Echoes and Identity
What is contemporary ‘Islamic’ art?

9 - 27 March 2017
45 Charles St, Peter Crawley Building
Trinity Grammar School, Kew, Melbourne

An exhibition of digital work curated by Dr Sam Bowker of Charles Sturt University
Detail from The Third Script (2016) by M. Javad Khajavi
Artists and Artworks

All artworks have been displayed with the written permission of their authors.

Azza Al Ghardaqa - *Haroof* (2014)

Mohammad Javad Khajavi - *The Third Script* (2016)


We Are Pi - *The Power of X* (2012)

Brooke Silcox, Mat de Koning and Abdul Abdullah - 'The Bad Guy' (*ABC Interview*) (2014)

Edris Alsami - *Adhan* (2014)

Introduction

*Echoes and Identity* started in 2016, John Waller asked me to curate an exhibition of "contemporary Islamic art". This is not as simple as it sounds.

'Islamic' art is a vast field. It can include objects, artworks and architecture from the seventh century to the present day, from all around the world. It is challenging, spectacular and vigorously debated by artists and art historians.

This word means many things to many people, because the phrase ‘Islamic art’ was invented by curators in the late 19th century to group together very different things under one label. We don't think of Michelangelo's *David* or Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* as ‘Christian art’, so why should we apply that term to 'Islamic' art?

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York no longer dedicates a gallery to 'Islamic Art'. They now call it ‘The Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia.’ This reflects the reality that the majority of art once called ‘Islamic’ is actually not about Islam. Most ‘Islamic’ art is secular.

Today, few artists describe their work as 'Islamic'. There are many groups within Islam, many regional differences, many languages, and many ways of making art.

The artworks in this exhibition come from Spain with reference to Iran, Amsterdam with reference to Doha (Qatar), Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, and Australia. They were made by PhD candidates and Honours students, by professional artists, choreographers and animators, as well as Muslim film makers. All seek to show you things that you have never been seen before, and all have been shaped by the history of 'Islamic' art and design.

This exhibition is about building on global heritage to make new and better art for our own time. When we talk about 'Islamic' art, we are not only talking about old mosques, calligraphy, geometric designs and highly intricate ornamentation. It includes a vast realm of creative achievements whose echoes continue to be seen in new work today, and whose identity remains contested.

This digital exhibition suggests ways in which 'Islamic' art might yet be re-imagined. It is a matter of echoes and identity.

**Dr Sam Bowker**
Lecturer in Art History & Visual Culture, Charles Sturt University
Guest Curator for *Echoes and Identity* at Trinity Grammar School, March 2017.
On Calligraphy

Of all art forms associated with 'Islamic' art, calligraphy is arguably the most important.

Arabic is a particularly versatile language for calligraphic purposes, containing letters that flow continuously and change shape depending on their position in each word. Items associated with 'Islamic' art often feature inscriptions (epigrams) in what may appear to be Arabic script, though this script can be borrowed to write in Turkish, Iranian, or Central and South-East Asian languages. These are often blessings or statements about the function, or owner, of the object itself.

Calligraphy is important because it represents the intersection of communication, physical skill and aesthetic accomplishment. It's also associated with the basis of Islam, the Qur'an (which means the Recitation) as a written document which Muslims believe are the divine words of God (Allah).

Generations of artists have sought to create increasingly beautiful, clear, challenging or innovative forms of calligraphy for all manner of purposes. It can be wrapped around buildings, woven and worn as textiles, and written by hand as almost-microscopic protective amulets or impressive books so huge they require four people to lift. Artists have also experimented with meaningless calligraphy – scrawls and repetitions that cannot be read by anyone, or shapes chosen for their form instead of their sound, or their sounds rather than the words they create. Calligraphy has endless potential.

As a recognition of the importance of calligraphy in the history of Islamic art, two artworks in *Echoes and Identity* are calligraphic. Both are written in Arabic, although their meaning is almost impossible to read. Both artists are challenging the conventions of calligraphy to ask questions about this art form, and suggest the potential of digital design to create new calligraphic inventions.

Illustration

eL Seed, a detail of *Perception* (2016), in the Zebbaleen neighbourhood of Cairo. *Perception* is an exceptional case study in contemporary Arabic calligraphy and community-based installation. Research it online to learn more about the work of eL Seed.
Azza al Ghardaqa - *Haroof* (2014)

*Haroof* is the Arabic word for the letters of the alphabet. It’s also the basis of the term *Haruffiya*, which was a movement in 20th century art where calligraphers wrote messages that had no discernible meaning. Instead they focussed on breaking the ‘rules’ of calligraphers from the past to create radical new artworks.

Born in Dubai, Azza al Ghardaqa now works as a graphic designer in Abu Dhabi. When she was an Honours student in the University of Canberra, she made this digital projection as an experimental form of precise yet fluid calligraphy. She wanted to achieve things with digital calligraphy that were impossible on paper, such as dynamic movement, three-dimensional layering, and the representation of time in motion.

Each shape is a combination of Arabic letters, stacked rather than joined from right to left. Each stack is actually the name of a flower or plant, emerging as a petal-like symmetrical composition. The combination of whirling ‘flowers’ can be accumulated as a carpet-like design, a form of knowledge associated with women’s oral histories, passed down with subtle changes from one generation to another. Given that many carpets evoke gardens, the use of flowers to create these whirling words is apt.

The sequence is also supposed to suggest the infinite, an ongoing theme in ‘Islamic’ art, through the limitless diversity and continuity of potential forms drawn from real and imaginary words.

- What does this artwork remind you of?
- Could it be written in another language? Which words would you bring together?
Mohammad Javad Khajavi - *The Third Script* (2016)

One of the most important aspects of ‘Islamic’ arts is the heritage of mysticism and mystery. As noted by the artist, *The Third Script* refers to the work of Shams of Tabriz, who was the spiritual instructor of Rumi, the very highly regarded 13th-century Persian poet. In his *Discourses*, Shams wrote:

“A calligrapher wrote three scripts
One he could read but no one else
Another he could read and others too
The third neither he nor anyone else could read.
I am that third script.”

M. Javad Khajavi created this animation as part of his PhD in Animation at the School of Art and Design in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research asked many questions - what might calligraphy be if it is valued by the immediate gesture rather than the lasting image? How might sound and shape visually interact in new ways? What could time-based calligraphy resemble? The open-ended nature of these questions evokes Sufism, but in this animation we see speculative answers, raising new questions for future artworks to solve.

The meaning of these words are challenging to determine, even for those who read Arabic. There is a form of Arabic calligraphy called *Siyah Mashq* in which a single letter is written and repeated until the page becomes black with ink. These were practice sheets for apprentices, but became valued by collectors as evidence of meditation and determination.

Khajavi created this animation through a combination of hand-drawn calligraphy in pastel and pencil, combined with photography and frame-by-frame visualisation. The music was written by Siavash Kamkar, and developed in collaboration with Ross Adrian Williams.

More information is available here: [http://www.thethirdscript.com/](http://www.thethirdscript.com/)

- What comes to mind as you watch and listen to this artwork?
- Of all the artworks in this exhibition, this is the only one with ambient sound. Why do you think this sound was selected to fill the room when all the others have headphones?

When we think of ‘Islamic’ art, architecture is one of our first points of reference. The design of mosques, madrasas, palaces, homes, gardens, tombs, mausoleums, markets and medinas gives visual identity to communities. Architecture changes around the world and throughout history.

Cristobal Villa’s 3D animation imagines a Persian shrine – the tomb of a saint or respected person – that does not actually exist. This building is combined from hundreds of details collected through the history of ‘Islamic’ architecture, resulting in a space that is reverential, serene, and evocative of sacred spaces.

It emerges from the principles of geometric design, unfolds into three dimensions as *muqarnas* (quarter-arches unique to Islamic architecture), and becomes a fully realised space complete with intricate arabesques, calligraphy, elegant stone work, and the flow of clean water.

- Have a look at examples of Islamic architecture. What features can you see that also appear in those buildings?
- What components would you collect to create an ideal building?
- Although this place is imaginary, the title is not. What is Isfahan?
‘Islamic’ art is known for the avoidance of the human figure. In reality, this is a myth. There is an abundance of figuration in ‘Islamic’ art, especially for objects and portraits intended for use outside mosques. ‘Islamic’ art is also known for refined approaches to geometric design informed by mathematical principles.

This video combines these popular perceptions to create a dynamic “human arabesque” of choreographed dancers, moving in a mesmerising kaleidoscope.

This process was filmed with no computer intervention. A camera was aimed down a column of three mirrors, and the dancers performed by lying on a flat stage that rolled between a red square, a black square, and white square.

A video revealing the design process can be seen here: http://blog.ted.com/video-the-making-of-the-power-of-x/

We are Pi is an advertising company based in Amsterdam. They created The Power of X to open the TedX conference in Doha, Qatar, in 2012

You can see it online here: https://vimeo.com/40401367

- When you first saw this, how did you think it was made?
- What words would you use to describe this video?
- Can you find artworks that share the shapes and patterns created in this video? (Look for inlaid wood parquetry from Syria or Egypt and zillige tilework from Morocco)
Islamic Art in Australia

As of 2016, less than 2% of Australians are Muslim. But Australia has a long history of interactions with Islam. Makkassan Muslim traders met with Indigenous Australians in Northern Australia as early as 1720, and the Afghan Cameleers left an important 19th-century legacy in regional and remote Australia.

Despite these cultural exchanges, historic forms of 'Islamic' art are rarely seen here. The only Australian public gallery that regularly displays 'Islamic' art is the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide. New artworks by Muslim Australians are featured in the Islamic Museum of Australia in Thornbury, Melbourne, but this collection is also unique. With the exception of Charles Sturt University, few Australian universities currently teach subjects dedicated to 'Islamic' art.

Australians have made our own contributions to this international field. An Australian fashion designer, Aheda Zanetti, was the inventor of the modest swimwear known as the *Burkini* (illustrated), which has become internationally famous and inadvertently controversial in Europe. Here it is worn by Mecca Lalaa, a health professional who is also Australia's first Muslim surf lifesaver.

*Echoes and Identity* features four digital artworks made in connection with Australia.

The following artworks ask what happens when we create art and objects that refer to Islamic heritage or identity in Australia. What might 'Australian Islamic' art look like?
The adhan is the Islamic call to prayer. It has echoed across Muslim communities five times every day for over a thousand years. The man who recites the adhan is called the muezzin, and in this Australian recital, he is named Edris Alsami. It was filmed in the Grampians National Park in Victoria.

The need to pray (Salat) is one of the five ‘pillars of Islam’, which all Muslims follow. The others are the need to fast during daylight in the sacred month of Ramadan (Saum), the expectation that one will undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj), the need to give charity to the poor (Zakat), and the affirmation that there is no God but God (Allah) and Mohammed is his Prophet (this statement is called the Shahada).

The words of the adhan change depending on the time of day, so the early morning version features the line “Prayer is better than sleep!”

The adhan is not a song but a series of statements, and each sentence is repeated once.

This is what Edris Alsami is actually saying:

Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar (God is the greatest, God is the greatest)
Ash-hadu an’ la ilaha ill Allah (I bear witness that there is no God but Allah)
Ash-hadu ana Muhammadan Rasoolallah (I bear witness that Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah)
Hayya ’alas-Salah (Rush to prayer)
Hayya ’alal Falah (Rush to success)
Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar (God is the greatest, God is the greatest)
La illaha ill Allah (There is no God but Allah)

- Have you seen or heard the adhan previously?
- How did listening to this make you feel?
Arguably the most important Australian contribution to ‘Islamic’ art is the mighty HSP.

The HSP, or Halal Snack Pack, has been featured on the menus of Australian suburban kebab shops for at least thirty years. Known as the AB in Adelaide ("a little from column A, a little from column B"), and possibly derived from the Iskender Kebab in Turkey, the HSP is a layer of chips, cheese, and halal lamb or chicken, ideally coated with the ‘Holy Trinity’ of garlic, BBQ and sour chili sauce.

The HSPAS, or Halal Snack Pack Appreciation Society, is a Facebook forum for food critics and satire. It was established by Luke Eagles and Ryan Durrington in 2015, and now has over one hundred thousand followers. The group has collectively decided that putting tomato sauce on an HSP is haram because it implies that the person using it is afraid of things from a non-Anglo background. Such people are called 'Haram Dingoes'.

Halal simply means 'permitted' in Arabic. Actions can also be fard (compulsory), mustahabb (recommended), makruh (disliked), and haram (forbidden). For example, alcohol and pork products are considered haram for Muslims, but vegetarian food and fresh fish are always halal - so is anything deemed kosher.

The HSP is important because it gives us a way to talk about Islam which is not so serious. When so much attention is given to the distortion of Islam by violent fundamentalists, the ordinary lives of Muslim people are often overlooked. This deconstructed kebab is all about bringing normality back to the conversation.

- Eat an HSP. How was it? Write a critical review.

- Give it score out of 10. What criteria informed your scoring system?
Abdul Abdullah is one of Australia’s leading contemporary artists. He is a winner of the Archibald Prize, has work represented in most Australian public galleries and many private art collections, and his paintings and photographs are highly regarded internationally. This interview showcases his artworks and his career as a young seventh-generation Australian man who happens to be Muslim.

It is not accurate to call Abdul Abdullah’s work the product of an ‘Islamic artist’, nor is it ‘Islamic art’. That’s reducing a complex personality and vibrant career down to just one aspect of the whole. This interview has been included in *Echoes and Identity* so we can discuss how an artist working in Australia might draw on aspects of their heritage, particularly if that heritage is Islamic. For Abdul, this refers to his interactions in school and the representation of Muslim Australians by the media.

- His older brother Abdullah Abdullah is also interviewed. How are their artworks different?
- What things matter to Abdul beyond his Muslim heritage?

  Is there an aspect of your heritage which informs your artwork? How does it appear?
Review Questions

What comes to mind when you think of ‘Islamic’ art?

Describe this exhibition in your own words.

Which artwork do you think you will remember most clearly? Why?

What surprised you about this exhibition?

If you have any questions, you can ask the curator Sam Bowker by writing to sbowker@csu.edu.au