

THE INTERFAITH CENTRE
OF MELBOURNE

FLOOR TALK 'BREAKING THE VEILS'
Exhibition of Women's Art from the Islamic World

Home

About Us

Special Event

The Rumi Concert

Prayers

Contact

Wednesday, 31 October, 2007

by *Bishop John Bayton, AM*

Welcome and thanks for the opportunity of interrogating such an important exhibition.

No sooner than I mention the title of this wonderful exhibition Breaking the Veils I am not only confronted by the world of Iconoclasm but I find myself constrained by it. Iconoclasts are those who break images. I have no problem with this, simply because the word Icon is so often confused with 'stereotype'. (Consider what the image of 'Burka' for example conveys to the uninformed Westerner.)

In the context of 'Veils' this stereotypical image is one that deserves to be broken. Smashed to smithereens.

Let me remark on the remarkableness of this Exhibition and say how grateful all Melbourne should be for the initiative taken by Helen Summers in bringing this collection to us – 72 artworks from 51 women from 21 Islamic countries - gifted artists from the religions of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, from countries embraced by the geographical and cultural boundaries of the Islamic world.

We often fall into the trap of referring to Judaism, Christianity and Islam as 'The three great Abrahamic Faiths' when perhaps we ought to seriously consider Buddhism and Hinduism as also belonging to "Brahma" – A'Brahma.

This is an exhibition of religious art. Having said this I must add that for me 'All art is religious'. This Exhibition is confirmation of my belief. However, debates surrounding this impertinence have raged for centuries.

In the twelfth century the Golden Age of Islam's Empire (apart from Spain), had dissolved into a number of sultanates and emirates. This has persisted.

How does 'religious art' differ from 'secular art'?

During this period the poet-philosopher-judge Ibn Rashd (1126-1198) conceived his argument that the sacred and the secular co-exist as two contradictory truths: (1) science and natural reason and (2) revelation. The debate continues to this day. God spoken of in terms of reason, he concluded, exists in the observable laws of nature, that is, in time and space. Transcendence lies in the realm of revelation.

Later, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) believed that he had resolved the question for Western Christendom when he wrote "Both truths lead to the same conclusion – the Universe of ideas and the substance of morality are both of God's creating".

It is by this philosophy that we, even to this day learn. By Apprehension and by Revelation.

Now you may well ask, "How is it that a man, a Christian man at that, and more curiously a Christian priest-artist can presume to interrogate and speak about the art of so many gifted non-Christian women artists? Women who come from Christian, Moslem, Buddhist and Hindu religions, within the Islamic world"?

Why Women?

Because women artists are priests, that is, people who live the kenotic lifestyle, emptying themselves of 'glory' in order to be incarnate in the divine act of creation. People sacrificing something of their own BEING, their own imagination. As the prophet Jeremiah said "whether they will hear or whether they will forebear". That is, indifferently. The true artist does not care if anyone understands what they are revealing.

Why Women?

Because a woman artist is 'Theotokos' a God bearer, bringing into the world something of God's Imagination. William Blake said of Jesus that He was 'God's Imagination'.

Why Women?

Because women not only conceive, but bring about Incarnation.

I am constrained to speak here, because I believe there is 'A Common Iconographic Alphabet'. Hidden in the depths of Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu and all Indigenous iconography there is an alphabet of images of universal realities. How is this?

First let me ask, 'Is not the art of calligraphy also the art of iconography? Is not the calligrapher also the one who translates images of Word'?



Let us consider Naima Shishini's '*Arabic Calligraphy*'. It is the integration of "Word" and "Image".

Although Islamic art is said to be anti-iconic, there are many images in Islam's two-dimensional art. Is not the depiction of "Word" also a depiction of "Image"?

While Western Christian art is three-dimensional, Eastern Orthodoxy and Oriental Christian art by contrast is like Islamic art. It is always a two dimensional image of multi-dimensional realities.

[Again as an aside, we ought never to speak of *Christian Art* but that is for another occasion.]

Buddhist art, which points us to an a-theistic form, presents some of the most beautiful three-dimensional images of the human form in the history of art. The Truth of what we speak of in Buddhist art is also an Incarnation.

Let me move on.

1. All art is autobiography.
2. All art is metaphor.

3. All art is sacrament.

4. All art is transcendent.

The art of iconography is the art of translation in which the iconographer brings to birth an IDEA, not of what exists, but of what IS. There is the world of reality and there is the world of imagery. One 'writes' an icon. Art therefore is 'writing' and all of these works are autobiographical.

Biography is wedded to metaphor where one thing is spoken about in terms of something else. All metaphors involve a linguistic tension in which the image and the thing imaged are identified but remain distinct. For this reason artists often give their works a title.

For the same reason an artist may decline to give a title to her works. We have a number of such Untitled works here. '*Untitled*' is as important a title as any other title and quite often '*Untitled*' is more important than 'Title' because it permits the viewer to be a participant in a way that a titled work does not.

To give a work a title is to limit the imagination of the viewer. You may observe this in almost all of the works in this delightful exhibition.

However, metaphor is not the end of the matter. Metaphor must lead into something beyond itself, into what the Greeks called 'psyche'. The Greeks made a god of her.

Beyond metaphor lies transcendence.

All art is sacrament – an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

Why Women?

In the beginning God created humanity in God's own Image and Likeness.

Image - Masculine-Feminine.

Likeness – In the Greek –

- Logos = Divine Intelligence
- Ethos = Character
- Nous = Mind

In various ways we discern this Image-Likeness in all forms of art and literature.

In all the religions of the art represented here we have this equation expressed in Word and Image. Some in particular express the obvious. Both Word and Image are specifically and obviously integrated.





Palestinian artist Laila Shawa's works are a classical example of what I mean. In her series *Walls of Gaza* she employs calligraphy to educate/inform/persuade the viewer, however despicable we might consider roadside hooligan signage to be, that graffiti is an acceptable, maybe even desirable form, not only of information but of formation. This art goes beyond the form of propaganda or political protest.

I myself have been to Gaza often. I have also stood in the desolate shadow of the 'Separation Wall' and wept.

In other works in this exhibition both Image and Word are abstracted. And what is an 'abstract' but a kind of 'shorthand' of what is ultimately determined.

In history there has always been tension between Word and Image, from the days when Moses went up onto the Holy Mountain to receive Torah. First Moses receives WORD from the hand of God's Yahweh. He descends to the plain below Sinai where he finds that his brother Aaron has made a Golden Calf. Moses smashes WORD. IMAGE predominates. He then ascends the Holy Mountain to carve out for himself a second form of the Ten Commandments, returns, crushes the Image of the Golden Calf and makes the people literally drink their own image. Word prevails.

This battle has raged ever since in the religion of the Abrahamic Faiths.

Vestiges of this conflict may be discerned in some of the works of this Exhibition. Conflict is often resolved by paradox. Rarely by reason. Despite the injunction against imagery in both Torah and Qur'an here, in the works of all the artists the canvas becomes an iconostasis.

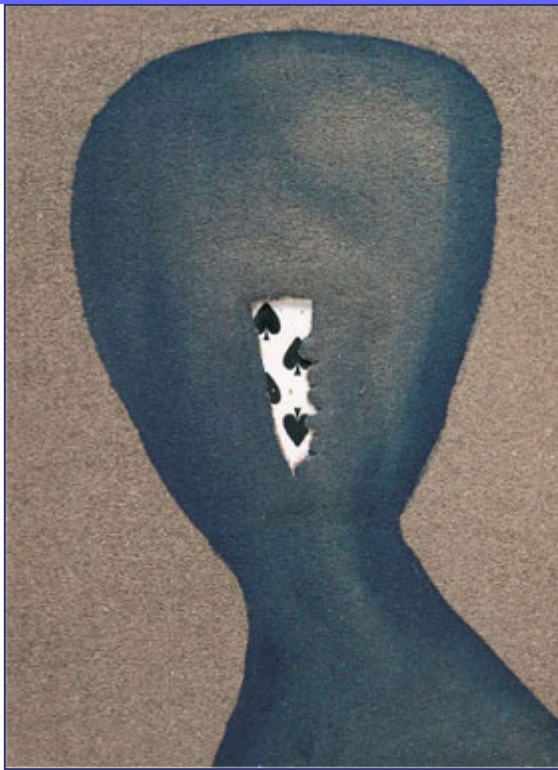
To understand the complexity of the form of much of this work we need to consider that word iconostasis seriously. Cf. 'Gallery'. 'Cave' [ad lib] Indigenous Australian art. The Iconostasis is the meeting place of two worlds – the *Now* and the *Not Quite Yet* – the Other. Heaven and Earth.

In the works of Buddhist and Hindu artists there is no such constraint, for the 'canvas' is always an iconostasis. It is a 'given'. Word and Image are eternally integrated.

I said a few moments ago that beyond metaphor lies transcendence. So it is that if we are to even begin to comprehend some of these works, born out of cultures that are quite different to the cultures of so called Christian West, we must interrogate these artworks at other levels of comprehension than the Literal.

There is also a Moral interpretation. There is an Allegorical interpretation. And there is a Spiritual interpretation.

In time left I would like to interrogate a few of the art works.



The Exhibition begins with the Invitation and the Catalog - 'Head with Spades' or as Meriam Bouderbala of Tunisia herself titles it – *Untitled* (get the point).

A kind of Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' image-cum-non-image this is a secret known not even to the imagination but only to the soul of the artist. The observer of this image becomes the one observed by what lies behind the picture plane. This is a Veronica – a 'True Icon'. It is also an enigma, enigma being that which ought not to be solved. Remember Oedipus who solved the riddle of the Sphinx and thus brought upon himself absolute ruin?

In many ways all these works are Iconoclastic. Images of passivity disappear beneath the visual demands for gender and culture-equality. These are not 'pretty pictures'.

We need to interrogate them not from the perspective of Western Modernism but as from an Oriental paradigm. Despite the fact that most of the artists have received some training in art theory and practice, they cannot put aside their entire cultural heritage in order to present images of modernism.



They are more than Icons of persuasive eloquence. Take Kamala Ibrihim's *Loneliness*. At first glance one could say, "Francis Bacon in disguise" but in the context of its Sudanese culture this is a very demanding evocation of hopelessness. No veil can cover the extremes of poverty, dispossession and brutality that has been inflicted upon the people of her country in the past thirty years.



Mounira Nusseibeh's *Kneeling in front of the Mosque*. What a terrible image of humiliation this is. This is no passive black and white feminine image of a devout woman at prayer. It is a challenge of all women who live with

patriarchy in all religions. What she is proclaiming is the urgency of a rightful place in the celebration of Divine Liturgies.

This is a challenge to all literalist interpretations of the headship of men in the sacred scriptures of all religions. St Paul says, "I won't let a woman preach". But that was two thousand years ago!!!

This could just as well be titled 'A Woman bewailing her right as a human being for Episcopal Ordination in the Anglican Church'. What hidden emotions and frustrated disappointments, anger and heaped-upon misogyny are hidden beneath this Veil.

The hidden darkness in this stark Painting is true, authentic iconoclasm and worthy of the title of the Exhibition - *Breaking the Veils*. This indeed is a letter in the universal iconographic alphabet.

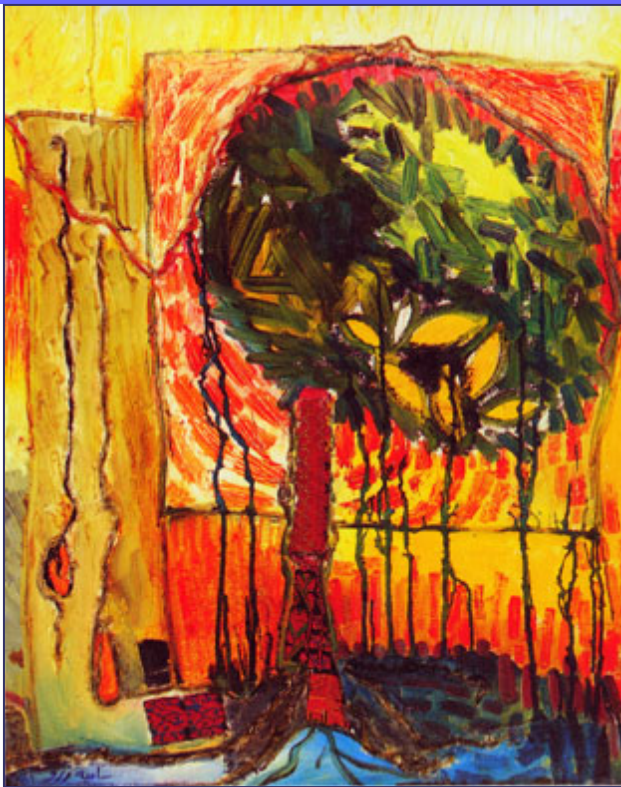


Mounira Nusseibeh's *Four Arab Women*.

We find four women and they are all looking at one thing. And the one thing they are looking at here is a wall. They are being excluded from what lies beyond the wall. And the thing that lies beyond the wall in this moral interpretation is the light. As an allegory, we find the women have no mouths, they have eyes searching and discerning but are not able to speak and the artist rightly proclaims here, that these women, these four women have no right of speech.

I think it is one of the most incredible paintings to come out of the Middle East.

I interpret art literally, morally, allegorically and spiritually in the same way I interpret say, the Holy Scriptures and again I say that if I interpret them only literally they will forever lead me into fundamentalism.



Samia Zaru's *The Endless Cause* a powerful abstract enclosing collages of the embroidery of other women, women whose classical fabric art, like the culture of Indigenous Australia, has been brought to the edge of total extinction as they are forced to eek out an existence by selling their beautiful works when such works ought rightly to be held in collections of public art museums throughout the world.

And so on.

The Interfaith Centre of Melbourne - Promoting Understanding and Cooperation For Peaceful Coexistence