Dance me to the end of night
Born in Tehran in 1972, Golnaz Fathi is an influential member of an exciting group of contemporary artists to surface in Iran over the last several years. While studying Graphic Design at Azad University in Tehran, Fathi, always fascinated by the expressive potential of traditional Persian calligraphic forms, immersed herself in a sustained six-year study of traditional calligraphy. She then became one of only a tiny handful of women trained to the highest level within that discipline. Despite this, Fathi felt the need to expand her practice, to develop new forms of expression. October Gallery conducted the following interview on the occasion of her second solo exhibition at the gallery, Dance Me to the End of Night.

It’s been over three years since Liminal-Subliminal, your last exhibition at October Gallery. Please tell us about your new work.

Yes, how time flies! In this new body of work, I used a very fine pen with ink to develop a new idiom. In stark contrast to my signature paintings with their deep brush strokes, this work is more minimalist, the abstract writing thinning to a mere line. I have been working this way for the past few years, now, and have exhibited in Dubai, New York, and Shanghai, but it was very important for me to show these new developments to a London-based audience. As well as large-scale canvases, this exhibition includes, for the first time, book and video works. One of these is a handmade, folded, Chinese-paper book, which is painted on both sides, not with script this time, but with numbers. Adopting the same technique of using a fine pen, I formed Arabic numbers across one side and, in contrast, used Roman numerals on the reverse. The work, stretching over two metres when completely opened out, is a vital part of the exhibition. Finally, I am showing two video installations in this exhibition. For these, I digitised my hand-written script, often creating multiples of the lines, and worked with software which allowed the lines to move, mix and resonate across the screen. All of these works are the result of my many meditations over the past three years.

The new works in this show are inspired by the Siah Mashgh technique. Could you tell us something about this.

Siah Mashgh consists of repeatedly writing letters over and over again, building layer upon layer, until the pictorial element is entirely covered by the density of the mark-making. Traditionally, calligraphers worked using the practice of Siah Mashgh for warming up their hands, before they began to write their main work. For me, it is more than an exercise; it is the most artistic part of calligraphy. When using this practice you don’t think about composition and your hand moves freely. You can change the direction and even turn the paper. Then, you reach a stage of solid black by repeating and repeating the alphabet. At the end you are left with a paper, which, although not legible, could still be a piece of art.

Your work integrates differing calligraphic modes such as Siah Mashgh, into the creative process. Do you anticipate how the work will develop or is the outcome unknown?

In general, I don’t think you can do anything without knowledge. Today, I break all the rules of calligraphy that I ever learnt, yet, without this early learning, I wouldn’t be able to create my work. So, nothing happens spontaneously. However, I do all the thinking before starting the works; a meditation which can take a long time. Then, when I begin to work there might be things that happen spontaneously and, while I welcome this adventure in the work, my trained hand also knows how to direct it.

Your creative process demands intense concentration and focus. Explain the origin of the works.

Firstly, I focus on the brush strokes. This part is vital, because I have to place them correctly. Secondly, I begin to write my lines, which requires a lot of concentration. I sit somewhere still and immerse myself in the work for hours and hours. I carry over this method from the many years of training as a calligrapher, when I would sit and practice for over six hours a day, without moving. So somehow it is a remnant of those years but applied in a different way. At times, I listen to music and, at other times, just work in pure silence. This part of the process puts me in an almost Zen-like state of mind. I forget about time and place; I am in a different world! The stillness talks to me. Finally, my attention turns to the red line. This is the last part, but it can often take days to decide the placement of that line. A stroke in the wrong place will destroy the whole piece.
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From where do you draw your inspiration? You mentioned to me before that your work is the result of a captured thought or story. Please can you elaborate.

The best inspiration, for me, is life itself. All my surroundings, circumstances and experiences affect my life. It could be a piece of music that moves me in a certain way or just a simple thought. I believe we have to look carefully around us, and, it is only then, that we find thousands of things that spark inspiration, even things that are very close to us. We should open our eyes and just sense them.

In this exhibition you are presenting two new video works. How has working with video developed your practice?

As I mentioned before, this is the first time I have worked with this medium. I am passionate about music and dance, so with these works I decided to take on the role of a choreographer and allow my lines to become like dancers. In this sense I created a different form of script in the videos, in comparison to those depicted with paint that are static, and have no movement; here they dance with the rhythm of the music. I feel it is important for artists to work with different media as it opens up the creative process and generates new possibilities. Although the script visible in the video was originally the same as that on the canvas, its identity is different, because I have treated it differently. It is this part of the process that I find the most exciting, when the work, through the use of a new medium, evolves beyond what I expected.

The titles you have given to your video works, *Dance Me to the End of Night* and *Let’s Blow Them Away* are interesting. Tell me more about where those titles come from.

The videos themselves gave me the titles. *Dance Me to the End of Night* concludes with two lines linked together as they move across the screen. For me, this was a direct representation of two lovers dancing in rhythm, and then disappearing...the only title it could be was *Dance Me to the End of Night*.

Entitling the second work, *Let’s Blow Them Away*, was instinctive. It had to be a literal translation of my actual intention; I really wanted to blow the lines away! For this work, I created a pyramid of my written scripts, and by blowing in different directions, interesting movements were formed. Having this power to direct and move my scripts around was a new opportunity for me. Just as I could create, I could also destroy.

It’s interesting that you frequently make reference to music. It seems a major component in the video works, especially in *Dance Me to the End of Night*, so beautifully set to Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 23. Has music been influential in the way you work?

Music has always been important, not only in my work, but also in my life. I cannot live without music! In the video works my aim was, as I said before, to give new life to the scripts through movement. In *Dance Me to the End of Night*, I wanted the lines to have a rhythm to which they could move. The work of Mozart, in particular his 23rd piano concerto, fitted perfectly with the rhythm and movement I wanted to achieve. The pauses between notes allow time for reflection and, suddenly, the lines are ready to dance again.

In the new paintings you’re showing, a thin red line prevails. Does this red line have symbolic overtones?

This red line is very important but, for me, it cannot be translated into words. Do we have to translate so many things? No, there are some things that just speak for themselves, and we should let them do that. Why not?

Most of your work is left untitled. Do you feel this allows the viewer more interpretative freedom?

Absolutely, it is my intention to give viewers the freedom to translate the works themselves, and not to feel that the artist is dictating to them how they have to react. I create works using my own experiences. The intended outcome is not to try to limit interpretation but to encourage and embrace it. Let the mind go as far as it wants!
Untitled (33), 2014.
Triptych - Acrylic, pen, gold leaf and varnish on canvas,
40 x 120 x 5 cm.
Untitled (32), 2014. 
Triptych - Acrylic, pen, and varnish on canvas, 
40 x 120 x 5 cm.
Untitled (35), 2014.
Book - Acrylic and pen on paper,
35 x 150 cm.
Untitled (34), 2014.
Triptych - Acrylic, pen, and varnish on canvas,
180 x 405 x 5 cm.