Line Calligraphic* (15 November 2015-30 January 2016), was the opposite. Where Gagosian displayed the splendour of Twombly on a grand scale, this group exhibition (curated, of course, by Ave) sought not only to contextualise Twombly's practice within the realm of other artists working with the line, but to pay homage to him and capture "his spirit," as Ave explains. Though equally expansive in its own way, *The Line Calligraphic* consciously moved away from a more sterile white cube model. Instead, it managed to create a complex interior that at once presented a salon-style hanging of the works as well as the feeling that one had stepped into an alternate space - a mental space, perhaps, or some deep, cavernous emotional interior. In short, it allowed for a much deeper experience, and sought to create an environment in which viewers could truly get to grips with what lay at the heart of Twombly's oeuvre, as well as strip back to an almost meditative exploration of the line.

The exhibition, part of Total Arts at the Courtyard's ongoing *Visual Dialogues* series, was held in the gallery's In-between Space and very much embodied the gallery's ethos to create a space that is "neither commercial nor completely institutional. Its place is not in a



Amir Falsafi, 2002, gouache on paper, 50x35cm. Courtesy of the artist.



1) Ahmad Amin Nazar, 2008, ink on paper, 70x100cm. Courtesy of the artist.
 2) Ahmad Amin Nazar, 2008, ink on paper, 70x100cm. Courtesy of the artist.



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museum, commercial gallery or university classroom, but, rather, an In-between space for artistic and intellectual collaboration." This was beautifully highlighted by the inaugural *Visual Dialogues* earlier in the year, which presented works by the late Behjat Sadr and Nazgol Ansarnia (16 March-20 April 2015).

The Line Calligraphic moved beyond the format of a two-person exchange to bring together works from Ave's own private collection alongside select pieces owned by Dariush Zandi and Shaqayeq Arabi - founders of Total Arts at the Courtyard - as well as collector Farhad Bakhtiar. "The essence of the idea was that the word *khatt* is used for both writing and for drawing," says Ave. "The line is taken and followed wherever it goes and the artists within this exhibition were chosen because this is what they do with the line - whether their work is text-based, figurative, abstract or even the three-dimensional, they embody this idea of seeing the world through the line, just like Twombly."

The artist selection was diverse, bringing together some 30 international names and crossing generations, geographies and styles, and comprised Ahmad Amin Nazar, Arabi, Ave, Lalla Essaydi, Amir Falsafi, Habib Farajabadi, Monir Farmanfarmaian, Raana Farnoud, Golnaz Fathi, Nelda Gilliam, Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh, Shahla Hosseini, Mohsen Jamalini, Mosaad Khouder, Farshid Maleki, Ardeshir Mohassess, Fereydoun Omid, Nasser Ovaissi, Faramarz Pilaram, Mehrdad Pournazarali, Khaled Al-Saa'i, Faisal Samra, Yashar Samimi Mofakham, Ali Shirai, Esrafil Shirchi, Koorosh Shishegaran, Hendrik Stroebel, Ali Talpoor and, of course, Twombly. While there was a predominance of works on paper, there were also larger pieces on canvas (such as those by Jamalini and Gilliam), alongside sculptural pieces by Arabi and Farjabadi, displayed on large, wooden crates throughout the gallery. This preference for the raw material, rather than traditional white plinths was also in homage to Twombly, who often used crates himself in his exhibitions, to similar effect.

Within the works presented, what was most interesting was the selection of precisely which works represented each artist's practice. *The Line Calligraphic* in general veered away from larger, splashier or better-known pieces - even by the likes of the Haerizadeh brothers, or big names like Samra and Fathi - to display delicate, nuanced earlier works (sometimes sketches). This provided a unique insight into works by an older generation as well as showing some of the beginnings for today's big Contemporary names. Case in point was a series of ink on paper works from the 1970's by Mohassess, featuring political satire, while watercolor and pen on paper works by Rokni Haerizadeh from 2008 illustrate a different side to the more color-saturated canvases we may be

used to, though still hinting at his recognisable phantasmagorical lines and forms. There were works on paper by Shishegaran which provided a fascinating insight into the construction of his more famous works on canvas. Similarly, a drawing by Farmanfarmaian, executed in New York after the Iranian revolution while working with Siah Armajani, revealed a side to her works on paper that had more in common with her famous geometric mirror mosaic works than her potentially better known delicate flower sketches (of her non-mosaic work, that is). And at the heart of it, like an *idée fixe*, the leitmotif of the line - from stark black on white to swathes of watercolor, each and every work displayed the power of a single line.

Indeed, the use of the line goes back through Persian art history as far back as Miniature painting, when artists developed the painstaking technique known as *pardakht*. This method, involving the execution of immensely small, fine brush strokes, builds up an image through a profusion of nearly imperceptible lines to elevate the two-dimensional picture plane. In Cy Twombly and the Line Calligraphic, this sort of delicacy and historicity was evident in works such as Amin Nazar's ink on paper drawings of wonderful beasts, flecks and lines of ink coming together to reveal human heads. Not only was the amount of works varied and comprehensive in artistic styles, subject and background, but the way in which it was hung - as mentioned, in salon-style - created walls full of asymmetric clusters. In the backdrop, painted directly onto the gallery walls, were large painted murals, of a sort, executed by Ave, Gilliam and Arabi in their mutual loose, flowing styles. This served to bring all the disparate works together, a common theme, as it were, and the final effect was akin to musical notes upon a staff. In fact, just as notes come together to create a piece of music, so too these lines coalesced to create moving sketches, deft examples of calligraphy or expressionist paintings. It also echoed Ave's selection process for the works themselves, first bringing together a core selection (some 70 of the total 98) of pieces to form the main show, and then adding from the two collections available to him rather like a composer embellishes a core melody. With its intimate feel, it created the feeling that one was *inside* the music, as it were, inside the symphony of lines and colors. Inside Twombly's head. Inside the mind of some wonderful collector. A strange, bold otherworldly mental space. If music was physical, this would have been it. "Coming up with the background was somewhat spontaneous," says Ave. "What do all these artists have to do with one another? The idea of the background was to embody the spirit of Twombly's work and make it a connecting link between all these artists that we've brought together." As such, it was a serendipitous flying visit



1) Farshid Maleki, pen on paper, 29x41cm. Courtesy of the artist.

2) Farshid Maleki, pen on paper, 29x41cm. Courtesy of the artist.

by Gilliam, en route from Texas, which led to the decision that she and Ave together would paint the entire interior. Taking three days to finish, materials included coal and chalk, each artist work on their own portions and then overlapping and adding to each other in an organic process. The looping lines resonated with many of the exhibited artworks and also emphasised the Twombly pieces on display. "I was worried at first that the background would clash with the artworks," admits Zandi, "but it was just such a beautiful amalgamation and turned out to be very complementary that initial plans to do just one wall ended up being the entire gallery interior." The charcoal, whispered Zandi, was in fact of the BBQ kind - an inspired find in a home depot store, as its softer texture gave great smudging to the piece. "The wall is so fresh," said Ave, "and that was also the wonderful thing about Twombly - his work always looks so fresh, as if he'd done it just a few minutes ago - it is timeless." The exhibition also had an educational component that went beyond the merely experiential. A special documentary, produced by Zandi and Ave, sought to introduce, showcase and explain Twombly's vast oeuvre to audiences within the UAE who might not be familiar with his life and work. Twombly a contemporary of the likes of the great American artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg yet spent most of his life overseas in Europe, particularly in Rome. "Twombly was not limited to just America or to a single period," explains Ave, "he was a great example of an artist being liberated by these definitions. This exhibition - as all exhibitions should be - wanted to be an educational experience, but hopefully that was just a part of it, and the other part was that of the emotional experience to these works."

And emotional experiences there were, with visitors reportedly spending protracted periods in the space. "I think this exhibition had a story, it had substance," muses Arabi, "and as such, people came, stayed a long time, and asked lots of questions. It was extremely rewarding for us to see people engaging on such a level, and we hope the show can travel onwards to other venues. It has been the most amazing phenomenon." Ave agrees: "I think it was a provocative exhibition, that's for sure. It made the viewer ask these questions: who is Twombly? What are we talking about, and why? It was wonderful to see people asking all these questions and then finding the answers here, in front of them. That is, after all, the whole point of our series *Visual Dialogues*."

In fact, the next *Visual Dialogues* will be called *Fearless: The Next Wave of Artists from Iran*, on view in March-April 2016 and will bring together artists from different generations, with the only criteria being that they have not had a solo show abroad. It will also mark

a special collaboration with three galleries in Tehran - O Gallery, Lajevardi Foundation and Aaran Gallery, who will present different works by the same artist group in their own venues at the same time. "It would be nice to be able to shine the spotlight on work by artists who are fearlessly doing their work and not being recognized, either financially or internationally, to the level that they deserve," says Ave. "Being able to do projects like this here at Total Arts is what this series of exhibitions is all about and to hold hands and co-operate with other galleries on this level is a really important thing to do if they are to get that platform."

Cy Twombly and the Line Calligraphic was a moving tribute to one of the world's great Abstract Expressionists and gestural artists, but it was also a finely tuned and insightful exploration of a base note that runs through so many artists' work. As they say, in the beginning there was the word. And the word was made of lines. After all, the line is also aleph, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet. Aleph is Alpha. It is all and yet it is a single line, a beginning and an end, the Alpha and the Omega. Like Mahler's symphony, every line has the ability to hold within it the world - and within the world... everything.

Cy Twombly and the Line Calligraphic ran from 15 November 2015-30 January 2016. *Fearless: The Next Wave of Artists from Iran* runs from 14 March-15 May 2016. For more information, visit www.courtyard-uae.com

ABOUT THE WRITER

Anna Wallace-Thompson spent 10 years with -CANVAS-, the premier magazine for art and culture from the middle east and arab world, most recently its editor-at-large, before moving to Conde Nast, where she is currently an acting associate editor. She contributes to titles such as Alef, Artasiapacific, Artforum, Art In America, Artsy, The Art Newspaper, Contemporary Practices, Frieze, Harper's Bazaar Art Middle East and NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art. Among others.



1) Rokni Haerizadeh, 2008, watercolor pen on paper, 50x70cm. Courtesy of the artist.

2) Rokni Haerizadeh, 2008, watercolor pen on paper, 50x70cm. Courtesy of the artist.