

Bound agony

by Muhammad Yusuf

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The inaugural of 'Fish and Moon', a solo exhibition by Iranian artist Parvaneh Etemadi, hosted by AB Bookness and JAMM in the latter's space in Dubai's Al Quoz, took place on Dec. 15.

The artist is one of the more established and experienced ones in Iran and her works, to the untrained eye perhaps mundane and minimal, never fails to carry a slew of meanings. That also is the Etemadi trademark.

Etemadi's exhibition focuses on a limited edition artist book, a suite of 10 original intaglio prints. It is inspired by Attar's poem The Conference of the Birds, which highlights the alienation of man from humanity and divinity.

The moon in Etemadi's imagination stands for the divine while the fish is a metaphor for man. The fish finds itself gasping for air under a glowing moon, which is reflected on its scales. Why does it gasp?

It does so because it finds itself a long way off from the divine — literally as far away as the distance between earth and sky.

The fish finds itself out of its habitat and unable to exist, just as man will find himself dead or nearly dead if he cuts his link with the divine.

Instead of life giving water, the fish is stranded on rocks, in a bowl, inside a pan, near dark abysses and at one place, has the knife waiting for it. It is twisted into various shapes, indicating agony and is at all times prostrate. You will look in vain for the playfulness or mischievousness normally associated with fish!

On the other hand, the moon serenely moves along. Sometimes it is full, sometimes it is a crescent. But at all times it gives off an aura of power and of being beyond reach of the stumbling fish.

It is a gothic atmosphere evoked by strong black and white tones. The rounded eyes of the fish give it a ghastly look and its wide open mouth indicates the horror it is suffering. The message is clear: man can prosper only by connecting himself to the light of the divine.

For this, he has to look within himself and attach himself to what is sacred. Etemadi also cleverly weaves the gist of Attar's spiritual masterpiece into her creations.

In the Conference of the Birds, the birds of the world gather to decide who is to be their king, as they have none. The hoopoe, the wisest of them all, suggests that they should find the legendary Simorgh, a mythical Persian bird

roughly equivalent to the western phoenix.

It leads the birds, each of whom represent a human fault which prevents man from attaining enlightenment. When the group of thirty birds finally reach the dwelling place of the Simorgh, all they find is a lake in which they see their own reflection.

Finally, what is the connection between fish and moon? It is not as outlandish as you might think. Those who have heard of the 'Solunar Theory' – fishing by moon phase (sol for sun, lunar for moon) – will not find the title of the exhibition or its associations out of place.

Every fisherman knows that the best fishing times are when the fish are feeding. This tends to be during dawn and dusk, but what often goes unnoticed are the two periods elsewhere in the day - moonrise and moonset.

Because the moon has an effect on a variety of factors surrounding the fish - including the live fodder they hunt - these periods, combined with the moon's phase, are what trigger feeding.

By understanding this, and choosing times when sunrise/sunset and moonrise/moonset coincide with new or full moon phases, the chances of landing a good catch of fish are increased. Therefore Etemadi has reeled in her subject successfully, so to say.

She was born in Iran in 1948 and currently lives and works in Tehran. Her works have received international acclaim and she is widely recognised in the art world. She was exhibited in Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris earlier this year in Multiple Modernities, a group exhibition curated by Catherine Grenier.

She has also participated in numerous art fairs and her works are in the permanent collections of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts, Centre Georges Pompidou, the Asia Society and a number of private collections.

AB Bookness was started in 2012 by Ali Bakhtiari. 'Bookness' was a phrase coined in the 70s by Philip Smith to describe how the ordinary book is transformed into an actual medium of art, much like a canvas. Smith held that a book should allow the artist to express himself through it in exactly the same way that he would through a canvas, a sculpture or an installation.

AB Bookness is also a continuation of a long-lived tradition of the art of bookmaking as the primary art form in the Islamic World.

Founded in 2009 by Kuwait-based art journalist and former Phillips de Pury Middle East Director Lulu Al-Sabah, JAMM is a contemporary art gallery in Dubai. Bridging cultures is its mission.
