

The Artist's Book: More Than Painting Words

Wen-chin Ouyang

The *daftar* (or 'artist's book') epitomises the fusion of world cultures and indigenous traditions that began during this period, established itself as a Middle Eastern tradition in the second half of the 20th century, and achieved world renown in the 21st century. But it is more than a union of East and West, past and present, and word and image. It is a site of contemplation on, among other things, the nature of humanity, language and communication. Dia al-Azzawi's *dafātir* are his library of poetry from the Arab world and beyond, and his creative responses to this poetry. They show that he is at home in the world as well as an inspired interpreter of poetics.

On the surface, the *daftar* is the painter's translation of word into image but at Dia Azzawi's hands it extends such relationship between word and image in more ways than one. It accentuates the narrative dimensions of painting, integrates art viewing into book reading, and offers us a serial of painterly tableaux that can orient how we read word and comprehend narrative. More importantly, it shows us that the experience of art, whether of a painting, or a poem, or an epic, is visceral, just like the materiality of the *daftar* itself. Azzawi's *dafātir* are both books and sculptures. They materialise for us our relationship with poetry and demonstrate that language is more than just word. Poetry, just like his *dafātir*, is a combination of word, image, sound, and body language. The musicality of the poems he recreates is his starting point as he writes in 'An Iraqi Perspective on Visual Art in Relation to World Literature':

I find that the intersection of poetry and drawing lies in the creation of a lasting spiritual dimension, and in establishing a space that results from the compression and transformation of language in the poetic text. This is what allows the musicality of colour and a variety of suggested forms (afforded by the tool of drawing and painting) to emerge as visual units, which sometimes are the key to developing a dialogue, or which foreclose that dialogue by depriving the work of artistic value.¹

Music, more obviously than poetry and painting, is abstract and visceral at the same time. The human body gives sound shape and form, translating it into music, the impact of which we feel physically. In Arabic culture, sound – as well as word and image – has always been a part of poetry and story, which are enjoyed most when they are performed live. Body language plays a role in how we comprehend and appreciate poetry and story. Azzawi's painting *The Figure of Love Struck Down by Sorrow* (1967) brings to life how the Arabs have understood

poetry and story as performance. Al-Jāhiz (d. 868) in his famous work on communication, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabayīn* ('Clarity and Clarification') locates meaning in how communication is effected, in addition to word, through physical appearance, bodily gestures, image, sound, and vocal articulation of the rhythmic patterns of words. This culture, together with the pre-modern tradition of book making, is the backbone of Azzawi's life-long engagement with the Arabic world of letters. The figure in the painting stretches his hand out, seemingly from a pulpit, [spawning](#) a series of letters, as if words of love are an extension of his body.

Azzawi's creative vision is also premised on pushing the boundaries of familiarity, seeking to transcend them, to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. Poetry is both expression and performance of the magic hidden in the folds of our ordinary life. Like the Arab modernist poets, who find resources for our *joie de vivre* in our quotidian routines and objects, coming to terms with the tumult of our times to find nirvana, Azzawi offers us the world in which the tumult is nirvana. The lines, shapes and shadows of his drawings, standing alone or merging with his handwriting, visualise, interpret, and perform the poems, while challenging our reading, and transforming our experience, of them. Each *daftar* works differently but the impact is consistent: an ecstasy (or *tarab*, in Arabic) that rushes through the lines and colours and the explosive energy they create. This ecstasy is our response to Azzawi's creativity.

The drawings he makes for Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab's poem 'Stranger to the Gulf'² do not complement the lines he writes in his own hand with visual narrative; rather, they convey the tumult an Iraqi exile feels as he sits on the Kuwaiti shores of the Gulf looking across at a homeland to which he cannot return. The stormy winds and their noise are inner turmoil he feels in his core. The boat and gramophone Azzawi draws condense the narrative into emotion and experience. The ways in which the drawings overwhelm the lines of poetry evoke how we feel when the violence of the winds threatens to capsize the boat we are on whilst their noise takes over all our senses. His rendition of Sayyab's 'Rainsong'³ is, on the other hand, moody. The blues and fluid lines capture the feel of the rain, and the sequence of drawings in blue, green, red, and yellow, remind us of the ancient Babylonian fertility myth that Sayyab writes into his vision of Iraq's decline and revival, death and return to life. Azzawi's visualisation of Mahmoud Darwish's 'To My Mother'⁴ transcends the materiality of quotidian life in his homeland – bread, coffee, kerchief, stove, courtyard – and transports us into a world of shifting moods as we move from remembrance of the brightness of childhood to a sense of defiance against a looming death, from patches of soft blue, green, yellow, and

red surrounding the white space on which the prelude of the poem is written to the black page punctuated by a red flame from which the second caesura peaks through in white.

We see Azzawi's musical vision more fully in his rendition of Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī's 'The Will of Life'.⁵ Every Arab knows by heart al-Shābbī's famous poem from 1933 which is today Tunisia's national anthem. It was and continues to be an expression of resistance to coloniality, tyranny, and trials and tribulations of life. The will of life, the poem shows us, is ingrained in human nature, as the earth, wind, rain, mountains, forests, and birds show us through their triumph over the vicissitudes of time or the life and death cycles and, in fact, tell us in their own voices. The poem is cast in a classical metre (*al-mutaqārib*) but its composition is that of a symphony. The voices of nature rise and fall harmoniously, as in Beethoven, Mozart or Stravinsky, and immerse us in the polyphonic world al-Shābbī creates with words and Azzawi with images. In Azzawi's drawings, different parts of nature, evoked through vague shapes but colourfully in a sequence of tableaux, flow into each other, leaving only the persistent hand and patch of red flame, to remind us of our passion to break free of all shackles and live in concert with nature where boundaries dissolve.

Notes:

¹ Cf. p.33 of this catalogue (TBC)

² Cf. AZ.DAF.11.2

³ Cf. AZ.DAF.89.6

⁴ Cf. AZ.DAF.11.3

⁵ Cf. AZ.DAF.90.1



Dia al-Azzawi, *The Figure of Love when Struck Down by Sorrow*, 1967, oil on canvas, 134 × 134 cm

The Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation, Beirut