



INFINITE PRESENT

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I especially want to thank all of the artists who participated for their inspiring work.

on the cover: NASSER AL ASWADI, *NOSTALGIE* (detail)

opposite: WALID SITI, *BIRTH OF A NEW MOUNTAIN* (detail)

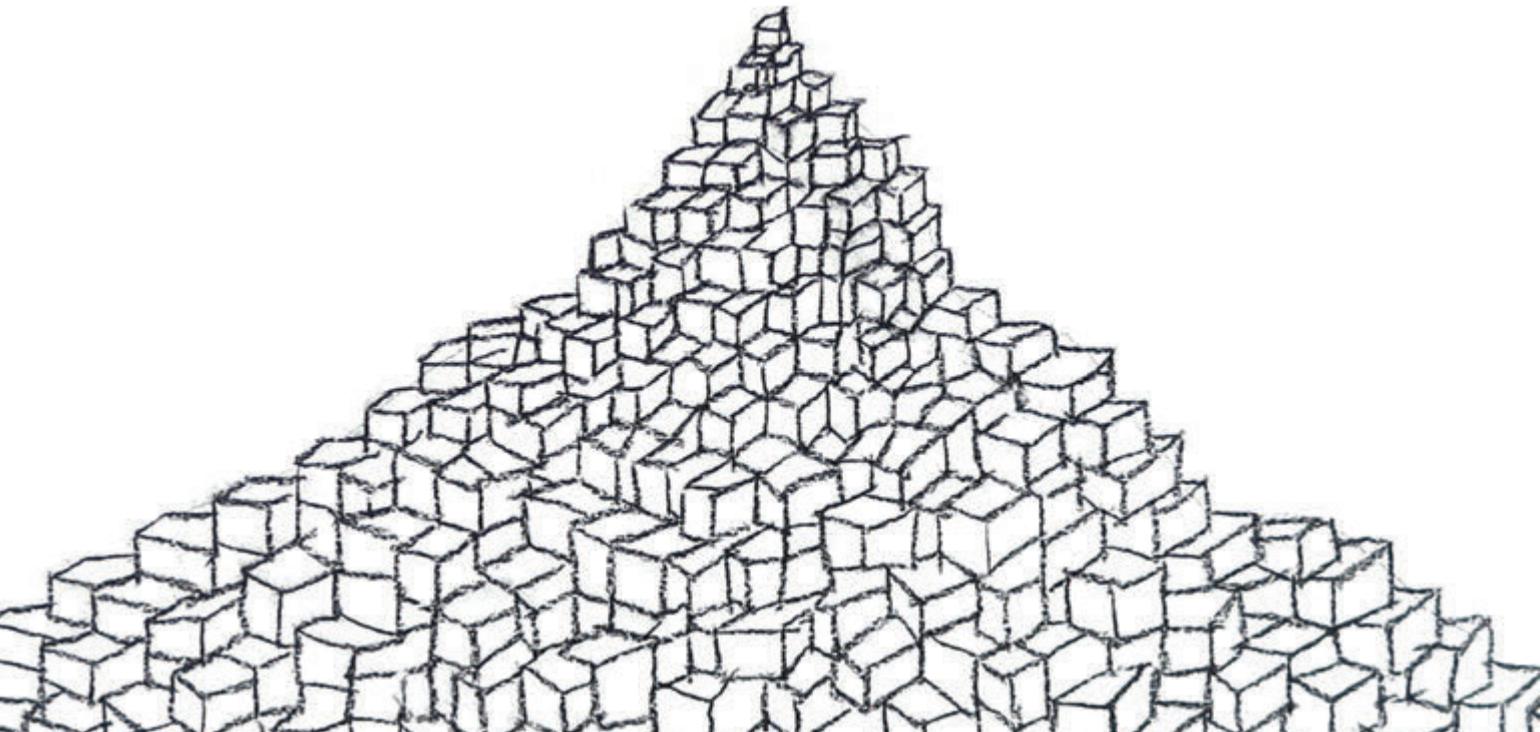
REVELATIONS FROM ISLAMIC DESIGN IN CONTEMPORARY ART

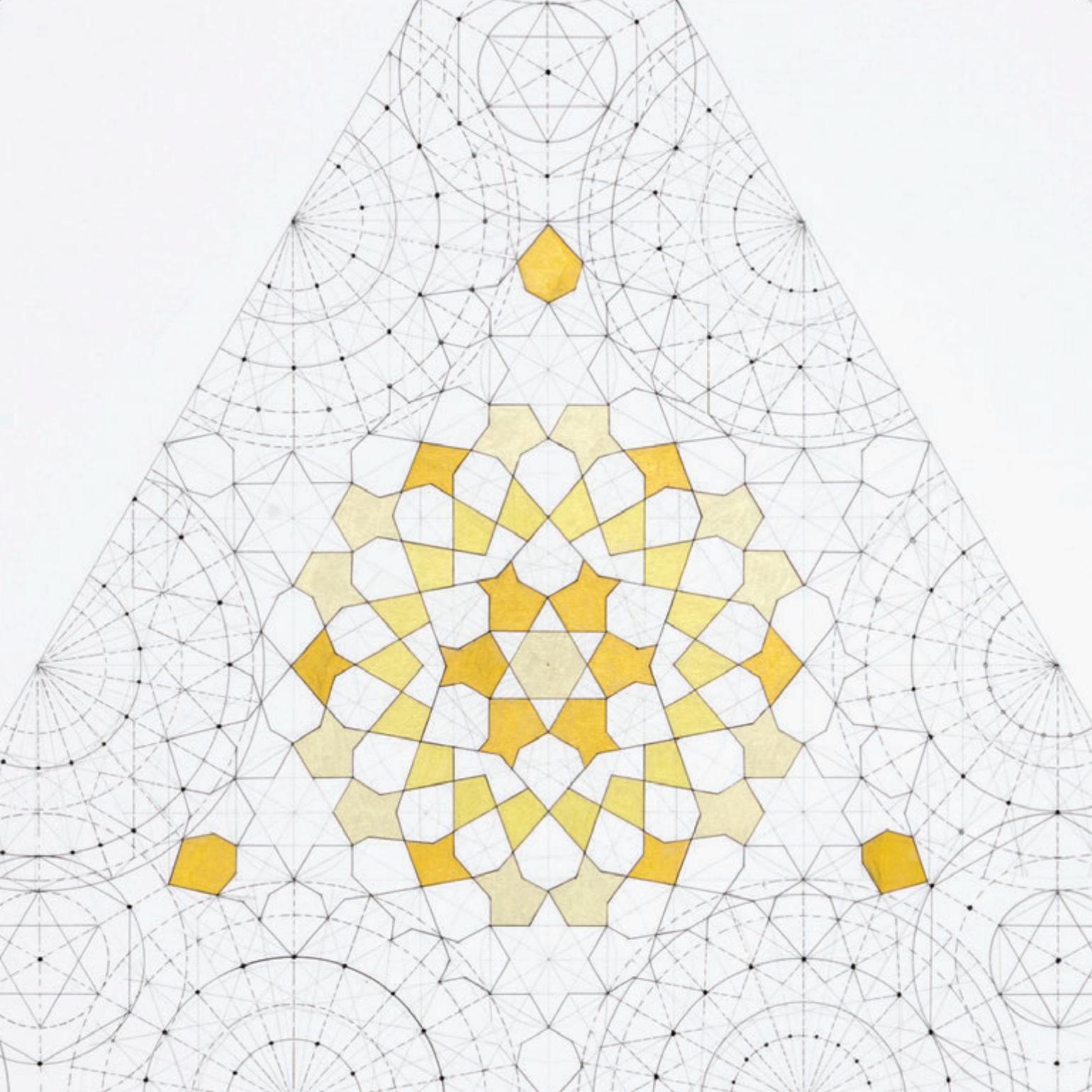
INFINITE PRESENT

CURATED BY MARIE COSTELLO

September 17 - November 30, 2018

CAMBRIDGE GALLERY 344





## Revelations from Islamic Design in Contemporary Art

As a student of western medieval art in graduate school, I was introduced to monuments of Islamic art throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Spain focusing on architectural elements such as pointed and horseshoe arches or decorative patterns that carried over into Romanesque and Gothic art. Working as a curator of contemporary art, I became aware of a number of artists that incorporate motifs from Islamic art into their work, a testament to the resilience of the forms through time to reveal new meanings. This exhibition brings together some of these artists to both celebrate their work and look at the connections to the past that inform their work. The artists and art works were chosen for their relationship to the geometry and calligraphy of Islamic design and the transformation of past meanings through the artistic practice. By combining traditions of the past in calligraphy, architecture and ceramics with cutting-edge concepts, these artists foreground the complexity and endless variations of these motifs. The edge between the literal and abstract, the concrete and mystical are blurred to create at times meditative, and at times politically-charged works. Not only do these artists carve out a new territory in abstraction, but they challenge preconceived ideas about these motifs. In these artworks, geometric patterns and calligraphy change through contemporary contexts, yet are *infinitely present*. For the viewer, they resonate historically, but are also tied to themes of deconstruction, geopolitics and aesthetics in today's world.

Calligraphy became a major form of decoration in both secular and non-secular art throughout Islamic culture that led to vast variations and exquisite refinement in the design of monuments and everyday items. Judaic and Christian traditions had both expressed anxiety about depicting God in a figural way due to fears of idolatry and the problem of portraying the perfection of God. For Islam, the word of God as revealed through Mohammad became the true representation of God,<sup>1</sup> and was later transcribed to become the Qur'an. Calligraphy was

developed to embellish the word with intricate design elements that become decorative forms in all media.

Legibility is not always important for calligraphic inscriptions in traditional settings, and certainly the location and interlacing of some of these texts do not make it easy. The use of interlace in calligraphy can obscure the literal message and enhance the sacred message. The word as image, however, *is* expressive politically, religiously and aesthetically. Arabic writing is highly aesthetic and lends itself to the creation of patterns of light and dark, complicated puzzles and symmetrical compositions. Throughout history, the innovations of these designs have been admired by diverse societies. Movable objects with fine calligraphy became part of a luxury trade of gifts between rulers. The high regard for the expertise and design elements of Islamic goods by elite Christians during the Middle Ages is validated by the presence of textiles, carved ivory or rock crystal containers and metalwork with Arabic inscriptions in church treasuries, often re-purposed for sacred functions, such as holding relics or the Eucharist.<sup>2</sup> Today, responses to this calligraphy may vary according to experience and point of view.

The artists in this exhibition reveal that calligraphy remains a powerful element that draws us in to interpret meanings and delight the eye. In the painting by **Rashid Koraïchi**, *La Memoire de la Sage*, the artist has created a bold figure on a patterned field by combining elements from different languages, thereby laying cultural associations that yield a universal meaning. From a Sufi heritage, he references Sufi verses that, in accordance with Sufi philosophy, "negotiate aesthetics with revelation." Also interested in the monumentality of the letter, **Hassan Massoudy** draws from global literature excerpting a specific word and, with flowing brushwork and color, heightens its meaning. In *Beauty*, the text is taken from Machrab, the 18th century Uzbek poet. Looking to upend the traditional execution of Islamic writing, he studied Japanese calligraphy, which added a new elegance

<sup>1</sup> Erica Cruikshank Dodd, "The Image of the Word" in *Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean* ed. Eva Hoffman (New York, 2007) 194

<sup>2</sup> Jerrilynn D. Dodds, "Islam, Christianity and the Problem of Religious Art" in *Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World* ed. Eva Hoffman (New York, 2007) 350-366

and speed to his brushwork. The drawing in this exhibition is from a series intended to bring the world together through love, using texts from East and West. In a lithograph from his *Red Series*, we see how **Nja Mahdaoui** stresses the visual impact of his compositions, which he refers to as 'calligrams' or 'graphemes.' The perfect balance of color and form is striking. The calligraphic form to the right suggests the end of a verse in an elegant Qur'an, but here is viewed as a purely aesthetic form. Combining geometry and calligraphy, **Kamal Boullata's** work emphasizes the purity of line. The word "Allah" is designed within a square unit and repeated in alternating colors, resembling patterned light. In an interview with Alexander Baraka, Boullata notes that he sees himself as "a writer of images, whereby the Arabic words assume the body of an icon, whose aesthetic components reflect a contemporary language of abstract expressionism."<sup>3</sup>

Other artists blur calligraphy further, allowing the viewer access to a purely abstract visual language, but rich with resonances to the act of writing. In **Nasser Al Aswadi's** canvas, letters are painted and stacked separately, tangled and "lost in the imaginary space of the painting."<sup>4</sup> The overall effect is of a fragment from the cosmic universe. **Pouran Jinchi**, who trained in calligraphy, but also in mathematics and abstract painting, starts with a poem. She then distorts the characters and arranges them in non-linear ways that create riveting compositions, alive with movement. **Golnaz Fathi** studied traditional Islamic calligraphy for six years, but breaks away from that tradition by using ball point pen rather than brush and ink, layering intricate lines to form compositions that pair the resulting form with the silence of blank space. The photographs of **Lalla Essaydi** employ calligraphy in a very different way. By inscribing women's bodies with calligraphic texts in henna, she highlights the tradition of this craft and uses it to challenge western fantasies of Muslim women. Here, a dancing woman references depictions by 19th-century Orientalist artists, reminding us that our current perceptions are still constructed

by artists who intentionally marginalized these women for their own pleasure.

Geometric patterns are also a major motif in Islamic art, and geometry underlies other aspects of the culture as well. The city of Baghdad founded by Al-Mansur, of the Abbasid Caliphate, founded in 762 AD, was designed as a perfect circle with a 2,000 meter diameter.<sup>5</sup> Standardization of calligraphy in the 10th century by Ibn Muqla centered on geometry and proportion. The first letter of the alphabet, the *alif*, became the standard of measure, and the shape of each letter was determined by a circle (with the a diameter of the *alif*).<sup>6</sup> The study of geometry was generated by the translation of Greek and Sanskrit documents into Arabic starting in the 8th century, and although there is no textual evidence for its symbolic use in various settings, geometry was a key component in building practices and surface design. There are manuals using forms of geometry that builders used for constructing domes, arches, ribs, muqarnas and two-dimensional patterns.

What brought about the widespread use of geometric patterning? Necipoğlu notes that a strong interest in mathematics, the asceticism of the the Sunni revival and Abbasid consolidation in the 10th and 11th centuries, inspired the *giri* system, connecting its spread to political, cultural and religious contexts.<sup>7</sup> *Giri* is Persian for "knot," and is a geometric system beginning with a circle that generates patterns of stars and polygons limitlessly.<sup>8</sup> The more orthodox theological concepts that were developing at the time may have created a reaction against the Umayyad decorative programs that were more representational and based on Late Antique models (crowns, jewels, vases and architecture). Geometry provided a purer basis for design. The historian, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), considered geometry to be cleansing: the study of geometry purifies the mind as soap cleans a garment.<sup>9</sup> The use of the arabesque, often organized in radial grids, allowed a flexibility to cover varying surfaces and continue without limit.<sup>10</sup> As the designs became more abstract,

<sup>3</sup> Baraka/Boullata Interview (Barjeel Art Foundation 2014) 3-4

<sup>4</sup> Tabari Art Space, Dubai website: <http://www.jamm-art.com/exhibitions/past/nasser-al-aswadi/press-release/>

<sup>5</sup> Ettinghausen, Grabar, Jenkins-Medina *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250* (New Haven, 2017) 51

<sup>6</sup> Roxburgh, David J. *Writing the Word of God* Museum of Fine Arts Houston, (New Haven and London, 2007) 25-26

<sup>7</sup> Necipoğlu, Gülru with Al-Asad, Mohammed *The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (Santa Monica, 1995) 104, 108

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Preface, ix

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 104-5

<sup>10</sup> Al-Asad Mohammed, "Applications of Geometry" in *The Mosque* ed. Martin Frishman and Hasan-Uddin Khan (London, 1994) 65

the distinction between foreground and background diminished and intricacy increased. Simple architectural forms and lines are transformed “into complex and smaller units with infinitely complicated lines and shapes.”<sup>11</sup> Although complex, most *giri* designs begin with a circle and need only a pencil, compass and straight edge to complete.

There has been much discussion about the meaning of geometry in Islamic art, especially in architectural settings—is it decorative or iconographic? Do the stars in patterns represent actual celestial bodies or intimations of a higher world? Contemplation of geometric forms could be seen as a more exalted form of perception. The aesthetic of these abstract forms is more cerebral than that of naturalistic imagery. Describing geometric ornament as *intermediary*, Grabar sees patterning as a method to create “a textile effect,” as textiles are a valued art in Islamic culture.<sup>12</sup> Sumptuous geometric designs in architecture could bring prestige to a patron much as luxury textiles did.<sup>13</sup> There are instances when cultural specificity can provide a context. Omar Kayyam lived in the area of the 11th century Great Mosque of Isfahan and worked on theories of irrational numbers and conic sections.<sup>14</sup> Patterns from the dome of the Great Mosque are composed with the irrational numbers of the Golden Mean. In other instances, inscriptions can lead the way toward meaning. Inscriptions under the star-patterned Comares ceiling at the Alhambra refer to “seven heavens, one upon another” (Surah 67 from the Qur’an).<sup>15</sup> Grabar concludes that our “wonder at their meaning” and our attraction to abstraction without meaning, is an aspect of the beauty of geometric compositions.<sup>16</sup> Necipoğlu observes that ultimately the issue need not be seen in oppositional terms, but that pattern also has meaning and iconographic meaning can sometimes be found through researching local geographical and political contexts.<sup>17</sup>

Several of the artists in the exhibition are inspired by Islamic geometric patterns to create new abstract compositions that at times honor the skills and concepts that underlie these patterns or create entirely new meanings. **Yasmina Alaoui’s** *14 Point Star Deconstructed, Grey and Black* is part of her *Zillij Series* that

directly references Moroccan tile patterns. These abstractions, that have become secularized, are built up from tiny particles into dense compositions that blur form challenging the viewer’s mode of seeing. The artist **Dana Awartani** also works directly with traditional motifs in her *Platonic Solids Series*. (Five solids where every face is a regular polygon of the same size and shape.) Her elegant and precise drawings stress how geometry is the basis of nature and universal harmony. The composition of the manuscript pages of **Abdullah M.I. Syed** contain oppositional equilateral triangles, made up of smaller equilateral triangles of gold and white. The perfect forms belie an underlying meaning connected to the intertwining of religious, political, and economic systems. On close examination some of the precisely hand-cut forms are from US dollar bills: the Providential Eye, framed by its own triangle. The forms used by **Walid Siti** in *Birth of a New Mountain* reflect the natural and cultural environment in his native Kurdish Iraq. Referencing the Kurdish mountains, where his father sought refuge during the Hussein regime, and iconic architecture such as the Minaret of Samarra, his work combines geography and politics. The forms are contingent rather than solid and reflect the process of building and creating, stacking cube forms toward a mountain’s pinnacle. The physicist, **Peter Lu**, has researched Islamic geometric tile patterns for a number of years, specifically *giri* tiles, a set of fundamental geometric tiles that he has identified that are used to create patterns in medieval Islamic architecture. As a photographer, he has captured innumerable examples of Islamic monuments across the globe that illustrate his theories.

All of the artists in this exhibition are inspired by past motifs in calligraphy or geometric pattern, but create new forms that bridge divides in time and cultures. Often the work is connected to identity. As artists are separated geographically, socially or politically from their heritage, they mine their traditions for sources, but also explore how those traditions are perceived by others. The end result is art that stands at a crossroads *and* rewards us with perpetual revelations.

– Marie Costello

<sup>11</sup> Ettinghausen, Grabar, Jenkins-Medina *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250* (New Haven, 2001) 86

<sup>12</sup> Grabar, Oleg *Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, N.J., 1992) 141-2

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 144-5

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 147

<sup>15</sup> Grabar, Oleg *The Alhambra* (Sebastopol, CA, 1992) 113-114

<sup>16</sup> Grabar, Oleg *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, N.J., 1992) 154

<sup>17</sup> Necipoğlu, Gülru with Al-Asad, Mohammed *The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (Santa Monica, 1995) 104



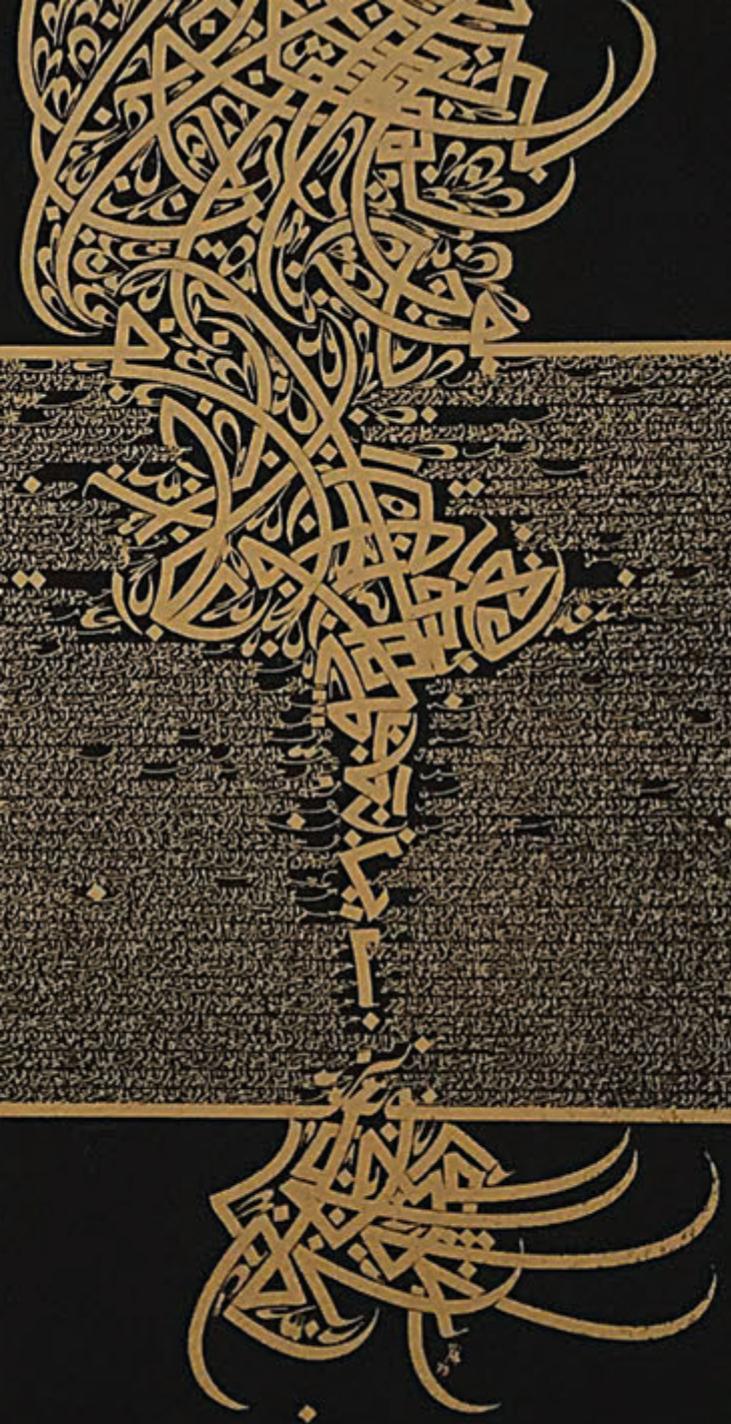
## The Islamic and the Contemporary in Art

**Nasser Rabbat**, Aga Khan Professor

Director, Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, MIT

**I**n the last few decades, Islamic art history began to open its folds to a burgeoning area of inquiry: the study of contemporary Islamic art. Formerly homeless, or at best aspiring for a nod from the mighty contemporary art world and a little corner in its lofty, lucrative, and theoretically sophisticated edifice, contemporary Islamic art is beginning to occupy a critical, though at time contested, juncture between the two fields that define its identity's parameters: Islamic art and contemporary art.

This is a welcome development for sure. After all, such a disciplinary recognition has helped contemporary Islamic art become the subject of sustained research and theoretical debates, and, perhaps more important, find a foothold in the global art market. But the juxtaposition of the two terms still carries a paradox that needs to be addressed if the field is to positively accept its composite name and find comfort in its double identity. This is so because the term "contemporary," in addition to indicating the dominant concepts, forms, and cultural attitudes of the present moment, usually implies a host of other characteristics, most of which revolve around notions of trendiness, worldliness, diversity, nonconformity, and open and free expression. "Islamic," on the other hand, aside from denoting a religion that is supposed to represent a territory and/or a people or a constellation of people, retains strong connotations of difference and otherness, and a whiff of exoticism, beneath its more current nuances of hostility, menace, and extremism. These negative associations, which are much more pronounced in the West than in the rest of the world, have caused many contemporary artists hailing from the Islamic world or working on "Islamic" topics or techniques to shun the category altogether, as we saw in the reactions to the pioneering 2006 MoMA Show, "Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking," the first exhibition in an American world-class museum devoted to contemporary Islamic art



or in various debates around global art exhibits such as Documenta (especially the reactions to the themes and the director Okwui Enwezor of the Documenta11 in 2002) or the trendy biennales in places like Sharjah or Istanbul.

Little noticed in these high-minded and acrimonious debates is the labor of hundreds, if not thousands, of contemporary artists who are either openly inspired by Islamic art legacies or motivated artistically by the current state of affairs in the Islamic world. These artists are not all Muslims. Nor are they all hailing from the Islamic world, even though most of them obviously are. Yet they are comfortably, and at times enthusiastically, working under the rubric “contemporary Islamic art.” Many in fact are reconfirming and redefining the historical and theoretical contours of their composite field through their work and the critical articulation of its significance. They also are testing new vistas of expression that would have been difficult to explore if they had jettisoned either one of the two qualificatives and its embedded approaches, domains, and legacies from their field’s definition. New, innovative, and sometime computer-inspired studies of light and darkness, letters and writing, patterns and tessellations, and movement and stillness — all mainstays of traditional Islamic art—are only the most obvious manifestations of contemporary Islamic art as we can see in several selected examples in the current exhibit.

The magnificent silkscreen of Kamal Boullata, for instance, with its dizzying repetition of the word Allah (God in Arabic) in a confined surface recalls the use of the word in sufi chanting to achieve a heightened sensory status, believed to bring the individual closer to the divine. Yasmina Alaoui and Nasser al-Aswadi use what appears to be fractal designs to construct aggregated patterns invoking the infinite space, whereas Walid Siti’s pattern generation is more earth-bound, yet wavering in its reference between a natural peak and a crowded and incremental urban agglomeration. Rashid Koraïchi, Nja Mahdaoui, and Hassan Massoudy, on the other hand,

tackle in their contributions the issue of the beauty of Arabic letters. Their letters, however, are not to be read as text. Instead, they are deployed in abstract compositions in which their forms are subjected to various maneuvers of twisting, prolongation, compression, and scaling that belong to our modern modeling vocabulary, all in order to explore the limits of their inner formal harmony, and thus their inherent aesthetics. These artworks are neither copies nor derivative versions of some ancient originals as some diehard detractors would claim. They are resolutely contemporary for being in-depth, reconceptualized, and variably abstracted probes of organizing principles of representations that Islamic art traditionally excelled in. As such, they are both historically informed and critically conceived. This is what makes them contemporary Islamic artworks.

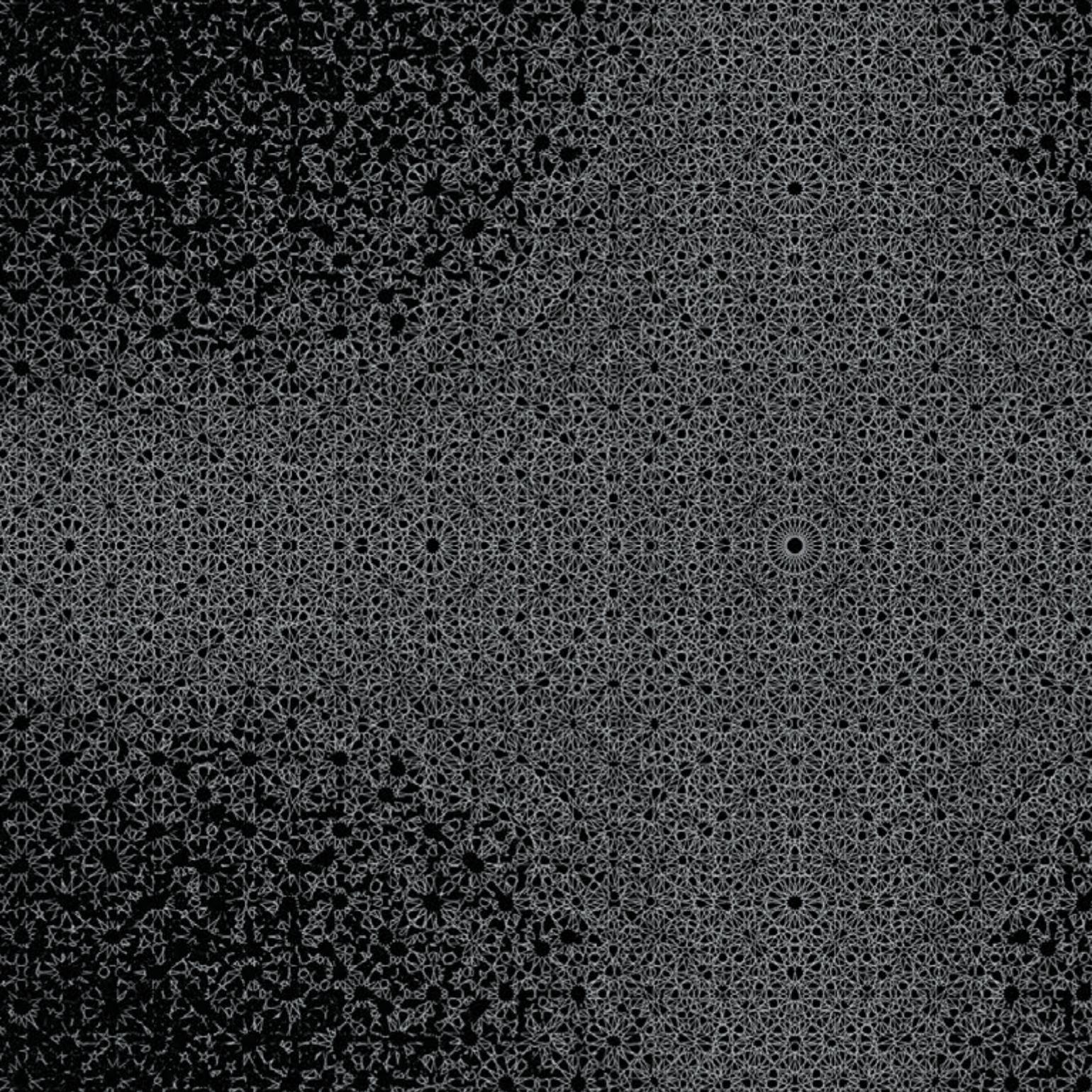
Evidently, abstracted writing and/or condensed or reworked tessellations are not the only ways in which an artwork can be contemporary and Islamic at the same time. There are other, little-recognized aspects of the traditional Islamic art repertoires and other traditions that interacted closely with them that can be and are being critically and creatively reconceptualized and contemporized. Here, I will identify two such venues, miniature and Orientalist paintings, that have been very adroitly deconstructed by contemporary artists. Both of these traditions figure very heavily in conventional historiographies as formative elements in the artistic heritage of Islamic art. Their presence in that constitutive mix in fact may partially explain the resistance mounted by various Western and West-based art critics to fully integrate contemporary Islamic art into the theoretical domain of contemporary art.

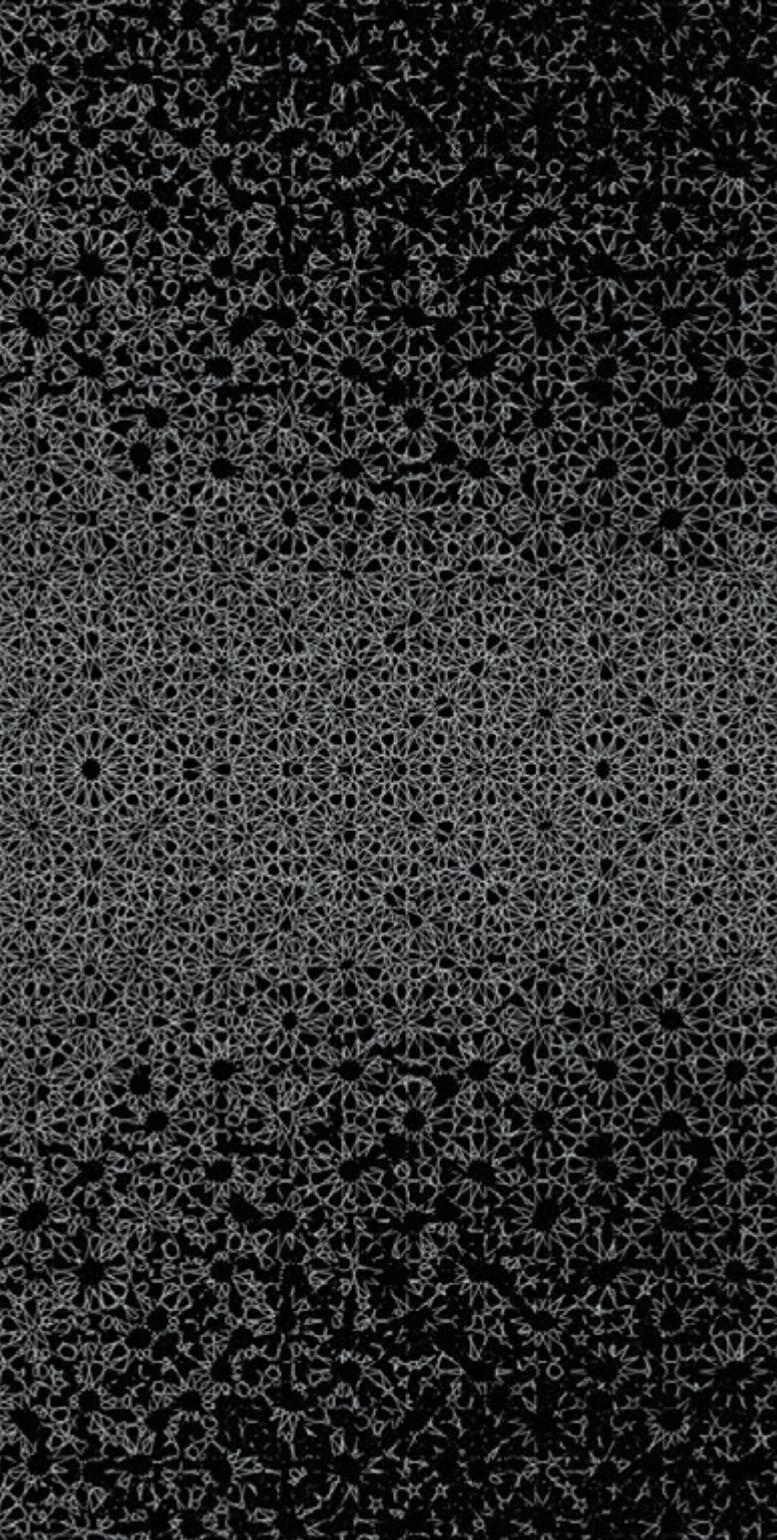
Incidentally, both Islamic miniature painting and Orientalist painting are doing exceedingly well in the international art market today thanks mostly to the emergence of a super rich class primarily in the Arabian Gulf states, which collects them as either beautiful

mementos of its heritage, or as accurate, if a bit romanticized, depictions of scenes from that heritage. But both are still questioned by art critics, although, ironically, for opposite reasons: the first because of its purported unnatural and flat representation of reality, the second for its excessive realism bordering on exoticism and fetishism.

For contemporary Islamic art, however, the burden of Orientalist Painting is not so much that of lineage and precedent as much as that of a domineering representation that is still obstinately common in art, media, and populist depictions of Muslim peoples today, sometimes even in the Islamic world itself, if we consider the exorbitant prices fetched by minor Orientalist paintings sold to wealthy Muslim collectors in recent years as indication of popularity. This is what Lalla Essaydi has been addressing throughout her artistic career. In her dream-like photos of women dressed in white with writing covering every surface and crevice in the photo's frame, Essaydi subverts several visual tropes of Orientalist painting with both a sharp sense of irony and a careful attention to aesthetics.

Herein lies the importance of critical engagement with global art, past and present, without dissipating in its blend. Contemporary Islamic art can and should project itself as encompassing both the notions of contemporary art coming out of the Islamic world (and its expatriate extensions of course) and the contemporary evolution of the (historic) arts of the Islamic world, thus claiming both a historicity and a contemporaneity, just like Western art. This seemingly contradictory coupling embodies the potential to equalize, or at least neutralize, the hierarchy that had the West as the only truly historical art, while the arts of the rest of the world as timeless or derivative, and to establish stronger links with other art fields that have equally realized the importance of engaging history in their contemporary conceptual, aesthetic, and epistemological formations.





## ARTISTS

Yasmina Alaoui

Nasser Al Aswadi

Dana Awartani

Kamal Boullata

Lalla Essaydi

Golnaz Fathi

Pouran Jinch

Rashid Koraïchi

Peter Lu

Nja Mahdaoui

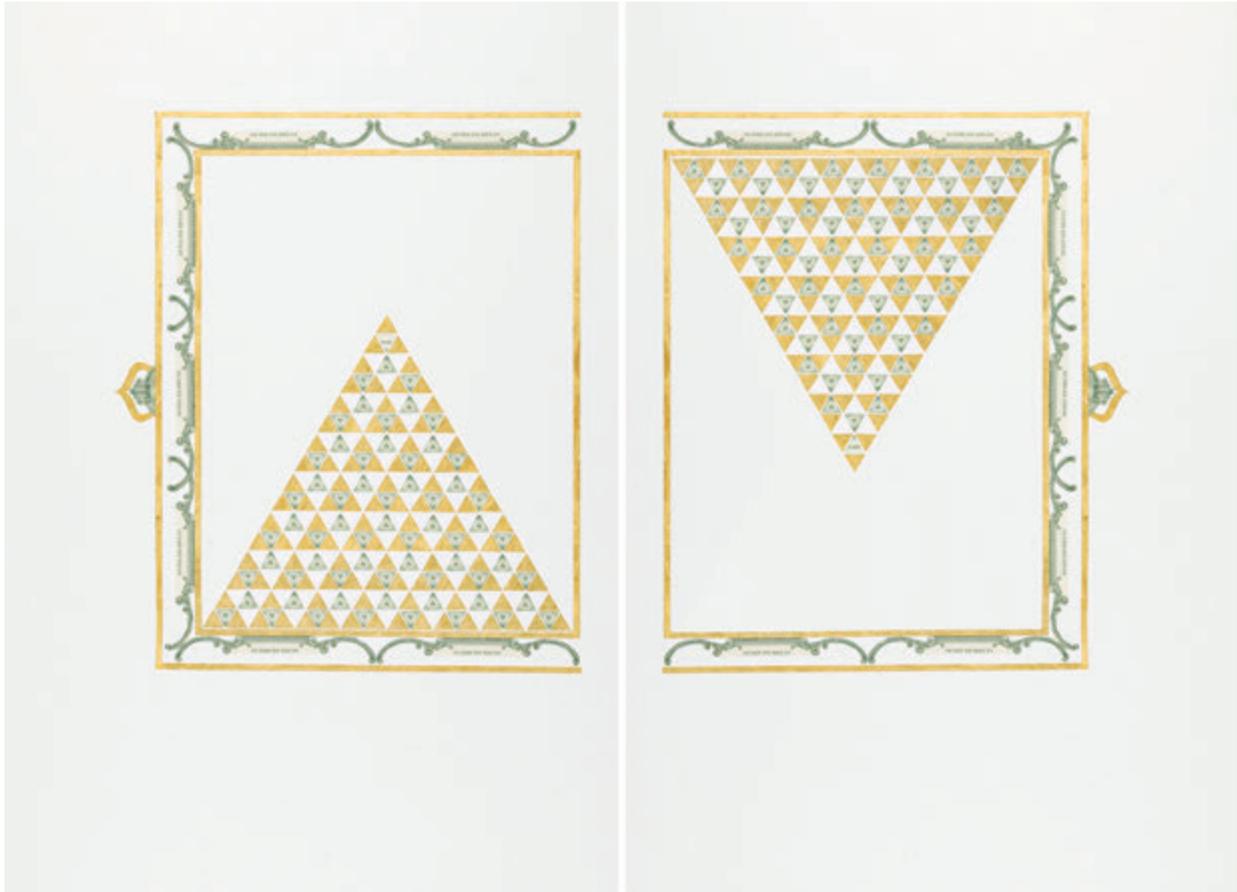
Hassan Massoudy

Walid Siti

Abdulla M. I. Syed

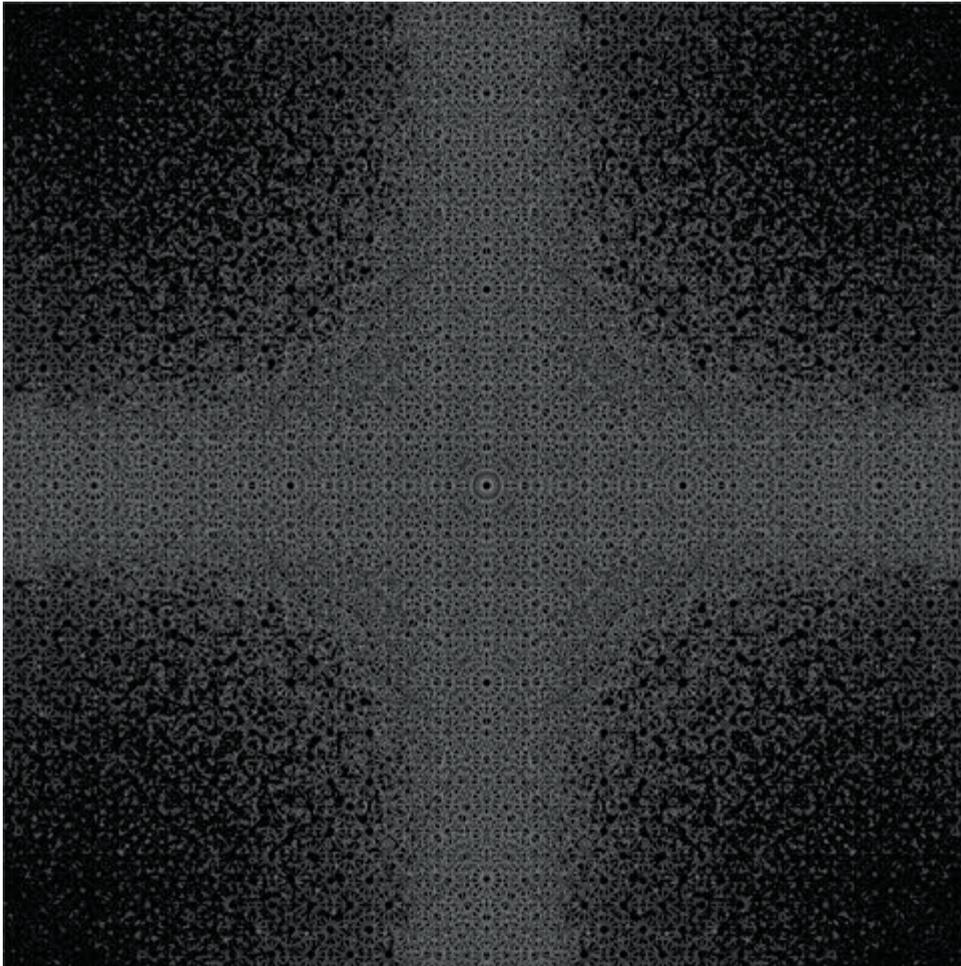
image: YASMINA ALAOUÏ, *14 POINT STAR DECONSTRUCTED*,  
GREY AND BLACK (detail)

# ABDULLA M.I. SYED



*Illuminated Prisms Manuscript I: Pgs. 1 & 2 (Diptych), 2017*

My use of banknotes engages with the central role that money plays in economies of consumption and exchange, and how money often navigates cultural and political identities and power structures. Within such structures, the green US dollar bill acts as a dominant instrument of addressing the micro and the macro, especially in the Global financial market.



*14 Point Star Deconstructed, Grey and Black, 2012*

I enjoy exploring the possibilities for Arabic culture, how it can retain its artistic and cultural heritage, yet adapt to a westernized world and find its voice in a changing era. My *Zillij Series*, draws upon Islamic sacred geometric motifs. The abstract images are infused with references to physics, biology, and astronomy.

# LALLA ESSAYDI



*Dancer A, Les Femmes du Maroc, 2009*

In my art, I wish to present myself through multiple lenses – as artist, as Moroccan, as traditionalist, as Liberal, as Muslim.

In short, I invite viewers to resist stereotypes.



*Beauty, Untitled (I wish to be a butterfly flitting around the candle of your beauty), 2013*

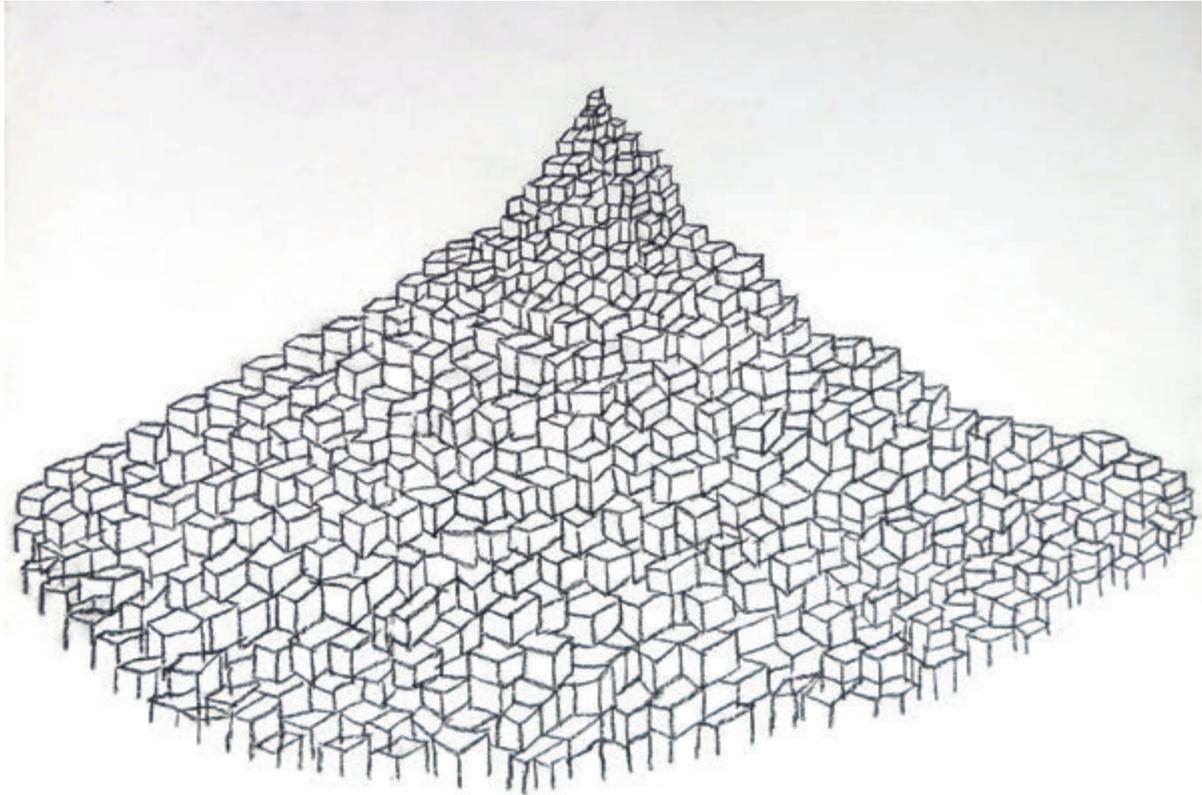
The gestures of the calligrapher become an open space, welcoming the words of the poet and the imagination of the onlooker.

NJA MAHDAOUI



*Red Square Series 4, 1999*

My view is to freely exit the graphic structure of the Arab letters or the verb syntax and the structure of the style. I have tried to extract the original signification power of these materials in order to achieve an aesthetic of form.



*Birth of a New Mountain, 2017*

I am interested in layering shapes like building blocks. I begin each work with a broad base and slowly build layers up to form a peak.

This repeating structure is a metaphor for the organization of society and hierarchy of power.

Architecture from our cultural heritage like pyramids, ziggurats or minarets demonstrates this idea.

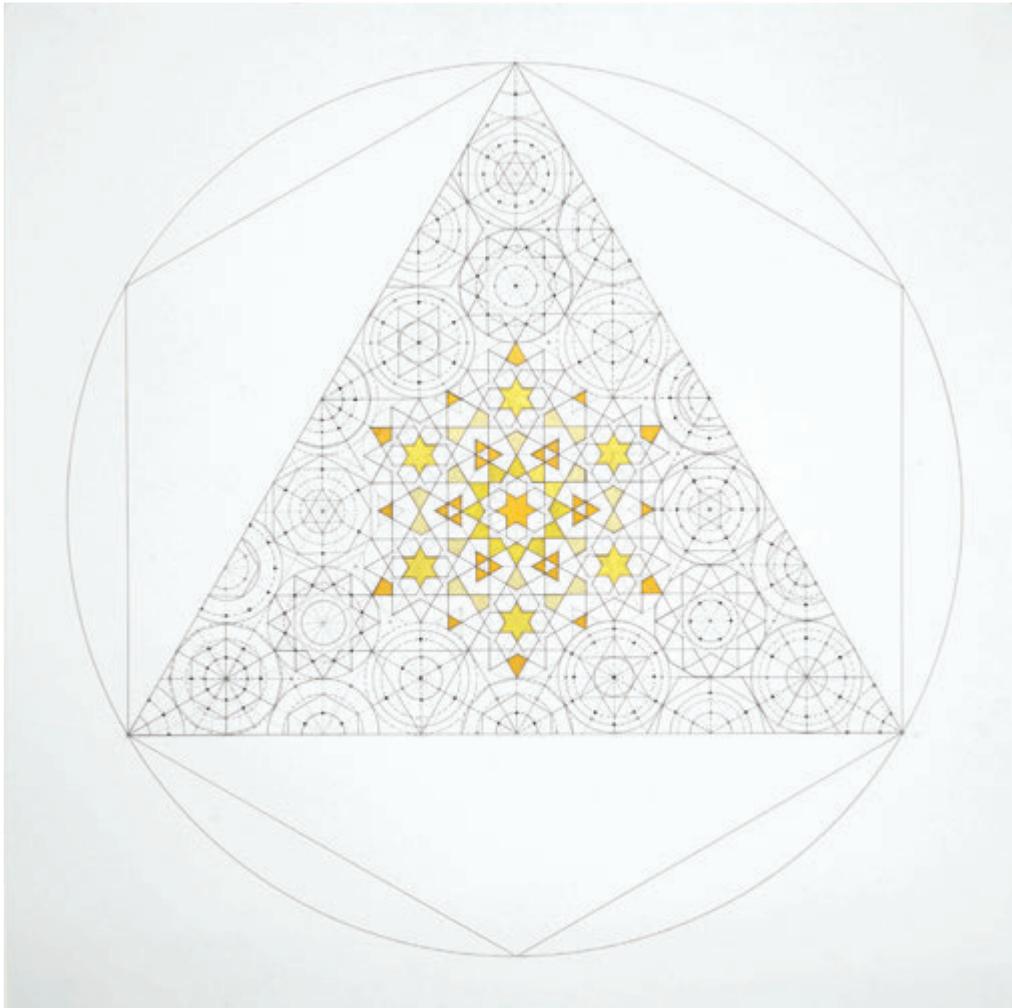
# NASSER AL ASWADI



*Nostalgie, 2016*

I use the energy of words and light.

Writing is at the heart of my work; it escapes the realm of pure terminology and enters the sphere of signs, of visual language.



*Icosahedron Within a Dodecahedron from the Platonic Solid Duals Series, 2016*

Geometry is the hidden language of everything natural around us from a microcosmic to a macrocosmic level. It is a language that creates harmony amongst chaos and unity within multiplicity, and this is what makes me so passionate about it.

# RASHID KORAÏCHI



*La Memoire du Sage, 2012*

In my work I use symbols, words and numbers in whatever way so that those who know the Arabic language or not can get my message. I am looking at the structured way the space of the outline penetrates the space of the symbols.



*Allah I (God), 1983*

When as a child I entered the Dome of the Rock from the small alleyways surrounding it, an entire universe would open up, and the spirituality was overwhelming. That spirit made me want to sit and copy designs to take some of the beauty home, later on gridded paper...that is where it all started.

## POURAN JINCHI



*Untitled (Poetry #99-13), 1999*

Persian script is really a starting point for me, but there are always more layers of meaning to my work. I don't really see a script — I see geometry, I see lines, I see curves. All languages are really codes, and scripts are markings of these codes. I have always been preoccupied with language and text as forms as a way to explore space and perspective.



*Untitled, 2016*

I have this love for writing, not only for Iranian— but Chinese, Japanese, every kind of writing is something magical for me.  
I never search for meaning; I am fascinated by the forms.

## PETER LU



*Detail from Entrance of the Estrefoglu Mosque Behsehir, Turkey, 2015*

In my photographs, I aim to present the most faithful, accurate portrayal of medieval Islamic monuments. Employing several imaging and computational techniques, I combine images at several focal points and exposures, empowering the viewer to choose her own perspective.

# ARTISTS BIOGRAPHIES

## **YASMINA ALAOU**

**Born in 1977 in New York; lives between Marrakesh and New York**

Of French-Moroccan descent, Alaoui studied Fine Art at the Carrousel du Louvre in Paris, France and earned a B.A. in sculpture from the College of William and Mary, Virginia. The underlying themes of her work deal directly with experiences of her multicultural upbringing and aim to bridge extremes through the embracing of opposites: from the secular to the holy, the classical to the contemporary, order to chaos and repulsion to attraction. Yasmina has collaborated with photographer Marco Guerra on the *Tales of Beauty and 1001 Dreams* series, which have been and collected and exhibited internationally since 2003. Her work has been exhibited in Morocco, Paris, Dubai and New York. She participated in Jeffrey Deitch's *Calligraffiti* exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery and *Grisaille* also at Leila Heller, as well as participating in the Marrakech Biennial in 2012.

## **NASSER AL ASWADI**

**Born in 1978 in Taiz, Yemen; lives in Yemen and France**

Al Aswadi studied architecture in Taiz and Sanaa. He has had one-person exhibitions in Yemen, Greece and France. For Nasser Al Aswadi, calligraphy is a way to express feelings and thoughts without them being specifically linked to language. He uses Arabic letters, words and forms as well as religious and musical sources. Nasser's work is inspired by the events of the Arab Spring, daily realities, rural landscapes, architecture, and public crowds on the streets. His work is represented the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris and Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

## **DANA AWARTANI**

**Born in 1987 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; based in Saudi Arabia**

Dana Awartani, a Palestinian-Saudi artist, graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins, London and received a Master's in Traditional Arts from the Princes School, London. Her art draws upon contemporary and traditional modes of practice and including historical techniques of illumination, ceramics and mosaics. Through these traditions, she focuses on the splendor of geometry as a vehicle to the infinite, beyond any particular religion or culture. She participated in the Venice Biennale (2013), Art Basel, Hong Kong (2015), the Marrakech Biennale, Morocco (2016), the Yinchuan Biennale, China (2016,) the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kochi, India (2016)

and the Jakarta Biennale, Jakarta Indonesia (2017). Awartani exhibited at the opening exhibition of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Art, New York and was a Visiting Artist there. (2017) Her work is found in the following collections: the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, Abu Dhabi, The Farjam Collection, The British Museum and other private international collections.

## **KAMAL BOULLATA**

**Born in 1942 in Jerusalem, Palestine; lives in Berlin**

Kamal Boullata is a graduate of the Academia di Belle Arti in Rome and the Corcoran Art Museum School in Washington, DC. Over the last four decades he has lived in the USA (1968-1992), Morocco (1993-1996), and France (1997-2012). Boullata's art has been exhibited extensively in North America, Europe and the Arab world. His fascination with the Dome of the Rock as a child and his interest in regional embroidery created a foundation to express his themes of identity and exile. Also renowned as an art historian, Boullata co-curated the first exhibition of works by Israeli and Palestinian artists in 1988. His work is found in the following collections: The British Museum, The Khalid Shoman Foundation, Patronato de la Alhambra Islamic Museum, Sharjah Art Museum, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, New York Public Library, Arab Museum of Modern Art, Bibliothèque Louis Notari, Barjeel Art Foundation and the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University. In 2012-13, Kamal Boullata was elected as a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin.

## **LALLA ESSAYDI**

**Born in 1956 in Morocco; lives in New York**

Essaydi received a BFA from Tufts University and an MFA in painting and photography from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. Her art addresses the complex reality of Arab female identity, combining Islamic calligraphy with representations of the female body. Often, her paintings appropriate Orientalist imagery from the Western canon, thereby inviting viewers to reconsider the Orientalist mythology. Essaydi, has exhibited extensively across the globe and is included in the following collections, among others: Williams College Museum of Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, the Fries Museum, the Netherlands; The Addison Gallery of American Art; The Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar; The Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore; The British National Museum; The Cleveland Museum of Art; Harvard Art

Museums; The Jordan National Museum of Art; The Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Louvre Museum; The Maramotti Collection of Contemporary Art, the Musée des Beaux Arts de Montréal; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

## **GOLNAZ FATHI**

**Born in 1972 in Teheran, Iran; lives and works in Teheran and Paris**

Fathi received a Bachelor's of Art in Graphics from Azad Art University, Tehran, and later studied at the Iranian Society of Calligraphy. Drawing on her extensive training as a calligrapher, she uses texts and letters as formal elements, transforming traditional calligraphy into a personal artistic language to be viewed abstractly rather than as text. She has exhibited in galleries and cultural centers around the world, including the October Gallery, London Art Forum of Wiesbaden, Germany and the Venice Biennale. Fathi's work is included in the following public collections, among others: World Bank, Washington, DC; Metropolitan Museum of Art; Brighton & Hove Museum; Carnegie Mellon University in Doha, Qatar; Islamic Art Museum, Malaysia; Asian Civilization's Museum, Singapore; The British Museum, London; Devi Art foundation, New Delhi; Farjam Collection, Dubai and the Salsali Foundation, Dubai. In 2011, Fathi was named one of the World Economic Forum's Young Global Leaders Honorees.

## **POURAN JINCHI**

**Born in 1959 in Mashad, Iran; lives and works in New York City**

Pouran Jinchi received an engineering degree from George Washington University before studying art at UCLA and the Art Students League of New York. She draws on literature, history, art, and religion to articulate a conversation between her materials and the subjects she addresses. Jinchi deconstructs the text to create "textual landscapes" that are recognizable yet illegible. Jinchi's works are represented in collections such as The Metropolitan Museum, New York; Pratt Institute, New York; The Museum of Fine Arts Houston; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, NY; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC; Federal Reserve Bank, NY; Farjam Collection, Dubai and Zayed National Museum in Abu Dhabi.

## **RACHID KORAÏCHI**

**Born in 1947 in Ain Beida, Algeria; lives and works in Tunisia and France**

Koraïchi studied at the Institute of Fine Arts and the Superior National School of the Arts in Algeria and after moving to France, studied at the

National School of Decorative Arts and the School of Urban Studies in Paris. His work is composed of symbols, glyphs and ciphers drawn from a wide variety of other languages and cultures from numerology to Chinese ideograms. Some works rework Sufi verses to attempt a visible manifestation of intangible ideas. Rachid Koraïchi was included in the international touring exhibition, *Short Century*, and in the 47th and 49th Venice Biennale, and *in Word into Art* at the British Museum, 2006. Part of his installation, *Path of Roses*, comprising embroidered silk, textiles, steel sculptures, roses and ceramics, was acquired by the British Museum. Koraïchi is included in the following public collections among others: the British Museum; the National Museum for African Art, Washington and the Museum of Islamic Arts, Doha.

## **PETER LU**

**Born in 1978 in Cleveland, Ohio; lives and works in Cambridge, MA**

Lu obtained an BA in Physics from Princeton University and PhD in Physics from Harvard University. He is currently a post-doctoral research fellow in the Department of Physics and the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences at Harvard University and has been recognized for discoveries involving girih tiles, quasicrystal patterns in medieval Islamic architecture. In collaboration with Paul Steinhardt, he demonstrated the use of girih tiles use to create quasicrystal tilings on the walls of Darb-i Imam shrine in Isfahan, Iran. The finding was considered a significant breakthrough by demonstrating a simple method that could have been used by workers to create extremely complicated patterns using girih tiles, and by identifying a medieval example of quasicrystalline patterns, which were not widely known to or understood by the West until the discovery of Penrose tilings by Roger Penrose in the 1970s. Lu has traveled extensively throughout the Middle East and North Africa, meticulously photographing monuments that demonstrate his theories. An exhibition of his photographs was held at the Kelvin Smith Library, Case Western Reserve University in 2017.

## **NJA MAHDAOUI**

**Born in 1937 in Tunisia; lives and works in Tunisia**

Mahdaoui graduated from the Academy of Arts of Santa Andrea in Rome and the Ecole du Louvre, Department of Oriental Antiquities, continuing his studies at the Cité Internationale des Arts. His work, inspired by Arabic calligraphy, is known for its highly skilled techniques in ink on parchment. Mahdaoui designed monumental artworks in the Jeddah and Riyadh airports and at the KAUST University Campus Mosque in Saudi Arabia. In addition, he has created many logos, designs and posters for plays, books, companies, and organizations,

including Amnesty International in 1991. He has participated in numerous exhibitions worldwide including *Word into Art* at the British Museum, *The Brush Dances and the Ink Sings* at the Hermitage Museum, and *Arab Book Art* at the French National Library in Paris. His works can be found in the following public collections, among others: the British Museum, the Smithsonian Museum, Mathaf – Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and the National Gallery of Kuala Lumpur.

## **HASSAN MASSOUDY**

Born in 1944 in Najef, Iraq; lives in Paris

Massoudy studied traditional fine arts, graphic design and calligraphy in Baghdad and later received a degree from the École des Beaux Arts, Paris. His studies led him to look deeper into calligraphy, but he remained influenced by western artists such as Picasso and Leger. The words and phrases, which are the inspiration for his calligraphy are drawn from proverbs, poets and philosophers throughout the centuries, ranging from St. Augustine, Virgil and Ibn’-al-Arabi to Baudelaire and Rousseau. He designed stage sets and created with the actor Guy Jacquet and later the musician Fawzi Al Aiedy, *Arabesque*, a public performance combining music, poetry and live calligraphies projected on a screen. Peace and tolerance are central themes of his work leading him to work with Amnesty International, UNICEF and other related organizations. Massoudy’s work was exhibited at the British Museum’s *Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*.

## **WALID SITI**

Born in 1954 in Duhhok, Iraq-Kurdistan; lives and works in the United Kingdom

Siti graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad and continued to study art in Ljubljana, Slovenia before seeking political asylum in the United Kingdom. Siti’s marks are both a way to construct a form, but also a form in themselves as if a metaphor for the tension between the group and the individual. A review in the *Economist* regarding his work in the Venice Biennale commented “it was the gritty crayon strokes that captured my attention, as if they were some illegible script, or alphabet.” Siti’s work is included in the following public collections, among others: The Metropolitan Museum, New York; The British Museum, London; The Imperial War Museum, London; The National Gallery of Amman, Jordan; The World Bank, Washington, DC; Victoria & Albert Museum, London and The Iraq Memory Foundation.

## **ABDULLAH M.I. SYED**

Born in 1974 in Karachi, Pakistan; lives and works in Karachi and Sydney, Australia

Syed holds a PhD in Art, Media and Design and a Master of Fine Arts from University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. He also holds a Bachelor of Art in Design and a Master of Education from University of Central Oklahoma (UCO), Edmond, Oklahoma. Syed’s artwork utilizes a variety of mediums and techniques to communicate complex political ideas. His political commentary tackles controversial topics such as the War on Terror, immigration, and Western attitudes towards the East. His art practice weaves real and fictional narratives of East and West, seamlessly knitting together cultural and art historical references and concerns from each. As a designer, he co-coordinated the Design Department at the University of Karachi. Syed’s work is in the following public collections, among others: the Devi Art Foundation, the Rangoonwala Foundation, the AAN Collection, Blacktown Arts Centre, Casula Powerhouse, University of Central Oklahoma and the US State Department Art in Embassy in Islamabad.

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**MARIE COSTELLO** is a curator and art historian with an MA in Art History from Tufts University and additional academic work at Boston University and Harvard University towards a PhD in Art History. As Director of the the Lehman Arts Center and later, the Union College Mandeville Gallery, she curated over 20 exhibitions. Costello was Assistant Curator for *Hope and Healing: Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague* at the Worcester Art Museum. A selection of her exhibitions includes: *Andy Warhol: Early Work* with Williams College; *Afghanistan: Weaving the Texts of War*; *African Photography, For Whose Eyes? Constructing and Deconstructing Identities* and *Art or Evidence: The Power of Photojournalism*. Costello’s curatorial projects focus on cross-cultural influences on society and perception over time.

# CHECKLIST

## **YASMINA ALAOUI**

14 Point Star Deconstructed,  
Grey and Black

Pigment print on watercolor paper

36" x 36"

2012

Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery, New York and the artist

## **NASSER AL ASWADI**

Nostalgie

Oil and natural pigments on canvas

53 ½" x 92"

2016

Courtesy of Anne-Claire Legendre Collection and the artist

## **DANA AWARTANI**

Icosahedron within a Dodecahedron  
from the Platonic Solid Duals Series

Shell gold and ink on paper

21 ¼" x 21 ¼"

2016

Courtesy of Athr Gallery, Jeddah and the artist

Octahedron within a Cube from  
the Platonic Solid Duals Series

Shell gold and ink on paper

21 ¼" x 21 ¼"

2016

Courtesy of Athr Gallery, Jeddah and the artist

## **KAMAL BOULLATA**

Allah I (God)

Color silkscreen, AP

19 ¼" x 19 ¼"

1983

Courtesy of Meem Gallery, Dubai and the artist

## **LALLA ESSAYDI**

Dancer A, Les Femmes du Maroc

C-Print mounted on aluminum

40" x 30"

2009

Courtesy of Howard Yezersky Gallery and the artist

## **GOLNAZ FATHI**

Untitled

Ballpoint pen on canvas

59" x 39 ½"

2016

Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York and the artist

## **POURAN JINCHI**

Untitled (Poetry #99-13)

Mixed media on canvas

12" x 12"

1999

Private Collection

Courtesy of artist and Art Projects International, New York

Photo: © Art Projects International, New York

## **RASHID KORAÏCHI**

La Memoire du Sage

Acrylic on canvas

31 ½" x 23 ½"

2012

Courtesy of Aicon Gallery, New York and the artist

## **PETER LU**

Detail from Entrance of  
the Estrefoglu Mosque

Behsehir, Turkey

Photograph

24" x 43"

2015

Courtesy of the artist

## **NJA MAHDAOUI**

Red Square Series 4

Silkscreen Lithograph

20 9/10" x 27 1/5"

1999

Courtesy of Meem Gallery, Dubai and the artist

## **HASSAN MASSOUDI**

Beauty

Untitled (I wish to be a butterfly flitting  
around the candle of your beauty)

Ink and pigment on paper

29 ½" x 21 ¾"

2013

Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York and the artist

## **WALID SITI**

Birth of a New Mountain

Crayon on paper

25" x 33 ½"

2017

Courtesy of the artist

## **ABDULLAH M. I. SYED**

Illuminated Prisms Manuscript I:

Pgs. 1 & 2 (Diptych)

Hand-cut U.S. \$1 banknotes collage and  
24k gold on Illustration board

22 ¾" x 30"

2017

Courtesy of Aicon Gallery, New York and the artist

## LENDERS

**Aicon Gallery**, New York

**Art Projects International**, New York

**Athr Gallery**, Jeddah

**Leila Heller Gallery**, New York

**Anne-Claire Legendre Collection**, New York

**Peter Lu**, Cambridge, MA

**Meem Gallery**, Dubai

**Private Collector**, New York

**Walid Siti**, United Kingdom

**Sundaram Tagore Gallery**, New York

**Howard Yezersky Gallery**, Boston

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