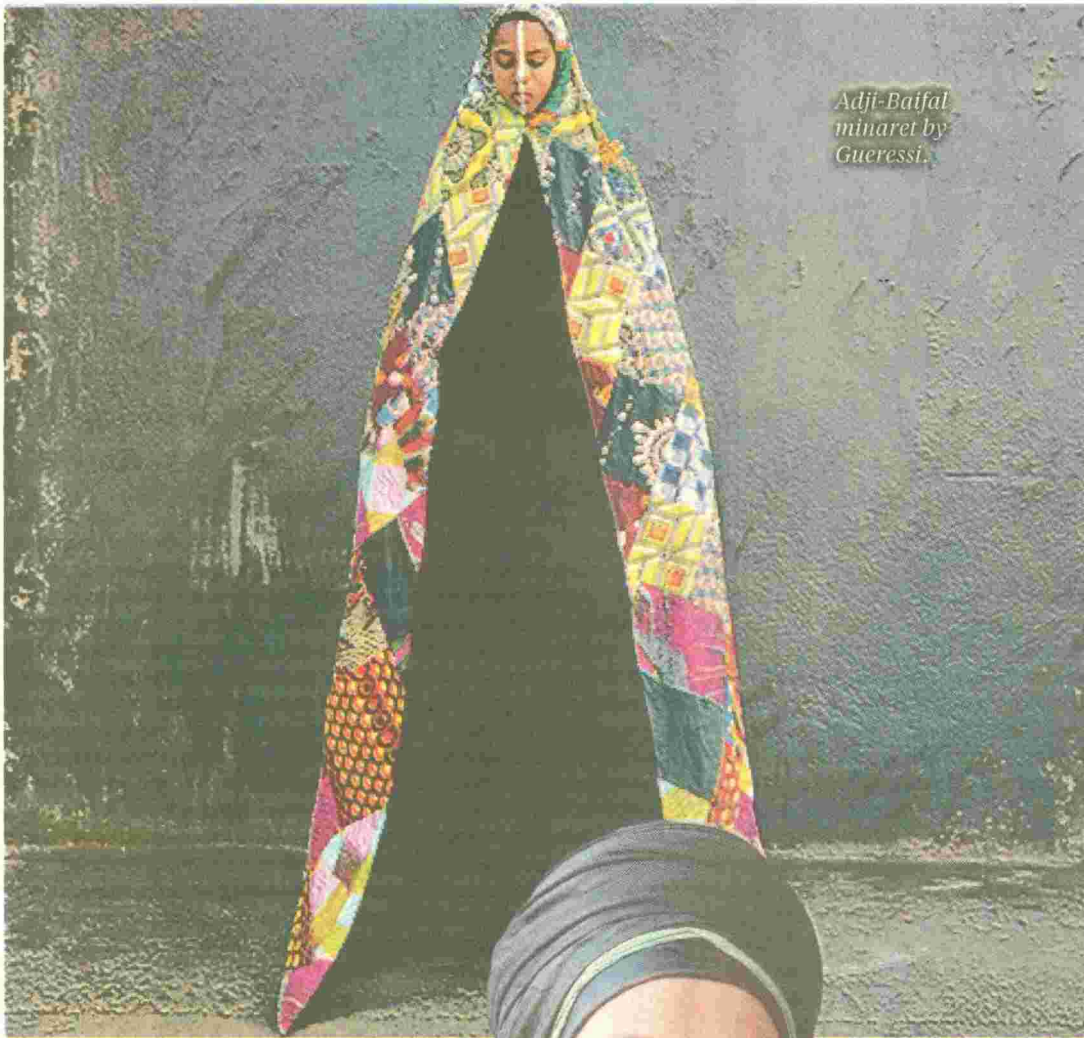


BROUGHT TO YOU  
BY LIFE & TIMES

**PLUSH** art



Adjl-Baifal  
minaret by  
Guerresi.

**"As an artist,  
I try to break  
away from all  
the norms."**

Maimouna Guerresi



# BRUSH BICULTU

Artwork based on Islamic h  
pathway to self-discovery

**T**HE two artists I meet during the recent 8th Marketplace of Creative Arts festival (MOCAfest) could not be more different. Where eL Seed will not disclose his full name, Maimouna Guerresi is open about taking the name "Maimouna" when she embraced Islam in 1990.

eL Seed is determined to keep his family out of the limelight, while Maimouna's muse is her daughter. eL Seed readily says he's 34 and Maimouna is horrified when requested to disclose her age. What both of them have in common, however, is a love for art and how it's shaped them into the successful artist they have become.

**CALLIGRAFFITI**

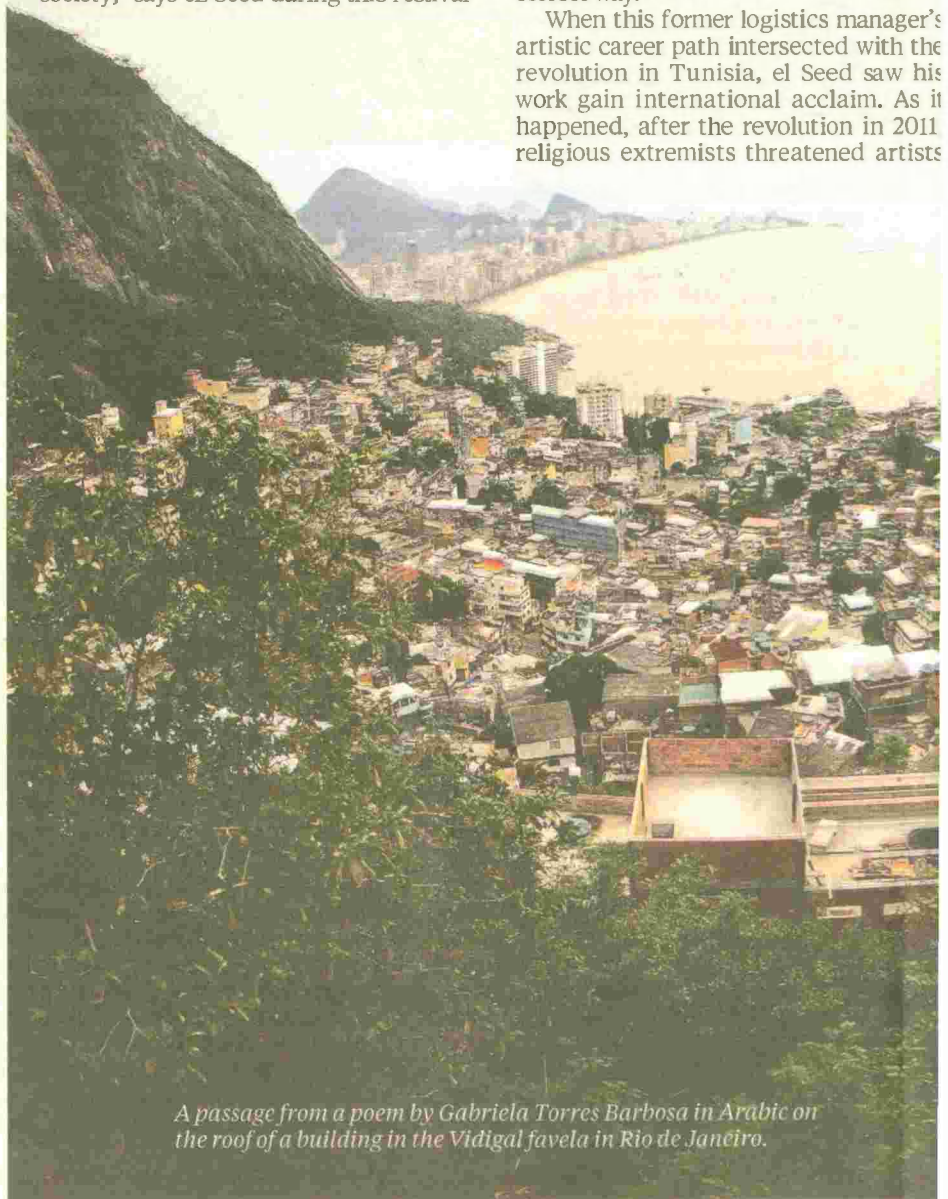
"The role of the artist is to be the mirror of society," says eL Seed during this festival

to gather Muslim artists to showcase and celebrate the diversity of their work in conjunction with the 11th World Islamic Economic Forum.

About 10 years ago, curious about his bicultural identity, this French-Tunisian street artist began to explore graffiti, which incorporates Arabic calligraphy, and called it "calligraffiti".

The calligraffiti that eL Seed created wasn't always met with approval. Indeed, he says that someone once asked him why the "alef" he drew was very long. He was told to learn all the rules of calligraphy before breaking them. His response was to question his critics' certainty that a shorter "alef" was the correct way to write the letter. He shrugs and adds: "Maybe, 500 years from now, someone will see my work and say that I wrote 'alef' in the correct way."

When this former logistics manager's artistic career path intersected with the revolution in Tunisia, eL Seed saw his work gain international acclaim. As it happened, after the revolution in 2011, religious extremists threatened artists



A passage from a poem by Gabriela Torres Barbosa in Arabic on the roof of a building in the Vidigal favela in Rio de Janeiro.

# I WITH URALISM

heritage leads two artists on a y, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

and destroyed Sufi shrines to stifle creative expression. eL Seed's response was to return to his hometown of Gabes, Tunisia and, from there, he created multiple works of art. One of his more renowned works appears on the minaret of the Jara Mosque based on the following verse from the Quran: "O humankind, we have created you from a male and a female and made you people and tribes, so you may know each other."

Not all of eL Seed's works are based on verses from the Quran. In fact, in Vidigal favela in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, he painted a translated version of a verse by the poet Gabriela Torres Barbosa: "You forgot how to love your people, to love your country, country of the poor, country of the black."

In Shoreditch, London, he took a quote from John Locke's work — "It is one thing to show a man that he is in error, and another to put him in possession of the truth" and painted an Arabic translation of it on a wall.

His more recent project can be viewed on the iconic Pont des Arts in Paris. The bridge is famous for people placing a lock

with their loved one's name on it and throwing the key into the Seine River. The authorities decided to convert this bridge into a temporary exhibition of street art. The quote now painted on the bridge is taken from the work of French playwright Honoré de Balzac, "Paris is a veritable ocean. Plumb it, you will never know its depths."

#### SEARCH FOR EQUILIBRIUM

A quick review of Maimouna's work and it's easy to recognise the need eL Seed also has — to create work based on an understanding of his Islamic heritage which is accepted by the West.

A mother of two adult daughters, Maimouna describes herself as "a photographer, sculptor and video installation artist living between Italy and Senegal." Born in Bassano, north east of Italy, she grew up in a Catholic family.

"Every night," she shares, "there was prayer and we went to Church every week." She adds that the frescoes in the churches, which were artists' depictions of scenes from the Bible, "were more scary than spiritual."



A quote by Honoré de Balzac in Arabic on the Pont des Arts across the River Seine by eL Seed.

After her education, Maimouna went in search of spirituality. As luck would have it, one of her uncles did a lot of missionary work which meant that she was accustomed to visitors from Africa. It was only a matter of time before she visited the continent and converted to Islam in Senegal.

In particular, Maimouna was influenced by a large Islamic Sufi order called the Mouride Sufi brotherhood. Its followers are called Mouride (from the Arabic word *murid*) and denotes the disciple of a spiritual guide. It was founded in the 19th century by Amadou Bamba and Mourides make up around 40 per cent of the total population in Senegal.

"In 1991, I changed the direction of my life," says Maimouna who uses the French word *metissage* to describe the identity she has been trying to assert ever since. She defines it as a hybrid of African and Western cultures, linked by Islamic spirituality, in particular, Sufi philosophy. Naturally, her work is the search for equilibrium between both these cultures and her sense of belonging to each one.

In her photographs, Maimouna often asks her models to pose in a manner that she's familiar with, such as formal references of the Madonna and late Gothic and Renaissance art. However, the facial features of the subjects may belong to

Oriental and African physiognomy.

A case in point is the photograph called Adji Baifal Minaret in Maimouna's book, Inner Constellations. The model in the photo is Maimouna's daughter, Adji Fatou Amdy Hadi. Maimouna says that she's posing in a way that seems familiar in the West. However, Adji is also wearing a typical Sufi vest made from 99 pieces of cloth, which, Maimouna says, represents the 99 names of God.

Similarly, in the photograph titled San Francisco, the man is from an ancient artistic and agriculturalist people called the Bambara from West Africa. The pose he's adopted and the birds milling about are a reflection of St. Francis of Assisi who loved animals with a special fondness for birds.

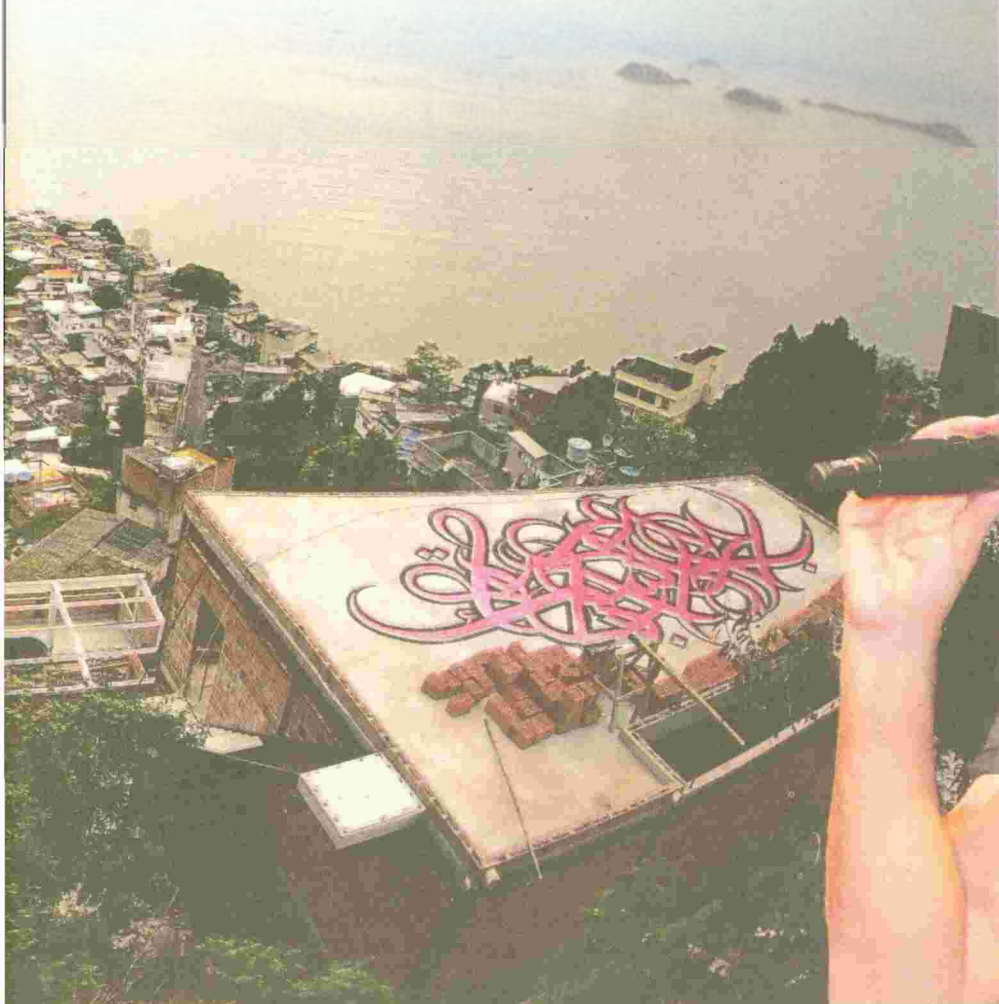
"As an artist, I try to break away from all the norms," says Maimouna, and adds that her art is often a complaint against the preconceptions and fears that people have towards Islam. Now based in Milan, she says that people are afraid of the religion and this, she puts down to propaganda.

#### THE CRAFT OF WRITING

This sentiment resonates with eL Seed. In fact, he says that many people he comes across associate the Arabic language with religious extremism. He brings the interview to a close on a cautionary note when he says since children today have practically forgotten how to write, they "will forget their legacy that is our script. If we forget our script, we will begin to forget our heritage."

How, though, do we get children to want to learn to write and become interested in something seemingly complicated as calligraphy?

eL Seed is brutally honest when he replies: "Throw away the iPad."



**"The role of the artist is to be the mirror of society."**

*eL Seed*