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'ONE AND THE SAME'

Reorient magazine's Joobin Bekhrad, on Zakaria Ramhani's unifying vision

Amidst the "Arab Spring" uprisings that have burgeoned across the Middle East and North Africa in recent years, artist Zakaria Ramhani has emerged as a poignant voice to articulate the zeitgeist in terms that, while contemporary, employ an historically pan-Arabic vocabulary, invoking themes of unity and transcendence.

Ahead of an [online-only auction of Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern and Turkish art](#), Christie's reached out to Joobin Bekhrad, editor of the online Middle Eastern arts and culture magazine, [REORIENT](#), co-founder of an online platform for contemporary Middle Eastern art, [artclvb](#), and a board member of the [MENA Arts Foundation](#), a nonprofit group dedicated to supporting artists from the Middle East and North Africa in Canada. Despite his numerous projects, he took some time to offer this in-depth look at Ramhani's [Faces of your Other, 49 \(2010\)](#) and the political, aesthetic, and philosophical issues it raises.

The "Arab Spring"

This work recalls some of Ramhani's others, which dealt directly with the uprisings around the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in Egypt. While the reference is not as direct as it is in his piece depicting militiamen beating a downtrodden female protester, for example, there are still palpable "clues" laden here. Perhaps what speaks the loudest is the visual relationship between the individual and the masses, and the aesthetic interplay between the two on the canvas. One can look at this relationship from two perspectives: on one hand, the masses can be perceived as the summation of countless individuals, who on their own may be nothing but background "noise" (as the painting seems to suggest), but who have a substantial voice when gathered together. Alternatively, one could say each individual protester is the product of a collective pain, and that no individual is truly separate from the "whole."

A Spiritual Dimension

This piece reminds me of certain spiritual philosophies, which the artist may or may not have been hinting at. In particular, it brings to mind the concept of the unity of existence expounded in the *Upanishads*, as well as the (much) later idea of *vahdat-e vojood* found in Sufism (literally, "unity of being"). Looking at this piece, these philosophies really seem apparent; it feels as if the artist is trying to say that all these "others" are just different dimensions of our own selves, and that, in reality, we're all one and the same.



Zakaria Ramhani, *Faces of your Other, 49* (2010), acrylic on canvas

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In addition to Ramhani's striking use of color, the way he's employed calligraphy also stopped me in my tracks. Interestingly, I originally thought Ramhani was an Iranian artist. It wasn't just his choice of political subjects and his name (I actually thought his last name was *RAHmani* — a common Iranian surname); Ramhani's rounded, playful strokes, choice of color, and predominantly aesthetic use of calligraphy (the actual meanings of the 'words' aren't of importance here, as is the case in many works featuring contemporary calligraphy) recall the works of Hossein Zenderoudi, Faramarz Pilaram, and the artists of the *Saqqa Khaneh* movement of the 1960s in Iran. It's incredibly interesting, given the generational, geographical, and cultural gaps between them and Ramhani. It could also, of course, just be a coincidence!

Guilt Trip

Ramhani's father used to paint portraits on commission in Morocco, a practice that always caused him much guilt, owing to the incompatibility of portraiture with orthodox Islam. Ramhani's father wasn't exceptional in that regard; one reads similar stories about Persian miniature masters who, at the end of their careers (or whenever they finally lost their sight — whichever came first!), repented having depicted images of sentient beings, and in some cases took to destroying whatever was left of their folios. One of Ramhani's upcoming exhibitions actually alludes to this (*May Allah Forgive Me*, Nov. 6 to Dec. 22, at Julie Meneret Contemporary Art). In this context, the piece could be seen as an investigation into those oft-opposing human impulses toward art and religion.

Maroc and Roll

To me, most of Ramhani's pieces — this one in particular — evoke images of European and American rock posters of the late 1960s. The faces, compositions, colors — and of course, the use of stylized letters and the typography — all could have come straight from a vintage Jimi Hendrix poster. As with the similarities between his works and those of the *Saqqa Khaneh* artists, it's a remarkable overlap. He may, as well, have been influenced in this respect by the works of the Moroccan artist Hassan Hajjaj — a contemporary of his, for whom the [idea of rock and roll](#) is central.