

## REPORT

### “Reverberating Echoes: Contemporary Art Inspired by Traditional Islamic Art”

Graduate Theological Union

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From January 31 through May 26, 2017, the Doug Adams Gallery, belonging to the Center for the Arts & Religion (CARE) at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA (Figure 1), hosted the exhibition “Reverberating Echoes: Contemporary Art Inspired by Traditional Islamic Art.” This exhibition was part of the broader mission of CARE to explore the relationship between the arts and religious traditions. It examines the influence of traditional Islamic visual culture on contemporary art practice.



**Figure 1:** Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. [Photo: C. H. Séquin].

The curator of this show was **Carol Bier**, a historian of Islamic Art. She is a Visiting Scholar with the Center for Islamic Studies at the Graduate Theological Union; she is also a Research Associate with The Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., where she served as Curator for the Eastern Hemisphere Collections from 1984-2001. For this event, she put together an outstanding exhibition catalog with beautiful, full-page pictures of all the displayed art works [1]. This catalog is invaluable for acquiring a deeper understanding of the different art pieces and was a tremendous help in the preparation of this report. This impressive book has been dedicated to the memory of Reza Sarhangi (1952-2016), the founder of the annual Bridges conference, which explores the connections between mathematics and art, music, architecture, education, and many other cultural domains.

Carol Bier selected seven artists from different regions of the United States with various interests, backgrounds, and training. These artists employ new technologies as well as traditional media, combining shapes, patterns, and light, to create wonderful, timeless artwork. They all draw upon a shared Islamic visual heritage of tiling patterns, architectural forms, calligraphy, and floral ornament, and thus many of their works exhibit a strong geometrical component. This is what fascinates me about this exhibition. I am not a scholar of Islamic art, but I have been in love with geometry since high school. Thus, when reading this report, consider that I am seeing these works of art through the eye of a computer scientist devoted to “artistic geometry.” For a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical meaning of these works, please consult Carol Bier’s informative exhibition catalog [1].

As I entered the exhibition room, my attention was immediately drawn to a display that I would not associate with traditional Islamic art: a hand-painted silk gown on a dressmaker’s form connected with threads to papers on the wall (Figure 2).



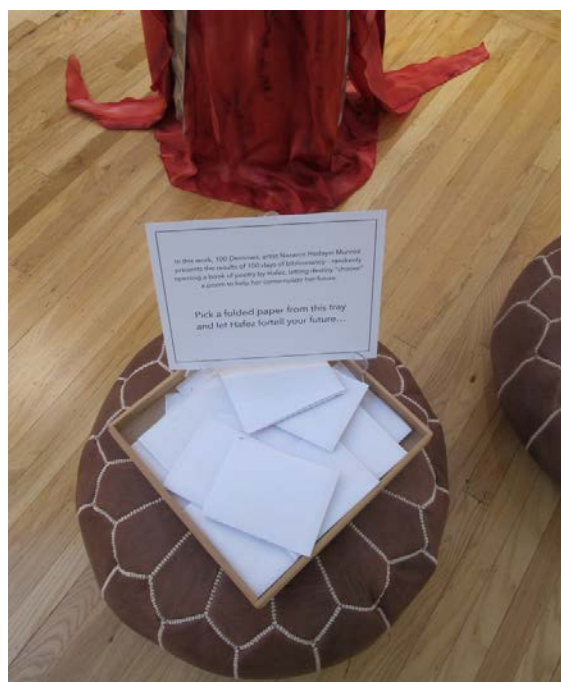
**Figure 2:** One corner of the exhibition room. [Photo: C. H. Séquin].

This piece was created by **Nazanin Hedayat Munroe** [3], who lives in New York, but is currently completing her doctoral studies of Persian art history at the University of Bern in Switzerland. She has served as Artist-in-Residence at the M.H. de Young Museum in San Francisco and also as an educator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Her conceptual art is rich with literary allusions to her ancestral Persian culture. The themes are often drawn from the poetry of Nizami (d. 1209) and Hafez (d. 1389). Her hand-painted silk garment prominently displays “sarnevesht” (“destiny” in Farsi) and is linked with 100 red threads to as many poems by Hafez, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet (Figure 3).

At the foot of the dressmaker’s form is a basket containing folded papers (Figure 4), and visitors are invited to pick one of them at random. Each paper contains a Persian poem, its translation, and an interpretation in simpler language, suggesting what this may mean for the visitor’s destiny. Selecting random entries from a book is an ancient Iranian way of foretelling the future.



**Figure 3:** *100 Destinies* by Nazanin Hedeyat Munroe (2015). Textile and mixed media installation: hand-painted silk gown, dressmaker's form, thread, map pins, and poems of Hafez on cardstock; 96" tall. [Courtesy of N. H. Munroe and the Center for the Arts & Religion, Graduate Theological Union].

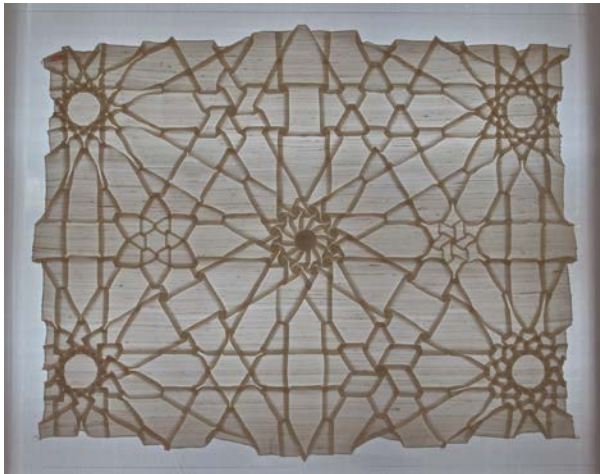


**Figure 4:** At the foot of Munroe's dressmaker's form is a basket with poems that can serve as fortune-tellers when picked at random. [Photo: C. H. Séquin].

The 35 art pieces exhibited in this room span an amazing range of depicted motifs: architectural elements, star patterns, floral patterns, calligraphy, fractals, figurative depictions, and light effects. They encompass an equally impressive range of presentation techniques: manual drawing and painting, folding, weaving, digital printing on various materials, ceramics, laser-cut pieces, 3D-prints, and light projection.

My most direct connection is with the works of **Chris Palmer** [4]. He also works on the Berkeley campus, where he is the manager of the Digital Fabrication Lab in the College of Environmental Design. I first met him in a workshop session at the 1997 Art and Mathematics Conference in Albany, NY, organized by Nat Friedman. Palmer demonstrated various techniques of paper folding and also showed some of his *Shadowfolds*. This was the beginning of my involvement with the annual Math-Art conferences. Subsequently, we met at a few Bridges conferences, most notably the one held in Granada, Spain, in 2003. Ten years earlier, this place was almost a second home for Chris Palmer, when he spent several months living next to the Alhambra, exploring its mosaics and geometrical wonders.

In the current exhibit, he shows some of his folded and pleated silk panels. Figure 5 is a pattern based on a 12-pointed star, a traditional Islamic design. It has been folded from a single piece of silk fabric, about one square meter in size. The dark bands result from areas where light has to pass through three layers of silk; the darker spots are formed where even more layers of silk overlap. The resulting geometric pattern is one of the key attractors that traditional Islamic art has for me -- but I do not have the skills to do such complicated folds.



**Figure 5:** *Shadowfold Zillij Dodecagrams* by Chris Palmer (2010). Textile: folded and pleated silk, uncut and undyed; 38" × 30". [Photo: C. H. Séquin].

**Chris Palmer** also displays a muqarnas model made from laser-cut plywood components (Figure 6). Muqarnas are three-dimensional architectural elements that originated in early Islamic Iraq. They serve as transition elements between wall corners, columns, and the vaults or cupolas above them. Chris developed an ingenious “finger panel” system that allows tiles to interlock and stay in place without the use of adhesives or any kinds of fasteners. Muqarnas are a common feature in many palaces and temples and remain a key element in Islamic architecture.



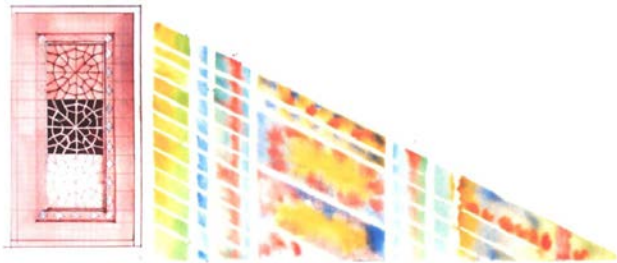
**Figure 6:** *Muqarnas* by Chris Palmer (1998). Wood: birch plywood, laser-cut; 39" × 39" × 39". [Photo: C. H. Séquin].

**Phil Webster** [8] lives in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California and works as an information technology consultant. As an artist, he works with 3D printing, laser cutting, and dye sublimation processes that fuse color to diverse substrates. He has taken traditional Islamic star and rosette patterns and enhanced them with computer programs that subdivide the basic geometry into similar, smaller parts, in a fractal-like manner. He may then laser-cut or 3D-print such patterns into screens. In Figure 7 he has arranged twenty such screens around the faces of an icosahedral frame. LED lights inside this polyhedron then project these patterns to the surroundings. I am myself an avid user of 3D printers, and this piece inspires me to design and construct my own polyhedral LED lamp.



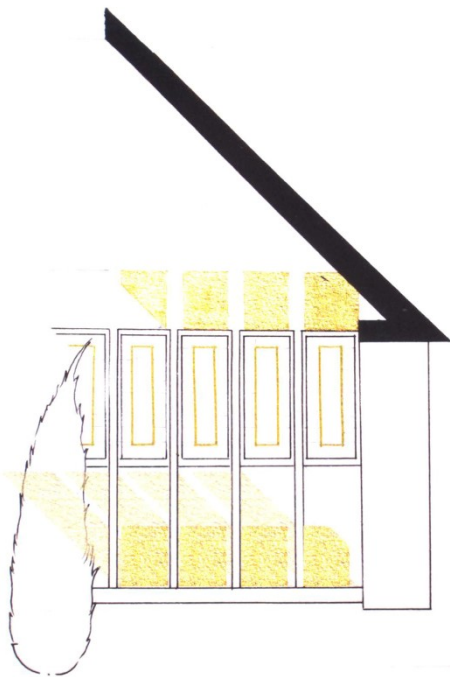
**Figure 7:** *Screened Icosahedral Lamp* by Phil Webster (2013). 3D-printed plaster composite with LED light; 7" × 7" × 7". [Photo: C. H. Séquin].

**Hooman Koliji** [2] is also interested in how physical structure affects the flow of light. As an architect, who teaches at the University of Maryland and who also leads the Initiative in Ecological Design Thinking, he is primarily concerned with the flow of light through windows. One of his paintings (Figure 8) shows artistically how sunlight may be transformed as it streams through a stained-glass window and then hits a wall. This painting reminds me of my fascination with a paneled glass door in the house of my grand parents that produced little colored rainbows on the floor when the sun was in the right place.



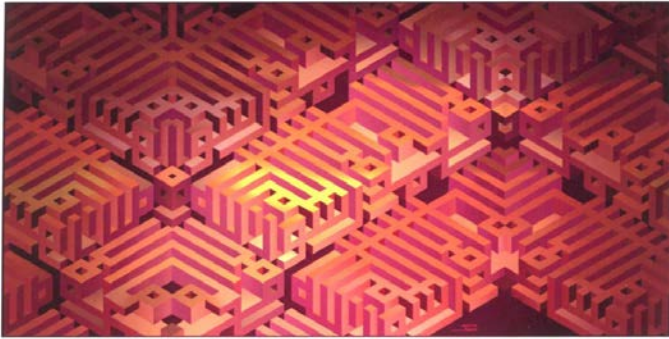
**Figure 8:** *Anamorphic Light* by Hooman Koliji (2010). Work on paper: manual and digital drawing; 15" × 11". [Courtesy of H. Koliji and the Center for the Arts & Religion, Graduate Theological Union]

In another dream-like drawing (Figure 9) Koliji studies light entering a building in an architectural study. His drawing exists in an imagined realm, exploring what may be possible, – in contrast to the more concrete and quantitative drawings used in Western architecture. A cypress tree outside the building is shown just as a simple outline.



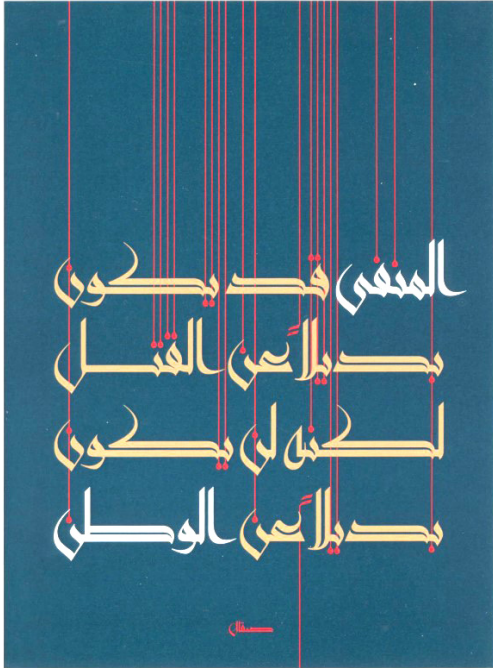
**Figure 9:** *Room, Orosi, Light* by Hooman Koliji (2010). Work on paper: drawing (pencil and ink); 9" × 12". [Courtesy of H. Koliji and the Center for the Arts & Religion, Graduate Theological Union]

**Mamoun Sakkal** [6], who obtained his architectural training in Syria, is a graphic designer based in Bothell, WA, and an Arabic typography specialist for Microsoft. He has designed several proportional calligraphic styles for various Arabic languages. In his digital print (Figure 10) he assembles planar elements with angles of 60 and 120 degrees to generate a display that seems to be an isometric projection of some cubistic, axis-aligned geometry. The surfaces of this illusionary 3D object form Arabic letters that spell out the statement “There is no God but God; Muhammed is His Messenger.” In this way, traditional calligraphic messages are combined with modern digital computer graphics techniques. This design also evokes an association with 3D burr puzzles; it makes me wonder whether it would be possible to design such a puzzle, where most puzzle pieces are stylized versions of the characters of the Western alphabet.



**Figure 10:** *Steps and Shadows wide 2* by Mamoun Sakkal (2014). Archival digital print on canvas; 72” x 36”. [Courtesy of M. Sakkal and the Center for the Arts & Religion, Graduate Theological Union]

In Figure 11 Mamoun Sakkal uses an excerpt from a text by Nairouz Malik, a Syrian writer; it translates: “Exile (*manfa*, shown in white) may substitute for killing, but it will not substitute for homeland (*watan*, shown in white).” The modern angular script is named Bustan after a Syrian calligrapher; it is suitable for Arabic, Persian, and Urdu.



**Figure 11:** *Manfa Watan / Exile Homeland* by Mamoun Sakkal (2014). Archival digital print on canvas; 36” × 48”. [Courtesy of M. Sakkal and the Center for the Arts & Religion, Graduate Theological Union].

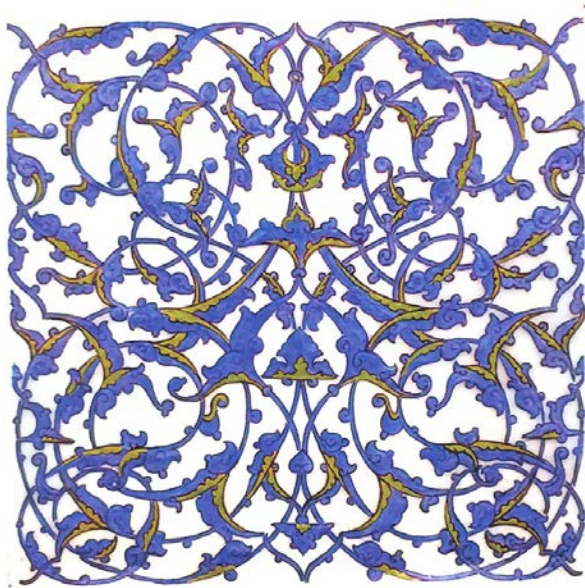
In Figure 12 Arabic calligraphy is cast into the shape of a bird. It reads “ Salam Houb,” meaning “Peace (and) Love,” – playfully reversed in the title of the work. It demonstrates how Arabic script naturally lends itself to be turned into free-flowing artistic shapes. This is my favorite piece of this show. When I visit art exhibitions with members of my family, we often play a game: Find one piece that you would like to have in your living room or your immediate daily surroundings for at least a year. I would gladly make such a commitment to this calligraphic work of art.



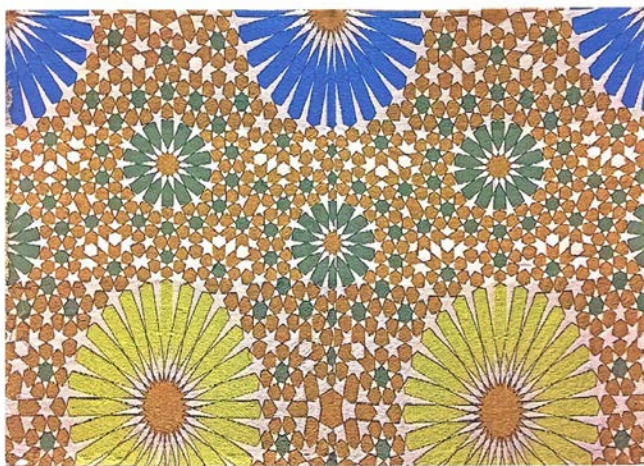
**Figure 12** *Salam Houb / Love Peace* by Mamoun Sakkal (2012). Archival digital print on canvas; 40” × 29”. [Courtesy of M. Sakkal and the Center for the Arts & Religion, Graduate Theological Union].



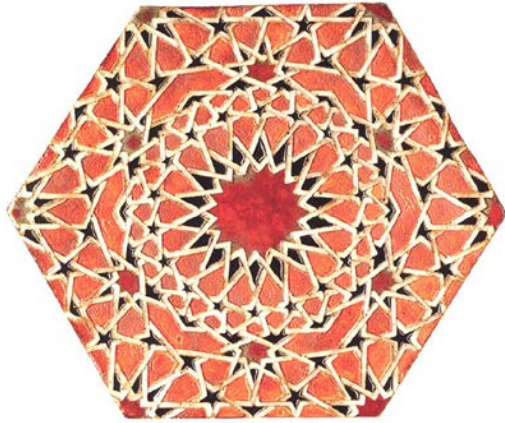
**Nathan Voirol** [NV] lives and works in New York. His practice incorporates both traditional methods, such as hand sketching and drawing on multiple layers of tracing paper, as well as computer-aided design. The results may be captured on paper (Figure 13), or in the form of a weaving on a computer-controlled Jacquard loom that manipulates the interlacing of the warp and weft yarns (Figure 14), or occasionally even in the form of a ceramic tile (Figure 15). In most cases, his designs show intricate patterns of high symmetry, often derived from traditional Islamic star patterns. The more free-form ornamental designs, reminiscent of natural forms depicted in an abstract geometrical manner, are often referred to as *Arabesque* patterns; a good example is shown in Figure 13.



**Figure 13:** *Arabesque Design* by Nathan Voirol (2016). Work on paper: drawing (ink and metallic marker); 9" × 9". [Courtesy of N. Voirol and the Center for the Arts & Religion, Graduate Theological Union].



**Figure 14:** *Star Pattern 7-fold Symmetry* by Nathan Voirol (2010). Jaquard-woven textile: cotton and viscose; 31" × 23". [Courtesy of N. Voirol and the Center for the Arts & Religion, Graduate Theological Union].



**Figure 15:** *Ceramic Tile* by Nathan Voirol (2007). Clay: molded, glazed, and fired; 15” diameter. [Courtesy of N. Voirol and the Center for the Arts & Religion, Graduate Theological Union].

I conclude my report on this exhibition with another piece that I would not immediately associate with traditional Islamic art (Figure 16). This painting / collage seems like a deliberate break with Islamic tradition, – not because it depicts human faces; human figures have appeared in books, on walls, and in other media, such as tiles or textiles. But, unlike all the other artwork in this exhibit, this piece seems to make a political statement.

It was created by **Manzar Rassouli** [5], who lives in Maryland and has been a consultant for the Baltimore mayor’s office of Art and Culture. Her permanent collection is housed in the Watermark Gallery in Baltimore’s Inner Harbour. Some of her work reflects on the Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the devastating effects it had on the women in her land of birth. Her art is a means of therapy to deal with the loss of her homeland. In Figure 16 she uses an expressive style influenced by Western art. She counterbalances dark tones and complex textures, produced with a collage from several different materials, with a bright bird in flight, to depict hopefulness within the uncertainties of our age.



