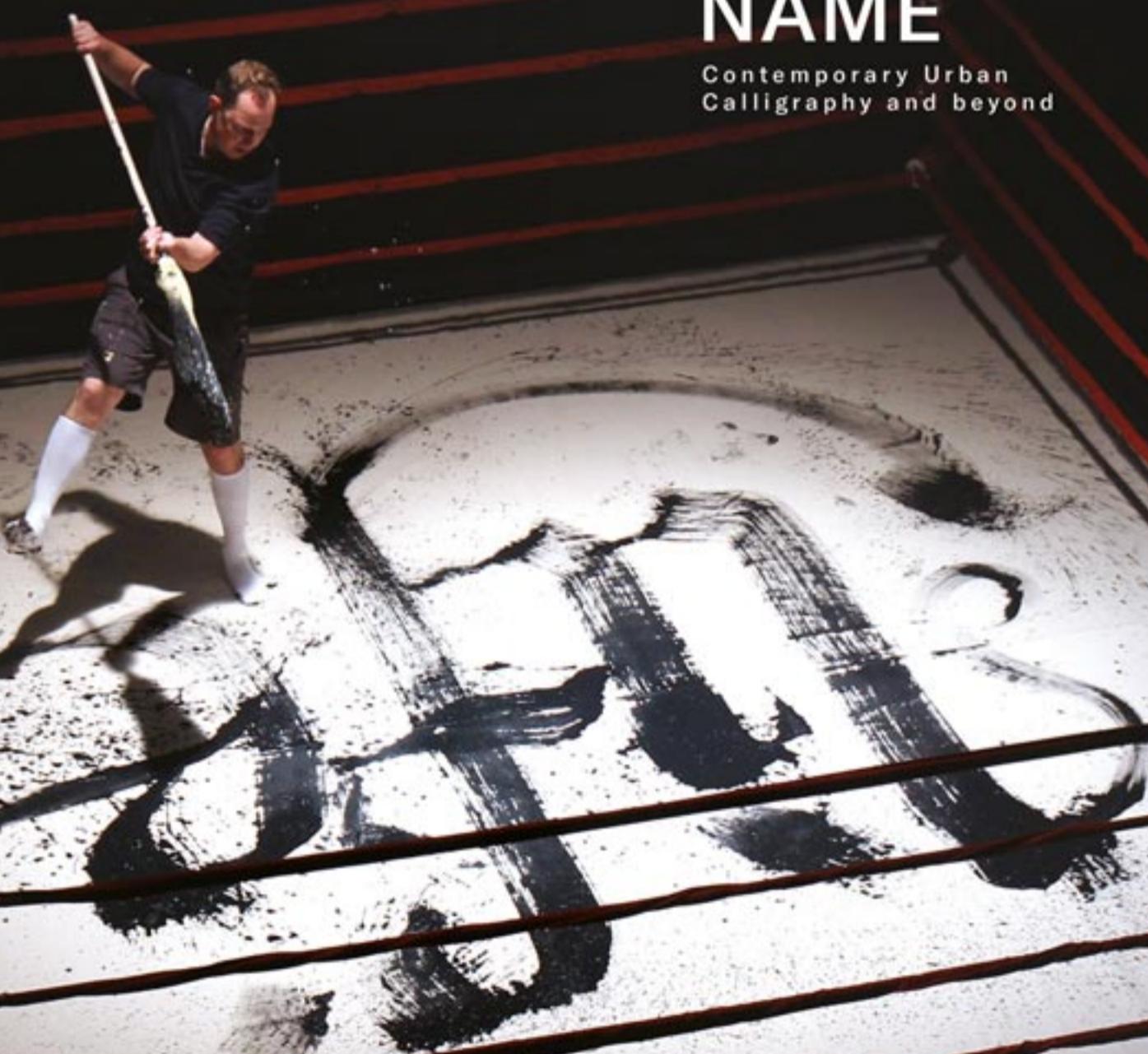


# THE ART OF WRITING YOUR NAME

Contemporary Urban  
Calligraphy and beyond



Patrick Hartl & Christian Hundertmark



1  
JonOne in his atelier  
2015

## JonOne

*'Le futur est dans les toiles' / The future is in the canvases* – John Andrew Perello (born 1963, New York, USA; lives and works in Paris), known as JonOne or Jon 156, founded the All Starz 156 group in 1984, after diving into the world of Graffiti at the age of 17 due to his childhood friend White Man. Different to other Graffiti artists creating figurative works, he produces abstract works that are influenced by movement, colour, and energy. As self-taught artist, JonOne began painting on canvas in 1985 because it offered the opportunity of leaving a mark in time. In the same year, gallery owner Rick Librizzi exhibited his work in New York. Following the invitation of Bando, he then went to Paris in 1987. In France, he had the chance to 'continue his personal development'. In 1990, JonOne met Pierre Cornette de Saint Cyr, who gave him the possibility to come to Hôpital Éphémère, setting up in Hôpital Bretonneau from 1991 to 1996. He then met Sharp, Ash, JayOne, and Skki And A-One, who introduced him to the world of Parisian art and made him discover galleries and exhibitions.

'Graffitim', his first solo show, took place in 1990 at Galerie Gleditsch 45 in Berlin, Germany – collective and personal exhibitions all over the world followed (Tokyo, Monaco, Paris, Geneva, New York, Hong Kong, Brussels). His paintings are an explosion of colours, and JonOne describes himself as a 'painter of abstract and expressionist Graffiti'.

**Which materials and tools do you use for your work? Do you have a special technique? Do you prefer wall or canvas – and for what reasons?**

'Materials' has always been something extremely interesting for me. I mean I started as like in the 1980s using one material, which was a spray can and a train. And then, little by little, I expanded my tools to acrylics, markers, using different papers, painting on canvases, and then using pastels, aquarelles, and gouaches, so I do not limit myself as far as materials go. Now, I paint with oils also.

So for me the medium I'm using is a necessary tool to execute the visions I have in my mind. So I don't limit myself let's say to like painting even on walls. I mean I mostly paint on canvases to tell you the truth because I'm more of a studio artist than let's say a street artist. But that's what I developed to. I respect people that paint on walls and things like that and come from the generation of street artists. But I'm from a generation of Graffiti vandals and vandalism and painting on trains. So personally, I have evolved to become a studio artist and painting on canvas, and that's where I'm at today. I don't know where I'll be tomorrow. Maybe I'll go back to painting on streets. But today, I'm doing big shows in foundations and even in museums. I just finished doing a group show in a museum in Korea. So I'm very proud of my evolution as an artist.

**Is there a specific piece of work you're most proud of? Or one with a unique story behind it?**

That's an interesting question because, yeah it is true, some works stand out more than others, and throughout my career, there have been some paintings that have been a marking stone in my life. Let's take the one I did for the Assemblée

Nationale in France, which I did in 2015 and which presented a canvas of Delacroix: 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité'. That was a very moving moment for me in the sense that putting a painting of mine in an international assembly of friends and be exposed there... and especially what it meant after the terrorist attack. Liberty is something I always stand for because I'm an artist who has always fought for freedom – freedom of expression. So that was a painting that really meant a lot to me.

**Do you have a precise plan when you start working, or are you simply struck by inspiration?**

Lately, I would say a lot of inspiration and improvisation. But I take notes usually when I travel or I see something that's inspiring for me. I'm a very – I don't like to say that word – 'cultivated' person, but I go towards culture, which is music and dance, and of course arts and people expressing themselves through poetry and literature, and that's something inspiring for me. I'm very talented in the sense that I'm surrounded by a lot of inspiring people – even actors, you know. My friend is an actor and he expresses himself on screen, and I have another friend that does theatre, and it's the transformation of oneself into something else. It's the same thing I do, I transform my emotions in a poetic burst of colours and energy. I think that's inspiring for people. So my plan is just to keep on painting and inspiring people.

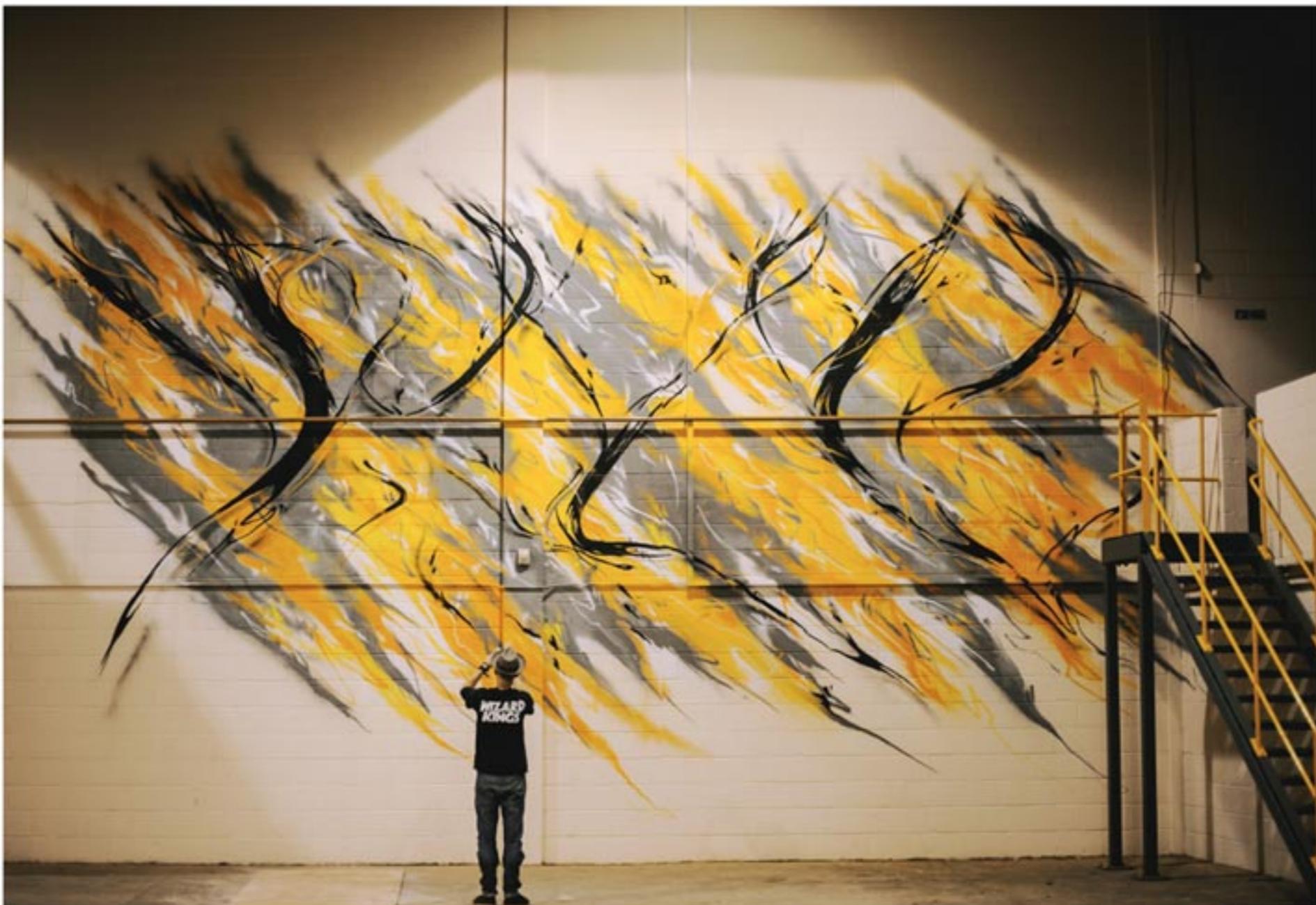
**Do you have roots in Graffiti writing? If so, how important are these roots to you, and how big is their influence on your present work? Would you say the street is the best teacher?**

Well, you know, I learned everything from



1  
Sacred Science  
Acrylic on multi-layered wood panels  
36 x 36 in  
2016

2  
The Jewel in The Lotus  
Fine Art Print  
2014



1

1  
Wildstyle  
Interior installation mural  
Spraypaint  
United Kingdom  
2015

1  
Panic Restrooms  
Noct Festival  
Photographer: Ian Cox  
Stavanger, Norway  
2014





## Vincent Abadie Hafez / Zepha

When we look at the work of Vincent Abadie Hafez, the first thing that strikes us is our inability to grasp what makes the mysterious harmony of these lines, traces of the painter's gestures, and movements that we imagine flexible and fluid. Far from the expressionism tinged with violence of a Pollock or the old-fashioned lyricism of a Mathieu, the pencil of Vincent Abadie Hafez dances on a melody that escapes us (for there is indeed a rhythm in the background). It does not confront the surface of the painting. No aggressiveness therefore in the energy that this artist deploys, and it is perhaps in this that it exceeds and re-actualises its primary practice of the painting, that is the Graffiti, to which we prefer the original term but also more suitable to define its essence: 'writing'.

We note this pictorial evolution by looking at a series of paintings in the public space, where Hafez redoubles and reactivates traces of erasure of tags due to the kärcher; taking note of the erasure by the cleaning services, he plays with the forms created by 'the adversary', accompanies them and finally transforms the duel into a duet. By this, he also renews the meaning that one can give to the concept of 'battle', here opposing the modern art of writing to the agents of its disappearance.

Undoubtedly, this series marks a turning point in his practice: while his illegal urban interventions consisted rather of "blows of bursts" – sort of actions 'punch' – the execution of his paintings today seems closer to a choreography and would be compared to aikido or tai chi more than to Thai boxing or karate, if we wanted to spin the metaphor of the fight.

Concerning this new way of struggling, one could say that it is exercised no longer 'against' but 'with'. The two main protagonists are now the line and space of the canvas. Each traced trait could be a new 'coup' – in the sense of chess this time – the game of holding the line balance in line, after the fact, the goal of the game being the inexplicable harmony that reveals these entangled writings: the accuracy of spaces and proportions, the harmonies of forms and composition, all things that anyone can appreciate without being able to grasp them together with a single glance, initiated or not.

Vincent Abadie Hafez rarely blackens the canvas of his calligraphy as one would blacken a sketchbook (no preliminary sketch here because in the game the issue is still uncertain). On the contrary, its rhythmic lines illuminate surfaces with generally dark tones. Moreover, it is perhaps in this light that one can understand the title of one of his recent works, a point of light colour consisting of calligraphy: 'Here comes the sun'. This interest in light, a sine qua non of painting, is also evident in one of his last exhibitions at the Galerie Jed Voras in Paris: the rays of sunshine passing through the glass door of the exhibition site come to coincide perfectly with the lines of the piece of recycled wood – painted by the artist at certain precise moments of the day, ensuring the overall composition should one see the installation and its ultimate cohesion in an ephemeral moment.

This 'all' becomes the work of Hafez as in this other event when it completely covers the floor of the exhibition of a painted parquet (again from recycled materials). It seems to fit perfectly like a puzzle, thus integrating the viewer into the very heart of painting, a noble labyrinth that leads only to itself in the manner of Japanese koans: an abstract meaning that only misleads us to bring us closer to a sensible evidence or language that appears to vanish as in the time of innocence. To place the viewer in the conditions of a pure aesthetic judgment, faced with what Kant would have called a free beauty, is perhaps what constitutes the heart of the work of Vincent Abadie Hafez.

– Brice Courtes

1  
JAGWA Temporary tattoo  
WIP  
Photo: Clem. C.  
2013

**Which materials and tools do you use for your work? Do you have a special technique? Do you prefer wall or canvas – and for what reasons?**

Most of the time, I like to use several mediums, acrylic, ink, and spray paint basically. The feel of the flat brush on a texture is something that carries me. It is this research around the gesture and effects of repulsion and attraction of the different types of paint (water/solvent) that I develop in my studio research.

I often use the technique that I call "palimpsest" – that I have been developing since 2008, which consists in "reserving" layers hidden under others that appear when rubbing the surface of the support. This allows me to involve the public on certain pictorial installations.

**Is there a specific piece of work you're most proud of? Or one with a unique story behind it?**

Each achievement to its unique history, and the feeling of pride is inappropriate. I would rather speak of satisfaction and this feeling applies especially to the evolution of the whole of my course because without evolution no movement. "Paragraph", a marquetry installation on the ground using recycled wooden crates, which asked of me a month of preparation and laying, the process and the final evolutionary and interactive work is the type of work, for risk taking is great, which satisfies me most.

**Do you have a precise plan when you start working, or are you simply struck by inspiration?**

It depends on the place, the surface, the environment, my condition, and constraints. Most of the time, I have as a basis a composition, a quick sketch, often realized in front of the surface, the arrangement of my shapes, voids and voids, general dynamics and also texts, words, which I use as a frame in the final composition.

**Do you have roots in Graffiti writing? If so, how important are these roots to you, and how big is their influence on your present work? Would you say the street is the best teacher?**

I'm a writer. Graffiti is my primary school. I'm part of the second/third generation of French Graffiti artists. This goes back to the early 1990s with my GAP crew (Guidance And Protection) on trains, trucks, and the rail tracks of Paris and its suburbs. This illegal practice in the public space, this "Art of Action", and this world apart that was Graffiti at the time, Internet did not yet exist, is in many ways still very present in my work.

The instinct, the urgency, the relationship to the public sphere, the hacking and the work of deconstruction of the letter are part of these elements specific to this practice, which reappears in my current research.

**What is it you're writing on your works? Are you still writing your name?**

I put aside this ego trip side to my current research, focusing on something broader and transcendental, based on deeper feelings – a more universal urban poetry. But that does not stop me from loving to write my name with a fatcap when the opportunity presents itself. I continue to appreciate the beautiful tags and always amuse myself to decipher its modern hieroglyphics tattooed on the skin of the city.

**The artists in this book all follow very different and partly very modern or abstract approaches of calligraphy. Do you actually see your work based in this field of art?**

The work of the letter is this foundation where everything begins. My school is that of the practice of writing on any medium, self-taught and

unconventional. I find myself in this world movement, whatever the label that is put on it. All my peers (brothers in stroke) are like me: "bridges" in their own way, linking institutional art and the street. The work of deconstructing the letter, its dynamics, its aesthetics, is the basis of my work. I do not know if we can speak of calligraphy in the sense that tradition requires the exact reproduction of a certain letter style with its own codex. I use more of the movement, the calligraphic trace, to go to an abstraction – a pictorial poetry, which is closer to abstract painting.

**You grew up in France, and you're working with Eastern and Western style letters. Have you been influenced by the Arabic or perhaps the Latin alphabet? Would you define your art as Islamic?**

Indeed, my research is based on this encounter between different alphabets in the image of an identity quest in a hyper-contemporary world, or one speaks of global village. My love for the Arabic letter and its different styles goes back to my discovery of painted ceramics in the Louvre Museum and afterwards, my involvement with the young people working with social educators since the years 2000. My pedagogy was based on the link between Graffiti and calligraphy and the history of writing, a kind of archaeology of the sign. My research stems from this approach, which involves a re-appropriation of the history of each one to better understand the common future.

Also, I discovered the work of Hassan Massoudy and Rachid Korachli, both of which very early had a very free interpretation of Arabic calligraphy. I found myself in this gesture close by, in a place of a work of lettering proper to the Graffiti, and in this transience. The meeting with visual artist Abdellatif Moustad in 1999, which taught me to cut a "calame" to prepare the ink and the paper, also contributed to the love that I carry for this alphabet – that I master in its form and its stroke but still not in its sense (still learning). This gives me a great freedom of stroke and adds to the repertoire of forms I use to compose my Latin letters, or more often to re-invent an own alphabet that appeals to the symbolism of this encounter and understanding, more than ever desired. I would speak more of spiritual and graphic trace, this reading of the sacred close to the Sufi practice with its own constraints as well as which calls for an open introspection on the other and corresponds better to the definition of what some call the "Zepha's" style.

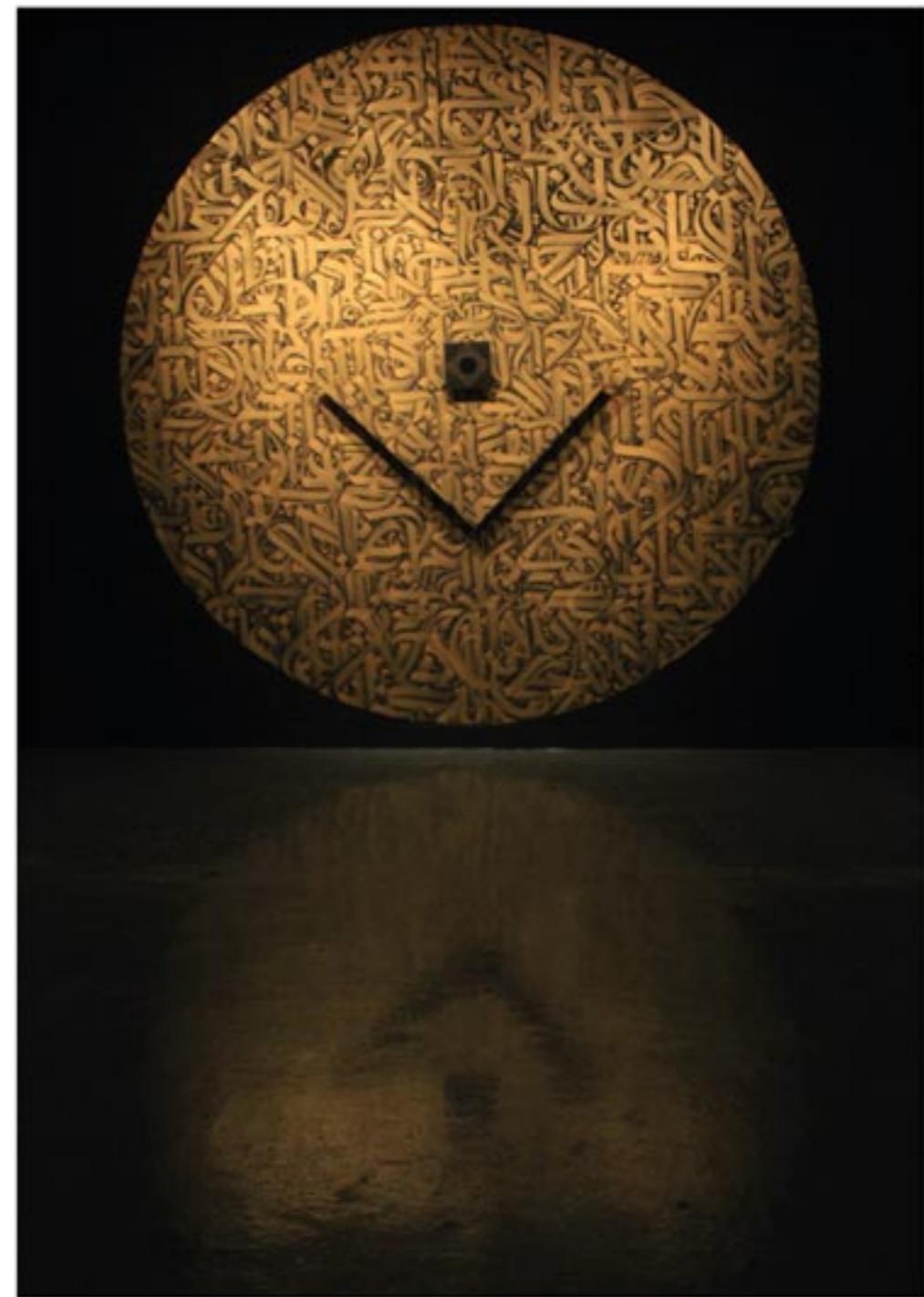
**Your approach towards art is very flexible since you work in different media. What do you think of the breaking of boundaries when it comes to visual arts?**

This is the hallmark of art, and I really think that culture and creation will save the modern world or rebuild it. It is up to each one to make his own, for this domain is not reserved for the initiated and must develop in all areas of human creation, without forgetting the primary meaning of life.



1  
GAP's whole Train  
Final touch  
Photo: WOO  
Suburb, France  
1996

2  
The Dot  
Calligraphy Art Biennale  
Sharjah, United Arabian Emirates  
2016



2



1  
Camouflage  
Silks x Carla Anikaki  
2016

1  
Perception Zarweh  
Cairo, Egypt  
2016

