

MOHAMMED ALI

By Buck Austin

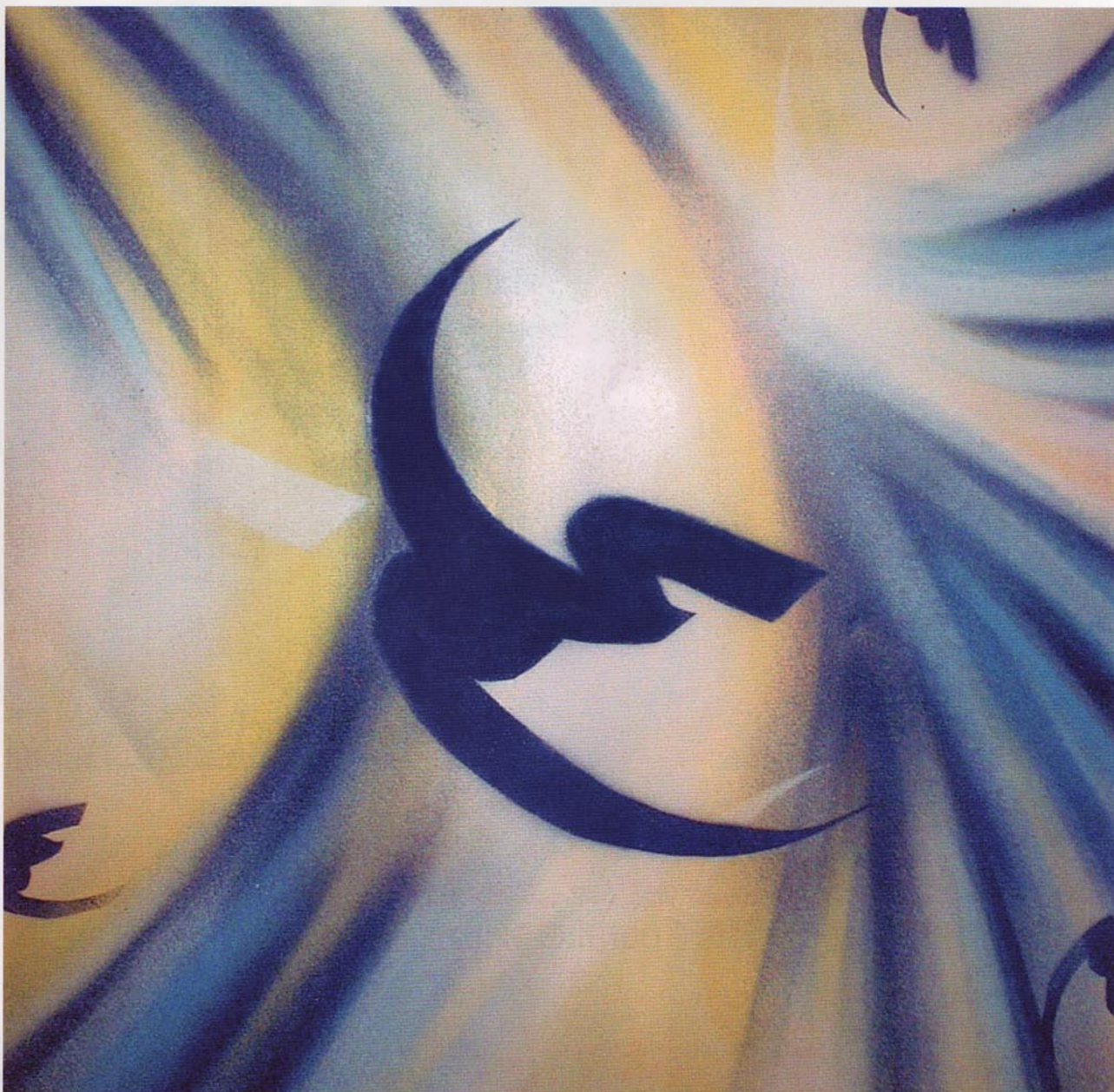
Driving from his native Birmingham, England to a night of clubbing with cronies in a nearby city, Mohammad Ali was jolted by the sudden vision of a vehicle in front of him bouncing off other vehicles like a sadist in a mosh pit. Jumping on the brakes, Ali felt the nose of his car dive and his upper back muscles clench around his spine. As his car shrieked to a stop, Ali found himself staring directly in the face of the driver who had caused the acci-

dent, their vehicles a few feet apart. Thoroughly shaken by the near catastrophe, Ali's thoughts in the following days centered on his Muslim faith. "I had come close to meeting my Lord. Was I ready to face him? What had I done with my life?" When seen through that prism, the graffiti art he was doing in his free time at college seemed pretty empty. But in reflecting on it, Ali was struck by the similarities between the stylized letters of graffiti tags and the graceful curves of the Arabic in the Qur'an, a book that, since the near accident, he had been reading with new vigor. Soon, Ali was engineering his own style of Arabic graffiti art. Melding on canvases Rothko-bold colors with an accessible visual language influenced by graffiti, traditional Arabic calligraphy flourishes, the design sensibilities of graphic linguist extraordinaire Neville Brody, and comic book "POW!" explosions, Ali's aerosol paintings have found a receptive audience at galleries and universities throughout England in the past five years.

The 26-year-old artist recently explained to ALARM the motivations behind his work.

Do you see your art as a tool to educate people about Islam?

Yes, that is the focus of my work. It isn't about commercial or personal gain. I wanted to make a change with the skills I was given. With all [of] what's happening in the media, the negativity, the stereotypes, the Islamophobia, I wanted to do something to change the condition of people around me. It wasn't enough to do this verbally. It would fall upon deaf ears. Some people have made their minds up, no matter how loud you are shouting. I began using my art as a means of communication, a bridge between the people, a talking point, something that triggered dialogue. It was something people of the West could certainly connect with, especially the young. It is a medium that is approachable and not something distant that people couldn't connect with. I wanted to show that not all Muslims are terrorists. We are regular people with regular interests.



How did 9/11 change your view of the mission of your art?

It didn't really change it. Misconceptions of Islam have always been there. 9/11 just encouraged me more to push it stronger. It's a religion that has been misunderstood and stereotyped for as long as I can remember. My last job as a graphic designer, before they employed me, they asked me, 'Do you have any extremist opinions?' I got the job in the end, but I knew then it was something I had to deal with. I had to do something to make a change.

Have you been able to gauge the effect your art has had on people who aren't Muslim?

I've done a lot of exhibitions throughout the UK, including Oxford and Cambridge Universities. The response from there was great. Non-Muslims often wish to purchase work. I always try to explain, without offending, that I am careful about who purchases my work. I say this because my artwork isn't just regular art. It's something very sensitive, something from the religion. So, to whoever buys my work,

I will explain how it should be hung, where it should be hung, etc. It shouldn't be hung in a bar where alcohol is served, or placed next to a picture of a nude woman or something like that! People usually understand; in fact, it makes the painting more special for them. My work represents recognizing the Creator, and good values such as honesty, wisdom, and peace – this is something all good people of society can appreciate.

Have you received negative reactions to your art?

Yes, definitely. After an article was written about me on the BBC website, a racist website responded on their web forums. They quoted parts of the article and started abusing the BBC for their support of 'some Muslim in Birminghamstan.' I think these guys misunderstood, thinking that I am going around the walls of the UK spraying Islamic messages! However it was quite clear enough from the article that I was a canvas artist, and my work was about peace, not world domination.



“I discovered an amazing parallel with graffiti and Islamic art.”

Has doing the art made your faith stronger?

Yes, for sure. I choose words that are powerful and symbolic of my faith, and write them in bold and striking styles. Reflecting on the meaning of the words in itself boosts the faith. I write words like “ilm” which means “knowledge” in Arabic. It’s such a powerful concept. Busying myself writing the word of God within my work certainly keeps me in a mode of remembrance of Him.

What was it that initially drew you to painting Arabic words?

The Qur’an was revealed to the people as forbidding figurative art, in order to prevent the images becoming symbols of worship, so it was a logical progression that calligraphy then became the focus of the art for Muslims. Before I became drawn to Islam and Islamic art, I

was already fascinated with letterforms anyway, due to my interest with graffiti art. So when I discovered Islamic calligraphy, it was a smooth transition for me as I was already experimenting with different styles of writing within my graffiti. In fact, I discovered an amazing parallel with graffiti and Islamic art. Islamic art was the glorification of God’s word, while the latter was glorification of man’s word.

Do you worry about making your art too Western and not traditional enough?

There are many issues that worry me with what I do. This is something very delicate. I am dealing with religion. I don’t want to do something incorrect, which might offend people and more importantly to me, God. Some people ask, ‘Would you paint words in Arabic back onto the walls, like the original graffiti?’ Although I’d love to be able to paint a huge mural with Arabic letters, that would really



excite me, I am wary, as someone may deface it, or spray on top of it. These are spiritual scripts, the word of the Creator. There are major issues here: vandals, maybe someone urinating on the works. Best to keep the medium of canvas, hung indoors, safe from all of this.

What is it about Arabic aesthetically that gives it power?

It's the harmony of the proportions, the accurate formation of the characters, the communicative action of the calligrapher's hand with fluid and elegant brush strokes. The elegance of the script to me is very soothing. The words almost dance in front of you. The lack of capital characters and the balance between the verticals and the open curves below the middle point induce a sense of harmony. They are often stylized in many ways, even written to form an oval shape, or a script maybe written to form the shape

of a boat. Many different styles of writing developed from different regions, from square, blocky script to smooth curves, however, the words remained the same.

To see more of Mohammad Ali's work, visit www.aerosolarabic.com.