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THREADS OF FAITH

MUHAMMAD YUSUF PROFILES AN ARTIST WHO GIVES A CONTEMPORARY TOUCH TO TRADITIONAL IDEAS OF EMBROIDERY



Adilah Bundakji

Islamic culture is projected in many ways. The muezzin does this by his call to prayer. The scholar writes books on the faith. Calligraphists spend years perfecting the shape of the alphabets that proclaim the message of Islam. Saudi origin embroidery artist Adilah Bundakji does this by creating tapestries that depict the symbols and sights of the Muslim faith.

A descendant of Meecan lineage with a Malaysian bloodline, she was born in South Africa and now divides her time between Jeddah and Karachi, Pakistan, since she is married to a Pakistani national. Her children are settled in the USA and Kuwait. It is natural that her art life has been eclectic, given her multi-national worldly experiences. The various influences that have inspired her art are woven into the very warp and woof of her tapestries.

She is showing a collection of her works at the Mondo Arte Gallery, Mall of the Emirates, Dubai, till July 25. Bundakji's homage to her heritage is titled Faith Inspired and is deeply affecting. She does not try to be comprehensive. What she does is to present a slice of the cultural life of Islam.

Worked out in gold, silver and multi-coloured threads, the tapes-

tries show thin and sere earth-coloured minarets against the yellow sun, the ninety-nine names of Allah done in dark and gold colours, a glittering silver sword set against a quadrilateral background, russet camels shaded by palm trees, wavy flora done in scintillating colours and a peacock with a flowing tail, among others. There is no stuffy detail. Minimalism is the rule. The eyes have thus the time to breathe.

Bundakji's artistic epiphany was sparked off by her meditation on the Kiswa, or the cloth that covers the Kaaba in Mecca. Even after nearly a decade-and-a-half of art practice, she is at a loss for words when she speaks about the Kiswa. "It is grand, elegant, strong and pure," she says. "It's gold work is majestic and the embroidery is solid. It is a striking art piece."

Reading the Quran regularly also inspired her. Her brother also gave a hand for what she says were her attempts to "bring barakat (blessings) to homes" that wanted to have a piece of her art. She embroiders Ayats (verses) from Surah Bani-Israel, Al Bakarah and Ikhlas, among others, on her creations. It is a good idea to have them as wall hangings since, doubtless, they will catch the eye, given their large dimensions (the biggest piece is 233 x 160 cms).

You could say the tapestries are the bigger cousins of framed verses from the Quran, a common sight in Muslim homes.

Their price ranges from Dhs19,000 to Dhs60,000, and considering the subject they deal with and the multitude of inputs that have gone into their making, the connoisseur has a steal here. Says Bundakji: "In my works, you will find French ornamentation, Austrian pillars, the Saudi Kiswa, Kashmiri designs and the culture of ancient Sindh in Pakistan. I think my work reflects my being: they have no nationality."

A graceful and confident woman with a wide, toothy smile and strong and shapely fingers connected to powerful wrists, Bundakji is an entrepreneur who extracts the very last sweat bead from her workers who create her works after she has designed them. (Not that she is a cruel master: on the contrary, she encourages her 40 employees, based in Jeddah and Karachi, to attend Quran classes to help them understand what they are weaving. She also supports them to have classes in Hadith (the sayings and traditions of the Prophet, PBUH), and alerts them to their responsibilities to their wives). She drives them hard only because of her perfectionism and because of her need for class. This is a rare

business happening, since corporate social responsibility is discharged through spiritual practices!

In Dubai, prior to the Time Out interview, she was taking orders from customers. It was clear from the way she asked questions and nodded or shook her head, that customer satisfaction was high up on her priorities list. That is why she counts among her clients, members of the Saudi royal family, leading Middle Eastern merchant families and art collectors who stint only on publicity. She first exhibited in the UAE at the Haughton Design Fair in Dubai in February this year. Faith Inspired is her first solo show.

Bundakji's works are almost musical in their effect. Through design, colour, texture and form, she tries to express the strong bond between Islam and art. "My fabric is my canvas, my threads are my paint and my needle is my brush," she avers. Through the use of iconography sourced from all over the world, she tries to eliminate differences of language, culture and creed. At the same time, she creatively expresses the uplifting message of the Islamic faith, which also emphasises the brotherhood of man. "My pieces are precious heirlooms!" she cries. "They are forever."

Photograph: Prashanth Mukundan