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Challenging tradition through colour and form: Iranian calligrapher Mohammad Bozorgi – interview

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Innovative calligrapher protests contemporary themes with stunning scripts.

Art Radar speaks with Mohammad Bozorgi to learn more about his signature style and how he has challenged the traditional rules of calligraphy.



Mohammad Bozorgi, 'Hearts Can Fly', 2015, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Mohammad Bozorgi (b. 1978, Tehran, Iran) masterfully weaves together colour and “complex” forms of Arabic and Iranian calligraphy utilising the three pillars of Islamic design: symmetry, repetition and rhythm.

An internationally recognised talent in the “newest generation” of contemporary calligraphers, the artist earned an Elite Diploma from the Society of Iranian Calligraphers in 2009. Bozorgi’s work has been exhibited throughout the world, including the 2016 edition of the **Sharjah Calligraphy Biennial** and is included as part of the **Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia**’s collection. Currently, the artist’s work can be seen at the **Ayyam Gallery** DIFC location until 25 August 2016 for his solo show **“Against the Darkness”**.

Posted by **Mohammad Bozorgi**
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Mohammad Bozorgi’s “My Artist Life” series

You were professionally trained as a biomedical engineer before you became a full-time artist. Does your previous career as an Engineer influence your work in any way? If yes, how?

Twenty-four years ago, I started my calligraphy education in Iran when I was thirteen years old. In high school, I studied mathematics and then biomedical engineering and business management while in university. My background in engineering and mathematics has assisted me in creating dancing curves and forms with words and letters, while my business courses have helped me manage and market my artistic career.

I am also a CEO for an IT company. I really enjoy my job! I feel that keeping in daily touch with staff and people keeps you alive and up-to-date. Everyday you learn new things regarding how to treat people. Discipline, perseverance and innovation are important principles in my management style. I obey these same rules in my artistic career.

You hold Momtaz degrees from the Calligraphy Association of Iran. What exactly does this degree entail and how long did you study with this Association?

Normally, it takes two years to complete an excellent (Momtaz) degree. But since academic degrees have never been important to me compared to learning new things, I did not pursue getting a calligraphy degree right away. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that it is vital for anyone who wants to pursue a career in calligraphy to pass some courses in Iran from the Calligraphy Association.



Mohammad Bozorgi, 'My Way', 2015, acrylic on canvas, 118 x 238 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Does the Saqqakhaneh school of Iranian painters from the 1920s influence your work? How?

The Saqqakhaneh movement is very well-known and has influenced many artists. So it is possible that some of my artworks were somehow influenced by this powerful movement, although I am not a disciple of this particular school. In my work, I have gradually found my own language in calligraphy.

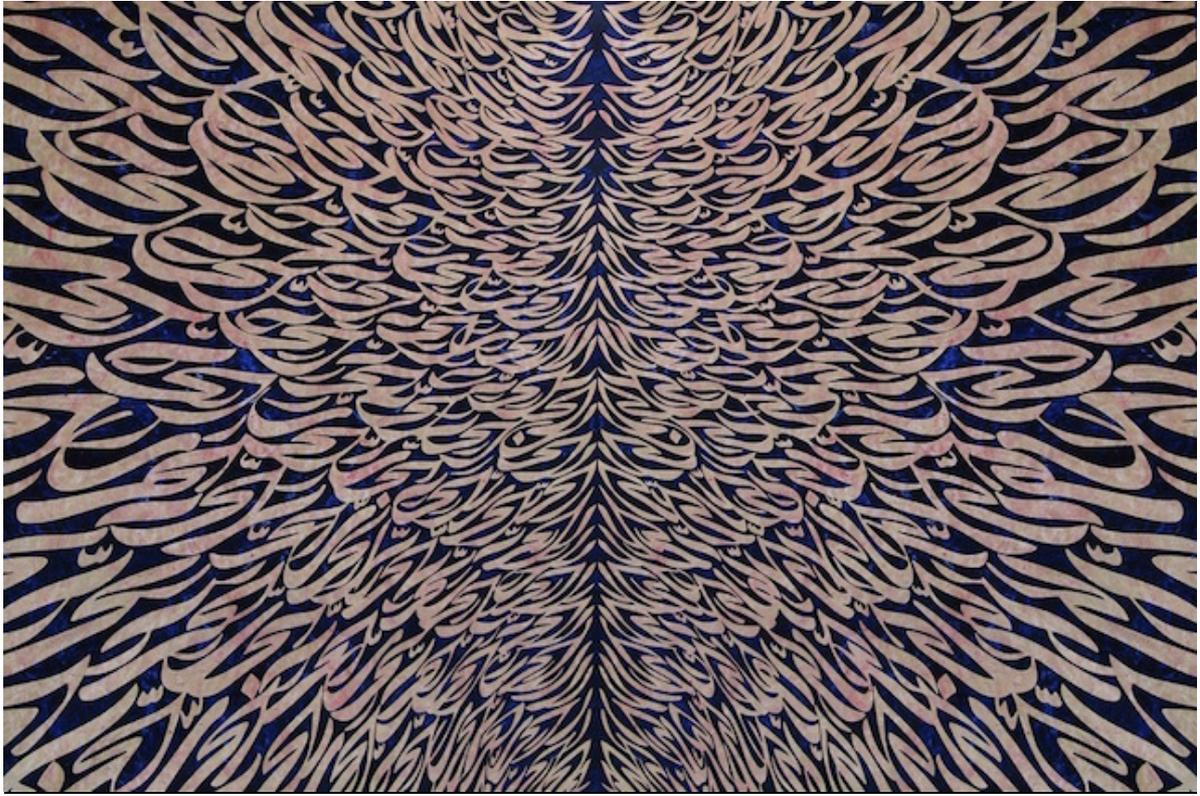
In an article found on *Shortlist Dubai* you said that you were affected by what goes on around you. How are these factors depicted in your artwork?

It is difficult to show emotions solely through calligraphy. Calligraphy, compared to painting, photography or video art, has no potential to show concepts such as war, peace, poverty, hunger. Therefore, I convey my meaning with colours, meaningful words, composition and titles.

As an artist, I believe I recreate the world as I observe it. The translation of what I observe is found within my new works. The series called "Colorful Tears – Grey World" has two main characteristics. One is the pronounced presence of colour and second, the complex forms of the letters and words. With the constant sad and dark news in the world around me that affects my life and the people around me, I find myself forced to use colour as a tool to keep hope alive.

The work entitled *Hearts Can Fly* is my ultimate dream of "floating hearts" in peace and kindness. In *Secret Garden* I address my (and probably a large part of the population's) constant search for a "lost paradise". This heavenly place represents a place of ultimate peace and harmony that is long gone. In *Hope*, I seek and search for hope. I use many bright colours to show humanity's "colourful dreams" that we hope will become a reality. In *War and Freedom* I look at the roots of war. Humanity has fought an endless war to gain freedom – a freedom that has been taken away for centuries using all kinds of excuses.

I am rebelling and protesting against the darkness of war and violence through the use of more colour in my new works. I protest against lost dreams, lost lives, against tears and the destruction of children's future and lost dreams.



Mohammad Bozorgi, 'War and Freedom', 2015, acrylic on canvas, 162 x 236 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Are some calligraphic forms better suited for Farsi than Arabic script? If so, which ones? Why?

In my work, I utilise more than twelve styles of calligraphy (such as *nastaliq-koofic-sols-naskh-divaani*). I have tried all of these styles to achieve the best result when combining meaning and form together. For example, in order to express the spirit of an Iranian poem, *nastaliq*, a kind of Iranian calligraphy, is the best form. *Shekasteh-nastaligh* (Broken-nastaliq) is a better way to write Iranian texts than Arabic forms. On the other hand, for writing religious words, Arabic calligraphic forms are best.

I love pure Iranian calligraphic forms but I firmly believe that the Arabic forms are much more flexible, harmonic and playful than Iranian ones overall. Arabic allows an inner dance and harmony which is compatible with my method to create artworks.

Is there a difference between the traditional forms of calligraphic work and the more innovative or modern forms? If so, how is this difference manifested in your work?

Of course there is! In the traditional methods you have to obey the rules. You can't violate any rules based on your innovation and creativity. Your hands are tied and any modern form is not acceptable. I like to stretch and compress the words. I love to design my form based on the composition which I imagine.

I love to deconstruct the words and script exactly like what children do with clay. In my works you can see the forms which are scattered or repeated! In my works the words are inextricably intertwined. If I want to stand on the stage of tradition, I could not create forms such as these. Of course I believe: to break the rules you must know the rules.



Mohammad Bozorgi, 'Hope', 2015, acrylic on canvas, 118 x 170 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

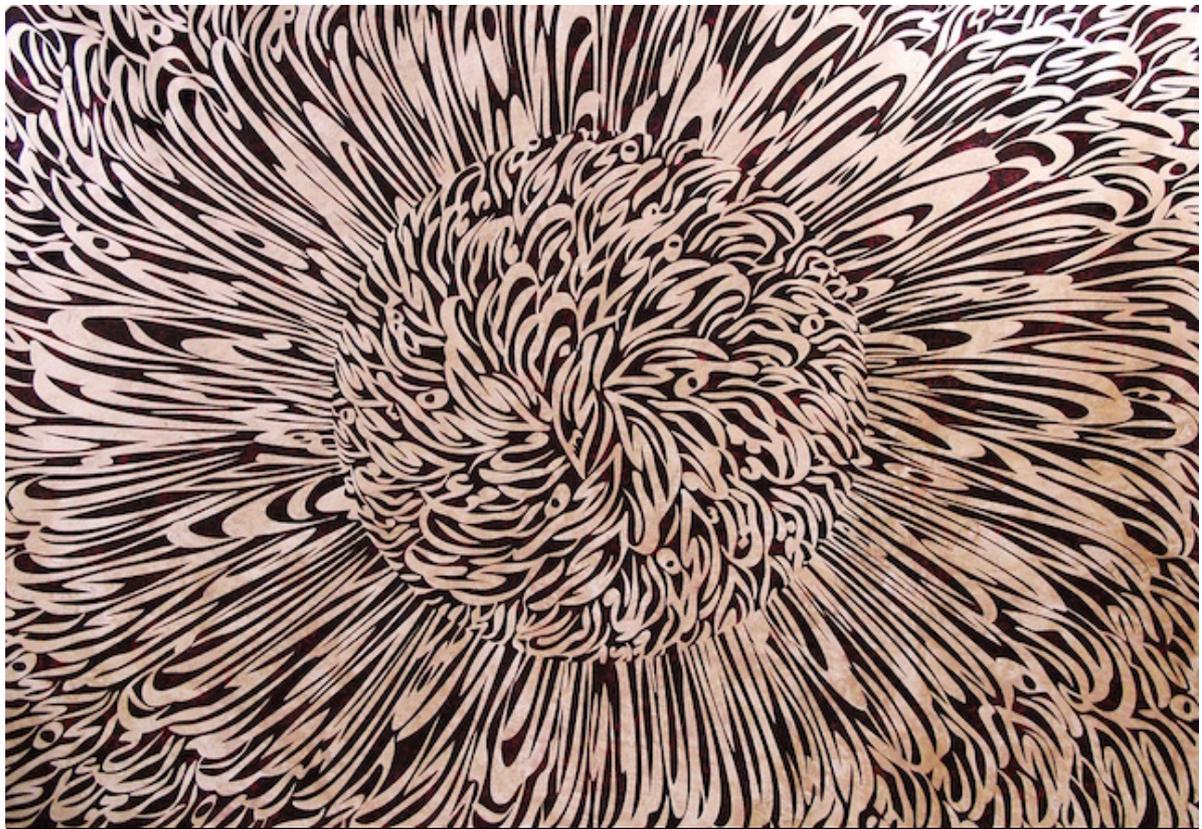
What subjects inspire your artwork?

EVERYTHING! Sometimes I repeat just one word to convey my meaning. Sometimes I use a religious message which is somehow acceptable to other religions. Sometimes I use some words related to our situation in the Middle East and the world. In a few pieces, I use meaningless (in positive aspect) forms just for the composition of the work.

There are many instances in your work where the calligraphy is mirrored. Is this a traditional calligraphic technique? Why is this particular technique important?

As far as I know, calligraphers (especially in the Arabic style of calligraphy) have used this technique for several centuries. Aesthetically, I think this technique opens our eyes to the beauty of forms through symmetry. When you stand in front of a mirror, you can see your real face in it.

In my eyes, the mirror is a symbol of human self-love in complete honesty. It reveals both your beauty and ugliness together. If you look at the words like you'd view yourself in a mirror, you can discover a new potential of beauty and composition within the forms. That's why I use this traditional technique.



Mohammad Bozorgi, 'Martyred Child (Damascus)', 2015, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 210 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

I find your work to be lush and hypnotic. Is there any particular colour palette that you prefer to work with or specific colours that lend themselves to your work? If so, which ones? And do they have a particular significance in traditional culture and/or in the art history of your country?

My palette incorporates a variety of colours. I use the colours based on the message which I would like to deliver but according to my Iranian background, special colours occupy a vast place in my palette: turquoise, beige, red (cadmium red, alizarin crimson), azure, gold and black.

I am interested in learning more about your powerful piece called *Martyred Child (Damascus)*. Can you please tell me more about it?

One day, I saw the picture of an innocent Syrian child laying facedown on the beach. I cried all night long. Then, I decided that I owe this child and all those who have died as innocents in the war. This piece pays my respect to all of those victims. In particular, I dedicated this artwork to that refugee child and on behalf of every child. In this piece, I have written (in Arabic) the words history, martyred child, freedom, war, regret, tears and blood. This artwork shows hope mixed with blood, tears and regret. The black and red background expresses the atmosphere of war (blood, fire and smoke-smudge) and the beige coloured words show the presence of hope amongst blood and fire.

Lisa Pollman

1197

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