



Azra Aghighi Bakhshayeshi, *Crimson*, 2010, 200 x 200 cm, oil on canvas

Azra Aghighi Bakhshayeshi, a descendent of the famous court Calligrapher Mirza Karim Khoshnevis Tabhari, is the only professional female calligraphic artist working in Iran. Her work explores the rich aesthetic possibilities inherent in the internal architecture of Persian script. For her, there is beauty not just in the meaning letters express but also in the form and texture of those letters.

Aghighi was born in 1968 in Qom, Iran into a literary family. In the early years of her calligraphic training, she was inspired by the beauty and variations of Persian letters. Her interest in understanding Persian logotype led her into graphic design, and she continued her studies of contemporary calligraphy scientifically. In university, she chose to study *Kufi* script with the renowned Calligrapher Master Nasrollah Afjai. Under Afjai's guidance, she discovered the freedom and potential for artistic expression available through calligraphy, especially in the minimalist forms of *Kufi* script. Working in this script, Aghighi, who considers herself a "Painter's Scribe," has found a way to express beauty with words – but in a non-literary way. For her, viewers need not understand the meaning of the letters and words to gain access to the meaning of her art; in fact, not understanding the words is exactly what she wants from viewers:

When viewers do not understand the meaning they are not reading the letters. I am looking for viewers who are seeing and not reading. These writings are whispers in my mind that do not mean too much, like a meditation. Sometimes they could be poetry, prayers, or just a conversation. I am not trying to convey spirituality with my writings. Speaking only one language creates a barrier between me and the viewer if they do not speak the same language. I am hoping to reach out to a broader audience with my art as a universal message.

While Aghighi is inspired by religion (especially early Islamic writings), the heart of her practice is not religious: "It is not my intention to pass [my religious inspirations] on to the viewer. I think my religious feelings in my work reveal my inner feelings. For me, these are very personal. I am delighted viewers appreciate my work and hope they can see that it is a contemporary artistic work. I am trying to show the viewer that my artistic inspiration continues to be part of a rich heritage from the golden treasure of Middle Eastern culture."

Although there are more than 1,500 women calligraphers in Iran, Aghighi's art is unique; she is a pioneer among women in the exploration of the potentialities of calligraphy as visual art. As she explains, "I sadly realized that I am the only professional calligraphic woman artist in Iran. I do not claim my works are unique but can say that I am the first woman using conceptual calligraphic writing as an art form."