

Dastafshani (Ecstasy): The art of S. Mohammad Ehsaey

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Fig. 1: *Dastafshani* series, yellow gouache, black enamel. on mat board. 50x70 cm

A review of an exhibition of contemporary Islamic calligraphy as abstract painting by S. Mohammad Ehsaey at the Ziba Art Gallery, Vancouver, February 9 – March 7, 2002.

It is a gift of grace, when on rare occasion, one encounters a visual expression that pierces the veils of the heart, revealing a direct experience of Truth. S. Mohammad Ehsaey is a master calligrapher and graphic artist from Iran. His exhibit, *Dastafshani (Ecstasy)*, is a unique blend of Islamic calligraphy and contemporary abstract painting produced as a deeply personal spiritual practice and visual expression of *zikr*, or ‘remembrance of God’. His paintings are an expression of his profound love of God; an intimate dialogue, from the innermost depths of the heart, with the Beloved. The artwork remains as a calligraphic icon, inviting us back to the centre of our being, to the living essence of the Divine residing in our own hearts.

Ehsaey uses the name of God, Allah [الله], and the utterance, ‘la ilaha illa Allah’ [لا إله إلا الله], generally interpreted as, ‘there is no god but God’, as both the form and content of his painted *zikr*. His work becomes both process and icon, praise and call to *zikr*, remembrance and

reminder, and a profound visible embodiment of the Sacred Word.¹

A *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad states, “For everything there is a polish which takes away rust, and the polish of the heart is *zikr*.”² The word, *zikr*, refers to remembrance of God through the repetition of the divine names and certain phrases which invite union with the Beloved.³ In the view of Seemi Ghazi, a scholar of Arabic:

Zikr is invoking, recalling and remembering our divine beginning and our divine end, and the moments of divine breath in between. The purpose is to actualize, harmonize and balance the qualities of the divine names within the self and within creation, by invoking them silently, upon the breath and with tone.⁴

For Ehsaey, remembrance has become a transformative visual practice, which has awakened in him a state of self-surrender and freedom.

I had the opportunity to speak with Mr. Ehsaey about the creation of the *Dastafshani* series, and his personal process of artistic and spiritual unfoldment that informs his unique expressions of the Sacred Word. Fred Shoai, owner of the Ziba Gallery, translated our conversation between Farsi and English, and offered insights into Ehsaey’s work and contemporary Iranian Islamic art. He explained

¹ My phrasing here is indebted to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), p. 17.

² Coleman Barks and Michael Green, *The Illuminated Prayer: The Five-Times Prayer of the Sufis* (New York: Ballantine Wellspring, 2000), p. 120.

³ Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999), p. 40.

⁴ Seemi Ghazi, personal communication, November 2002.

that the exhibit's title derives from the Farsi words, *dast*, meaning hand, and *afshan*, spreading, suggesting the hands of the heart opened in celebration, praise and thanksgiving, reflective of Ehsaey's ecstatic paintings. The series was created between 1996 and 2002. All of the sixty-nine paintings are untitled, and together form the resounding voice of a passionate *zīkr* of Allah.

Mohammad Ehsaey has been writing the divine name as his life work for over fifty years.



Photograph: S. Mohammad Ehsaey at the Ziba Art Gallery, Vancouver, 2002

He says, "Calligraphy has been the artistic core of my soul for as long as I remember." Born in Tehran in 1940, his talent for calligraphy was encouraged as a child, and by the age of eighteen, he already was highly regarded as a master calligrapher and teacher. He later studied painting and graphic design at the University of Tehran, where he was also teaching calligraphy. With the encouragement of Mr. Parviz Tanavoli, renowned Iranian sculptor, as well as mentor and friend, Ehsaey began his quest to develop a direct and spontaneous expression of Allah using calligraphy as the expressive medium. His experimentation led to the creation of a new genre of painting which he calls *khat-naghashi*, meaning in Farsi, 'letters and painting', or 'painted script'. What has emerged over the past thirty years is a vibrant, visual expression of the artist's intimate conversations with the Beloved.

Since its revelation, the Quran has been treasured as the direct word of God, and calligraphers have been held in the highest esteem as transmitters of the Sacred Word. Decorative calligraphy of the Quran and poetic texts is incorporated into ceramics, architecture, books, painting, tile and metal work, and textiles. The script has become an art form which can be used anywhere, and an invitation

to see God in every direction.⁵ As such, the calligraphic form of the Name functions as a visual aid to the development of spiritual life, and is used as a method for realizing the Named.⁶

Ehsaey's calligraphic skill and artistry is renowned throughout Iran and the Islamic world; his monumental ceramic murals of Quranic texts grace the walls of the Islamic University of Theology and the al Ghadir mosque in Tehran, as well as the Iranian Embassy in Abu Dhabi. He teaches graphic design and calligraphy at the University of Tehran, and continues to play a central role in the development of the arts in Iran through the museum and cultural communities. His work is widely exhibited around the world, including Vancouver, where *Dastafshani* was enthusiastically received.

Having mastered the forms and rules of calligraphy, Ehsaey has endeavored to free himself from constraint through the deliberate loss of technical control, trading the fine reed pen for the wide and thin edges of a putty knife. Working spontaneously, he begins by painting the word Allah or the phrase 'la ilaha illa Allah', in Arabic script, in bold, fluid strokes of colour – vermilion, cadmium yellow, prussian blue – on mat board. The image is then covered with a specially prepared black, enamel paint. Ehsaey has less than a minute to inscribe the word Allah into the wet, black surface before it hardens, removing the viscous paint in sweeping strokes with a putty knife. The result is an undulating window in the form of the word Allah, through which Allah is revealed in luminous colour, like an inner reality, radiating from beneath [Fig. 2]. The process is suggestive of 'polishing the face of the heart', cleansing the heart of impurities and removing the layers of darkness that obscure it, revealing divine essence, the light of Allah, shining from within.⁷

Through the black of deep, timeless space, the void, the words Allah, or 'la ilaha il la

⁵ Markus Hattstein, 'Islam – World Religion and Cultural Power', pp. 8–33 in Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius, eds., *Islam: Art and Architecture* (Cologne: Konemann, 2000), p. 9.

⁶ Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p. 31.

⁷ Barks and Green, *The Illuminated Prayer: The Five-Times Prayer of the Sufis*, p. 46.

Allah', blaze from the inscription, with accents of scarlet, vermillion, and ochre [Fig. 3]. The work is fresh, immediate and elegant. Swooping lines with smooth, clean edges unfurl in joyous exaltation, while the vertical strokes are fluid and graceful, alive like the tips of flames [see Fig. 1]. Overlapping the inscribed words with the brushstrokes of colour beneath creates an impression of depth and mystery, a poetic play of light and shadow suggestive of veils, and 'hidden treasure', longing to be known [Fig. 4].⁸

The artist confided that some of his favourite pieces are rendered in subtle pastel tints, just whispers of colour, covered with white or cream enamel, which evoke gentleness and peace. Several energetic brush and ink paintings in black and white [Fig. 5], repeat the name Allah in a dynamic burst of energy. Considering his brushes as extensions of his body, Ehsaey says that creating these gestural pieces is a kind of "divine dance of painting", reminiscent of the repeated, graceful movements of ritual prayer.

Ehsaey's freedom of expression comes after many years of diligent training and practice, mastering the art of many styles of calligraphy. He twists, rotates, stacks and stretches the words, repeating vertical strokes with a living, breathing spiritual energy, at times gentle and fluid, and at others wild and visceral, transmitting a quality of burning, and passion for God. The repetition of Allah takes on myriad forms and patterns, such as the vertical column of yellow Allah with scarlet accents [Fig. 6]. Often the name Allah stands alone, while in other pieces, a dynamic tension is created by images of the Word, yearning and pulling towards each other like a tide, the soul's longing to return to the infinite ocean of Being. In Fig. 7, the name Allah is rotated in four directions. Painted in warm peach tones, the fluid forms of the words take flight, like birds, or the wings of the heart. Fred Shoai suggests the image is evocative of the *tawaf*, the circumambulation of the Ka'ba, the cube-shaped holy shrine of Islam in Mecca.⁹ The weightlessness and freedom of the works is enhanced by the framing; floated between glass and framed in gold or black, the

paintings seem to emanate from the depths of space.

One wall of the gallery is hung with traditional calligraphies of Persian poetry and passages from the Quran, many written in scarlet ink on gold leaf [Fig. 8]. They provide a contrast to the painterly work, with their highly controlled and refined calligraphic mastery. Ehsaey's rendering of the *Fatiha*, the opening *sura* (chapter) of the Quran, is a calligraphy of exquisite beauty, delicacy and grace, written on shell-pink paper [Fig. 9]. Several other pieces are written in *nastaliq*, a distinctive Persian script preferred for the writing of mystical poetry, which flows in gentle diagonal lines across the page. A gallery visitor I later spoke with became full with emotion when he recalled the beauty of these pieces, which for him embody the spiritual essence of Islam.

Ehsaey says he uses the words 'la ilaha illa Allah', and the name Allah as symbols, as an invitation and doorway to the Divine Reality which "convey the inner meaning of the *zikr*". Releasing himself of all thought and intention, Ehsaey becomes an empty vessel, a clear conduit for divine expression, and is completely absorbed in *zikr* while painting. He describes the process as effortless and without mind: "I don't think of anything when I am working. I am only concentrated on the Word. The work is worship because it comes from God." Painting becomes a unifying experience in which the veils dividing Creator, creation, seer and seen, fall away. The seer and the seen become one, and God alone is real.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hattstein, 'Islam – World Religion and Cultural Power', p. 13.

¹⁰ Barks and Green, *The Illuminated Prayer: The Five-Times Prayer of the Sufis*, pp. 46, 56.



Fig. 2: *Dastafshani* series, teal/blue gouache, black enamel on mat board, 45x45 cm



Fig. 4: *Dastafshani* series, blue gouache, black enamel on mat board



Fig. 3: *Dastafshani* series, red/ochre gouache, black enamel on mat board, 50x70 cm



Fig. 5: *Dasafshani* series, black enamel on board, 70x100 cm



Fig. 6: *Dastafshani series*, yellow/vermillion gouache, black enamel on mat board, 50x50 cm

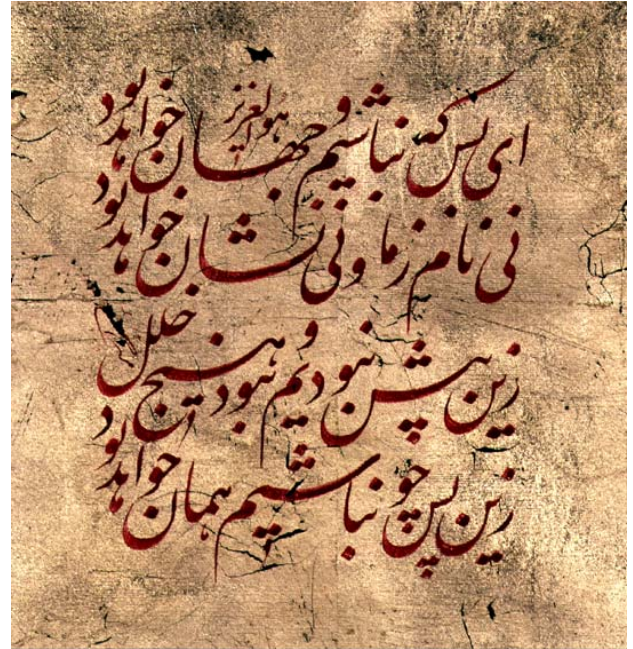


Fig 8: Red ink on gold leaf



Fig. 7: *Dastafshani series*, peach/grey gouache, black enamel on mat board, 70x70 cm



Fig 9: Opening *sura* of the Quran, black ink on pink paper

In excerpts from his artist's statement, Mr. Ehsaey describes his long period of effort, trial and error, and ultimately, self-surrender to reach this state of union:

With calligraphy in the early days, I tried to elevate my work through technical skill, which took hard work and persistence for many years. I then tried to transform this technical skill into a spiritual art. My attempts seemed fruitless, and I have to confess that 'achievement' was gained through 'failure'. I finally understood that technical perfection in art is a contradiction. Art has to flow, and cannot be forced.

For peace of mind, and developing deep concentration, I started writing on scrap paper... then disposing of it with tranquility and ease. Now and then, I used to select some pieces among the works and concentrate on them. This 'intention of writing' was another stage, which I later abandoned.

The discipline I forced on myself has set me free. There is no longer any distance between my art and myself. What you see has been done with ease and without endeavour.... These paintings have been created from my heart and soul. I offer them to you.

For Ehsaey, this act of creation is a sacred union between the soul of the artist and the Beloved, a mystery which, he says, "cannot be described in words", and then adds, "That is why I make art". The image that is created is the visual manifestation of *baraka*, spiritual energy or grace, which touches the innermost heart of the viewer, continually beckoning the heart into contemplation and remembrance of the One. Ehsaey offers, "Each person is invited to interpret and experience the art in their own hearts. Awakening to the Word is the effect of the knowledge or energy that is already inside of us. The soul is drawn to the awakened state, and recognizes it."

I asked Mr. Ehsaey if he considered his art to be a spiritual service, bringing the Divine Word to others. He responded,

My work is a personal statement...art is an instrument for people to experience meaning, to access the unknown, to make a connection. Art is a tool...which opens communication with others, but not while I am doing it, only afterwards. While I am doing my art, I don't think of anything. I just do it! Because I have to do it!

This passion and inspiration is transmitted through his painting, and can be felt by viewers who may not have any knowledge of Islamic calligraphy. Describing the power of the word Allah as a symbol, Ehsaey explains,

The Word is sacred. It is how the Prophet Muhammad received the holy Quran. Word is how this treasure has been transmitted. The symbol carries an energy of its own, which is recognizable to others, even if they are not familiar with Arabic or Islam. This is because in all traditions and all cultures, Truth is One.

Dastafshani coincided with *The Spirit of Islam*, an exhibit on Islamic calligraphy at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (October 2001 – May 2002), one of the first major museum exhibitions of Islamic art in Canada. Mr. Ehsaey presented slide lectures and calligraphy workshops as part of the museum's educational programming. Visit *The Spirit of Islam* web site at <www.moa.ubc.ca/spiritofislam>. For information about future exhibits and calligraphy workshops, please contact Fred Shoai, Director, Ziba Art and Framing, email: <ziba_gallery@hotmail.com>, phone: 604-734-0309.

Editor's Note: Permission to reproduce the artwork in this essay was granted by the artist S. Mohammad Ehasey.