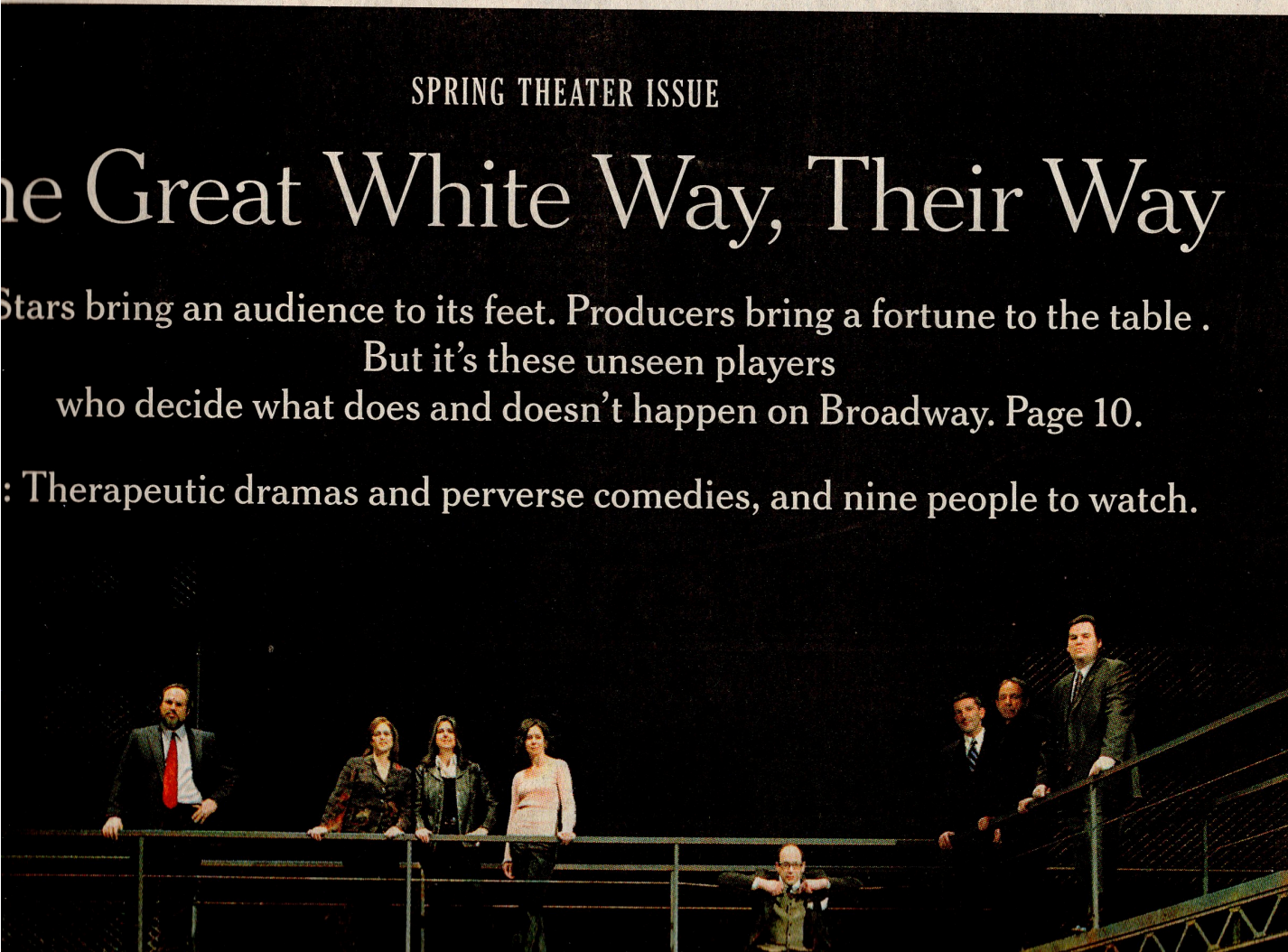


SPRING THEATER ISSUE

On the Great White Way, Their Way

Stars bring an audience to its feet. Producers bring a fortune to the table. But it's these unseen players who decide what does and doesn't happen on Broadway. Page 10.

Therapeutic dramas and perverse comedies, and nine people to watch.



The Last Aria Of Tony Soprano

The men who created the most unforgettable TV gangster now contemplate the biggest mafia funeral.

By BILL CARTER

HIGH on the wall of the otherwise nondescript conference room inside the production offices of "The Sopranos" hangs a small, framed photograph of a man with his face half shadowed by a fedora.

Ambling by in his lumbering gait, slowed by a slight limp from a recent leg injury, James Gandolfini stopped to take a look at the photo. "Who's that?" he asked.

"Fellini," said David Chase.

Federico Fellini might seem an odd choice to oversee the room where an American television series is planned, but why not? Has there ever been one that was richer, more dense with the complexities of family life — in all its connotations — and yes, more atmospherically Italian (Italian-American in this case) than "The Sopranos"?

"It's all a big discovery process," said Mr. Chase.

HOLLAND COTTER

What Does Islam Look Like?

THE West and Islam are on a cultural collision course. That's the best-selling fiction that many people — politicians, religious leaders and the media on both sides of the equation — are working overtime to turn into fact. Actually, it's a very old story, and art is routinely pulled into it.

Always, we hear Islamic art talked about in the way something called the "Islamic world" is talked about, as if it were unitary, unchanging, inscrutable and over there. We hear that Islamic

And can new Islamic art help the West see more clearly?

art is, by definition, religious art, and we hear about its hostile relationship to the human image.

We got an earful of this with the furor over Danish cartoons lampooning the Prophet Muhammad. The fact is, images of the Prophet abound in Islamic art and culture; the Metropolitan Museum has several examples in its Islamic collection. But unlike the cartoons, such images are not caricatures.

The cartoon issue isn't primarily an art story, any more than the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya in India was an architecture story, or the censure of "The Satanic Verses" was a story about contemporary fiction. It's a political story, an ancient and universal one, about how an im-



Museum of Modern Art

"Pleasure Pillars" (2001) by Pakistani-born Shahzia Sikander.

age, and almost any image will do, once it is fused to cultural identity — Islam, in this case — can end up being used as a weapon.

As it happens, at the same time that intense partisan heat is being generated around the topic of popular images and Islam, we are getting a number of exhibitions of contemporary work to which the name "Islamic" is attached. Some shows approach the Islamic connection hesitantly; others embrace it. Together they tell us very different things about the reception of a cultural category called "Islam" in the West.

By far the most prominent exhibition of contemporary art on the subject yet seen in New York opens today at the Museum of Modern Art. You would never guess that subject, though, from its title — "Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking" — in which the word Islam does not appear.

All but three of the featured artists were born in some part of the so-called Islamic world: Algeria, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine and Turkey. But they all live and work in the West and have made their careers in the mainstream international art scene, which means in Europe and the United States. Despite their Western positioning, they are routinely tagged as Islamic artists by an art world addicted to marketable categories. The question posed by the show's curator, Fereshteh Daftari, an assistant curator at the Modern who was herself born in Iran, is "How 'Islamic' is their art?"

Most of these artists are tagged Islamic because of their backgrounds. Yet much of their work is far less about Islam itself, as a religion or culture, than about their relationship to Islam

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What Does Islam Look Like?

Continued From Page 1

— in some cases it is close and positive; in other cases, distant and critical. But in most instances, it is ambivalent — the opposite of how Islam is treated these days in the larger world.

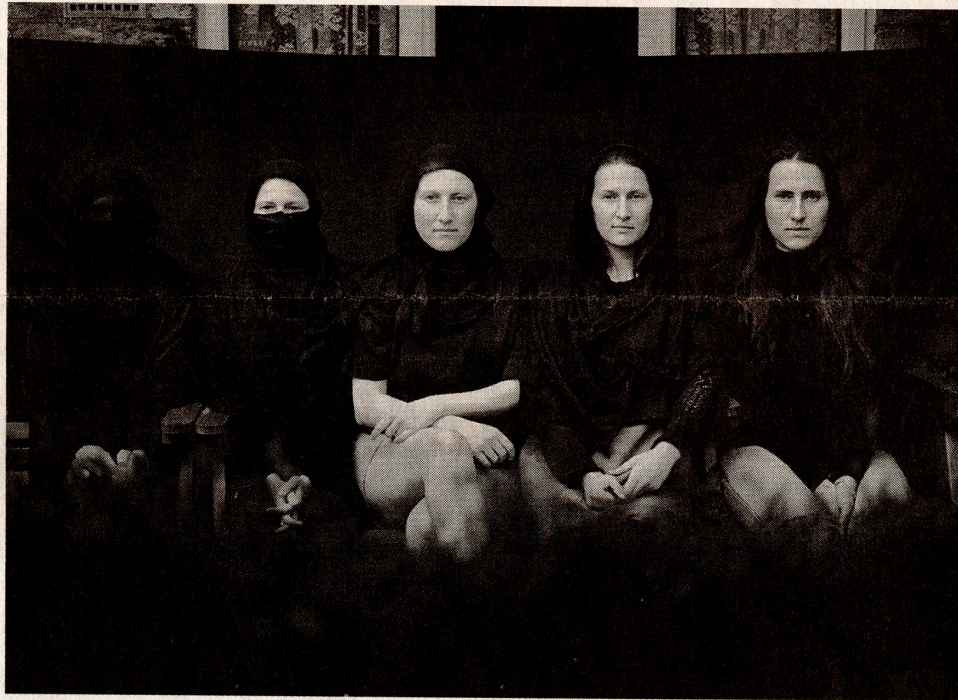
In these works, images and forms associated with Islam, far from being sacrosanct, are invitations to individualistic and unorthodox experimentation, to examine and play with Islamic identity without being confined to it.

Several artists, for example, tap into miniature painting, a primarily secular tradition. Raqib Shaw, born in 1974 in Calcutta, raised in Kashmir, and educated in London, produced astonishingly ornate, cloisonné-style paintings that borrow from Persian miniatures, but also from Hieronymus Bosch, Jackson Pollock and Kashmiri shawl patterns, to create a realm of sub-aqueous eroticism.

Another example are the immaculately executed paintings of Shahzia Sikander, who was born in 1969 to a Muslim family in Pakistan. They combine courtly Mughal and Rajput themes — portraits of rulers and dancers — with images of fighter jets, oil rigs, mosque domes, predatory animals and paradise gardens, as if telescoping related, destructive histories.

Ms. Sikander studied miniature painting in art school in Lahore, and radically transformed the medium after moving to the United States, adding personal and political content. Her new work met with disapproval in Pakistan, where she was accused of, among other things, pandering to Western taste. Yet a number of younger Pakistani artists have recently followed her lead.

Six of them are showing at the Aldrich Con-



though certain Western-based artists, including some at the Modern, make it their own.

Shirazeh Houshiary, born in Iran, based in London, paints single words — she doesn't tell us what words — over and over until they dissolve into an unreadable glow. Is her art calligraphy or Western-style abstraction? Both. Rachid Koraichi, raised in a Sufi family in Algeria and now living in Paris, invents "calligraphic" texts with Arabic characters, Chinese-style ideograms and talismanic signs, and embroiders them in gold on silk banners to create banners for a new, universal language.

Shirin Neshat, born in Iran, turns the written word — as distinct from calligraphy, with its very particular skills — into a quasi-revolutionary instrument in a series of 1996 studio photographs of young women who are dressed in traditional black veils but carry guns and have passages from erotic poetry and paeans to religious martyrdom written in Persian on their faces and hands. The artist seems to be symbolically placing political power in the hands of the kinds of veiled women who are automatically assumed by many Westerners to be oppressed vic-

MoMA's new show asks, just how 'Islamic' is these artists' work?

at the Aperture Foundation in Chelsea last year was a truncated version of a larger Dutch survey that combined images of the Islamic world — here called the Arab world — by photographers from that area and from outside it. Only the "native" photographers were in the New York edition, and then only some of them, but the variety of styles and themes was tremendous.

Collectively, they created a picture of a multifaceted, multicultural Islamic world that was intensely complex without being arcane. It is secular and religious (Christian and Jewish as well as Islamic); politically fraught, but also everyday-ordinary. People get up, go to work, have lunch, come home, turn on the evening news and see insanity happening out there.

Sometimes, these days, that insanity is hap-

the Queens Museum of Art last spring surely did not. Much of the art in that show addressed the terrible post-Ayodhya Hindu and Muslim violence of the last decade.

But rather than laying the cause of violence at the door of ethnicity, it pointed to upper-level political forces, including those in the media, which created a Hinduism and an Islam that could be set at war.

Further expanding the "Islam world" picture were a handful of New York gallery shows. Apex Art in TriBeCa opened one window with a show of five young artists, laconically titled "Too Much Pollution to Demonstrate: Soft Guerrillas in Tehran's Contemporary Art Scene." Kashya Hildebrand in Chelsea opened another with a survey of popular culture in Iran that made it completely unrecognizable as the land of burqas and mullahs of Western lore.

In a different style, Pomegranate Gallery, in SoHo, recently showed five Baghdad-based artists with work produced during, or right after, the United States invaded the city in 2003. Qasim Sabti was represented by collages he made from books from the library of the Academy of Fine Arts that he found scattered in the street.

After rubbing out the titles on the covers, he arranged the ruined volumes face down in patchwork patterns. From a distance the results look like exercises in modernist geometric abstraction. Up close, under frayed edges and through tears in bindings, you see printed words and phrases in different languages: Arabic, German, French, English. They are evidence of the cosmopolitan Islamic world that political powers, intent on creating a myth of unbridgeable divides, want to bury.

It is a vision that is both objective and embracing, materialist and devotional, made by an artist who cannot be defined narrowly as Islamic but also cannot simply be called contemporary. The two identities are intertwined. The collage is made of matter that belongs to the West and Islam equally: books, words, knowledge, poetry. It is yet another in a world of images ranged like missiles. But this is an image of vulnerability, of labels erased.

So, is there an "Islamic" to be found in the picture that all these exhibitions together create? If there is, it is capacious, multifold, fantastically detailed and, of course, still unfinished; like Western art, it's a project in progress. The political fictions that have commandeered center stage represent only a part of the picture, though it is easy — and dangerous — to take them, or their Western counterparts, for the whole. If art does nothing else, it challenges us not to look at





temporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn., (through March 12) as a collective called Karkhana, which the artists formed as an activist gesture in response to the political and religious aggression worldwide after Sept. 11. Only one lives in Lahore now. The others are in Chicago, New York and Melbourne, Australia.

They collaborate by mail, each artist adding new elements to paintings when they receive them. The images include Mughal dress patterns; New York subway maps; amorous couples; Western politicians as clowns and Islamic clerics as satyrs; outtakes from colonial photographs; images of nature (birds, flowers, trees) and of violence (daggers, bullets, guns), interspersed with calligraphy and scribbles.

Calligraphy is the sovereign, definitively Islamic art form, one with inherent religious connotations as the medium through which the Koran is transcribed in Arabic. It is also the one Islamic art that shares nothing with Western art,

sumed by many Westerners to be oppressed victims of Islamic religious law, but who don't necessarily see themselves that way at all.

A pair of photographs by Jananne Al-Ani, who was born in Kirkuk, Iraq, of an Iraqi father and Irish mother, does the same thing in another way. The pictures are of the artist, her mother, her two sisters sitting side by side in progressive degrees of veiling. The veiling decreases from full to none if you read the pictures in the left-to-right direction of written English, and increases from none to complete if you read in the right-to-left direction of written Arabic.

It is possible to read the work as critical of orthodox Islamic custom. But Ms. Al-Ani's historical reference is to European colonial photographs of "exotic" Muslim women, which she turns into a visual essay on the artificiality of Western and Islamic identities.

The artificiality of a fixed identity is the exhibition's critical argument. And in the context of the present, violent, real-world standoff between two artificial constructions known as the West and the Islamic world, it certainly makes sense. Yet other exhibitions in the past year have successfully approached the subject of Islam in art more organically. They struck a better balance between the personalized approach of the work at the Modern and the images of communal "Muslim fury" spilling from the media.

"Nazar: Photographs from the Arab World"

Sometimes, these days, that insanity is happening right down the block. And if the Aperture show felt unrealistically pacific to viewers whose reality is shaped by CNN, "Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India" at the Asia Society and

does nothing else, it challenges us not to look at the world too narrowly. By its very breadth it reassures us that no image is *the* image. That culture is, always, about change. That sometimes collision courses can turn into open highways.

