Chapter Two:

Negotiating meaning between Contemporary, Islamic and Muslim art

Islamic art has influenced contemporary artistic practice in varying and impactful ways. The great collections of Islamic art in museums and galleries such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art continue to inspire a diverse aesthetic. "Comprising sacred and secular objects, the collection reveals the mutual influence of artistic practices such as calligraphy, and the exchange of motifs such as vegetal ornament (the arabesque) and geometric patterning in both realms." The Jameel Prize at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) invites new work to be made every two years, based on traditions of Islamic art to show "how artists and designers use these traditions in a way that is vividly relevant to the contemporary world." The V&A’s Islamic art collection dates back to the 1850s and is one of the largest in the world.

Dissecting the relationship between Muslim artists, Islamic art and Western art history is no easy task. In his essay What Makes Islamic art Islamic? (1976) Oleg Grabar reflects on the political and academic changes that occurred during his academic career around the 1970s. Grabar initially studied Islamic art from a historical point of view until the Western Muslim elite (which he was part of) begun to question the representation of Islamic art and dissect the language they had

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adopted. Grabar describes the: ‘uneasy equilibrium between three poles: the ways and procedures of art historians in general, the restrictions and expectations that provided Islamic art with its originality, and the visual junctions between contemporary Western and traditional Islamic arts.’\textsuperscript{111} Although Grabar does not give any answers he does make some important connections of Islamic art with contemporary art theory. Firstly, he says that the social meaning of Islamic art was one where there was ‘aesthetic democratization’ – everyone, regardless of social status, could enjoy art. Secondly, the process of ornamentation can be seen as highly contemporary as ‘just as in writing (using) arbitrary but modular signs to express its deepest meanings rather than ideographic borrowings from the perceived world of nature.’\textsuperscript{112}

Using the term ‘Islamic art’ without understanding the way it has been shaped in the past may create a trap of definitions, bounded by expectations and ideas of what it may signify to individuals, Muslim communities, collectors and institutions that include Islamic art. In order to understand the different ways Islamic art has been interpreted, I have divided this chapter into four sections:

1) Classical Islamic art – Islamic art present in institutions, as artifacts from the past, collected by art collectors during the colonial period in the Islamic empire. These form the basis of museology collections.

2) Islamic art as an aesthetic – art and design based on traditional styles of Islamic art such as calligraphy and ornamentation. These aesthetics are based on the principles connected to the Oneness of God and Islamic spirituality.

3) Islamic art as a spiritual practice – Muslim artists connect their practice of

\textsuperscript{111} Oleg Grabar, "What Makes Islamic Art Islamic?*, in Islamic Art and Beyond: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art, Volume Iii (Burlington, Vt: Ashgate/ Variorum c2006), p.xx.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., p.250.
Islamic arts and creativity to their personal spiritual practice.

4) Contemporary art by Muslims – Contemporary artists who create works that may or not be connected to their idea of being Muslim. They identify as Muslim for personal, cultural, ethnic or religious reasons.

David Slater suggests that theories of globalization produced in the West must be rethought in the light of critical post-colonial perspectives.¹¹³ This entails a sustained treatment of critical research on globalization produced by the non-West, such as examining what Muslims make of Islamic art. By making a connection between the global and the postcolonial, we open up different ways of thinking about politics and culture in global times and how power continues to play out in the art through a propagation of Islamic art.¹¹⁴ As we will explore in this chapter, these permeating ideas of Islamic art have come to influence the way Muslims produce art, on one hand, and the way audiences view Islamic and Muslim art, on the other.

1. Classical Islamic art

Mikhail Piotrovsky in *Earthly beauty, heavenly art: the art of Islam* (1999) says:

The expression ‘Islamic Art’ at once is both simple and complicated. Generally speaking, it refers to the art made by people who profess the faith of Islam. But whether we can make a strict definition of such a thing is as an artistic

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phenomenon has both raised, and continues to raise, serious
doubts among researchers and writers.¹¹⁵

Art history defines Islamic art as that produced in the former countries ruled by
Islamic empires such as the Maghrib and Spain, Egypt and Syria, Turkey, Iran,
Central Asia, and India over a span of fourteen centuries, covering a multitude of
forms such as architecture, calligraphy, mosaics, metalwork, pottery, jewelry and
textiles and to a lesser extent, painting and sculpture. While decorative arts in the
West are considered ‘minor,’ they made up a very large stylistic movement within
Islamic art, representing ‘universally accepted themes and symbols’¹¹⁶ connected to
the intrinsic spirituality of ‘the extension of the design beyond physical boundaries of
the object…that is, the visual representation of the universe, its intricate and infinite
existence.’¹¹⁷ Although many of the Islamic artists were not Muslim by faith, they
were still able to work with the principles of Islamic art. In The Formation of Islamic
Art (1973), art historian Oleg Grabar explains:

Islamic does not refer to the art of a particular religion, for a
vast proportion of the monuments have little if anything to
do with the faith of Islam. Works of art demonstrably made

¹¹⁵ Mikhail B. Piotrovsky and John Vrieze, eds., Earthly Beauty, Heavenly Art: Art of Islam
(Amsterdam: De Nieuwe Kerk Amsterdam
¹¹⁶ See Ettinghausen, Arab Painting: Treasures of Asia., p.15.
¹¹⁷ Ettinghausen, Arab Painting: Treasures of Asia., p.15.
by and for non-Muslims can appropriately be studied as works of Islamic art.\footnote{118 Oleg Grabar, \textit{The Formation of Islamic Art} (New Haven and London Yale University, 1973), p.1.}

‘Islamic art’ is an umbrella term for material culture that is as deep as it is wide. Blair and Bloom suggest:

\begin{quote}
The term ‘Islamic art’ seems to be a convenient misnomer for everything left over from everywhere else. It is most easily defined by what it is not: neither a region, nor a period, nor a school, nor a movement, nor a dynasty, but the visual culture of a place and time when the people (or at least their leaders) espoused a particular religion.\footnote{119 Shiela Blair and Jonathan Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study If an Unwieldy Field," \textit{The Art Bulletin} 85, no. 1 (1989).}
\end{quote}

As these ideas demonstrate, historical definitions of Islamic art carefully define Islamic art within perimeters of what it is and is not. More importantly, there is adherence to a historic timeline of Islamic art based on the Islamic dynasties beginning with the inception of Islam in 570 AD in Mecca and ending with the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1924.\footnote{120 These dynasties are the Umayyad caliphate (661-750), ‘Abbasid caliphate (750- 1258), Fatimid Caliphate (910-1171), Ayyubid Caliphate (1171-1260), Mamluk Caliphate (1250–1517) and Ottoman Caliphate (1517-1923). See The Met, "The Nature of Islamic Art " http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/orna/hd_orna.htm. Date accessed 19 June 2016.} Islamic art has only been created by a Western construction of it, that the very concept of Islamic art is immersed in Orientalism:

\begin{quote}
Twentieth-century scholars began to look back to a golden age of Islamic culture that they believe had flourished in the eighth and ninth centuries and project it simplistically onto
\end{quote}
the kaleidoscopic modern world. In short, Islamic art, as it exists in the early twenty-first century is largely a creation of Western culture.\textsuperscript{121}

Robert Irwin points out that the study of Islamic art is still at its infancy in the West, perhaps due to the loss of works throughout time.\textsuperscript{122} In Australia exhibitions of Islamic art have played an important role in building bridges with the wider community (which I will expand upon further in Section Four). Exhibitions featuring historical Islamic art objects include \textit{Crescent Moon: Islamic art and civilization in Southeast Asia} (2006), a National Gallery of Australia partnership with the Art Gallery of South Australia, \textit{Love and Devotion: Persia and beyond} (2012), at The State Library of Victoria and the travelling exhibition \textit{Art of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D Khalili Collection} which was organised by the Art Gallery of N.S.W. Its then director Edmund Capon remarked about the impact of the exhibition that: ‘Hopefully the curiosity will lead to interest and the interest will lead to knowledge and the knowledge will lead to appreciation and appreciation will lead to harmony.’\textsuperscript{123} Furthermore, Louise Ryan’s study of \textit{Art of Islam} asks how these events influenced the development of contemporary art by Muslims in Australia. She says the exhibition played the role of peace-maker by promoting ‘peace and understanding by demonstrating the shared cultural heritage of Judaism, Islam and Christianity’ at this time when the Cronulla Riots had set the tone of the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims only two years earlier.\textsuperscript{124} The Minister Barbara Perry who opened the exhibition reiterated that this was an ‘invitation for

\textsuperscript{121} Blair and Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study If an Unwieldy Field." p.10.
\textsuperscript{124} Louise Ryan, "Negotiating Difference: Islamic Identity on Display " \textit{International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia} (2012).
engagement between civilizations’ and that art was ‘…written in the humane and unifying language of art [which is] above all other things – simply beautiful’ (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{125} Thus, this no doubt displays the contemporary relevance of these collections of Islamic art and the relationship with Islam and Muslims on two levels – one in the past and one in the present. However, one may question the relevance of Islamic art in further understanding the socio-political, philosophical and religious underpinnings of Islam that existed parallel to this? Irwan is concerned about ‘what can buildings, paintings, and textiles tell us about medieval Islamic politics and society that documents cannot? It is a mistake to think of the history of Islamic art as a solid body of knowledge. It is better to picture it as a net – that is, a lot of holes tied together by string.’\textsuperscript{126}

2) Islamic art as an aesthetic

Piotrovsky describes the fundamental tenants of the Muslim faith through their study of classical works of art and architecture.\textsuperscript{127} Their study follows what Blair and Bloom (2003) call the ‘universalistic’ approach. This entails ‘all the arts produced by Muslims everywhere as reflecting the universal verities of Islam, just as God’s ineffable unity encompasses the infinite diversity of his creation.’\textsuperscript{128} Directly tied to Islamic beliefs, this theme of universalism seems the most befitting in providing an accurate description of Islamic art. The most important aspect of this approach is that it draws on Islamic beliefs of God. Where colonial studies of Islamic art saw the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{125} Ibid. Date accessed 17 September 2015.
  \item \textsuperscript{126} Irwin, \textit{Islamic Art in Context}, p.242.
  \item \textsuperscript{127} Piotrovsky and Vrieze, \textit{Earthly Beauty, Heavenly Art: Art of Islam}
  \item \textsuperscript{128} Blair and Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study If an Unwieldly Field; ibid.p.158.
\end{itemize}
patterns and decoration as an ‘enigma,’ Piotrovsky provides a way to understand these through an Islamic interpretation.

For Piotrovsky the three core elements of Islamic art are Arabic calligraphy, arabesque (vegetation scroll) and ornamentation (geometrical art). The highly complex nature of calligraphy and ornamentation are deeply connected to Islamic beliefs stemming from the Qur’an that contains ideas and principles from which Islamic societies base their laws, rules of conduct and system of values. Muslims believe the Qur’an is the direct word of God, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and is a ‘direct intermediary between God and people.’ The Qur’an was recorded in Arabic script and has maintained this language that has specific stylistic and artistic features that influenced the development of Islamic art aesthetics. The significance of the Qur’an as the most revered and read scripture for Muslims developed the art of manuscripts, book illustration and calligraphy. Calligraphy is also used independently as a written system of language on other ‘secular’ (non-religious) art works, as Terry Smith reflects in *Contemporary Art, World Currents*:

The widespread use of words, letters, or sentences as core compositional elements in the fine arts, architecture, decorative arts, and crafts of the region reflects the pervasive vitality of Arabic calligraphy, but is rooted above all in the sacred texts of Islam, the Word of God (Allah) as revealed to

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130 Piotrovsky in ibid.
131 Piotrovsky in ibid., p.52.
the Prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century and inscribed in the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{132}

Because the Word represents the direct transmission between God and people written script and calligraphy subsume a largely religious function in Islamic art which ‘explains the desubstantiated nature of Islamic art and architecture, for it consists of an unending stream of ornamentation that embodies the divine and formless Word.’\textsuperscript{133} Arabesque is one form of decorative motif that emerged after the tenth century. Also known as foliate scroll or vegetation art, it utilises organised foliate or floral motifs, angular interlaces, or decorative inscriptions in a sprawling design which cover whole surfaces. Arabesque was used to decorate surfaces of mosques and buildings as well as everyday items such as ceramics. Ornamentation or geometrical patterns come in the form of squares, circles, triangles, straight lines and lozenge shapes. Used together with vegetation scroll and calligraphy, ornamentation was used to give structure to large surfaces. When used layer upon layer, geometrical patterns created a three-dimensional illusion:

The very notion of using geometry for such purposes would be a deeply semiotic creation, which, just as in writing, used arbitrary but modular signs to express its deepest meanings rather than ideographic borrowings from the perceived world of nature. While occasionally hermetic, the process is a strikingly contemporary one.\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{132} Smith, \textit{Contemporary Art: World Currents} p.236.
\textsuperscript{133} Piotrovsky in Piotrovsky and Vrieze, \textit{Earthly Beauty, Heavenly Art: Art of Islam} p.52.
These patterns were often metaphors for the ‘all-pervasive but intangible divine’ where all ornamentation decoration starts with a centre, thus representing God.\textsuperscript{135} The ‘endless’ nature of ornamentation and arabesque then implies the infinite nature of God. Ornamentation is usually seen to cover surfaces of mosques and buildings and is very prominent in architecture.

Today, Islamic art aesthetics have been transmitted to Muslim audiences in Australia online through websites and images serving instant Islamic art aesthetics from geometric forms to Iznik tiles. These include Islamic Arts Magazine and Muslima: Muslim Women's Art & Voices, the latter providing a platform for women who are ‘defining their own identities and, in the process, shattering pervasive stereotypes.’\textsuperscript{136} These online platforms have gained wide readership in the last few years as digital exhibitions and have become a new trend in contemporary art providing access to Gen Y and Z in general. How removed these exhibitions and institutions are from the grass-roots initiatives of Muslim expressions is something to ponder on.

3) Islamic Art as a spiritual practice

Islamic art is seen as being highly entwined with the spiritual aspects of Islam. Islam comes from the root words s-l-m, ‘salam’ or submission to the Will of the Creator, Allah. A Muslim is an individual who follows the faith of Islam. The concept of Tawheed expresses the absolute oneness of God. The whole of creation is in submission to the Creator, that is, in an eternal state of being ‘Islamic.’ Tariq Ramadan explains how human beings are also part of this divine unity in the sense of

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
unity of their own being – their heart, their soul, their mind, and their body." This understanding guides humans on how to interact with this world and to ethically determine how he or she goes about on the quest to the divine path (sabil Allah). These fundamental principles of faith may inform the daily lives of Muslims through culture, family values, community values or an individual’s moral outlook. At the centre of ideas of Islamic art is the connection to God, and in this sense it is comparable to other devotional practices. As the former Art Director of the Islamic Museum of Australia, Nur Shkembi describes:

To a Muslim, the basic principle that everything is the creation of God does away with the ideological boundaries of what art should be to also explore the spirituality in science, maths and philosophy. For example, the intention of the structured rhythm of the geometric designs, the arabesque (or vegetation) and the nature of the calligraphy is to express the form and order found in everything that Allah has created, including that of the unseen, the gardens and spiritual journey of the afterlife. The circle and its centre are the point at which all Islamic geometric patterns begin. The circle symbolically represents one God, eternity, without beginning, without end.¹³⁸

In Kenneth George’s study of Abdul Djalil Pirous in *Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld* (2010), Pirous, as he is known, is a prominent painter whose works are based on an Islamic devotional practice or Sufi art known as dzikir (remembrance) imbued with Arabic calligraphy. To Pirous, making art is tied with his religious beliefs: ‘whatever I say in my art expresses my belief, and my faith in value for this life…like I say, I am an ordinary Muslim. I just want to be a good Muslim.’ George’s study also reveals the shared anxieties of Muslims who believe arts in Islam fall into two strict categories - permissible (halal) or impermissible (haram) acts. This is because image making in Islam is seen as aniconic, iconophobic and iconoclastic. Today misinterpretations of Islamic teachings are disseminated in Muslim communities through schools, madrassah (Islamic schools) and respected elders in the community. At it’s most extreme view, Islamic thought seems highly hostile to representational art and image-making, for example the ramifications of the so-called ‘Danish cartoon controversy’ which ‘…reinforce the idea that Islamic culture, wherever it is found is backward, repressive, and aesthetically impoverished.’

The Melbourne based female Muslim art collective Crooked Rib Art took their name as a direct reference to Islamic spirituality. The ‘crooked rib’ refers to biblical and Islamic sources explaining how Eve, the first woman was created from the rib of Adam, the first man. While this story might be read in terms of the inherent weakness of women, the Crooked Rib Art blog explains that this is in fact a positive a symbol of Islamic womanhood and ‘to express the flaws in the misinterpretations

139 George, *Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld* p.4.
140 Ibid., p.10.
141 Ibid., pp.10-11.
of our faith made by those claiming to hear our case, yet unwilling to hear our voice.'

Another event that joint Islamic teachings and the arts together was *Creativity and the Spiritual Path* (CSP) created by Australian graphic designer Peter Gould and artist Khadija O’Connell from the Bay Area, California. It was a series of conversations designed to ‘nurture and cultivate creativity among Muslims around the globe, both individually and collectively.’ The first CSP was in February 2009 in the Bay Area, then again in November 2009 in Sydney. To date six events have been held in different cities showcasing a spectrum of creative disciplines by Muslims from around the world. After embracing Islam in 2002, Gould travelled extensively around the Middle East where he reached a ‘turning point’ in his creative and spiritual outlook, establishing *Azaan* (now www.peter-gould.com), a design company specializing in graphic design and contemporary Islamic art. He tied his travels, his beliefs in the tenants of Islam with commerce and graphic design to explore ‘…the rich visual & spiritual traditions of Islam.’ Gould spent a few years living and working in The Bay Area and circulated amongst scholars like Shaykh Hamza Yusuf and Imam Zaid Shakir from Zaytuna College, the first Muslim liberal arts college (well known for their progressive teachings of Sufi Islam). Shaykh Hamza Yusuf is orignally British, and was ranked as ‘the Western world’s most influential Islamic scholar’ in 2009. In the 1990s he influenced dozens of young Muslims to revive

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144 Ibid.
traditional Islamic studies, many of whom became teachers in Zaytuna College. 

Yusuf’s impact on young Western Muslims came to prominence after 9/11:

“He confronts what it is to be young, British and Muslim”, says Fuad Nahdi, publisher of Q-News, the Muslim monthly magazine. “He shows there is life beyond beards, scarves and halal meat. He inspires confidence that you can build Islam in the west from all the local ingredients. You do not have to include political or theological burdens from traditional parts of the Muslim world.”

This direct correlation between traditional Islamic teachings and individual expression helped to build confidence in the Muslims around the world who were unsure about the place of arts in Islam (especially in the West). Idil Abdullahi takes issues with what is known as Islamic art:

There are issues. Especially the term ‘Islamic art’ has always confused me. If you make art, you can’t really call Islamic because art is not haram to begin with. When you give it the term Islamic, you’re trying to make something sacred that is already sacred. If you’re going do art, like nudity, that’s against the Shariah, but if you’re painting or singing, poetry, the idea that it has to be called Islamic, is not a term given by Muslims themselves, it used to be called Muhammadan Art.

147 Jack O'Sullivan, "If You Hate the West, Emigrate to a Muslim Country " *The Guardian* 9 October 2001. Date accessed 31 May 2016.
Now they are calling it Art of Islam. Muslim studies on art are all Western, Eurocentric based. People and artists are confused because they are not sure where they fit in. You’ll be ‘boxed in.’ I remember one girl who was good at drawing and then stopped because someone told her she wasn’t allowed to do that anymore.”

Islamic art can be said to form part of a spiritual and devotional practice reflecting Islamic principles. Grabar explains ‘Islamic in the expression Islamic art is not comparable to Christian or Buddhist in Christian art or Buddhist art’ as the term Islamic does not reflect objects made for the purposes of worship. Non-religious items that are a part of Islamic art included objects for the home that were imbued with ‘religious’ meanings, so he says this demarcation between the religious and the secular is not entirely useful. This use of Islamic ornaments to beautify a Muslim home is not new. For many Muslims the home is a space infused with religious meaning. The Muslim home is a space where daily ritual acts takes place such as performing salat (ritual prayer). It is also a space that reflects other Islamic values such as the separation of men and women (more so for non-related people than family members) and reflects ideals of minimal consumption and cleanliness. In a Western Muslim household, the inhabitants may pick and chose any aspects of Islamic culture they like. The use of Islamic ornaments serves as reminders for the Muslims and more importantly demarcates a ‘Muslim space’ from a Western one.

148 Interview with Idil Abdullahi with Hamida Novakovich, 2014.
149 Grabar, "The Experience of Islamic Art ", p.2
150 Ibid., p.104.
4) Contemporary art by Muslim artists

While it is true that all contemporary art produced after World War II can be defined as ‘contemporary art,’ artists who are Muslim struggle to have their work seen as contemporary art free from the association with Islamic art and art produced with devotional intent. In her flyer for the exhibition ‘You Am I: Contemporary Muslim Artists’ (2010), Nur Shkembi suggests the artistic production of art for Muslims has a deep religious association:

The Muslim artist at times seems to struggle to define themselves in the here and now. Islamic Art and the ‘c’ word, contemporary, seem to curiously repel each other with much gusto. … Spirituality has no time line therefore one may begin to consider the concept that traditional Islamic Art is Contemporary Art. It is traditional in the understanding that it carries this very same unconscious expression of *dhikr* regardless of what form or era it expresses itself in.151

Shkembi aims to blur the line between the dominant approaches of Islamic/Muslim art today, that of historical Islamic art, and that of the inner world of Muslim artists whom she represents through her show. Revisiting Kenneth George’s study on Islamic art as devotional practice, he remarks: ‘Recuperating an artistic vision through the rubric of ‘Islamic art’ does not destine today’s Muslim artists to an inescapable and derivative identity, but potentially equips them with a way of talking back to and reclaiming authority from the West in a bid to change our globalized art

circuits.' So, this begs the question, if a Muslim artists produces art with a devotional intent, is this art contemporary as opposed to 'Islamic art'? What more, is the difficulty in drawing out what the intention of the artists is, and whether this amounts to the artist’s spirituality, if at all? Particularly useful is George’s term ‘Lifeworlds’ to express ‘the ongoing circumstances in which we find ourselves, culturally, politically, historically, and experientially.’ He explains:

Today’s lifeworlds are both intimate and global in dimension. They are interconnected, lived-in spaces that bring people- with their thoughts, experiences, and sense of self- into reciprocal touch with global currents, seldom through a single language or culture but more commonly through a vast field of cultural-linguistic alternatives and pluralities.

George takes an actor-and-object approach with reflections from the actor on their objects and produces what he terms an ‘ethnographic art history.’ He says one of the dangers of this approach is ‘over privileging the figure of the artist… so as to treat the painter as if s/he knowingly is in control of aesthetic self-expression’ which ‘overlooks the social, cultural, and unconscious forces at work in creating both art and a self; and the latter is to cave in to the ideological forces of global capitalism.’

In this same sense, Rubaba Haider voices the predicament she faced with showcasing her traditional Islamic art in exhibitions in Australia. Although trained in Islamic art in Pakistan, she deliberately moved away from Islamic art for fear of being ‘type

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153 George 2010 p.4.
154 George, Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld p.4.
155 Ibid., p.144.
156 Ibid.
casted’ as an Islamic artist. She reflects on Arabic calligraphy:

Arabic calligraphy? Its copied – can you call that contemporary? Even though they are contemporary? I don’t call it contemporary. They don’t appeal to me because it is so reproduced. It’s fine to be inspired by the Islamic patterns and to make it something of your own. I have studied Islamic borders and if I just copied it, I think the appeal just looses itself.157

Glenn Lowry, the current Director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) discusses the complexity of an Islamic artistic identity in his 2008 Eva Holtby lecture on contemporary culture Oil and Sugar. To Lowry, artists are in a continuous dialogue and negotiation between global and local values. This struggle and expression of art enables many to work in a ‘global system’ that allows them to fall under the category of cosmopolitan and thus, contemporary.

Looked at from a different perspective, these artists are prepared to foreground their belief in a cosmopolitanism that transcends national or religious affinities in order to participate in the open and fluid exchanges of ideas and images this enables…Their cosmopolitanism…becomes a means of asserting their contemporaneity – an affirmation of

157 Ibid.
their access to and familiarity with the most progressive artistic practices and ideas available anywhere in the world.158

Speaking of artists mainly from the Middle East, Lowry explores the complex territory of the social, cultural, and political forces shaping their worlds. Lowry dismisses the term ‘Muslim artist’, simply preferring the term contemporary artists. He further explains; ‘challenges confronting the generation of artists who come from countries that are predominantly Muslim but are committed to a practice that engages them with artists and audiences elsewhere in the world.’159 He, like many other academics in the field ask – what makes art from the Middle East or art from Muslims Islamic? The idea of a contemporary art produced by Muslims emerges out of a history of Islamic art and aesthetics, and amidst the growth of a new generation of Western Islam. Contemporary artists such as Abdul Abdullah and Abdul Rahman Abdullah create works that draw on a range of inspirations that are not necessarily about being Muslim. Their works are held in various collections around Australia, including the Islamic Museum of Australia in Melbourne, which views their work as part of the history of Islamic art as it evolves into the contemporary. The way in which art embeds spirituality is a theme that has persisted through this generation, and in this sense carries on the heritage of classical Islamic art if we consider the original diversity it embodied.

158 Glenn Lowry, "Oil and Sugar: Contemporary Art and Islamic Culture " in Eva Holtby lecture on contemporary culture, No.3 (2008).p.12
159 Ibid., p.20.
Chapter Three:
Developments of Muslim arts in the Middle East

The emergence of Modern Islamic Art

The first European school of fine arts was the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts (Sanayi-I Nefise Mektebi), established in Istanbul in 1883 before the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1924. Istanbul was seen as one of important centre of culture in the region that influenced surrounding nations. In 1908 the second school of European fine arts was established in Cairo, teaching easel painting techniques including landscape, portraiture and still life. In 1924 Kemel Ataturk changed the official language in Turkey to Latin and in 1928 the Shah Reza Pahlevi banned traditional dress in Iran. Western arts spread to Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria ‘in large through graduates of Ottoman military and naval engineering schools where it was taught as part of the curriculum.’\textsuperscript{160} Foreign teachers taught the elites to embrace these arts, as they let go of indigenous forms of art. The time the Ottoman Empire fell, the elite of the country had already adopted Western art practices seeing them as superior than the indigenous traditional crafts, leading production into decline. Here ‘the occupation of Islamic land mainly by the French and the British undermined not only their economic self-sufficiency and ability to govern, but also their art.’\textsuperscript{161} Widjan solemnly describes the subsequent ‘loss of cultural identity creating a schizophrenic sense of guilt’ for the Arab artist due to what she was as the loss of geo-religious identities in the face of Western colonization.

\textsuperscript{160} Smith, \textit{Contemporary Art: World Currents}
After World War II there was a resurgence of traditional arts during the rise of pan Arab nationalist movements across the region. Although the damage from three decades of Western intervention into traditional arts was difficult to reverse, these Arab nationalist movements gave rise to quasi secular Arab states backed by the United States, Britain and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Zaha Hadid describes growing up in the Middle East as a child in the 1960s:

During my childhood, the Arab world – particularly the capital cities of the Beirut, Cairo and Baghdad – was experiencing an exciting engagement with the arts, infused with a dose of pan-Arab nationalism. Cairo in the 1960s was at its zenith… Beirut was the Middle East’s financial and tourist centre, where airlines stopped on their way to and from the Far East.\textsuperscript{162}

Well-known Modernist artists emerged such as Madiha Omar, Jamil Hamoudi and Shakir Hassan al-Said who mixed traditional arts with modern forms, embracing modernist art forms with Arabic calligraphy. Hassan al-Said was influenced by French modern painting while studying in Paris. He ‘combined the central tenents of Sufism with those of art informel.’\textsuperscript{163} Iran’s period of modernist artistic growth was more extensive with three Tehran Biennales between 1958 – 1966 and the establishment of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in 1977, ‘part of Shah Reza Pahlavi’s short lived efforts to modernise Iranian Culture.’\textsuperscript{164}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Smith, \textit{Contemporary Art: World Currents} p.237.
\item Bisharat, \textit{Contemporary Art from the Islamic World} p.241.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
modern art in the region was constantly intersected with the rise of independence movements that continued into the late 1970s. For example in Baghdad, the Baghdad Group of Modern Art ‘contributed to the spirit if independence manifested in the 1958 revolution against British rule.’

Artists in Exile

At the same time, Arab nations such as Palestine were experiencing dispossession and exile. The creation of the State of Israel marked the ‘Nakba’ (catastrophe) period in 1948 where many Palestinians were exiled to the West or neighbouring Arab states. Terry Smith reflects that the ‘post-Nakba artists were deeply affected by the experiences of displacement (ghurba) and the challenges of creating a national culture in conditions of extreme adversity.’

Gannit Ankori in Palestinian Art (2006) says that much of this art reflects a ‘synthesis between oriental and occidental components; the deliberate assimilation of indigenous religious and traditional art forms, such as Arabic calligraphy, Islamic art, Christian icons, Fellahi embroidery etc.; and a national, anti-colonist iconography that articulates a collective identity.’

Kamal Boullata (b.1942) is the most well known of modernists in exile from Palestine and who observes the way Palestinian art have developed under the influence of multiple pressures pertaining to the ‘the three stages that characterize emerging national cultures in colonized territories.’

Ankori says about Boullata:

These ‘assimilationists,’ as he critically calls them, superficially ‘transliterate’ European styles of painting and

165 Smith, Contemporary Art: World Currents p.238.
166 Ibid., p.247.
168 Ibid.
apply them to Arab, national or local subject matter. On the other hand, Boullata exalts artists who return to native visual sources without imitating them, and are enriched by European culture, without copying it in a derivative and subservient manner… a vertical search. 169

Iran’s 1979 revolution saw the exile of many artists such as Farhad Moshiri, Shirin Neshat and Shadi Ghadirian who experienced exile as young adults. 170 Many Iranian artists such as Moshiri, Ghadinan and Monir Farmanfarmaian returned to Iran in the 1990s. Others consider themselves as continuous exiles like Emily Jancir; many of these artists draw on their experiences of being ‘outsiders’ in their ancestral homeland and their new countries abroad. Under the conditions of exile, conceptual art played an important role in expressing issues that could not be verbally expressed. It also meant that art produced was more than just reformulations of traditional arts (or crafts). Here the artists’ role ‘shifted from genius, mastering techniques, to investigator, complexity of thought.’ 171

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169 Ibid., p. 17.
Contemporary reflections

Widjan Ali’s Contemporary Art from the Islamic World (1989) and Modern Islamic Art (1997) were the first comprehensive histories tracing the development of modern Islamic art that bridged an important shift from classical Islamic arts to modernity then contemporaneity. In these books she deeply reflects on the current state of ‘Modern Islamic art’ (which I would say, writing Modern Islamic Art in 1997), we can exchange for Contemporary Islamic art:

Modern Islamic art is an enigma that carries ambiguous connotations, in both its name and nature. On the one hand, the term modern conjures up a progressive, timely condition. On the other hand, the word Islamic has overtones of tradition and religion more relevant to the past than the present.

Her publication is aimed at promoting the importance of ‘Islamic art’ at a time in which people were questioning what it meant to be ‘Arab’ under ideas of Pan-Arabism and art that reflected these concerns. Her use of the term ‘Islamic art’ may be connected to her need to preserve the cultural heritage in Jordan as she was the Princess, formerly married to Prince ‘Ali bin Naif of Jordan. She is also founded the Royal Society of Fine Arts (1979) and the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts

172 George, Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld
173 Blair and Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study If an Unwieldy Field." p.xi.
(1980) with the aim of ‘the promotion of world peace through the advancement of the arts and the eradication of cultural apartheid.’ As Terry Smith aptly describes:

The region is the historical cradle of Islam, which has undergone a resurgence in recent decades, as many Muslims have challenged the modernizing paths taken by the countries in which they live and have sought – in varying forms, from negotiated coexistence to revolutionary fundamentalism.

With the array of conflicts and political movements occurring throughout the Middle East the growth of arts from the region cannot simply be summarised into one movement or style, let alone as ‘Islamic art’ both in modern and contemporary forms. Reflecting on these developments, Glen Lowry, MoMA director describes the boom in the art field in the West and abroad:

Artists such as Ghada Amer, Shirin Neshat, Walid Raad, and Kader Attia…are recognised as significant figure in the international scene…Art Dubai, now in its third year of activity, is an important commercial forum for contemporary art from the Middle East, while both Bonhams and Christie’s have open branches in the Gulf to cater to the growing market there. New publications such as Canvas and Bidoun… [and]

175 Bisharat, Contemporary Art from the Islamic World. p.236.
Checkpoint...are devoted to the work of contemporary artists from the Middle East. New galleries such as Green Cardamom in London, The Third Line in Dubai, and The Townhouse in Cairo...The Albion Gallery in London and New York, and Kamel Mennour in Paris. Qatar and Dubai have museums of modern art and Sharjah has the respected Biennials that draw upon the region, as well as beyond, in terms of both the artists who participate and the audience who attends.¹⁷⁶

Indeed this interest in arts from the Middle East, Muslims and Islamic art has boomed in the past fifteen years as Lowry describes. The oil rich Gulf region has been heavily investing in the arts. Dubai, Sharjah and Qatar are all seen as heavyweights in this region, with their ongoing development of the arts. However, these new art centers are undoubtedly hierarchical in nature, with questionable ethics such as the abuse of guest labourers from countries such as Sri Lanka and India. Alain Quemin (2013) points out these contradictions that attempt to create new cultural edifices funded by the wealth of the region suggesting that art serves any number of functions that have little connection with value and connoisseurship but are instead ‘...as a cover for further repressive policies’ within these states.¹⁷⁷ Returning to Ankori’s work on Palestinian art, she mentions that for a long time, art from the occupied territories have long been absent ‘in the historiography of art’ because Palestinian art is ‘either totally overlooked or relegated to the margins of the art globe.’¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Ankori, Palestinian Art p.15.
Anne Ring Petersen discusses the idea of cultural identity in the global art world by demonstrating that it is informed by a 'very complex network of entangled, intersecting and antagonistic concepts that reflect the variety of agendas and positions articulated in this discourse.' Globalization creates not only greater ‘imagined communities’ but idealized monolithic cultures. As it is a ‘global’ identity, this brings to the fore specific relationships such as those between the global, national and local, as well as issues of migration and borders (to name a few) that play into this reinvented global era. Exhibitions attempting to convey a unified sense of belonging to a contemporary Arab, Middle East or Islamic aesthetic have undoubtedly drawn a range of criticisms from artists, curators and critics who feel pigeonholed as token representatives of the region.

The exhibitions Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East (2006) at The British Museum, London, Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking (2006) at the MoMA, New York: and [Dis]locating Culture: Contemporary Islamic Art in America (2011) at the Michael Berger Gallery, Pittsburg. [Dis]locating Culture was one exhibition that challenged the stereotyping of Muslim and Islamic art by problematizing notions of cultural and religious homogeneity in through individual experiences of the artists. [Dis]locating Culture brought together nine contemporary artists to challenge stereotypes of Islam and build understanding through art. As gallery owner and co-curator Michael Berger mentioned the exhibition ‘shows that art related to or by Muslims isn’t ‘Islamic,’ but is

contemporary American art. However, a critic of the exhibition, Nadine Wasserman looked past its attempt at creating dialogue saying that the show lacked ‘aesthetic coherence’ and diversity – six out of the nine artists were from Iranian heritage and other others were from the U.S, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. As a concluding thought, Wasserman asks ‘how does painting about painting “challenge notions of cultural and religious homogeneity”? in reference to Anoka Farquee’s Islamic art abstract painting.’

*Here and Elsewhere* (2014) exhibited at the New Museum in New York was based on dichotomies ‘here’ and ‘there,’ othering and self-othering, to make a point about being exoticised. It made a crucial point where artists represented a play on this self-referenced othering has delineated Muslim artists. The exhibition borrows its title from a 1976 film-essay by French directors Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, and Anne-Marie Mieville. Their film, *Ici et Ailleurs* (Here and Elsewhere), was initially conceived as a pro-Palestinian documentary, but evolved into a complex reflection on the ethics of representation and the status of images as instruments of political consciousness. The film pays particular attention to the position and role of the artist in the face of historical events. A reflection on what is at stake in the act of representation characterises many of the works in the exhibition, as many artists reconsider the task of witnessing and chronicling social and political changes. The New Museum describes the parameters of the exhibition:


The exhibition does not propose a fixed definition of Arab art or a distinctive regional style… [It] highlights specific cities and art scenes while emphasizing the importance of dialogues that extend internationally… revealing multiple social and aesthetic landscapes rather than a fictional sense of unity.\textsuperscript{184}

Dina Ramadan echos the concerns of what can be seen as sweeping generalisations of art from the region. She says ‘zeal is quickly giving way to disillusionment as it becomes more and more apparent that 'curiosity' about these artists is restricted to their position as regional or cultural emissaries, with little attention being given to them as individual artists engaged in an international art scene.'\textsuperscript{185} Her argument rests on the idea of deep-seated binaries such as the ‘Occident’ and the ‘Other’, the West and the non-West and the ‘persisting disconnect between art theory and the site of artistic production,’ that is ‘artists in their indigenous spaces.’\textsuperscript{186}

\textsuperscript{185} Ramadan, "Regional Emissaries: Geographical Platforms and the Challenges of Marginalisation in Contemporary Egyptian Art.." Date accessed 15 March 2016.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
Chapter Four:
The Development of contemporary Muslim arts in
Australia: Community Development Projects

In ‘The invisibility of Islamic art in Australia’, Sam Bowker discusses how the Muslim and Islamic arts have been largely left out of the Australian art landscape. When taken as a whole, he says there are few examples of Muslim art that lends to a presence of Islamic art in Australia:

When seen from Australia, the contributions of Islamic artists, designers and poets can seem irrelevant. Most are located, like Star Wars, a long time ago in a place far, far away. If we look at Australia’s most distinctive contribution to the history of Islamic architecture – the vernacular mosques of the Afghan cameleers in Central Australia – we can see the main problem we face. Essentially, what have the Umayyads ever done for us?\(^{187}\)

Bowker’s problematic proposition ‘what have the Umayyads ever done for us?’ questions the relevance of Islamic art in Australia. Referring to Islamic Blair and Blooms’ *The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections from an Unwieldly Field* (1989) he reiterates Islamic art is ‘too vast – across distance, cultures and time’ to be

synthesized into a homogenous entity, much like Muslim communities across the world. Bowker looks toward established collections of Islamic art to deduce the comparative lack of presence in Australia (except for the South Australian collection of Islamic textiles). There is no doubt that the development of Islamic art in Australia is relatively new as he correctly points out contemporary Muslim artists engage with ‘...the cosmopolitan exchange of objects and ideas (that play) important roles in the formation and critique of identities.’ This section focuses on this development of art within Muslim communities in Australia. Early Muslim artists Khaled Sabsabi and Hossein Valamanesh instigated important conversations and exchanges pertaining to the nature and place of the arts by Muslims and Arabs in the wider Australian society in which they interact.

Khaled Sabsabi (b.1965, Lebanon) migrated to Australia in 1975 and settled in Western Sydney. His work ‘reflects the complex and often fraught space of border identities, migrant territories and identity production.’ Similar to U.K artists of the same generation, Sabsabi was influenced by American hip-hop scene, identifying with the earlier Black Civil Rights movement as a teenager growing up in Western Sydney. Sabsabi is a community arts worker and mentor to many, centering his practice on a spiritual investigation that blends religion, identity and art. For Sabsabi, ‘religion is an intensely personal issue,’ where ‘...spirituality and the sacred is all around us. We are part of it and we should be part of this. It’s not something that’s exclusive or unattainable – we all have the capabilities.’ Sabsabi’s award winning video installation *Naqshbandi Greenacre Engagement (2010)* (Blake Prize, 2011) is an invitation for the audience to become part of the Sufi ritual as they sit on a mat in front of three televisions that display women, men and children engaging in a lengthy

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189 Ibid.
and harmonious ritual. His work was inspired by his journey back to his native homeland – Tripoli and the greater Middle East. During this time he delved into Sufi Islam studying rituals and music, forming the basis for his work that takes place in an intimate space located in Suburbia Western Sydney.\(^{191}\)

Hossein Valamanesh (b.1949, Iran) immigrated to Australia in 1973. Primarily a sculptural and installation artist, his work ‘combines cultural elements from Australia and his native Iran, (relating) to memory, cultural dislocation, loss, and the progression of time.\(^{192}\) Valamanesh’s works from the 1970s and 1980s focussed on homeland and belonging including that of the Aboriginal Australians. He abandoned the binaries of East and West, here or there and as his 1997 work Longing/Belonging of a burning Persian carpet in an Australian landscape, shows the dichotomy between these words is not always clear-cut. Instead, ‘in-betweenness is accepted.’\(^{193}\) Given the context of these early Australian Muslim artists, we can see themes of identity, belonging and migration were important aspects in shaping their art practice.

**Community Cultural Development in Sydney**

Contemporary art exhibitions about Muslims in Australia can be seen as early as 1998 with the exhibition *Arabmade: An Exhibition of Contemporary Arabic-Australian Art* and *East of Somewhere* (2001), at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre in Sydney.\(^{194}\) These exhibitions reflect the struggles of many Middle Eastern migrants during their resettlement in Australia. Similarly, *INSIDE OUT: Muslim Women*
Exploring Identities and Creative Expressions (2004 -2006) by the Auburn Arts Council address the high levels of discrimination (especially directed toward Muslim women) that arose after 9/11. The program aimed at ‘breaking the existing misconceptions, prejudice and myths in the wider community surrounding women who chose to wear hijab.’ Over the course of two years the participants (Muslim women and girls from Sydney’s West) showcased their work in an empty shop space in Auburn Central. The GenYM artists Idil Abdullahi, Zahra Habibullah and Fatima Mawas were involved in the program, thus providing an early launch pad for their interest in the arts. Alissar Chidiac reflected on the impact it had on the participants:

During this project there have been relationships between individuals and groups, content and context, process and product, the local and the global, the intimate and the public…symbolic reminders of the physical and personal, social and political, emotional and spiritual transformations which can occur within an ordinary space.

Cultural community development was also instrumental in creating the exhibition No Added Sugar: Self-determination and Engagement – Australian Muslim Women Artists in 2012, again curated by Alissar Chidiac with the addition of Rusaila

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Bazlamit at the Casula Powerhouse Art Centre in Sydney.\textsuperscript{198} No Added Sugar began as the ‘Australian Muslim Women’s Arts Project’ and like INSIDE OUT and ran over an extended period of time (18 months) with a large community engagement component.\textsuperscript{199} The artists were Eugenia Flynn, Idil Abdullahi, Resala Alazzawi, Fatima Killeen, Asiya Sian Davidson, Marwa Charmand, Mehwish Iqbal, Zeina Iaali and the Crooked Rib Art collective.

The work presented in No Added Sugar spanned a variety of mediums – ceramics, installation, video, sound, photography, textiles, mixed media, paintings and drawings. The subject matter ranged from migration, memories of home, childhood, belonging, war, discrimination, spirituality and culture. The artists were encouraged to be bold with their subject choices, pushing the boundaries of what may be presumed as ‘typical art’ by Muslims.\textsuperscript{200} For example Ilaahi’s Made To Measure (2012) and You Complete Half Your Religion When You Get Married (2012) pointed out the preoccupation of marriage in many Australian-Arab cultures and the liminal status associated with women who choose to divorce. Despite the success of No Added Sugar in the media, questions arose about the use of the term ‘Muslim women artists’ in the exhibition title. One such response can be seen in the comments of the ABC’s article that accompanied a news segment on the women:

If the exhibition is not about being a Muslim don’t call it Muslim. Being an artist myself I cringe at the thought of being part of a Christian or whatever colour conviction

\textsuperscript{199} The name of the exhibition name developed to be ‘No Added Sugar’ to suggest the rawness of expression by Muslim women.
exhibition. The works are obviously done by women, that is information enough for me. What they want to express should come through in their works, and… Sorry ladies but this self-selective importance of Islam doesn’t cut it with the history of Islamic belief i.e destruction of knowledge, intolerance and nihilism. If you were simply female artists then one might take notice. This self-importance and exclusivity doesn’t come under the jurisdiction of ‘art’. Islam and freedom of thought are contradictions! [edited].

These reader’s opinions of the ABC’s article reveal a few important points that should not be entirely dismissed as simply insensitive to the women’s work. The collective religious identity marker ‘Muslim women artists’ in the title of the exhibition was seen as contradictory, unnecessary and perhaps even detrimental to the female reader who herself is a practicing artist. There was a sense that the artists were identifying as Muslim as a deliberate act of exclusion or differentiation from the wider artistic community. The commentator suggests that a gendered role in art would be more befitting in the West than voices attached to religious or national identities. In the same interview curator Rusaila Bazlamit says ‘…we are trying to break way from the stereotypes…it is about self determination.’ The very essence of the No Added Sugar collective was a shared sense of connection through various experiences of being Australian Muslim women and artists.

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Faith, fashion, fusion was another large exhibition by the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, launched in May 2012 at the same time as No Added Sugar. Although not about contemporary art, Faith, fashion, fusion explored the increasing global ‘modest clothing’ market and how notable Australian Muslim women incorporate their faith into their daily lives. With this balance of displaying the hijab in terms of fashion and business, and a diverse practice on the other hand, Faith, fashion, fusion appealed to a wide audience of museum visitors. In this sense, fashion and style were successful tools of social engagement. However this museum style of exhibition, which puts every day objects and people on display, must be questioned in terms of its ongoing relevance to challenge deeply held misconceptions about the Muslim community and Islam in general. Here the exhibition became a space of social cohesion and community outreach, where the audience was invited into understanding an everyday norm for Muslims women, including those of the No Added Sugar artists. In contrast, No Added Sugar was more deliberate in its attempt to go beyond the ‘surface’ and to showcase the capacity of Muslim women as contemporary and conceptual artists.

**Gen Y creative expressions in Melbourne**

Crooked Rib Art was instigated by the Muslim Women’s Council Victoria and funded by the City of Melbourne's Community Cultural Development Program in 2007.\(^{203}\) It was made up of 10 young Muslim women from Melbourne who came up with the name to reflect what they perceived as their misunderstood identity. They were perhaps the first Gen Y female Muslim artistic collective in Australia, uniquely identifying their experiences of being ‘young, female and Muslim’ in Melbourne as

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\(^{203}\) Ibid.
part of a new urban subculture that is made up from being outside of the mainstream, whilst still being part of the cosmopolitan centre.  

Like *INSIDE OUT*, Crooked Rib Art participated in number of artistic workshops run by professional artists in order to produce a final exhibition. A well-known U.K. Islamic graffiti artist Muhammad Ali mentored the group through a graffiti art mural in the city centre. Ali was well known for his work engaging with isolated British Muslim youth using graffiti and other urban arts in safe spaces.  

Crooked Rib Art also engaged with the wider community as part of their artistic leadership training, creating art programs for high school students that tackled a range of teenage struggles. By highlighting these issues as a group, they move beyond self-reflexivity and identify with other groups who have been discriminated against.

By the time the Crooked Rib Art collective emerged, Muslims in Melbourne had already began to become active in their efforts to tackle discrimination in a range of ways. In 2010 the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV)’s Art Director Nur Shkembi created a grass-roots community art exhibition entitled *You Am I: An exhibition of Contemporary Muslim Artists* which ran for three consecutive years. In Shkembi’s role she selected numerous works to be on permanent display in the Museum, leveraging the contemporary artists Shkembi had collated over her years of grass-roots engagement with Muslim artists across Australia.  

Unlike *INSIDE OUT*, Crooked Rib Art and *No Added Sugar*, the *You Am I* exhibitions were the first un-

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204 They say: What does it mean to be young, female and Muslim in Melbourne? It can mean listening to Lupe Fiasco on your iPod, studying hard, attending extra-curricular Arabic classes, playing soccer, attending an Islamic camp, discussing fashion and art, and more, available from: Art, "Crooked Rib Art ". Date accessed 14 June 2016; ibid.

205 See ibid. Date accessed 14 June 2016.

funded exhibitions aimed at showcasing a wide catchment of works by Muslim artists without Community Cultural Development aims attached to it.

Schottmann reflects that community organisations that were established before the 1980s were organised based on ethnic groups, the ‘many of the new initiatives set up by their children and grandchildren born and raised in Australia were aimed at the wider public.’ This includes The Islamic Museum of Australia (IMA), which has played an important role in creating dialogue using Islamic arts and Islamic history. Helen Light writes ‘The Islamic Art Gallery seeks to make connections between the past and the future, to show that expression of Islam in Australia has as much relevance today as the presentation of the historical art objects.’ It has claimed a permanent and physical space where some of these artists’ works are currently being displayed. Of the GenYM artists, Abdul Abdullah, Abdul Rahman Abdullah and Idil Abdullahi’s work are permanently displayed at the IMA. The IMA’s mission is to ‘create a culture of awareness and understanding through innovative environments, programs and tools that help people nurture their curiosity about Islam and build bridges of understanding between cultures.’ The IMA intends to create a place ‘for positive self-expression for Australian Muslims and act as a means of breaking down cultural barriers between Muslims and mainstream Australian society.’ The IMA comprises four permanent galleries: Islamic beliefs and practices; Islamic contributions to civilisation; Islamic art and architecture; and Australian Muslim history. It is more educative in scope and purpose as well as design with the Desypher architects envisaging an ‘Islamic Exploratorium,’ rather than an art gallery

210 Ibid.
or museum. In this space ‘interactive and participatory experiences create an atmosphere of awareness and understanding through a range of environments, programs and tools that will assist visitors to nurture their curiosity about Islam and Muslims in general.’

Anisa Buckley writes in her promotional essay that a ‘cultural gap’ was created between Muslims and non-Muslims due to hostility created by the various terrorist attacks since 9/11, thus Islamic art plays an important role ‘...to educate the Australian public about the vast cultural heritage of Muslims and Islam.’ Bowker says it is ‘a myth that we can approach a work of art from a position of complete openness,’ – a neutral space, so to speak. Here, we can see that Islamic art plays a function, beyond aesthetic or historical appreciation, in intervening into public understandings of Muslim identity and history.

**The Social Inclusion/Exclusion dichotomy**

Efforts at showing Islam in a positive light have come from many directions. In 2009 the Department of Immigration and Citizenship published *The Australian Journey – Muslim Communities* in an effort to recognize ‘...the diversity of Australia’s Muslim communities and …the important role many have played in Australia’s past and present and will continue to play in the future.’ The *National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security (2005-2009)* was a government initiative by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs aimed at ‘building resilience, addressing social exclusion and supporting community safety in

211 Ibid.
213 Bowker, "The Invisibility of Islamic Art in Australia ".
214 Ibid. Date accessed 16 September 2015.
vulnerable communities.’ 215 Although aimed at ‘culturally diverse’ community groups, the majority of NAP funding went to various Muslim community groups in Australia. One such community organization under which many community endeavors takes place is the Islamic Council Victoria (ICV), the ‘peak body for Muslim organizations in Melbourne’ representing more than 90,000 Muslims through numerous member organisations located throughout Victoria. 216 All programs included Muslim participants, even if they were part of a larger group of participants from different minority or ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds. In 2005-2006 a total of $506,821 was distributed over nineteen community groups and organisations. 217 In such efforts the government is able to shape the ‘new face’ of Islam in the West by playing on the inclusion/exclusion dichotomy of Islamic extremism that is occurring on an international stage. 218

Returning to Schottmann’s reflections on the impact of terrorism and Islamophobia in Australia, he says that ‘there is palpable frustration among many young Australian Muslims about perceived pressures to have to continually prove their credentials as citizens, which they envisage as an almost Sisyphean effort with

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216 Novakovich, "Inclusion and Exclusion of Australian Muslim Artists in Contemporary Art," pp.205-06. Among the ICV’s mission statements are the ‘Promotion of an accurate, informed and positive understanding of Islam, Muslims, and issues important to Muslims’ and the ‘Empowerment and encouragement of the Muslim community to continue to be actively, responsibly and positively integrated into mainstream Australian society.’ The focus on integration is seen as a key objective for the positive social and political mobility of the Australian Muslim community.
217 Many of the programs were aimed at developing leadership, producing law-abiding citizens, preventive and proactive methods to deal with issues of personal, psychological and social wellbeing and programs that endeavored to gain a deeper understanding of the self in an Islamic and Australian context. The creation of Australian ‘values’, ‘empowerment’, and responding to ‘extremism’ were among the strongly held themes. Other key words espoused were ‘building bridges,’ ‘conversations,’ ‘understanding,’ ‘breaking down barriers,’ ‘grassroots,’ ‘engaging,’ ‘contribution,’ ‘role models,’ ‘participation,’ ‘challenge stereotypes’ and ‘integration’ as cited in ibid., pp.205-07.
218 Nonetheless these programs are favorably received for opportunities of funding, support, sponsorship, business ventures and the like. Individuals and community groups from the Muslim community have also reached out to government by voicing their opinions on important issues and opening opportunities for government to meet local Muslims on their terms.
constantly shifting goalposts’. 219 In the years following these early government efforts that we can see, one may ask how we may adequately measure the outcomes of these programs? Schottmann also asks, ‘10 years after the massive expansion of interfaith dialogue and community engagement, it is still possible to question whether a range of Islamic practices and observances can be accommodated by the secular Australian state [?].’ 220 A second wave of federal funding (approximately $40 million between 2010 and 2014) under the program name ‘countering violent extremism (CVE)’ was aimed at deradicalisation of young Muslims, but overall the program was not seen as highly successful in reaching ‘those most in need of assistance.’ 221 Instead they are seen as ‘unfairly singling out their community and holding all Muslims ‘open to recruitment by radical extremists, and not fully attached to Australian mores and values.’ 222 Similar to the conversations between artists and curators in the No Added Sugar exhibition and Creativity and The Spiritual Path gatherings, we can see that dialogue within Muslim communities (on a range of issues) is just as important as dialogue with the broader public.

220 Ibid., p.421.
Conclusion

In the current climate of increasingly intense Islamophobia, radicalization and social upheaval, contemporary art lies at an interesting cross-section between the demands of institutions that seek to exhibit new work and the rawness of expression by artists who reflect their place in society. The exhibition *HERE&NOW16/GenYM* attempts to convey new work by contemporary Australian artists who are both gen Y and Muslim. In curating this exhibition, this thesis aims to canvas both existing identity politics about what it means to be young, Muslim and Western today, and to canvas similar exhibitions concerning contemporary Muslim artists in the West. What was discovered was a lack of exhibitions post-9/11 that focused on the cohort of Muslims who grew up with this event as a pivotal defining moment. As I have examined, for the *GenYM* artists, it was not the only defining event in their lives, but it was indeed a shared one, as much as it was for many others who freshly recall what they were doing the exact moment 9/11 occurred.

In the 15 years following 9/11, contemporary art has played a pivotal role in bringing about dialogue on topics not previously discussed by Muslims. This boom in creative expression correlated with the rise in Muslims producing literature, comedy and street arts all in an effort to showcase their authentic identity. Art made by Muslims preceding 9/11 was heavily focused on artists coming from the Middle East, or artists working with Islamic art aesthetics. This boom in arts is also highly lucrative, with the popularity of art biennales in places like Dubai and Sharjah growing every year. In Australia, individuals have also recognised the importance of the exhibition in aiding a positive conversation about Muslims and identity. While there is a pressure to be a present voice in this dialogue, this sole aim may run the risk of over-seeing various other pertinent concerns that are personal, global,
religious and secular in nature. Lastly, I have examined how the visual identity of Islamic art can problematise current discussions by relegating artistic works as a lighthouse during dark times. The historical underpinnings of Islamic art, and how Muslims interact with this today, are important sites for further investigation. Like we have seen in GenYM, Islam, both in spirituality and contemporary political discourse manifests in the various ways the artists come to view themselves as ‘Muslim,’ both publically and privately. Here, what emerges are the most interesting expressions of creativity through contemporary art.
Appendix I: Artists Statements

Abdul-Rahman (b.1977 Port Kembla, NSW Australia)

On Practical Magic (2016):

Growing up in Victoria Park during the early 1980s we had an extensive vegetable garden. Watching my dad sampling the produce of the backyard led me to believe that basically anything was edible. My mother tended the garden lovingly as an extension of the kampung life of Malaysia that she knew as a child. Australia presented a different problem, seeing me as a toddler stuffing the leaves of unfamiliar plants into my mouth set her off a path of learning as much as she could about Australian vegetation. She studied Horticulture, driven by the need to know which plants were poisonous in an effort to keep me alive.

For me it is this knowledge of the natural world passed on through mothers for generations that is a fundamental form of practical magic, a depth of knowledge that provided for the dietary, medical and social health of the family on a grass roots level.

On Storytelling:

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. I like to think that every memory we collect as human beings, no matter how small will become part of us, who we were is who we’ll always be, we just keep adding to that equation. It’s the way that we draw on these memories, how we let the emotive content of memory affect us,
Idil Abdullahi (b.1980 Somalia, migrated to Australia 1993)

On Loss (2012):

*Loss* (2012) are molded from two Somali *lood* (Quranic writing tablets). She recalls the extensive process of learning Arabic in school from making her own ink and brushes and learning from master students in her school.

We would go every morning to wash it and clean it. Then we would make the ink and pen ourselves. To make the ink, we would have to get saab (a plant), coal and then we would try and beat each other to see who would make the best ink. It’s not like a slanted brush but a blunt brush like the ones Chinese Muslims use. It would always be with me. Every day we learnt the lessons on the tablet. At the beginning the teacher would write it for us then as we get better, we practiced ourselves, then present in front of our peers without looking at what we wrote. We use to watch the way the older students use to write, was amazing. Of course, the teacher had a flawless style of writing.

The wire in *Loss* was an afterthought but it came to represent to ask it that pain and honour of the refugee experience and finding the positivity in it. I believe everyone experiences loss. We are always attached to the idea of loss so this piece was about taking the burden from myself and letting the form take its own shape.

*On fleeing Somalia and living as a refugee:*

When the civil war happened, we just had to flee. We were feeling from one area to another. I was about 10 years old. I vividly remember everything. It started in the place where we were staying at, we
couldn’t even get a car to take us, we just had to walk. I was in school when I heard the first gunshots. It was like non-stop bullets going ahead. I had a madrassa in the afternoon and we still went, and the guns were getting louder. It was close by. My mum told me to get inside and our neighbors told us there was a coup so the people are uprising and fighting against the army. We just had to get up and leave in two days. We didn’t eat anything. All our neighbours gathered in a room and hoped for the shooting to die down.

My mum got some tickets to go to Kenya. When we went to the port to go to the boat, 3 men came and starting shooting people in the face. I remember seeing a young kid, a mother and another child. I remember seeing the mother on the floor and her legs just failing, as she was shot and a teenage boy we were talking to said his mother and someone else was shot. So we went to another port. We kept waiting and waiting because the owner of the boat was letting his family members on before other people. The boat was maxed out, there were over 700 people on board. So we waited for two days on this weird island with no food. We had to cook salt water with rice. Finally another boat came and we were just dumped in it, with no space to go, with no room besides us. While we were on the boat, we heard that the boat we were supposed to be on, sank. There were 750 people on the boat and only 200 survived. The boat hit a rock and flooded. We still didn’t believe it until we met some of the survivors. My mum’s friend who had eight children was on the boat and she died, four of the children died. Other friends we had also died. The horrific way was that people were clinging onto water cans and pieces of wood to survive. And I remember my mum saying, we were supposed to be on that boat, we were supposed to be on that boat. So any time I get angry about something not working out for me, I always remember that time and say, if it's meant to be, it will be, but you can’t try and force yourself into something because you don’t know where you could be.
On materialism and consumerism:

There is a new consumerist phenomena of buying materials, mainly dira’ (traditional Somali female attire) that is beyond a woman’s means and never wearing it again since it has been seen by everyone. Though this practice may look innocent and harmless, these dira’s are expensive, and have created financial and even relationship breakdowns in families who have come here as refugees with not a lot to their names. *Ukahae* – ‘it’s bombed’ – ‘kasuka he’ its lost it’s value, its used. The idea you can NEVER use it again people have seen you in this so you can’t where this again. Traditionally, only older people wear the dira’, but now younger girls are trying to wear it as part of accessing their culture. It’s a huge cost ($300). I’ve had people come up to me and tell me, you’ve worn it again! I said, who cares, who is going to see me wear it?

*The Whitening* is multilayered and talks about the cultural loss and identity issues facing the Somali women internally and externally. This work centers on how hijab styles that were often made from brightly coloured materials changed by slowly losing their colour and creativity in order to assimilate. Yet on another level it’s speaking on the ideas of face lightening, it’s ties to colonial days and it’s toxic effects.

Rubaba Haider (b.1987, Quetta Pakistan, migrated to Australia in 2009)

On ‘Like a shadow I am and I am not’:

I was with my mother for 10 days while she had surgery in my home town of Queta. When I went back to school in Lahore, I was confused about what I wanted to work on as previously I was choosing topics that were not personal to me. The surgery was very stressful – my mother was unconscious for a really long time, and then the stitches weren’t right and they had to redo
them. I watched the doctor redo the stitches and my mother come back to consciousness. I was standing by the whole time.

*What kind of surgery was it?*

It was on the ovaries and intestines. That is why in my work you can see a lot of flowers and lotuses. My mother was really young when she had the surgery and for her it made her feel not complete – she didn’t feel feminine anymore. When I went home I photographed her sewing kit. For example the pin cushion – I photographed it, zoomed in it and painted it. I looked similar to my mothers skin. All of my paintings and works are inspired by my mothers sewing kit, by her dresses, threads and pins.

**On her training in traditional miniature arts:**

I have never exhibited my traditional work at all. The *You Am I* exhibition was the first place that I have exhibited it because I thought that people haven’t seen traditional miniature works before and I wanted to mix it with my contemporary work. For my studies it was there to show I was trained in traditional miniature arts but all of my work was contemporary because people in Pakistan aren’t really interested work that is not mine – it is traditional, it is not mine, it’s somewhat ‘copied.’

**On working as an artist in Australia:**

I guess there is newness for the artists in Australia. For me as an artist I think it is important for me to think outside the box. When I talk to people who are embedded in the art world, they didn’t even ask if I were Muslim. I use to wear the hijab and when I took it off they didn’t even notice. They have pushed me to do whatever I have wanted to do. They never said ‘the market wants this kind of work, so you should do this kind of work.’ They don’t use the word ‘should’ at all. Working with communities they
sometimes tend to push a direction which promotes my identity as a ‘Muslim’. But I am a Muslim and I don’t need to be reminded that I am. I feel uncomfortable with the label of ‘Australian Muslim artist.’ They should just say this is ‘Rubaba’. The whole sentence doesn’t fit well with me. I don’t mind if they said I was a ‘Pakistani’ artist. The term ‘refugee’ has also been assumed about me too, and I am not a ‘Hazarat refugee.’

Suzi Elhafez (b.1985, Cairo Egypt)

On the influence of Islamic art:

My most unique achievement is establishing myself as an emerging visual artist. My multidisciplinary art practice explores contemporary interpretations of traditional Islamic art. My work aims to communicate notions of unity and the subsequent realisation of continuity; whether it be within the individual, among a community or collectively as a society. I am interested in using the formal geometric elements of Islamic art; balance, alignment and repetition to pose deeper metaphysical questions relating to the cycles of birth, life and death and the repetitious nature of our cyclical patterns of behaviour and belief, both individually and collectively, which inevitably shape our conceptions of truth and reality.

My art practice is innately driven by a desire to realise the power of art to build cultural bridges in order to diversify an open and accessible dialogue of inclusion and understanding of practising moderate Muslims from the Arab world within the contemporary Australian context. My ultimate goal as a visual artist would be to sustain a contemporary art practice which serves as a cultural medium of communication in order to proliferate and propel a positive and progressive view of the foundations and moral grounding of Islam. The realisation of my professional achievements as a visual artist lies within the advocacy of a cultural
dialogue of interconnectedness and diversity within Australia through art. I believe this is particularly relevant in order to create effective channels of communication and meaningful cultural exchanges within our community.

**On her heritage:**

I came to Australia with my family when I was five years old. We emigrated in 1991 from Cairo, Egypt on a business visa predominantly to seek a more stable and secure lifestyle as a young family. My parents chose to settle in Australia as it provided a very high standard of living and education as well as prosperous economic opportunities. We first arrived in Canberra where we stayed for six months but eventually settled in Perth, WA, where we have lived ever since.

I am very proud of my Egyptian heritage; Egypt has a majestic and vast history. My identity is embedded with Egyptian values as I was fortunate enough to have parents who made a paramount effort to maintain our connection to our heritage, through annual visits to Egypt which served to preserve our cultural values and awareness. Through my Egyptian heritage, growing up in an Australian context I had the opportunity to be culturally diverse in being able to draw on the very rich history and culture of Egypt as well as infuse that with an Australian way of life. I identify equally with these two cultures, and although Egyptian and Australian culture is so diametrically opposed, I was placed within a context where I needed to reconcile the two. However I have the autonomy and willingness to take on the best of both worlds. I have been able to take full advantage of the richness of my Egyptian heritage; the generosity, openness and authenticity of Egyptian culture and its people as well as the incredibly relaxed and active approach that is characteristic of an Australian way of life. I feel very fortunate to have access to these two very different and
distinguished cultures which have equally shaped my identity. I am innately Egyptian yet markedly Australian.

Zahra Habibullah (b.1981, Wellington New Zealand)

**On object-making:**

I always knew that I wanted to be an artist of some way, shape or form. I love things and I love ‘place’ and connections to that place. I feel like objects are the embodiment of that for me. In object-making, I have to make an impact in some form… the arts for me was not about making art for art’s sake. I always struggled with the idea of jewellery because I thought it was only for the elite.

My series of work produced for my graduate show (*Family heirloom series*) was developed on the idea of melding identities of objects to create new heirlooms and in effect, new histories for mixed-heritage marriages.

**On her travels to the Middle East:**

My 20s is where I was shaped my aesthetics connections to Islamic art… in my travels my brain was soaking up everything I was experiencing- like the old streets of Fez and Marrekesh. I can actually have lived *in* it – walked through the streets and gone through the archways. Living in Morocco, I had a lot of access to artists, but being a woman and not speaking the language were huge barriers. I wasn’t allowed to technically study because I was on a spouse visa, staying at home not being able to work. I began doing calligraphy and art just to fill my time. I found an artisan who was a plaster craftsman and struck up a friendship with him. He had a studio so we agreed to trade skills – he would teach me some plaster techniques and I would teach him some jewellery.
techniques I had learnt. I would go there about three days a week and learn how to make plaster.

On the effect of terrorism and 9/11 on her:

I was directly affected by 9/11. When 9/11 happened I was from Morocco to America, and a hijabi. I was profiled and detained at an American airport for 14 hours. I was not let into the country. I was only 20 so I was beside myself – I was just some Aussie girl! It was horrible to be treated the way I was. Following that I experienced depression. I learnt a lot from that and it made me stronger but I was depressed for quite sometime because after that I wasn’t allowed to go back in the States for a whole – around 5 to 6 years, until I sorted out what the issue was – the previous trip I went on, I overstayed my visa by two days due to my agent booking. It shaped how I felt about America even though my husband at the time was American and how they treated non-Americans.

Fatima Mawas (b.1986, Sydney Australia)

On Fiddler on the roof:

At the end of 2009, I went on a three-month trip to Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. My friend Afria, who is a traditional Achanese dancer was doing workshops in Palestine. I was running digital storytelling workshops. We met at a UN refugee camp in Bethlahem ‘Desha.’ Palestinian camps were made to not be permanent, but eventually camps and tents turned into buildings and then entire blocks. There were two cultural centres in the camp and the violinist was from one centre so we invited him to collaborate in the film.

Palestine is all about the land and the soil. We heard a lot of stories about people being taken at night and their bones or ashes
being returned years later. So Afira grabbed some soil (which was hard to find because everything is concreted) and then did an impromptu dance. At the end of 2014 with the last attack on Gaza, the three consistent things are birth, death and occupation. Checkpoints change, who gets targeted get changed. Afira was seven months pregnant at the time and we decided to film part two.

Nadia Faragaab (b. 1984 Somalia, migrated to Australia 1995)

On growing up and conflict in Somalia:

I’m Somali, born in Mogadishu in 1984 we moved to Australia when I was 10 or 11. The war began in 1991. We were in Mogadishu for about 6 months when the war began. I have five brothers and two sisters. Two of my brothers were studying in Latrobe at the time, and that’s how we came here. We came to Australia for the need to find a safer peaceful place to live. I was actually shot. There were stray bullets coming through the house. My mother was 9 months pregnant when I was shot and she was very close. My father was reluctant, hoping things would get better. I was shot near my spinal cord so it was a ‘miracle’.

I think I has made me ‘over protective’ of peace and safety. When I say I love Melbourne and Australia it’s not because I am romanticizing about the West or because I believe we have things that Third World countries don’t have. It’s the presence of peace and absence of war. Of course there is corruption here, but it doesn’t overrun Australia. You can get to where you want here based on your own merits.

On Kronologies (2011):

Kronologies (2011) is about my search to find images and symbols that resonate with me. I ‘Googled’ images of Somalia and what comes up are often very negative images – famine, guns, suffering. I
found nothing beautiful except the ‘odd supermodel’. This work is about the images that I would like to see come up when you Google Somalia. They are mostly of people, but this is how I see Somali’s – beautiful, normal people who aren’t always holding guns or always suffering from famine or drought.

My work has a lot of Somali presence, whether its symbolic or whatever and one of the reason being the forced nature of our migration. I don’t see how I could have come to Australia without war happening. When you have a connection to a land and a place, you are not really in a hurry to leave it. My art is also about seeing an absence of where you have come from – in libraries, on television, in pop culture. The only book I found in my library about Somalia hardy said anything in it. There is an absence of knowledge to people just about every day Somali things, not particularly about art or culture.

*On Qolka (2011) and Smoke Alarms (2011):*

I wanted to explore what happens when people are not preoccupied with war or crisis. I just wanted to see symbols of things that resonate and are part of the collective memory of the Somali person. It can be seen as a luxury but it’s about contributing to one’s feelings of peace and a wanting to preserve that.

In *Smoke Alarms*, this is something every Somali person in the diaspora would understand, the *unsee*, the incense which is very common in every Somali house. And of course in every Western country you have smoke alarms. This installation is not one I had to explain to a Somali. It wasn’t abstract or anything. They said ‘Ah we get it, we understand… Ours doesn’t even have a battery in it’.
Marziya Mohammedali (b.1985 Hong Kong, migrated to Kenya 1994, then Australia 2005)

My mother and her family fled a few months before my father’s family did (they were both teenagers at the time). My mother said that a threat from their neighbours made the threats very, very real: a neighbor remarked casually on Eid, ‘Aaj hum galay milenge, kal hum tere galay katenge’ (Today we will embrace each other, but tomorrow we will slit your throats). As my grandmother was constantly very ill, my father – at that point 16, illegally driving underage – drove my mother’s family to the docks so they could board a ship to safety.

My Dad was on the boat out of Chittagong - to his knowledge the last boat that got out - and they had to leave in the dead of night, and even as the boat pulled away, there were people running down the pier trying to set fire to the boat.

Abdul Abdullah (b.1986, Perth Australia)

Abdul Abdullah is a seventh generation Australian with direct paternal link to a convict ancestor who arrived in Australia in 1815. His mother is Malay and he identifies as Muslim. He describes his experience growing up in Australia as that:

…despite my family’s 200-year history on the continent, I am continuously put into a position where I have to justify my colour, my name and my religion. While I was born here and identify myself as an Australian, I have been engaged by a portion of the community that denies my right to do so. The idea that I should somehow ‘go home’ is confusing, and in this body of work I wanted to deconstruct the idea of home and what that means in the contemporary multicultural Australian context. Taking from Robert Hughes’ account of early settlement in *Fatal Shore* and Babette Smith’s
Australia’s Birthstain, I believe Australia has a tenuous relationship with the concept. Our History seems to reflect an; ‘it’s mine because I said so’ approach. This post-war need to identify ourselves as apart from our neighbours, and the lingering colonial mentality of European racial superiority has left us with an insecure and fractured cultural identity. What is home in this country, if it is not the place you plant your flag?" 223

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Appendix II: Installation images
Appendix III:

*HERE&NOW16/GenYM* exhibition resources
HERE&NOW16/GENYM

Hamida Novakovich, Curator

HERE&NOW16/GenYM weaves together the voices of nine contemporary Muslim artists who are all members of Generation Y or under the age of 40 (which in Islam generally refers to the age of ‘youth’). This exhibition explores multiple voices, not necessarily of being young and Muslim today, but from young Muslim artists today.

This exhibition canvases the experiences of growing up with the influence of Islam in Australia, experiences which have been greatly overlooked by narratives of otherness, Orientalism, feminism, and Western notions of Islamic art.

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in exhibitions of contemporary art by Muslims, Middle Eastern or Arab artists. Adding to the complications of existing identity politics, many exhibitions have been overshadowed by the need to delineate a space free from what Egyptian academic Dina Ramadan calls the ‘objectification of the artist’, where non-Western artists are called on to represent ‘the collective’ voice. HERE&NOW16/GenYM attempts to allow the multiplicity of stories, voices and experiences speak for themselves free from appropriated context. As generational peers they each negotiate their identity through their artwork under three broad themes.
Abdul-Rahman Abdullah and Idil Abdullahi’s sculptural works evoke vivid tales from their childhood memories. In *Practical magic*, Abdul-Rahman recalls how his mother studied native Australian flora in order to keep her son safe from consuming poisonous plants as a child. The camel is symbolic of the belief that faith must also be practical, drawn from the Hadith (saying of the Prophet Muhammad) ‘Trust in Allah, but tie your camel’ (Hadith, Sunan At-Tirmidhi 2517).

Idil’s ceramics *Loss* gives form to the wounds and trauma that was brought about by the 1990 Somali Civil War, which Idil and her family fled as refugees. Here, Idil uses a Somali looh (wooden Quranic writing tablet) to represent the dual ideas of loss and healing. Moulded from traditional scarves, *The Whitening* points to identity issues facing Somali women who whiten their skin in order to assimilate into wider society. *Dead Dir’a* reflects on what Idil observes as a new consumerist phenomenon of buying expensive materials, mainly dir’a (traditional Somali female attire) for social status.

Rubaba Haider’s installation *Like a shadow, I am and I am not* (this title coming from the poetry of Persian Sufi-Saint Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī) experiments with installation and performative art. Inspired by objects found in her mother’s sewing kit, her work is influenced by the experience of witnessing her mother undergo surgical treatment and nursing her through to recovery. The embroidery materials of pins and threads become metaphors for pain and healing.

Suzi Elhafez’s existential piece *Demarcations of Timelessness* questions the mortality of the human being and the significance of what one leaves behind after death. The repetition of the human torso marks a shift from her previous work, which fused non-figurative geometric Islamic ornamentation with digital manipulations of the human form. This work uses the human form itself to form the geometric arch alignment. Through the repetition of this human form she investigates questions surrounding the nature of being and temporality. She writes:
Our brief spark will end.
What we create becomes our immortality
In the artifacts of marking time
are the demarcations of timelessness.

Occupied land, heritage & belonging

Zahrah Habibullah’s Palestine Keys and Family Heirloom series 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 and enamel 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.

Fatima Mawas’s films Fiddler on the Roof and Fiddler on the Roof II are filmed four years apart – in 2010 in a Ramallah refugee camp and in 2014, Melbourne after the 2014 conflict ‘Operation Protective Edge’ when high levels of emergency births were occurring in Gaza. Inspired by the dual stories of the loss of land (both of ownership and access) and people, Mawas mixes the impromptu dance against the sharp sounds of the violinist found in Ramallah by compartmentalising the scenes akin to the Palestinian state.
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) and Smoke alarms contain household objects such as idin and uunsii (musk) that are part of the collective memory of the Somali people. In Dhadig (Women) she juxtaposes images of ‘Somalia’ from Google onto the jilbab (full length outer garment worn by some Muslim women) on top of black and white prints of traditional Somali women. Her multi-layering of images and textures questions how one may come to see themselves through the objectification of images as well as both insider and outsider.

Outsiders

Marziya Mohammedali’s mixed-media installation Call Them Home is a memorial to those who have died while seeking asylum, be it on the way to Australia, within the 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.

Abdul Abdullah’s Pushback and Reclaiming territories look at the broad frustrations of marginalised youth. Drawing on his previous works from Siege, 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 masked figures in Abdullah’s photographs could be any youth, anywhere today – a reflection of the coalescence of emotions and events seen through multiple channels of media, the world over.
CAMPUS PARTNER
We would like to acknowledge and thank our campus partner:
Centre for Muslim States and Societies.
The Centre for Muslim States and Societies conducts research to provide a better understanding of the beliefs and practices of Muslim states and communities in the Indian Ocean region.

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LWAG+ LWAG+ is a free app that you can use to learn more about the art on display in this exhibition.
Download it from the App Store or Google Play and enable Bluetooth on your phone. When you stand in front of an artwork, the app will prompt you with information about the work’s origin, meaning and context.
For more information, visit lwag.uwa.edu.au/app

Join the conversation with #GenYM
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