

On Two Fronts by Anna Seaman



تصميم مبدئي للوحة "الوقوف"، ٢٠١٤.
A sketch of *Standing* artwork, 2014

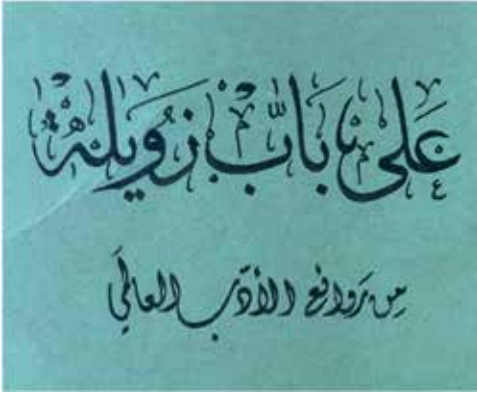


Begin at the beginning. Whilst most exhibitions do not sustain a linear narrative and can be perused from any angle, it is important, at least in this case, to pause and take stock of the title. It was not without significant (one might even say, disciplined) consideration that the artist chose these two words to describe this display of his work. *Insurgence* on its own exudes a kind of military connotation, a rebellious strike against the establishment. But *discipline* adds a counterweight and brings it back into balance – well, almost.

Wissam Shawkat is the rebel in the midst of the title's explication. His approach to calligraphy is, in many ways, in keeping with the rigid proportions and restrictions that the artform demands and indeed, relies upon to maintain its aesthetic equilibrium. However, at the same time Shawkat creates something completely fresh, finding new forms and shapes that respect the rules whilst simultaneously breaking them. It is supervised freedom that goes against the by-rote methods that many traditional calligraphy practitioners are almost indoctrinated with during the process of learning.

Within this rebellion, the very letters themselves are Shawkat's weapons. In a kind of paradoxical relationship with the language and unlike many purists, Shawkat divorces the words from their meaning so that the curves, lines and dots become graphic symbols and aesthetic compositions rather than text. They snake across the canvas in bright tentacles of primary reds or swoop in generous loops of muted greens and blacks, decorated with punctuation marks. At times, the forms, which are minimalist and Bauhaus in their inspiration, gather at the base of the canvas, or peer around the edges leaving the negative space to take centre stage. In short, there is life to the lettering because as the artist paints their dance, he has choreographed them to be the chief character of the performance.

لوحة من معرض "حروف الحب"، نيويورك، ٢٠١١.
Artwork from 'Letters of Love' exhibition, New York, 2011



تصميم لعنوان كتاب بخطي الثلث والديواني، البصرة، ١٩٨٦
An artwork of a book in Thuluth and Diwani fonts, Basra, 1986



"بِسْمِ اللَّهِ" بخط الديواني الجلي، الموصل، ١٩٨٨
Basmalah in Jali Diwani, Mosul, 1988

Casting the frame of reference back to Shawkat's childhood and this is perhaps not surprising. Since the age of 10, when he spent many a frightened hour holed up in an underground bunker in his home town of Basra in Iraq during the war with Iran in the early 1980s, calligraphy has been Shawkat's escape. "During those weeks I spent in the shelter in 1984," he remembers, "I was practicing all day long because there was nothing else to do."

This pre-teen obsession was to continue into adulthood and become a lifelong fascination. In 1987, when his family moved to Mosul, Shawkat worked in a sign-making shop to save money for books and tools and to attend an intensive calligraphy programme. After graduating from high school and then gaining a degree in civil engineering, Shawkat served in the Iraqi army where calligraphy saved him again. "I was called on to make signs and do all sorts of lettering work for my superiors, rather than the usual work of a soldier," he recalls. By 1998, when he was done with education and the army, he attempted a career in engineering but it was only one week before he quit his first job and joined the family stationery firm; the business of lettering, by then, was flowing in his veins. And so it was that Shawkat carved own path into the sacred space of traditional calligraphy.

The roots of Arabic calligraphy can be traced back to 10th century Iraq when Muslim scholars needed a method to document the Holy Quran. Leaving oral traditions behind, Muslims across the Ottoman Empire developed different scripts to create the earliest forms of calligraphy and later these texts and the accompanying rules of composition became a venerated visual art form for Quranic text. Calligraphy became almost fused to its content meaning that to this day, the configuration of the letters and the way they are drawn has almost become synonymous with the religion itself along with the undercurrent thought that to change that might be to alter the content itself.



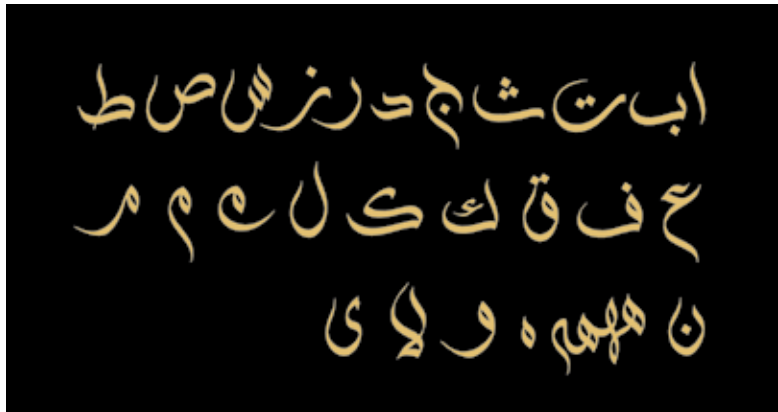
لوحة بخط الوسام، ٢٠١٠
Artwork in Al Wissam style, 2010

As such, it is customary in Islamic cultures to gain a diploma (or 'ijaza') upon becoming a master of the language. This is when a student is able to replicate the handwriting of his teacher, in the classical script, a lesson that has been taught the same way since for centuries. Shawkat however, did not pursue this path and has no such document. Nonetheless his "mastery" is still complete and one might argue, even more evolved because he has managed to push the artform forwards. In writing about Shawkat's practice, Dr. Nabil F. Safwat, an art historian and scholar said: "If a language does not evolve and acquire technical terms for newly arrived inventions and ideas it is bound to wane." He goes on to say that Shawkat rides both the wave of modernity and that of tradition at the same time. "He has in one hand, the knowledge and ability to work in the traditional styles; in the other, the wish to combine that knowledge with a hint, an allusion to assume new meaning."

In this spirit, Shawkat created his own eponymous script in 2004. The letters in Al Wissam style have a modern look and feel but still maintain the essence and DNA of the tradition and they are the base of many of the pieces in this exhibition. Further observations will show Shawkat's recent experimentation with Thuluth, one of the oldest script forms that is written on the principle that one-third of each letter slopes. If you look at the art of calligraphy from an outsider's perspective, it may seem impenetrable and staid. Immediately the archaic format brings to mind those who lived in centuries past and were probably using a quill pen and an ink bottle. Yet, to see Shawkat's work and his use of the Thuluth script is to look at something sleek and minimal. He has managed – like the Roman god Janus – to face two directions at once. Whilst simultaneously looking ahead and looking behind, Shawkat is riding the wave of the present.

It is also important to note that experimenting with and evolving the traditional styles is actually what has resulted in the success of Arabic calligraphy through the ages. Instead of being a rebel, Shawkat should be considered to be following in his forefathers' footsteps.

أبجدية خط الوسام بشكلها الحالي
The Arabic alphabets in Al Wissam script in its current form



Specifying unique rules for each style is perhaps what has led to Arabic being seen as a sacred, untouchable script or language. However, historically, Arabic proved to be a very adaptive script both for Arabs and non-Arabs alike maintaining the basic abstract shapes and characteristics of the 28 letters but otherwise leaving the door open for the emergence of all sorts of calligraphic styles, radically different from each other. It is through this open door that Shawkat passed so easily during his own relationship with the script.



٢٠١٨، "رباعية الحب ٢"
Quad Love 2, 2018



٢٠١٩، "قُلْ شَيْئًا"
Say Something, 2019

In this exhibition, in a piece titled *Quad Love 2*, the letters appear to be strutting across the frame like proud animals and in *Say Something*, the black lettering seems almost figurative with the two shapes on either side coming together in an embrace. It is this ability to bring life to the forms that defines Shawkat's style. Whilst modern Arabic typography needs rules in order to impose some kind of graphic standards for duplicating the calligraphic styles with a mechanical context, Shawkat is using the rules of proportion only to create something visually appealing.

Also present in the exhibition are pieces from *Calligraforms*: a mix of calligraphy and typography that places emphasis on the letters as graphic forms and equal emphasis on the positive and negative space. Due to his consistent and thorough observations of the shapes of the letters as well as the space around them, Shawkat continues to free the formations from any constraints, be that meaning or stylistic and fills every corner of his compositions with an aesthetic balance punctuated by pops of red and white.

Whilst not a retrospective, this exhibition is a look back over the career of one pioneer as well as maintaining a contemporary stance with the inclusion of current works. Shawkat creates new forms and rhythms from the existing codes and restrictions within calligraphy.

لوحة من سلسلة "مونومنتال"، ٢٠١٥
 Artwork from *Monumental* series, 2015



With this, his work takes on a new freedom, which on one hand can be interpreted as rebellious and bold and on the other feels completely natural to an artist who has fostered a life-long relationship with the letters themselves.

Anna Seaman is an established visual arts journalist in Britain and the United Arab Emirates.