

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Kalsi, Jyoti. "Y.Z. Kami's Middle East show: Journey towards the light within."
Gulf News (March 30, 2016).

GULF NEWS 

Y.Z. Kami's Middle East show: Journey towards the light within

Y.Z. Kami's first solo show in the region is an exploration of introspection and the human desire to seek heaven and infinity



(1 of 2)

Black Dome Black gesso on linen, 2015

Image Credit: Supplied

Published: 14:30 March 30, 2016
By Jyoti KalsiSpecial to Weekend Review

GULF NEWS 

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

American-Iranian artist Y.Z. Kami is well known for his portraits as well as his abstract works inspired by sacred architecture. The New York-based artist's paintings are suffused with light, tranquillity and spirituality

. The subjects in his hazy, fresco-like portraits seem to be lost in an inner world, and his monumental, meditative, luminous paintings of barely visible "mandalas" allude to the transcendence of the soul towards the inner light.

His first solo show in the Middle East, "White Domes", presents his visualisation of the inner journey through recent works from his abstract "Dome" and "Endless Prayers" series, several portraits, a painting of hands, and a sculptural installation.

The artist, who was born and raised in Iran, was excited to exhibit his work in the region for the first time, and spoke to *Weekend Review* about his inspirations, techniques and the meaning of his works. Excerpts:

How did you get interested in portraits?

I learnt to paint from my mother who was a portrait painter, so I have been painting portraits since childhood. For me the human face is the most amazing subject matter. Every face is unique and behind every face there is an ocean of beauty. This beauty is not defined by time, place or culture. It is the essence of the divine in all of humanity.

Why did you start blurring your portraits?

Earlier, my subjects looked directly out of the canvas allowing viewers to look into their eyes. But gradually and quite subconsciously the eyes closed and the portraits became blurred. I found it exciting to move away from the precision of features, because it gave me more freedom with my brush strokes. I feel that the haziness gives a sense of movement — like a tremor that suggests the "presence" of a living person.

The three portraits in this show are all different. One shows a young man looking at the viewer, but also beyond into infinity. In another one my subject's eyes are closed as if he is in a state of deep introspection. And in the third portrait the woman's gaze is turned downwards. I see her as the Madonna looking at her child, and find the same spirituality in her face that is seen in images of saints in art from the Middle Ages and Byzantine icons. My ultimate aim in these portraits is to convey the presence of the inner world that exists within every human being.

How did the Egyptian Fayoum paintings influence your portraits?

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

During my student years in Paris, I was fascinated by the collection of Fayoum paintings at the Louvre, and did a lot of research on them. These encaustic paintings, which have survived for more than 2,000 years, are actually portraits of the dead and were buried with them. I was attracted by the intensity, the stylisation and the sense of mystery of the eyes, which were always highlighted in the paintings.

What is the idea behind focusing on hands, and making them appear as if light is emanating from them?

The paintings of hands folded in prayer are perhaps influenced by my frequent travels to India. I like doing these paintings because this gesture is a very direct and universally understood image of devotion. I do not consciously plan it but they always end up having this inner luminosity. My whole work is about light, so probably my lifetime of research makes this happen.

How did you move towards abstraction?

As a teenager I got very interested in the architecture I saw during my travels in Iran. My first abstract works, in the 1990s, were photographs of the domes of Persian mosques and muqarnas. I gradually moved to drawings, collages and later to paintings and sculpture.

How did the abstract series evolve?

I began doing the "Endless Prayers" series a decade ago. Here, I scan and print words from prayer books and mystical poems of Rumi and Hafez on rice paper, and then cut out square or rectangular pieces, using glue to recreate the circular patterns and colours of the brick work and tile mosaics on the domes. Sometimes I make them look like sacred scrolls, and cover the words with gold leaf, offering just a presence of the poem.

In my monumental paintings of the "Dome" series, I simply create circular patterns with repetitive stamps or strokes of ink, acrylic or gesso on linen, with the light coming through the centre. I use raw linen because it has the colour of earth, and do several washes with acrylic to create a luminous glow. These abstract works refer to ceilings, which in Sufi and other mystical philosophies are a metaphor for heaven.

Unlike the perspective of actual domes, my domes are abstract, with all the blocks being the same size, creating a sense of infinity. So, these abstract works are about heaven and seeking infinity, which resides inside us. Ultimately my dome paintings and sculptures are "mandalas", which are forms as ancient as humanity and exist in all cultures.

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

What is the meaning of the colours of your domes?

The white domes refer to the pure white inner light mentioned in many mystical traditions. The black domes allude to the darkness or the experience of the dark night of the soul that one must pass through to reach the white light. I also use blue as a metaphor for heaven, and I have tried to recreate the special turquoise blue seen in the mosques in Isfahan. Since last year I have also been using gold leaf, to represent divinity.

What is the concept behind the sculptural installation in this show?

This sculpture was originally commissioned for the Istanbul Biennale in 2005. It comprises soapstone blocks inscribed with the words of a poem from Rumi's "The Book of Shams-e-Tabrizi". I originally presented it as a series of separate circles, each representing the movement of a whirling dervish. But here, I have arranged them in 12 concentric circles, with each circle featuring a verse from the poem.

The poem is simple and beautiful, inviting the beloved to come and get into the work, and its repetitive words help the whirling dervishes to get into a meditative trance. At the centre I have placed salt, as a symbol of white light. Alchemists believed that salt is necessary for the transformation of elements to higher metals, hence the salt in this work is also a metaphor for the journey of the soul through different levels of awareness.

The black, white and gold dome paintings flanking the floor sculpture allude to the idea that during the act of transformation and the journey towards light the soul has to pass through a darkness that is "blacker than black" to reach the whiteness and purity of heart that ultimately leads to the divine light.

Does this show have any political connotation being held at a time when the region is in turmoil?

Today in this world and especially in this region, we really need inner light. I will be happy if my work can contribute even a tiny bit of light.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

"White Domes" will run at Leila Heller Gallery Dubai until April 25.