

# GAGOSIAN ASIAN ART

By Olivia Sand

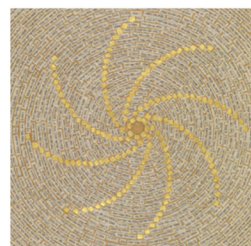
As a painter, YZ Kami (b 1956 in Tehran and presently based in New York) has never been part of any trend or fashion. On the contrary, over the past decades, he has consistently followed his own path, continuously working on large-scale portraits. In these works YZ Kami has inadvertently endorsed the role of an *éclairé* (scout), emphasising the features that make each of his sitters unique. Over the years, the way he has gone about portraying his sitters has changed considerably, going from a clear depiction to one that is more blurred – seemingly in the process of appearing or disappearing.

Driven by his personal interests, especially in sacred architecture, or 'the sacred' in more general terms, YZ Kami has embarked on various series (*Dome* and *Prayer Hands*) that bring the celestial in all its possible forms closer to us. In addition, a most generous artist at heart, his prime concern is not just the painting per se, but the viewer, and how to share his observations about the world with them. In the interview below, he discusses his approach more thoroughly with the Asian Art Newspaper.

Asian Art Newspaper: By what name do you actually go?  
YZ Kami: Kami is my nickname and therefore, all my friends call me Kami. Then, the first time in my life, I had an exhibition, I always wanted to have a name with initials, like poets, or some Persian poets who have initials in their name and similar to some of my favourite poets: TS Eliot and WH Auden. YZ stands for my family name which is Youssefzadeh and Kami is my nickname. So that is the origins of my pen name. I sign my paintings YZ Kami, or Kami.

AAN: Your mother was also involved with painting and the art world.  
YZK: Yes, my mother was a painter. She was did very academic painting: portraits, landscapes and still-lives. She was a student of Heydariyan, who was among the first generation of painters that went to Europe in the 1920s and 30s in order to study and then came back to Iran. They visited major museums like the Louvre in France and the Uffizi in Italy. My mother was a very academic portrait and landscape painter, and I grew up painting with her. She always had a studio in our house and that is how I started to paint.

AAN: Did she paint for a living?  
YZK: No, not as such, painting was her passion.



*Endless Prayers (detail), 2015-2016, Mixed Media on Paper, in 54 Parts, Each: 76.2 x 57.2 cm © YZ Kami. Photography by Rob McKeever. Courtesy of the artist and Gagorian*



YZ Kami. Photo: Sueraya Shabeen

## YZ Kami

AAN: Have you always been attracted to portraits?  
YZK: Actually, as far as I can remember, what basically interested me in painting was to paint portraits. It has been like that since I was five or six years old. To paint the human face has always been my passion and is the most fascinating subject matter.

AAN: You not only have an interest in art, but also in film and philosophy. What specifically intrigues you in these other disciplines?  
YZK: I never went to art school. I have been painting since I was a child and when I finished high school and went to Europe to study, I did not want to become a painter. Painting was something that I had been doing all my life. So I went to study philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris. I stayed there for six years, which also allowed me to follow my interest in film, but I always remained a painter at heart. I subsequently went back to painting which eventually became my profession. Needless to say, I was influenced by everything that I encountered throughout my study, or in life in general, especially things on which I spent time and passion. I believe that the books I read, the teachers I encountered, and the films I saw definitely had an impact on me.

AAN: The people you paint, do you mainly focus on acquaintances, close friends, or people whose faces you think are interesting?  
YZK: All of these. Friends, family, acquaintances – and I do ask strangers to sit for me sometimes. It happens quite often that I will ask someone if they are willing to sit for me and then I use these pictures for a portrait. It is very intuitive and in that moment, a face can just capture you.

AAN: After having completed numerous portraits, in your opinion, what makes a face interesting? The eyes ... the charisma?

YZK: With years of painting faces, I find that all faces – with no exception – are fascinating. To select a face is 'a spur of the moment thing' and intuitive, when something triggers in me which has nothing to do with physical beauty. It is something else. For me, all faces have a certain beauty. Maybe one face is not one's taste for any kind of intimacy, but beauty is in every single face, in all eyes, in the whole composition of the face.

AAN: Do you have people sitting for you for the whole process, or do you mainly work from photographs?  
YZK: For years, my process was to have a sitter in front of me. The portraits were always life-size portraits, but then in the 1990s, I started to enlarge the face and gradually it became larger and larger. From then on, I started to use photographs. I could not work having the subject in front of me and

doing a 10 foot high painting. I photograph the sitter and then I print the photograph and use that to paint.

AAN: With the photograph, especially if we are dealing with family or friends, do you paint accurately according to the photograph, or express how your feel about them or know them?  
YZK: It always changes. Even people that I do not know, the photograph that I have taken may not be the same as the portrait I am painting – it changes.

AAN: It seems that the paintings have gone gradually from being very sharp to being blurred.  
YZK: Yes, the painting has become blurred. I started to paint a little bit more blurry, just to refer to the sense of the memory of a face. The memories that we have of faces, even close people to us, are never precise. There is a tremor, a movement. When I started to blur the images, this blurriness gave me a freedom in how I painted: as there is no precision, the brushstrokes are looser and freer, and I became very attracted to this idea. So I continued and it has become even more blurred with time.

AAN: Now that your work appears more blurred without any specific detail standing out, what is the most interesting part of the painting for you?

YZK: The challenge is the whole surface of the face. As you pointed out, my portraits have always been the sitter looking at the viewer, staring at the viewer with the eyes looking directly at you. In the case of the eyes looking at you, the focus is the eyes because the eyes are so powerful (as they say, the eyes are the window of the soul). Since I started to paint the eyes closed, or absent, or looking down (not in all portraits, but in quite a number of them), it is very different and there is not one focal point. It is the whole surface and the challenge is

to make that whole experience come alive.

AAN: One statement that frequently comes back in regard to your work is that you are 'making the invisible visible'. It goes both ways and I would turn that statement around, saying that you are 'making the visible invisible'. What are your thoughts?  
YZK: That is very interesting and you are absolutely right. It goes both ways. I agree.

AAN: Looking at a number of your pieces, what is your relationship to colour?

YZK: Colour is very subtle. When you look at the actual palette that I prepare to paint, it is very colourful. There are different shades of red, blue and green, but the way I mix them, they have a tendency to become more like earth colours. They do not scream at you. On the contrary, they are quiet and they are more fresco-like. The way I prepare my paint is very matt and dry on the surface although I paint only with oil paint. The final results do look like a wall painting with the shininess of oil taken away.

AAN: Considering the portraits, have you ever completed any self-portraits?

YZK: For the first time in my life, I am painting and working on a self-portrait. I have done a few portraits that are self-portraits in the early 1990s that are from a childhood photograph of mine and that are called Self-Portrait as a Child. It is a series that I worked on in 1992-1993, but as an adult, this is the first time I am doing a self-portrait.

AAN: Why did it take so long to start working on self-portraits?  
YZK: I do not know. I am painting it from a photograph. In the process I have changed the painting from the photograph a lot – making the painting very blurry.

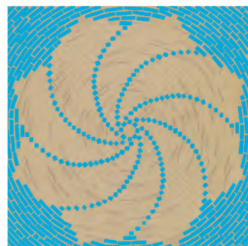
AAN: You are interested in Fayum paintings (funeral portraits on mummies). Do they have a specific impact on you, or on your work?  
YZK: I think so, because when I was a student in Paris, I used to go a lot to the Louvre. Right at the beginning, I fell in love with them. They have a beautiful collection of Fayum at the Louvre and I have been looking at these portraits ever since. There are also marvellous ones in London at the British Museum and some beautiful ones at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. I have also seen some at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. I have always loved these portraits. They are very unreal with those exaggerated eyes and the stylised format.

AAN: Considering your emphasis on portrait paintings, how did the



*White Dome V (2010-2011), acrylic on linen, 284.5 x 307.3 cm (unframed) © YZ Kami. Photography by Rob McKeever. Courtesy of the artist and Gagorian.*

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*Untitled (2010) oil on linen, 251.5 x 172.7 cm (unframed)*  
© Y.Z. Kami. Photography by Rob McKeever.  
Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian



*Untitled (Hands) I (2013), oil on linen, 274.3 x 182.9 cm (unframed)* © Y.Z. Kami. Photography by Rob McKeever.  
Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian.



*Man with Violet Eyes (2013–2014), oil on linen, 274.3 x 182.9 cm (unframed)* © Y.Z. Kami. Photography by Rob McKeever. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian.



*Marwin (2013–2014), oil on linen, 274.3 x 182.9 cm (unframed)* © Y.Z. Kami. Photography by Rob McKeever. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian.

*Dome* series of paintings make their way into your work?

YZK: It started with an interest in architecture, on which I have always been very keen, actually space and architecture to be more specific. Then, it came about by my looking at ceilings in different traditions of sacred architecture in the Middle East and in Europe. I think there is a connection between the Dome paintings and the portraits. There is a focus on the centre that is also present for the face and everything that emanates from that, but at the same time, they are totally different projects: one is very abstract and very repetitive whilst the other is figurative.

The large portraits, however, when you are in front of them are like fields of colour, they are very abstract, but when you take a picture of them or when you see them from a distance, they are very figurative. With the Domes, the experience probably is the same as with the portraits in terms of the aura that I want to convey. It is the

same experience as the portraits, but obviously with a very different visual information and visual approach.

AAN: What type of relationship do you have with light within your various pieces, say in the Dome series, the portraits, or *Prayer Hands*?

YZK: In the paintings, the only way to see the face is through light. At the same time, I do not know if I succeed and it may sound very abstract, but I want to give a feeling for the viewer that the light is emanating from the face, or is emanating from the hand rather than being lit. There is an inner light that we all have. In the portraits, that comes through to the viewer.

AAN: When you refer to an inner light, it makes me think of Rousseau. You seem to be tremendously optimistic towards humanity.

YZK: Yes, absolutely! I truly believe in that sacred light that is inside

every being. With the ‘white Domes’ it is obviously also the experience of light. At the centre, there is this emanation of light which is very white and there are mystics in different traditions: they talk about the white light – that experience of divine light as a pure white. So, there is also a reference to that in the Domes series.

AAN: How did the pieces focusing on the hands come about?

YZK: By coincidence, I took a picture of a friend’s hands in prayer. I did a sketch, then I did a painting and then more paintings followed – larger pieces with huge hands in prayer. Hands in prayer is a very direct allusion or reference to sacred. For instance, eyes closed or eyes looking down, one can be in thought, one can be asleep, one can be in meditation, or one is praying, we just do not know. With Prayer Hands there is no mistake. It is about a divine moment, or a sacred experience. Where I come from – meaning in Islam and Judaism –

there is no Prayer Hands. This custom is mainly in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. It is a very direct image of sacred.

AAN: Is this series ongoing?

YZK: Yes, it is. As with my portraits, the hands are very blurred, because they are so large, when you are in front of them they are just fields of colour.

AAN: What was the response towards the Prayer Hands series?

YZK: The response is very positive. Everyone, even if they do not consider themselves religious or follow any kind of religious discipline, can react very positively to these paintings. Maybe it triggers an image of hope. The image is uplifting and has that movement that is vertical towards high-up. From an art historical point of view, there is the reference to Dürers’s famous drawing in the Albertina Museum in Vienna (*Praying Hands*, circa 1508) that is an exquisite small drawing of just a pair of hands in prayer. That reference to Dürer is very obvious.

AAN: Did the *Endless Prayer* series start around the same time as the Dome series?

YZK: Exactly. They are very connected. They refer to the architecture in terms of the form, the ceilings, and the brick. In *Endless Prayers* there are sacred texts as if they are written on those bricks. They are used from Sufi poetry to Sanskrit, to Hebrew texts, to Arabic prayers. They refer to many different sacred traditions.

AAN: The literary verses you are referring to are all very poetic, with generous and warm wording.

YZK: The essence of great poetry is sacred for me. There is a Persian poet that I love and always read is Hafez and also Rumi. But then, there are also French, American, English or German poets, too.

AAN: Do you consider yourself a religious person?

YZK: I do not practise any specific religion and I am totally allergic to organised religions. However, if you ask me whether I believe in a spirituality and a spiritual life, yes I do, it is the centre of my interest. For as long as I can remember, I have always been drawn to comparative religions: Islam which I come from – mostly Sufism (the mystical dimension of Islam), Christianity to which I am also connected, Judaism, as well as Buddhism and Hinduism. It is a very big part of my interest and psyche.

AAN: In the Dome series, what aspect of architecture attracts you, especially when visiting sacred places?

YZK: Sacred architecture is a place where one sits to meditate, or for a believer to pray. Since I was a child, I always felt vibrations in sacred places like a church, a mosque, or a synagogue. All these people who for centuries were there and prayed, maybe there is something here to explore further. I was always very drawn to the inside of these buildings.

AAN: Is your interest in sacred architecture related to the colours or motifs found inside?

YZK: The motifs are usually very simple. As you know, in sacred architecture the ceiling is always very important because the ceiling refers to heaven high above. So all things that happen on the ceiling fascinate me.

AAN: Have you been back to Iran recently?

YZK: The last time I went back was in April 2015. I had an exhibition in London and after the opening I went to Tehran for two weeks and it was much better than my previous stay. I have been back once in every five years. I was more optimistic last time.

AAN: You recently exhibited in a group show in Tehran. What was the response?

YZK: I had a one room installation, which unfortunately I did not get the chance to see, but it was received very well. That was the first time that I showed in Iran – in April 2016. The installation was an earlier work from 1993, an entire room with old photographs mounted on canvas with portraits painted in some of them. The concept of the exhibition was about architecture. The piece belonged to me, but was sold to a foundation in Iran during the show.

AAN: Was your piece in Iran sold according to market prices?

YZK: Yes, it was sold according to market prices which I very much surprised me. Apparently, it is a very active art market with very enthusiastic collectors. That is what I keep hearing.

AAN: At this stage, would you be tempted to keep a studio there?

YZK: No, I do not want to keep another studio as I am already running two studios in the US, one in Manhattan and one in Garrison. However, to go and visit sometimes is good.

AAN: Painting has been declared dead on many occasions. Did you face a moment when you thought you were completely out of place compared to what was going on around you in the art world?

YZK: No, I do not think so. What was going on in the art world was never essential to my undertaking. It is my character that I have always followed my own inner path. Each one of us has a very particular DNA that is different from any other human being. Each one of us has also has our own particular path. I always thought, especially if one is in the creative field one just has to follow this and not pay too much attention to the noise outside. People continue to paint.

AAN: Today, in our world filled with images, Instagram, Snapchat, how do you try to visually stand out with your work?

YZK: I do what I am supposed to do. One thing that I have to say is that I do not paint for myself, I paint for the viewer. The painting becomes alive when there is a viewer, someone looking at the work. It is not about painting a piece and keeping it in my storage. I agree with you that we are saturated by this world of images through the internet and other forms of information, but as I said, each one of us is unique. If you are true to your own nature, true to yourself, your image is not going to be like anyone else’s as your DNA is not like anyone else.

AAN: I would tend to answer that your portraits force the viewer to stop.

YZK: That is nice! That is actually the biggest compliment!

● *The work of YZ Kami is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, from 19 November to 19 March, 2017*