



Night Journey and Ascension

'Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Inviolable House of Worship (at Mecca) to the Remote House of Worship (at Jerusalem) – the environs of which We had blessed – so that We might show Him show him some of Our symbols: for verily He alone is all-hearing, all-seeing' (Sura 17, Verse 1).

This Qur'anic verse refers to the Prophet Muhammad's (p.b.u.h.) night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and his ascension from there to heaven where he was granted a vision of the Hereafter and of the secrets of Paradise and Hell. The archetypal encounter with the divine realm, only hinted at in the words 'We might show Him some of Our symbols', is the subject matter at the root of Ahmed Moustafa's diptych 'Night Journey and Ascension'. It explains the power of the work in which a series of what appear like thunderbolts give rise to bundles of ascending rays of iridescent colour that rise up to a world beyond the confines of the canvas.

The elements of composition ascend with unrestrained velocity as though engaged in an uncommon race on account of a powerful force which attracts them to the heights – a force that defies weight, size and quantity and to which no earth-bound gravity applies. As gravity is

nullified, time is reduced to a furtive moment in which all of Time itself is contained. Complete chaos seems to arise – and yet the viewer senses a hidden order at work which harmonises the outpouring of opposing energies and unites them into a magic image of the Tree of Life – 'a blessed tree, an olive tree which is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is so bright that it almost shines though no fire had touched it' (Qur'an, Sura 24, Verse 35).

The multiple moving forms which generate the composition consist in fact of repeated visual utterances of the above cited Qur'anic verse which are scattered in different colours and sizes over the lower regions of the painting and from whose letter-shapes emanate the upward charging rays. The varying guises in which the Qur'anic utterance is displayed reflect a plurality of perspective inherent in the wording of the verse, as the divine speaker refers to Himself, first as 'He', then as 'We' and lastly as 'He' once more. Displayed against a deep night-blue background of seemingly limitless depth, the words appear as though discharged into the midst of interstellar space.

The painting, however, appeals not only to the eye, but also to the ear. The utterances are displayed with such rhythm, the upward moving streams of lines are so freely and harmoniously intertwined as though they formed part of a polyphonic chorus of glorious praise. Musical sound is here made visible as it travels through space. In making us aware of the link between hearing and sight, space and time, the composition evokes the closing statement of the Qur'anic verse: 'verily He alone is all-hearing, all-seeing'. In its very grandeur the composition thus hints a reality which dwarfs it and all else, and is 'measureless to man'.

As summarised by the artist himself, the work strives to give expression to a heavenly, angelic celebration, in which visible forms assume the role of sounds, in which meanings assume the hue of colours, while all is imbued with the scent of camphor and musk, and engulfed with a sprinkling of the dew of eternal life in which there is no 'where' and 'in between', and in which absolute goodness reigns supreme.

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Image size (consisting of two panels, each 240 x 148.5cm) : 240 x 297 cm (H x W)

Media : Oil and watercolour on 638gsm paper mounted on canvas