

| Botanist of Letters

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The ability to read Arabic is irrelevant when it comes to appreciating Wissam Shawkat's work. While traditional calligraphy embellishes a text or verse, the pieces comprising *Inside/Outside*, the artist's first show at XVA Gallery in Dubai, do not contain prescriptive written messages. When encountered out of context, it might not even occur to viewers that these Calligraforms—the term Shawkat has chosen to name his new style and approach to abstract collages, silkscreen prints, and works on paper—have a foundation in calligraphy at all.

Arabic calligraphy is a rigorous medium constrained by fixed stylistic scripts, stalwart rules, and a classic master-student transmission of skill. The Arabic alphabet is made up of 28 characters. Each letter appears differently depending upon its position in a word, and can be placed in initial, medial, final, or stand alone form with prescribed connections, flourishes, or tails. Shawkat continues to follow these assumptions with precise attention and real reverence.

After his primary school teacher Muhammad Ridha Suhail introduced the class to calligraphic forms, a ten year-old Shawkat began to gain knowledge of the medium in Basra, where he grew up amidst the Iran-Iraq War. It's not a memory he likes to discuss, but he vividly recalls writing and re-writing the letter Ha, over and over again on the tile floor of a half-built bathroom in a construction site where his family had taken shelter during a particularly heavy aerial bombardment. Shawkat was arguably drawn to the fixed order of Arabic calligraphy at a time when his world was in chaos—studying, copying, and revising thuluth (the most complex, demanding script) until reaching mastery many years later.

Rather than continue on the path of a traditional calligrapher, Shawkat began avidly researching and responding to European artistic movements, ultimately coming to view himself as a conceptually motivated artist. His pieces are a true hybrid of modern European and Middle Eastern influences. To the West these include Cubism, Futurism, Geometric Abstraction, The Bauhaus, and De Stijl.

While in New York City for his 2011 Letters of Love exhibition at Reed Space, Shawkat first encountered work by Cecil Touchon. The American artist is widely considered the father of conceptual collage for his technique of stealing advertisement posters from the streets, then cannibalizing their many letters into found forms. Back in Dubai on his studio floor, Shawkat returned to the Arabic letter Ha as a starting point, carving its outline into small squares, then shuffling and rebuilding the character into a foreign, new structure. A number of these smaller works can be found at XVA and are particularly suited to the gallery's intimate setting.



Gathering, Mixed media on board 33 cm x 33 cm, 2015

With eyes to the East, Shawkat spent time a great deal of time pouring over books and works by several of the most prominent Arabic calligraphers from Turkey: Sami Efendi, Mohammed Nazif, Hamid Al Amadi and Halim Efendi. Unlike many of his contemporaries who had the chance to train with a master, receiving one on one tutorial and critique over a number of years, Shawkat did not have that kind of access in Iraq, and learned largely through correspondence, books, visits to museums and independent research.

Curiously— because his approach is so distinct from the Hurufiyya artists who do not have backgrounds in calligraphy yet layer letters onto canvas - Shawkat recently came across a 1940's quotation by the movement's late founder Madiha Omar with which he strongly identified: "Each letter is capable and has a personality dynamic enough to form an abstract design." Though his work maintains deep roots in calligraphic forms and principles, beginning in 2010, his pen and brush have "liberated" the Arabic letters from their originally intended structures.

Monumental 11/11, his 2015 solo exhibition at Tashkeel, a non for profit arts space in Dubai, gave Shawkat a platform for publicly declaring his departure from calligraphy, as his series Monumental Forms isolated aspects of letters, unbound them from one another, and gave them agency to move across canvas and paper as free new beings.

Shawkat is in constant dialogue with the shapes generated by the spaces, shadows, and silhouettes inside and around the thuluth style letters— taking these as his point of departure for the exhibition. He explains, "As calligraphers, when we train in classical scripts we spend years upon years



Homage to Bauhaus, Acrylic on handmade paper, 50cm X 68 cm, 2015

working towards mastery of the letters' forms. In reality, we also master the space around them—the positive and negative space, the black and white, the inside and outside of the letters.”

The artist's newest work—an ongoing series—serves as a response to Geometric Abstraction, an early 20th Century movement that followed on the heels of Cubism. Piet Mondrian attempted to break the world down into purely two dimensional fundamental structures that floated on clouds of otherwise blank canvas, while his controversial Russian contemporary Kazimir Malevich coined the term 'Suprematism' to name his struggle to emancipate painting and painters from the project of representation.

The direct influence of these artists and their respective manifestos are particularly evident in *Balance*, a large scale acrylic on linen in which facets of silt-hued letters are suspended in space, clinging to one another like unpolished gemstones. Below, is a jaggedly symmetrical rise of shapes, each made up of a distinct aspect of the inside space from the letter Ha. Is this calligraphy or abstract art—and how might those distinctions matter many decades from now? Wissam Shawkat is questioning art world certainties and the very notion of language itself, and many of those answers are still to be determined.

Like a botanist in the garden, Shawkat expertly—and at times scientifically—takes cuttings of letters then grafts them together into new unrecognizable forms. His compositions are almost figurative, with the characters he creates taking on the ability to dance, argue, fly, and embrace. The exhibition's title, *Inside/Outside* is a play on this process. Yet, it also alludes to Shawkat's identity as an artist who consciously positions himself on the outskirts of both the calligraphy community and the Middle East's contemporary art scene.