

ZAKARIA RAMHANI'S

large-scale paintings use Arabic calligraphy as a formal gesture, reducing the written word to brushstrokes. The paradox at the core of Ramhani's work is the tradition of aniconism in Islam. His fascination with portraiture is at odds with the practice of Islamic calligraphy, which has long been a venerated art form for representing the divine in a humble way, without using figuration. Dense with layers of calligraphic curves, the linguistic meaning of Ramhani's script is illusory and intended to be illegible, even to readers of Arabic.

In the modern Muslim world, the ban on images creates many contradictions vis à vis the flood of imagery propagated by new forms of media technologies. Idolatry is condemned in the Quran, and Muhammad discouraged creating images of any living being. This proscription has been upheld since the ninth century, and is common today among certain conservative branches of Islam. Figurative painting in North Africa was not popular until the twentieth century, and even then it was typically created for a colonialist audience.

Growing up in Morocco, Ramhani was not sheltered from figurative representations; he encountered many forms of media imagery.

May Allah Forgive Me refers to a sense of guilt that haunts both the artist and his paintings. Reflecting on these works, Ramhani noted that guilt often stems from organized religion, the doctrine and practice of which can inflict a kind of psychological violence on its subjects. Ramhani grew up in a Muslim society and in an artistic household—his father was a landscape painter who avoided portraying the human figure for religious reasons. He occasionally had to paint commissioned portraits and explained to his son that he would ask God's forgiveness. Each person who reads this title is uttering a prayer, one of the most potent linguistic constructions.

Volume 1 is inspired by recent political activism in Egypt and the Middle East. Ramhani's work has caused controversy by daring to critique the interstices of violence and religion.

Authorities at Art Dubai censored Ramhani's *You Were My Only Love* (2012), objecting to its representation of police brutality in Tahrir Square using a traditionally Islamic mark-making technique. Ramhani altered the famous image of the “blue bra woman,” who became a symbol of Egyptian protest against extreme military power, showing her struggling against gorillas as Vincent Van Gogh looks on disapprovingly. For this exhibition, Ramhani continues to provoke thought by altering well-known media imagery. His series depicting famous dictators in a state of childhood anonymity points to a kind of impossibility of obtaining truth through representation—who can tell from their young portraits what kind of men these children become? What can be conveyed about subjectivity hovers between text and image, although neither is fully legible. The painter's strokes cannot be deciphered—language breaks apart on the surface of the canvas.

The figure of the father is prominently featured in this body of work. The stern look of *The Unknown General* is juxtaposed with naïve childhood portraits of famous dictators. Thinking about the Middle East in particular as part of the history of Western imperialism, the allegorical “father” was absolutely aligned with military force. Yet in the young dictator

series, *I'm Sorry Father*, the observer also takes on the point of view of the father. This swapping of roles points to Ramhani's interest in the often-fluid categories of sameness and otherness. The tension between identification with representation and perception of difference is a concept rooted in Lacanian philosophy. Otherness has taken on new meanings in the wake of Postcolonial theorists like Edward Saïd, who used the term Orientalism to describe negative and false cultural assumptions of “The Orient” by the West.

Language is a crucial site for repression and resistance in a postcolonial context, and in *Volume 2* of the show, Ramhani rehearses this fraught relationship to language and identity in his meditative self-portraits. *Faces of Your Other*, an ongoing self-portrait series that he has worked on for many years, addresses the viewer with a direct pronoun. It implies that he is *made other* by the gaze of the Western viewer who sees his native language as mere ornament. In a world rife with imagery, religious tradition and increasing globalization create spaces torn by contradiction. Through his work Ramhani describes the difficulty of representing one's cohesive self under these conditions.