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# Kamal Boullata: For the Love of Jerusalem

Nasser Rabbat



The Alhambra, Granada, Spain, viewed from Sacromonte, photo courtesy of the author

Granada is the perfect place for a meditation on exile for an Arab. Inscribed in our collective memory as the last city in Andalusia to be (re)conquered by the Catholic Kings in 1492, the city still bears witness to that golden age of Islamic culture with its core monuments the Alhambra, city hall, madrasa, converted mosques and a caravanserai, in addition of course to the Albaicín, the hill-hugging neighbourhood that grew right before the fall of the city opposite the Sabika Hill where the Alhambra stands. For centuries, poets, essayists and moralists recalled Granada, and the Alhambra, as our ‘Paradise Lost’, the marvellous city that we could not hold on to. This remained the case until we collectively lost Palestine in the middle of the twentieth century and the ripple effect of that Nakba, or catastrophe, has weighed in heavily on the consciousness of generations of Arabs since. Palestine became the fresh wound, the new *last* loss, actively remembered and ideally reimagined in countless literary and artistic works. Granada, probably because of its ethereal beauty and the growing distance from its tragedy, became the erstwhile *lieu de mémoire*, often evoked with resigned nostalgia and exaggerated visions of past grandeur.

This is an appropriate introduction to my appreciation of the late Kamal Boullata for a number of reasons. I first met Kamal actually in the Alhambra in 1998 during a conference on the horizons of Arab culture in the twenty-first century convened by the Syrian poet Adonis. Boullata, the

Palestinian exile who carried his native Jerusalem in his heart, had come to the conference to exhibit his art-book based on Adonis's poems invoking the Alhambra, *Twelve Lanterns of Granada*. The accordion-like book unfolds with *muqarnas* cutouts marking the transition from one poem to the next.<sup>1</sup> Echoing the actual enchanting *muqarnas* of the Alhambra, the book design conveys the intricate geometry, the playfulness of light seepage and reflection, and the waif-like fragility of its architectural subject matter. It captures the ephemeral beauty of the Alhambra five centuries after the last Nasrid king, known in the West as Boabdil, had heaved his 'last sigh' as he turned back toward his Red Castle on his way to exile.<sup>2</sup> This moment, assigned a fictional place on a hill outside Granada and depicted in numerous European paintings, is usually seen as the embodiment of resignation, deep sorrow and despair, all associated with the realisation of an irretrievable loss.



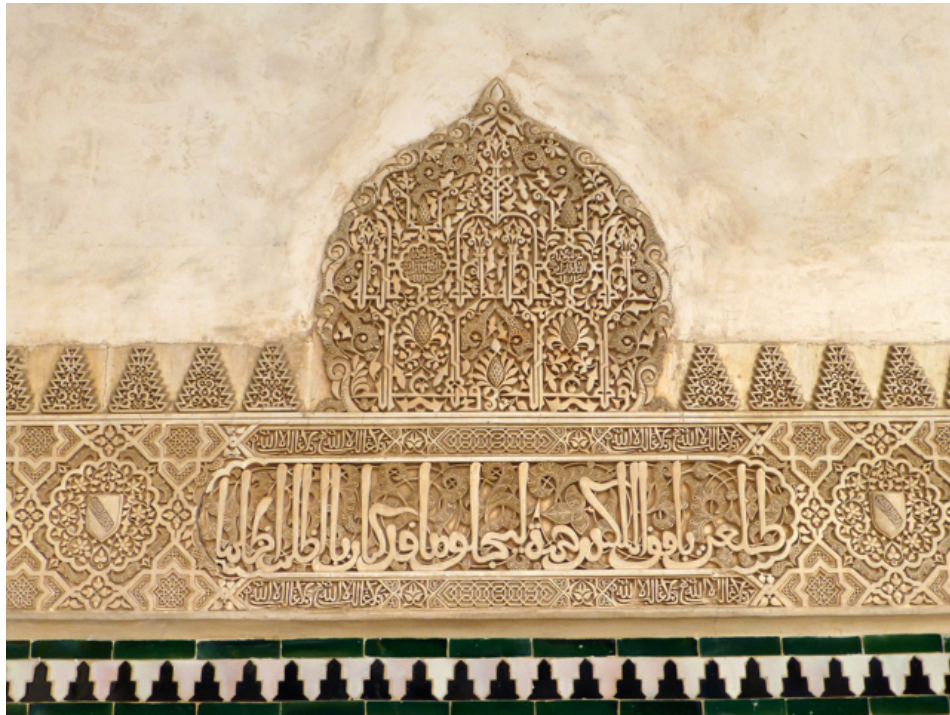
Kamal Boullata, *Twelve Lanterns for Granada*, 1996, handcrafted artist's book with Adonis's poem, with the *Twelve Lanterns for Granada* series of 12 silkscreen prints, 1996, installation view at West Court Gallery, Cambridge, January 2020, photo courtesy of Jesus College, Cambridge

But Boullata was not interested in pedalling the melancholy of loss. His *Lanterns* book, supplemented by a group of twelve silkscreen prints, crossed vertically and diagonally in harmoniously colourful

<sup>1</sup> *Muqarnas* are a form of ornamental vaulting, sometimes described as honeycomb vaulting, in Islamic architecture

<sup>2</sup> *Al Hamra* means the 'Red Castle' in Arabic, and has been distorted to Alhambra in Spanish

strips, instead brings to mind a resonant *joie de vivre*. This was precisely what the Alhambra was known for in its golden years, as attested by its intricate architecture so exquisitely inscribed with the lyrical soliloquising poetry of Ibn al-Khatib and Ibn Zamrak, which celebrate its spaces of pure beauty, merriment and extravagant lifestyles. Boullata's *Lanterns*, which he himself likened to the calligraphic poetry as it completes and gives voice to the Alhambra's geometric marvels, had in fact leaped over five centuries of lamentation to recapture the essence of what the place could conjure up and how it *should* best be remembered today.



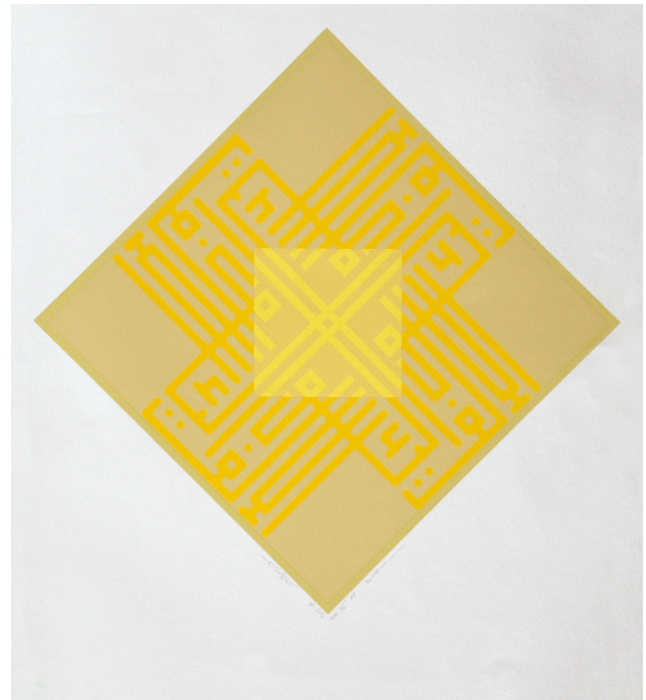
Poetic inscription in the Alhambra, Granada, Spain, photo courtesy of the author

Kamal and I shared not only a life-long appreciation of the intricate marvels of Islamic art and architecture, but also a humanist understanding of the Arab past – an understanding that rejects both the religious swaddling of what is, after all, a normal human history with its pros and cons and the dominant defeatist readings of that same history, mired in the ongoing impediments of the Arab present, from colonial manipulation and occupation to civil wars. Kamal, the wandering Palestinian who spent his adult life between the United States, Morocco, France and Germany, was a consummate Arab of a hopeful generation who felt at home in the cultural spaces of Arabic language, history, visual references and music. His work engendered an artistic language informed by this expansive sense of belonging, which saw the total cultural legacy of the Islamic world, including that of the non-Muslims, as a source of inspiration. Abstracted Arabic letters, square and sinuous strips, and various geometric shapes imperceptibly floated from the depths of that history to rest on the surfaces of his canvases, shimmering while acquiring new meanings.



Kamal Boullata was born in 1942 and spent his youth in Jerusalem before and after the Nakba. As an adolescent, he learned to paint icons with the artist Khalil Halabi (1889–1964), the heir to a century-long school of icon painting based in Jerusalem, which is a city-specific variation on the venerated tradition of Byzantine iconography. The young Kamal used to take long walks around his city, witnessing the spatial dialogue, and sometime competition, between its various houses of worship. Belonging to almost every denomination of the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – these sites display history in layers deposited on their repeatedly restored and modified facades and their antique worship rituals

involving all the senses. Kamal absorbed all of this diverse richness of form, colour and sound. In direct line of view of his family’s home in Jerusalem, he could see the Dome of the Rock. He was captivated by its geometry: pure, poised and sublime, or, to use his own words, ‘Only in the Dome



Kamal Boullata, *Al-Alif wa-l-Ya'* (The alpha and the omega, Ibn 'Arabi), 1983, silkscreen, 52 x 52 cm, photo courtesy of Paco Fernandez



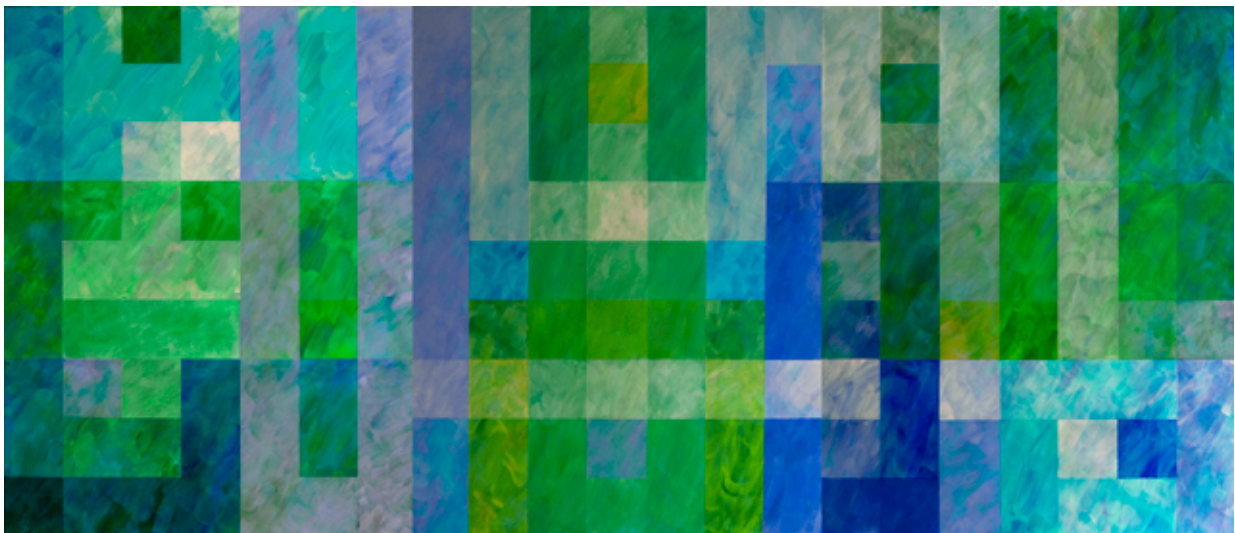
The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, photo courtesy of Nicola Gray

of the Rock did the architectural expression of the convergence between the physical and the metaphysical realms itself reflect a historical meeting that made Jerusalem a city open to all its citizens and the rest of the world.<sup>3</sup> This impression stayed with him and drove his subsequent interest in geometric forms, especially in their intrinsic ability to activate a plurality of fluid configurations through relatively few and simple operations like rotation, scaling, sliding, shifting

<sup>3</sup> Kamal Boullata, 'To Measure Jerusalem: Explorations of the Square', in *There Where you Are Not: Kamal Boullata, Selected Writings*, Finbarr Barry Flood, ed, Hirmer Verlag, Munich, 2019, 37– 47, p 40

and multiplying. He was to continuously explore these qualities in his own compositions throughout his life, animated not only by the complex geometric patterns of Islamic art, but also by the elegant lines of Arabic calligraphy, which became Kamal's introduction to a language of abstraction.

For the rest of his career, Kamal remained committed to what I will term 'referential abstraction': an abstraction that usually alludes to a historical or scriptural referent, be it an Arabesque or a Qu'anic verse or an Arabic parable. The words remained legible in his paintings for a long time, although it was their geometric intricacies and their transformational potential that intrigued him and attracted him to their abstraction. Why abstraction, though, is a question worth asking. For although abstraction was still a formidable form of artistic expression in the 1960s when Kamal came of age, there were definitely other artistic schools that were emerging in the art scene as avant-garde movements. In my view, Kamal's gravitation toward abstraction was a conscious choice that echoed aspects of his own life circumstances and his personal temperament. Perhaps abstraction connected him to the Arabo-Islamic artistic abstract heritage he felt to be his own. Perhaps it helped him cope with the cruelty of the reality he and all other Palestinians were subjected to with the irreconcilable loss of their homeland. Abstraction as a trajectory may have allowed Kamal to organise what he wanted to express of loss, hope, nostalgia, uncertainty, anger and despair without outbursts or painful disclosures. Perhaps, too, and this is almost certain, abstraction was his gateway to his universal humanism. This shaped both his personality and his art, even though his dreadful exile could have led him to retreat into trying to heal his wounded national identity (which did sometimes appear in his early ink sketches commemorating the Palestinian struggle in the 1960s and 1970s). Instead, he created his work from a place of compassion and love that is at once lyrical, contemplative and intertextual. He engaged with the poetry he enjoyed, read and abstracted in collaborative works with great poets such as Adonis, or in renderings for poems by the undisputed bard of Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish.



Kamal Boullata, *Al-Ma' min Lawn al-Ina'* (Water is the colour of the vessel, al-Junaid) 2009, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 234 cm (triptych)

Kamal was forced to leave his native Jerusalem after the Israeli occupation of the rest of the city in 1967. He studied in Italy and in Washington, DC, and spent the rest of his life exiled (in the deepest sense of the word, as articulated by Edward Said) before settling in Berlin in the last years of his life. This meandering experience endowed him and his artistic approach with a deep sense of humanity and worldliness. Kamal saw the world through eyes that penetrated into the core of things to inspect what is kind, forgiving, shared and humane in them. Exile also affected the position of Kamal in the world, which he saw essentially as the communal home of humanity, where all could live and prosper together. This ecumenical perception, however, never undermined the position of Jerusalem for him. The city remained entrenched not only in his memory but also in his conscience and in his daily life. It coloured and permeated, literally and figuratively, all that he painted.

Indeed, Jerusalem is the artist's first inspiration and his last refuge: the anchor of childhood memory, the domain of youthful seeking and struggle, and the insightful nostalgia of older age. In his life-long attachment to his city, Kamal Boullata resembles Italo Calvino, the son of Venice, whose 1972 book, *Invisible Cities*, is a love song to his native city. Calvino captures the same meditative quality that Kamal paints through his alter ego, Marco Polo, who, in the book, recounts to a rapt Qublai Khan the fables of the cities of his vast Mongol empire that the Khan had not visited. These fables are magical, mysterious, ephemeral, illusive, captivating, depressing, oppressive, tyrannical, liberating, humanising and demonising, all at once. But Calvino (and I think Kamal as well) is all along really constructing a chronicle of nostalgia, for we discover at the end that his fictional Marco Polo was essentially weaving together, from memory but also from fantasy, a thousand and one images of his beloved Venice, all cast in the fragmented narrative of the fabled cities of the East.

Unlike Calvino, however, Kamal's longing was more viscerally painful because he could never again, because of the Israeli occupation, visit his beloved city to retrace the footsteps of his childhood. Jerusalem was an invisible cross he carried in his heart that could only echo as pangs of reminiscences in shape and form and which penetrate his entire oeuvre. But the yearnings of the artist in exile surfaced in his art, filtered through the expansive layers of his intellectual formation from his reading in philosophy, theosophy and Sufism, to his deep admiration of the humanist literary tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, about which he wrote so penetratingly in his many published essays.

These subjectively absorbed intellectual traditions from East and West imbued Kamal with a transcendent sensitivity that allowed him to render the one marvellous miracle of the Prophet Muhammad, his Night Journey (*Israa'*) to Jerusalem and the Ascension to Heaven (*Mi'raj*), into one of his most enigmatic and irradiant abstractions. The *Mi'raj* was one of the most popular representations of the Prophet, with hundreds of variations produced in every capital of Islamic painting from Istanbul to Delhi. This extraordinary miracle appears to have unleashed the creative imagination of the many artists who drew it, most of whom were descendants of the Ilkhanid school practising in the Timurid



and post-Timurid courts of the Persianate world between the late fourteenth and early seventeenth century. Kamal, abstractly following the compositional structure of his predecessors' rendering of the *Mi'raj*, distills from them what is really important about this decisive moment in the Prophet Muhammad's divinely guided mission.



Kamal Boullata, *Al-Mi'raj*, 1991, acrylic on paper 40 x 60 cm

A shaft of light in the centre, evocative of the axis mundi that connects earth to heaven via Jerusalem, indicates the passage across the heavens to *Sidrat al-Muntaha*, the heavenly lote tree that marks the end of the seventh heaven, the last threshold which no creature can pass. The thin, illuminated lines floating inwardly towards the overwhelming light column could be seen to signify the shattering of the edges between the super-imposed heavens as the Prophet, guided by the archangel Gabriel, proceeds through all seven of them until he reaches the throne of God.

A Timurid artist working in Herat around 1436–1437 anticipated Kamal Boullata's painting by imagining the final encounter at *Sidrat al-Muntaha* as a field of infinite light (Kamal's beloved *nur 'ala nur*). Sinuous golden flames, clearly influenced by Chinese art, engulf the Prophet as he prostrates in

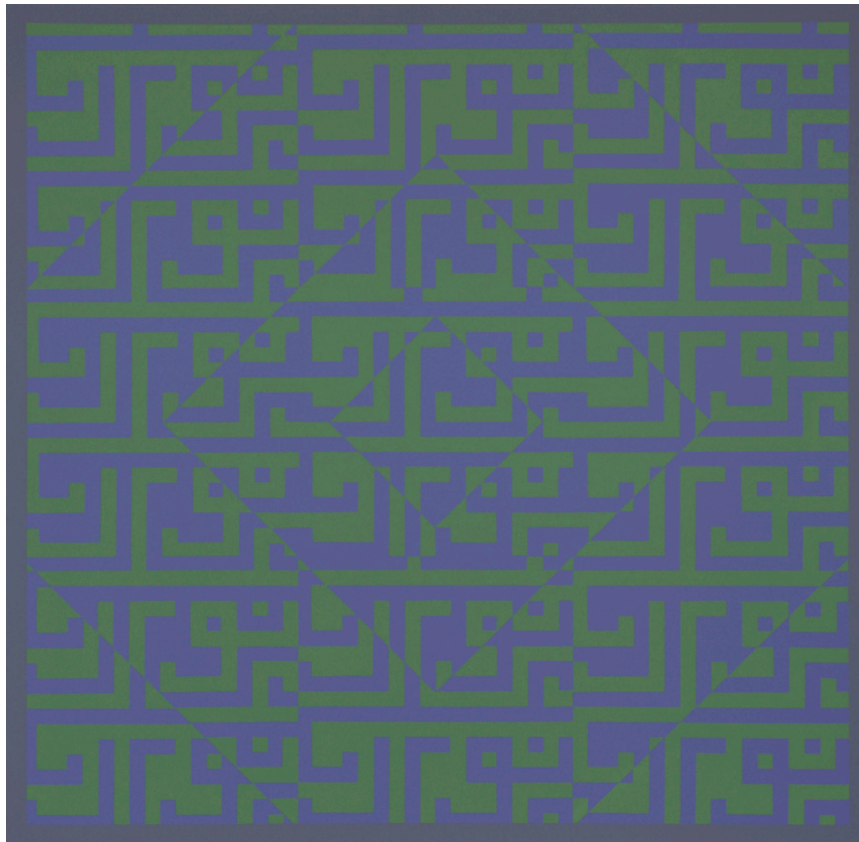


Timurid *Mi'rajnama*, 1436–37, in a manuscript by Ferid ed-Din 'Attar in the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, reproduced courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ark:/12148/cc346597



complete surrender, in front of the unseen and unseeable God, whose presence is hinted at only by His *Nur*. The Timurid artist, whose work borders on abstraction, has erased all traces of dimensions, proportionality or finite space: there is no foreground, no background, no horizon, no plane to stand on, no shadow – only the emanation of the Light of God filling his or her entire field of vision.

Penetrating the true reality of things was the holistic aim of Kamal Boullata's art, not only because he was an erudite humanist, but because he was also a genuine Sufi who saw in the core of things manifestations of the one essence that brings together all things. He expressed this in abstraction. However, there is in Kamal's art, and in his written work as well, an urgent and clear pushback against the double marginality the vagaries of our times have assigned to him and his Palestinian people: the marginality of 'the Other', and the marginality of his art as that of 'the Other'. Kamal was, of course, an expert on the existential impact of 'the Other', particularly the one exiled from his home by brutal force. His art recast the many contradictions and ruptures that have shaped his life to heighten his personal, national and human tragedy. The marginality of the art of the Other, on the other hand, is the product of the art historical context in which Kamal operated: the long standing marginality of the painterly art in comparison to other areas of expression such as poetry and music in Arabic culture, as well as the historical context faced by Palestinian and Arab art confined to the margins of the West-dominated global art culture.



Kamal Boullata, *Nur 'ala Nur* (Light upon Light, Qur'an XXIV: 35), 1983, silkscreen, 45 x 45 cm, photo courtesy of Amanda Ribas Tugwell

His response, historical and cerebral at the same time, can be read in a 2010 proposal he submitted to the Euro-Arab Foundation for Higher Studies, entitled ‘Granada/Jerusalem: Interchanging Visions’. In this proposal, he wrote: ‘it is Granada with which Arabs have recognized the most common affinities with Jerusalem especially after the 1948 exile of Palestinians. Like Granada, Umayyad Jerusalem had been incarnated as an open city for its multiethnic communities who over thirteen centuries learnt to enjoy interfaith relations. During periods when the rest of the world was intoxicated by segregation, people in Granada and Jerusalem who have been bred to tolerate religious contradictions under Islam continued to appreciate cultural differences.’ He ended his exposé with an attempt to recapture that utopian vision: ‘In today’s globalized world in which “anti-aesthetic” and “post-aesthetic” discourses are finally wearing off, can we contemplate the creation of an aesthetic that is commensurate with the “Andalusian ethic”? As religious fanaticism fomented in different parts of our globe, how could today’s art be an instrument of intercultural and interreligious dialogue?’<sup>4</sup>

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*Editor’s note: Kamal Boullata (1942–2019) published one of his early essays, ‘Facing the Forest: Israeli and Palestinian artists’ in Third Text no 7 in 1989, and he remained a friend and supporter of the journal. A volume of his selected writings, There Where you Are Not, edited by Finbarr Barry Flood, has been published by Hirmer Verlag in 2019, along with a collection of essays about his work, Uninterrupted Fugue, edited by Burcu Dogramaci.*

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<sup>4</sup> Kamal Boullata, ‘Granada / Jerusalem: Interchanging Visions’, a proposal to the Euro-Arab Chair of Arts and Cultures, Euro-Arab Foundation for Higher Studies, Granada, Spain, dated 6 April 2010