Meeting with Rachid Koraichi

Leticia Cordero Vega

A major force for Arab artists throughout the Eighties has been the use of calligraphy and the arabesque. According to an Arab proverb, writing is the language of the hands, whereas calligraphy is the reflection of the soul. This artistic movement has taken two directions. At one level, artists have based their work on linguistic concerns connected with poetry in particular, and with literature and philosophy in general. Here the texts are legible. Knowledge and ideas are taken from different sciences, like medicine and astronomy, to which writing was very close. In this vein, the work of the Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata stands out, establishing a relationship between the organisation of the Arabic alphabet and the visual imagery of poetic language. While the Lebanese artist, Ali Omar Ermes, links literature to calligraphy from the scripts of the Koran, and to poems portraying its central characters, Salem Farhat Tamimi from Libya incorporates the sunnas of the Koran in his pieces.

At another level, artists have taken, as a point of departure, the theoretical discourse around the letter and traditional vocabulary, together with the formal elements and symbolic dimensions they inherited. Writing is given an abstract, non-literary style, using words stripped of semantic significance. The formal statement of the message is preoccupied with using the characters to reappropriate the graphic and gestural feeling of writing. Notable in this respect is the work of Rachid Koraichi.

Rachid Koraichi, of Algerian origin and resident in Tunis, is an artist who enables the contemporary and the traditional to come together in a very personal style. In his work, he incorporates outlines and signs inspired by the Arabic alphabet, ideograms and characters from cuneiform Mesopotamic script, which shift between the legible and illegible through the use of positive and negative form. Thus Koraichi appropriates elements that co-exist in diverse cultures, and makes use of the written record in order to impregnate his work with the ambience of his world, a world in which the earthly encounters the spiritual.

The following interview is a dialogue with the artist about his work and some of the problems of current Arabic art.
Leticia Cordero Vega: I am aware that you have an interest in literature, particularly poetry. Historically, calligraphy was responsible, in part, for translating the messages of the Moslem faith, and has been the only means by which the text of the Koran appeared with the arabesque as a decorative element in traditional art, as well as making a contribution to modern art. In your use of calligraphy, is there an interest in tackling the traditional?

Rachid Koraichi: My work is not calligraphy.

LCV: Do you mean to say it is not writing, but that it lends itself to a re-working of calligraphic characters; a calligraphy stripped of its semantic meaning?

RK: Calligraphy has its specific rules and techniques. You can see in the pieces I have made, aside from the use of fragments of manuscripts, that there is a difference between calligraphy and the work of art that comes from calligraphy.

In our civilisation, in the Islamic and Arabic world, religious connotations are attributed to whatever document has been written in Arabic. Looking at my most recent pieces you can appreciate that all the characters of Arabic script have been inverted, showing I have no interest in whether they can be read; in this respect my intention is the opposite to that of calligraphy. My interest is in the spectator having first impressions of the effect of a piece of text, but only from an aesthetic point of view.

LCV: Calligraphic painting emphasises a continuity between the rich heritage of Islamic traditions and modern Arabic culture. Of course, not all the Arabic
artists who work with calligraphy are practising Moslems, but is there not a mystical interest on the part of those artists who take on board the scripture and Arabic calligraphy in their work?

RK: You know that I come from a very religious family; Koraichi is the name of a member of the family of the prophet Mohamed. I was brought up religiously until I was about sixteen years old, when I abandoned it, and till today have not practised any religion. The Arabs say that those who write the Koran upside down are in league with the devil.

There are artists who work the text of the Koran in a legible way, and have made studies of Arabic calligraphy; others use the characters of scripts from diverse Arabic texts, including the Koran, poetry, etc, in an illegible way.

There can be contradictions among calligraphers and artists without weighing one group against the other. I think that the calligrapher studying writing can make contributions, but he does not include the process of creation in his work like the artist.

You can appreciate that in my work I use symbols, words, or numbers in whatever way, so that those who know the Arabic language or not can get my message. I am looking at the structural way the space of the outline penetrates the space of the symbols.

LCV: The work you do, is it the result of previous research, or does it come from the creative process?
RK: No, it is something that has been present since my childhood, partly the result of my religious upbringing and the type of reading I was taught by my family; so for me, literature has a great spiritual force which I consider gives some, not everyone, the means for understanding.

We must remember that, centuries ago, highly cultured people lived in monasteries, dedicated to reading and the necessity of understanding the manuscripts. The same happened in our religion, independent from situations outside art. In this sense we must not generalise, because there are artists who do not know how to read, yet have what we call spontaneity.

LCV: The use of traditional calligraphy in a work of art is visually powerful, and is one of the ways of being close to cultural traditions most used today. Do you think your work runs the risk of falling into the ‘decorative’ trap and becoming the cliché of Moslem art, where exoticism was allowed to take over in a way that did not establish new meanings, but tended towards mitigating an essentially aesthetic perception?

RK: That’s true, there is a risk; we are very worried, and are looking at what we can do, because it is a danger. It is a new tendency that is making us apprehensive.
LCV: Out of the East-West encounter comes an interchange of influences acquired from Western culture and Arabic heritage. I think the most successful Arab artists have internalised more the influences that are closer to their sensibility, like calligraphy, the popular symbols, or those elements alive in their surroundings. It does not always happen the same, though, when artists use figuration; the results are less successful, as if the image had been borrowed, and was not the consequence of an assimilation from within. What do you think?

RK: At the beginning of the Fifties, schools that existed in the Middle East produced fine art in a Western style. For that reason we say that the history of the fine arts in our country is new, recent. Before the decade of the Fifties, Arabic fine art fundamentally was equated with the decoration of houses and mosques and the illustration of books. During the colonisation of Spain by the Arabs, in Grenada for example, the books on medicine or fauna had beautiful illustrations. When we say that Arabic fine art appeared in the Fifties, it is because it was at that time we began to commercialise, but there is no doubt that the work of the Arab artist dates from much earlier: we must not forget the figure paintings, ceramics, nor the gold and silver work.

LCV: Do you consider that the concept of fine art as an autonomous statement is true now in the Middle East, and is the result of the process of colonisation which accompanied the Western definition of art?

RK: Certainly. Due to the fact that ours is a civilisation characterised by the
strength of its language, its poetry, for its oratory and not for the visual, it was very difficult for us to introduce ourselves to the art market. As yet we do not rate with the art historians, critics, collectors or the specialists who guide art. Besides, there is a kind of pressure from the West on the Third World, and especially towards the Arab World. But before blaming the West, I think most of the responsibility lies with us. We must demand respect. For example, I cannot tolerate the Israeli government exchanging two or three of their prisoners for ten thousand Arabs. If we continue like this, the West will never have respect for our people and this makes it easier for them to keep us at an inferior level.

LCV: I feel the East-West influence has affected both sides. It has not only been from the West to the East. Although African art has been a source of study for Western artists since the Cubists, and is important today in contemporary art, Moslem art became a rich source for many Western artists such as Klee, Kandinsky, Matisse, to name but a few; they were very sensitive to the strength of Arabic culture. Distinctive elements of Arabic culture have marked the art of the West up until today. What is your opinion of this?

RK: I agree with you totally, but this was in the past, and I am talking to you about present reality.

LCV: It is just that I am passionate about Arab art, and I think at the hour of confrontation, it will have to be handled with a different sensibility than the Western sensibility with which we are usually associated.

RK: Yes. Although I must reiterate that it is impossible for this to actually happen. It is something that has to come from ourselves, and things do not happen like that. Look, our governments, despite knowing we have cities that are part of our history and tradition, destroy them.

LCV: Is this what your piece Desert Storm is about?

RK: What motivated me to make this piece was the Gulf War. I needed to express clearly the significance of that operation.

I consider the most important thing now in all this is that we Arab artists, despite the difficulties that face us on an economic level, and with regard to our people understanding works of art and the problem of emigration, are conscious of the historic and cultural times in which we are living.

Translated from the Spanish
by Frederica Brooks

At the time of going to the press, titles of Rachid Koraichi’s 3 works illustrated here were not available.