

*Beyond Words* presents a selection of contemporary artists of Arab and Iranian origin inspired by classical calligraphy who have developed their own artistic language through calligraphy. We generally associate calligraphy with the great art of Islamic calligraphy and its sumptuous Koranic handwriting, or we think of richly decorated objects in Islamic art rather than associating calligraphy closely with anything in contemporary art.

Calligraphy was originally developed in order to transmit the word of God in written form. The perfect word of Allah should be written down in a commensurately perfect script. The basis for traditional calligraphy, which prescribes the rules for the script's proportions, was laid down in the 10th century by vizier Ibn Muqlah. Legibility of the text and line aesthetics required a method of proportioning. Through Ibn Muqlah's established geometric rules, the alif, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, was designated as the scale unit, its length defined by points, and from then on used for every Arabic system of calligraphy.

Mastering the art of calligraphy often required years of continuous training and years of practice. Learning the various writing styles demanded strict adherence to the established rules. Calligraphers viewed themselves as artisans and not as artists in the European sense. With the passage of the centuries, calligraphers constantly devised new writing styles, but they always remained within the traditional framework. An entirely original creation was not the highest aim.

The 19th century brought far-reaching changes, however. The influence of Western nations increased in the Orient. This came about through colonial policies on the one hand and intensified as Europe's industrialization stimulated interest in developing the Middle East economically. European modern art was deeply influenced through cultural exchange and contact with Muslim lands around the turn of the century. Artists such as Delacroix, Matisse, Picasso, Klee, and Macke were inspired by the Orient, and the new ideas they gained from it found expression in their works. At the same time, the development of modern art in the Islamic countries received crucial impulses from the most diverse influences of the Western world. A modern Arabic art emerged in which calligraphy was also newly positioned. Many Arabic artists had studied in art academies in Europe and initially oriented themselves towards Western art. With time, however, they increasingly developed their own visual language. Since then, modern art has undergone a process of continuous development from which the fine arts have emerged as their own art form.

If calligraphy is an art form that follows strict rules – down to the specification of the amount of time required to put a line on paper – then the room for developing one's own personal ideas in calligraphy seems a priori to be quite limited. The rich spectrum of works modern, contemporary calligraphers are producing is thus all the more astounding. The calligraphy of contemporary artists is not about continuing a tradition. In order to achieve their own free expression, they are breaking the strict rules, for example by their faster motion during the writing or through the use of alternative writing implements instead of the traditionally used qalam, a quill made from reed.

In this way, the expression of emotions, personal feelings, and moods can be realized in a dynamic setting. Contemporary artists create calligraphy from a rich repertoire of forms. They thereby expand the potential of calligraphic script to the point that it begins to approach picture forms. For many, the objective is no longer to render the word or text of a poem in a readable form and a specific calligraphic style; rather, they seek to express the content through various means of artistic expression. By giving the words individual form and through specific composition and coloring, the artist attempts to make visible what lies behind the letters. In the course of artistic exchange with the calligraphy, some artists break away entirely from traditional calligraphy and work purely with Arabic script letters that have morphed into abstract characters. The multifaceted results of such artistic processes are clearly to be seen in the works of the artists presented in *Beyond Words*.

Karin Adrian von Roques



Memory of Samarkand | 150 x 155 cm | mixed media on canvas | 2008

## KHALED AL SAAI

Khaled Al Saai, born in Syria, studied calligraphy and painting. As with Hassan Massoudy, for Al Saai Arabic calligraphy is a medium for expressing feelings, thoughts, and sensations without becoming tied to the language. He deals especially with Arabic letters, their shapes, and their symbolic, religious, and musical origins. It is this variety of meaning, as well as the formal possibilities of the various writing styles, that influence Khaled Al Saai's creative processes. On his numerous trips through Arab countries, Europe, and the US, he has been inspired by cities and countryside, by landscapes and architecture, by the bustle of people in the street, and by the change of seasons, always anxious to realize his impressions in calligraphic creations. In each case he chooses a writing style that provides the best sensorial and emotional fit to his impressions. Letters and words are not arranged on a straight or horizontal line but rather written densely or detached, superimposed or one below the other, interlaced or labyrinthine in the imaginary space of the canvas. Letters interwoven in this way follow their own peculiar rhythm. Highly individualistic landscapes emerge as well as pictures that depict personal feelings and sensations. Khaled Al Saai exhausts the possibilities of Arabic script and makes it into abstract characters in order to convey the impressions of his trips and feelings as well as its abstract essence.



Nun | mixed media | 87 x 120 cm | 2008

## ALI HASSAN

The Qatari artist Ali Hassan focuses almost exclusively on the Arabic letter *nun* (ن; the letter "n" in the Latin alphabet) in his works. Worked out in large scale as a determining element of his pictures or in variegated modifications within the widest ranges of compositional structures, this letter is the main actor in Hassan's work. Hassan's choice of this single letter from the Arabic alphabet is hardly a capricious act. Each of the 28 Arabic letters holds a symbolic meaning that in mystic circles has developed into a form of kabbalistic science. The letters themselves form an important part of this symbolic language, not just in the mystical and profane poetry and prose but in calligraphy as well. For example, the letter *nun* plays a role in sura 68, titled *nun wa qalam* (N and the quill). This sura has inspired the widest interpretations by mystics. For some, it points to the godly quill that inscribes all our fates upon a tablet. For these, the quill is an important instrument in the hand of the calligrapher; whose holy task it is to transcribe the word of God. Further, some letters are also the beginning letters of holy names, and in addition possess a numerical value. Such are the considerations that have contributed to a complex system of the letters' nexus of meaning. Like Ali Hassan, many Arab and Iranian artists are conscious of the meaning of individual letters and refer to them in their work.



Wala Ghalib Illa Allah | 200 x 120 cm | acrylic on canvas | 2008

## MOHAMED KANOO

The Abu Dhabi-based artist takes a completely different approach. His studio more closely resembles an experimental laboratory where he experiments with colors, materials, and techniques. Here he attempts to translate his impressions from life and his surroundings, his experiences, and reflections directly into his work as concisely as possible. He prefers simplicity, the message reduced to its essential. Following his predilections he selects a color or color combination and studiously applies it. He tends to limit himself to a few basic colors, which he uses unblended. In his working method he relates to the Arabic term *Tajrid*, which for him embodies leaving off all unnecessary embellishment. This approach gave rise to Kanoo's series *Wala Ghalib Illa Allah* ("There is no victor apart from God"), in which he works with extremely reduced artistic means. Centered on a monochromatic background, the narrow, black lettering draws the gaze of the viewer irresistibly towards itself. This is exactly the intention of the artist, who would like to draw attention to this saying and its meaning. This series was inspired by the Alhambra in Granada, where he discovered this phrase, once intended to remind the Nasirids to govern justly, on a wall. In the context of Kanoo's work, this saying now takes on a wider connotation. "There is no victor apart from God" should in many respects resonate with us and remind us that humans are not all-powerful. Typical for Kanoo is his picking a largely unobserved detail out of everyday contexts and making it the subject of his work. Kanoo's minimalistically constructed works impress on account of their strict aesthetics.





Le temps | 75 x 55 cm | ink and color pigments on paper | 2007

## HASSAN MASSOUDY

Iraqi-born Hassan Massoudy belongs to that group of artists who, coming from classical calligraphy, soon freed themselves from its strict rules and found their own individual artistic expression. Massoudy selects poems and quotations of international poets and philosophers and places them at the bottom rim of a page. From these he finally filters out a few central words in order to convey a monumental form and thereby approximate the word with a pictogram. Massoudy is not concerned with rendering a poem or epigram in a specific style of script but rather with capturing its ineffable meaning and making it visible. According to Massoudy, every work of calligraphy conceals an image, which he seeks to transmit through colorful, concrete written characters. In his calligraphic compositions, the artist lets his feelings guide him as he seeks to give expression to his inner mental state. In order to achieve the richest possible variety of forms, Massoudy has enlarged his range of writing implements and today works mostly with palette knives of varying widths. Words originally written horizontally are shifted to the vertical, thereby not only gaining in monumentality and achieving a new form of meaning but also creating a new aesthetic impact. Massoudy writes with sweeping gestures, quick and precise. With Massoudy, calligraphy becomes a body language that conveys his innermost thoughts.



Étoile Filante | 150 x 125 cm | oil and acrylic on canvas | 2003

## FARHAD MOSHIRI

The Iranian artist Farhad Moshiri captivates with his large-scale works in which monumental jars are depicted. These archaic-seeming, plastically painted jars remind one of antique clay pots and the old Persian tradition of ceramics manufacture. Lettering shines forth from a monochromatic base in Persian Nasta'liq style: single words, single sentences, coming from Moshiri's childhood or encountered in daily life. What is special here is the combination. He is inspired by episodes from the old Persian and Oriental tradition in which he was raised but is simultaneously alert for input from his current surroundings. In this way Moshiri combines the visual past and present, transforming the traditional and banal into a contemporary message and aesthetic that allows new relationships and perspectives. Despite a high degree of pictorial elegance, at times the compositions become irritating, which can perhaps be read as an expression of the tension between tradition and modernity in the Iranian way of life today. The art of calligraphy interests Moshiri primarily for its beauty. In addition to the jars, there is another series, in which he paints single letters and numbers that appear as a repetitive, endless pattern on the canvas. In their ornamentation, they conjure up traditional Islamic art, but through transformation they achieve a new contemporary message and aesthetic.



Untitled | 200 x 120 cm | acrylic on canvas | 2008

## AHMAD MOUALLA

The Syrian artist Ahmed Moualla also studied classical calligraphy but turned at first, somewhat contrary to Yusef Ahmad, to free painting. He painted large canvases with expressive and sometimes socially critical themes. During his studies in graphics and visual communication in Damascus and Paris, he sought after other forms of calligraphy and developed new types of scripts. As an aficionado of Arabic poetry, Moualla had a vision one day of a room entirely devoted to Arabic poetry. In his consideration of how the interior of such a room should be designed, calligraphy again became the focus of his attention. Since then it has played a central role in his most recent work. Of particular interest is the relationship between painting and the art of writing, especially how these two disciplines can be artistically united so that their traditional and cultural connections are made apparent. Moualla places special emphasis on transcending the graphical and decorative boundaries of Arabic script, taking up the rhythms of Arabic calligraphy and with the possibilities offered by painting transferring it into a new aesthetic. The legibility or illegibility of the cited words and text passages thereby becomes a game. Moualla says: "I think I have succeeded in placing the calligrapher and the painter on the same level, far removed from Sufism and metaphysics. I for myself refer entirely to modern painting in which the types or shapes of the characters, by virtue of their mere existence, suggest a playful color change. The entire process is not based on a calligraphy that wants to paint pictures or painting that seeks to write calligraphy. It is a process that wants to revive Oriental art in modern art."

# BEYOND WORDS



Farhad Moshiri | Amour (detail) | 270 x 180 cm | oil and acrylic on canvas | 2003

## CONTEMPORARY CALLIGRAPHY FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

curated by Karin Adrian von Roques

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