



Studio profiles A series exploring local artists



Artist Soheila Esfahani, in her Kitchener studio, uses calligraphy in a new way, combining the ancient words of the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi with contemporary imagery.

PETER LEE, RECORD STAFF

Blending East and West

BY ROBERT REID
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The world has split down the middle in recent years despite such homogenizing forces as economic globalization and mass media saturation.

In contrast, Kitchener artist Soheila Esfahani bridges East and West through her highly personal approach to art.

Born in Tehran, the capital of Iran, Esfahani moved to Canada in 1992 at the age of 19. She came to Kitchener-Waterloo because her husband was enrolled at the University of Waterloo.

He eventually graduated with a doctorate in electrical engineering. For her part, Esfahani decided to study art at UW, a task that took eight years to accomplish because she combined it with raising a son and a daughter.

Even though she comes from a family of doctors and engineers, art was always encouraged.

"My mother was interested in art, she painted watercolours as a hobby," she recalls from her studio. "She drew pictures as she made up stories for us."

Nonetheless, Esfahani focused on mathematics in high school as preparation for becoming an architect.

"I always wanted to do something creative. That's why I studied architecture.

She spent a year in architecture at Azad University before accompanying her husband to Canada. Her twin sister completed a degree in architecture before moving to Vancouver.

Esfahani intended to study architecture at UW, but she spent two years studying English and was prevented from enrolling in a co-op program after giving birth to her first child.

"I decided to study fine arts with the aim of switching to architecture at a later date, but I enjoyed fine art so much I decided to stay."

After a year in fine arts at Wilfrid Laurier University, she transferred to UW because of its more comprehensive studio program.

"I really struggled," Esfahani confides. "I had my second child, so I could only take courses part-time."

Although it was a long, arduous journey, she persevered and graduated in 2003 with an honors BA. Her maturity has served her well.

"By the time I graduated I was confident about what I was doing, whereas my classmates were still trying to figure out what they were about. I knew what I wanted. I had time to digest what I had learned."

Although she enjoys working in various media, especially sculpture, Esfahani has con-

"I discovered I couldn't do abstraction without any meaning."

SOHEILA ESFAHANI
ARTIST

centrated on painting for practical reasons.

"You need expensive equipment and studio space to do sculpture or printmaking, but you can buy paint and canvas at Michael's, go home and paint at the kitchen table."

Esfahani adopted abstraction as her chosen vocabulary while still in university.

"I tried different approaches, but abstraction was what I wanted to do."

Her breakthrough came when she began writing on the canvas by squeezing paint from a bottle as a ground for abstract imagery.

The incorporation of text in painting isn't anything new in Western art. But Esfahani's use of calligraphy is different, combining the ancient words of the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi with contemporary imagery — a blend of past and present, East and West.

"One day I decided to write on the canvas in my own language and it was the start of the whole thing," she recalls.

"I discovered I couldn't do

abstraction without any meaning. A red painting has to be more than red paint on canvas."

Esfahani's calligraphy provides a lyrically flowing ground for the conceptually rigorous abstraction.

She is aware of the paradox of her calligraphy being abstract lines for Western viewers who cannot read the language.

"Writing is the abstract form of language," she observes.

She had been in Canada a decade before re-acquainting herself with the poems of Rumi, which she had learned years before in school. Interestingly, Rumi has enjoyed enormous popularity among Western readers in recent years.

"I came to Rumi anew as an adult. It was quite a discovery or, rather, re-discovery."

Reinventing the ancient art form of calligraphy and interpreting the mystical ruminations of Rumi in a contemporary context transcends history and culture.

At bottom, it's a deeply spiritual impulse — representation-

al imagery is banned from Islamic mosques. So it's no wonder Esfahani views her work in terms of spiritual transformation.

"I think of my work in terms of alchemy," she explains. "Such earthly metaphors as turning lead into gold are symbols of spiritual transformation."

It's also symbolic of the creative process, which transforms pigment on canvas into a painting equally expressive of ideas and emotions.

Esfahani would like to do graduate work. However, it might well be that her artistic successes make further study unnecessary.

She's completing two years as artist-in-residence at the Homer Watson Gallery; was a finalist in the sixth annual RBC Canadian Painting Competition, which showcased her work across the country; and recently received her first Ontario Arts Council grant, which will provide a year of studio time.

She is associated with the Toronto artist-run Propeller Centre for the Arts and has a forthcoming show at the Rotunda Gallery, in Kitchener City Hall.

Not bad for an artist who graduated from university only two years ago.

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