

one to watch



TRAIN OF THOUGHT

Young and upcoming Egyptian artist Sameh Ismael is not only a talented calligrapher, but is a hip graffiti artist with ambitious plans.



The train pulls into the station, brakes screeching as it pulls to a stop at the platform. As the doors open, people pour out, a sea of men and women going about their daily business. It is just another day, with errands to run, buses to catch and jobs to do. Yet, these people have just experienced something out of the ordinary, for the train on which they have ridden is no boring grey, but a brilliant mixture of yellow, orange and blue. In fact, the train is covered in English and Arabic graffiti, skillfully applied from top to bottom and front to back.

Little could Sameh Ismael have imagined, when, 10 years ago, he began work as a graphic designer at Egyptian Television, that by the age of 35, he would be curating and organising exciting graffiti operations and working on new and fresh perspectives in traditional Arabic calligraphy.

Born in Cairo in 1974, Ismael studied Classic Arabic calligraphy before going on to do a bachelor of arts in graphics and book art at Helwan University. Graduating in 1997 and going almost directly to work for Egyptian Television, the aspiring artist practiced his creativity by freelancing with advertisement agencies, and even managing to design the calligraphy for famed Egyptian director Youssef Chahine's film, *Al-Masseer (The Destiny)*. After a joint exhibition with Hamdy Reda in 2006, the young calligrapher's career suddenly took off at break-neck speed. Follow this with both group and solo exhibitions in Cairo and Abu Dhabi, Ismael was poised to unveil a project that was leaps and bounds removed from the traditional realms of Arabic calligraphy.

"I believe that one of the reasons Latin letters and calligraphy have become so popular in Arabic-speaking and Islamic countries is due to the developed techniques and innovations used in different applications, such as electronic typography, the printing press and graffiti areas that basically depend on delivering a direct and interactively dazzling message to the viewer," explains Ismael. "Arab calligraphers are still imprisoned inside the walls of mosques and places of worship, although many calligraphers have tried to develop Arabic calligraphy through their artistic works. The fundamental connection between Islam, the Qu'ran and Arab calligraphy has also contributed to the hesitation of using Arabic letters in a rational modern manner."

Working in new and original techniques, Ismael's beautiful and elegant calligraphy led to something of a much more street-culture nature. In 2008 he curated the project 'A Dialogue on the Railway', working alongside Austrian graffiti artist Thomas Mock. Together the two bedecked carriages of the Egyptian Railways Association with coats of colourful graffiti, melding East and West in a litany of calligraphy, images and artistic swirls. "As I work in the field of Arabic calligraphy, I tend to search for new trends and techniques in art," explains Ismael. "I also mix Arabic calligraphy with these new artistic techniques. Graffiti is one of the most



Sameh Ismael at work on a train.

important techniques, because it is a Western artistic trend that has spread so easily. I decided to enter its world and launch Arab Contemporary calligraphy issues, apart from my other artistic work in painting."

The choice of a public transport train was a conscious one, and very much part of the thinking behind Ismael's project. A firm believer in the need to 'rehabilitate' the populace on street art, he felt that a train would be one of the best ways to share the new and exciting techniques he was creating. "This rehabilitation will not occur unless art goes out to the streets and the everyday life of people in a tangible manner," Ismael stresses. "Hence the terrain of my project, an old everyday transport vehicle that people use in Egypt to take them throughout the country." Used by a large portion of the tourism sector, the Saeed Train was perfect for Ismael, with its trips between the country's capital and such ancient sites as Aswan and Luxor. "The train is a large mobile artistic space which carries ideas, inspiration and enjoyment for everyone to see. It can be used to support the dialogue of cultures on the artistic level," smiles Ismael.

With audience reaction extremely positive, Ismael has been encouraged to continue his graffiti projects. "I received so many calls from people from all walks of life who congratulated me and demanded more of this art. In my opinion, this was the real success of the project." Currently working on 'The Train Symposium', an initiative that would bring 24 artists together to graffiti the surfaces of an Egyptian train (half of whom would be Egyptian, while the other half international artists), Ismael hopes to target "the heart, mind and soul of the ordinary public." Concludes the talented young artist, "Arab calligraphy is extremely rich, enchanting and interactive. Life is short, and spending it in the creative routes of this line is well worth it."

Sameh Ismael is represented by Almasar Gallery in Cairo, Egypt. For more information call +201 22161115 or visit www.almasargallery.com