



CULTURE

AN INVISIBLE RED THREAD

Juma Al Haj makes a statement about the pandemic with abstract takes on Arabic calligraphy.

Words by Ruba Al-Sweel

In the long debate over whether art can be viewed separately from the artist, Sharjah native and newcomer Juma Al Haj settles it: “My work features personal scribbles from my journal—I write almost daily.” A graduate in visual communications from the American University of Sharjah, Al Haj confides that texts from different sources catch his eye and serve as a catalyst for his own diaristic soliloquy. Journaling, collecting thoughts for his art, is a ritual highly revered by Al Haj, given that he only moonlights as an artist but reports for work in the government sector every morning.

One such text inspired the work on view at Tashkeel’s *Covid Conversations*, which closed on Jan. 4. The group exhibition by UAE-based artists and designers showcased works that respond to their diverse experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Featuring spirals and scrolling motifs with a technique underpinned by the abstraction of calligraphic patterns, Al Haj’s *Untitled* (2020) is drawn from ancient Chinese lore which reads “*An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, and circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.*” Hung solemnly like a prayer, red ink breaks up the stark whiteness of the canvas. Applied in careful meditation, the lines of abstracted Islamic lettering, while barely legible, are nonetheless formidable. Even though Al Haj laughingly proclaims that he’s “...really good at English cursive, but atrocious at Arabic handwriting,” this imperceptibility of text is no failure by the artist. Rather, it takes inspiration from a significant art movement that took place in the Arab world at the beginning of the 14th century, peaking again in the mid 20th century, called Huru-

COURTESY OF JUMA AL HAJ



fiya. Melding the traditional with the contemporary, the technique focuses less on readability and decryption, and more on deconstructing and foregrounding the formal elements of the Arabic letter.

“While the proverb is never actually written, I infuse the thickness of the strokes with the sentiment of the texts,” he says. “I developed my own technique in loosening my hand and thickening some strokes, which helped me improve my Arabic handwriting significantly,” Al Haj says.

Perhaps the fabled red thread of the Chinese proverb was least visible during a time of government-mandated isolation and decreased human connection, but Al Haj quickly recognised an emerging pattern of alternative connectivity. “I was on social media all day, and found myself reconnecting with people, hobbies and interests. I even made new friends online,” he says, emphasising the irony of a global pandemic bringing the world to a halt of collective recalibration and prioritisation.

Isolation had the artist deliberate over a pre-united UAE, paying aesthetic homage to the former flag of Sharjah, which had a red rectangle on a white background. “The inspiration from this flag in particular is very personal. I moved back to Sharjah from the capital after a country-wide lockdown was announced. I felt it important to be with family,” he explains.

The flag is an apt metaphor when speaking of unbreakable connections. A tapestry of interconnected threads, weaving in and out of vision, but never breaking apart. It’s no wonder, then, that each line echoes with a sentimentality that is cathartic. Each line a thread in the Theory of Everything. ■