

An abstract artwork featuring a large, vibrant yellow splash in the center. Overlaid on this are bold, expressive black ink strokes that resemble calligraphy or gestural brushwork. The background is white, with scattered black ink splatters and thin, wispy lines. The overall composition is dynamic and energetic.

**GOLNAZ FATHI**

Liminal-Subliminal



Born in Tehran in 1972, Golnaz Fathi is becoming an influential member of a talented group of contemporary artists from Iran who have been attracting much international acclaim. Raised in the early 70's, in a country of many contradictions, Fathi was a young child during a period of great change on both the historical and social levels. The years leading towards the Iranian Revolution were sufficiently extraordinary as to impart a series of powerful impressions at a critical period of her development. Artists in Iran today are reaching out to address the world in their own terms. At the creative core of Fathi's life is the desire to reveal the world she inhabits – in ways that require no interpretation and no translation at all.

Given the supreme importance of the word of God as set down in the Qur'an, classical emphasis upon the primacy of the written word elevated calligraphy into the pre-eminent

form of artistic expression. Rather than imitating the materiality of objects, artists of the Islamic world engaged in a quest to represent the eternal nature of things. Thus, the continuing refinement of scriptorial technique became the central tap-root of the writing tradition developed amongst the Arabic speaking peoples. This emphasis upon the written word was communicated to the many lands and languages influenced by Muslim civilisation. The Iranian language of *Farsi* comes from the Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family, and after the Islamic conquest of Persia (7th to 9th Century), *Farsi* came to be written using a modified Arabic script. In this precise sense, the scriptive art of Golnaz Fathi flows directly from a richly ornamented and classical tradition.

Fathi has been fascinated by the expressive potential of Persian calligraphic forms for as long as she can remember.

She recalls being spellbound by the painterly fluidity she encountered in an old book of lithographs her grandfather had given her as a child. 'Each page was a work of art in itself. Although there was text, the composition of the work was so exquisite that I've still never read a single sentence from that book: I neither needed to – nor wanted to!' Such early insight contributed to her decision to pursue studies in Graphic Design at Azad University in Tehran. Soon after, realising her lack of formal grounding in basic techniques, she immersed herself in a sustained, six-year long study of traditional calligraphy. The seriousness of her approach to a discipline that demanded, minimally, eight hours of daily practice, coupled with her manifest talent, ensured her rise to become one of a tiny handful of women trained up to the higher levels attainable within the field.

# GOLNAZ FATHI

## Redrawing the World without Words

At this point Fathi had to choose between formal acceptance into the privileged world of Islamic calligraphy – governed by eminent, if conservative, calligraphers – or continue in pursuit of a far less certain objective by following her heart to develop a burgeoning artistic career. She tells of passing before a committee of learned, grey-bearded examiners who, while taken aback at her wavering when offered a prestigious place in the Calligraphers' Association, were persuaded to allow her time to reflect upon their offer. Having agonised over her choice, she returned to the same sober room, and, in front of the same austere committee, replied positively when asked if she'd reached a decision. 'Yes!' she answered, 'I've decided...' – the moment described an arc of silence – '... to follow my heart!'

Yet, even as the door leading one way was closed upon her, a new path was opening up, one that grounded its point of departure on the same rigorous practices as had earlier been instilled by her advanced calligraphic training.

The calligrapher's art is founded upon a world of practice: the unstinting repetition of a wide range of skilful techniques until the writing hand attains to such mastery of movement that the results of deliberate intention are rendered as natural and spontaneous expressions. Abandoning the compass and rules of calligraphic convention, Fathi began a sustained

**It could be a love story, or unspoken words, or anything written in an illegible way! No one can read it, but, who knows, maybe one day somebody will figure it out and let me know!**  
— Golnaz Fathi

Fathi used modern media and novel materials as exploratory tools. She added bold swatches of primary colours to the constant debate between complementary principles: white and black, light and dark, male and female,

whose balanced moment – at every instant – determines the textured fabric of the present. On either side of a thin red line, glyphs snake across the page in contrary directions. The equilibrium of the mirrored Rorschach figures lasts only so long as we maintain our distance. Drawn into the pulsating lines, we realise that each stroke is original and unique. The bilateral



exploration of the broader peripheries of writing. She learnt the alphabet of abstraction. The territories explored filled with added significance the more she travelled beyond ingrained habits, allowing her wandering mind – and cursive hand – to meander through uncharted spaces. Once sensed, the luminous existence of this other world became the lure that eventually resulted in the pieces shown here. They are brief sketches torn from the journal of a journey into an other-world of line, colour and form. There could be no return to the everyday land of a purely illustrative visual language.

and radial symmetries remain, but closer investigation reveals deeper levels predicated upon differences and distinctions. Still further in, scrawling footnotes and exuberant blots act as diacritical marks that punctuate the large-scale patterns. Fathi tightens the spiral of interpretation by calling each work 'Untitled,' then associating each with specific lines in poems by Rumi, Neruda or Anna Akhmatova. Though nothing is explicitly decipherable, her pithy commentaries add directions to the search. Meaning is intuited from the gestural scripts, as reflections of an actor's mind might be read upon his face, or a dance might be watched in the present continuous tense.

*Untitled, 2008. Acrylic on paper, 1000 x 53 cm.*

Nizar Qabbani, the Syrian poet, states:

*I sweep away the beginnings of things  
and with a new language  
that has the music of water, the message of fire  
I light the coming age*

Fathi, too, is engaged in a comparable quest. She pours the abundant regime of her daily life - her practice, bubbling emotions of the intimately personal realm, the rhythmic breath of the day's events - onto the canvas in an unending flow of emergent invention. She refigures the world, redraws it in a new language that exists before the imposition of language, before

Many other western artists also investigated the primal power of abstract series of signs. Early 20th Century avant-garde painters and poets such as Henri Michaux, Christian Dodremont and Brion Gysin had undertaken earlier explorations of the liminal/subliminal boundaries of the legible domain. They established their various 'logograms' and 'cut-ups' on abstract calligraphies of imaginary scripts. Each was inspired by the ideographic possibilities inherent in oriental languages and Gysin was familiar with both Japanese and Arabic writing. Beginning from the Orient, one thinks of the Chinese artist, Xu Bing, whilst the Islamic tradition offers many fine examples - the impromptu ideograms of Korāichi and the coloured abstractions or 'calligraffiti' of the Jordanian,



the stirrings of thought itself. Each sinuous stroke is an imprint of pre-verbal experience – when the world was fresh and unknown. Its undertow draws us back to immediate empathy with the surrounding present – to the here and now.

Other works give precedence to the written word as object. Perhaps, they take inspiration from the graffiti splashed across exterior walls during recent times of intense political debate. These pieces (cf. pg. 7 ff.) record the palimpsest of historical events, successive affirmations and counter-claims, each effacing and partially overwriting the scribbles of the day before. The dripping stain of red animates and reconfigures the whole composition.

Wijdan. Sometimes these complex writing practices are styled 'automatic writing' or called 'asemic' – which implies an absence of absolute meaning. Fathi's startlingly innovative pieces must, however, be considered as 'polysemic'. Each is densely inscribed with potential meanings and freighted with interpretive possibilities. The works come to mean something unique to each particular individual who views them. Considered this way, the polymorphous works of Golnaz Fathi are not ancient or modern, neither eastern nor western, they cross the boundaries between categories. Existing on both sides of the thin red line of liminal awareness, they stand as 'evocations' of moments of original perception. They are to be savoured as much as they are to be shared.

Gerard Houghton, Kyoto, November, 2010



The blank canvas is my friend.  
I convey my words to it and  
receive my answers from it.

*Untitled*, 2010.  
Mixed media on canvas,  
170 x 140 cm.

Does it need to be read?  
I doubt it... The forms fascinate  
me more! They are woven into  
each other, they have  
become one!



*Untitled, 2010.*  
Acrylic on canvas,  
170 x 140 cm.



The brush strokes should be strong enough to defend themselves. They stand there and you are to judge.

*Untitled*, 2010.  
Acrylic on canvas,  
170 x 142 cm.

This is the wall in front of my studio. I used to see it every day. But then one day it was painted white...



*Untitled*, 2010.  
Acrylic on canvas,  
170 x 142 cm.