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Issue 413

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Calligraphy of eternity

BY JULIET HIGHET



'The Seven Doors of Heaven'

ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT CONTEMPORARY Arab visual artists is Algerian-born Rachid Koraichi, who for many years has lived in Paris, achieving international recognition. Like many of his creative contemporaries who use Arabic calligraphy in their work, he offers a modern slant on ancient, sometimes forgotten, artistic practices, and conveys spiritual upliftment, a glimpse into eternity through his refined, exquisite art.

Koraichi's name is a transliteration of the Arabic Quraishi, indicating his descent from one of the oldest Sufi intellectual families in North Africa, whose roots can be traced back to the 8th century. Sufism's deeply humane character respects intellectual curiosity, tolerating diversity and freedom of expression. For generations, Koraichi's family have practiced the contemplative study of the Koranic message, and while honouring this legacy, as an artist Koraichi does not feel limited by it. In fact he reinvents and invigorates Islamic tradition. His new series of lithographs, titled *Ecstatic Flow*, is explicitly devoted to the Sufi mystical elements of Islam. Its central theme relates to the lives and teachings of 14 Sufi masters dating from the 7th to the 17th centuries, presenting 14 sets of seven lithographs, for the number seven is a 'magical' one, as we shall see.

As a small boy, Koraichi was fascinated by the Arabic calligraphy in the old books in his home, whose illuminated pages had flourishes of arabesques; books that were all the more tantalising because they were kept away from children. At the age of three, before his regular school day began, he attended a *zawia*, a traditional school for Koranic study. Somewhere along the line in his upbringing, he came across the prehistoric cave paintings of Tassili, whose iconography, vibrancy and delicacy enchanted him.

Background

Koraichi's formal art education began in Algeria at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, before he moved to Paris in 1971. There he studied at several institutions including the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs. An archetype of multiculturalism, his art fuses not only Sufi philosophy, symbolism and numerology with his Koranic heritage, but also with popular Arab visual culture such as talismanic symbols and magical numbers. Living in Paris and interacting with a cosmopolitan art world, his approach is modern, international, with an arresting array of media. These include installations and performance art, along with various metals, ceramics, textiles, carpets, murals, painting and print-work such as etchings and lithographs.

Koraichi also collaborates with local artisans like the potters of Jerba in Tunisia and the Moroccan embroiderer Fadila Barrada, who works with indigo linen. In his 2002 exhibition *Seven Variations of Indigo*, he created silk-screened banners and squares stamped with intricate patterns applied with inked wooden stamps, some antique, others he had carved himself. For this show he drew upon the inspiration and techniques of Syrian artisans.

Koraichi has also collaborated with Middle Eastern and North African artists, intellectuals and exiles addressing the harsh political realities of the region, especially his native Algeria, where he has been actively involved in the struggle for democracy and freedom of speech. He has identified too with the fight for freedom in Palestine, creating *Qassidat Beirut* or 'Poem of Beirut', giving visual representation to his friend Mahmoud Darwish's 'Ode to Beirut'. He said: "I see in the exhibition of this project in the city of Ramallah a new step of solidarity with the besieged and victimised Palestinian people." Koraichi gave the artwork to the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre in which it was shown.

Koraichi's work has been described as "writing passion", a personal alphabet which is simultaneously aesthetic and ideological, in which letters become symbols and signs. Glyphs and ciphers are drawn from ancient cultures, some imaginary, others real – the shapes of Chinese and Japanese ideograms, for example; or Berber and Tuareg *Tifinagh* characters and magical squares. In effect, he has developed a language all of his own, a script of graphic, political, intellectual and spiritual power. Media such as gold thread embroidery on silk and black steel sculptures literally embody the word, and become his own sacred calligraphy. As Maryline Lostia puts it in her article *A Celestial Architecture*: "In his quest, Koraichi echoes the same concerns as Sufi writers over the centuries, who have wondered how words, images or signs can truly interpret the mysteries envisioned in ecstatic contemplation."

As the press release for the forthcoming exhibition of Koraichi's new series *Ecstatic Flow* explains – it exemplifies his quest to embody a complex spiritual vision, by the expression of the Sufi mystical elements of Islam, in works of art of great subtlety and imagination, this time on paper. The title *Ecstatic Flow* is derived from the Arabic word *fa'-ya'-dad*, meaning 'to overflow', 'to flood' or 'to emanate', suggesting an urgent outward movement of exuberance and abundance. It also describes the emotion of a human being experiencing divinity, an ecstatic feeling of connection, overflow-

ing the normal containing limits of human consciousness.

One of the most well-known of the 14 Sufi masters featured in *Ecstatic Flow* and with whom Koraichi is connected by a similar mystical vision of love, is the 13th-century poet, traveller and founder of the order of whirling dervishes, Jalaluddin Rumi. In other series, Koraichi takes the movements of the circling dancers and solidifies them in fluid steel sculptures expressing moving meditation.

Around the world

Koraichi's elaborate installation *The Path of Roses* was included in two Venice Biennales, shown in Ankara and Morocco, at London's October Gallery and at the British Museum, part of which was acquired by the Museum. It consisted of several different elements, including embroidered silk textiles, steel sculptures and ceramic ablution bowls, in which floated roses, inscribed with texts by Rumi. *The Path of Roses* was concerned with the Islamic concept of *Safar* (travel and transcendence) and traced the journey of Rumi from present-day Afghanistan to found the Dervish order in Turkey, and to meet another Sufi mystic, Ibn El Arabi, who is also featured in *Ecstatic Flow*.

The number seven is associated with *Safar*, or journey, and occurs again and again in Koraichi's work. Rumi travelled as a child with his father to meet Al 'Attar, author of *The Conference of Birds*; later commenting that Al 'Attar had reached the 'Seven Cities of Love', meaning that he had attained spiritual realisation. Koraichi's installation *Seven Doors of Heaven*, made of metal calligraphic signs, is a reference to the seven doors of heaven and hell mentioned in the Koran, displayed in the Ground Force Africa Garden at the British Museum. In another exhibition at the October Gallery titled *Ancestral Memories*, 49 glowing bronze finials and a fabulous, monumental textile embroidered with signs, symbols and sayings, were displayed. These recalled the ancestral designs of the flags of each of the Sufi Brotherhoods. The 49 brass finials would have surmounted the flag-bearing poles. Interestingly 49, or 7 x 7, is a number charged with numerological significance, not just in Sufism, but in other traditions as well, such as Islamic, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish and Christian, rep-



Rumi, from the *Ecstatic Flow* series, celebrates the colour indigo

resenting 'perfection' and 'completion'.

In *Seven Variations of Indigo*, Koraichi celebrated the colour blue, which he suggests echoes the 'vaults of heaven', as described by Rumi. The indigo-blue linen banners also relate to the Blue Koran in Cairo. Just as the *sura*, or verses, of the Blue Koran are written in gold, so Koraichi's banners are embroidered with webs of intertwining gold threads. But frequently he avoids colour, working with the dramatic contrast of black on white or earth-coloured clay, as Rose Issa comments, who curated his first London solo exhibition in 1988, and in which his steel calligraphic amulets were starkly black. In his installations he often plays on the intersections of the shadows of his metal sculptures, their transience evoking the ephemeral character of life, in contrast to the permanence and stability of his steel forms. The combination of their polished surfaces gleaming in the light and their dancing, diaphanous shadows holds eternity captive. For both Rumi and Koraichi, the aesthetic and the metaphysical cannot be separated – after all great art is always about transformation. ■

'Ecstatic Flow' is at London's October Gallery from 11th June–10th July 2010.

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