



Riot of colour (clockwise from top left) Grey Lunista, Grand Stamp, Green Lunista, Yellow Pledge, Black Allure, Talisman

# Rediscovering the beauty of language

Nima Behnoud gives Persian calligraphy a contemporary twist

Nima Behnoud gives Persian calligraphy a contemporary twist using vivid colours and emphasising inherent geometric forms

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New York-based Iranian artist Nima Behnoud's work is inspired by Persian culture and calligraphy. In his first-ever exhibition, Behnoud is showcasing a series of silkscreen prints on paper that feature verses from the classical poet Jalal-eddin Rumi, references to Persian history and mythology, pre-Islamic Iranian motifs, calligraphic letters and Islamic arabesque patterns.

But the vivid colours he has used, the way he has juxtaposed the different elements and his emphasis on geometric forms rather than the meaning of the words give these artworks a contemporary look.

"I have a huge collection of old Iranian and Middle Eastern manuscripts, books, royal seals, stamps and stone carvings obtained from antique stores and flea markets around the world. The writings, motifs and figures in my artworks have been reproduced from these items. But I always try to present the ancient Iranian and Middle Eastern culture in a modern way so that everybody can appreciate its beauty regardless of whether they understand the words and symbols or the philosophy behind them," Behnoud says.

A striking feature of Behnoud's work is the beautiful way in which the blues, reds and oranges flow into each other to create a bright background for his layered compositions.

The colours are influenced by his work as a fashion designer. In fact, while he has never exhibited his art in public before, his label NiMaNY is well known around the world.

Launched in 2004, the clothing brand has been featured in prestigious magazines such as *Vogue* and *Maxim*, and Behnoud's clients include celebrities such as Kevin Spacey, Heidi Klum and Paris Hilton.

"The colours look so vibrant because although these artworks are done on handmade paper, instead of ink, I used

the same fabric paints here that I use on my garments," the artist says.

In some of the artworks, Behnoud has merely played with a single calligraphic letter to create fun, pop-art-like compositions. In others ancient motifs such as winged lions, angels, royal seals and fantasy characters from the epic *Shahnameh* are superimposed on a collage of words comprising Rumi's poetry, excerpts from literary texts and even calligraphers' practice sheets.

"Rumi's poetry in the background depicts the richness, depth and enduring beauty of my country's cultural heritage, whereas the symbols on top represent superficial elements that keep changing over the years. For example, in one artwork I have used a Qajar dynasty royal stamp with a very French design to comment on the foreign influence on the cultural fabric of my country during that period. And in another piece, I used the royal seals of kings from various periods in Iranian history to depict the contrast between Iran's deep cultural heritage and the shallow, egoistic and elitist attitude of those who ruled the country," Behnoud says.

The artist is also displaying some of his wearable art pieces such as scarves and ties to highlight the connection between fine art and fashion design.

"There is a general feeling that everything about Middle Eastern culture is sacred and should only be represented in a particular way. But I have tried to break away from that with my fashion garments and my artworks. Even if the celebrities who wear my clothes know nothing about Rumi or the *Shahnameh*, it is enough for me that they find my representations of my culture beautiful and embrace them. Similarly, my art presents a pop-art version of a very rich culture, making it accessible to everyone," Behnoud says.

■ Nima Behnoud: Studio Art will run at Total Arts gallery at The Courtyard until April 30.

## Faceless masses

Iranian artist Shohreh Mehran's latest exhibition, *Defaced*, features a series of portraits of people she does not know. The identity of the men and women in her beautifully detailed oil paintings is hidden from viewers because their faces are covered by their hands or behind veils. The handcuffs indicate that these "defaced" people are criminals who have been arrested, and their body language suggests that they are hiding their faces in shame.

These paintings are all based on photographs of criminals published in the newspapers in Teheran. Mehran has been collecting such images for the last three years and has reproduced them in her paintings. "I see these images in the media everyday and I wonder why the newspapers publish them despite the faces being hidden. Although I know that these people are criminals, I cannot help feeling some sympathy for them as they face this difficult time," the artist says.

Mehran's haunting portrayals convey a collective sense of shame. But they also make us think about whether these people are covering their faces because they are guilty or because they are innocent victims. By creating a permanent record in the form of paintings, of people who find themselves on the wrong side of the law, the artist also questions the premise behind showing the image of a person whose face is not recognisable. And by inviting viewers to contemplate the legality of her own act of appropriating these media images, she forces them to ask whether her subjects have been treated justly. Perhaps her paintings allude to the faceless masses that have to constantly face the terrible consequences of the selfish, egoistic and misguided actions of their shameless leaders and the hidden forces that support and manipulate these leaders.

■ Defaced will run at Etemad gallery, Al Quoz, until April 27.



State's fury The portraits in the *Defaced* series are based on newspaper photographs