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London's the Key exhibition celebrates diversity

Ben East

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Inside St James's Church in London, amid the pews and Corinthian columns, is a major East-West art exhibition that offers a "contemporary message of hope for a harmonious, peaceful and tolerant world".

And as curator Paul-Gordon Chandler points out, "it's a critical message for London at this moment in time – this exhibition celebrates pluralism and diversity."

Running until August 15, *The Key* is a fascinating group show featuring 40 Egyptian, Middle Eastern and western artists. After meeting Chandler and his colleagues from the inter-religious, non-governmental organisation Caravan Arts in Cairo, the participants were sent a blank, 1.2-metre high fibreglass ankh, the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph often regarded as a universal symbol of tolerance and peace.

The only stipulation was that the artists' efforts had to embody the message of the show. Otherwise, they could take the ankh, designed and sculpted by Egyptian artist Reda Abdel Rahman, in any direction they wanted – and most have. As Chandler says, some are gentle messages of harmony, others are edgy political statements.

Ahmed Al Bahrani's *A Wall of Baghdad*, is wrapped in barbed wire. Maher Guirguis's *Invocation and Peace* – used on the poster – is colourfully modernist, while Elisabeth Bolza's *Syncretic Ankh* marries elements of calligraphy, image, map work and collage in a spectacular, archaeological but determinedly contemporary piece.

"The ankh is a perfect and powerful symbol because it binds lots of elements of culture together, and I wanted to reflect diverse cultural heritages in my piece," says Bolza, a Seville-based Austrian artist who has spent a career studying and researching Islamic art and civilisation. "So it's about embracing the images of Christianity, Islam and Judaism and bringing them together – the backdrop is the Holy Land. I'm trying to see where we all come from and where the common denominator lies. The answer to that comes from history."

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On the back of her ankh is a beautiful poem in Arabic script by Kahlil Gibran. The translation is *The Key's* aims in microcosm: "I love you my brother, whoever you are – whether you worship in a church, kneel in your temple, or pray in your mosque."

Bolza adds: "For me, art is a powerful vehicle for unifying people and enhances understanding and respect between cultures and creeds. It's obvious what divides us. Isn't it more worthwhile to look at what we share?"

Which might as well be Caravan's mission statement. *The Key* is just the latest in a series of travelling exhibitions Chandler's organisation has undertaken, which have included everything from straightforward paintings to life-size fibreglass donkeys. The tours always stop in the Middle East, Europe and North America: *The Key* opened at The Nile Art Gallery in Cairo in March and will go from London to Riverside Church, New York City, in September. Usually, but not always, the exhibitions take place in sacred spaces thanks to Caravan's overarching vision of inter-religious harmony.

"Caravan was set up in Egypt in 2009 with this initial idea that we are all journeying together through the arts and can learn from each other based on the things we have in common," explains Chandler. "I grew up in Senegal and I'd see the need to bridge between Christianity and Islam as a young man. I moved to Egypt in 2003 from the States, where the divide between cultures and faiths because of 9/11 had become really worrying. And in Cairo, quite haphazardly we began an interfaith contemporary arts festival based around the episcopal church I was working at and the Sunni Islam community. I couldn't believe it. Thousands came."

For all the good intentions, however – and there are many here – one wonders if it is it really possible for art to change the suspicions, fears and concerns that have become so central to how the human race regards itself in the 21st century?

Naturally, Chandler thinks it can – he talks about art's capability to speak to people at a deeper level than a news headline. But certainly the range of interfaith programming that surrounds a Caravan show – music, literature, film and discussion panel strands – means that the art can become a point of encounter rather than just an exhibition.

"Particularly when this show comes to the West, it's a chance for people to touch the soul of the middle eastern people through their artistic expressions, rather than read terrible stories about them in the newspapers," he says. "And it also opens eyes to the richness of Islamic culture, while debunking some of the myths."

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"At the end of the day, all of this is about realising that the 'other' is like ourselves. We're only changed by experiences, and so *The Key* is about creating a new experience for someone, whether that be an artist or someone who just likes the work. We may not always be spectacularly transformational at a Caravan show. But we can slowly change the way people think, for the better."

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