



Golnaz Fathi. *Untitled*. 2013.
Pen on canvas. 146 x 128 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist

THE WEIGHT OF THE WORD

In Part II of our language-themed issue, we move beyond decipherable meaning and into the realm of deconstructed text. Starting with a compact history of asemic writing in art, from the ancients in the East to the abstractionists in the West, we deep dive into the regional variation of Lettrism known as *Hurufiyya*. We learn that Cy Twombly’s scribbles can be seen in Arabic script, and letters can morph into human bodies. Words are layered, repeated, written backwards, or broken down with the artists we feature, all of whom obscure language as a form of abstract art.

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Abdulnasser Gharem. *Concrete Block*.
2010. Rubber stamps and industrial
lacquer paint on 9mm plywood board.
120 x 100 x 54 cm. Image courtesy of
the artist



ONE-ON-ONES

Meet the calligraphers and contemporary artists who have moulded letters and blurred the lines of legibility. Whether versed in Arabic, Japanese, or other languages, they emphasize the practice of gesture over meaning and looking over reading. Here, the act of language becomes an exercise in defiance as word becomes image.

One-on-ones with the word artists

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Nasser Al Aswadi. Image courtesy of the artist

Nasser AL ASWADI

Yemeni. Abstract calligraphic art

Nadine Khalil: You were trained as an architect; what drew you to calligraphy in the beginning?

Nasser Al Aswadi: I started by studying architecture. I was influenced by my surroundings and I would draw houses and architectural motifs which had Islamic expressions engraved on them. Primitive art is considered as one of the most important symbolic activities through which human beings can express certain aspects of their existence. And over the centuries, the Yemenis have excelled in this art form through which they have inscribed literature and poetry as well as the rule of law. This is how the Arabic letter began adorning public places.

NK: Is language the point of departure for your artwork?

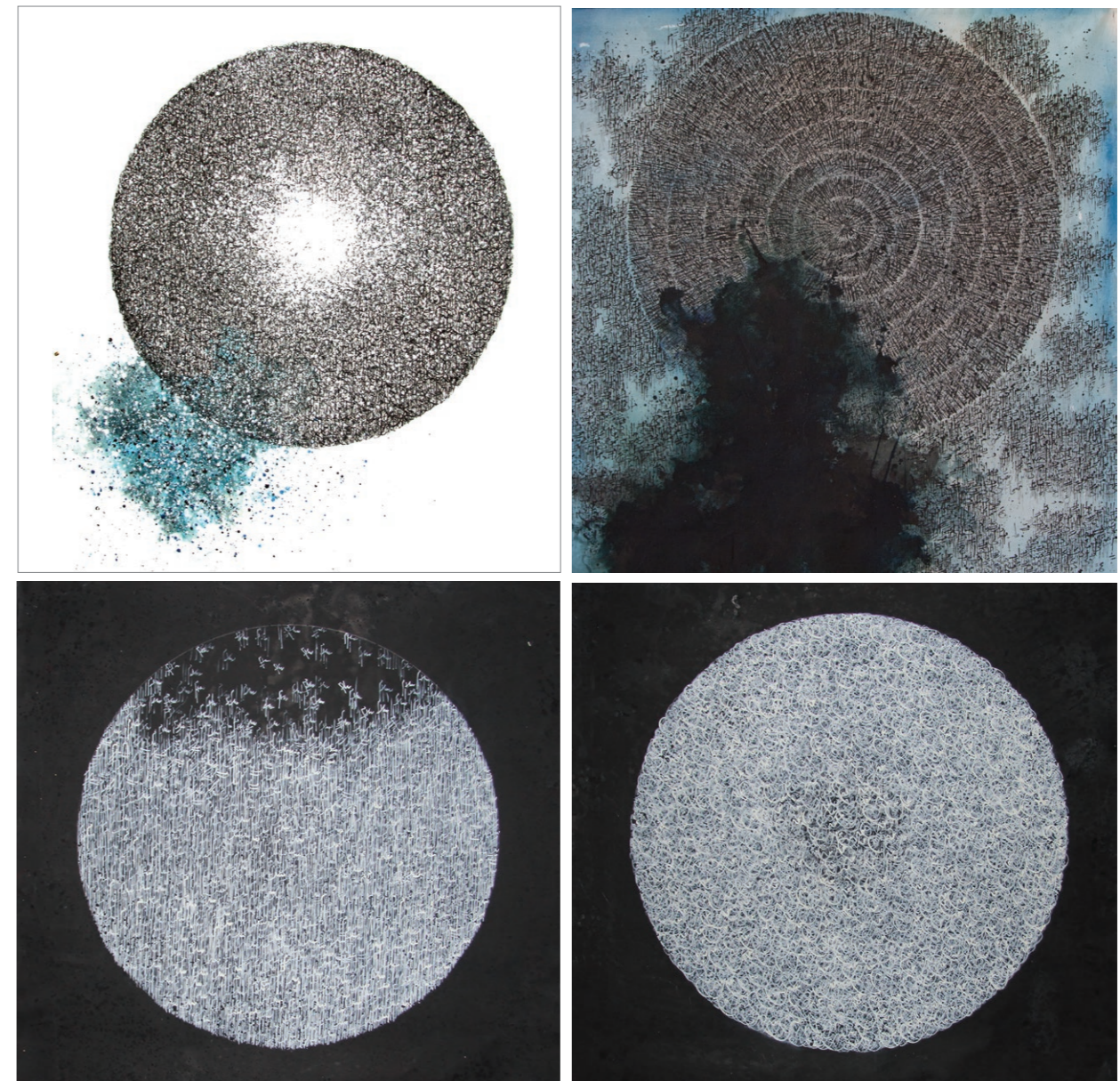
NA: Yes, it's a start – I also do not want to believe that the letter is sacred.

NK: When does a word stop being a word?

NA: The word ceases to be a word when it is transformed into an aesthetic form – whether in terms of colours, abstraction or free form – and another identity takes over its essential purpose. Here, the line, or the word, becomes a painting. The calligraphic possibilities that exist can render painting into an open visual form.

NK: What is the symbolic value of the act of repetition in your work? Why did

Facing page:
Clockwise from
top left: Nasser Al
Aswadi. *Tenderness*.
2017. Oil and natural
pigments on canvas.
130 x 130 cm;
Untitled. 2013. Oil
and natural pigments
on canvas. 140 x
140 cm; *Untitled*.
2016. Oil and natural
pigments on canvas.
126 x 126 cm;
Untitled. 2016. Oil
and natural pigments
on canvas. 126 x
126 cm. All images
courtesy of the artist



you choose the approach of repeating letters over and over to the point of their erasure or disappearance?

NA: Sometimes loaded words such as 'dream', 'love', 'tolerance' or 'peace' are used to couch other meanings or connotations, especially as a means of relating to the conflicts we are facing in the region, without being too direct. I deliberately layer words on top of each other to solidify them and lend them strength in a kind of interdependent and cohesive manner. The layers create the artwork as they become figures or bodies. Although their complexity makes the words undecipherable, this is the point. I want every person to perceive the work

differently since I don't want it to be restricted to the Arab viewer or anyone who speaks Arabic.

NK: Your work has a cosmic element to it, as if it is depicting the universe, and it's often in monochrome colours. What is the symbolism behind these elements?

NA: My time in France lent itself to this reduction. We see the black and white colours and their derivatives in most of my works, and this refers to the environment in which I lived, as there were no colours in my neighbourhood beyond monochrome or stone colours. That's why black dominates most of my paintings.

NK: The words and letters in your work become entire landscapes. Are you liberating the words from their meaning? If so, then why?

NA: I began drawing with words 15 years ago. The word became the centre of my artistic gestures and would impose itself sometimes. I became influenced by the beauty of a word in the way it was expressed in love poems. So I translated these words into paintings. I still have not found anything more intricate than the lines of words, in their regular or less regular forms. In their clear, honest and fluid movements, I think words gave me the freedom of expression and opened up different horizons in my art.