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Taking Islamic design to unexpected places



IMAGES COURTESY OF GALLERY 344

Nja Mahdaoui's "Red Square Series 4," from "Infinite Present: Revelations From Islamic Design in Contemporary Art," at Cambridge Arts Gallery 344.

By Cate McQuaid GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 24, 2018

The theological adjective “apophatic” suggests that God is best sensed when not defined. In Islamic cultures, fluid, decorative calligraphy and geometric patterning have for centuries sought to express the divine without spelling it out.

“Infinite Present: Revelations From Islamic Design in Contemporary Art,” a radiant show at Cambridge Arts Gallery 344 curated by Marie Costello, spotlights the centrality of traditional arts in recent decades.

A few artists use traditional methods to tackle today’s issues. Abdulla M.I. Syed patterns illuminated manuscript pages with equilateral triangles, some bearing the Eye of Providence snipped from a dollar bill. The symbol of a single eye appears in many sacred traditions; inserting

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

it into his tessellations, Syed makes uneasy correlations among the divine, the almighty dollar, and Big Brother.

But most use intricate geometry or calligraphy to express the word of God, as their forebears did, updated in form and technique. Kamal Boullata's striking silkscreen "Allah I (God)" formats the Arabic word for God into an illegible pattern, a lattice of little bridges and pathways in gray-blue and sandy peach, glowing in keen harmony.

Text here is often inscrutable, but familiar. Rashid Koraïchi's paintings blend systems of writing. In "La Memoire du Sage" the artist sets a dancing glyph of hooks, checks, and crosses against a murmuring golden field scribed in different languages, referring to Sufi notions of the aesthetics of revelation.

Drawing on Moroccan tile patterns, Yasmina Alaoui's pigment print "14 Point Star Deconstructed, Grey and Black" looks like the daintiest lacework, stars knotted in circles. Yet it is eruptive. A central cross rises, then fades into thready blackness at the corners, capturing the constant, breathing chaos between dissolution and coalescence.

This is all apophatic. But the clearest picture is by Golnaz Fathi, who layers tiny lines in ballpoint pen into a vibrating shadow around a rectangle. The white area, a fluttering light surrounded by darkness, captures the immanence in empty space. That may be hope, or desperation, or God. Whatever it is, it thrums.

INFINITE PRESENT: Revelations From Islamic Design in Contemporary Art

At Cambridge Arts Gallery 344, 344 Broadway, Cambridge, through Nov. 30. 617-349-4380, www.cambridgeartscouncil.org/gallery344