

## **ABSTRACT**

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Contradiction between the visible (zahir) and the veiled (baatin) creates this dialog of what we see and what the reality holds within; “They find as what they seek...” I have found my secret hide-outs, the Sanctuaries as my divine peace and every time I am in contact with them, I reveal myself onto myself. My early life experiences of not settling down in one place and moving from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan and later to America have left me with this sense of homelessness. In order to find connections between my roots, and myself, I started building my own comfort spaces within the spaces that were available at that time. By allowing my viewers to interact with the sculptural installations, I invite them to explore the concept of self-actualization and self-realization.

For the past two years I have been investigating Kufic calligraphic fonts in my artwork. In the tradition of Sufism, the whirling and spinning helps one to know how to travel into the presence of the Divine, purify one’s inward from filth, and beautify it with a variety of praiseworthy traits.

# **UNVEILING THE INNER SELF**

By

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

I have come to appreciate what I have as time and space changed around me. I was trained as a miniature painter in Lahore, Pakistan and at that time I was painting intimate spaces on a hand made paper that suggested the conflict between the inner and outer spaces. “Step in; Step out” were a series of paintings inspired by the repetitive Islamic geometrical patterns and were not bigger than 9” in dimension. I made them as a result of being away from home, as my family was in Saudi Arabia. I knew that I needed to create new and different work. What awaited me was a brilliant journey that ends with this thesis. I took on various projects that were both classical and modern. I began the laborious task of becoming a contemporary artist. I created an active digital journal archiving images by artist I admired. All of my recent work is a product of this research.

When I came over to America and started with the studio arts program, it triggered a nostalgic feeling for home. Then I realized that over the years I did not have a particular location that I could call home. Instead, I had a handful of custom and traditions based in faith and my identity as an Islamic woman. The drastic change of location was inspiring at this particular time in my life. I started constructing three-dimensional spaces and I called that my *Sanctuaries*. Taking advantage of this opportunity, I also made use of the resources that were available to me at the current time. I continued making the *Sanctuaries* as they served as secret hideouts for me.

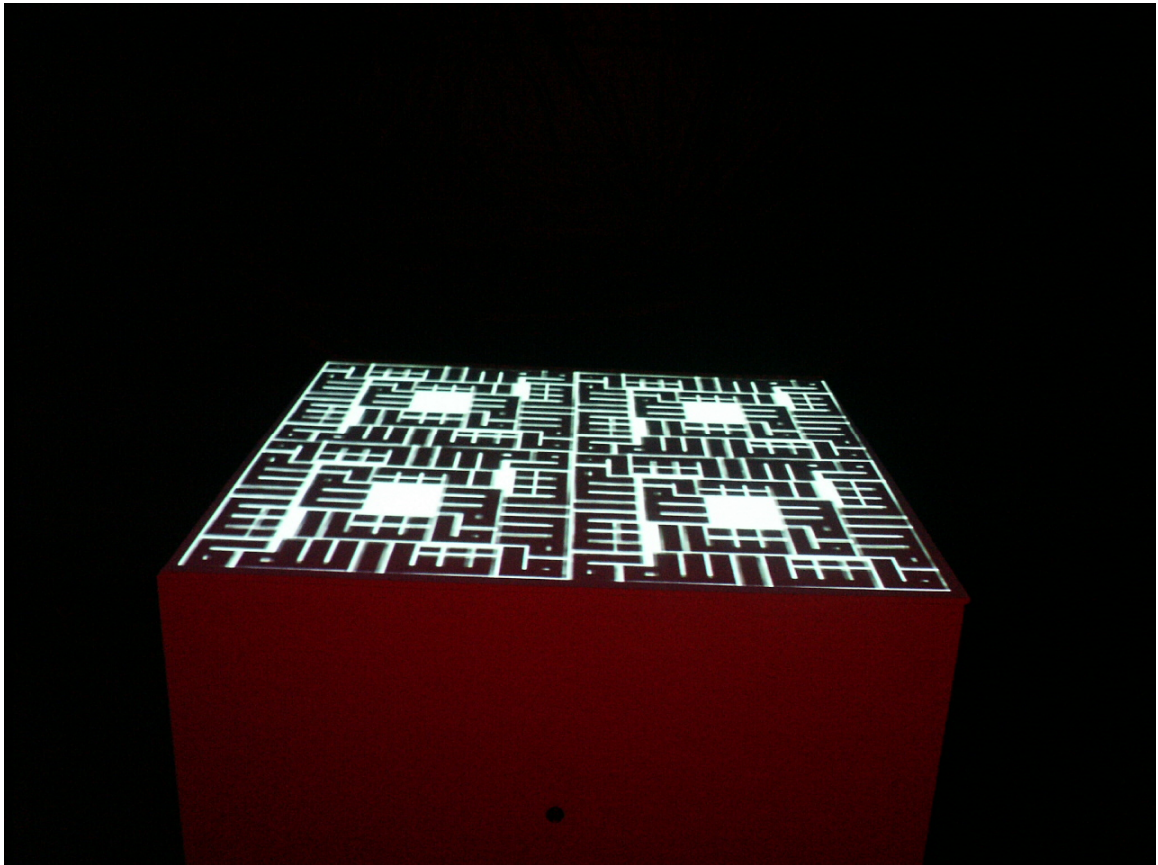
*Sanctuary I and II* were constructed of organic materials whereas the later ones were made in wood with video projection on them. I have even reused and recycle the materials and that resulted in one art object being derived from another. The first sanctuary that I made was to make myself comfortable with the new environment. In these installations I tried to create formal environments, through them my fellow students could learn more about my culture and traditions. (It seemed fair considering that I was anxiously learning as much as I could about my new environment). The work was a direct reaction to being isolated. Cause and effect is the beauty element in my art pieces. Artwork produced in reaction to the current situation made it very personal.

I don’t intend my viewers to feel a *specific* way; in fact, I try to keep the experience open ended. Sometimes I play the role of an educator, intentionally providing venues that open up to a lot of questions regarding my culture and religion (in particular the ones with Arabic text).

The same can be said about when I started using onions and garlic as part of my

installations. During my third semester I created numerous pieces using onions. My grandmother often uses onions as a way of cleansing evil spirits from affected persons (usually children). The ritual is called *Nazar* and as I know, it involved using onion peels and setting them on fire to assist in spiritual healing. The association of garlic with spiritual power is quite universal, but to burn onion peels to ward off evil spirits is practiced in far eastern region only.

*Sanctuary III* was a Zoetrope box that was 3'x3' in which a viewer was invited to peek at a photographs of onions on a 360 degree view. This piece was a spiritual device in which the participant would crank the arm of the zoetrope and watch a rotating onion that symbolized the cleaning process of the viewer. Like *Nazar*, this act involved key elements of the viewer's gaze and the act of spinning an onion.



While I was constructing the sanctuary with onions and garlic, I recalled the phrase "*Mashallah*" meaning by God's will. Muslims use it very often as a blessing. That was the time when calligraphy became a part of my installations. I incorporated this phrase by

projecting the calligraphy over the object. In one of my other installation, “Aab-e-Hayaat” (fountain of youth) the calligraphy was projected directly on the floor. The inspiration was derived from the fountain that was in my undergrad college in Pakistan. Four abstract wooden benches were placed in a way that viewers could watch the projection on floor while sitting on them, just like I, along with my friends used to sit around that fountain. The concept was to provide the audience with a relaxing space where they could engage with the mesmerizing effect of the text being written and erased by light.



In order to simplify the font, I went with the basics. The earliest copies of the Quran were written in a script called Kufic (a), which had no vowel signs. The simplicity of the font lies in its geometry and the minimal cubic structure. Through a complex process of reducing down the information of alphabets on the graph paper, I started drafting geometric patterns. The repetition of the words laid in an order started making fascinating geometric patterns. Although the words can be read there are times when going through the reduction process the words become plain shapes with no meanings. It is similar to losing the pure meanings of what's being said in the procedure of translation. These

shapes also enhance the strength of the architectural structure of the installations.

I was also exploring personal identity and what it meant for me to be a Muslim living in a multi-ethnic and multi- religious society. Especially after 9/11 incident, Westerners started getting more involved in knowing further about Islam and its followers. My efforts were to emphasize the main message and meaning of Islam, peace.

I knew about the famous Persian poet, Islamic jurist and theologian Mawlana Jalal-ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (b) and Sufism. I was also curious to learn more about it. So for that matter I started going through Rumi's poetry and how he described Islam. For him the base of everything was 'love', doing the good in this world not because you want to protect yourself from hell and have desire to achieve heaven. Most Muslim preachers use this ideological approach to introduce Islam to their followers. However in the tradition of Sufism, every good deed is in love of God; restraining yourself from harming any living thing not because of bad karma but because you love everything God has made. *"The term Sufism has come to mean those who are interested in inner knowledge, those who are interested in finding a way or practice towards inner awakening and enlightenment"* (c). This also reminded me of looking at few Persian miniature paintings of Sufi saints meditating in a deserted land. Life of a Sufi is like a Buddhist Monk who spends his whole life in isolation, meditating day and night and has nothing to do with political or social issues of the world. As if he is living in another world that he has created himself. The change in the root of motivation makes a huge difference. Although I have been practicing Islam as my religion my whole life, learning about this ideology opened my eyes to new perspective of looking at Islam.





## CHAPTER II

### “HIDDEN & VISIBLE”



In the “*Hidden & Visible*” installation, the front portion consists of four layers following the rest of the three with a gap. According to Islamic teachings, for the door to heaven and sky, one has to go through first four layers before entering the remaining three. And it has often been suggested that the first four are the toughest ones as compared to the rest. The last layer of this installation is the full original script. I used seven layers because this number has great significance in Islam. Seven doors to hell and also to heaven, seven layers of sky are a just to name the few. This odd number has often been divided into two parts, four and three.

The pause between these two sections deals with the state where the viewer can either look back or/and look forward. It all depends on the viewer's perception. They can also see beyond the provided hanging layers if they intend to. The clear material allows all sort of information to merge in with the calligraphic patterns to create unique effects. The effects can also be seen in the moving shadows and reflections that occur as a result of slight movement in the layers.

### CHAPTER III

#### “SPINNING I & II”

Sufi's whirling is not just simply about spinning but it is a spiritual ritual practiced by dervishes to achieve the highest point of perfection. By perfection, I am referring to a state of completeness and flawlessness. “*They try to desert their nafs (egos) or personal bad desires by listening to their master and Sufi music, thinking (about God) and whirling which resembles the rotation of other beings such as electrons and planets of micro- and macro cosmos.*”

Each and every action of this ritual is symbolic such as in Sema ritual ‘*white skirt represents the ego's shroud. By removing the black cloak, he is spiritually reborn to the truth. At the beginning of the Sema, by holding his arm crosswise, the semazen appears to represent the number one, thus testifying to God's unity. While whirling, his arms are open: his right arm is directed to the sky, ready to receive God's beneficence; his left hand, upon which his eyes are fastened, is turned toward the earth. The semazen conveys God's spiritual gift to those who are witnessing the Sema. Revolving from right to left around the heart, the semazen embraces all humanity with love. The human being has been created with love in order to love.*’



The use of right hand for good deeds is a very common practice among all the Muslims and even in other cultures and religions. Generally speaking, the twirling or spinning makes a person dizzy and nauseous. The person moving in circles starts losing sight of the objects around him/her. The motion blur helps in taking a broader view and generalizing the whole space.



My video piece "*Spinning I*" deals with the parallel scenario. The object spinning in the video is a foam cup sculpture resembling a dome. The sculpture is spinning at a constant speed but after a while it slows down and changes the direction of the twirl. I have applied multiple layers of video to achieve haziness by treating it in the computer program. When a person will look at this video, the large-scale projection might mesmerize him/her and it becomes one on one interaction. So it becomes a unique personal experience rather taking in the laid out information. This is a meditative technique almost non existent in the West. To enhance this experience even further, I am planning of projecting this video on a concave or a convex surface.



“*Spinning II*”, the embroidery video is the one that I relate to on a very different level and even the properties of this video are very different from the first one in many ways. This piece captures more of my personal background training as the tradition of embroidery has been passed on from one generation to another. For an earlier version of this video I had the movie camera placed on the tripod while I made stitching marks on a piece of cloth. But the final results were far from what I wanted it to look like. I didn’t want this video piece to look like a documentary so I spent considerable time focusing on the formal elements of the text.

In order to connect this piece with the “*Spinning I*”. I came up with the solution of using only pictures and then joining them all together to make a video of threads spinning on the surface of the fabric. I dedicated a corner of my room and set up my tapestry on the frame and my camera on the tripod. Everyday I would take 100-200 pictures. I took pictures of each individual stitch and by the end of the project I had 2,790 pictures to work with. After joining these images together on the computer program, they started getting some movement in them when they were all seen at a constant speed one after another. The spinning factor started to appear as well although it was not enough to give a feeling of dizziness but it still carried the ability to grab the attention. The writing of Arabic text directly relates this piece to my older installations where I was projecting Kufic script over the objects. My preliminary idea was to cover the tapestry with rings of calligraphic patterns and later on I started over layering, which made it even more interesting. The video starts from being blank surface to words covering every inch and then goes in reverse, back to blank surface.

The words repeat as “*Ya Hayo Ya Qayom* (The Living and The Self-subsisting), the two names of God out of 99 names. These two phrases have also been used in Sufi poetry as sung by late Nusrat fateh Ali Khan, an internationally renowned Pakistani Qawwali (d) Singer.

“Spiritual music is the key to the treasury of Divine Verities. The Gnostics are divided: some listen with the help of stations (Maqamat); some with the help of the states (halat); some with the help of spiritual unveiling (mukashifat). When they listen according to the stations, they are in reproach. When they listen according to spiritual unveiling, they are in union (wisal); when they listen according to vision, they are immersed in the Divine Beauty”. (e)

In conclusion, my work over the last three years has been about personal growth. Beginning with my refined and formal miniature paintings and ending with my most recent installations, I’ve sought to convey elements of my culture into my work. My ultimate goal is to convey the universal traits that all people can be inspired by. As an ambassador of Islam, my work seeks to find the seldom talked about spirituality of my beliefs. In this thesis I hope to have given you a glimpse of the possibilities of how art and faith can be intertwined. For indeed religion and artmaking is nothing new. But in my recent pursuits I have traveled thousands of years and have embraced both Eastern and Western traditions to come full circle. For just as the Sufi traditions explain there is no end to this journey merely an ongoing cycle or continuum in which new surprises await at every corner. As my excitement settles and my graduate work concludes I anxiously look forward to finding a new home and creating contemporary miniature paintings once again.

## NOTES

- a. **Kufic** is the oldest calligraphic form of the various Arabic scripts and consists of a modified form of the old Nabatean script. Its name is derived from the city of Kufa (in modern-day Iraq). Kufic is a form of script consisting of straight lines and angles, often with elongated verticals and horizontals.
- b. Mawlānā Jalāl-ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (Persian: **ی‌مور دم‌حم نی‌دل لال ج‌ان‌الوم**), also known as Mawlānā Jalāl-ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī (Persian: **ی‌خل‌ب دم‌حم**), but known to the English-speaking world simply as Rumi, (September 30, 1207–December 17, 1273), was a 13th century Persian (Tādjīk) poet, Islamic jurist, and theologian.
- c. “THE ELEMENTS OF ISLAM” By: Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri
- d. Qawwali is a form of Sufi devotional music popular on the Indian Subcontinent. Often listeners, and even artists themselves, are transported to a state of wajad, a trance-like state where they feel at one with God, generally considered to be the height of spiritual ecstasy in Sufism. ( definition according to Wikipedia)
- e. By Baqli, Abu Muhammad Sheikh Ruzbehan **Baqli** (1128-1209) was a poet, mystic, and sufi from Iran.

