



# Cultural connections

## ESFAHANI'S ART SPEAKS OF POETRY, LOVE AND TRANSFORMATIONS

By Veronica Ross

WELCOME TO beauty. That was what I felt when I stepped into the small studio belonging to Soheila Esfahani at the Homer Watson House and Gallery maybe five years ago.

It was a sunny summer day and there was Esfahani, the artist-in-residence, with her intelligent eyes and smiling face surrounded by her paintings, which I remember as being all golden and white. I bought a

small one for my brother-in-law who is from Turkey. I thought he would appreciate the Farsi calligraphy based on the writing of Rumi, the famous 13th-century Persian poet.

It was an overwhelming experience to see more of Esfahani's work recently at the Blue Skies Yoga

Studio on Victoria Street North in Kitchener. Here was Rumi again; here was the same beauty reflected in close to 20 larger canvases, white writing on black and brown, white on white, gold on black, as well as smaller pieces — red, rich gold, yellow on pale green.

It's a soothing place with light coming through big windows and the gentle sound of flowing water from the fountain. The paintings added history, meaning, the big expression of love in Rumi's work.

Esfahani's art has been here for almost two years, since shortly after the studio opened. ►



## ACROSS THE CULTURES

Soheila Esfahani, whose art draws from her Iranian roots and her Canadian experience, has a studio space at Globe Studios in Kitchener. Behind her is Journey II (acrylic on canvas, 2008), one of her works based on poetry by Rumi.

Photography • Mathew McCarthy





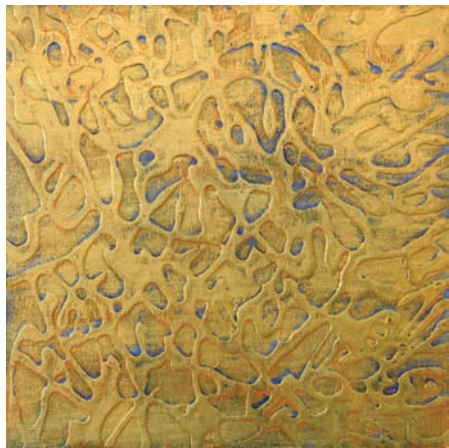
## FROM SCRIPT TO ART

Farsi calligraphy based on the writings of Rumi, the famous 13th century Persian poet, is the launching point for these pieces by Soheila Esfahani.

Above: Seeking II acrylic on canvas, 2008

Right: Reed Bed II, oil on canvas, 2006

Below: Gold III, acrylic on canvas, 2004



► “It’s beautiful,” says Janine Keller Ng. She owns and runs the studio with her husband, Cheong Ng. “It sparks conversation by everyone who comes here. ‘Who is this? Who is the artist?’ they ask. We tell them the poems are about love. We have a book of texts and more information. (The art work) completed the space.”

“I do yoga there,” Esfahani tells me in an interview at her art studio at Globe Studios on Whitney Place in Kitchener. “My work is a meditative thing. I need to get to that meditative moment. There’s a connection of meditation to Muslim prayer. And Rumi



goes well with yoga.”

The larger pieces, she says, repeat lines from Rumi. She quotes from a longer poem about longing for the eternal: “He who is not to be found is my desire.”

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Esfahani was born in Tehran, Iran, in 1972. She came to Waterloo when she was

19 because her husband was studying engineering at the University of Waterloo. It was difficult to adjust.

“It took me a good six years to adjust. I was homesick. I didn’t do art then. Being an artist — it wasn’t on my agenda. I was trying to get over the language difficulty.”

The young family lived in student housing.



## THE ‘WRITE’ STUFF

Soheila Esfahani “writes” using a mixture of acrylic paint and acrylic medium in a squeeze bottle, a technique she uses for many of her paintings.

Photography • Mathew McCarthy

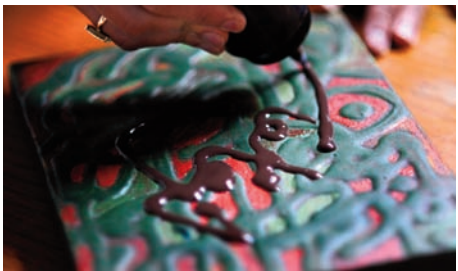
Compared to Tehran, Waterloo “looked small, almost like a village. That was a shock.”

She was familiar with western culture from television and movies. “I thought the western world would be a bigger world than what I had before.”

She liked drawing as a child; her mother, a talented watercolour artist, was a big influence. She came from a professional family who was traditionally religious. She wears a hijab, a simple scarf.

Esfahani originally wanted to be an architect, but studied fine arts at the University of Waterloo. She soon had two small children and it took her eight years to graduate with an honours BA in 2003. She obtained her master of fine arts at the University of Western Ontario in 2010. Her dissertation was Trans (across, over, beyond) Investigation of Cultural Translation in Visual Arts.

She has a long list of exhibits all over Ontario and will have one in Buffalo this year. She has lectured and taught at Western as well as the Clay & Glass in Waterloo and the Homer Watson House and Gallery in Kitchener.



Her work has been bought by the Art Bank of the Canada Council for the Arts and Brock Solutions in Kitchener and is in private collections in North America, Europe and the Middle East. In November, she was one of the artists in the Box 10 art show in the old Breithaupt Block in Kitchener.

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“Making art is not a weekend thing — you have to do it everyday. You need to be focused,” Esfahani says.

Rumi changed her art, gave it direction. She began writing his words in Farsi on canvas, creating abstractions with the repetitive use of lines of poetry, which sometimes overlapped.

“Rumi spoke to me. There was a universalism there. I started writing his verses in my painting. The professors were really supportive of me.”

“Her art is a lovely blend of artistic modes and methods,” comments Professor Judith Miller of Renison College at the University of Waterloo. “I like the sheer pleasure of her work, the stylized calligraphy. I appreciate ►

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## CAPTURED IN WOOD

Soheila Esfahani's wooden plaques explore "cultural translation," which she explains as "moving from one culture to another — migrancy, carrying back to a third space." She created the designs and an aunt in Iran did the fretwork.

► the intersection of language and the visual."

"Rumi was the street," Esfahani says. "I haven't really done Rumi for the past two years. I had bigger questions."

The bigger questions were about cultural translation, which was the topic of her dissertation.

"Cultural translation," she explains, "is an academic term meaning moving from one culture to another — migrancy, carrying back to a third space."

Homi Bhabha, author and post colonial theorist, was an influence.

The defence for her dissertation is in the Globe Studio: 15 wooden plaques with fretwork designs on them. Esfahani created the design concepts; her aunt in Iran did the fretwork and sent the pieces to Canada.

"I started collecting designs that have connections to me. I sent them to her. She sent them back. This was part of the project."

There is a verse from the Koran in fretwork. A heart from a wedding invitation. A tree based on an Indian classmate's painting, an artichoke design by William Morris, "from a greeting card my brother

sent for the Persian New Year."

She also displays a shipping skid standing upright, painted brown with intricate designs based on William Morris wallpaper; behind it is gold, the third space — neither here nor there but somewhere, and something new is how one might understand this.

She saw the wallpaper in the Eldon House in London, Ont. Built in the 1830s, it is now a museum stuffed with artifacts from all over the world, reflecting the travels and experiences of the owners: cultural translation.

It's easy to miss the stack of shipping skids, piled one above the other. They're made of pale wood — they might be in a factory, but the ends of the slats are illustrated with gold illuminations, like illustrations in old manuscripts.

The skids were an installation piece at the Box 10 show, which Alan Daniel, Kitchener artist and illustrator, visited. He was impressed.

"Seeing Soheila's work ... made me realize it is an exultation of the commonplace from the highly embellished stack of

packing skids to her interpretation in both the positive and negative spaces of Persian script. Persian script, while exotic to me, is her everyday subject and material."

Also in her studio, there is Rumi again: a large piece of writing done in a transparent acrylic medium on a stained black background. It is about, Soheila says, "What can't be found. You can't find the text, can't find the poem. It's becoming movement of the line."

Professor Patrick Mahon, her thesis advisor, says, "Her work reminds us people come fully formed. People translate themselves to make their work. . . .

"She uses her own experience which is woven into the work. It is not didactic. . . . It's beautiful on its own. Her work has helped me to be that much more aware that artists speak ... with a personal voice."

Maybe movement is an apt metaphor for Esfahani's life and work.

She has been here for half of her life, almost 20 years. She still finds Tehran more cosmopolitan than Ontario, but says Canada is an interesting place for artists right now because of the cultural diversity. Her daughter chooses not to wear a hijab, but teases her mother about her plain scarf, so unlike the ones worn by fashionable women in Tehran.

In a way, her art tells a story about moving: back and forth across oceans and across time and through mystery.

You cannot find the Rumi poem the way he could not find his heart's desire. You look at the packing skids and think about memory and also about what else was packed, what came over the sea from the old homeland — ornaments, knick-knacks, books, good leather boots?

It is interesting that Esfahani found her "voice" in art by setting down, in paint and in her first language, the poems by Rumi.

It was the beginning of a progression: emigration, immigration, settling, returning to the original place. Sending parcels back and forth, the way she did with her aunt.

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