

Canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

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JAMEEL PRIZE



TRADITION *AS CONTEXT*

Mahnaz Fancy examines the impact of the Jameel Prize and discovers an unexpected dividend.



At a time when contemporary artists seem to avoid religious or geographical labels and reservations are expressed about new categories like “contemporary Islamic art” or about Islamic art history’s Orientalist origins, the bi-annual Jameel Prize for “international contemporary art and design practices inspired by Islamic tradition” is surprisingly successful at multiple levels. Given that the winner of the fourth edition of the Jameel Prize will be announced on 7 June 2016 when the exhibition of works by the 11 shortlisted artists will launch its international tour at the Pera Museum in Istanbul, we have an opportunity to look back at how it has developed since its launch in 2009.

This prize is a partnership between the Saudi philanthropic initiative Art Jameel and London’s Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and one that garners enormous international visibility as each edition’s exhibition travels to international venues from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe and the USA. It serves as a platform for negotiating stubborn cultural polarisation between the so-called “Western” and “Islamic” worlds. This cultural diplomacy mission is implicit in the partnership and its origin in an earlier effort on the redesign of the museum’s Islamic Middle East Gallery – one of the most earliest major arts initiatives aimed at shifting stereotypes of the Islamic world in the post-9/11 moment.



Facing page: Installation view of Jameel Prize 3 at the Moscow State Exhibition Hall, 2014.

This page: Afroz Amighi. *1001 Pages*. 2008. Image courtesy Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York.

future in one well-coordinated move.” Works selected by the prize offer a glimpse into what Islamic culture really looks like today, thereby serving as an effective foil to often-circulated stereotypes as well as to the decontextualizing effects of “global” contemporary art.

Viewers of works in any edition of the Jameel Prize are reminded that Islamic art never had an overtly dogmatic or religious cultural frame but rather, it evolved over time to reflect new cultural contacts. The diversity and malleability of this aesthetic legacy not only incorporates elements from Byzantine, Chinese, Egyptian and Persian civilizations into its visual language but also continues to sustain and evolve distinct idioms derived from traditional craft like calligraphy, ceramic, tapestry, mosaic and metalwork. The historical circulation of material culture (both decorative and functional objects) carried these Islamic traditions out into new geographies in the same manner that contemporary migration and the interconnectedness of the contemporary global condition continue to do

BRINGING HERITAGE INTO THE PRESENT

The Jameel Prize is an elegantly subtle extension and complement to that first collaboration, it picks up the conversation on Islamic cultural heritage and extends it to the present day. President of Community Jameel International Fady Jameel further explains that the prize “encourages artists globally to continue exploring the role of Islamic traditions in the world today as expressed through art, whether in the form of traditional or contemporary artwork, craft or design.” This shift, as Tim Stanley, co-curator of the Jameel Prize and senior curator for the V&A’s Middle Eastern collection, reminds us, acknowledges a long history of exchange: the collection “was formed from the 1850s onwards as a resource for British industrial design. The Jameel Prize gives us a chance to turn from the past to look to the

so today. This phenomenon is vividly shown from short-listed Lebanese furniture designer Nada Debs’ concrete carpet bringing together her Muslim Arab roots with the influence of her Japanese upbringing in 2013, to Brazilian artist Lucia Koch’s architectural interventions in this current edition that reference the lattice window coverings found in Brazilian houses since 16th century Portuguese settlers bought Islamic traditions to the New World with them.

REIMAGINING A TRADITION

To further emphasise this foregrounding of the Islamic aesthetic heritage’s influence today, or “multiple expressions of Islam, in many different



By providing a much-needed contextual dimension and bridge across the divide between the Islamic craft heritage and contemporary practice, it actually complements the rapid development of contemporary art from the region.

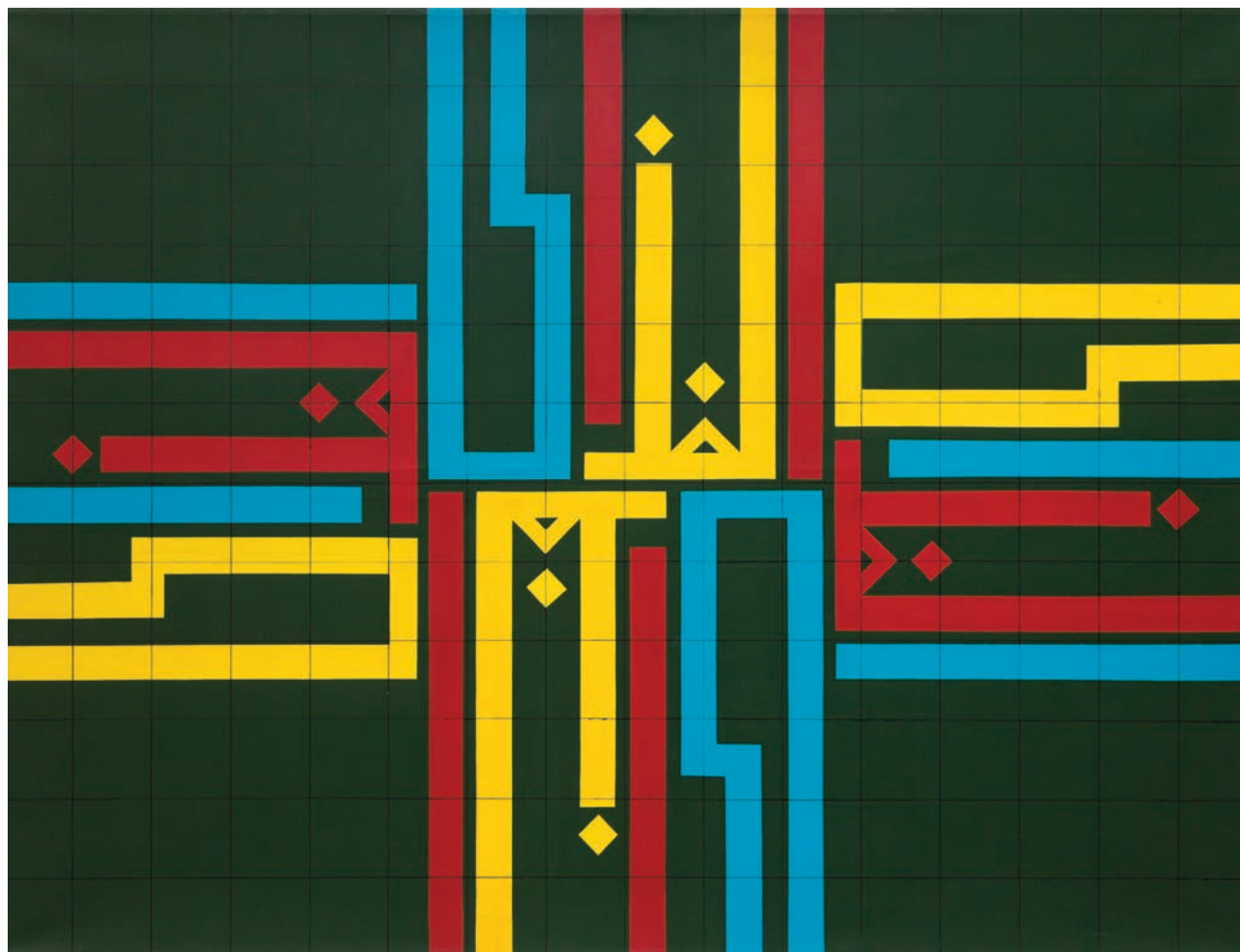
contexts," as Renata Papsch, general manager at Art Jameel describes it, the prize is open to nominations for artists from anywhere in the world. Nodding to the definition of Islamic art as a category that includes artisans from all over the world and of many religions, the prize has no prerequisite religious or cultural identity for nominated artists or designers. The short lists of artists for each award therefore reveals names from the USA, Brazil, England and Norway, to Algeria, Iran, Kosovo, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – a heterogeneity that only amplifies their wide range of disciplines from furniture, graphic, fashion and jewellery design to architecture, sculpture, miniature art and calligraphy.

To look only at works selected by the Jameel Prize over the years that reference Islamic calligraphy and architecture, we see diverse distinct contemporary practices. From Seher Shah's intricate architectural drawings in *Jihad Pop Progressions 4* in 2009 to the architectural scale models resting on a carpet in Babak Golkar's *Negotiating the Space for Possible Coexistence No.5* in 2011 and design label Dice Kayek's winning submission *Istanbul Contrast* in 2013 which translates different periods of Islamic architecture into garments, Jameel Prize artists consistently present inspired renderings that speak to their unique visions and contemporary practices.

Similarly, Jameel Prize artists have re-imagined the Arabic calligraphic tradition in innovative manners from Mecca-trained calligrapher Nasser Al-Salem's radically rethinking of the sacred script in *Guide us Upon the Straight Path* where he creates a new style based on hospital monitor graphs, typographer Pascal Zoghbi's invention of a 21st century Arabic font *29LT Fonts Collection* (both in the 2013 edition) and Lara Assouad's stripped back typography in *The Modern Arabic Alphabet and Type Project* in this year's edition, to Rachid Koraïchi's winning work in 2011, *Les Maitres Invisibles*, which commemorates Sufi thinkers through a graphic language that combines calligraphy with ideograms symbols and cyphers.

A NEW GENERATION OF ARTISTS

While the prize has honoured the work of some very well established artists like Koraïchi, Rasheed Araeen, and Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, in retrospect, it seems to be a very effective platform for bringing emerging and mid-career artists to the international art world's attention at key early stages of their careers. As Afruz Amighi, Jameel Prize winner of the first edition in 2009, recounts, "Most, if not all



Facing page: Installation view of Lucia Koch's *Mostruário (acrílico-espelho) / Showcase (acrylic-mirror)* from the series *Materiais de Construção / Construction Materials*. 2012. Steel sliding frames, mirrored acrylic. Photography by Everton Ballardm. Image courtesy the artist and Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo.

This page: Rasheed Araeen. *Al-GhazaliAl-GhazaliAl-Ghazali*. 2010–11. Acrylic on canvas. Photography by Vipul Sangoi.

All images courtesy the artists and Victoria and Albert Museum, London, unless otherwise specified.

of the Jameel Prize winners that came after me, were artists and designers who were already well established in their own right. In my case, I had just come out of an MFA programme at New York University, and although I was working with a small gallery that believed in my work, I was working in total obscurity. There were only a handful of people who were aware of what I was thinking about and working on my studio everyday. Winning the Jameel Prize gave my work, very suddenly, an international audience. I can say that nearly everything that came after – all the museum acquisitions, a commission for the 55th Venice Biennale – all this was a result of having been given that platform of visibility.” And, Amighi is one of many.

This is possibly the most unexpected impact of the Jameel Prize. Whereas its influence on public opinion might be hard to gauge, the list of names of the contemporary artists selected in the first couple of editions reads like a roster of the same artists who are currently celebrated by the international and Middle Eastern art worlds. From the first edition of the Jameel Prize (2009) alone, we see names from the current listings of hot exhibitions in Dubai’s Alserkal Avenue: from Amighi (who is being shown in Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai this Spring) to Hassan Hajjaj (whose latest show at The Third Line Gallery just closed), Seher Shah (whose show at

Green Art Gallery closes on 9 May) and Hamra Abbas (who will be shown at Lawrie Shabibi in Autumn). Others like Hayv Kahraman (2011), Faig Ahmed (2013) and Waqas Khan (2013) quickly rose to visibility in the international art fair circuit shortly after being shortlisted by the prize.

While it’s not unusual for an art prize to contribute to the ascent of an artist’s career, what’s interesting about this one is that it has done so despite the contemporary art world’s expressed reservations about associating artists too closely with their cultural or religious identity. We cannot deny that the Jameel Prize has played a part in catapulting the careers of some of the most successful new artists to have emerged from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. By providing a much-needed contextual dimension and bridge across the divide between the Islamic craft heritage and contemporary practice, it actually complements the rapid development of contemporary art from the region. The late April announcement that Antonia Carver will step into the role of the first director of Art Jameel after six years as director of Art Dubai reveals how rapidly this divide has been bridged.

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