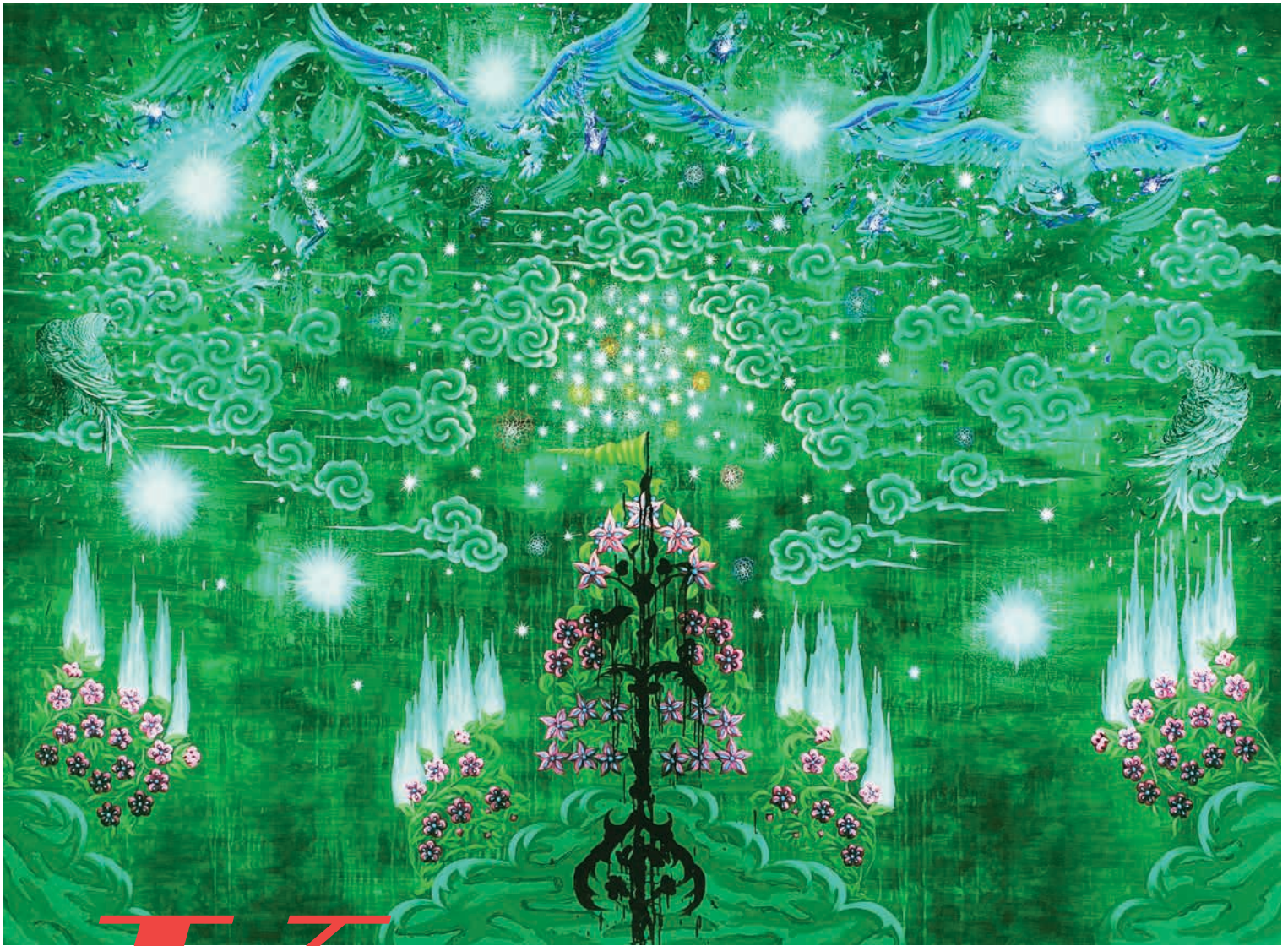






HISTORY PAINTING

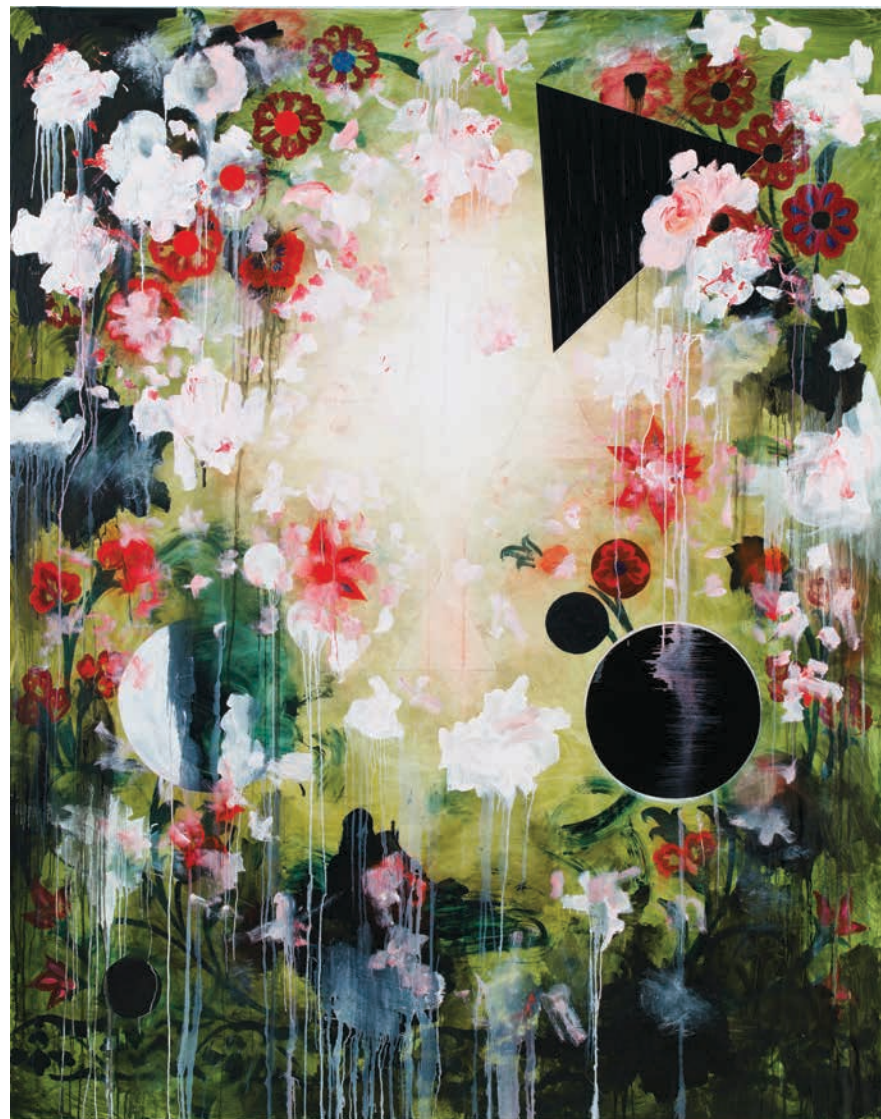
KAMROOZ ARAM



Ideologies and iconography are at the core of Kamrooz Aram's *oeuvre*, rendered abstractly through his paintings, drawings and collages. **Murtaza Vali** speaks with the Iranian-born New York-based artist, who is among the winners of the Abraaj Group Art Prize this year.

Kamrooz Aram's studio is located in a refurbished factory building on Varick Street in Bushwick, an industrial Brooklyn neighbourhood that has seen an influx of young artists in recent years. The Iranian artist's workspace is littered with the many tools of his craft: stretched and primed canvases of various sizes, piles of tubes of paint, pastels, oil sticks and grease pencils, tins filled with brushes and palette knives, stacks of makeshift palettes encrusted with smears of pigment, jugs of thinner and paint-stained rags. Though he is first and foremost an oil painter, Aram does regularly dabble in other media and a small selection of his ink on paper drawings and collages also grace the studio's walls. While his finished canvases are neatly stored away on shelves in the back corner, those currently in process gingerly lean against the walls, each perched on a couple of blocks of wood. Aram often works on more than one canvas at a time and as we talk, he cycles through some of what he has been working on for the past year – a series of 27 canvases titled *Palimpsests* – a selection of which will be shown at his solo exhibition at Dubai's Green Art Gallery in March alongside a newly published monograph.

Though it is difficult to make out many of the finished works, a simple grid, tilted 90 degrees, provides the series with its basic structure. It anchors an array of repeated floral forms, executed in lush reds and greens as well as a black-and-white geometric pattern, both jostling with the other for visual dominance. The integrity of both forms of ornament is challenged by various painterly marks – from gestural brushwork and drippy and splotchy applications of paint to scraping into, wiping away and covering up sections of painted canvas – creating a sense of constant movement within



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each composition. In their inability to resolve completely or to settle down, these canvases reveal a growing anxiety with iconography and succinctly capture the Diasporic condition of in-betweenness. Urban space is another key reference and the cycles of additions, erasures and the layered construction of Aram’s canvases are inspired by city walls, surfaces upon which urban history gradually accumulates, bearing witness to shifting fortunes, from civil war and civic protest to bureaucratic acts of everyday censorship. “I think of these paintings as a type of history painting,” says Aram. “I call them *Palimpsests* because they reveal their own his-

tory. Traces of each of the different layers that make up the painting are visible in the finished work.” The series has also brought Aram back to geometric pattern, abstraction and painterly process, issues he first explored while in college at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore in the late 1990s.

THE PATH TO ABSTRACTION

Born in Shiraz, Aram moved to the USA with his family in 1986 when he was eight years old. A self-described troublemaker, he always felt out of sync with the conservative Cincinnati suburb

Opening spread:
 Left: *1907 (Palimpsest #9)*. 2013. Oil, oil pastel and wax pencil on canvas. 152 x 137 cm.
 Centre: *Backdrop For A Spirited Decline (Palimpsest #18)*. 2013. Oil and oil pastel on canvas. 152 x 137 cm.
 Right: *Backdrop For An Unstable Interior (Palimpsest #24)*. 2013. Oil, oil pastel and wax pencil on canvas. 213 x 168 cm.

This page:
 Left: *Palimpsest (For Beirut)*. 2011. Oil on canvas. 213 x 168 cm.
 Right: *Angelus Norus (Reconstructed)*. 2011. Oil on canvas. 213 x 168 cm.

Facing page:
Mystical Visions Undetected By Night Vision Strengthen The Faith Of The Believers And Make Their Enemies Scatter. 2007. Oil and collage on canvas. 213 x 305 cm.



This page:
Untitled (Fana #10), 2011.
Oil on canvas.
152 x 137 cm.

Facing page:
Coming And Returning,
2002. Oil and pencil
on canvas. (Diptych)
152 x 373 cm.

where his family settled and explored various creative outlets as a teenager before discovering art, and in particular painting, as a medium for self-articulation and expression. Given Aram's subsequent and longstanding engagement with Islamic ornament, his interest in geometric pattern has a somewhat unexpected origin: the floor of the Arena Chapel in Padua, home to Giotto's famous frescoes, which he first encountered during a college art history lecture. Entranced by the repeating star motif, Aram decided to shift his painting practice away from the figurative towards a study of such patterns and began to research the use of geometry in Islamic art and architecture and its roots in Sufi thought. As a universal form, ornament and pattern allowed Aram to engage his rich cultural heritage with-

out being reduced to, or by, it, avoiding one of the major pitfalls of art based in identity politics. And as abstractions, they allowed him to enter into a dialogue with the histories, ideologies and processes of Modernist painting.

Aram began graduate school at Columbia University in New York in 2001, just two weeks before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. While the faculty and his peers at Columbia were not dogmatically anti-painting, they did challenge Aram to push his practice beyond purely formal and painterly concerns towards one that was critical and engaged with actual content. During his time there, his imagery shifted away from geometric patterning, gradually incorporating and repeating bits of iconography. Precise but



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painterly abstractions of expanding and contracting Islamic geometries such as *Coming And Returning* (2002) gave way to works like *Beyond The Borders II* (2003), a part of Aram's thesis exhibition in 2003, which featured generic floral motifs – appropriated from Persian carpets that Aram photographed at a New York store – melting into drips of paint. A meditation on the transcendent spirituality of geometry was replaced by a postcolonial critique of Islamic art and aesthetics reduced to the decorative and the kitsch, to an exotic luxury commodity. By privileging such a commodity over a canonical masterpiece as the source for the ornament repeated on his canvases, Aram put into question its cultural authenticity, its timeless “Islamic-ness.” This play with authenticity

and value, as qualities not intrinsic to an image or object but as products of their specific context that are projected back onto them, reappears in different guises throughout his *oeuvre*.

TRANSLATING SCENES

With the USA entering into an ill-advised military campaign in Iraq, Aram increasingly felt the need to engage with the conflict. “Though it was happening far away, in New York you really felt the presence of the war” he says. “While I could not see myself making anti-war protest art, I knew it was going to enter my practice in some way. And it did through iconography.” Aram drew inspiration from the overblown political rhetoric deployed by all sides of the conflict, a type of na-

tionalist fervour heightened by a heavy dose of religious dogma and apocalyptic good versus evil scenarios, used equally by George W Bush and Saddam Hussein. “I began to ask myself if it might be possible to paint this spiritual energy, the spiritual energy of war,” recounts Aram. “What would it look like if I literally painted some of what was being described?” The results, shown in an exhibition titled *Night Visions And Revolutionary Dreams* at Oliver Kamm/5BEgallery in New York in 2007, are visionary and verge on the psychedelic. On luminous canvases, whose emerald green backgrounds mimic the otherworldly glow of military night vision technology, Aram brings together an idiosyncratic visual language – floral arabesques and swirling clouds, camouflage pattern and glorious bursts of light, floating angelic



This spread, left to right:
Beyond The Borders II,
 2003. Oil on canvas.
 152 x 183 cm; Installation
 views of *Generation After
 Generation, Revolution
 After Revelation*. 2009. Oil
 on canvas. 10 canvases
 installed on wood blocks.
 274 x 152 cm each.

All images courtesy
 the artist and Green Art
 Gallery, Dubai.

figures and majestic hawks. Though some might attribute this iconography to specifically Islamic or Iranian sources – evidence of a critical laziness that insists on interpreting art through an artist’s biography and cultural origins – Aram’s sources are diverse and the signs multivalent. While the star bursts signify both explosions and fireworks, the quality of mystical or holy light these images exude borrows equally from Hudson River School landscapes, Christian art and calendars and posters that feature Shi’ite Imams. The latter two are also the source for the faceless angels. The hawk, though originally derived from an Islamic scientific treatise, points to the use of birds of prey as symbols of nation and power around the world.

An invitation to exhibit at LA><ART, a non-profit space in Los Angeles, in 2010 was an important turning point in Aram’s practice. Free to experiment, under the title *Generation After Generation, Revolution After Revelation*, he presented a suite of 10 vertical scroll-like paintings. Each features a single floral arabesque, isolated like a herald or emblem, subjected to various additive and subtractive painterly acts. The series revealed a growing iconoclastic impulse, a move towards destroying the image or dissolv-

ing it into the materiality of paint that has only gotten stronger in subsequent work. “While the LA><ART show was about the idea of revolution, of a wiping clean of the slate, I realised that finally, a clean slate is an impossible fantasy, that traces remain. The show was really just a deconstructed *Palimpsest*,” notes Aram.

DEFINING THE AUTHENTIC

Additionally, his interest in divine light and revelation as not, or rather, not only, spiritual but also painterly phenomena has carried over from iconographic paintings into his recent, more formal experiments. In the *Fana* series, titled after the Sufi concept of self-annihilation as a necessary step to accessing divine truth, the painted surface is carefully removed to reveal a luminous array of triangles. In a set of related works, the pattern of triangles resembles *Angelus Novus* (1920), Paul Klee’s famous angel of history, immortalised in Walter Benjamin’s writings. Unlike his first foray, Aram’s recent reengagement with geometry, pattern and ornament is broader in scope. In his work since 2010, these elements, derived from and referring both to Islamic aesthetics and the



The installation will introduce ambiguity into an otherwise authoritative display.

history of Western abstraction, form a terrain upon which a dialogue or negotiation between the two unfolds, revealing unexpected and previously unacknowledged juxtapositions, intersections and re-evaluations that challenge art histories that privilege the contributions of the latter over the former.

In the months leading up to the Abraaj Group Art Prize exhibition, Aram was hard at work on his winning project, which will be revealed at Art Dubai this March. It will engage the many issues he has dealt with in his paintings through the years and will present – in what is a significant departure for him – a multimedia installation that mimics the sorts of display cases used in the Islamic art galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum and the Louvre. “Encyclopaedic museums like these purport to tell

history; there is power and politics embedded in their modes of displays,” notes Aram. The neutral linen that is standard in such displays will be used as a painting surface for precise geometric abstractions that will frame some of his collages and serve as a decorative backdrop for an arrangement of ‘Islamic’ artefacts of questionable provenance. A playful form of institutional critique, the installation will introduce ambiguity into an otherwise authoritative display, posing questions about how art histories are constructed and narrated and how artistic and cultural authenticity are eventually established. 📍

Palimpsest runs from 17 March–3 May at Green Art Gallery. For more information visit www.kamroozaram.com and www.gagallery.com