Syrian poet Adonis: calligraphy, art, poems and politics

By: Karen Dabrowska

"The end of the age
That rained stones
Means the beginning of an age
That rained oil....."

Syrian poet Adonis held the audience spell bound in West London's Mosaic Rooms as he recited his poems with passion and melancholy.

He was surrounded by his art work: calligraphy, colour and figurative gestures which he calls 'rakaim' – around 100 ink drawings, featuring poems handwritten in Arabic calligraphy and collaged with layers of found materials such as old parchments, rags, and fragments of paper.

During the past two months he has been visiting the UK for a series of

literary events and an exhibition of his exquisite drawings in the Mosaic Rooms: A Tribute to Adonis celebrating his life, poetry and criticism.

The Mosaic Rooms' series of talks reflected Adonis's influence on poetry, literary criticism, history, Sufism and politics. Topics ranged from the relationship between literature and revolution to the evolution of the Arabic language after the birth of Islam and the influence of English modernism on Arabic poetry.

Adonis is one of the most influential poets of the 20th and 21st centuries, and is seen as the Arab world's answer to T.S. Eliot. However, few Westerners heard of him until last year when the Syrian poet won the €50,000 Goethe Prize and became a favourite for the Nobel Prize for Literature

Now in his eighties, the Arab world's greatest living poet has proved to be a controversial figure where contemporary politics are concerned. He has been criticised that his open letter of protest to President Assad was too soft.

With Syria teetering on civil war – and speaking before President al-Assad rejected Arab League calls to step down – Adonis was unequivocal that "the present regime absolutely has to go. The Ba'ath party has to go, and another regime to be put in place that's secular, democratic and pluralist." Yet he is against both armed uprising and foreign intervention. "Guns can't resolve these problems. If everyone took up arms, there'd be civil war." Outside military intervention has "destroyed Arab countries, from Iraq to Libya". As for its humanitarian rationale, "it's not true – it's to colonise. If westerners really want to defend Arab human rights, they have to start by defending the rights of the Palestinians."

Commenting on the Arab spring he insisted that "a real revolution must change the structures of a society, not simply its governing regimes." He fears the return of repressive religious ideology, a fear that has sadly turned out to be justified. "I am overjoyed at the festive and happy wedding we are witnessing everywhere but I fear that it will soon turn to tragedy."

Exiled to France after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, he worked to bring to Arabic poetry the international recognition it

'This is the only collage in the exhibition where I've used black ink. It's a text from the 8th century – another beautiful love poem – this time by Bashar ibn Burd, one of the founders of Arab modernity at that time. He was killed by the Caliph after he was accused of being irreligious'

deserves. Even today, when he is more than eighty years old, he retains his fresh and critical outlook on the events of his homeland, attracting controversy and debate because of his cautionary and critical words on the Arab Spring.

Adonis was born Ali Ahmad Said Esber near the city of Latakia, western Syria, in 1930.

Aged 17, he adopted the name of the Greek fertility god, to alert napping editors to his precocious talent and his pre-Islamic, pan-Mediterranean muses.

He had no formal education for most of his childhood, learning the Quran at the local mosque school and memorising classical Arabic poetry with the help of his father. His formal education began when, as a teenager, he recited one of his own poems to the then President of Syria, who gave him a scholarship to a French lycée in Latakia, followed by studies in philosophy at Damascus University.

In 1956, he was forced to leave Syria after being imprisoned for his involvement with the Syrian National Socialist Party, from which he later resigned. He moved to Beirut, Lebanon, and, together with Yusuf al-Khal, set up the legendary Shi'r (Poetry) magazine, one of the Arab world's most influential literary journals. Adonis then studied in Paris before returning to Beirut and taking up a post teaching Arabic Literature. In 1982, he and his family relocated to Paris as a result of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon where he remains resident to this day.

Adonis' work includes over 50 books of poetry, criticism and translation. His multi-volume anthology of Arabic poetry (Diwan al-shi'r al-'arabi) covers almost two millennia of verse.

Adonis is recognised as the man who led the modernist movement in Arabic literature.

"How bitter language is now and how helpless the alphabet", he comments in one of his poems. "I have always felt the need to re-interpret our history. For history is not made up only of facts but of meanings which we need to reveal... often our history is told by those in power. Poetry has the extraordinary ability to express the identity of a people. It does not reinvent history but expresses its deepest meanings. I prefer to be a prophet."

'The text here is from a pre-Islamic poet, Abu Zu'aib Al-Huzali which speaks of his life and loves. The cardboard comes from a torn-up box of books'

In a tribute to Adonis on one of the walls of gallery in the Mosaic Rooms were V. S. Naipaul's words: "His vision is extraordinary. His poetry sublime… He is for me a master of our times."
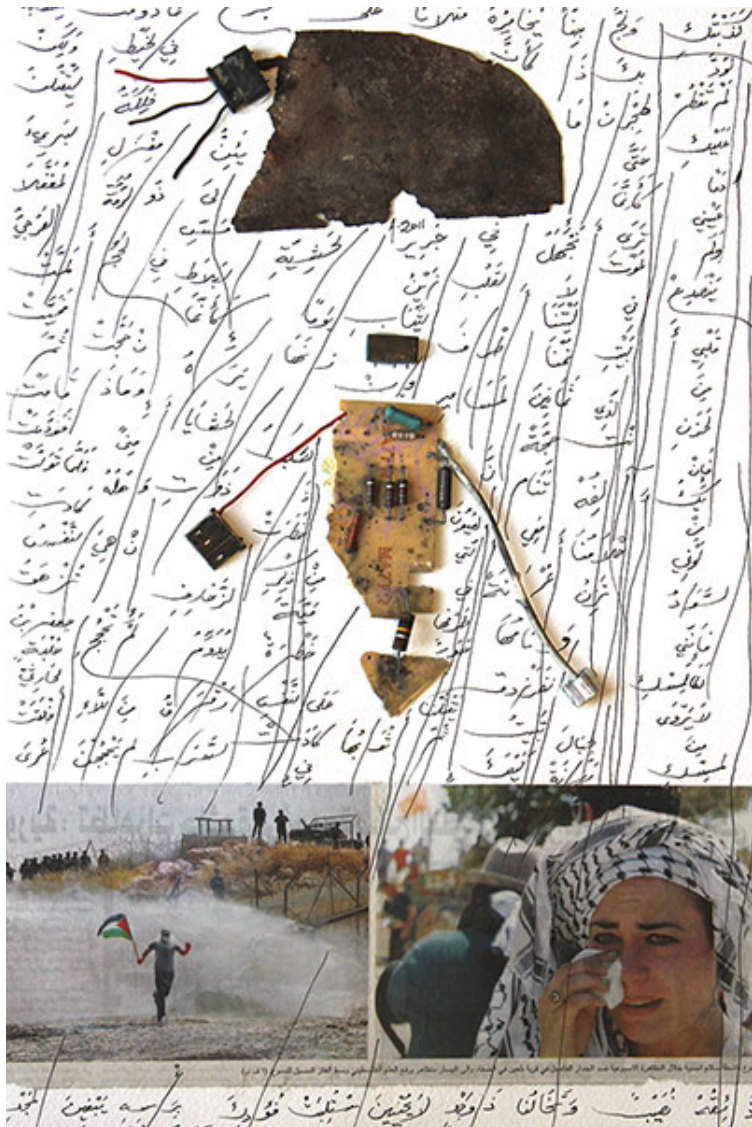
'This is the only rakima where I've used a photograph. It's a young woman protesting against the wall in Palestine. The text is an assemblage of pre-Islamic writings which speak of peace and against oppression'

'Here the marks are an imitation of calligraphy. It's not a real text, just a game with letters – the skin of words, but not the words themselves'

'This text is part of a love poem. It's one of a series of rakaim using my own poems for a book which I'm putting together at the moment'