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Written in style: Golnaz Fathi's calligraphic works debut in Shanghai – interview

Posted on 20/09/2013

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Iranian artist Golnaz Fathi discusses the speaking stillness of her work.

Trained as a traditional calligrapher in Iran, artist Golnaz Fathi will exhibit her Persian-inspired works for the first time in China at the Pearl Lam Gallery in Shanghai. Art Radar talks to the artist about her hopes and expectations for her major debut in China.



Golnaz Fathi, untitled, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 200 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Golnaz Fathi's exhibition "The Living Road" takes place from 15 September to 10 November 2013 at the [Pearl Lam Gallery in Shanghai](#). The exhibition includes 23 new works in a wide range of media including pen on canvas, LED light works, and acrylic on canvas.

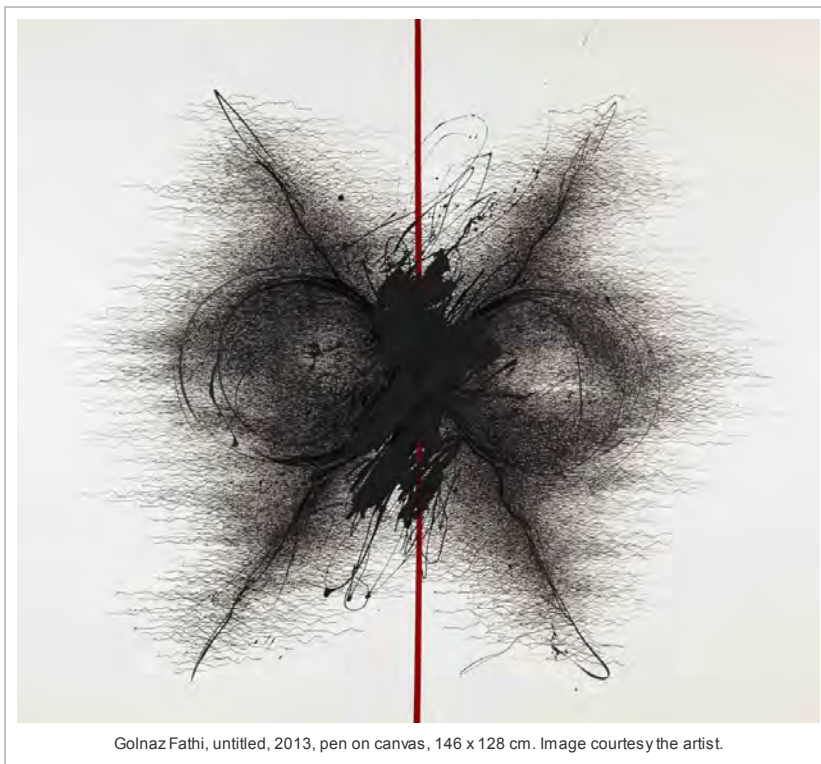
Based on the practice of Persian calligraphy, Fathi's gestural abstractions combine textual elements inspired by the Middle Eastern Modernists of the mid-twentieth century who used the written word aesthetically.

Golnaz Fathi: Reflecting on tumultuous times

Fathi was born in Tehran in 1972 and was a young child during the Islamic Revolution. The tumultuous time influenced her as an artist to create works "which asks for pause and contemplation" according to the [gallery's press release](#).

She studied classical calligraphy at the Iranian Society of Calligraphy in Tehran and practised writing Persian script full time for six years. In the male-dominated tradition, she is one of the few Iranian female artists to have trained to the highest level.

She has exhibited in museums and galleries in cities around the world and currently lives and works in Tehran and Paris. Her works are in major collections such as the [British Museum, London](#); the [Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi, India](#); [The Farjam Collection, Dubai](#) and the [Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore](#).



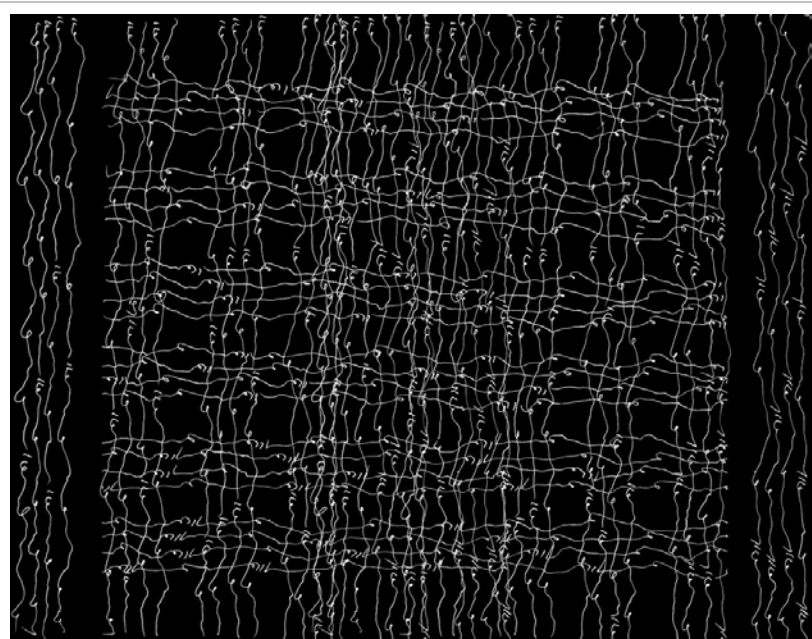
Golnaz Fathi, untitled, 2013, pen on canvas, 146 x 128 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

This is your first show in China, what are your expectations and how do you think Chinese audiences will respond to your calligraphic works?

Yes, this is my first exhibition, and I do hope it will relate well with the people in China. Honestly I always wanted to exhibit my works in China or Japan because of their deep knowledge of calligraphy, which is the same in Iran. We know it well but use it in different ways. There is no need to explain the history for people because they have grown up with it while it's the opposite in America or Europe.

Do you see similarities between the two cultures' practice of calligraphy?

I think in classical calligraphy and practices, some general rules of both countries are the same: the exercises are like meditations in order to control your movements, your thoughts and emotions so the perfection and harmony of the textual image is achieved. Although the instrument that people use for calligraphy in each country is different — China, brush; Iran, reed — the goal of expressing the aesthetics of the text is the same.



Golnaz Fathi, untitled, 2013, plexiglass box and LED light, 24 x 32 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

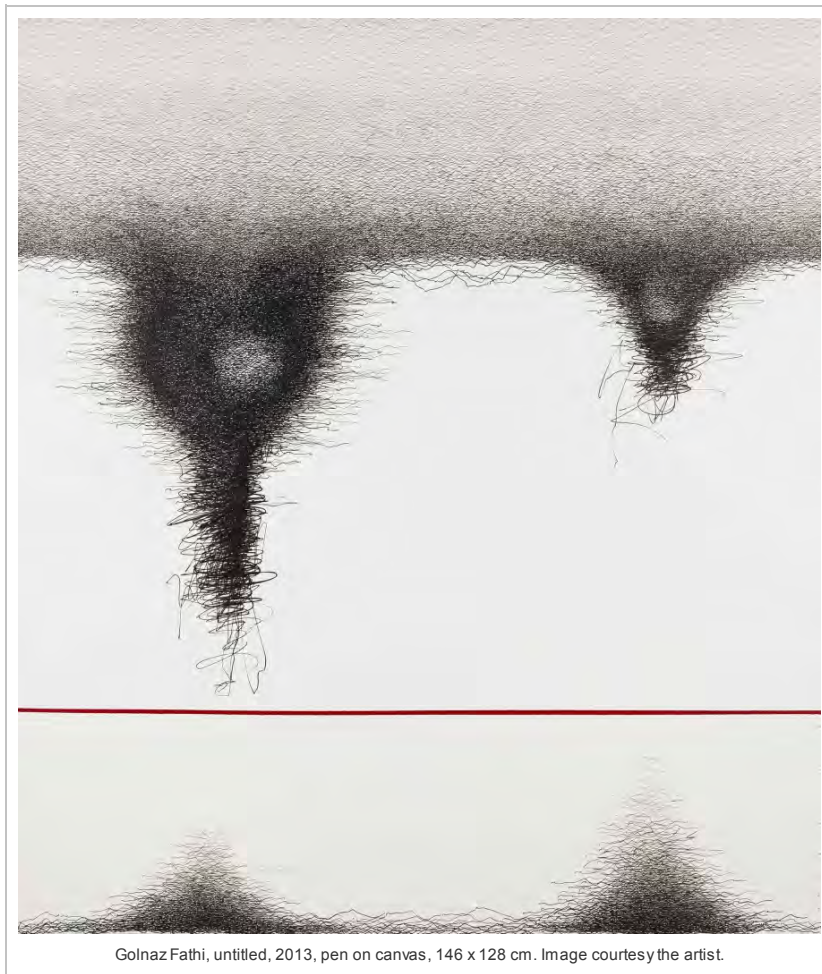
There are similarities in your work to that of Chinese artist [Yang Jie-chang](#). In his conceptual work, he repaints Chinese landscape ink paintings over and over until the paper is completely saturated with black. Please describe Shiah Mashgh, black practice. Do you see it as a traditional act of mark-making, or is it a conceptual and performative act?

I am thrilled that you compare my work with such a great artist. The process we use is very similar; we apply thousands of layers of ink until the paper is covered with black ink. We need to be patient.

The origin of Siah Mashgh is traditional in classical calligraphy. This is a calligrapher's warm-up exercise, repeating letters over and over again until the white paper is entirely covered with black ink. The artist would then move to another sheet of paper to create the final work. This means that the initial sheet of paper was not valued — it was just an exercise tool to enable the artist to move onto another sheet and create the final work. In the end, this initial sheet of paper has such a beautiful composition, which is made without thinking or previous

sketching, it has to come from the heart! This has always been more artistic than the final work.

What I do today is transform this technique as you mentioned to a conceptual and performative act. I use this in a very contemporary way and transform calligraphy into abstract forms, which are almost purely lines.



Golnaz Fathi, untitled, 2013, pen on canvas, 146 x 128 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Do you want the viewer to understand the words you paint, or do you want the viewer to see it as aesthetic form? What are you trying to say to the viewer?

I am not writing anything; even Iranians can't read them. The script becomes as abstract as I have mentioned, and it becomes almost purely lines. I only know the origin comes from my meditations, perhaps sometimes it ends in stillness, a stillness which talks.

They can also be read as visual meditation or a form of prayer, where the layering speaks of the process and the rhythmic passing of time. You can almost retrace the movements of my hand making uncompromising gestures and attempting to capture on canvas a moment of a thought, word, sound or a story. I want the viewers to see it with pictorial eyes. Nothing is dictated to them. They are free to interpret [the works] as what they want.

You live in Tehran. How is the situation there for women artists? Are women able to create, exhibit and fully express themselves?

Yes, I live in Tehran. My roots are here and I love my country. It's a place where I can work. As long as your works are not political or nudes or anything against religion, it doesn't matter if you are a man or woman.



Golnaz Fathi, untitled, 2013, diptych, pen on paper, 208 x 106 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

You were one of a few women to get to the highest levels of study in traditional calligraphy. What was the key moment that made you decide to devote yourself to contemporary art, rather than continuing in the tradition?

It was a hard moment to decide and change the direction because I loved calligraphy and still do. But I noticed that the road was a dead-end. It's only a repetition and this is not my goal. I need the freedom of my mind and hand. I don't want to obey the rules, because that would restrict my artistic acts. I learned them, and I am so grateful to those years. But it was time to break them to go further and without knowledge you cannot do it.

Susan Kendzulak

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