

ما بين منسجم منه ومضطرب ... إلى أن يقول:  
بالأقن في الهوى العذرى معذرة  
من إلك ولو أنصفت لم تعلم ...  
والنفس كالطفل إن تعاه شىء على  
حب الرضاع وإن قوطمه ينظم ...  
كم حسنت لفة للمرء قانعة  
من حيث لم يدرك أن السم في الدسم ...  
قد تفر العين ضوء الشمس من رمده  
وبينك القم طعم الماء من مسقم ...

سبعة آيات في المردة  
كعبة الله البقري

انظر إلى  
الأشياء في كتابك  
لمس الكون ...

الشكل المتضاعف ...  
من الباء والتاء والثاء والنون ...  
يجمع في برامجه مشتركة أو متشابهة  
وتتبادل النقاط من الألف إلى الألف ...

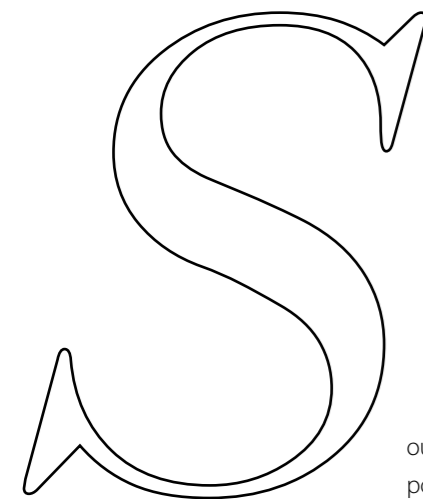
قدان علي  
علي عمر الرضوي

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2004 م

# THE POWER OF THE LETTER

ALI OMAR ERMES

Through his iconic paintings and wide-ranging cultural commentary, Ali Omar Ermes has come to represent the artistic and intellectual soul of the Arab world. **James Parry** meets the man who seeks to inspire his fellow citizens to greater heights.



Opening spread: (Detail) *Multiple Forms*, 2004. Acrylic on paper, mounted on canvas. Approximately 152 x 122 cm. Collection of the artist.

Facing page: *Wa Lan (Ever)*, 2003. Acrylic on paper. Approximately 150 x 120cm. Private collection, Kuwait.

outhern England, in the middle of May: as I drive to my appointment along winding country lanes, their hedges frothing with hawthorn blossom and wildflowers, it strikes me that this seems an odd place in which to visit one of the Arab world's leading artists and intellectual voices. I am on my way to meet Ali Omar Ermes, who for almost three decades has lived and worked outside his native Libya. Here, in the heart of the English countryside, is where he has made his home, at least for the time being. I turn a corner and there on the crest of a hill sits his house, enticingly screened by a grove of established trees. He greets me at the door, smiling warmly and explaining that, "it was a chapel many years ago," in reply to my question on the history of the house, "and was later converted into a private residence." With mullion windows and elegant sandstone facades, the building has an imposing yet welcoming presence and is set in mature gardens. All very English, in fact.

However, the interior of the house presents a different aspect altogether, for this is very much the home of a man clearly steeped in Islam – in all senses, be they religious, intellectual or artistic – but who also succeeds in ensuring that his faith sits easily with life in his adopted country. Ermes lives here with his wife and extended family, and leads me into a comfortable library, full of Chesterfield sofas, wooden panelling and endless shelves of leather-bound books. The room is imbued with an atmosphere of scholarship, academic enquiry and intellectual exchange. Coffee is brought in by Ermes's son, Mohammed, and we start to talk.

Ermes was born in Libya in 1945, at a time when his country was reeling from the effects of the Second World War, its people battered and bruised by the presence of foreign troops and several years of fighting and devastation. "We Libyans were just bystanders, as our land was trampled over by others," he recalls. More immediately, the war signalled the destruction of the thriving business set up by Ermes's father, Omar, and, like many Libyans, the family found itself on hard times. The young Ali Omar spent his early childhood in the historic town of Zlitan, a centre of learning and culture going back several centuries and a place when Muslims expelled from Andalusia in the early 16th century had subsequently settled. As he recalls Zlitan's physical setting, describing its beautiful shoreline backed by fertile farmland, orchards and palm plantations, I begin to understand how the verdant English landscape is not such a surprising choice of location for a man so clearly appreciative of nature's beauty and significance.



This page, from left to right: *Contradictions of Joy*. 1993. Acrylic on paper. Approximately 152 x 122 cm. Collection of The National Museum of African Art, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; *Lammatal Lamm*. 2003. Acrylic and ink on paper, mounted on canvas. Approximately 152 x 122 cm. Private collection; *Aeen. Sharp and Clear*. 2005. Acrylic on paper. Approximately 100 x 100 cm. Private collection, Middle East.

Faimg page: (Detail) *Silah*. 1992. Ink and acrylic on paper, mounted on canvas. Approximately 130 x 115 cm. Collection of the artist.



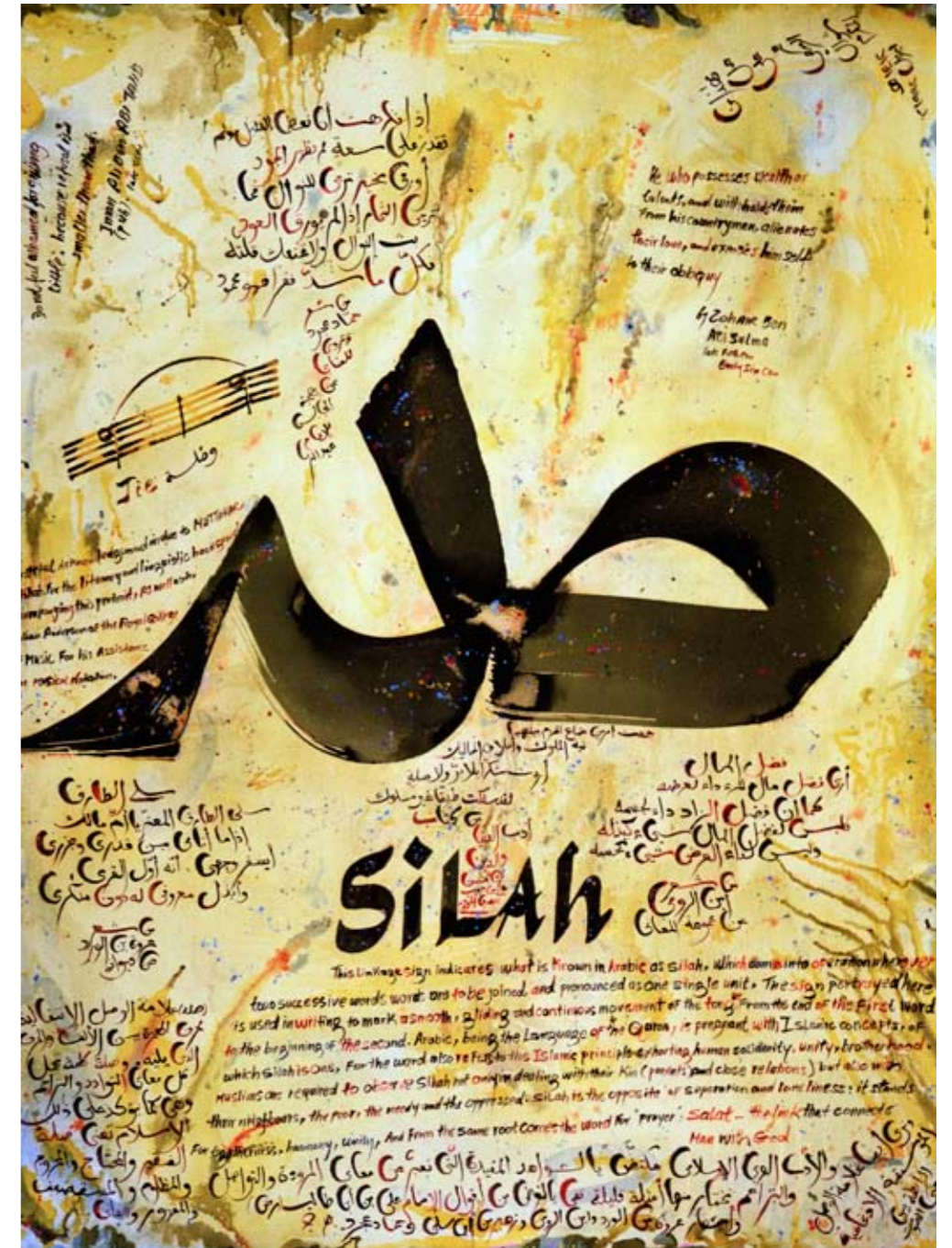
**“You cannot learn how to fly by painting birds.”**

BEYOND NATURE

Nature is certainly present in Ermes’s ground-breaking paintings, but not necessarily in ways that most Western observers would immediately understand or subscribe to. As on many subjects, he has distinct views on the portrayal of nature in art; “I think there is no point in just painting nature, or indeed human portraits for that matter, for the simple reason that one cannot do a better job than what is already there,” he explains; “for me, the idea of learning about nature by simply painting it in replication falls short, intellectually speaking. You cannot learn how to fly by painting birds. Nature should be looked at in terms of what it inspires within us. Art should be a totally new inspiration, not something adapted, repeated or copied. Otherwise humanity will never move on.”

Such clear expressions of belief and their application to artistic practice, and indeed, to life itself, have come to characterise Ermes as a creative commentator. Whilst his dramatic canvases, defined by the use of Arabic letters arranged on richly textured and essentially abstract backgrounds – the overall effect surely an expression of nature’s beauty and power when shaped by human endeavour? – are universally admired, Ermes is far more than an artist in the conventional understanding of the word. He writes, lectures, promotes and stimulates discourse and debate, and is constantly engaging himself in different aspects of life, right across the social, creative and political landscape. Yet he sees all of this as simply part of being who he is. “I don’t see why an artist should stop at producing works on canvas or paper; the debate is so much wider. I want to engage in different aspects of life, negotiate and discuss ideas and philosophies, and see how things develop. One of the keys to an effective life as a human being is to be busy, to be involved. The will to improve is central, both in terms of individual satisfaction and the well-being of the wider community.”

At the age of 10, Ermes moved with his family to the Libyan capital, Tripoli. “I was fascinated by the big city,” he recalls, “but also felt something of a small-town boy there.” Once at secondary



school, he began painting in earnest and was soon selling his works – “I was really experimenting then, creating landscapes, portraits, anything” – as souvenirs to the increasing number of overseas workers who were coming to work in Libya in the wake of the discovery of the country’s oil reserves. Interestingly, however, he was drawn primarily to science as a study subject; “I’ve always had a great love of history and science, especially

the achievements of the Islamic world in fields such as physics, chemistry and astronomy. I even wanted to be a scientist myself.” Incorporating the intellectual properties of these subjects within his art came naturally to him and has continued to inform Ermes’s work ever since. He views a holistic approach, in which all aspects of human existence are considered, as essential to creativity and a natural expression of the universality of Islam.



# “The Arabs lost leadership of the world centuries ago and have been declining ever since. We need to return to the fundamental vision of freedom and liberty.”

Whereas calligraphers work only in pen and ink and are subject to the strictly defined limitations of their craft, Ermes has much more freedom at his disposal. In works such as *Silah* (1992), *Contradictions of Joy* (1993) and *Aeen. Sharp and Clear* (2005) – Ermes uses just one letter as his focal point, seeking to explore the strength and properties of the visual effect of that particular letter, often via its abstraction. However, in other paintings several – or even multiple – letters are combined to articulate a particular statement or to explore the various creative possibilities of their shapes, as in *Multiple Forms* (2004).


Throughout his work, Ermes combines the letters with excerpts and quotes drawn from literature, both historical and contemporary, as well as from political speeches and writings. Poetry is especially prominent, much of it drawn from the halcyon period of Arabic literature during the pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras. Poets such as Zuhair Ibn Abi-Sulma, Abu Al-Tayyib Al-Mutanabbi and Abu Firas Al-Hamadani, plus many others, have provided Ermes with endless inspiration and food for creative thought and expression.

## MATTERS OF CONSCIENCE

In other works, Ermes chooses to run more overtly political texts alongside his letters, addressing a wide range of themes, from freedom of speech and political leadership (the latter tackled especially powerfully in *La’ Na’am and Lakin* [No, Yes and But] (1993), a commentary on the double-talk of political leaders) through to alienation, the role of the individual in wider society and man’s impact on the natural environment. *Wa Lan* (Ever) (2003), for example, features excerpts of poetry, which both reject terrorism and condemn corruption and cultural abuses. Although Ermes derives much of his inspiration from Islamic culture and thinking, he is anxious that his works be seen as accessible and relevant to all cultures; *La Tahzann* and *La Tahinn* [Do Not Despair, Do Not Allow Self-Degradation] (1993), for example, were two paintings that he created during the Bosnian crisis in an effort to speak on behalf of all humanity about what was happening in the Balkans. “All of us are universal citizens, brothers and sisters,” he reflects; “We may differ and even make war on occasions,

but we can’t get away from the fact that we are all inextricably linked.”

I ask him what he thinks of the view, expressed by certain Western commentators and even by some in the Middle East, that the region is overly obsessed with the past and with constantly looking back rather than forward. To see the light at the end of the Middle Eastern tunnel, does one really have to turn round and look behind? Ermes laughs. “Well, yes and no. The real issue is that people only feel protected by what they know, as in their history. Their current situation is so fragile. If you look forward... well, to what? To a Western-style modernity? To what everyone else is doing? That’s a worrying prospect for many people, and there is such distrust, of the big powers, of political leaders generally, of the layers of hypocrisy etc. The Arabs lost leadership of the world centuries ago and have been declining ever since. We need to return to the fundamental vision of freedom and liberty, as defined by the cultural values of the Arab world, and raise our game for the good of humanity.”

For Ermes the quest continues to bring the Arab world back to centre stage, to a place where it is noticed, respected and valued once more. “We need custodians of fairness!” he exclaims, “a coalition with all that is good from the West and other parts of the world, based on mutual understanding and trust, so that collectively we can implement proper and lasting justice globally.” Meanwhile he is already busy on his next project, a series of paintings based on the achievements of the great Arab/Islamic scientists of the past, looking at what they said, how they contributed to world knowledge and advancement, and what was said about them – a typically complex and insightful approach that promises a momentous exhibition in two or three years’ time. Before then, he has an important show scheduled at Meem Gallery in Dubai in autumn this year, paintings to be auctioned by Sotheby’s in both London and Doha, and is also discussing a major monograph on his life and work. “Every artwork is like a book and every exhibition is like an encyclopaedia,” he says. Sure enough, piece by piece, the metaphorical global library of Ermes is coming together. 

For more information visit [www.aliomaremes.com](http://www.aliomaremes.com)

Previous spread: *La’ (No)*. 2003. Acrylic on paper. Approximately 150 x 120 cm. Private collection, Morocco.

Facing page: ‘A444’. 1992. Ink and acrylic on paper. Approximately 152 x 122 cm. Private collection, Switzerland.

All images courtesy the artist.

