GenYM: 
Curating Gen Y Australian Muslim Artists

This thesis is presented for the degree of Master of Curatorial Studies in Fine Arts of
the University of Western Australia

July 2016

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Abstract

GenYM: Curating Gen Y Australian Muslim Artists

This thesis explores the curatorial impetus behind the exhibition HEREnOW16/GenYM, exhibited at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery between 30 April – 16 July 2016. This exhibition showcases nine contemporary Australian Muslim artists whose works are tied together by their identity as Gen Y Muslims.

In order to understand exhibitions concerning Muslim artists, I look at how they have been shaped in various ways, from changing ideas of Islamic art to national and regional based exhibitions. More often than not, art by Muslims aligns with the idea of the ‘other.’ In this thesis I explore the development of the arts in the Australian Muslim community and how this has been used as a bridge-building tool between the Muslim and the wider community.

The artists’ studies are based on a study of their works, recorded interviews and on biographical material supplied by them. Also attached are installation images and the exhibition catalogue, floor map and list of works.

Hamida Novakovich
July 2016
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Glossary of terms

Allah The name for God, the Supreme Being, in the Arabic language; the common name for God in Islam.

Dir'a Traditional Somali house dress.

Dzikir Repetitive acts of remembrance of God.

Hadith Saying of the Prophet Muhammad.

Islam A monotheistic religion with the second largest following in the world and Submission (to the will of God).

Jilbab Full-length outer garment worn by some Muslim women.

Looh Quranic writing tablets.

Madrassah Islamic schools teaching traditional knowledge including Qur’an recitation and Hadith.

Muhajabi A Muslim women who wears the Islamic head covering.

Muslim A follower of the religion of Islam and a person who submits their will to God and believes in Him.

Sabil Allah Divine path leading to Allah.

Souk A traditional marketplace.

Tawheed The Oneness of God. This is the fundamental concept of Islam of monotheism in Islam.

Ummah The global Muslim community bound together by ties of religion.
Acknowledgements

As part of my Islamic tradition, I would like to start by praising and thanking God for this opportunity. I have been blessed to be able to study a part of my faith in my post-graduate research. Since 2010 paving the way for a career in curating and research that aims to investigate the socio-political forces that shape the fluid concept of ‘identity’ and being Muslim today.

I want to thank the University and the constant support from my primary supervisor Darren Jorgensen. Thank you to Samina Yasmeen and the Centre For Muslim States and Societies who have taught me about patience and perseverance in my studies. Also thank you to my supervisor Stefano Carboni who has a wealth of knowledge of Islamic art that is both eye opening and inspiring.

My gratitude must be imparted to Ted Snell and the large team at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and John Stanton the former Director of the Berndt Museum of Anthropology with whom I first started my ‘curatorial journey.’ Ted Snell’s trust in my ability as an emerging curator has allowed me to stretch myself and learn the ‘ins and outs’ of curating contemporary arts.

I’d like to thank some important mentors who helped me canvas the field such as Eve Chaloupka, Nell Ustundag, Nur Shkembi and Peter Gould. My gratitude must be extended to the HERE&NOW16/GenYM artists, whom I have had the pleasure of working with extensively. I feel privileged to have been able to listen to the stories behind the works in the show as well as watch their exponential growth over the years.

Last but not least is my family and friends who have supported my work and I throughout the years. I hope that this work leads to an even deeper investigation about Islam and Muslims in society today as I believe that the arts unlocks our inner most deepest expressions.
Preface

In 2010 I wrote my anthropology honours dissertation on the topic ‘The Global Ummah: Exploring art and identity of Muslims.’ My thesis looked at how identity, culture, religion and spirituality influence the way Muslim artists create, share and market their work to Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. It heavily relied on the presumption that Muslim artists are connected to traditions of Islamic art and express this in a myriad of ways. The main questions that arose in my honours research carried through to my studies in New York at Sotheby’s Institute 2014, where I completed a course called Introduction to Curating, and into this Masters which has predominantly been concerned with the nature of identity and representation of Muslim artists.

The most pertinent moment in defining Gen Y Muslim artists, largely born after 1980, was the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001, colloquially called 9/11. After this date, the idea of being Muslim has undoubtedly become a highly contentious debate in the public discourse. This politicisation of identity is something Muslims must contend with in one way or another.

In 2012, I began this Masters of Curatorial Studies in Fine Arts to further explore the identity and belonging of a specific subset of my original studies – Gen Y Muslim artists. I published a chapter in Muslim Citizens in the West: Spaces and Agents of Inclusion and Exclusion (2014) which looked at how the current developments of artistic activity in Melbourne and Sydney between 2005 and 2012 fit into a policy that aimed to counter radicalisation of marginalised groups including Muslim communities.¹ Under the Australian government’s National Action Plan 2005 – 2008, over $500,000 was spent on a range of programs (that included the promotion of arts as an expression of Muslim identity) in Muslim communities. Arts, and Islamic arts were used as a bridge building tool, a commercial endeavour and an expression of identity. This chapter reflected the dominant discourse of the day – and in many ways I was trying to show how Muslims and their art had been used to fulfil the requirements of specific government funded grants. As I have stepped back from

¹ Hamida Novakovich, "Inclusion and Exclusion of Australian Muslim Artists in Contemporary Art," in Muslims in the West: Spaces and Agents of Inclusion and Exclusion, ed. Samina Yasmeen and Nina Markovic (Farnham, Surrey UK: Ashgate, 2014).
being a participant in the Muslim community to an observer from afar (and one who no longer needs to ‘represent’ the community herself), I can now see various hidden motivations and influences that emerged within this former work. As a young Muslim woman who was previously an active member of the Australian Muslim community, I was privy to the many nuanced interactions, feelings and motivations of how people felt about their place in Australian society and pertinently to this thesis – how they viewed art. My position as both a Muslim and post-graduate student allowed me to approach many artists and art workers to discuss issues I have seen as relevant to these studies. I asked how do Muslim artists view Islamic art, and their place in it? In 2008 I met Nur Shkembi, an artist and community curator who talked about how Islamic art is an ongoing tradition, connected to Muslim identity and spirituality. Unlike the consensus by art historians who say Islamic art ended after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Shkembi and others assert that it is a continuous practice.

Many times, with the mention of the possibility of a ‘contemporary Muslim art’, the reaction is ‘oh is that like Islamic art?’ The correlation between Islamic art (in a classical sense) and contemporary forms of art seems like a natural link to many people, especially from the Muslim community. For many, Islamic art is not a ‘thing of the past’ but a living art form connected by the tenets of Islamic beliefs and the expressions of the Oneness of God (Tawheed) within Islam. The belief in Islam spans history, geographic boundaries and nationalities to create a global and historic lineage or ‘Ummah,’ that continues today.

Some Muslim artists identifying as contemporary artists, like Rubaba Haider, do not want to be identified with Islamic art, even if they were trained in traditional Islamic art. Others like Abdul Abdullah do not have issues with participating in institutions such as the Islamic Art Museum although he does not view his art as Islamic art. Examining the way exhibitions of Muslims have been curated in the past, for example in the exhibition Without Boundaries: Seventeen Ways of Looking at MoMA in 2006, gave me an insight into how these sensitive identity politics were handled. Nonetheless, since 2001, studies on identity and its various manifestations and how these coalesce together are only now being fully realised.

Introduction:

Curating GenYM

Kids these days don’t abide by established rules and codes: their attitudes, vocabularies, tastes, sexualities, and political leanings are threatening, complex, and, of course, fascinating to those outside of their generation.

- Lauren Cornell, Massimiliano Gioni and Laura Hoptman, Younger Than Jesus, Artist directory 2009.3

The exhibition HERE&NOW 16/GenYM was exhibited at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery in Perth, Australia from 30 April – 16 July 2016. GenYM (for short) weaves together the voices of nine contemporary artists of Muslim background who are ‘Gen Y’ or under the age of 40. These artists are Abdul Abdullah, Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, Idil Abdullahi, Suzi Elhafez, Nadia Faragaab, Zahrah Habibullah, Rubaba Haider, Marziya Mohammedali and Fatima Mawas. HERE&NOW is an annual show by the Gallery that commission’s new work by artists from or residing in Western Australia (of the GenYM artists, these are Abdul Abdullah, Abdul-Rahman Abdullah,

Suzi Elhafez and Marziya Mohammedali). The space was thus divided into two – the Westpac gallery exhibited _HERE&NOW16_, and the Maller gallery exhibited _GenYM_. In between these two galleries was Pro/Ject Space, a multimedia gallery that exhibited Fatima Mawas’s films. The exhibition was followed by a large public program event called ‘FORUM,’ where, except for Suzi Elhafez and Zahra Habibullah, all artists discussed their works in more depth against the backdrop of theoretical themes. In this thesis the artists’ works are grouped into three broad themes: Childhood memories and reflections on spirituality; occupied land, heritage and belonging; and experiences of being ‘Outsiders.’

Authentic narratives of Muslim experiences in Australia are few and far in between. Appearances of Muslims in the media continue to be relegated to international and domestic political affairs where they are seen as part of a large body politic bombarded by a constant entourage of crisis all over the world. Since 9/11 the reiteration of Muslims as a homogeneous entity creates stereotypes that feed into narrow understandings of Muslims and Islam, both as a system of knowledge and as a historical religion. Islamic art has always sat at an interesting cross section between Islamic beliefs and history, in that it is a continuing practice by many Muslims around the world. One of the main challenges facing contemporary Muslim artists are misconceptions about what constitutes Islamic art. These assumptions have gained traction over time and are present in some Muslim communities more than others. One example is that is that Islamic art is iconoclastic (against the production of figurative art).

One may ask whether these broader issues affect the terminology used to describe contemporary art by Muslims and what each term may imply or be interpreted as
group representation and social identity. My use of the term ‘Muslim artist’ is not intended as a replacement for the term ‘contemporary artists’ or to create a separate exclusionary category. Instead, I utilise this as functional language to analyse a group of artists who are identified as ‘Muslim’ in a broader context. This exhibition GenYM is not a plea for an alternative Muslim expression to singularly challenge dominant perceptions of Muslim identity, rather it can be seen as a ‘collaborative practice…. in which the dominant discourses of globalization might find new lines and networks of resistance.’

Chantal Pontbriand approaches the study of contemporary art by investigating each artist’s work as a case study for ‘our current condition of being-in-the-world.’ The issue of representation and identity seems to be a constant issue when artists are grouped together under identity markers. For some artists, the issue of representation bears a similar construction when faced with exhibitions organised around an allegedly shared identity. If we were to accept these premises, artwork would merely function as an icon of the artists’ identity where they are treated as vehicles of content, put in the service of stereotypical images or clichés, or even more pertinent – used as counter-narratives for the War on Terror. As we will see, many of the GenYM artists work against tokenistic representation because the dilemma of speaking for oneself, whilst seeming to speak for others has always been a deep concern, especially when it comes to Muslim women artists.

Whilst there are many angles to approach this study, I have kept in mind that it is ultimately a thesis on curatorial studies relating to the exhibition GenYM. Scott

McQuire and Nikos Papastergiadis use the analogy of ‘spirals’ to unpack layers of issues in their publication *Empire, ruins & networks: The transcultural agenda in art* (2005).6 Beginning with an outer ring, this study situates the artists in the current socio-political context of the world today. Here I ask; what does it mean to be Muslim in today’s socio-political climate? I look at global Islamophobia verses global Muslim art, (in terms of aesthetics spread through shared ideas of a Muslim Ummah or community) and the influence of Orientalism in shaping the way Islam was and continues to be viewed today in both art and politics. The second ring asks how Gen Y Muslims are perceived today and what are the challenges in considering a body of artistic expression described as ‘contemporary Muslim arts’? In the global space of contemporary art we find diaspora, Third World and art from the margins functioning as a so-called ‘neutral space’ from which artists may speak authentically. I challenge this by looking at the growing value of Muslim arts in growing art markets. Finally, the central ring explores how the artists view themselves through their artistic practice. This thesis is organized into four chapters:

- **Chapter One: Constructions of Muslim identity.** The discourses around these identities are used as wedges into broader discussions of the integration of Muslim minority communities in the West.

- **Chapter Two: Negotiations of contemporary Islamic and contemporary art.** Here I will unpack the definitions, history and aesthetic of Islamic art that constitutes a common artistic language as well as a tool for bridge building.

- **Chapter Three: Development of Muslim arts in the Middle East from the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1924 onwards and how the artists negotiated various identity pressures.**

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6 McQuire and Papastergiadis, *Empires, Ruins + Networks: Transcultural Agenda in Art* p.5.
• Chapter Four: Development of Muslim arts in Australia, and key figures and trends in showcasing artistic expression from around 2005 onwards.

Before moving on it is important to ask who are the GenYM artists? Predominantly aged in their 20s and 30s, they may be early to mid-career artists who have recently become known to curators and institutions in the past few years.
Who are GenYM?

Gen Y generally refers to the generation born between the 1980s and early 1990s, postdating Gen X. They are also known as Millennial, Y Generation, Generation We or Echo boomers. Gen Y are the first participants in the digital world, having witnessed the birth of the Internet and its impact on every aspect of modern life. In the West this generation has displayed their capacity to be productive members of society, transmitting ideas to a global stage on everything from fashion and lifestyle to political commentary and ‘thought leadership’ such as Ted X, online.³ Gen Y Muslims, like their peers are digital natives. The effects of social media were visible in parts of the Arab world in instigating the youth led ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011. Suffering from years of unemployment and deeply held resentment of long-reigning dictators, the ‘newly educated (and) globally exposed’ Gen Y Arabs instigated anti-government protests and uprisings across Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Syria and Libya.⁸ Although these protest movements failed to become a ‘democratic Spring’ due to the pervasive power of the ruling institutions, it did reflect the overwhelming ‘pear-shaped’ population in the Middle East that journalist Allegra Stratton wrote about earlier in her book Muhajababes: Meet the New Middle East - Cool, Sexy, and Devout (2005).⁹ Noting that two-thirds of the population in the Middle East are under 25, Stratton describes the ‘underground youth movements of Beirut – seduced by Beirutis,’ a widely accepted, unconservative culture that is largely disseminated through popularised television stations featuring creating scantily-clad, but

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⁹ Allegra Stratton, Muhajababes: Meet the New Middle East - Cool, Sexy, and Devout (London: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2006).
religiously observant women, or ‘Muhajababes’ (coming from the Arabic term *Muhajabi* – a woman who wears the Islamic head covering).

More recently, social media has also allowed new industries to open up with Muslim fashionistas gathering millions of followers worldwide. Fashion blogger couple Ascia AKF and Ahmad Asb (‘The Hybrids’) are both mixed heritage (Ascia is American/Kuwaiti and Ahmad is Latino/Kuwaiti) and in their mid-20s who have over 1.7 million followers on the social media site Instagram. Perhaps the popularity of The Hybrids lies in their representation of a shared global (albeit highly consumerist) culture that appeals to Gen Y Muslims who seek role models that are both Muslim and Western. Gen Y Muslims have been dubbed as ‘Generation M’ or ‘Yummies’ due to their distinct dual Muslim and Western upbringings. Speaking of the rights of Muslim women to wear the headscarf in countries such as France, Carla Power and Christopher Dickey (2003) shed light on young Muslims who assert their legal rights in Europe. They are:

Confident, culturally ambidextrous, second- and third-generation Europeans, aware of their rights as European Union citizens. And critically, they are asserting the right to be both modern and Muslim, both European and Islamic. Gen M is changing Islam from a foreign faith into a dynamic force for change that cannot be resisted any more than it can be

10 Ibid., p.74.


12 "Ascia and Ahmad Are Couple Bloggers with Double the Style to Love (Photos)," Huffington Post *Style* 9 October 2013. Date accessed 15 June 2016.
In Australia, according to the 2011 Census there are 476,291 Muslims, making up around 2.5% of the total population. There is also 4.1 million second generation Australians making up around 20% of the population. They are defined as Australian-born people living in Australia with at least one overseas-born parent. Approximately 39 per cent of Muslims were born locally and it is estimated that by 2020 the total Australian Muslim population will exceed one million.

Muslims are ethnically diverse with different languages, cultural practices and religious schools of thought. Within Islamic heritage, individuals are considered youth until the age of 40. At this age, an individual is considered to have reached a higher level of maturity and rationality. This is also known as the age of ‘decision.’

In the Qur’an God says:

We enjoined the human being to honour his parents. His mother bore him arduously, gave birth to him arduously, and took intimate care of him for thirty months. When he reaches maturity, and reaches the age of forty, he should say, “My Lord, direct me to appreciate the blessings You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents, and to do the

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16 It is also known as the age of responsibility, where by a person is now fully responsible for their actions in the eyes of God.
righteous works that please You. Let my children be righteous as well. I have repented to You; I am a submitter” (Chapter 46: verse 15).\textsuperscript{17}

Like the \textit{GenYM} artists, young Australian Muslims grapple with multiple identities being cultural interlocutors for their migrant parents. They are typically the first educated in their families (especially in Australian higher institutions), heralding new opportunities for their families and communities whilst voicing pertinent issues that have come about through their interactions with the Muslim and wider community.

Sven Alexander Schottmann (2013) says in the last decade strong Gen Y, (and X) Muslim Australian voices have emerged such as Waleed Aly, Randa Abdel-Fattah, Irfan Yusuf and Mariam Veiszadeh who are ‘representative of a new generation of Australian Muslims.’\textsuperscript{18} They are both Muslim professionals and public figures who ‘successfully challenged stereotypes of their communities as the irredeemable Other’ especially in popular culture and mainstream media.\textsuperscript{19} Waleed Aly was the host of ABC TV’s Big Ideas program and Radio National before becoming the host on Channel 10’s \textit{The Project} in 2015. Another successful gen Y Muslim is lawyer turned comedian, Nazeem Hussain whose series \textit{Legally Brown} on ABC ran for two seasons from 2013. Aly writes about the timely place of the show in 2013:

\textbf{Hussain is a creature of a different time and circumstance} ...

\textbf{his is the world of post-9/11 Australian Muslims. It’s about more than ethnic stereotyping. It's about being a consistent}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} Surah 46 - Al-Ahqaf (The Sandhills)\textit{The Qur’an} English Meanings and Notes by Saheeh International (Al-Muntada Al-Islami, 2001-2010).\textsuperscript{18} Sven Alexander Schottmann, "Being-Muslim in Australia," \textit{Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations} 24, no. 2 (2013): p.420.\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.}
target of political opportunism, where everyone from the Prime Minister to the Foreign Minister to an otherwise washed-up backbencher with a view on burqas has you in their sights; where bombs detonate in Western capitals and unrelated nations are invaded. It is an altogether heavier, more politically contentious world.20

Waleed Aly’s book *People Like Us: How arrogance is dividing Islam and the West* (2007) and Randa Abdel-Fattah’s young adult novel *Does my head look big in this?* (2005) made early headways allowing Muslims to become a more pronounced and publically visual presence in Australian society. Other literature such as *Coming of Age: Growing up Muslim in Australia* (2014) by Amra Pajalic and Demet Divaroren collates twelve stories of Australian Muslims who grew up in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, and *Yassmin’s Story: Who Do You Think I Am?* (2016) reflect on a plethora of issues that affect young Australian Muslims.21 These endeavours paved the way for the community to embrace the artistic efforts by young people who didn’t want to be on the back-foot of the backlash against the Muslim community due to the rise of Islamophobia. Initiatives like these meant there was a flourishing of discussions about issues within the Muslim community that attempted to reach out to the Muslim community as well as the mainstream.

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Gen Y, Muslim arts and Curating - Various approaches

The concept of art specific to Gen Y has been represented in several significant international exhibitions, most prominently The New Museum’s *The Generational: Younger Than Jesus* in 2009. Curated by Lauren Cornell, Massimiliano Gioni and Laura Hoptman, *Younger Than Jesus* exhibited 500 contemporary artists from around the world, under the age of 33 – Jesus’s age at the time of crucifixion. The artists were selected through a network of 150 colleagues who sourced international artists born just after 1975. They were then compiled into a Yellow Pages styled directory sourcebook that accompanied the exhibition in New York.

Similar to *GenYM*, *Younger Than Jesus* captured the newness of a generation based on the presumption that ‘some of the most radical gestures in art history have been carried out by artists in the early stages of their careers’ where ‘it is a similar momentary fissure between radical unfamiliarity and recognition that also characterizes generational conflicts.’

Critics such as Howard Halle and Barbara Pollack liken the exhibition to a ‘cattle call’ where the artists seem to be clumped together in an almost reductive manner with not much else tying the exhibition together. In Pollack’s opinion, *Younger Than Jesus* focuses too heavily on the bland depiction of ‘ageing’ whilst ‘lacking youthful energy and no distinct style of medium to distinguish the cohort of millennial artists.’

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23 The Editors of ARTnews, "When They Were Still 'Younger Than Jesus': Revisiting the First Two New Museum Triennials," (2015), http://www.artnews.com/2015/02/19/when-they-were-still-younger-than-jesus-on-the-first-two-new-museum-triennials/. Date accessed 17 August 2015.
Beginning in 2001, *Contemporary Arab Representations* curated by Catherine David, is said to be one of the first major projects showcasing contemporary art by Arab artists in both Western and Arab contexts. Noted for its unique style of presenting art outside of galleries or institutions, this project started as a travelling exhibition, then transformed into a discursive series of events with various exhibitions, readings, lectures and performances including the Venice Biennale in 2003. The aim of the project is ‘to stimulate locally based critical platforms and exchanges in the Middle East, as well as between the different centers of the Arab world and the rest of the world.’

David’s focus is based on self-representation, that must occur from within and as Pablo Lafuente reflects ‘the local cultural agents are to be responsible for their own image.’ He notes that the format of *Contemporary Arab Representations* is vital for allowing works to have equal value, not utilizing the term ‘art’ which is too easily associated with ‘notions such as avant-garde, modern, market, museum and, ultimately, progress conceived within a linear historicity and the consequent hierarchy between different cultural contexts.’ *Contemporary Arab Representations* presents a radical shift in the way exhibitions on Muslims and Arabs have been shaped, as we will touch on throughout this thesis.

Art historian Terry Smith argues that curating is ‘caring for the culture, above all by enabling its artistic or creative transformers to pursue their work’, and a process whereby art or objects are looked after, or presented in a thematic way to tell a

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27 Ibid.
story. Smith says ‘to exhibit is…to bring a selection of…newly created works of art, into a shared space…with the aim of demonstrating, primarily through the experiential accumulation of visual connections, a particular constellation of meaning that cannot be made known by any other means.’ In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries avant-garde art was displayed in collective gatherings and public exhibitions for the first time. The ‘exhibition’ became a site for power, commerce and determining the aesthetics value of art. The 1960s saw the rise of the ‘curator as creator’ where the curator became the collaborator between the artists and their works. As Walter Hopps described it, the curator was ‘like a conductor striving to establish harmony between individual musicians.’ In the 1990s, curators became more independent from institutions, moving around as agents between artists, the public, institutions and power players in the art world. Smith observes that contemporary curating is:

…much larger than contemporary art. It must encompass all other art: art from any and every past, current art that is not contemporary, as well as projective, future art…Like contemporary art, contemporary curating is embroiled in time, but not bound by it; entangled with periodizing urges, but not enslaved to them; committed to space, but of many
kinds, actual and virtual; anxious about place, yet thrilled by
dispersion’s roller-coaster ride.\textsuperscript{32}

The idea of contemporary art is still being debated due to the unfolding nature of
works being made under the banner of ‘contemporary art’ as well as it being seen as
largely a product of Western art history. Smith also reminds us that contemporary art
is itself a construction. It is, ‘critical, theoretical, historical and above all, a historical
inquiry.’\textsuperscript{33} More importantly, the space of the exhibition challenges us to think in the
present. Smith says ‘there is a spatial and phenomenological horizon for
contemporaneity within the exhibition: it is discursive, epistemological, and
dramaturgical space in which various kinds of temporality may be produced or
shown to coexist.’\textsuperscript{34}

Studies of exhibitions take into consideration the space, works selected and how well
these interact with the audience. So, what makes a group show successful? Ralph
Rugoff suggests a great group exhibition asks its audience to make connections,
bringing together a ‘stimulating and unpredictable combinations. It immerses us in
an experience of shifting yet interlinked viewpoints, and multiple climaxes.’\textsuperscript{35}

Exhibitions are:

The primary site of exchange in the political economy of art,

where signification is constructed, maintained, and

\textsuperscript{32} Smith, Thinking Contemporary Curating p.28.
\textsuperscript{34} Smith, Thinking Contemporary Curating p.29.
\textsuperscript{35} Cited in Ralph Rugoff. "’You Talking to Me? On Curating Group Shows That Give You a Chance
to Join the Group’," in What Makes a Great Exhibition?, ed. Paula Marincola (Chicago: University of
occasionally deconstructed. Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions – especially exhibitions on contemporary art – establish and administer the cultural meanings of art.36

Peer group shows create an exhibition ‘package’ which asks the audience to consider important questions, creating structures for communication, as well as arenas of experience. Marcel Duchamp says ‘the viewer is responsible for half of the work in creating art’s meaning… (and)…exhibitions need to ask interesting questions, even unanswerable questions.’37 It is important that the curator does not do all the discovering for the audience, but interrogates concepts and meanings for a broader discussion. The visual, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue, is ‘languaged,’ and is ‘…an integral part of culture and of history, not in the sense of a static backdrop…but rather as a complexly activating principle.38 In the GenYM exhibition, I aimed to create an immersive experience for the audience from the way the works were ordered to the lighting and space between works. Images of the exhibition, as well as the floor map and titles of the works are in Appendix II.

Today, contemporary art is more de-centralised in nature, which has given way to questions as to how power is allocated in the art world. What we consider contemporary art in today’s globalized world must be looked at in light of how Muslim, Middle Eastern diaspora arts developed after the advent of colonialism in the Middle East. The colonial project of collecting what eventually formed ‘Islamic

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36 Christophe Cherix in Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*
37 Rugoff, "'You Talking to Me? On Curating Group Shows That Give You a Chance to Join the Group'."
art’ has influenced the way Muslim cultures view their own histories and in turn, manage and propagate this today. To Smith, ‘Contemporary art is no longer one kind of art, nor does it have a limited set of shared qualities somewhat distinct from those of the art of past periods in the history of art yet fundamentally continuous with them.’\(^{39}\) He further points out that contemporary art is truly an art ‘of the world’:

Diversity marks every aspect of the production of art, from the limitless range of materials used by artists, through the broad scope, specificity, and unpredictability of the questions their art raises. Contemporary art is – perhaps for the first time in history – truly an art of the world. It comes from the whole world, and frequently tries to imagine the world as a differentiated yet inevitably connected whole.\(^{40}\)

Pablo Lafuente asks us to consider the epistemological bounds of truth ‘as adequation’ when it comes to art and representation. He says:

…it implies questions about the fairness of the representation.

Furthermore, when the objects of that representation are human beings, a political dimension comes into play. When ‘representation’ appears together with ‘Arab’, misrepresentation is an inevitable consideration. The West's relation to the Arab world, currently and historically, combines ignorance with a ‘will to knowledge’ (in a

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40 Ibid. p.8.
Foucauldian sense, as a desire to acquire an immediate knowledge of social relations with a regulatory goal). This, according to Balibar, are the two main mechanisms of racism.  

In the realm of contemporary art he says, the West too often already preconceives what is considered art. In the *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois predicted that ‘the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colour-line.’ His discussions on race and ‘double-consciousness’ points to the continuing importance of internal identity conflicts at play for people of colour and or minority status in dominant Anglo-Saxon societies. Double-consciousness is ‘this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’ Indeed, how a person of colour views himself in relation to how others view them is an issue for Muslim artists today. This thesis aims to delve deeper into understanding the significance of contemporary Muslim arts today as the artists grapple multiple streams of identity.

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43 Ibid., p.2.
GenYM Artist’s themes

Childhood memories & reflections on spirituality

Abdullah’s sculptural work has been described as ‘Magic realism,’ where life-like objects, animals and figures are mixed into imaginative narratives. Abdullah’s work invites the viewer in to a glimpse of his inner world as he recreates memories and stories. He says ‘For me, each of these works represents a recollection, a small passage from my life that will stay with me forever and has become an indelible part of who I am.’⁴⁴ His refined technical skills are demonstrated through the production of a series of sculpted pieces from cats, ravens, lambs, chandeliers to his own family members and himself. He uses a range of materials including cast resin, timber and

acrylic and incorporates found materials into the works, such as vintage furniture and lighting.\textsuperscript{45}

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah’s \textit{Practical Magic} (2016) (figure 1) recalls how, as a child, Abdullah’s mother would often have to stop him from consuming poisonous plants that grew in their backyard. Taking measures into her own hands, she undertook studies in horticulture in order to recognise the vast array of Australian plant life that was markedly different from her native Malay environment. Her actions reiterate a belief passed down to Abdullah, that one’s faith must be coupled by worldly practicality. Thus Abdullah carves the symbolic baby camel noted \textit{hadith} (Saying of the Prophet Muhammad) ‘Trust in Allah, but tie your camel.’\textsuperscript{46} The camel was significant in ancient Arabia where it was the source of transportation, companionship, wealth and food for the traveller. To Abdullah, his mother is both the source of security and wisdom who inhibits Islamic values. Thus his sculpture becomes much more than a representation of a Hadith. It is an ode to his mother and her very real ability to keep him alive as a child.

Idil Abdullahi’s sculptural work \textit{Loss} (2012) (figure 2) is formed from her vivid memories of fleeing Somalia as a young girl. Molded from two Somali \textit{looh} (Quranic writing tablets), Abdullahi recalls the extensive process of learning Arabic after making her own ink and brushes and learning from masters in her school.

\textsuperscript{45}Peter Rigby, "Crows and Curios Critters at Perth’s Venn Gallery," 8 July 2013. Date accessed 8 July 2013.

\textsuperscript{46}The full Hadith is: Anas bin Malik narrated that a man said: "O Messenger of Allah! Shall I tie it and rely(upon Allah), or leave it loose and rely(upon Allah)?" He said: "Tie it and rely (upon Allah)." Source Sunan At-Tirmidhi, Book 35, Hadith 2517, see Muflihun, "Jami` at-Tirmidhi Book 35 Hadith 2517," Muflihun.com, https://muflihun.com/tirmidhi/35/2517. Date accessed 18 June 2016.
Using the tablet form for the ceramics is a deliberate act by Idil to bring about healing, replicating the ritual of *taheel* (medicine). Her transition from a peaceful childhood into a life as a refugee in the matter of days is similar to the ‘liminal’ status assigned to non-Australians – a constant background from which she works.
As a self-proclaimed ‘story teller’ through the visual arts she aims to communicate issues and ideas that are significant to her and the communities in which she works.

*Dead Dira*’ (2012) (figure 3) and *The Whitening* (2012) (figure 4) generates important discussions on consumerism, mental health and ideas of beauty and Whiteness. Abdullahi started working as a henna artist for weddings then stumbled across the use of henna on paper, rather than the body, as it is typically applied in many customs especially wedding ceremonies. As she continued to experiment with the intersection between mediums such as ceramics, materials and hands a small body of experimental works emerged from this including *Dead Dira*’ where Abdullahi describes how the simple house-dress (dira’) has transformed into a symbol of wealth in the Somali community in Australia. Here, she says she observed a trend over a number of years where, especially during large weddings many women would compete with one another in obtaining expensive dira’s from places like India and Saudi Arabia. *The Whitening* are molded from four traditional Somali scarves that are casted in porcelain and left white. Here, she refers to the loss of vibrant colours and patterns of traditional materials in the wake of new ideas of ‘whiteness’ gained during post-migration settlement in Australia. What seems like dampened clumps of wet towels are also reminisce of bleached bath towels and bathing rituals of Africans in the West who use many whitening and bleaching products to gradually lighten their skin.
Rubaba Haider’s installation Like a shadow, I am and I am not (2016) (figure 5), (this title coming from the poetry of Persian Sufi-Saint Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī’) is deeply rooted in the experience of witnessing her mother undergo invasive surgical treatment and nursing her through to recovery.47 Inspired by objects found in her mother’s sewing kit she suspends 700 safety pins by thread from a ceiling in a dark room allowing them to float free in space. A single yellow flood light fills the dark space with a warm glow against music played on loop that features traditional Hazara oud (musical instrument) merging into western classical music, representing her journey from Pakistan to Australia. Haider attended the National College of Arts in Lahore, the only institution in the world that gives an official degree in Miniature arts. Her previous works are based heavily on pointillism drawing on fine gouache on paper pieces (wasli), created using traditional miniaturist techniques, giving her work a life-like quality in contemporary forms. The concept behind her body of work centres on the metaphor of embroidery and fabrics for surgical medical stitches and skin. These objects she employs are connected are imbued with emotive symbolism

which helps her engage with the audience on an unconscious level, making each individual view it from a different perspective.

Suzi Elhafez is a visual artist working across photography, painting and sculptural installation. Her work explores intersections between philosophy, neuroscience and Islamic art, among other subjects. Elhafez became exposed to Islamic art through her Egyptian heritage, where she experienced the beauty of Cairo’s historical architecture from a young age. She was captured by the quality of geometric precision, complexity and grandeur of Islamic Art and ornamentation both aesthetically and conceptually. Elhafez uses characteristics of Islamic art; symmetry, alignment, pattern and repetition, in order to inform her work. Her existential piece *Demarcations of Timelessness* (2016) (figure 6) questions the mortality of the human being and the significance of what one leaves behind after death. The repetition of

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the human torso marks a shift from her previous work, which fused non-figurative geometric Islamic ornamentation with digital manipulations of the human form.

Figure 6. Suzi Elhafez, *Demarcations of Timelessness*, 2016, photograph, archival print, 100 x 190 cm, image courtesy of the artist.
Occupied land, heritage & belonging

Figures 7 – 9, Islamic ornamentation objects (left to right):
Zahrah Habibullah, Islamic ornamentation objects, 2013, Blue and gold stainless steel, perspex, nylon thread 10 x 3 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, Islamic ornamentation objects, 2013, Pearl stainless steel, perspex, nylon thread 8 x 3 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, Islamic ornamentation objects, 2013, Clear stainless steel, perspex, nylon thread 8 x 3 cm, photos property of Hamida Novakovich.

Figures 10 – 14, Family Heirloom Series (left to right):
Zahrah Habibullah, The Shan Convert, Great Grandmother – Family Heirloom Series, 2013, Perspex, Sterling silver chenier, stainless steel, enamel 8 x 3cm
Zahrah Habibullah, Charles Buchanan, Great Grandfather – Family Heirloom Series, 2013, Perspex, Sterling silver chenier, stainless steel, enamel 8 x 3 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, Zainab Buchanan Mustaqeem, Grandmother – Family Heirloom Series, 2013, Perspex, Sterling silver chenier, stainless steel, enamel 8 x 3 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, Dad and I – Family Heirloom Series, 2013, Perspex, Old family photograph, Sterling silver chenier, stainless steel, enamel 8x 3 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, Noahs Travels, Noah – Family Heirloom Series, 2013, Perspex, Sterling silver chenier, stainless steel, enamel 12 x 3 cm, photo property of Hamida Novakovich.
Zahra Habibullah’s work is steeped in her understanding of heritage and objects. Born in New Zealand, her heritage is mixed Burmese with her paternal grandparents coming from Bengali Scottish and Burmese heritage. Her maternal grandmother was third generation Indian. As a young woman in her 20s, she travelled and lived in many Middle Eastern countries such as Oman, Qatar and Morocco with her then husband where she began informal training with traditional Moroccan artisans, swapping her silver smiting techniques for newly acquired plastering techniques. Inspired by various forms of Islamic art Habibullah began painting and producing multiple works under the banner of an online store called ‘Souk Collective’ (souk, meaning traditional marketplace in Arabic). She created *Islamic ornamentation objects* (2011) (figures 7 – 9), some of which are brooches using metal, Perspex and chenier, creating a 3 dimensional effect when held against light. In the months following 9/11, Habibullah was detained for a period of time whilst attempting to enter the U.S. Her visa was rejected (later this was found to be a technical issue), greatly affecting her in the following years.

Thus her theme of belonging, heritage and home became a strong thread between her earlier works such *Family Heirloom series* (2013) (figures 10 – 14) and her most recent series *Palestine Keys* (2014) (figures 15 – 21), *Palestine objects* (2014) (figures 22 – 24) and *Palestine photos* (figures 24 – 32).
Zahrah Habibullah, *Palestine Keys – In memory of...*, 2014, acrylic, sterling silver, cotton, nylon 9.7 x 4 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, *Palestine Keys – In memory of...*, 2014, acrylic, sterling silver, cotton, nylon 9.7 x 4 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, *Palestine Keys – In memory of...*, 2014, acrylic, sterling silver, cotton, nylon 9.7 x 4 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, *Palestine Keys – Home is where your heart is wear it over your heart, And we ran and left everything behind*, 2014, sterling silver, cotton, nylon 7.5 x 3 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, *Palestine Keys – Home is where your heart is wear it over your heart, My key is akin to my land*, 2014, sterling silver, cotton, nylon 7.5 x 3 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, *Palestine Keys – Home is where your heart is wear it over your heart, Since I was born there has been blood and war*, 2014, sterling silver, cotton, nylon 7.5 x 3.3 cm, photos courtesy of the artist.
Figures 25 – 32, Palestine photos, (anti-clockwise):

Zahrah Habibullah, Confined spaces, 2014, heat transfer photo, acrylic, cotton, nylon 10 x 14 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, Will fences keep us in, 2014 heat transfer photo, acrylic, cotton, nylon 14 x 10 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, Lighting Gaza, 2014, heat transfer photo, acrylic, cotton, nylon 10 x 14 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, Gaza’s gate to the sea, 2014, heat transfer photo, acrylic, cotton, nylon 10 x 14 cm
Zahrah Habibullah, New growth, 2014, heat transfer photo, acrylic, cotton, nylon 14 x 10 cm (image not available)
Zahrah Habibullah, Small openings, 2014, heat transfer photo, acrylic, cotton, nylon 14 x 10 cm (image not available)
Zahrah Habibullah, Warm cups of tea, 2014, heat transfer photo, acrylic, cotton, nylon 14 x 10 cm (image not available)
Zahrah Habibullah, Scaling walls and barriers, 2014, heat transfer photo, acrylic, cotton, nylon 14 x 10 cm (image not available), images courtesy of the artist.
These works relate her own search for ancestry and belonging with that of the Palestinians, whose stories inspired her and her husband’s work in Gaza in recent years. She mixes perspex, stainless steel, enamel and with sterling silver chenier and photographs in an attempt to create new objects imbued with ancestry that can be passed down from generation to generation she says ‘I love things and I love place and connection to place and I feel objects are the embodiment of that.’

Palestine is also central to Fatima Mawas’s works Fiddler on the Roof (2010) (figure 33) and Fiddler on the Roof II (2014) (figure 34), filmed four years apart – in 2010 in a refugee camp in Bethlehem and in 2014 in Sydney after Operation Protective Edge when high levels of emergency births were occurring in the Gaza Strip. Inspired by the dual stories of the loss of land (both of ownership and access) and of people, Mawas and Achanese dancer Afira O’Sullivan created an impromptu dance against the sharp sounds of a Palestinian violinist, by compartmentalizing the scenes like the Palestinian state. She recounts; ‘Palestine is all about the land and the soil. We heard

49 Interview with Zahra Habibullah with Hamida Novakovich, 2014.
a lot of stories about people being taken at night and their bones or ashes being returned years later.  

Figure 35. Fatima Mawas, *Fighting For Air*, 2012, HD, 16-9, single channel video, stereo, image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 36. Nadia Faragaab, *Qolka*, (the Room) 2011, installation, photo property of Hamida Novakovich.

50 Interview with Fatima Mawas 2014.
Her 7 minute feature *Fighting For Air* (2012) (figure 35) addresses the coming of age of a teenage Muslim girl Khadija in the 1990s who is struggling with her identity and sexuality in her Lebanese Australian household. Khadija is secretly involved with illegal street fighting where she feels she can be herself, drawing on the struggles with identity and sexuality in Mawas’s life at the time.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 37. Nadia Faragaab, *Smoke Alarms*, 2011, installation, photo property of Hamida Novakovich.

Nadia Faragaab explores nuances of what it means to be Somali – ‘the constants and the change – no matter where the Somali is living in the world.’ Her installations *Qolka (The Room)* (2011) (figure 36) and *Smoke Alarms* (2011) (figure 37) contain household objects such as *idin* and *uunsi* (musk) that are part of the collective memory of the Somali culture. In *Dhadig (Women)* (2011) (figures 38 – 43) she juxtaposes images of ‘Somalia’ from Google onto the *jilbab* (full length outer garment worn by some Muslim women) on top of six black and white prints of

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traditional Somali women. Her multi-layering of images and textures questions how one may come to see themselves through the objectification of images both as insider and outsider. Similar to Idil Abdullahi, Nadia experienced the trauma of war as a refugee. As a child she was shot by a stray bullet and says this experience influences her belief in the necessity of dialogue within the Somali community in terms of discussing new cultural norms (such as wearing the jilbab) at face value. Kristin Langellier discusses the negative images of Somalia in mainstream media such as in the 1993 film *Black Hawk Down* and images of ‘starving women and children, the violence and lawlessness of the continuing civil war, and the piracy in international waters off the Somali coast – all subject to mobilization within global narratives about terrorism after September 11, 2001.’

52 Thus her works can be seen as an ongoing invitation for viewers, especially her community to talk about what being Somali means – in the many dimensions this takes place from the media, to cultural norms to one’s imagination.

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Figures 38 – 43, *Dhadig (Women)*, (left to right):
Nadia Faragaab, *Dhadig – Inanta Kow*, 2011, archival print on canvas with machine sewn digitally printed fabric, 82 x 55 cm
Nadia Faragaab, *Dhadig – Dhadig Kow*, 2011, archival print on canvas with machine sewn digitally printed fabric, 82 x 55 cm
Nadia Faragaab, *Dhadig – Inanta Labo*, 2011, archival print on canvas with machine sewn digitally printed fabric, 82 x 55 cm
Nadia Faragaab, *Dhadig – Dhadig Labo*, 2011, archival print on canvas with machine sewn digitally printed fabric, 82 x 55 cm
Nadia Faragaab, *Dhadig – Inanta Saddex*, 2011, archival print on canvas with machine sewn digitally printed fabric, 82 x 55 cm
Nadia Faragaab, *Dhadig – Dhadig Saddex*, 2011, archival print on canvas with machine sewn digitally printed fabric, 82 x 55 cm, photo property of Hamida Novakovich.
Experiences of being ‘Outsiders’

Marziya Mohammedali’s mixed-media installation *Call Them Home* (2016) (figure 44) is a memorial to those who have died while seeking asylum, be it on the way to Australia, within detention centres or as a result of the trauma endured through Australia’s asylum seeker processing program. Her work with activists in Perth has made her privy to conversations and anecdotes from asylum seekers greatly charging her work. Mohammedali’s influence for seeking justice for asylum seekers (she is a protest photographer) is in part influenced by her parents’ stories about fleeing Bangladesh (then known as East Pakistan) when Bangladesh seceded from Pakistan. They were being threatened with violence and persecution because they were non-Benglisis. Mohammedali paints the upper sides of the fishing boat with the names of known victims who have passed away whilst beneath the word ‘unknown’ is repeated, indicating the vast lists of names that have not reached public knowledge in recent years. Mohammedali’s work is reminiscent of Palestinian-American artist...
Emily Jancir, who is a third generation exile and U.S. resident. Jancir’s *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages that were Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948* (2001) consists of a refugee tent with the names of villages sewn onto the tent with thick black thread.\(^{53}\)

Figure 45. Abdul Abdullah, *Pushback*, 2016, digital print, 100 x 175 cm, image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 46. Abdul Abdullah, *Reclaiming territories*, 2016, digital print, 100 x 175 cm, image courtesy of the artist.

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Abdul Abdullah’s *Pushback* (2016) (figure 445) and *Reclaiming Territories* (2016) (figure 46) look at the broad frustrations of marginalized youth. Drawing on his previous works from the series *Siege* (2014) they are concerned with the depiction and perception of monsters coming out of the dark. Images of marauding youth during the Arab spring, the London riots and even the recent mob violence in Melbourne and Perth perpetuate a universal distrust of young marginalised people. The figures in Abdullah’s photographs could be any youth, anywhere today, a reflection of the coalescence of events seen through multiple channels of media, the world over.

This work relates to his 2011 work *Them and Us* drawing on symbolic imagery (the ape masks that Abdullah wears) from the American science fiction film *The Planet of the Apes* (2001) directed by Tim Burton, based on the original 1968 film. This highly popular film is based on the fable of ‘species role-reversal tapped a deep vein of symbolism in American national mythology: the symbolism of race difference and race conflict…and ghetto conflicts in the modern city.’ Abdullah’s narrative is designed to draw the audience into the experience of ‘the other’ by proposing alternative modes of empathetic negotiation. He believes ‘historical and contemporary depictions of “the other” as the savage, unreasoning alien, have been used to justify war, oppression, exploitation as well as inequitable domestic social policies.’ While *Siege* talks to the experience of young Muslims, the issues and questions raised are designed to be relevant to the experience of young people from

57 Abdullah, "Abdul Abdullah ". Date accessed 10 March 2016.
all ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Abdul’s work on identity and multiculturalism positions himself as a hybrid product of the system, which ‘served as a metaphor for the negative consequences of racial encounters,’ that is ‘Us and Them.’

Post-colonial studies, Narratives and the Politics of Fear

At the basis of the GenYM artists themes is the importance of narratives, both self-proclaimed and prescribed that they, as individuals and as a peer group grapple with. The politicisation of culture has become a problem for the GenYM artists, but one of their roles is to depoliticise it once more, as in Nadia Faragaab’s Smoke Alarms (2011), a comic work that represents the everyday issue of burning incense in houses equipped with fire safety devices, saying that culture is inherently adaptive, even imagined as in her work Qolka (The Room) (2011).

Dean Chan critiques the terminology used by curators in the late 1990s to encapsulate what they term the new Asian ‘presence’ in contemporary Australian art. In the exhibition catalogue: Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian Interactions (1996), the artists are described as being in a ‘liminal space and in-between time, which, having broken out of the binary opposition between circular and linear, gives a third space and a different time the chance to emerge.’ Like Abdul Abdullah, Chan takes issue with the use of the term ‘hybrid’ to describe people of mixed culture who often ‘hyphenate’ their identities and the inherent binary this creates. Although the featured artists were marketed in a seemingly positive way, Zahra Habibullah’s journey to

58 Ibid.
establish ‘place’ alongside her identity (both spiritual and ancestral) led her to create works that voiced the conflict she internalized. The same could be said about Abdul-Rahman who draws on narratives passed down to him from his parents. Rubaba Haider’s repetitive use of objects from sewing kits forms the basis of her healing-based practice that becomes a continuous, even all-consuming ode to pain and healing. Suzi Elhafez’s *Demarcations of Timelessness* is suggestive of this also, the repetitive human torsos in the faint shape of Islamic ornamentation against the depth of black reminds us that human life ultimately ends.

The effects of 9/11 in shaping discourse on Muslims and refugees are brought to light with Marziya Mohammedali’s work *Call Them Home* (2016). The *HERE&NOW16/GenYM* exhibition opening coincided with the latest news of tragedy – an asylum seeker on Nauru known as Omid burned himself alive in protest of Australia’s continuing policies.\(^{60}\) Caterina Albano reminds us that we currently live in a time of ‘fear’ where ‘subjective experience and socio-cultural constructs coalesce to produce today’s feelings of fear and anxiety.’\(^{61}\) In the space of art, she argues, ‘becomes the vehicle of a new terror that for the critic is both dangerously subversive and, in general, ethically futile, which in turn may be formalized into a contemporary aesthetics of fear.’\(^{62}\) These artists practice what is known as what Ruth Ilham and W. Alan Smith say is hermeneutical ‘praxis’– the epistemological theory or ‘knowledge-for-the-sake-of-transformation’ to challenge theory in light of a practical experience.

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62 Ibid., p.15.
in the arts. Here, they can be seen as individual voices rather than as segregated groups who are interpreted in terms of competing narratives of ‘truth.’ They say ‘to regard different religions simply as rational belief systems with incompatible truth claims, implies a problematic distortion of the multifaceted phenomenon under investigation.’ Instead of viewing religion as an ‘imaginative engagement,’ praxis allows individuals to ‘critically reflect on their social/historical situation and present action therein.’ This understanding of identity expression may be a useful way to look at the GenYM artists in terms of offering alternative views to the predominant post-9/11 discourses that have consumed ideas of growing up since 2001. As Langellier says ‘identity as an unfolding performative accomplishment challenges static and essentialized notions of differences and thus joins postmodern trends that emphasize hybridized, transnational, in-between, and other “third space” conceptualizations (for example Bhabha 1994, Forman 2001, Ibrahim 2008, Khan 2000).’

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63 Praxis-centred theology intends to be put to work in the lives, communities, and situations of people (Joyce Ann Mercer in Ruth Illman and W. Alan Smith, Theology and the Arts, Engaging Faith (Routledge, 2013), p.50.
64 Schleiermacher in ibid., p.29.
65 Ibid., p.54.
66 Ibid.
Chapter One:

Constructions of Muslim identity, from Orientalism to Terrorism

9/11 marked a new era in many ways. The U.S. led War on Terror and subsequent terrorist attacks in Bali, London, Madrid and most recently Paris have further deepened suspicions of Islam and Western Muslims. ‘The notion that there is somehow a fundamental incompatibility between Muslim civilization and Western civilization, or rather between key ‘values’ embedded within the cultures of those civilisations, poses a very threatening and depressing challenge to those who like the idea of living in a multicultural Britain,’ says one U.K. commentator, and the same could be said in Australia.68 The fear of Islamic extremism are not only reflected in the media, but are vocalised by a growing number of Western politicians and academics who view Muslims and Islam as a greater social threat.69

In 2014 the threat of the ‘Islamic State’ or ‘Da’esh’ in parts of Syria and Iraq, renewed the threat of ‘home-grown’ extremists (many of who are Gen Y) who have joined as foreign fighters and supporters.70 In the West’s popular imagination, Muslims have become the ‘folk devil’ of western liberal democracy where they are

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69 George Morgan and Scott Poynting, Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West (Ashgate 2012).
‘antithetical to the things liberal democracies loved and cherish(ed) most… (such as) education, on civic life, or on the arts at large.’

Muslims have become a demonized, racialised Other ‘reduced to caricatures of oppressed women and misogynistic, violent men inclined to terrorism’

giving way to popular anxieties around transnationalism and the failure of multiculturalism and of immigrants to assimilate into Australian society.

In this chapter I will look at how this atmosphere created by the War on Terror has undoubtedly affected the way Muslims have come to view themselves, their communities and the plight of other Muslims or the *Ummah* (the global Muslim community) all over the world. There are different approaches to the study of Muslim identity that aim to understand Muslims as a socio-religious group. This includes post 9/11 discourses on Muslims, Islam, Islamophobia and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of Muslims in the West.

Literature on Muslims in contemporary art is largely limited to discussions on identity. Typically, introductory chapters in art exhibition catalogues read like ethnographic portraits of Muslims from a sociological, anthropological perspective. This chapter will address this contemporary issue of identity, and the politicisation of identity, through the representation of Muslim women. For women have been constructed as the most helpless of Muslim subjects, and it is through these representations, and the underlying Orientalism of these representations, that it is possible to understand the construction of identity in a post-

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9/11 world. I will also look at how gen Y Muslims have been perceived as objects of a greater campaign targeted at de-radicalisation post 9/11 and how the arts have been used as one counter-narrative strategy.

Orientalism, Muslim women and Islamic art

Western views of Islam formed during the colonial era reflected European ideology about Muslims and the Middle East then known as ‘The Orient.’ Colonial expeditions into the Middle East were marked with fascination, difference, exoticism and the aesthetics of travel.\(^{74}\) Edward Said’s groundbreaking critique of Colonial methods of representations in the Middle East, *Orientalism* (1978), haunts Western stereotypes of the non-West, making exhibitions daunting at times for curators and institutions. According to Said, Orientalism is ‘the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient…Orientalism (is) a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.’\(^{75}\) Here these Orientalist ideas perpetuated romanticized versions of Islam as ‘distant’ and removed from the West, justifying colonialism for 200 years.\(^{76}\) Islam in the ‘East’ was consistently viewed in polar opposition to Europe in the ‘West’ and ranges of descriptors were employed to describe Islamic beliefs, norms, practices and people, including evil, barbaric, backward, oppressed and so forth. As Said points out, Orientalism is a discourse that Orientalises the Orient for the purpose of Occidental consumption. Throughout the centuries these binary

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oppositions are reinvented in post-colonial and post-9/11 contexts to function in contemporary times.\textsuperscript{77}

Prior to 9/11, Orientalist literature on Muslims had popular appeal in North America through novels and films such as \textit{Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women} (1994) and \textit{Not without My Daughter} (1991) which ‘helped to incite racist, anti-Muslim and anti-Iranian feelings across Europe and North America’ and in the aftermath of 9/11, this genre has gathered a new momentum.\textsuperscript{78} In the space of arts, Muslim women must also work against these challenges. Theo Van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s 2004 film \textit{Submission} challenged what was seen as Islamic practices of violence against women, justified by verses from the Qur’an. The film was met with negative responses by Muslim extremists who murdered the director in 2004, concreting ideas that Muslims were easily offended by any form of imagery that aims to critically challenge Islam.

The US media urgently sought to understand the 9/11 attacks through a ‘cultural’ understanding of the treatment of Muslim women, but this mirrored an Orientalist stance. As Maryam Khalid argues, Orientalism is necessary for critical analysis to understand the War on Terror discourse and how Westerners may come to view non-Western ‘Others,’ whether it is through the media or the arts.\textsuperscript{79} She links this to the language of Orientalism; ‘…it uncovers the ways in which non-Western cultures, traditions and peoples are and have been perceived in the ‘West’ through binary


\textsuperscript{79} Khalid, "Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the 'Other' in the War on Terror."
oppositions depicting the ‘East’ as irrational, backward, exotic, despotic and lazy, and the West as rational, moral and the pinnacle of civilization."\textsuperscript{80}

The effect of Orientalism on Muslim women has been significant. She is a figure that threatens to dis-gender the hegemonic construction of ‘good Muslim’ versus ‘bad Muslim,’ which is one of the key cultural logics of the U.S. – led global…support for ‘liberal’ or ‘moderate’ Islam as Maryam Khalid describes. Muslim women are seen as being neither passive nor oppressed, and are instead ‘willfully veiled…who is seen to defiantly negate western liberal notions about social development and secular modernity.’\textsuperscript{81} This view adds to the binary in which Muslims are seen to adopt Western values as ‘good’ while those who are overtly religious and Islamic are deemed to be anti-West and therefore ‘bad.’ Furthermore Amina Jamal says ‘colonial representations of the Muslim women have been intensified and also overwritten by notions of gender, race, class, and religion shaped by ideas about security and civilization.’\textsuperscript{82}

Post-colonial theory has played an important role in challenging Western ideas of modernity. The post-colonial has allowed for the possibility of a multiplicity of experiences that do not necessarily entail ‘a decisive break or rupture with the past, ‘but instead provide a space for ‘an uneven negotiation between past and future that can remain unresolved.’\textsuperscript{83} In the global world of contemporary art it is said that

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid. p.17.
\textsuperscript{81} Amina Jamal, "Just between Us: Identity and Representation among Muslim Women " \textit{Inter-Asia Cultural Studies} 12, no. 2 (2011): p.204.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p.204.
cultural specificity and exotic annexes can be seen as tools that can be leveraged in this market, as well as to represent the agency of those who are not well represented.

Annette Tzavaras discusses how art was used to depict images of the ‘Orient,’ which still exist in Australia today. The first image of women in hijab in artistic media was in the 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers* in the wake of the Iranian Islamic revolution.⁸⁴ The late 1970s onwards presented mass images of Iranian women clad in dark ‘chador’ and rifles marching through the streets partaking in the revolution. This militarised image of Muslim women drastically shaped the Middle East where ‘…Islam became conflated with terrorism’ superseding previous Orientalist and exotic ideals of the ‘Far East.’⁸⁵ This has changed the way the mainstream has imagined Islamic aesthetics to be – either reminiscent of exoticism or a reminder of oppression.

One of the earliest Orientalist paintings in Australia made in 1897 by Arthur Streeton, depicts the iconic image of an Egyptian women ‘Fatima Habiba’ as a fictive representation of ‘the imaginary orient.’⁸⁶ As an artist, Streeton was able to capture the ‘Orientalist mystique’ in his travels in the Middle East:

> Fleeting effects of light and movement, colourful patterns of the mosques, and the winding and narrow passageways. The tall

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minarets towering into the brilliant blue sky, the dazzling and sparkling clarity and crispness of white.\(^87\)

Colonialists collected art for Orientalist campaigns which fed into various depictions of the ‘Other’ in the West. We can see that this has continued today where culture can be accessed through multiple channels without any access to the source culture. She also cites Ziauddin Sadar who traced 800 years of Orientalist thought developed during Western interaction with Islam where ‘Islam is seen and evoked as a ‘problem,’ resulting in an impasse: Islam as an insurmountable obstacle between Western civilization and its destiny: globalization.\(^88\)

In their volume *Theology and the Arts, Engaging Faith*, Illman and Smith discuss how the arts and theology may interact in relation to the traditional centres of the Western art world. Western art history has been shaped by Eurocentric views of the world, developing as early as Greek and Roman art.\(^89\) In European art history, the West positions itself at the centre of aesthetic creation, value and preservation. Arjun Appaduari suggests that Western civilization was the ‘yardstick by which all other civilizations and cultures were measured: ‘Western modernity became a natural, binary opposite of non-western tradition, which came to be known as medieval, ‘evolving’ cultures.\(^90\) Third world, developing or non-Western societies were (and in

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87 Ibid.  
88 Sadar in Khalid, "Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the 'Other' in the War on Terror," p.18.  
89 A dominant feature of history is that it is divided into ‘ancient’, ‘medieval’ and ‘modern’ thus art movements also came under this umbrella. However, Eurocentric views are not accurate because Europe is a mix of cultures. From historical Greece Jon Pietersie says – it did not simply absorb non-European influences, ‘it was constituted by them’ in Illman and Smith, *Theology and the Arts, Engaging Faith* p.39.  
many cases are still) seen as frozen in the past thus creating a new form of racism that excluded outsiders who did not fit this idea of ‘art.’ Sean Cubitt says:

Art that demonstrates unredeemable cultural difference is of the highest value, since it undergirds the fundamental argument of neo-racism: that there exist cultural differences that cannot be overturned, differences that provide ideological and discursive explanations for the continuation of white dominance.\textsuperscript{91}

Boris Groys discusses how Western standards of beauty and aesthetics creates another power play in art – that of hierarchies of value. He points to the importance of aesthetic judgment that reflects dominant social conventions and power structures.\textsuperscript{92} So that as images of mass culture, entertainment, and kitsch have emerged in the twentieth century, these have been given more aesthetic status within the traditional high art context:

By criticizing the socially, culturally, politically, or economically imposed hierarchies of values, art affirms aesthetic equality as a guarantee of its true autonomy. It is not the ‘vertical’ infinity of divine truth that the artist today makes reference, but to the ‘horizontal’ infinity of aesthetically equal images.\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{91} Sean Cubitt in ibid., p.39.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., p.15-17.
In this sense, we can attempt to understand how Islamic art has been seen in terms of high art, and GenY artists who are instead indebted to popular culture influences such as hip-hop fall short of the grandeur seen in major institutions.

**Islamophobia and Gen Y Muslim Identity Politics in the West**

It is no surprise that the majority of literature available on Muslims surrounds issues of identity construction, especially for young Western Muslims. In Australia, the relationship between Muslims and the wider community has centred on the ongoing debate of what it means to be ‘Australian’. Early literature discusses the historical place of Muslims in Australia such as *Muslims in Australia* (2004), *Islam Dreaming: Indigenous Muslims in Australia* (2011) and *Understanding Muslim Identities: From Perceived Relative Exclusion to Inclusion* (2008). Government publications aimed at combating negative images of Muslims in Australia have highlighted the achievement and contribution of Australian Muslims, including *The Australian Journey: Muslim Communities* (2006), and the University of Technology Sydney’s *Voices shaping the Perspectives of Young Muslim Australians* (2011) and aim to understand how Islam, in its various religious, cultural, ethnic and socio-political and economic manifestations influence young Muslims identity in Australia. Speaking of the Australian Muslim community’s interaction with the wider community post-9/11, Samina Yasmeen and others argue that this self-inclusion and/ or exclusion from

society comes from both the mainstream and minority groups and more solutions are needed in order to arrive at a socially cohesive society.95

Tariq Ramadan uses Islamic theological and juridical tradition to make his case, suggesting identity forged on multiculturalism, globalization and integration undermines the individual’s sense of belonging to one nation, saying that citizens may have a ‘scattered’ sense of loyalty and identity. In his discussion of young British Muslims, Madood says their identity is directly influenced by outside pressures, namely foreign policy, social exclusion and Islamophobia alongside which are theological, societal and familial (i.e. parental culture) factors that also play a large role in identity construction. Muslim youth are not described in a generational sense, but more in terms of a generation responding to a stale atmosphere of Islamophobia; ‘The relationship between race, ethnicity, youth and digital media, post 9/11 politics, online hate-speech practices, and digital youth and media cultures is critical to an understanding of Muslim youth in western societies today.’96 These premises have given weight to many Muslim artists who feel motivated to present a positive representation of Muslim Australians. Gen Y Muslims are thus considered a formidable force warranting attention from academia, the media and public.

Alice Aslan says the term Islamophobia emerged around 1990 in response to a religious-political revival at the end of the Cold War. Islamophobia can be defined as ‘a contemporary form of cultural racism that refers to the marginalization and

95 Such as Tariq Ramadan and Philip Lewis: "Understanding Muslim Identities: From Perceived Relative Exclusion to Inclusion". Date accessed 12 October 2012 Tariq Ramadan, Western Muslims and the Future of Islam (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2004). Not surprisingly, these factors combine leading to genuine confusion, ‘…for while in the minds of some young people, there is a genuine sense of crisis – they are not sure as to what their identity should be’ Lewis, Young, British and Muslim
96 Yasmeen, Muslims in Australia: The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion p.85.
exclusion of Muslims based on their cultural and religious differences.\textsuperscript{97} Islamophobia became an outcry against increased migration to, and multiculturalism in Australia. It relates to the post 9/11 fear of the Muslim Other based on a popularized collective insecurity and anxiety. She describes how many people in politics, media and wider society view Muslims and Islam as a problem, attributing crime, misogyny, terrorism and violence to Islam.\textsuperscript{98}

Strategies against the perceived threat of Islam by the collective Western democracies play out in a number of ways. Firstly, they are against public symbols of Islam, such as the banning of women’s headscarves, building of mosques and halal food certification. Secondly, the state has been able to adopt more punitive/ coercive measures and ‘regimes of surveillance’. Thirdly, there are challenges to the rights of free expression and association of minorities. Authorities also turn a blind eye to acts of vilification in forms of ‘permission to hate’ and do not hold both acts of violence at the same level.\textsuperscript{99} All of these factors are becoming more global in that ‘there are greater levels of cooperation between nation states towards standardizing strategies of policing of, and punitive response towards, those deemed to be ‘outsiders.’\textsuperscript{100}

\textit{Assertions of Islamic Identity through the arts}

The \textit{GenYM} artists were teenagers or young adults when the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre occurred on September 11, 2001 and they witnessed over a decade of various forms of Islamophobia unfold as individuals and community members, often being described as:

\textsuperscript{97} Yahya Birt 2006 in Aslan, \textit{Islamophobia in Australia} pp.1-2 and p.9.  
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., p.9.
(T)hey (Muslims) are neither completely foreigners nor really recognised as Australians. Their uncertain status and place in Australian society leaves them vulnerable to discrimination and racism: they are generally marginalised as un-Australian, and also paradoxically blamed for not integrating into Australian society. And when international conflicts break out, their loyalty to Australia is constantly questioned, and they are either described as a fifth column and intimidated, or just tolerated.\(^{101}\)

So how has this atmosphere influenced the way Muslims produce and interact with art? Abdul Abdullah recalls being influenced by the appearance of Western Muslims in Gangster Rap from the early 1990s, that he encountered in the media.\(^{102}\) The coincidence of hip-hop and Muslim identity can be traced as far back as the 1970s.\(^{103}\) Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the new Youth Culture (2014) by Hisham D. Aidi and Michael Muhammad Knight’s fictional novel Taqwacores (2003) also highlights the punk rock subculture inspired by the Sufi anarchist Peter Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakin Bey).\(^{104}\) Other subcultures such as graffiti arts resonated with young Muslims globally well before 9/11.

After 9/11, a cohort of authors from the United States such as Asma Gull Hasan and

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101 Morgan and Poynting, Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West p.9.
103 The correlation between hip-hop artists and culture and Australian Muslim artists would need more discussion, but can be seen with artists such as the Crooked Rib Artists who worked with graffiti artist Muhammad Ali from the UK between 2005 – 2008. Other artists like graphic designer Peter Gould also linked many Australian Muslim artists to artists from the Bay Area, San Francisco from 2002 onwards.
Moustafa Bayoumi attempted to define their identity by writing about their experiences based on the dual identity of being American in the wake of the negative repercussions of the terrorist attacks. Writing in 2002 in the book *American Muslims, The New Generation*, Hasan describes herself as a ‘twenty-five-year-old Muslim feminist cowgirl’ who was ‘convinced that Muslim Americans are the victims of mistaken identity.’\(^{105}\) Bayoumi’s work *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America* (2008) traces the experiences of seven young Arab-Americans navigating life in a post–9/11 environment.\(^{106}\) He references W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, reflecting on the process of being in-between ‘villain and victim’ in the West. These anxieties have also played out in the form of comedy. Comedy was perhaps the most popular artistic way Muslims in Western countries started challenging misconceptions about Islam, while at the same time critiquing government foreign policies through their identity as citizens utilizing freedom of speech and expression. *Allah Made Me Funny* is an American comedy group established in 2003 featuring three comedians – Azhar Usman, Preacher Moss and Mohammad Amer.\(^{107}\) *Allah Made Me Funny* played on the use of the Arabic name Allah for God, which had come to be associated with terrorism. They modeled their show on Spike Lee’s *The Original Kings of Comedy* (2000) where three Black comedians discuss various aspects of their lives.\(^{108}\)

These grassroots artistic expressions originating from street arts can also be seen to be influential, post 9/11. One example is el Seed, a graffiti artist from Canada who


was born and raised in Paris, France to Tunisian immigrants. He applies his knowledge of Islamic artistic practices such as calligraphy and geometric ornamentation to create his own complex style of street art. Graffiti first emerged in the 1960s as an illegal activity associated with lower-class youths in New York. It was only until the 1970s that ‘Graffiti art’ became a recognised art form gaining the respect of the art world under ‘Pop art’. Around the 1980s, the ‘novelty’ of original graffiti art wore off as few artists conformed to the changing standards within the art community. Graffiti art was seen as lacking in aesthetic and thus denigrated to ‘low art’. Even so, graffiti art still developed into a distinct form of art. el Seed’s use of sacred text or script in the form of graffiti art (called Calligraffiti) reiterates the power of subversive street art in providing a voice to minority or marginalized people.

So it is that Muslim identity is constituted on the one hand by the representations of a Western society shaped by the impact of September 11. On the other, Muslim artists have been influenced by various art forms such as comedy, graffiti and hip-hop. These various forms also play a role in shaping Muslim identity in the twenty-first century, as they respond to the negative representations of Islam in the West.