

cynthia byrnes
contemporary art

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Artist Statement

For a thousand years, Islamic artists have patterned their surfaces, long before Pollock activated the surface of his canvases in what Harold Rosenberg called “apocalyptic wallpaper.” Islam has always found the value of pattern and rhythmic repetition in art as a visual representation of a spiritual realm, a visual mantra, if you will. The implications of this are profound and far-reaching, especially as western art today sits in the midst of such great conflict between Eastern and Western cultures.

Yet, this, for me, is the essence of why painting is so powerful and why painting is not frivolous, but vital in today's climate, because it bridges the gap between visual and spiritual modes of understanding. As Mark Rothko said, “The most important state of being for the artist to fashion through constant practice is faith in his ability to produce miracles, miracles that come with the interaction between the known and unknown, real and abstract, conscious and subconscious, material and spiritual.” My paintings are an exploration of these ideas, an attempt to synthesize and enlighten pursuits of eastern and western art and their traditions. Using the full visual language of abstraction – color, shape, line, mark, and texture - I merge the traditions of Islamic pattern and abstract expressionism and thereby consciously cross boundaries of culture, history, religion, race, ideology and politics. In this manner I attempt to “tell the story” of culture, politics, and humanity in this time and place.

As Picasso said of ‘Guernica’, “The importance of the painting is not the illustration of an event. The painter does more than document. It should have the same value to a blind man, for a painter paints not what he sees, but what he feels, what he tells himself about what he has seen. It should transcend the moment.” Similarly, for me, painting is not the reproduction of nature as much as the dynamism of visual forces. In my paintings I do not want to reproduce the visible, I want to create an experience of perception. For it is that interaction with a painting, that experience of perception, that truly offers enlightenment, for if vision is “seeing”, then perception is “knowing,” which reveals the intangible element and transformative power of history's greatest paintings. Essentially, a painting offers that moment of enlightenment when “seeing” becomes “knowing,” that fully unnamable but universal experience of connection and understanding of what, a moment before, was baffling to us, that moment of realization that lies beyond our will or intention. It is the essence of wonder, the spark of inspiration, the moment of realization and the magic of enlightenment. What is painting, but the elevation of our sensory experience that we may connect with our understanding and wonder of the world and our place in it? What is more common and universal in the human experience? That is my hope for my work, and why I find painting to be vital in today's climate, because it offers the opportunity to enlighten by example a synthesis of understanding, of aesthetic, of a necessary and vital sense of commonality and the universal in the human experience.