

Without Boundary



ISLAMIC OR NOT

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We often think of artists in terms of their origins, even when much of their life and work takes place elsewhere. This is problematic with artists from the Islamic world, particularly in light of the intense attention currently directed toward Islam from the West.¹ In academic curricula and lectures, and in articles in the art press, artists such as Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat, and Shahzia Sikander—of Palestinian, Iranian, and Pakistani origin respectively—are regularly described as “Islamic.”² Yet these artists share neither nationality nor religion, have studied in Europe and the United States, and live and work in London and New York.

When the adjective “Islamic” is so regularly attached to quite different bodies of art, the question bears asking whether it is applicable to them. The region we call “the Islamic world” stretches from Indonesia to the Atlantic coast of Africa; to call the art of this entire area “contemporary Islamic art” is surely reductive, like calling the art of the entire Western hemisphere “contemporary Christian art.” *Without Boundary* sets out to look at the work of a number of artists who come from the Islamic world but do not live there. Only active consideration of this kind will slow down the race toward simplistic conclusions and binary thinking.

The study of “Islamic art” is an occidental invention, originating in Europe in the 1860s.³ Definitions of the term vary from one context to another; the scholar Oleg Grabar cuts through them by defining Islamic art as “art made in and/or for areas and times dominated by Muslim rulers and populations.”⁴ In our present polarized moment, the term is loaded with political and religious subtexts, and yet it has been applied to artists who would not necessarily use it to describe their own work, who do not live permanently in Islamic areas, and who produce art

for European and American art spaces in which Muslim visitors are only a fraction of their audience. Is there any identifiable commonality in their art?

Without Boundary approaches its subject from a variety of perspectives, the first of them formal. Classic traditions of Islamic art that have become well-known in the West include, for example, calligraphy, the painting of miniatures, and the design of carpets. These forms might lead a Western viewer to label an artwork “Islamic.” To explore to what measure the artists in *Without Boundary* actually depart from any conventional notion we might have of Islamic art, then, this exhibition and book will examine their work in part by approaching it through just these taxonomic types. A second focus of *Without Boundary* is the question of identity, whether secular or religious—a frequent issue in an exhibition of artists the majority of whom have experienced long-term dislocations across national borders. Finally, since the Western sense of Islamic art is tied deeply to religion, a third section of the exhibition explores questions of faith.

In all of these areas, the artists in *Without Boundary* defy the expectations imposed by the term “Islamic art”—a term that was in any case originally devised in reference to traditional art forms. To impose categories on artists who resist categorization, of course, is a contradiction in terms, and I do not intend *Without Boundary* to share in the homogenizing impulse that has become so widespread. To highlight the difficulty of making origin a defining factor in the consideration of art, then, the exhibition also includes two Western artists, and one or two more will be discussed in this essay. Although not influenced by artists from the Islamic world, these artists share interests, references, and strategies with them.

Text versus Calligraphy

Calligraphy, through its ancient association with the Koran, holds a privileged position in the aesthetic traditions of the Islamic world (fig. 1).⁵ The medium of both religious and secular texts, it has evolved into distinct styles running from the minimal to the highly ornate, from the angular to the fluidly cursive. Written in many languages but always in the Arabic alphabet, these styles follow rules but also allow variation, even sometimes quite radical experimentation, so that in some countries recent modes of calligraphy are seen as local expressions of modernism.⁶

The paintings of **SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY** are abstractions in which neither traditional nor modernist calligraphy is immediately recognizable, yet all of these works rely on a basic building block: a word, inscribed from right to left in Arabic script. Repeated, sanded down, and rewritten to the point where areas of the painting come to resemble a web of cracks, Houshiary's words are illegible, indeed virtually invisible, and she has not revealed their content. The mark dissolves; a trace of the art-making activity, it moves between being and nonbeing, “between existence and nonexistence,” as Houshiary says.⁷ Working on canvases laid on the floor, Houshiary seems intent on drawing out of their fabric an echo of presence so faint that it equally signifies absence. Summoning paradoxes and dualities in order to transcend them, she turns to a palette of oppositions: black and white, darkness and light, life and death.



1. Page in a Koran (Sura 53, verses 1–2). 14th century. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 14 1/2 x 10 5/8" (36.9 x 27 cm). Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. Purchase



2. Shirazeh Houshiary. *Gaze*. 2003. White Aquacryl and graphite on canvas, 6' 2 13/16" x 6' 2 13/16" (190 x 190 cm). The artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

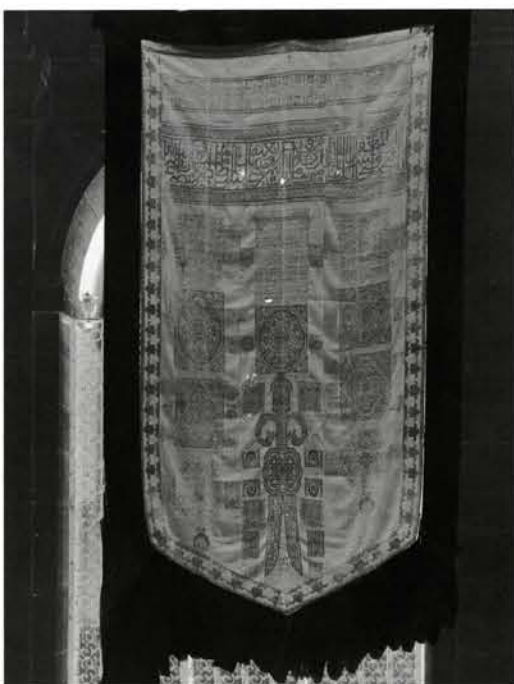
A central metaphor in Houshiary's work is light. *Gaze* (2003; fig. 2), for instance, seems to flicker and vibrate, mirroring the act of seeing. Erasing what Houshiary calls the “distinction between the viewer and the painting,”⁸ the work moves beyond purely optical sensation by calling on the viewer to experience awareness. Seeking the possibility of illumination, Houshiary asks literal text to release ultimate sense.

In *Fine Frenzy* (2004; plate 1) the word becomes the epicenter of an explosion. On the one hand writing seems pulverized and atomized, on the other, still clinging like particles of dust—or conversely of light—to the surface of the canvas, it seems to expand beyond the work's borders, and beyond any physical geography. The source of light in the work—a word, present at the painting's inception, expanded into a vortex of energy—is born in darkness. Houshiary is an admirer of Minimalism (born in Iran, she moved to London in 1974 and studied at the Chelsea School of Art, so that her artistic formation is Western) but she finds in that idiom of reduction and repetition not the theoretical and spatial issues that usually determine discussion of it but a language of meditation. In the tradition of abstract painting, meanwhile, her predecessors might be Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, and Agnes Martin, whose work similarly had mystical

aspects. Unlike those artists, though, she arrives at abstraction by concealing a text.

Unlike Houshiary, the Algerian artist **RACHID KORAÏCHI** makes his text highly visible, embroidering it in gold letters on large silk tapestries. Yet the sign system he mostly uses is his own invention, and indecipherable. The message is coded. Even when Koraïchi does use Arabic script—when he inscribes his signature and the date at the bottom of a tapestry, for example—he usually writes it backward. The mirror image has an important place in Islamic thought; as the artist points out, for example, the Sufis believe that knowledge of the self is never direct, and must always rely on the mirror.⁹

Salome (plate 6), a series of twenty-one textiles from 1993, tells a veiled and cryptic tale, according to Koraïchi, about a doomed personal relationship, while also referring in its title to the biblical story of the infamous dance that led to the death of John the Baptist.¹⁰ In choosing this text, Koraïchi underlines the importance of Christianity in Algeria, a hybrid nation in religious terms. His ideograms, too, have links to the many visual cultures of North Africa, old and young, including numerology, Talismanic inscriptions, calligraphy, tattoos, Sufi banners, and the rock paintings of the Ahaggar region of Algeria, to name a few. Adding to this gene pool in *Salome* is a symbol found in Ancient Egyptian tombs, to which Koraïchi draws attention with arrows: the boat that carries life beyond the grave. Among all these references, a family resemblance to the banners (fig. 3) of Islamic North Africa remains apparent.



KUTLUG ATAMAN is best known for video installations incorporating interviews with people who are in some way exceptional or remarkable. Since the interview by nature involves language and narrative, it is consistent with Ataman's practice that he should also have turned to writing, a basic medium of these modes. In a series of six animated videos from 2003, he addresses the separate semiotic premises of word and image, which he shows merging, separating, and merging again. An image pregnant with meaning hides words; words become moving images, as if aspiring to visual status. In this sense Ataman's animations are metaphors for film- and videomaking.

World (no. 1) (2003; plate 4) and *Beautiful* (no. 2) (2003; plate 5), each containing the Turkish word of its title, combine this interest in cinema with an origin in a marginal tradition of calligraphy in which artists design religious invocations in the form of horses, lions, birds, and sometimes human faces (fig. 4). Returning to this verbal/visual genre but rendering it secular, Ataman also returns to the use of Arabic script, which the modern founding figure of his native Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, banned in 1929 in the so-called "alphabet revolution," part of the country's project of modernization. The ornamental letters of Ataman's calligraphy, then, belong to an outcast alphabet, a status sometimes elaborated through the profane spirit of these animated works—as in *World*, where the letters, as they rotate, form into a phallic erection.

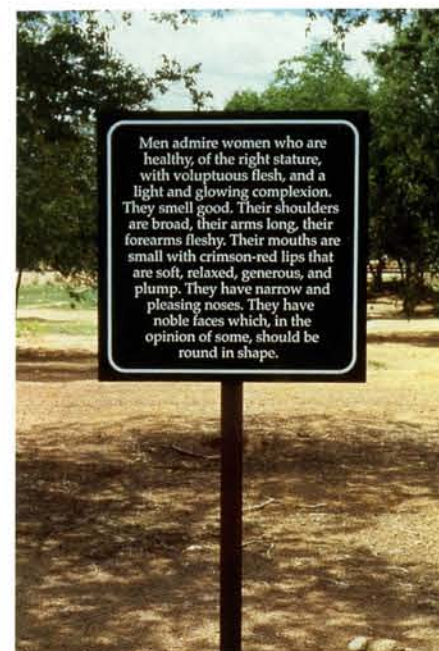
If video animation and Islamic calligraphy are newly allied in Ataman's work, handwritten calligraphy also makes a strange



3. North African pilgrim's banner. 1683. Silk, 12' 1 1/2" x 6' 3" (369.57 x 190.5 cm). Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass. Gift of John Goelet

4. Lion formed of ornamental Tawqi script. Persian, probably 19th century. The script reads in English, "Ali ibn Abi Talib, may God Almighty be pleased with him and honor him"

5 and 6. Ghada Amer. *Love Park*. 1991. Paired signs and benches. Installation view, park adjacent to SITE Santa Fe exhibition



bedfellow for the mechanically reproduced medium of photography. The early work of **SHIRIN NESHAT**, however, involves just this partnership, comprising words in Persian handwritten on her photographs to render each print unique. "I was always fascinated by the art of calligraphy," Neshat recalls, "and most importantly in how text and image fuse in both Persian and Islamic art, from miniature paintings to other forms. Also, I collected in Tehran's bazaars small plates, good luck charms, where mythological figures of men, women, and animals are completely covered with inscriptions, both inside and outside."¹¹ In works of this kind Neshat replays the upheavals she found when she visited Iran in 1990, after a sixteen-year absence. (She had left as a teenager in 1974, five years before the revolution that toppled Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.) The contradictions implicit in these works show her grappling with a revolution that had turned the familiar into the uncanny.

In *Speechless* (1996; plate 3), from the *Women of Allah* series, begun in 1993, a woman wears a gun barrel in place of an earring, while her face is veiled with script—a eulogy to martyrdom in the name of Islam, quoted from the writings of the contemporary Iranian poet Tahereh Saffarzadeh. Evoking the alliance between religion and politics in postrevolutionary Iranian culture, *Speechless* also considers the revolution's empowerment of the social classes that toppled the Westernized regime of the shah. In *Untitled* (1996; plate 2), meanwhile, a photograph from the same series, Neshat points to an internal discord, this time writing text on the hand of a woman shown raising her fingers to her lips. The gesture might signal a kiss as well as a self-imposed silence, and this time Neshat quotes Forough Farrokhzad (1935–67), a poet known for the sensuality of her writing—in fact a poet whose writings fell into official disfavor

in postrevolutionary Iran. Neshat lets the poem grow vertically on the hand's upward-pointing fingers; below, on the back of the hand, is a religious invocation, set in a circle and written in letters evoking traditional Islamic calligraphy. Disputing the divisions in culture that she saw in postrevolutionary Iran, Neshat sets on the same body an assertion of faith and the words of a poet of life.

This fusion of religion and sensuality is often missed in the West, where the women in Neshat's images are frequently interpreted as one-dimensional Islamic types. The writing on Neshat's photographs has been similarly misunderstood: an audience that does not read Persian, and may not distinguish clearly between Iranians and Arabs, assumes that her texts are in Arabic and perhaps even excerpted from the Koran, which Neshat has actually never quoted.¹² **GHADA AMER** leaves less room for misunderstanding. Even when she was still a student, at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Nice, Amer defied a teacher's expectation that this Egyptian-born artist might use Islamic calligraphy. Instead she chose to work with Roman script, legible to her audience in France.¹³ The sources of her text works range a wide territory, from banal popular culture (fashion magazines) through reference material (the French dictionary *Le Petit Robert*) to translations from historical Arabic literature. In *Love Park* (figs. 5 and 6), for instance, made for a town park adjoining the SITE Santa Fe exhibition of 1991, Amer planted signposts inscribed with quotations from Sheikh Nefzawi's *Perfumed Garden*, an erotic handbook written in North Africa in the sixteenth century—and perfectly respected, no anomaly, in the Arab world of its time.¹⁴ The critic Olu Oguibe accordingly notes of Amer, "Her work may be seen as the continuation of a long tradition of Arab investigations of both sexuality and human passions" and simultaneously as an offensive against "present configura-



7. Elaine Reichek. *Sampler (Starting Over)*. 1996. Embroidery on linen, 8³/₄ x 67¹/₂" (22.2 x 171.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Marcia Riklis Fund

tions, or popular perceptions of that culture."¹⁵ One agenda of Amer's work, then, is to celebrate Arab culture, much belittled in the West, by setting parts of its literary history before Western eyes; at the same time, she also confronts the conservative currents in contemporary Islam by restoring to visibility parts of its written tradition that were integral to it in the past.

Issues of gender are central to Amer. In *The Definition of Love according to Le Petit Robert* (1993; plate 7), for instance, she embroiders the well-known French dictionary's explanation of the word "amour" on canvas, using thread, she says, because it is "the women's tool 'par excellence.'"¹⁶ Drawing or writing with a needle is a strategy Amer shares with a number of contemporary Western artists, some of whom have chosen it for similar purposes.¹⁷ The New York artist Elaine Reichek, for example, practices a conceptually informed kind of embroidery, making works like *Sampler (Starting Over)* (1996; fig. 7), in which carefully sewn quotations of lines from Homer, words and images by Reinhardt, and a design from an ancient Greek vase frame Penelope, the legendary weaver of the *Odyssey*, as "the first process artist."¹⁸ Just as, in aligning Penelope with Reinhardt, Reichek's *Sampler* addresses issues of gender and the writing of art history, Amer's *Definition of Love* encroaches on the male field of Abstract Expressionism: while Reichek neatly embroiders the black panels of Reinhardt's work, Amer mimics the "drips" of Jackson Pollock with a cobweb of loose threads, informal lines stitched and stretched all over the canvas. If Amer should clearly be seen in part through the lens of Arab culture, that view must be complemented with an awareness of her context in contemporary Western art. She was only eleven years old when she moved to France, and if she later settled in New York, it was because she wanted to be seen as an "international" artist, rather than as "Egyptian or Middle Eastern or French."¹⁹

In Houshiary's hands, then, Islamic calligraphy becomes invisible or illegible text, a hermetic sign, a grain of abstraction. "Transcending name, nationality, cultures," in her words, she buries the ethnic mark.²⁰ Koraichi's invented ideograms similarly maintain a genetic link to Islamic banners but translate them into code, replacing public religious invocation with a private narrative.

Ataman, always favoring the exceptional over the norm, uses a marginal calligraphic tradition to make irreverent animations in which text morphs into image. He makes calligraphy a malleable tool of subversion. Neshat retains a facade of tradition but complicates and contradicts the expectations associated with it. And Amer turns her back on Arabic script, using crude Roman letters that explicitly distance her from the elegance of Islamic calligraphy. The means and strategies of all these artists defy tradition and align them with contemporary practices.

Beyond Miniature Painting

When **SHAHZIA SIKANDER** took up the study of miniature painting as an art student in Lahore in 1988, Pakistani artists had long considered this time-honored form an anachronism. "It supposedly represented our heritage," she says, "yet we reacted to it with suspicion and ridicule. I had grown up thinking of it as kitsch." In this context Sikander's decision to study miniature painting "was an act of defiance."²¹ Right from the beginning, her transformation of the miniature capitalized on its innate, preexisting hybridity, which, however, she extended by incorporating in it both personal content and references to Western modernism. In *Perilous Order* of 1997 (plate 9), for instance, Sikander depicts a friend in the guise of a Mughal prince or emperor, one of the Muslim rulers of India. This one, though, Sikander surrounds with figures from Hindu mythology—*gopis*, worshipers of Krishna, derived from a miniature of the Basohli school, which flourished in northern India during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.²² The dots regularly punctuating the surface meanwhile recall a regime of repetition that she associates with Minimalism. Finally a pure invention of Sikander's hovers in the lower center: the shadowy silhouette of a female figure, perhaps an alter ego, with roots in place of feet—interconnected roots that absorb energy only from themselves, suggesting that this woman is self-nourishing.

In *Pleasure Pillars* (2001; plate 10) Sikander again embraces heterogeneity. Dancing figures drawn from Mughal miniatures, a classical Venus matched by a figure of the Hindu goddess Devi, a self-portrait with spiraling horns, the high-tech war machinery



8. Sigmar Polke. *This Is How You Sit Correctly (After Goya and Max Ernst)*. 1982. Acrylic on fabric, 6' 6³/₄" x 70⁷/₈" (200 x 180 cm). Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden

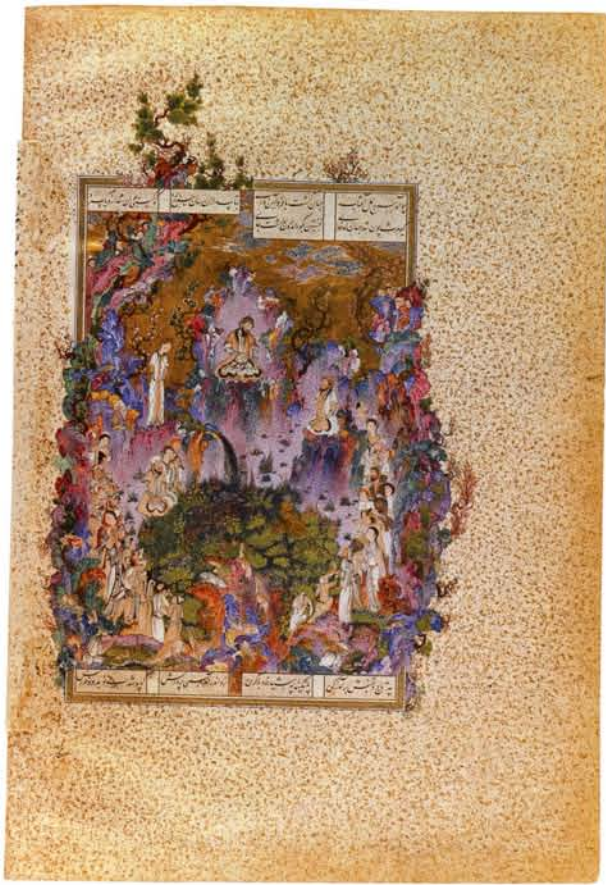
of a modern fighter plane, and battling animals plucked from miniatures of Iran's Safavid period form the elements of a narrative without a story line. For Sikander these layers of ideas, or thought processes, create "open-ended possibilities."²³ Her art education, it should be remembered, did not stop in Lahore; having moved to the United States in 1993, she studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she was exposed to semiotics and post-Structuralist theory. Among the Western artists she admires is the German painter Sigmar Polke, who similarly mixes images of varied origins in an attempt to destabilize fixed meanings (fig. 8). The comparison with Polke, Sikander comments, "rarely comes up in conversations," but she "studied his work to understand layering paint and narrative."²⁴

Sikander's work reflects the issues and events of today's world. Post-9/11 politics seep in. *Web* (2002; plate 11), with its fighter planes caught in the spider's web of some dusty, oil-rigged corner of the globe, could be a poet's antiwar editorial. The context suggests a new interpretation for the traditional motif of a lion devouring a deer. The series *51 Ways of Looking* (2004) sees Sikander finding argumentative possibilities in abstraction, if, in some cases, abstraction showing traces of

representation. In #2 (plate 12), for instance, a floral border recalling Islamic book illustration frames a rectangle of monochrome black that conjures a modernist art history running from Kazimir Malevich to Reinhardt. In the next drawing in the series (plate 13) the border breaks down: the black center overflows into the margin while the margin grows into the center. This mutual intrusion invites metaphoric interpretations to do with other kinds of center and periphery, whether in artmaking—the relative positions of abstraction and ornament in the modernist hierarchy, say—or in the world beyond.

Elsewhere in the *51 Ways of Looking* series Sikander telescopes farther into the realm of abstraction, drawing straight and curving lines that intersect to form squares, rectangles, triangles, and circles (plate 14). Such drawings recall the modernist idea of a universal language, free of any cultural association, but as if to contradict that notion Sikander points out that geometry is "fundamental to Islamic art."²⁵ In Sikander's work, as Eugenie Tsai has written, "Categories of culturally specific and universal have become totally irrelevant."²⁶ Yet another drawing from the series (plate 15) again plays on the idea that representation and abstraction are each other's nemeses: the apparently abstract elements making up a whirling, circular pattern are in fact derived from the coiffures of *gopis*, female figures in the iconology of the Krishna cult. Abstracted through reduction to their hair, disengaged from their usual narrative burden, they wheel and dance in the supposedly neutral zone of abstraction, quintessences of themselves.

The affinities between Sikander's art and the miniature tradition remain apparent even as she moves from drawing to painting to animation (plate 8). The scale of **RAQIB SHAW**'s paintings—which may be as much as fifteen feet wide—immediately distances them from the miniature, but the jewellike quality of their color, Shaw's infinite attention to their minute and multifarious details, and the presence of a note of almost hallucinogenic fantasy invite comparison to such Persian miniatures as Shah Tahmasp's *Shahnameh* of c. 1522–40 (fig. 9), a vision of a royal court as an earthly heaven presided over by a benign ruler. Shaw similarly, in *The Garden of Earthly Delights III* (2003; plate 16), gives his world an authority figure—but his is a haloed ibex (fig. 10), a brooding beast, and where the Tahmasp *Shahnameh* describes a kingdom in which the civilizing influence of a legendary shah extends to the taming of animals, Shaw glorifies libidinal excess. His Eden is governed by the id. Unlike the *Garden of Delights* (c. 1510–15) of Hieronymus Bosch, the direct inspiration for the series from which this work comes, Shaw's triptych is free of moral taboo: when man and animal copulate (fig. 11), no punishment threatens.²⁷ Permissive and celebratory, the work seems to advocate—in the most literal way—the generation of new, hybrid possibilities.



9. *The Court of Gayumars*, page from the *Shahnameh* painted in Tabriz, Iran, by Sultan Muhammad for Shah Tamasp. c. 1522–40. Opaque watercolor, ink, colloid silver, and gold on paper, 12⁵/₈ x 9¹/₁₆" (32 x 23 cm). Aga Khan Trust for Culture, Geneva



10. Raqib Shaw. *The Garden of Earthly Delights III* (detail). 2003. Mixed media on board, three panels, overall: 10 x 15' (305 x 457.5 cm), each panel: 10 x 5' (305 x 152.5 cm). Private collection, London. See plate 16

Besides recalling the idyllic gardens of Islamic art, Shaw's *Garden of Earthly Delights* series may relate to the Kashmir of his childhood. "Kashmir," he says, "was named paradise by the Mughal emperor Jehangir, who said 'If there is heaven on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here.'"²⁸ Shaw has also spoken of the "overdose of luxury" that he knew as a child—he came from a wealthy Kashmiri family—but that he gave up for the life of an artist. He warns, however, "My work has nothing to do with what Kashmir stands for because in a sense as a child I had so many influences. My parents are Muslim, my teachers were Hindu scholars and I went to a Christian school, and historically Kashmir was Buddhist."²⁹ Shaw's work cannot be confined to any one geographic location. His sources range wide; he names among them Persian miniatures and Kashmiri shawls; jewellery; from Europe, old master painting and medieval heraldry; from

Japan, Hokusai prints, *byobu* (screens), *urushi* (lacquer ware), and *uchikake* (wedding kimonos); and many hours in natural history museums and libraries.

Having studied at London's Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, Shaw is well versed in modernist art history. In Pollock, for example, he admires the discovery of a medium or technique, and the balance the American artist struck between getting lost in that medium and knowing and controlling what he was doing.³⁰ Shaw too has discovered a medium, a cloisonné technique in which he pours enamel paint onto a board, then draws in it with a porcupine quill. Also like Pollock, he works with an all-over structure in which a dizzying sea of detail produces abstraction. At the same time, he is interested in the tension between abstraction and description—but the narrative must be pursued and sought out. The viewer is the seeker in a game of



11. Raqib Shaw. *The Garden of Earthly Delights III* (detail). 2003

hide-and-seek. By straining identification in this way, the painting discloses not a single story but the impulse for tale-telling itself.

Looking under the Carpet

Many Islamic carpets express the idea of paradise as heavenly garden, to which the Muslim prayer mat is seen as a gate.³¹ **MONA HATOUM's** *Prayer Mat* (1995; plate 18) speaks of no heaven, however, unless it be the painful threshold to heaven that some see in martyrdom or sacrificial self-immolation. From a distance the mat's thick darkness promises a surface as soft as velvet; it is actually made of upward-pointing brass pins. Into this hostile site the artist has inserted a compass, such as Muslims use to orient themselves toward Mecca in their daily prayers.

Since Hatoum herself is a Christian, her choice of subject matter in *Prayer Mat* is unconnected to her faith. Nor does it

relate to her origins: the child of Palestinian exiles, she was born in Beirut, and neither Palestine nor Lebanon is particularly known for the production of carpets. The meaning of the work must then be sought elsewhere. Having gone to England for a visit in 1975, Hatoum was unable to return home as Lebanon fell into a war of ethnicities and religions that would last until 1991. Although her work, with rare exceptions, is without explicit ethnic reference, it is profoundly infused with the experience of exile. When the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish asks "Who am I, without Exile?",³² he defines a condition that is also Hatoum's. The compass in the sculpture may then indicate the search for direction on the part of the exile, of whatever ethnicity or religion, and the pins the painful bed on which he or she must kneel. The prayer mat imagery is Islamic but the content is both personal and universal.³³

On formal grounds too, Hatoum treads contentious turf. As a geometric floor piece in low relief, *Prayer Mat* immediately cites the work of the American sculptor Carl Andre and more generally Minimalism at large, even while its use of ready-made objects (compass and pins) derives from the antithetical tradition of Marcel Duchamp. The result is a hybrid offspring, perhaps with a grudge against the Minimalist parent, who would not have shared Hatoum's regard for either hand labor (the pins are handsewn into the canvas support) or referential, emotional, worldly content. Even so, both the Minimalist and the Duchampian references link Hatoum to contemporary art in Europe and the United States, as opposed to the context of Islam.

Prayer Mat has affinities with a work that in conventional terms may be the most Islamic-looking object in the exhibition, in the sense that it is visually closest to a source in Islamic art: the untitled carpet from 1996–97 by the American artist **MIKE KELLEY** (plate 17). The pattern is based on a Turkish carpet in the collection of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 12), and Kelley had it woven in Iran.³⁴ But that doesn't make it either Turkish or Iranian: the original is already a hybrid of Turkish and Persian influences,³⁵ and Kelley, trying "to make something that wasn't Turkish,"³⁶ produced an object more hybrid still by changing the ground from red to green, a color more pertinent to his own, Irish-American background than to anything in Ottoman carpets.³⁷ He also replaced the motifs in the central medallion with a group of the hex signs—tulip, heart, and bird—traditionally used by the Pennsylvania Dutch people of the northeastern United States to decorate houses and barns. The central, cloverlike shamrock is of course an Irish emblem, indeed a symbol of the Irish nation. Kelley's carpet may wear an oriental mask but it is fully cross-pollinated.

Like Hatoum in *Prayer Mat*, Kelley seems to be criticizing Minimalism in his untitled carpet. In fact the American artists of the 1990s attacked aesthetic proscriptions and rigid, system-based intellectual procedures of all kinds, and Minimalism was among the most visible targets. Kelley's carpet is ornamental, handmade, and hybrid—hybrid to start with and made more so by his interventions. Both he and Hatoum have taken a reference from the Islamic world—an anomaly for both artists—and turned it against a Western aesthetic authority. At a time of escalating global divisions, Kelley's carpet has an added meaning: as a combination of orientalism and Americana, it undermines those who base quick identifications and analyses on a supposedly "Islamic" appearance.

The carpets of **SHIRANA SHAHBAZI** render the rubric "Islamic" even more problematic. Born in Iran, Shahbazi lives in Zurich and travels the world taking photographs that she then transfers into a variety of different mediums including carpets. Subjects she may photograph in Zurich, Harare, or Shanghai



12. Islamic medallion rug, made in Egypt during the Ottoman period. Early 17th century. Wool, 6' 7" x 48" (200.6 x 121.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Joseph V. McMullan

(plate 22) join a global tribe of itinerant signs that migrate among mediums. The young Swiss woman in [*Woman-02-2003*] and [*Farsh-01-2004*] (plates 19 and 20), for instance, appeared first in photographs that bear a family resemblance to advertising images and that Shahbazi passed to Iranian billboard painters whom she flew to Venice for the 2003 Biennale. There the artists converted the images into murals, oversized contemporary Madonnas—a reference clarified by the rendering of a gigantic lily, the Christian symbol of the Annunciation, on the ceiling above them (fig. 13). Incarnated next as carpets, the images have shrunk back down in size, being reduced to the dimensions of small oil paintings. Now, as portraits, still lifes, and landscapes, they invite association with classic genres of Western painting. Although they address the Islamic carpet tradition, they do not function as carpets; the change in scale, and the transfers



13. Shirana Shahbazi. *The Annunciation*. 2003. Installation view, *Delays and Revolutions*, Italian Pavilion, 50th Venice Biennale. See plates 19 and 20

among mediums, affirm their identities as shifting signs, as well as Shahbazi's resistance to rigid identifications and the right she claims of infidelity to any supposedly authentic origin.

Identity in Question

The notion of gender looms large in discussions of Islamic identity, which often focus on the veil worn by many Muslim women. In Western perception, the veil or chador has come to symbolize an asymmetry of power between men and women in the Islamic world. Inside that world, however, the veil confirms no single set of beliefs: *hijab* (the Islamic code of modest dress) may indeed be repressively enforced, but the wearing of the veil may also signify resistance to colonial and later secular powers, may be a relatively neutral matter of custom, may express religious faith, or may assert social status. In short the veil involves a spectrum

of meanings that shift from one geographic, historical, and social context to another.³⁸ It is no surprise that artists react to this array of signification in highly idiosyncratic ways.

Untitled I and II (1996; plates 23 and 24), a photographic installation by the half-Iraqi, half-Irish artist **JANANNE AL-ANI**, conveys this complexity in visual terms. In part, Al-Ani is reacting to the orientalist vision of the idle, lascivious odalisque exemplified in paintings such as Ingres's *Turkish Bath* (1862–63), or in photographs such as the Comtesse de Croix-Mesnil's *Portrait of a Mahometan Woman* (1893; fig. 14).³⁹ She also takes on that vision's mirror image: the fully veiled Islamic woman whom many Westerners consider oppressed. Al-Ani's work addresses, or reacts against, a construct produced in representation by the phenomenon of orientalism.⁴⁰ The artist confirms that her work is "not about an East/West binary but about the construction of that binary through Orientalist art and literature."⁴¹

In *Untitled I and II*, two photographs that in exhibition are installed facing each other, Al-Ani, her mother, and her three sisters perform a process of becoming: from left to right of the



14. Comtesse de Croix-Mesnil. *Portrait of a Mahometan Woman* from *Femmes d'Orient*. 1893. Photograph. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

row in which they sit, each woman is progressively less veiled, so that they range from fully concealed on the far left to bare-headed on the far right. In charting the move from one condition to another, Al-Ani reveals the artifice in the construction of Islamic identity—a demonstration that she strengthens by her decision to show one woman's bare knee, sign of a totally different dress code, in the lower half of each panel. Almost cinematically, a flux is made visible: the ebb and flow of identity. The two photographs are not exact mirror images; the order in which the women sit is reversed from one picture to the other, so that the woman who is completely revealed in one panel is completely veiled in its twin, and vice versa. The result is that Al-Ani's Irish mother disappears in one image into the Islamic role and appears in the other as a middle-aged white woman with cropped hair, an image that, as the artist points out, invites no orientalist fantasies.⁴²

By insinuating herself in the scenario, Al-Ani adds to its meaning: both photographing and being photographed, she plays a double role. The visitor who must walk through the corridor between the two pictures, and be surrounded by gazing women on both sides, is similarly both viewer and viewed. Al-Ani has said, "In my work on the veil, I confront the notion that the veiled subject is passive, oppressed, and voiceless. I try to shift the relationship between the position of the viewer and the viewed, so the veiled person is in an empowered position, seeing without being seen."⁴³ With *Untitled I and II* Al-Ani returns the power of the gaze to the observed. In describing the performance of a gradation of identities for the camera, the work explores the orientalist narrative in photographic history.

Approached through the lens of her Egyptian origin, **GHADA AMER**'s embroideries of nude and near-nude women would certainly be read as subverting the expectation that the images made by a Muslim artist should conform to *hijab*. Just as Amer refuses Arabic calligraphy, she also refuses portrayals that follow the dress code of conservative Islamic culture—but it would be more accurate to say the dress code of virtually any culture, since she has lifted these images from pornographic magazines. Yet the figures in works like *Eight Women in Black and White* (2004; plate 26) are in fact veiled in a way, by embroidery, tangles of thread, the pentimenti of stitching. Part obscured by a casual allover pattern evoking Abstract Expressionism, they only become clear to us through their insistent repetition, a device recalling Minimalism. Moments in modern art that are mostly associated with male artists are reconciled through a medium perceived as the domain of women.

Amer opposes any ideology "denigrating the female body by trying to make it asexual," be the beliefs fundamentalist (of any religious faith) or feminist in persuasion.⁴⁴ Showing two women four times each, in a device that besides its art-historical references evokes the repeat patterns of the decorative arts, *Eight Women* most clearly illustrates the head and flowing hair of one of the figures, and the phallic fingers around the hips of the other. (Amer has said that back in Egypt, "Everything is so hidden that if you have a finger out, it becomes the focus of sexuality.")⁴⁵ Figure by figure, Amer seems to be stitching a model free of the puritanism of any culture.

Some see **SHIRIN NESHAT** as the Islamic artist above all others who can inform the West about the status of women in the Islamic world. Neshat has protested, "By no means do I feel like any kind of an expert or ambassador of [either Islam or the West], but as an Iranian living here, I feel I am invested in this whole dichotomy."⁴⁶ Americans and Europeans have mistaken Neshat's work for documentation of the oppressed condition of women in Islamic societies; her compatriots in Iran, meanwhile, have criticized it as remote from the truth. It should be noted that the scenarios she stages project visions brewed in exile, obsessions and hopes revolving around a homeland turned alien in her absence. Between Neshat's departure from Iran in 1974, for the United States, and her first return visit in 1990, the Islamic republic had become firmly established. She explored the new codes of behavior in the *Women of Allah* series discussed earlier.

In *The Last Word* (2003; plate 38), a photograph related to a film of the same title, Neshat choreographs two actors in a scene from her own autobiography.⁴⁷ We see an interrogation. A power struggle is evident, in which the middle-aged male interrogator draws authority from the pile of archaic manuscripts stacked in front of him, and from the underworld opacity of the space in

which he is conducting his proceeding—a cavernous darkness conjuring both the terror of bureaucratic officialdom and the trauma of the female character facing her accuser. In the film, she responds with a poem by Farrokhzad that ends with the words "I am joined to the sun." It is significant that this woman wears no veil; she could be of any nationality or faith, and the scene could be taking place anywhere courts operate in secrecy. To read the woman's identity as generically Islamic is to fall into the trap of preconceptions.

In 2000, while **MARJANE SATRAPI** was living in exile in Paris, she took up the thorny subject of identity as it is both defined and contested in postrevolutionary Iran. She did so by telling her own story—with a great deal of humor—as a child living under the Islamic regime that had toppled the Pahlavis. The medium was the comic book and its title was *Persepolis*. That city was the capital of the Achaemenid empire, which was centered in what is now Iran from the sixth century until the fourth century B.C.—a high point in the history of pre-Islamic Persia. In calling her series "Persepolis," then, Satrapi invokes a history that extends back in time far beyond 1979, and beyond the Islamic regime with which Iran has come to be identified.

Satrapi's combination of text and image can be seen as a device shared with the illustrated manuscripts of Islamic art, but she acknowledges that her "big revelation" was Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1986), which tells the story of his father's experiences as a European Jew during World War II.⁴⁸ Satrapi's first book, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003), is an account of growing up in a country torn first by the revolution and then by the eight-year war with Iraq; the second book, *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2004), begins with her departure for Austria in 1984, at the age of fifteen, sent there by her parents to attend a Catholic boarding school. The "Kim Wilde" chapter illustrated here (plates 27–35) comes from the first book, originally published in French and so far translated into sixteen languages (but not Persian).⁴⁹ The year is 1983, the revolution is four years old, the artist is thirteen, the war with Iraq is raging, and government-supported "guardians of the revolution" are ubiquitously present, looking into every nook and cranny of public space to promote virtue and prevent vice, including the temptations of behavior perceived as Western. The Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlu (1925–2000) wrote of this period,

They smell your breath
Lest you have said: I love you
They smell your heart:
These are strange times, my dear⁵⁰

The teenage Satrapi's parents become her accomplices, smuggling into the country for her a cool denim jacket, a

Michael Jackson button, and posters of the '80s English pop star Kim Wilde and the metal band Iron Maiden. Wearing the jacket, the button, and her "1983 Nikes," the young Satrapi decides to take a step toward her dream of being a "kid in America" (following a well-known Wilde lyric) by buying some tapes—a selection ranging from "Esteve Vonder" to "Jichael Mackson," all sold clandestinely on the streets, as drugs would be in New York. As she is happily heading home, her denim jacket and "punk" shoes attract the attention of the guardians. Stopped, she is interrogated: "What do I see here? Michael Jackson! That symbol of decadence?" "No," she replies, "it's Malcolm X, the leader of black Muslims in America." She lies for survival. The passage shows the porosity of cultural borders but also speaks poignantly of the ravages of an internal war of cultures, a double set of values resulting in identities only half embraced. Satrapi is just as critical of the narrow, rigid vision of the nuns in her Austrian boarding school. Her description of alienation at home and exile abroad resonates beyond her personal history.

The head cover required of women by the Islamic regime in Iran is by no means universally mandated in the other countries of the region: in Turkey, for instance, where Satrapi's mother shops for goods to smuggle back home, she is seen wearing no veil. The men and women in the Palestinian communities taped by the conceptual artist **EMILY JACIR** in her video *Ramallah/New York* (2004–5; plates 36 and 37) likewise dress in secular modern clothing. Here Jacir, whose work is inextricably linked to her identity as a Palestinian, pairs two video screens, one showing views of Palestinian communities in New York, the other of Ramallah, in the West Bank, the two cities in which she has lived during the past six years. But she offers no obvious clue as to which is which—travel agency, deli, or convenience store, they could all be in either place. A male hairdresser cuts a woman's hair; young people of both sexes mix freely in a restaurant and bar—on both screens. Contrary to popular belief in the United States, the one society seems no less open and contemporary than the other.

Ramallah/New York moves beyond gender issues. The travel agency, a location that returns more often than the others, points to the importance of travel for Palestinians, a widely scattered people. An image of Christ and the Virgin Mary posted in a convenience store reveals that its Palestinian owners are Christian. Jacir's documentary addresses the lives of Palestinians whose relationships, life-styles, and above all their claim to an ordinary identity contradict the stereotypes propagated by the media, whether CNN or Al-Jazeera. Shown as twin cities, Ramallah and New York look virtually indistinguishable.

The veil is not the only cipher of Islamic identity; in *Keffieh* (1993–99; plate 25), **MONA HATOUM** turns to the headscarf

traditionally worn by Arab men—but the pattern of Hatoum's keffieh is embroidered using strands of women's hair, in an interweaving of the two genders in one fabric. Hatoum recognizes "a kind of quiet protest" in the art of embroidery, which, like Reichek and Amer, she specifically associates with women.⁵¹ In *Keffieh*, then, she is subtly giving women visibility, through both the work's medium and its technique. And she is engaging women's voices in a garment that she sees as "a potent symbol of Arab resistance,"⁵² and one that, as "a symbol of struggle, . . . has a definite macho aura around it."⁵³ Along with *Prayer Mat*, *Keffieh* is one of Hatoum's few works with an ethnic reference.

Beside deflecting machismo with a feminine intervention, Hatoum neutralizes another duality, this one visual: the regular, meshlike pattern of the keffieh is both constituted and outgrown by something literally organic, the women's hair that in places overruns the work's edges to spread beyond them in curls and tufts. In making political art, Hatoum does not sacrifice matters of aesthetic form but enlists their oppositional possibilities. That central pattern, while traditional for keffiehs, also recalls wire fencing, directing our attention to issues of land, home, and territory—topics of vital importance to Palestinians. But Hatoum addresses those issues metaphorically and through the intimation of the uncanny, making a familiar object seem strange and uncertain. The late Edward Said once wrote of Hatoum, "No one has put the Palestinian experience in visual terms so austere and yet so playfully, so compellingly and at the same moment so allusively."⁵⁴

The Lebanese artist **WALID RAAD** takes the identity debate in the direction of fiction, pushing truth into sly falsehood, authenticity into fabrication. Raad works in many mediums, including film, text, and performance, but his most frequent accomplice is photography, perhaps just because the photograph has so often been seen as as a neutral, accurate documentary record. Simulating the roles of historian, archivist, and reporter of facts, Raad works repetitively and serially, as many Western photographers have done. Concealing both his artfulness and himself, he hides behind a putative collective, The Atlas Group, supposedly founded to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon, and in particular the civil wars of 1975–91. The Group keeps archives in Beirut, Raad's native city, and New York, where he lives and teaches. It was founded in 1967, 1976, or 1999, depending on what you are reading;⁵⁵ the contamination of fact by error is part of Raad's intention, reflecting an effort to sap the authority of the writers of history. Making frequent appearances in his work, for example, are documents supposedly bequeathed to The Atlas Group's archives by a "Dr. Fakhouri," "the most renowned historian of Lebanon" until his death, in 1993.⁵⁶ Dr. Fakhouri is actually an invention of Raad's.

Among the documents preserved in the archives is the group

of photographs titled *Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves* (2003; plates 39–62). An accompanying statement announces that these images, "the only photographs of Dr. Fakhouri," are "a series of self-portraits he produced during his one and only trip outside of Lebanon, to Paris and Rome in 1958 and 1959." Rumor has it that the actual photographer was Raad's father, who took these self-portrait snaps (which in some cases the artist has scanned or otherwise manipulated) during trips of his own.⁵⁷ Truth dissipates, deceptions spread—but Raad has discussed his work in terms of the "false binary of fiction and non fiction."⁵⁸ Even if the photographs actually show the artist's father on trips to Europe, in some no less convincing way they may also represent the fictive Dr. Fakhouri, a Lebanese historian visiting the grand landmarks of the colonial civilizations. They may also be telling as mnemonic records of the times before 9/11, when a Middle Eastern visitor could pose innocently and unbothered against the monuments of the Western capitals. As straightforward fact the photographs suppress tensions that in other dimensions they may reveal. Behind these innocuous tourist snapshots lurks a charged narrative.

On Spirituality

Grabar has argued that the word "Islamic" does not refer to the art of a particular religion—that "works of art demonstrably made by and for non-Muslims can appropriately be studied as works of Islamic art."⁵⁹ In this polarized moment, the term may seem too tightly tied to the religion of Islam to allow any secular meaning, but artists from the Islamic world are by no means all practicing Muslims or for that matter Muslims at all. The art in *Without Boundary* rarely refers directly to personal religious beliefs, but a sense of spirituality does appear, not necessarily anchored in any one creed.

The work of **KUTLUG ATAMAN** offers little insight into what his faith might be. Whether his subject is a Turkish opera singer, an Englishwoman with a passion for amaryllis plants, or a German moth-collector, his art in general testifies to an interest in unusual people, and so to a desire for pluralism. *Twelve* (2003; fig. 15) should be viewed in this context: it revolves around interviews with six members of the Alevite community, a Shiite subgroup—and in Turkey, a secular country with a Sunni majority, Shiites are already a minority themselves. The Alevites believe in reincarnation and the transmigration of souls. Ataman's six interviewees meld their past and present lives in seamless narratives, and in the context of his work this video installation highlights, in his own words, the idea that "all documentary is a narrative and all narrative is constructed. All narrative, hence all lives, are in the end created as art by the subject."⁶⁰

A more personal approach to religion, or at least to events implicating it, appears in Ataman's *99 Names* (2002; plates 63



15. Kutlug Ataman. *Twelve*. 2003. Six DVDs, six DVD players, six LCD projectors, six directional sound panels, six quartz-crystal high-contrast rigid rear-projector screens, six benches, each DVD c. 45 minutes. Installation view

and 64). This uncharacteristic but compelling work took shape during the period of escalating worldwide extremism after 9/11. "When I made this piece," says Ataman, "I was inspired by the ninety-nine names of Allah, who is described in terms of ninety-nine qualities."⁶¹ These qualities attributed to Allah cover a territory that Ataman compares to the trajectory between the id and the superego. In his five-screen video installation, which echoes the motions of Sufi rituals, a man appears in various stages of meditation. Where the characters in Ataman's documentaries are usually loquacious, talking endlessly as they revise their lives for the camera, the protagonist of *99 Names* is silent, and moves from quiet introspection in the first screen, through stages of increasingly visible agitation, to literal chest-beating in the final screen. An inner force, which Ataman characterizes as sexual, fuels his energy until he loses control.⁶² This hypnotic spectacle offers an intimate experience of an altered state but leaves the door open to interpretation. In some installations of *99 Names*, the screens are installed on different, progressively

higher levels in the space, so that the man appears to take flight. The screens may also be set up so that his pounding movements seem directed against the architecture around him. Is this eruption, we may ask, an ecstatic experience or a baring of the darker side of humanity? Is his violence the logical conclusion of following a certain path or the result of a deviance from it? *99 Names* is Ataman's visceral response to 9/11.

The expression of spirituality need not be linked to any specific faith. As it was written by the thirteenth-century Persian poet and mystic Jalal al-Din Muhammad, also known as Mawlana and as Rumi,

What is to be done O Moslems? For I do not recognize myself
I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr, nor Moslem
I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land, nor of
the sea
I am not of Nature's mint, nor of the circling heavens . . .
I am not of India, nor of China, nor of Bulgaria, nor of Saqsin
I am not of the kingdom of Iraqain, nor of the country of
Khurasan . . .
My place is the Placeless, my trace is the Traceless
'Tis neither body nor soul, for I belong to the soul of the
Beloved
I have put duality away, I have seen that the two worlds are one
One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call⁶³

Houshiary, the Iranian painter **Y.Z. KAMI**, and the American video artist Bill Viola all draw strength and inspiration from Rumi and from other spiritual masters and poets. All proceed with an eye turned inward. This shared interest is striking in the context of this essay, which sets out to deflect the old concepts of "Eastern" and "Western" and to affirm the common humanity confined by this binary structure.

Kami's portraiture may describe outer surfaces but seeks the inner life, what the artist calls "the soul." A face for him is a site of epiphany, in the sense defined by Emmanuel Lévinas, whose classes Kami attended at the Sorbonne, Paris, in the late 1970s.⁶⁴ A Kami portrait, then, is rarely about the sitter; each appearance pertains to something larger—a sense of some overall human self. Kami's paintings create a human kinship, turning solitary individuals into a fraternity, a tribe, the community of humankind.

Kami often conceives his portraits in series, though each one is highly individualized. The works of the early 1990s were inspired by Fayum portraiture, painted in Egypt in the first-to-third centuries A.D. as funerary imagery, and therefore intimating associations of mortality. In the series of the past decade, there are figures that blur, tremble, and visually withdraw. Their retreating presence, however, remains as intense as that of the other,

fully focused portraits. These series encourage meditation on the flow between presence and absence, and on impermanence and change.

For the series to which the two works in *Without Boundary* belong, Kami began by photographing visitors to a meditation center in Vermont. His paintings treat the people he met there with old master grandeur. Speaking in terms of Jungian archetypes, Kami likens the female figure here (2004–5; plate 65) to Sophia, “the woman wisdom of God,” also understood as the mother of God.⁶⁵ Her regal serenity, Kami acknowledges, also recalls the Madonna of Piero della Francesca’s *Misericordia* polyptych (fig. 16).⁶⁶ The companion picture (2004–5; plate 66), an archetype of a different gender and age, is equally simple and serene. The series featuring these two figures, the former fully present and the latter on the threshold to elsewhere, passes from Christian to Eastern modes in its spiritual references, transcending geographic boundaries. The subdued palette and dry, frescolike quality of the surface reinforce the paintings’ aura of sanctity.

Kami’s vocabulary derives not just from old master painting but from the academic realist art of his native Iran. Initially derived from Europe, and embraced in part in reaction against the abstraction of traditional Islamic art, this kind of work, dis-



16. Piero della Francesca. *Polittico della Misericordia* (*Misericordia* polyptych; detail). 1445–62. Oil and tempera on panel, 8' 11 1/2" x 10' 9 15/16" (273 x 330 cm). Museo Civico, Sansepolcro



17. Y.Z. Kami. *Rumi, The Book of Shams e Tabrizi (in Memory of Mahin Tajadod)* (detail). 2005. Soapstone, salt, and lithography ink, dimensions variable

seminated in Iran between the late nineteenth century and World War II, was associated with the West and with modernism.⁶⁷ Kami learned it from a student of a student of Mohammad Ghaffari, or Kamal-ol Molk (1848?–1940), the best-known artist of this genre. Aesthetic lineages of this sort complicate such labels as “contemporary Islamic art,” which obscure the intervening period of “post-Islamic” modernisms.

Besides painting in a figurative style, Kami also makes sculpture, and in a more abstract idiom. In both bodies of work he remains close to the teachings of mystical thinkers and poets. In *Rumi, The Book of Shams e Tabrizi (In Memory of Mahin Tajadod)* (2005; fig. 17), for example, he ink-stamps on soapstone bricks the words of a repetitive, rhythmic poem by Rumi: “Come, come my beloved, my beloved,/Enter, enter into my work, into my work!” Rumi is said to have often composed to music while performing the *sama*, the mystical Sufi dance.⁶⁸ Emulating the whirling movements of the dance, Kami makes each of Rumi’s words a building block in a series of consecutive circles—each circle, repeated, becoming part of a larger constellation. In his abstraction as in his portraiture, Kami approaches the universal by examining the specific.

In any kind of thinking concerned with the grand scheme of things, dualities exist only to be surmounted. The most extreme of all dualities, being and not-being, blend in the work of **SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY**. *White Shadow* (2005; plates 71 and 72), executed with the British architect **PIP HORNE**, is a sculpture that aspires to be absent: between being and nonbeing. Houshiary says, “Its form is in a state of flux.”⁶⁹ It is constructed in such a way that its presence is incomplete—is an absence—

and the artist describes it in terms of “absence of form, absence of mass and presence of shadow.”⁷⁰ The form soars into space only to seem to remove itself and disappear, like a ghost. It becomes apparent through light while simultaneously converting light into shadow. As it dances around its skeletal axis, it too is engaged in the *sama*.

In its formal heritage too, *White Shadow* confirms confluence rather than opposition, fusing influences that range from the spiral minaret of the Great Mosque of al-Mutawakkil in Samarra, Iraq (fig. 18), built in the ninth century A.D., to Constantin Brancusi’s *Endless Column* (1937; fig. 19), in Târgu Jiu, Romania. The work is also the most recent addition to a series of towers created by Houshiary and Horne—the last of them, tellingly, in the vicinity of the absent Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in Manhattan. The contradictions of tradition and modernity, the spiritual and the scientific—or of Islamic and not—evaporate in these structures, which erase such oppositions. In the physical structure of the towers, the artists animate the double helix of human genetics with the dance of a whirling dervish.

Like Kami and Houshiary, the American artist **BILL VIOLA** is well versed in the mystical literature of Europe and Asia. In particular, Viola has said that he considers Rumi a “supreme source of inspiration.”⁷¹

Viola has related the video diptych *Surrender* (2001; plates 67–70) to the teachings of Rumi.⁷² Two vertically stacked screens show images of a man and of a woman, each image placed to suggest a mirror reflection of the other. As if seeking to merge, the two figures bow in each other’s direction. Each prostration brings them closer to each other, until they finally seem to touch—at which point we realize that the images we are watching seem to be reflections in water, which breaks into shimmering ripples that dissolve into abstraction. Discussing this work, Viola quotes Rumi: “He who sees only his own reflection in the water is not a lover.”⁷³ Viola’s search beyond the reflection unites him with Kami, who looks to the surface for something beyond the world of appearances. Houshiary similarly seeks “to capture the substance or the essence of things rather than the thing itself.”⁷⁴ All of these artists observe human life with awe and compassion.

The artists joined in *Without Boundary* are a widespread, disparate group in art’s global mainstream. They come from Algeria, Egypt, India, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, and Turkey, and their works manifest both ruptures and links with their places of origin. But the exhibition reveals what they share: a tie based not in ethnicity or religion, but in their way of revising, subverting, and challenging the aesthetic traditions they deal with, and of bringing preconceived notions of cultural homogeneity to ruin. Their close juxtaposition in *Without Boundary* reveals the idiosyncrasies of their personal approaches, and therefore the fallacy



18. Minaret, Great Mosque of al-Mutawakkil, Samarra, Iraq. 848–52



19. Constantin Brancusi. *Endless Column*. 1937. Cast iron and steel, 98' (29.8 m) high. Public sculpture, Târgu Jiu, Romania

of basing our perceptions of them—as artists, as people—on a single collective difference.

Where calligraphy rubs elbows with the digital and *gopis* with abstraction, where carpets shrink to the size of an academic still life and where the small-scale exactness of the miniature fills an immense all-over surface, we are no longer in territories defined by origin or by Western traditions. Rather, we face erased borders and an expansion of the pool of signs and references, a world of new possibilities. The tales these artists tell have of course sprung from specific situations, but their modes of expression take into account other histories and perceptions. A critique of calligraphy, for instance, may also subvert Abstract Expressionism; exile may be explored through a language that undermines Minimalism; a comic book may host stories from an Islamic revolution; veiled women may unsettle the Western gaze. Such complexities bar the use of “Islamic” as a term of convenience. “European” or “American” are equally inapplicable. The rich texture of expression exceeds the binary opposition.

And this is the reason for bringing these artists together, although they belong to no one culture and have neither initiated nor constitute a movement or school. Pointing to a phenomenon one might call Post-Orientalism, they resist essentialist notions of who they are. Their multifaceted selves speak not collectively but individually. Maintaining the freedom to criticize as well as to celebrate, they belie the mentality of division. They are unconcerned with the binary oppositions of present-day politics, whether cultural or global—including “Islamic or not.”

Notes

- For an introductory description of the "Islamic world" see Melise Ruthven with Azim Nanji, *Historical Atlas of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 16–17. See also Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: at the University Press, 2002), and Reinhard Schulze, *A Modern History of the Islamic World*, trans. Azizeh Azodi (New York: at the University Press, 2002).
- The term "Islamic," which in aesthetic discourse was until recently applied mainly to the traditional arts of the Islamic world, is now being applied to modern and contemporary art. See, for instance, Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997). At Middlebury College, Vermont, a course on "Approaches to Islamic Art" addresses "the issue of contemporary Islamic art." The University of Minnesota offers a course on "Contemporary Islamic Art and Architecture" that deals with Shirin Neshat and Mona Hatoum. The same artists are called "Islamic" in Charles Giuliano, "Shirin Neshat and Mona Hatoum," *Art New England* 23, no. 3 (April–May 2002): 9.
- See Oleg Grabar, *Penser l'art islamique* (Paris: Institut du monde arabe, 1996), p. 25. With Reinhard Schulze, Grabar traces the first discussion of art as "Islamic" to Moriz Carriere, *Die Kunst im Zusammenhang der Culturentwicklung und die Ideale der Menschheit*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1863–73).
- Grabar, personal communication with the author, 2005. See also Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973).
- On calligraphy see Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Leiden: Brill, 1970); Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1984); Yasin Hamid Safadi, *Islamic Calligraphy* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1987); and Nabil F. Safwat with a contribution by Mohamed Zakariya, *The Art of the Pen: Calligraphy of the 14th to 20th Centuries* (London: The Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1996).
- In Iran, for instance, the stylistic flexibility of calligraphy allowed it to accommodate itself to the indigenous modernist art that began to thrive in the 1960s. See Fereshteh Daftari, "Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective," in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, eds. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 39–87. On calligraphy in the Arab world see Silvia Naef, "Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab World and Its Relation to the Artistic Past," *RES* 43 (Spring 2003): 164–74. In "The Post Modern Turn in Islamic Calligraphy," a paper delivered as part of a panel on "Contemporary Art and Islam" at the annual conference of the College Art Association in 2004, Maryam Ekhtiar argued that abstraction did not enter calligraphy as the result of an encounter with Western modernism but that it was inherent in traditional forms of calligraphy written not "to be read, but to be seen and admired."
- Shirazeh Houshiary, e-mail to the author, July 17, 2005.
- Houshiary, e-mail to the author, September 18, 2005.
- Rachid Koraichi, conversation with the author, November 2005.
- Koraichi, conversations with the author, June 2004 and March 2005.
- Neshat, e-mail to the author, August 22, 2005. In this context one notes the work of the Armenian-Iranian artist Sonia Balassanian, who has inscribed self-portraits, in which she wears a veil, with words in Roman letters such as "stoning" and "rape," as well as with words crossed out altogether. These works may also include found documents in Arabic script. See *Portraits by Sonia Balassanian* (New York: S. Balassanian, 1983).
- Neshat, conversation with the author, 2005.
- Ghada Amer, conversation with the author, 2005.
- See Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, Boston, and Melbourne: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).
- Olu Oguibe, "Love and Desire: The Art of Ghada Amer," *Third Text* 55 (Summer 2001): 72.
- Amer, quoted in Teresa Millet, "A Conversation with Ghada Amer," in *Ghada Amer* (Valencia: IVAM, 2004), p. 32.
- See Laura Auricchio, "Works in Translation: Ghada Amer's Hybrid Pleasures," *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 27–30.
- Elaine Reichek, *When This You See . . . Elaine Reichek* (New York: George Braziller, 2000), entry for plate 14, n.p.
- Amer, quoted in Millet, "A Conversation with Ghada Amer," p. 30.
- Houshiary, quoted in Ann Barclay Morgan, "From Form to Formlessness: A Conversation with Shirazeh Houshiary," *Sculpture* 19, no. 6 (July–August 2000): 26–27.
- Shahzia Sikander, in "Nemesis: A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander by Ian Berry," in Berry and Jessica Hough, *Shahzia Sikander: Nemesis* (Saratoga Springs: The Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, and Ridgefield, Conn.: The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2005), pp. 5, 7.
- See Daftari, "Beyond Islamic Roots—Beyond Modernism," *RES* 43 (Spring 2003): 183, note 18.
- Sikander, conversation with the author, 2005.
- Sikander, e-mail to the author, August 27, 2005.
- Sikander, conversation with the author, 2005.
- Eugenie Tsai, "Reviews: Shahzia Sikander," *Time Out* no. 497 (April 7–13, 2005): 79.
- Raqib Shaw's image of human-crustacean sexual relations recalls a genre of Japanese prints; see, for example, Matthi Forrer, *Hokusai* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), p. 217, fig. 236. But Shaw's models were empirical: he writes, "The image of the human form in the painting is the silhouette of my body and the shrimp is from a drawing that I made of a preserved specimen at the Natural History Museum." E-mail to the author, August 17, 2005.
- Shaw, e-mail to the author, March 18, 2004.
- Shaw, in "Raqib Shaw in Conversation with Richard Dryer," *Wasafiri* 42 (Summer 2004): 74.
- Shaw, conversation with the author, 2005.
- See Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art* (Hanover, N.H.: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 1991), and Elizabeth B. Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden: In Persia and Mughal India* (New York: George Braziller, 1979).
- Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, trans. and ed. Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché with Sinan Antoon and Amira El-Zein (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 113.
- In a paper prepared for the panel "Contemporary Art and Islam," held at the College Art Association's annual conference in February 2004, Gannit Ankori described Hatoum's *Prayer Mat* as "evoking Islamic culture as well as the theme of exile," and said that it "addresses the exile's loss of direction when away from home."
- Mike Kelley found the carpet in a reproduction, in the June 1970 *Bulletin* of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. A collage that he made of this illustration and the hex-sign images was sent to Iran for the carpet-makers to copy. Conversation with the author, November 2005.
- I would like to thank Grabar and Massoumeh Farhad for their expertise and insight on the subject of the Met's carpet.
- Kelley, conversation with the author, March 31, 2005.
- Ibid.
- See David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros, eds., *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, and London: in IVA, 2003).
- Jananne Al-Ani used this photograph as an illustration in her essay in *ibid.*, p. 95. She was a co-curator of the exhibition that the book accompanied.
- See Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 393.
- The founding text here is of course Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).
- Al-Ani, in "Richard Hylton Interviews Jananne Al-Ani," in *Jananne Al-Ani*, exh. cat. (London: Film and Video Umbrella, 2005), n.p.
- Al-Ani, conversation with the author, March 2005.
- Al-Ani, quoted in "Jananne Al-Ani," in Sharon Kivland and Lesley Sanderson, eds., *Transmissions: Speaking & Listening* (Sheffield: Site Gallery, Sheffield Hallam University, 2004), 3:155.
- Amer, quoted in Valerie Cassel, "Unscripted Desire: Excerpts from Conversations with Ghada Amer," in *Ghada Amer: Reading Between the Threads* (Hovikodden: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 2001), p. 45.
- Amer, quoted in Auricchio, "Works in Translation," p. 30.
- Neshat, quoted in Babak Ebrahimian, "Passage to Iran: Shirin Neshat Interviewed by Babak Ebrahimian," *PAJ*, September 2002, p. 51.
- See "In Movement: A Conversation between Shoja Azari and Shirin Neshat," in *Shirin Neshat: 2002–2005* (Milan: Charta, 2005), p. 11.
- Marjane Satrapi, quoted in Steven Heller, "Marjane Satrapi: A Graphic Memoir," *Eye* 13, no. 50 (Winter 2003): 76. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was published by Pantheon, New York, in two volumes, in 1986 and 1992.
- In the United States, both volumes were published by Pantheon, in 2003 and 2004 respectively.
- Ahmad Shamlu, "In This Blind Alley," in Nahid Mozaffari and Ahmad Karimi Hakkak, eds., *Strange Times, My Dear: The Pen Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2005), p. 372.
- Hatoum, in *Mona Hatoum: Images from Elsewhere. Week 36*, exh. brochure (London: fig-1, 2000), n.p.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Edward Said, *Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (London: Tate Gallery, 2000), p. 17.
- See Alan Gilbert, "Walid Raad," *Bomb* no. 81 (Fall 2002): 40.
- See The Atlas Group and Walid Raad, *The Truth Will Be Known When the Last Witness Is Dead* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Noisy-le-Sec: La Galerie, and Aubervilliers: Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, 2004), p. [9].
- In conversation with the author in 2005, Raad would not confirm this rumor.
- Raad, quoted in Wolf Jahn, "Atlas Group/Walid Raad," *Artforum* 42, no. 10 (Summer 2004): 261.
- Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, p. 1.
- Kutlug Ataman, quoted in Carolyn Kerr, "Ataman," in *Turner Prize 2004*, exh. brochure (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), n.p.
- Ataman, e-mail to the author, February 28, 2005.
- Ataman, conversation with the author, 2005.
- Rumi, quoted in Afzal Iqbal, *The Life and Thought of Mohammad Jala-ud-Din Rumi* (Lahore: Bazm-I-Iqbal, [1955]) pp. 117–18.
- In conversation with the author in 2005, Y.Z. Kami referred to Emmanuel Lévinas's *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*, 1971 (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, Livre de Poche, 1996).
- See Carl Jung, *Jung on Alchemy*, ed. Nathan Schwartz-Salant (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 148. Kami guided the author to this reference.
- Kami, conversation with the author, early 2005.
- See Daftari, "Another Modernism," pp. 41–44.
- Schimmel, *Rumi's World: The Life and Work of the Great Sufi Poet* (Boston and London: Shambala, 2001), p. 196. On Sufism and dance see pp. 195–204.
- Houshiary, e-mail to the author, July 2005.
- Ibid.
- Bill Viola, in "Conversation: Lewis Hyde and Bill Viola," in Lewis Hyde, Kira Perov, David A. Ross, and Viola, *Bill Viola: A Twenty-Five-Year Survey*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1997), p. 144.
- See "A Conversation: Hans Belting and Bill Viola," in John Walsh, ed., *Bill Viola: The Passions*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003), p. 207.
- Ibid.
- Houshiary, quoted in Morgan, "From Form to Formlessness," p. 25.

Jananne Al-Ani

Ghada Amer

Kutlug Ataman

Mona Hatoum

Pip Horne

Shirazeh Houshiary

Emily Jacir

Y.Z. Kami

Mike Kelley

Rachid Koraïchi

Shirin Neshat

At a time when the Islamic world is the subject of extraordinary interest in the West, *Without Boundary* explores the work of a number of artists who come from that world but live elsewhere, in cities ranging from Paris to New York to Buenos Aires. How do these artists address the cultural legacy of Islam, and is their work connected by any common thread? Fereshteh Daftari, organizer of the MoMA exhibition that this book accompanies, proposes a pause in the rush to quick conclusions. *Without Boundary* also contains an essay by Homi Bhabha, the preeminent theorist and scholar of the postcolonial condition, and a prose piece by the Turkish writer and novelist Orhan Pamuk, author of *My Name Is Red* and *Snow*.

The Atlas Group/Walid Raad

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