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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-------|
| EDITORIAL | |
| Idealogy Journal Information | III |
| Editorial And Reviewer Board | IV |
| Muqaddimah of Idea: The Reflection from the New Perspective | V |
| <i>Muhamad Abdul Aziz Ab Gani, Ishak Ramli</i> | |
| Idea of Arts and Social Science: An Introduction | VI |
| <i>Muhamad Abdul Aziz Ab Gani, Ishak Ramli, Mohammad Hafiz Yahaya, Nurul Shima Taharuddin, Haslinda Md Nazri, Muhammad Redza Rosman, Nizar Nazrin</i> | |
| ORIGINAL ARTICLE | |
| Personal Branding On Instagram: Visual Framing Analysis on the West Java Governor Candidates Online Campaign | 1-7 |
| <i>Darfi Rizkavirwan, Edo Tirtadarma</i> | |
| The Perception of Malaysian Youth Towards Indonesian Modest Fashion | 8-14 |
| <i>Husna Saaidin, Suriati Saidan, Wan Nadhra Ixora Wan Kamarulbaharin, Shaheela Abu Bakar</i> | |
| Designing Development for Rice Agricultural Community in Delanggu Subdistrict, Klaten Regency, Indonesia: Enhancements based on Regional Cultural and Natural Potentials Studies | 15-24 |
| <i>Pandu Purwandaru, Lira Anindita Utami, Deny Ardianto, Sayid Mataram</i> | |
| Study of Symbol for the Kasunanan Surakarta Palace through the Spradley Ethnography Approach | 25-30 |
| <i>IF Bambang Sulistyono, A. Purwasito, Wardo, TS Pitana</i> | |
| Muslimah Design Trends through the Role of Fashion Forecasting | 31-40 |
| <i>Suriati Saidan, Husna Saaidin, Wan Nadhra Ixora Wan Kamarulbaharin, Norzaleha Zainun, Mohd Hafnidzam Adzmi</i> | |
| The Development of Bacterial Cellulose Biomaterials Using the Material Design-Driven Approach for Packaging Industry | 41-59 |
| <i>Fadzli Irwan Bahrudin, Liew Yong Kian, Zati Hazira Ismail</i> | |
| An Investigation into Safe Printmaking Methods. With Etching Without Acid, for Art & Design for Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan | 60-70 |
| <i>Fazal Ellahi Khan & Nigel Power</i> | |
| Identifying the Teaching Aid Effect That Parents Use to Enhance Reading Skill of Their Children | 71-79 |
| <i>Muhammad Syazwan bin Mohamad Sharil, Supervisor: Norhayati binti Che Daud, Dr. Haszlin binti Shahrudin</i> | |
| A Study on Wayfinding System in National Museum Kuala Lumpur | 80-84 |
| <i>Muhammad Fikri bin Saidi Othman, Nur Fatin Athirah Binti Mohd Narawai & Muhammad Salehuddin Zakaria</i> | |
| A Mediamorphosis on the Book of Yaseen | 85-88 |
| <i>Zamzami Almakki</i> | |
| REVIEW ARTICLE | |
| The Aesthetics of Contemporary Arabic Calligraphy in Duaa Alashari Painting: The Story of Love | 89-93 |
| <i>Estetika Kaligrafi Arab Kontemporari dalam Lukisan Duaa Alashari: Kisah Cinta</i> | |
| <i>Duaa Mohammed Alashari</i> | |
| Unravelling Discarded Second-Hand Winter Knitwear into Reusable Recycled Material | 94-99 |
| <i>Wan Nadhra Ixora Binti Wan kamarulbaharin, Suriati Saidan, Husna Saaidin, Muhammad Hisyam Zakaria</i> | |

The Aesthetics of Contemporary Arabic Calligraphy in Duaa Alashari Painting: The Story of Love

Estetika Kaligrafi Arab Kontemporari dalam Lukisan Duaa Alashari: Kisah Cinta

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ABSTRACT

Arabic calligraphy is known as Islamic calligraphy. Alashari artworks introduce Arabic calligraphy as an art form to contemporary viewers and show them how to identify, understand and appreciate its varied styles and modes. This paper aims to present the aesthetics of contemporary Arabic calligraphy and the spirituality in the Alashari painting. The method used in this study is the descriptive-analytical method. The study concluded that this painting expresses movement, rhythm and dynamism as seen through the calligraphic marks and dripping.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Contemporary, Arabic Calligraphy.

ABSTRAK

Kaligrafi Arab dikenali sebagai kaligrafi Islam. Karya seni Alashari memperkenalkan kaligrafi Arab sebagai bentuk seni kepada penonton kontemporari dan menunjukkan kepada mereka cara mengenal pasti, memahami dan menghargai gaya dan mod yang pelbagai. Kertas kerja ini bertujuan untuk mempersembahkan estetika kaligrafi Arab kontemporari dan kerohanian dalam lukisan Alashari. Kaedah yang digunakan dalam kajian ini ialah kaedah deskriptif-analitik. Kajian merumuskan bahawa lukisan ini mengekspresikan pergerakan, irama dan dinamisme seperti yang dilihat melalui tanda kaligrafi dan titisan.

Kata Kunci: Estetika, Kontemporari, Kaligrafi Arab.



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1. INTRODUCTION

My work deals with the Arabic language, influencing me and directing my aesthetic. The Arabic calligraphic marks with their repetition represent the infinite sense of spirituality behind my work. I use the words from the holy book, the Quran, poems, or songs. My writing uses Islamic cultural heritage but can be considered as contemporary style. It is divided into angular and cursive lines and different types based on tradition. However, I do not follow any rules or use conventional tools or techniques to create my art. As the words progress in the painting process, they lose their legibility to gain a new kind of inertia and meaning that embraces a visceral sacred space rather than a literal description. In the final product, I hope to convey a sense of universal spirituality based on meditation on the meaning behind the words. My paintings evoke language and echo classical tradition; they often incorporate contemporary calligraphy and Quranic colours such as white, black, red, blue, green, silver and gold, which are prominent in ancient Eastern societies. However, I use contemporary methods to illustrate the importance of building upon history with life as a source of inspiration.

1.1 Background

Duaa Alashari was born in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and lived there for many years. Then, she moved to the United States to get her painting MFA from the Savannah College of Art and Design in Savannah, Georgia. In 2021 Alashari She earned a PhD degree in Philosophy, majoring in Islamic Art and Architecture from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in Malaysia. She received her Bachelors of Islamic Art Education from King Abdu Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in May 2007. Alastair's work is displayed in King Abdu Aziz University and Arabia Calligraphy Gallery in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and the Savannah College of Art and Design in Savannah, Georgia. Alashari's art, which often combines Islamic calligraphy with representations of the Islamic decorations, addresses the complex composition of show identity from the unique perspective of personal experience. In much of her work, she returns to her Arabic language and culture, looking back on it as an artist caught somewhere between past and present and as an artist, exploring the language in which to "speak" from this uncertain space. Her paintings often appropriate Arabic calligraphy and Islamic art tradition, thereby inviting viewers to reconsider the beauty of Islamic art. She has worked in numerous media, including painting, glass, metal, and fabric. "In my art, I wish to present myself through multiple images, as an artist, as Saudi, as a traditionalist, as Muslim. In short, I invite the viewer to experience different art from the Middle East and show them how to identify, understand, and appreciate its varied styles and modes."

1.2 Artistic Influences

Like myself, many contemporary Arabic artists deal with the origins of the Arabic script in western and eastern contexts. Some of them link their work to the religion of Islam, while others focus on social and political issues relating to their own One strong influence for me is the work of Nja Mahdaoui. His paintings are considered abstractions that use Arabic letters as an essential element, yet the words are not a linguistic symbol; they are a kind of music. Nja Mahdaoui is a Tunisian artist and considers himself 'an explorer of signs. He has also been described as a choreographer of letters.' In 1967, he graduated from the Academy of Arts of Santa Andrea in Rome and the Ecole du Louvre. He receives inspiration from the Arabic language, leading to abstract compositions. He does meticulous work by creating on parchment. The concept beyond his works is based on the choice of materials and medium and how these elements play significant roles in conveying the work's messages. He explores multiple contemporary and traditional materials such as canvas, vellum, papyrus, arches paper, silkscreen prints, books, posters, designs, sculptures, aluminium, brass, melamine, drums, textiles, embroidery, tapestry. As stated in the book *Artist of the Modern Middle East*, "Nja Mahdaoui does not paint, he writes, but he does not write... Arabic calligraphy yes and no. Yes, in the fluidity of the shapes. No, in its reading, Mahdaoui says, To a non-Arabic speaker, it appears as coherent text. Even Arabic speakers assume at first it's a text with meaning. But when they start reading it, they realize it is not an actual word.

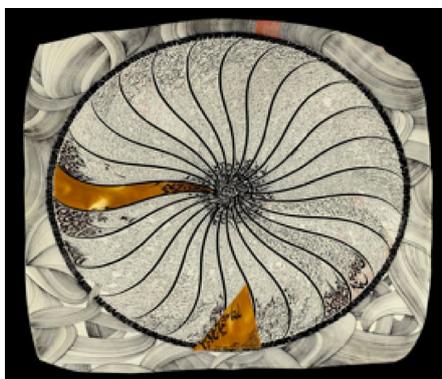


Figure 1: Nja Mahdaoui, *Untitled*, Parchment, china ink, gold and silver, 90 x90 cm, 2007.
(Source: nja-mahdaoui.com).

Similarly, the message from my art is to convey the principles of peace, mercy, faith, love, and heaven based upon Islamic belief. Art has the power to facilitate communication between Eastern and

Western cultures and can create harmony. I want my art to be a viaduct of communication between different societies and present its spirit.

2. STUDIO ARTWORK EXPERIMENT

Poems also play a particularly vital role in my art. These traditional poems predate Islam in Arabic culture: “in Arab tribal kingdoms [...] oral tradition existed that ensured the survival of a remarkable body of Arabic Poetry which continues to be cherished and learnt today.”²⁴ Ancient Arab poets were astonishingly eloquent, and poems that they created were relevant to their way of living in such a harsh environment like the desert, battling for honour, or expressing the values of generosity and hospitality in beautiful writing. But again, these points are only references for me. I deconstruct the poem so that it is no longer a poem, and the words become multiplied and turned into their abstract composition. In doing so, I hope to create a work that conveys a message that is universal and accessible to everyone but also conveys a surface-level aesthetic and understanding of Arabic culture that places the work in a distinct cultural context.

For example, in *The Topic of Love*, I was inspired by an early twentieth-century poem from Oum Kalthoum. The poet describes the fear of love and the oppression of love to all those who possess it and how love can change someone’s whole life. Oum Kalthoum - *The Topic of Love*

Throughout my life, I've feared love
And the topic of love
And the oppression of love to all those who possess it
And I know stories filled with sighs, tears and groans
And lovers falling in love and never turning back
Throughout my life, I've said no to desire and nights of desire
As well as no to tormenting my heart
I met you and found that you changed my whole life
I don't know how I loved you I don't know how my life
From a whisper of love, I found myself loving and falling in love night and a day at its mercy.



Figure 2: Duaa Alashari, *The Story of Love*, Acrylic on canvas, 60x 72 inches, 2015.

I used this poem as the basis for my work to represent my love for calligraphy and how the love of this art has changed my whole life. Using the words of the poem as a starting point, through the process of repetition, the word loses its meaning. By transforming its legibility, the word moves beyond language. The calligraphic marks and the layers of intense and transparent washes of colours of paint that cover the surface of the painting give the work a metamorphic subtlety and profundity regarding both spiritual and sublime. The multidimensional sense of space in *The Story of Love* is achieved by using superimposed layers of calligraphic marks. Equally important to achieving this is a sense of space. However, space is designed, so the viewer's perceptual shift of the work ranges from infinite to finite to facilitate meditation. In *The Story of Love*, there is both an invitation into the space of that space. To enhance their contemplative theme, I combine light and dark areas to strongly contrast the value in a way that encourages the viewer to see the painting as a symbolic progression of thought. Low resolution and merging colours nod to the infinite, while the surface is asserted over these colours with striking marks.

My exploration of the language and the application of multi-layered metallic paint with dripping transform the work from a flat painting into a sculptural object. When installed, the piece is hung on the wall with a two-inch separation, so it casts a shadow. This adds more dynamic complexity to work and forces the viewer to extend the meditative space into the physical world rather than only keeping it confined to the world of a canvas.

3. CONCLUSION

Alashari artist creates work intended to convey a universal sense of spirituality, orchestrating movement and complexity in each composition. If her work is too easy to read or understand, she has not made the viewer enter a meditative state. Even people from her nation cannot read Arabic because of the complex layering and expressionism. She believes that language, in a sense, must lose its known meaning to become the starting point of expression and to present an accurate emotional message for her to deliver her ideas about faith. Alashari said, " my artwork is kind of practice of worship". Some Arabic Artists still influence Alashari since her works incorporate language, but she is also inspired by how they convey it through an abstract composition.

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