

'It's the coming together of the West and Islam'

SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

Graffiti artist Mohammed Ali and photographer Peter Sanders speak of how Islam has influenced their art and how understanding it can help bridge the gulf that divides the world

By Veena Kuruvilla

DUBAI Two men, both British, both united by their faith first and then by their works. Had providence not stepped in, these two would have never crossed paths.

While photographer Peter Sanders discovered Islam when he set out on a photographic mission to capture world religions through his camera, artist Mohammed Ali, who was born into a Muslim family, touched base with Islam after a grave car accident had him seeking the bigger picture and the larger message contained in it.

Today, the two of them have brought their creations to the Fairmont Hotel, Dubai for their joint exhibition, *Salam in the City*. What is apparent from their framed creativity is that the artist wields graffiti and calligraphy for the cause of Islam and the photographer, his lens.

Sanders and Ali come with the message of peace at a time when intolerance and religion-rooted rage is dictating the rhythm of this world. Quiz these gentlemen on art clashing with the fundamentals of Islam and they say there is none.

Ali says, "Art is a reflection of my faith. Some people ask me if I find it difficult to be in the parameters of Islamic art because of figurative issues. They ask me if I am limited or restricted in any way. To me it is a great challenge to be able to work within a framework. It makes me think in a different way...breaking out of the box. What is most important to us is our faith. My faith is more important to me."

But isn't graffiti, an art form that originated in the streets of America, a contradiction to the religion? "People ask me, 'Isn't it blasphemous?' They can't understand how something as wild as graffiti art can be turned into a spiritual thing. But my work has no contradictions whatsoever. It's the coming together of the



Seated from left to right: Mohammed Ali, Nadeem Malik (press agent) and Peter Sanders. (Photos: K.N. Murali)

West and Islam," says Ali.

Clearly, it's not just the Islamic calligraphy and street graffiti that Ali is attempting to bridge through his work. Together with Sanders, he is aiming to pull together the new and the old and the West and Islam.

Says Sanders, "Islam influences what I photograph. I did intend to photograph all the major religions and started with Islam but I never got beyond it."

Armed with his camera, Sanders spent the past 35 years of his life travelling around the Muslim world looking for what is left of traditional Islam. Ironically, the pockets of traditional Islam that he has pieced together is hung on the walls of a modern building on Sheikh Zayed road. "I'm trying to remind people what Islam was. It's interesting that it is in this modern building today but this is where we are in history today."

Islamic art, however, is not for eyes that have embraced and accepted Islam alone. Ali says, "Islam is our inspiration,

but we are projecting it for everybody."

Their perspective on the recent cartoon controversy which has brought to boil simmering anti-Muslim sentiments in Europe and the rest of the Western world is, surprisingly, not of anger. Sadness maybe, but not that of retaliation or wrath. In fact, they hope to convert this situation to the positive and sound the real message contained in Islam.

Sanders says, "As human beings when we don't understand something and we are frightened of something we have to belittle it and that's what has happened. I'm not a politician. I just want to bridge build and reach out to people with my art. It's our fault we haven't represented what we should have. People haven't understood the religion."

With calligraphy sprayed on to canvases and photography representing the different faces of Islam, the men hope to dispel the negative tones that the West associate with Islam.

If Sanders had his way, he would publish a positive newspaper because "we need a paper called the Good News".

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Ali manipulates aerosol spray cans for lending graffiti effect to calligraphy.