

Nothing to declare, 2007
mixed media and gauze on paper, 42x60 cm
Image courtesy of Rose Issa Projects

Maliheh Afnan: Traces, Faces and Places

Foreword by John Berger, Edited by Rose Issa (Saqi Books & Beyond Art Productions, 2010)

This beautifully illustrated and thoughtfully conceived volume celebrates a career that has spanned 50 years, three continents and several lifetimes of constantly evolving output.

Maliheh Afnan's work has been snapped up by stealthy collectors for decades and is finally receiving the international fanfare she has never sought but definitely deserves. She has been in the spotlight at the recent landmark exhibitions *Taswir: Pictorial Mappings of Islam and Modernity* at the Martin Gropius Bau Museum, Berlin (2009); *Re-Orientations: Contemporary Arab Representations*, at the European Parliament, Brussels (2008); *The Dance of Pen and Ink*, at The State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow and The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg (2007-08); and *Word into Art*, at The British Museum, London (2006).

Anyone that has had the privilege of meeting the artist is always immediately impressed by the uplifting effect of a rare and complete elegance: in demeanour, appearance, and a palpable integrity expressed in few, but warm and witty words, carefully chosen. Her work reflects these qualities, being at once understated, exquisite and subtle, but with a quiet power that speaks to the heart and stirs feelings of yearning and nostalgia that take one by surprise. The effect is not intentional or even consciously made, but with a background like Afnan's, perhaps inevitable, with the spectre of conflict and loss a constant shadow.

Afnan was born in 1935 to Persian parents in Haifa, Palestine, and her formative years were spent at the crossroads of huge historical change and a time of great upheaval in the Middle East. During the Second World War she lived through Italy's air raids on Haifa and then in 1948 the Arab-Israeli war. The family left for Beirut in 1949, where she went to high school and graduated with a BA from the American University of

Beirut. Marriage and a move to Washington followed, where she graduated with an MA in Fine Arts from the Corcoran School of Art in 1962. After a few years in Kuwait, she moved back to Beirut to enjoy the flowering of a promising career whose highlights included her first solo show at the Galerie Claire Brambach, Basel in 1971 and an exhibition organised by Michel Tapié at the legendary Galerie Cyrus in Paris in 1974. Then the Lebanese civil war broke out, and she stayed in Paris for 23 years, and in 1997 moved to London, where she lives today.

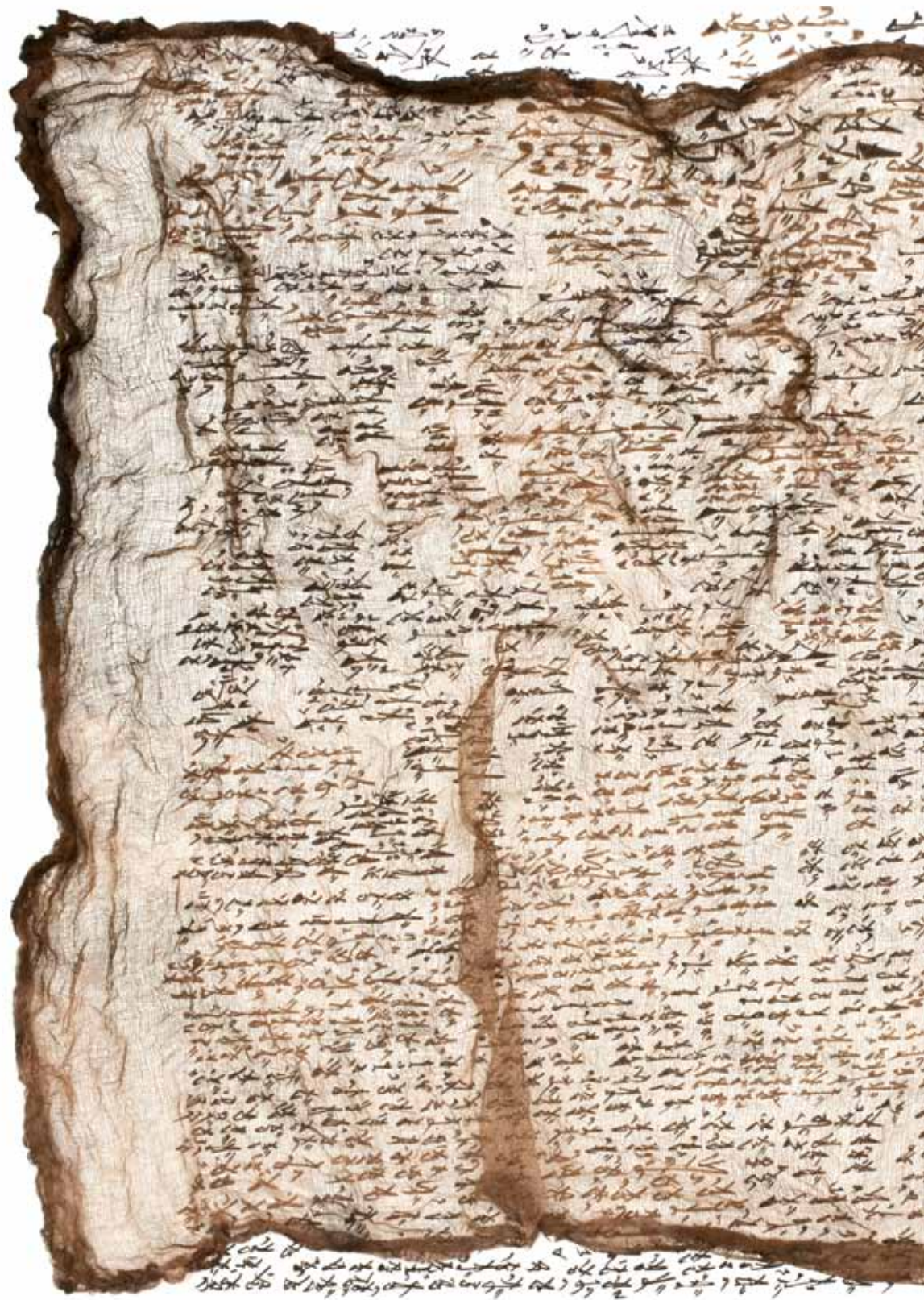
Afnan may not see herself as a “Middle Eastern artist”, saying “I feel great sentimental attachment to Lebanon, Iran and Palestine, but I have never been a political creature.” She does admit however, that observing the Middle East from the West, “I react quite emotionally to what is going on. I remember during the Lebanese civil war I used a blow-torch in my work, which was probably the result of my seeing television images and photographs of all the destruction and burnt buildings. So whether I like it, or not I have become political.” It is little wonder that displacement and exile are recurring themes, but despite their poignancy and poetry, her works are not sentimental. Rather, we find layers of colour and abstract mappings of patterns, repeated glyphs and eroding outlines that resemble a spectre’s last reach into the real world before vanishing into the ether. Captured in the moment before they disappear, these “Traces, Faces and Places” of the book’s title may be slipping away, but they linger long in the memory. “My material is the past, that may be true to most of us,” Afnan says. “There is a collective subconscious, some may call it genetic memory. It’s not just my memory but also that of my family and ancestors... I unconsciously but continually refer to scripts, places, faces from the past, both real and imagined.”

The book focuses on works from the 1970s on, which fall broadly into five categories: *Ecritures* (Traces); *Personnages* (Faces); *Paysages* (Places); *Reliefs and Objects*; and *Veiled*. She works on paper, enjoying its texture and reaction when she applies ink, oil pastels or water-soluble pigments such as tempera and gouache

to its surface in layer after layer, creating a gentle patina. Small in scale, restrained, the images glow with a palette from her homeland: subtle browns, burnt umber, yellow ochre, grey, an occasional wash of rose-pink sienna... The result is that they sometimes look archaeological, like ancient scripts on papyrus or shards of terracotta that reference the ancient Persians, Greeks and Romans that have roamed the lands of her past.

Afnan says that her method is to “write her paintings”, and the rhythmical surface of the *Ecritures* – covered in dots and scratches, meandering or quivering strokes – can often resemble the score of some syncopated music. “I start with a line,” she says. “That line leads one on, making a life of its own, making me a mere instrument of its journey.” The process is a conversation between the artist and her canvas: “I never plan my work, I never know beforehand what’s going to come out.” The art critic, writer and painter John Berger says in his foreword that her work is written in a mother tongue and “Mother tongues are not found in dictionaries... they contain the pre-verbal, the verbal, the words of all languages and all that has not yet been named in any language.” Perhaps that is why her works speak to so wide and varied an audience, crossing all borders and age groups.

Afnan began to include scriptural elements in her paintings and drawings very early in her career as calligraphy had always interested her. This was partly a legacy from her childhood, she says, when official papers and bills came in three languages – English, Hebrew and Arabic. But the thunder-bolt moment came in a Washington, when she first saw the art of Mark Tobey in a gallery. He was to be a profound and lasting influence, the first to introduce and legitimise the use of abstract calligraphy and patterned scripts into modern art. When Afnan made a pilgrimage to his studio in Switzerland some years later, he mentored and encouraged her and facilitated that first European solo exhibition at the Galerie Brambach. “I love looking at scripts,” Afnan says. “They excite me visually and excite me even further when I can’t read then because then it’s so much more mysterious and they could be so many other things, rather than some banal statement.”



Veiled Testament, 2006
mixed media and gauze on paper, 84x104cm
Image courtesy of Rose Issa Projects

Fragment of an ancient manuscript page, likely from the Quran, featuring dense Arabic script in a cursive style. The text is written on aged, yellowish parchment with irregular, torn edges. The script is densely packed and covers most of the page area. The parchment shows signs of wear, including discoloration and some staining, particularly along the right edge. The text is arranged in horizontal lines, typical of classical Arabic manuscripts. The fragment is positioned on the left side of the page, with the right side being blank white space.

Even the Personnages are somehow “written” – the characters are imagined yet seem strangely familiar; they are almost always male and elderly, their lives, hopes and disappointments showing through their lightly drawn features. The *Paysages* are similarly hazy, their titles saying it all: *Vestiges*, *What Remains*, *Once Upon a Place* or *My Tree*. “Place matters to the displaced,” is the artist’s wry comment.

It was her next series, *Veiled*, that brought her international critical acclaim. She first conceived the series as a reaction to the reaction following 9/11. At a time when the world was focusing on the literal veiling of women in Islam, and expecting artists from the Arab world and Iran to produce works around this theme (which they have, ad infinitum), Afnan was instead drawn to the other kind of cover up – not of bodies or faces, but of concealment of truth, character, feelings and intentions. The emotion behind everyday phrases – veiled anxiety, veiled agendas, veiled threats – was made manifest in ink and gouache writings on paper which she gently covered with gauze dipped in smoky colours. The look is again ghostly and delicate – a gentle cloud hovering over the text beneath, which may express something more unsettling, reflected in the titles of the works: *Veiled Melancholia*, *Veiled Emotion*, *Veiled Confrontation*, *Veiled Strategy*, and the poignant image that appears on the cover of the book – of gauze shaped in the form of a suitcase and a title that makes a lump come to the throat of anyone who has ever experienced being an exile or émigré: *Nothing to Declare*.

Katia Hadidian is a London-based freelance writer and editor. Regular clients include the publishers Condé Nast, Hachette and National Magazines, and her interviews, features and reviews have appeared in Psychologies, Harper’s Bazaar, GQ Style and Traveller.