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"I have a theatrical background so I can't paint small. I have to have large canvases because that's where the theatre is for me," says the Syrian painter Ahmad Moualla.

A man of characters

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Take any exhibition of work by emerging Middle Eastern artists, and calligraphy is bound to feature somewhere. "It's used as a way of stamping Arab identity" says Ahmad Moualla, the Syrian artist, whose exhibition, *New Works*, at Dubai's Green Art Gallery, features plenty of the classical script in which he trained as a young man. His own reasons, though, are less about nationality than communication. "I could be from anywhere and still use it. It's a code like any other. Unfortunately, that's how a lot of the West reads work from this region, but not everyone who uses calligraphy is trying to form an identity. In my case, I did it from a philosophical angle."

In fact, this relatively recent development in his work, which previously consisted mainly of doom-laden figurative scenes, focuses not so much on the script as the texture he creates using inches of paint, through which lettering is etched - in one, right through to the raw mesh of the canvas. Some is legible; some is not. "I started playing around with it," he says, "and in some cases the figurative and the text converge; sometimes it's pure calligraphy; and sometimes it's abstract." Certainly, the Pollock-style layering and loose arrangement of the script differentiate these works from many of the other calligraphic homages that line the walls of the region's galleries.

It is a habit that has been building in stages, starting with the odd word two years ago, and graduating into the swirling mass of script he has chosen to display in this pleasantly tired Dubai venue. Having built a career - he has won both the Lattakia Biennale and the Al Burda prize, and his works now sell for tens of thousands of dollars - out of his figurative work, Moualla began to feel that the potential of calligraphy in art had not yet been fully realised. "I wanted to push the boundary to see where it would take me," he says "It was a big challenge for me to go back into calligraphy. Nobody had really ever tried calligraphy in this way before".

He sees its ubiquity among artists from the region as yielding mixed results. "Most of these artists are purely calligraphers, so they aren't able to integrate it into a painting but rather are trying to make a painting out of calligraphy, which is not possible because they are calligraphers by heart and not painters. For, me, it is the opposite, so what you see is not calligraphy - it's a painting."

Wearing a dark brown suit and with an unkempt mane of black hair curling over his collar, Moulla has the gently dishevelled bearing of a geography teacher. Yet these oversized canvases, with their elaborate use of colour and lavish scrawls, hint at an inner sense of drama. "I have a theatrical background so I can't paint small," he says, "I have to have large canvases because that's where the theatre is for me."

His figurative works, of which several feature in the exhibition, use theatrical staging to present people in intense philosophical discussion. "It's as if you have a building and you slice it in half to find this scene," he says. "So there's also layering in those works; the calligraphy and the figurative works are closely linked." While philosophically this may be the case, in fact they couldn't look more different - the intricate loops of the script are a far cry from the looming abstract shapes of his other work.

So what is his philosophy? Both styles of work, he says, make the same point: that society is breaking down to the point where we are de-civilising. "I have always been very critical of society," he says, "and part of the reason I started to integrate words was so that I could express myself more clearly." In one of his mixed works, in which he has combined the figurative with script, the words, which have been taken from an Al Mutanabbi poem and an Al Marri poem from the 10th century, talk of a time of monkeys. "These words are still very valid today," he says. "I am critical of humanity as a whole. We have become monkeys."

He uses another of his figurative works to elaborate: a group of people stand gathered on the shore while a ship hovers on the horizon, "it's the same boat that brought Napoleon, the typewriter and the computer - all these new exciting ideas," he says, "but it's also the same boat that brought the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and poverty. These are conflicting ideas and there are these poor people waiting on the shore who may either get the typewriter or some amazing new discovery; or they may be waiting for something worse - poverty or war."

Perhaps not surprisingly, given their nation's proximity to Israel and Palestine, the war is a subject that has much occupied his Syrian contemporaries. "They always tried to find some way to express national struggle," he says. Does it matter how discernible his point is to the viewer? "Of course it is and always has been an important part of my work," he says, "but some people might read it differently." Though Moualla's figurative works may have a strong sense of foreboding, his antipathy towards humanity's complacency is far from obvious in the calligraphy. He insists, however, that the two styles are closely linked. "They're not separate entities," he says, "but each feeds into the other."

Although it may be commonly used in the rest of the Middle East, calligraphy, says Moualla, is not predominant in his native Syria. "You barely see it," he says. "Often when painters use it in their work, it's mainly symbolic - it's calligraphy for decorative purposes. My work is about something more profound." Instead, he says, the Syrian school remains largely expressionist. "We try to do work that somewhat resembles current trends in international galleries," he says. Western interest in Syrian art is not what it should be, though. "Perhaps in the past there was some interest when Syrian students went to study abroad," he says, "but it's no longer the same. Arab nations' ideas are changing. Western interest in young Syrian artists would be of great support, if we are going to continue to see that happening."

Luckily, support from within has given these green shoots some nurturing. "There's a national art directorate in Syria now; a national museum, and we're trying to set up a national gallery. There are more and more young people who are becoming interested in painting and visual arts, and more people who are taking on the adventure. Hopefully at some point that will yield something more clear-cut and tangible."

The high prices that some of his Iranian counterparts have been commanding in recent years are, he says, a long way off, though. "I'm an artist, not a merchant or a politician. I don't understand why some prices are so high. A painting is sold for \$5,000 (Dh18,500) one day and the following day it jumps to \$50,000 (Dh185,000). It's either business, propaganda or advertising - it is not a motivation for me."

New Works by Ahmad Moualla will be at Green Art Gallery, Dubai until Nov 20. www.gagallery.com

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