



SPOTLIGHT

## A DIALOGUE WITH EMPTINESS

*Writing as a tool of expression*

Cairo-based graphic designer and lettering artist Mariem Abutaleb offers a contemporary take on Arabic calligraphy. She experiments with the script to create compositions that document poems, songs and personal reflections on a variety of mediums—from Japanese-style scrolls and the dense pages of her *Book of Diaries*, to designer shoes embroidered with lettering.

Motivated by the Zen belief that white space is conducive to reflection, Abutaleb creates a dialogue with this emptiness which, she says, allows the letters and their infinite possibilities to speak. “My writings break the silence, but it’s never about erasing the space,” she says.

Abutaleb has a bachelor’s degree in graphic design from the American University in Cairo, but never had a singular master or calligraphic tradition that inspired her. “My style emerged from my own reflections and experiences, and my practice grew naturally over time,” she says.

Her journals are the starting point, serving as unfiltered records of her thoughts, experiences and emotions, to be transcribed later onto her works. “Integrating diaries into my artwork is an intimate process that allows me to bridge the personal and the universal,” she says. “I often find myself returning to earlier diaries to understand how my ideas have evolved.”

A case in point is her project *Lettering Diaries*. Here she created 20 diaries, archived by date, combining various stylised handwritings, which were then re-elaborated to form compositions.



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Abutaleb has also explored Egyptian folk heritage and literature. In the work *Mawaweel* (2023), she was inspired by traditional Mawal songs to create lyrics, while in *Folk Songs Archive* (2020) she interpreted Egyptian folk songs. For each of the 40 songs she documented, she created a different font, translating visually her emotions while listening to the music.

She will have her first solo exhibition in Cairo in April. —**Naima Morelli**

Header image: *Writings / كتابت* Ink on Fabric, 100 x 520 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photographed by Dina Sakr.

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