ARTnews
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What's Hot

Nikki Lee: Extreme Makeover

De Kooning's Hidden Legacy

Exploring Islamic Traditions at MoMA

OPPOSITE **Shahzia Sikander combines elements from Hindu mythology, Persian tales, and personal experience in paintings such as *Pleasure Pillars*, 2001.**

Gained in Translation

Calligraphy, miniature painting, Sufi mysticism, and other traditions are the starting point for a new generation of artists from the Islamic world who are using the language of contemporary art to inflect their work with multiple layers of meaning

BY GLENN D. LOWRY

IN *MY NAME IS RED*, THE TURKISH NOVELIST Orhan Pamuk describes an epic battle at the Ottoman court in the 16th century. Miniature painting, with its flat, stylized forms, stands in opposition to newly introduced European perspective, with its emphasis on individuality and the illusion of space. The fight between those who support tradition and those who espouse innovation eventually leads to a series of murders.

The tension between old and new, past and present that is at the center of the drama of *My Name Is Red* is, to a large extent, still being played out today as artists from the Islamic world confront the challenge of making contemporary art for an international audience grounded in European values and ideas. Although there is no single solution to this problem, the 17 artists featured in the exhibition "Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking," organized by Fereshteh Daftari, assistant curator in the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, reveal a number of the issues involved in navigating this terrain.

Look closely at Jananne Al-Ani's untitled 1996 photograph of a woman transformed by the process of being unveiled, or at Ghada Amer's *Eight Women in Black and White* (2004), with its dense skein of stitches masking pornographic images of women, or at Mona Hatoum's *Prayer Mat* (1995), made of sharply pointed pins that render the mat threatening. What is most striking is that none of these works is what it appears to be. Each one presents a seemingly straightforward external appearance that upon closer inspection becomes ambiguous, so that first impressions quickly give way to meanings that resist immediate understanding. These are layered and complex works of art that play upon our assumptions—about *hijab* (the Islamic code of modest dress), pornography, and piety—in order to create a new and different set of assumptions about identity, gender, and ideology.

Al-Ani, Amer, and Hatoum were born in countries where Islam is the predominant religion—Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon, in 1966, 1963, and 1952, respectively—and, like a number of other artists from the Islamic world under consideration here, they no longer live there. They practice their art as exiles, living mostly in Europe and the United States. To what extent can—or should—their work be considered within the context of Islam and, more particularly, of Islamic art? Is there an appropriate language or set of concerns to describe their work? How should we locate these artists in terms of their practice and ideas?

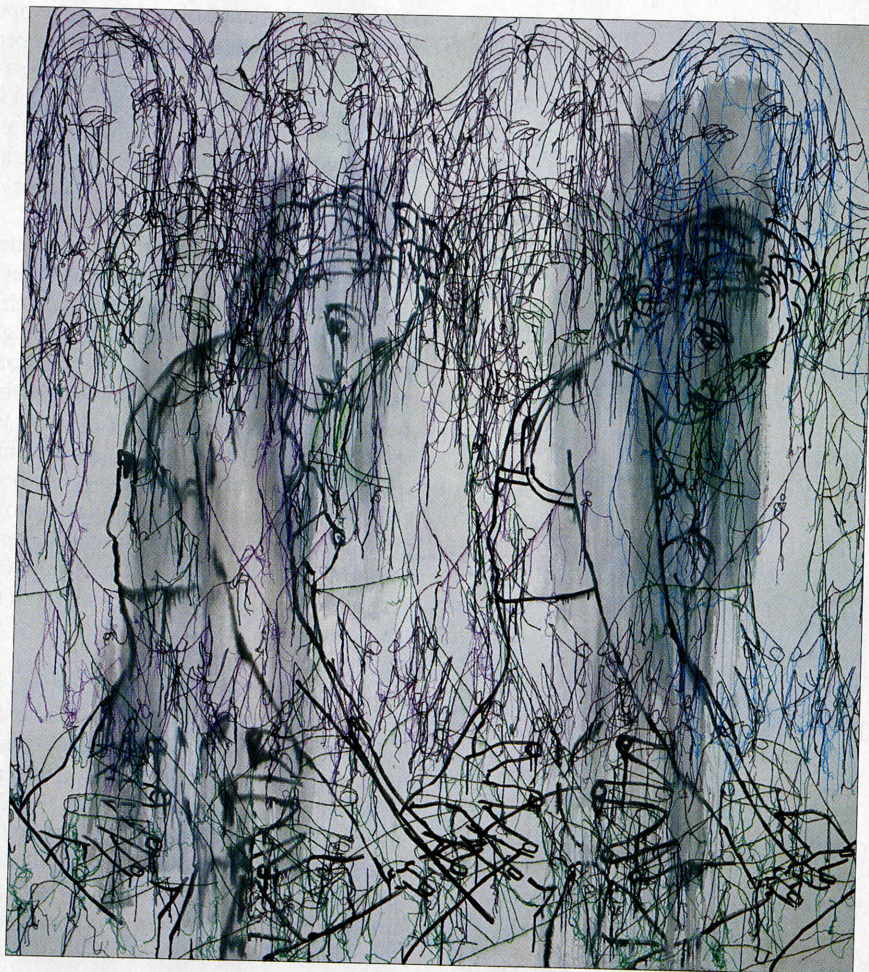
Kutlug Ataman's calligraphic animations, for instance, take as their point of departure one of the most fundamental aspects of Islamic art: the act of writing. But then they subvert that act—in the case of *World (no. 1)*, 2003, by morphing the calligraphy into the shape of a phallus, an image abhorrent to practicing Muslims. The beauty of Ataman's calligraphy challenges us to come to terms with the shape it draws and asks us to reconcile our appreciation for writing with our awareness that the words and the image they make are at odds with one another.

While Ataman's *World* treats Islamic art explicitly, addressing directly the long history of calligraphy, Y. Z. Kami's por-

Glenn D. Lowry is the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking" is on view through May 22.

traits deal only indirectly with Islamic mysticism, particularly the Sufi tradition of spiritual development. His finely rendered portraits of both friends and strangers, seen head-on and often at monumental scale, seem at first to be straightforward depictions. They are painted in muted colors with a gently scalloped stroke that gives the surface of the paintings an almost feathered appearance. But what is noticeable about his figures is their stillness: their eyes are often cast downward, as if they are about to close, and there is no sign of movement. Each figure is caught as if in a trance, at peace with the world, a condition that Kami associates with mysticism and spirituality. The sense of quiet and calm they evoke becomes for Kami a visual analogue of the Sufi tradition.

At first glance, the presence of any identifiably Islamic dimension is invisible in his work. Upon upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Kami's portraits are suffused with a deeply felt understanding of Sufi values. The differences between Ataman's and Kami's work suggest both the range and the complexity of issues involved with any examination of contemporary art that deals with Islam or Islamic art.



Ghada Amer hides layers of images beneath dense skeins of embroidery in *Eight Women in Black and White*, 2004.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Islamic art for these artists is a tradition—perhaps one among many—to be questioned and explored as part of an exercise in self-definition. As for artists who work across cultural boundaries, their challenge is to make art that is at once both deeply personal and broadly meaningful while addressing the issues and experiences of the different worlds in which they live. All of these artists have succeeded by avoiding what cultural historian Ian Buruma calls the "trap of hybridity," in which self-conscious efforts to merge different traditions produce little more than superficial decoration hiding ill-digested ideas.

Other artists use different strategies. For instance, Shahzia Sikander, born in Pakistan in 1969 and educated at the National College of Arts in Lahore and at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, decided to learn the traditional techniques of Persian and Indian miniature painting as an act of defiance, because miniature painting was scorned by her teachers and peers at home. Responding to the harsh regime of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq in the 1970s and '80s, Sikander (as she told critic Ian Berry) realized that "military presence has a way of prevailing, and either you respond in ways that are reactive or that become subversive. . . . The conventional approaches in the painting department pushed me toward miniature painting because no one else was interested in it." Combining images from different sources, Sikander creates densely layered paintings that transcend traditional notions of narrative to combine "overlapping commentaries on lived experiences, art history, and pop culture."

Given Sikander's interest in the dualities and contradictions of formal and conceptual structures, her paintings cannot be read in a straightforward manner but must be seen as personal meditations on the larger issues of culture and identity, tradition and modernity, Islam and the West—questions to which she consciously avoids providing clear answers. Recently Sikander has begun to use computer programs to animate her drawings. The results often suggest a kind of entropic collapse, as the individual parts of these images disengage from one another and then recombine in more and more complicated ways until they fold in on themselves. The process allows Sikander to add layers of literal and conceptual meaning while deconstructing the idea of the individual, autonomous miniature painting. In both her painted images and her animations, Sikander uses the process of layering to knit together elements from Hindu mythology, Persian tales, and personal experience in order to explore the shifting nature of the space—metaphorical and physical—in which we live.

Raqib Shaw was born in Calcutta in 1974 and grew up in Kashmir before attending the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London. Like Sikander, he uses the formal language of Persian and Indian miniatures to make large-scale, brightly colored, almost hallucinogenic enamel paintings. The subjects of paintings like *The Garden of Earthly Delights III* (2003)—which is, among other things, an homage to Hieronymus Bosch—grow out of Shaw's vivid imagination. He has described himself as living locked in a world he has created for himself—a world that is the result of having grown up with Muslim parents, studied with Hindu tutors, and attended a Christian school.

Shaw resists being defined as either a Kashmiri or an Islamic artist, and just as Sikander was attracted by the outcast status of the miniature, he turned to painting because his peers at Saint Martins looked down on it. He wanted to create a new kind of imagery, richly detailed and self-consciously beautiful, that could converse with the history of art. By evoking the patterned surfaces of miniature paintings and Kashmiri textiles, with their finely wrought lines and dense networks of forms, Shaw sets up an expectation that is sharply undermined by his subject matter of writhing animals, humans, and aquatic creatures, often copulating with each other and ejaculating in bursts of exuberant color—none of which would be possible in an Islamic context.

Marjane Satrapi was born in 1969 in Rasht, Iran. She grew up in Tehran, then left for Vienna in 1984. She returned to Iran in 1988 but left again for Europe six years later, this time moving to Paris, where she currently lives and works. Satrapi takes a very different approach from those of Shaw and Sikander: instead of subverting the formal structures of an Islamic mode of representation, she appropriates the visual language of the Western comic strip. The two volumes of her comic book *Persepolis* tell her story of growing up in Iran during the revolution that deposed the shah, the subsequent war with Iraq, her exile in Austria during her high-school years, and her return to her homeland. Drawn in black and white, the simple cartoon images and their texts provide a running commentary on Satrapi's life as she comes of age and learns to deal with the religious regime running Iran. Her self-definition is complicated by her move to Austria: to integrate herself into her new country, she has to forget who she is and where she comes from. Then, when she returns to Iran, she discovers that she is a foreigner at home as well. Satrapi feels that the language of drawing escapes cultural specificity. As she told Dave Weich of Powell's Books, "When you draw a situation—someone is scared or angry or happy—it means the same thing in all cultures. . . . Also it is more accessible. People do not take it so seriously. And when you want to use a little bit of humor, it's much easier to use pictures." Her story is laced with skepticism about politics, directed toward Islam, Iran, and the West, and with the recognition that the Iranian regime forces its citizens to live double lives. In *Persepolis* Satrapi makes skillful use of the cartoon strip's simplified format to maintain a critical distance or ambivalence toward her life experiences.

Y. Z. Kami alludes to Sufi tradition in portraits of people who seem to be caught in a trance, such as *Untitled*, 2004–5.

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Rachid Koraichi, one of the older artists in the exhibition, was born in 1947 in Ain Beida, Algeria. He studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Algeria and then at the École des Arts Decoratifs, the Institut d'Urbanisme, and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he has lived since 1971. Koraichi, who comes from a distinguished Sufi family, is interested in Islamic traditions of mysticism, numerology, and writing. Often taking the form of bannerlike textiles, his work makes extensive use of calligraphy, so that on the surface it appears to be entirely within the vocabulary of Islamic art. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that what looks like Islamic calligraphy is in fact an invented language of signs and symbols, mixing Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Berber, and Tuareg elements to create what Koraichi calls an "alphabet of remembrance." Highly personal and idiosyncratic, this alphabet allows Koraichi to take typically Islamic forms, with their formulaic inscriptions, and subvert them for his personal use, an act of resistance that he sees as privileging the individual over the community.

Although all the artists under consideration here were born in one world and live in another, they do so from relatively privileged circumstances. They are well educated and come from mostly solidly middle- or upper-class families. Amer's mother, for instance, is an agronomist and her father a diplomat; Kami's father was a businessman; Shaw's from a long line of successful merchants. Many went to school, either in Europe (like Amer, Shaw, and Satrapi) or the United States (like Sikander). They are part of a sophisticated and growing population of émigrés from the Islamic world who live in the West. While they form a counterpoint to the disenfranchised, often poorly educated, and marginalized Muslims living in France, Germany, and England (who now make up between 5 and 10 percent of the population in those countries), they share with them a recognition that the traditional boundaries between the Middle East and the West have become blurred and that this has created a confusing and challenging environment.

Raqib Shaw uses patterned surfaces evocative of miniature paintings and Kashmiri textiles but incorporates content that is decidedly un-Islamic in *The Garden of Earthly Delights III*, 2003.

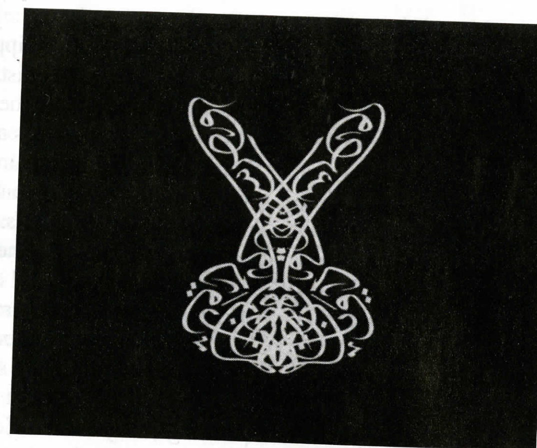
The Islamic world historically has been defined by those countries where Islam is the predominant religion—from Morocco in the West to Indonesia in the East. Linked by successive waves of conquest that began to radiate out from the Fertile Crescent in the seventh century A.D. and bound by a common religion and accompanying social code, these countries are home to more than 1 billion people. But to speak of an Islamic world presupposes that Morocco and Turkey, Egypt and Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia, for instance, with their very different social, cultural, and political systems, belong together in some fundamental way simply because they share a religion. The "Islamic world," like the notion of a culturally unified Europe, needs to be thought of as an idea, not a hard reality. Both Europe and the Middle East, as Edward Said pointed out more than 20 years ago and Robert Bartlett noted more recently, "are obviously not natural facts but cultural constructions, invented, indeed, as a pair of contrasting polarities."

For some Muslims, Western secular culture and the conspicuous consumption that often goes along with it are seen as undermining their faith; others acknowledge the democratic systems of the West but struggle to balance that appreciation against a religion that they feel leaves little room for liberal values. Muslims who have either grown up in Europe or North America or moved to the West and adopted Western values often find themselves both alienated from the Muslim community and, to varying degrees, rejected by Western communities—or, worse, targets of suspicion.

PRIVATE COLLECTION/COURTESY VICTORIA MIRO GALLERY, LONDON
TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN GALLERY, NEW YORK; BOTTOM: COLLECTION THE ARTIST

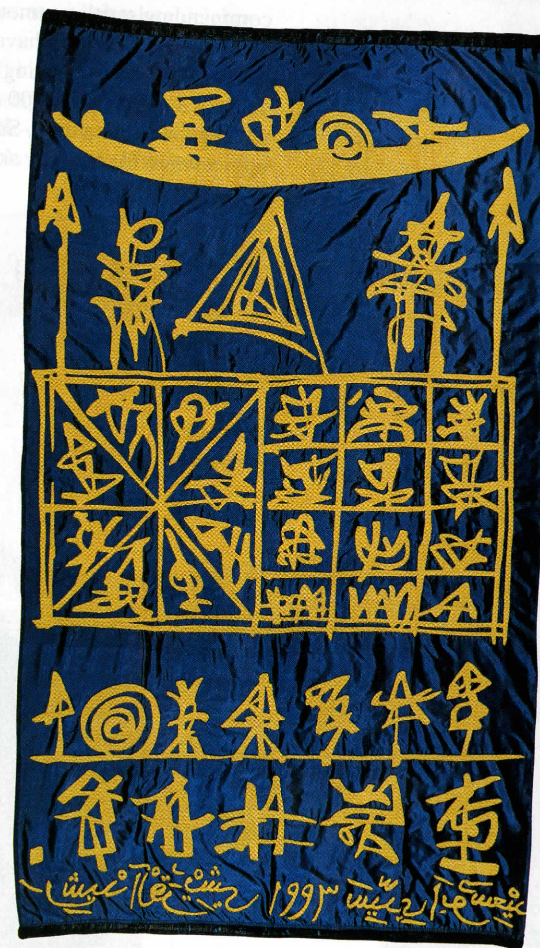
Across this range of opinion and experience, the problem of defining oneself in this world is extremely difficult, especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks first in New York City and Washington, D.C., and later in Madrid and London, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

For the artists in "Without Boundary," this has meant finding a way to express themselves that transcends being identified as "Islamic" to avoid being dismissed or stereotyped. Using the language of contemporary art firmly positions them within the culture of modernity, with its emphasis on self-reflection, criticism, and skepticism. Although artists like Koraichi, Shaw, Ataman, and Shirin Neshat, in particular, use formal devices associated with traditional Islamic art, their work nonetheless operates within the context of contemporary art through the subversion and critique of the sources they appropriate. Where Islamic art rarely allows for personal expression, their work is rooted in individual experience and expression. Calligraphy and miniature painting, myths and folktales, Koranic and Sufi traditions are all part of a complex world of images and ideas available to these artists that inflect their work but do not delimit it.



Kutlug Ataman's video installation *World (no. 1)*, 2003, morphs Arabic writing into phallic shapes.

In a fluid and global environment where technology collapses borders and physical distances are moot, these artists can, in theory, practice anywhere they want. In reality, given the conservative nature of many Islamic countries—with their restrictive policies concerning freedom of expression, political activism, nudity, sex, religious debate, and homosexuality, among other social and cultural issues—they offer difficult, even impossible environments for artists who make challenging art, especially art that questions or critiques religious beliefs. It is largely for this reason that all of the artists under discussion live and practice primarily outside their countries of birth.



Rachid Koraichi invents his own calligraphy in *Salome*, 1993.

But if these artists have found places to work in Europe and North America, they have also had to contend with the fact that many of the social and religious issues they faced in traditional Muslim countries now confront them in different but no less real ways in Europe and, to a lesser extent North America. The conflict of values inherent in this situation can be seen as a catalyst for much of these artists' work. Caught between the tensions of Islam and modernity, Europe and the Middle East, freedom of expression and communal values, faith and secularity, the artists in "Without Boundary" tend to be skeptical of religion, politics, and social mores. Their work seeks to undermine our expectations and assumptions through a strategy of subversion.

Although Sikander, Kami, Satrapi, and Koraichi—like all of the artists under consideration—draw on experience in the Islamic world to make their work, their art as a whole resists easy categorization. They have used the means of contemporary art, from the exploration of gender and identity to the use of irony and humor, to transform their personal experiences of Islam and Islamic art into universal ones. What relates them to each other is less their connection to Islam (which, in any event, is extremely varied) than what Homi Bhabha calls an "attitude of ambivalence" and their use of subversion as a means to undermine any direct understanding of their art. Islamic art is one subject to be explored and critiqued, but it is not the only issue their art addresses—and for Ataman, Amer, Hatoum, and Shaw, it is not even their primary interest.

While the artists in "Without Boundary" were born in the Islamic world, and have their roots there, that world is undergoing dramatic change. Their work operates in a unique psychological and metaphorical space, fraught with the tensions and contradictions that characterize Islam today. By neither confining themselves to making art that addresses only Islamic issues nor denying the importance of Islam in their work, these artists resist definition. Their ambivalence and at times skepticism further complicate any easy reading of their work. But each offers us a unique way of looking at or thinking about Islam and the world through highly informed, deeply felt, and visually moving works of art that are as provocative as they are engaging. ■