

***Visual Verses: From the Form of Spirit to the Spirit of Form\****

By

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*Visual Verses: From the Form of Spirit to the Spirit of Form*  
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## **ABSTRACT**

*Visual Verses: From the Form of Spirit to the Spirit of Form*, is a personal spiritual journey that re-envisioned the studio as a sacred space, and art making as a spiritual practice, during a process of cultural adaptation from a religious context (Saudi Arabia) to a secular one (Canada). The project used a number of methodologies that integrate elements of *Ta'wil*, sound visualization, and art making as worship within the theoretical framework of Sufism and Sufi practice. The investigation culminated in the visual representation of Islamic holy scripts in new ways, beyond the traditional methods of calligraphy; the work is thus situated between a strongly religious background and contemporary art practice. This visual exploration was an attempt to combine the spiritual path and studio practice of a Sufi artist, and thereby highlight the author's spiritual journey as a form of self-exploration and cultural adaptation.

Keywords: Islamic Art, *Ta'wil*, Sufism, Worship, Calligraphy, Sound Visualization, Adaptation.

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## **DEDICATION**

To the creator of beauty, Allah.

And to four of his beautiful creations,

Mama, Baba, Abdullah, and Tameem.

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## **GLOSSARY**

It might be helpful to clarify and define certain words that occur numerous times in this thesis, and that form the basis of many of my arguments.

### **Beauty**

The philosophical theory of aesthetics and art is not a main focus of this research. Here I refer to the mystical conception of beauty, with its ethical and metaphysical forms, and I highlight the human relationship with the divine attributes of beauty. Beneito defines beauty in this sense as “an aesthetic of the spirit, an art of contemplation” (1995, p. 1). It is an intimate beauty that is a result of contemplating majesty.

### **Religion**

In this thesis, the term ‘religion’ refers to any named religion, that is, a major system of belief. The religion in question here is Islam; other religions are also sometimes mentioned. ‘Religion’ also includes, but is not limited to, Islamic rituals, calendars, holy days, prayers, and sacred texts (Elkins, 2004, p. 14). Elkins describes religion as public and social as it involves the family, the congregation, and the wider community. It is usually very hard to talk about religion in a general sense, especially with regard to Islam, as Islam has many branches and sects, each with its own wealth of knowledge and points of reference.

## **Spirituality**

Elkins defines spirituality as “a system of belief that is private, subjective, largely or wholly incommunicable, often wordless... Spirituality in this sense can be a part of religion, but not its whole” (2004, p. 14). I feel that using the term ‘spiritual’ or ‘spirituality’ in this paper will help me to better express my own opinions and beliefs that belong to me personally and not necessarily to the Islamic religion as a whole; the use of this term thus prevents me from generalizing and speaking on behalf of 1.6 billion people of the Muslim faith. All instances in this paper that refer to ‘spirituality’ are based on my own understanding of the term and reflect my understanding of my own spirituality and faith from a Sufi perspective.

## **Sufism**

Sufism is the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam. It is a path followed by Muslims in the search for truth, love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God (Nasr, 2007).

It is quite a difficult task to explain what Sufism is, or who a Sufi is. This is similar to Rumi’s story, in which a number of people were blindfolded and were asked to touch an elephant. As they had never seen an elephant before, each one described the part of the animal that his or her hands touched: one described it

as a pillar, another as a large fan, and another as a water pipe. But no one could describe what the animal looked like as a whole (Schimmel, 1975). What we do know is that Sufism is an accepted name for Islamic Mysticism; in my research I am interested in this “Mysticism.”

Annemarie Schimmel (1975) explains, “Mysticism contains something mysterious, not to be reached by ordinary means or by intellectual efforts.” She also explains that the root of the word comes from the Greek word *myein*, “to close the eyes” (p.31). Mysticism can also be defined as “the great spiritual current which goes through all religions” (Underhill, 1956, p. 191). It might be wisdom, love, or light, or it might be nothing. In my quest to find the truth and to create beauty, I rely on Sufism and Sufi teachings; these form the foundations of my very own spiritual path. As Schimmel (1975) explains, Mystics in all religions tend to follow different paths that lead to God. The *Tariqa*, or path, is the path that branches out from the *Shari’a*, which is the God-given law of Islam. Schimmel explains:

This derivation shows that the Sufis consider the path of mystical education is a branch of that highway that consists of the God-given law, in which every Muslim is supposed to walk, no path can exist without a main road from which it branches out; no mystical experience can be realized if the binding injunctions of the *Shari’a* are not followed faithfully first” (34).

Although I was raised in the geographical region that mainly follows the Sunni branch of Islam, my family belong to the Sufi sect. In this long and never-ending

mystical path, I borrow teachings from various schools: Shia-influenced Sufism, like the Nematallah Sufi order, and Sunni-inspired Sufism like the Qadiriya way, to name a few. I am utilizing this path in a novel way of seeking and worship, and on my path I pick whatever is suitable from the large body of knowledge of Islamic Sufism. At the end of day, “Sufism traces its origins back to the prophet Himself” (Schimmel, 1975, -. 46), no matter which school or sect I am inspired by.

### ***Ta’wil***

Here I adopt the Sufi meaning of the word *Ta’wil* which Nasr refers to in *The Garden of Truth* (2009), that is, Sufi commentaries which are spiritual hermeneutics. These are not humanly contrived meanings but rather the exposition of meanings already contained in the sacred text but not visible. The word *Ta’wil* means “to take something back to its origin” (Nasr, 1987, p. 14).

### **Truth**

Truths what I seek, what I look for, and what I think about. It is extremely hard to define ‘truth,’ but let me put it this way: obtaining truth is the goal of every Sufi,

and by obtaining truth one is freed from the bondages of ignorance (Nasr, 2007). I am a seeker of truth.

### **Wahhabi**

Wahhabi is the fundamentalist movement of Islam that seeks to purify the Islamic religion of any innovations or practices that deviate from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. In the West, the term has been used mostly to denote the form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia (Commins, 2006). According to Commins (2006), Wahhabi leaders in Saudi Arabia are committed to eradicating all other sects of Islam from Saudi Arabia, including Sufism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

My project, *Visual Verses: From the Form of Spirit to the Spirit of Form*<sup>1</sup> is an interdisciplinary art project that allowed me to explore the themes of adaptation and relocation within the context of my Sufi background. This exploration culminated in the production of a series of visual representations of Islamic holy scripts. As a contemporary Sufi artist relocating from Saudi Arabia to Canada, I discovered the role that the creation of art can play in forging a path towards the understanding of hidden truths. I used Sufi methods and applied them to the art-making process, thereby adapting my worship and spirituality to a different form. In addition to following traditional Islamic worship practices, I discovered that making art could also be a form of spiritual practice.

### **Background: Home versus New Home**

I was raised in Saudi Arabia in a Sufi home. My parents are devout Sufis, and the quest for truth was interwoven throughout our everyday lives. As the website of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order explains, “The practice of Sufism is the intention to go towards the Truth, by means of love and devotion. This is called the *tarikat*, the spiritual path or way towards God” (“What is Sufism?” 2011). This was extremely private to us, almost like a secret. Although we lived in an Islamic country, the Islam I learned at home was completely different from the Islam that was preached at school.

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the project is borrowed in part from Elkins and Morgan’s work *Re-*

Wahhabism is the dominant faith of Saudi Arabia (see Fig. 1) and is a fundamentalist branch of Islam that insists on literal interpretations of the Qur'an; religious leaders of this sect believe and teach that those who do not participate in their form of Islam are heathens and enemies. Since the establishment of Saudi Arabia, Sufism has been shunned, and religious officials have tried their best to eradicate any Sufi celebrations, or rituals (Commins, 2006). This created the first significant internal-versus-external conflict in my life: I was taught one thing at home, and I was taught the exact opposite at school. I was taught that love is the way to God, and I was taught that God was going to throw me into Hell for being a Sufi. Our celebrations, holy days, and rituals were secretive and private—which, for some reason, made them ever more special and dear to my heart.



Figure 1. Al Madinah, Saudi Arabia, burial place of the Prophet Muhammad.

*Source: Personal photo*

Despite the differences in beliefs between the Sufi community and the Wahhabis, we agreed on many things. We all fasted in the month of Ramadan, we were all happy on Eid day, and we structured our days around our five daily prayers. Five times a day the *moathen*, the person in charge of the call to prayer, would chant into a microphone that was connected to the mosque's loudspeakers, so that the entire neighborhood could hear. A beautiful song-like chant was spoken to inform Muslims that it was time to leave everything, close shops, wake up, and go to the mosque. For ten minutes, Muslims prayed together, bowing to Allah together, regardless of their specific belief.<sup>2</sup> That unique religious spirituality that I grew up with was the first thing I missed when I moved to Canada. Here, I no longer have a call to prayer.

When I moved from a country with a dominant faith that almost everyone follows to an extremely multicultural country with various faiths and beliefs, I experienced a tremendous amount of freedom. I was free to choose my own faith; I no longer needed to hide any part of it. To me, that was both exciting and scary. It meant that my meetings and appointments would no longer be constructed around prayer times; it also meant that I did not have to continue to live in the Sufi–Wahhabi conflict. As cultural adaptation theorist Earle H. Waugh (1991) suggests, it meant that a period of intense cultural adaptation was ahead of me, and religion was only one of the elements in this cultural adaptation matrix.

My religious/spiritual adaptation had nothing to do with the place itself (Canada), as the major religions in Canada are derived from a common

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<sup>2</sup> For more on Islamic prayers, see [http://islam1.org/how\\_to\\_pray/index.htm](http://islam1.org/how_to_pray/index.htm).

Abrahamic root. As Waugh (1991) points out, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share beliefs that are similar and that have had a complex relationship for the longest of times. This adaptation period was mainly about spirituality and the support system that I had back home in Saudi Arabia, inside my home and in society as a whole; it was at this point that I realized how my art practice was the main substitute for the support system that I missed and was looking for.

The more time I spent in the studio, the more I felt as if I was in a prayer. Through art and art making, I reconnected with the spirituality I missed the most. My art practice became my prayer, and these moments in my studio became sacred; I felt the connection in these creative sessions more so than I had ever felt in any prayer. Thus began my journey in creating as a form of worship and in making visual representations of verses that I have spent a lifetime memorizing. This body of work is the result of my journey. It all made sense, as “God is beautiful, and he loves beauty” (Muslim, Sahih Muslim, Book 001, Hadith No. 164).

Scholars in many disciplines have long grappled with questions like “What is the ultimate truth?” and “Which paths can lead us to the truth?” Although explored through numerous theoretical frameworks, these questions remain subjective, with no clear answer. These questions form the basis of my studio-based research, as outlined in this paper.

## **Context**

My research began with the following question: *How can I cope, reflect, and explore spiritual seeking in this new secular context?* I realized that a journey of practice-based art making was presenting itself. But this journey was inspired and led by spirituality and the seeking of truth, and to explain the truth is a difficult task. Scholars and philosophers from every religion have written endlessly about the truth; however, Nurbakhsh, a master of the Nimatullahi Sufi order, explains that most attempts to theorize the truth have fallen short. Philosophers view the absolute from a limited perspective, so all they see is a part of the absolute, and not the infinite in its entirety. This does not mean that what they see is incorrect; it *is* correct, but it is only a part of the whole (“What is Sufism?” 2011).

Nasr argues, “According to Sufism, the supreme goal of human life is to attain Truth, and whose attainment... makes us free” (2007, p. 30). Nasr’s meaning is that the perfection of the absolute can never be fully expressed using words alone; this assured me that exploring the truth through a medium other than words might lead to insights that may bring me closer to the absolute. This new journey could become the path towards making and creating beauty, “Beautiful” being one of the 99 names of Allah (Samat & Bresson, 2001).

Through my art, I intended to embark on a Sufi spiritual journey, one that might offer me some insight and answers into the methods of truth seeking in creative ways. Through exploring materials and creating art, I would be able to reflect on how such methods might help me to acquire

knowledge. I might take a step closer in this never-ending path of seeking the truth, as “Sufism is at the highest level a path of knowledge, a knowledge that is illuminative and unitive, a knowledge whose highest object is the Truth” (Nasr, 2007 p. 30).

### ***Visual Verses: Research Questions***

My spiritual practice relies on my belief that God is the origin of all forms and of all beauty. By material exploration of holy scripture and sound, and through rigorous art making and creating influenced and guided by my journey in search of spirituality, I planned to undertake the following research questions in the studio:

1. What methods of representation can inform a journey of spiritual seeking?
2. How can sacred Qur’anic texts be represented in new ways as a form of spiritual contemplation?
3. How can a Sufi artist cope with, reflect on, and explore spiritual seeking in a new secular environment?

The following section provides a detailed explanation of how I approached the research questions and of the theoretical and methodological framework that guided my work.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### The Qur'an as a Foundation

*Christ said, "In my Father's house are many mansions" (John 14:2).*

This saying has various meanings. As Nasr (1987) explains, one meaning might be that many religions lead to God, and that there are many spiritual paths one can follow. To do justice to the topic of religious art, one would have to examine a vast body of material from east to west, dating back to the first traces of religion. In my case especially, this investigation would require an in-depth study of the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as they are bound together by the Qur'anic phrase 'religions of the Book'—in other words, Abrahamic religions. All three religions have made major contributions to the field of religious art; all have experienced debates and arguments over the words and images used by adherents to the faith (Plate, 2002). Plate explains that the common historical wisdom of all three religions has preferred words to images; however, he emphasizes that if we investigate more deeply into the realm of words and images, we cannot choose one over the other as they are inseparable. The most vital art of the Islamic tradition, calligraphy, has been called "the art of visualizing Islamic holy text" (Plate, 2002, p. 90); this paper will focus on calligraphy, exploring the images that arise from this word-oriented religion.

I have neither the space nor the expertise to undertake a comprehensive study of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as they perceive and treat the visual arts. I have, therefore, selected the path of Islam—a religion that, like others,

has contributed greatly to this discourse. As a practicing Sufi, born and raised in the birthplace of Islam, Saudi Arabia, I am best equipped to explore this religion rather than Judaism or Christianity.

Nasr says, “The Muslim lives in a space defined by the sound of the Qur’an” (1985, p. 4). The Qur’an has always been the starting point and the centre of many Islamic arts, as it is the crystallization of the divine word in human language. Mosques were built as places where the faithful could gather and hear the Qur’an recited, and Islamic calligraphy was created to write out the verses of the Qur’an in an ornate, decorative manner worthy of God (see Fig. 2). The art of illumination is, according to Nasr, “a visualization of the spiritual inspiration related to the writing and recitation of the text of the word of God” (1985, p. 5).



Figure 2. Leaf from the Qur’an, Middle East, 800–900.

Source: *Victoria and Albert Museum archive*

In conclusion, as Nasr puts it,

...without the Quran there would have been no Islamic art. The rhythm created in the soul of the Muslim, his predilection for “abstract” expressions of the truth, the constant awareness of the archetypal worlds as the source of all earthly forms, and the consciousness of the fragility of the world and the permanence of the spirit have been brought into being by the Qur’an in the mind and soul of those men and women who have created the works of Islamic art (1987, p. 9).

In my studio explorations, as a form of worship I attend to a new form of representing the presence of the Qur’an by closely observing as this prototype of all sacred sounds manifests itself in forms of beauty. Just as “calligraphy is the response of Muslim souls to the divine message” (Nasr, 1987, p. 9), I believe *Visual Verses* is the embodied response of the divine message itself in material beauty (see Fig. 3). I believe that this form of art is the crystallization of the inner realities of the Qur’an and the imprint of this reality in me as an artist and in the soul of the art that is created.

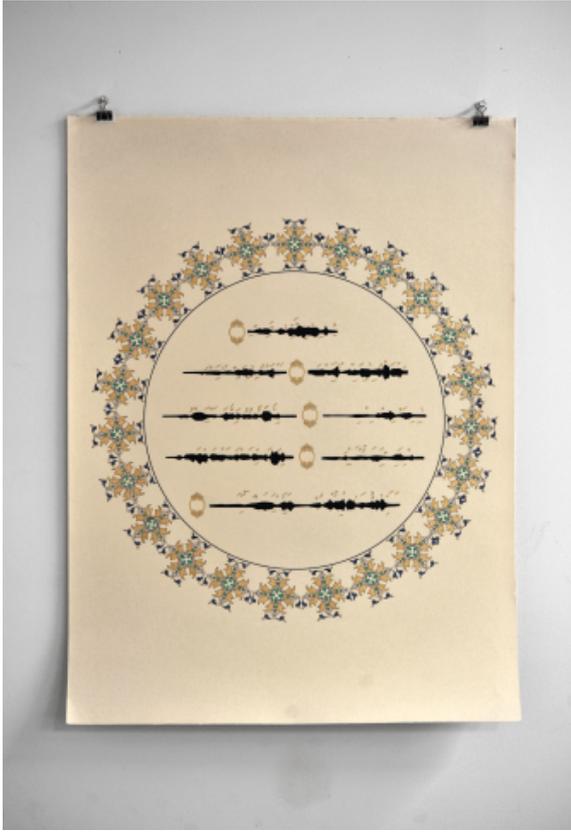


Figure 3. *Fatiha*, 2013. Soundwaves, gold leaf, ink

### **The Arts of Islam: A Brief History**

*Read: in the Name of thy Lord Who createth,*

*Createth man from a clot,*

*Read: And it is thy Lord the Most Bountiful*

*Who teacheth by the pen,*

*Teacheth man that which he knew not.*

*(Qur'an 96:1-5)*

Jean-Louis Michon (1985) states that the art of Islam is already present in these first words of the sacred book, the Qur'an, in both *what* is said and *the form* in which it is said. As the Qur'an, which in English literally means 'reading' or 'recitation,' is meant to be heard and recited, it leads to the first and major art of Islam, the recitation of the Qur'an, known as the Chant (Michon, 1985, p. 4). And because the word of God needs to be written in a book, here we have a hint of the second major art of Islam, calligraphy. Michon describes calligraphy as follows:

... an art which man carries within himself, in a certain manner, from the beginning of the Revelation since God teaches man by the pen, the calamus or reed, a symbol of the Prime Intellect, which, having been plunged in the ink of divine Wisdom traces the sacred signs which grant the human being access to knowledge (1985, p. 4).

He goes on to say:

Recitation, the art which manifests the sound and modulations in Arabic of the verses of the Koran in time; calligraphy, the art which transcribes visually the vocables and fixes them in space ... with these two modes of expression we find ourselves at the very source of the art of the Muslims, the source from which the artists of Islam have never ceased over the centuries to draw their inspiration (1985, p. 5).

Islamic art historians Sheila Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom define Islamic art as "art made by artist or artisans whose religion was Islam, made for patrons who lived in predominantly Muslim lands, or for a purpose that is restricted or peculiar to a Muslim population or a Muslim setting" (2003, p. 34).

This definition includes, but is not limited to, calligraphy, painting, rugs, ceramics, glass, metalwork, architecture, and music. The *Grove Encyclopedia* (2009) provides extensive information about Islamic arts from a

geo-historical perspective. While most western scholars study Islamic art from an external vantage point and attempt to locate Islamic art within its historical and geographical contexts, others engage with Islamic art from within its religious, philosophical, and artistic contexts. My perspective for this paper is neither historical nor descriptive, but is one based on the spiritual message of Islamic art.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the study of Islamic art was established in the West after the colonial domination over major Islamic regions including Egypt, Iran, North Africa and India (Blair & Bloom, 2003). *The Dictionary of Art* defines Islamic art as “art made by artist or artisans whose religion was Islam, made for patrons who lived in predominantly Muslim lands, or for a purpose that is restricted or peculiar to a Muslim population or a Muslim setting” (2003, p. 21). According to Oleg Grabar (1973), the term ‘Islamic’ becomes the first hurdle when attempting to integrate Islamic material into the wider field of Art History. This topic usually restricts itself to religious contents, but in this context it encompasses all cultural norms of Muslim societies. Grabar states:

In its classical centuries, before the major impact of the West, Islamic art can be seen primarily as the art of a culture with any number of regional and temporal subcultures within it. What I mean by ‘culture’ in this context is a broader series of very varied impulses and needs – social, intellectual, ecological, climatic, political, and of course religious – which were sufficiently constant over the centuries to explain the relationship to each other of such diverse attributes of monuments ... All these creations, one can argue, must be seen and understood primarily as expressions of, so to speak, an anthropologically defined culture, tied together perhaps by the faith of

Islam, but not any more so than, let us say, Versailles and a Russian icon are related by being products of a Christian world (1973, p.32).

The lack of indigenous scholarship has led to many arguments about the use of the term 'Islamic' art, as it simplifies the diversity and complexity of the tradition, both geographically and temporally. The term also attempts to include all genres of art making, including painting, architecture, ceramics, illustration, textiles, and more; this makes it difficult to define a single field of Islamic art (Blair & Bloom, 2003). Moreover, the use of the term is also problematic as it references the religion of Islam itself. Echoing Grabar (1973), Blair and Bloom say, "While some Islamic art may have been made by Muslims for the purpose of faith, much of it was not" (2003, p. 21). Blair and Bloom also highlight the fact that there is no record of artists in all of the Islamic domination period who identify their artwork as particularly Islamic. There are many debates around the term and what it includes; this research is concerned with a deeper meaning. A discussion of the history of Islamic arts as a whole is beyond the scope of this thesis, but in general, I am interested in Nasser's statement: "Islamic art is like any other sacred art: it is not simply the materials used but what a particular religious collectivity has done with the materials in question" (1987, p. 3).

For the purpose of my thesis, and for the relevance of my artwork, here I will touch upon the intended meanings and implications of Islamic art, as well as its spiritual message. I will show how Islamic art is, for all Muslims, a path to understanding the truth.

## **Calligraphy and Its Spiritual Message**

In Nasr's words, "The primordial creative act was at once the primordial word which is the origin of all sounds and of the Noble Qur'an as a sonorous universe, and the primal point which is the origin of the sacred calligraphy that is the visual embodiment of the sacred word" (1987, p.17). Nasr explains that Islamic calligraphy is a response of the souls of the Muslims to the divine message of Allah, and an embodiment of the crystallization of truths that are contained in the Qur'an and the Islamic revelation. This art is bonded to the world of spirit as it represents the external manifestation of the words of Allah in this visible world. This sacred art only exists to aid seekers through a barrier of material existence, so as to be able to gain access and have a taste of the realities of the spiritual worlds. Nasr goes on to explain the role of materials used in calligraphy: "Calligraphy and Illumination are as it were compensations for such contingencies as ink and paper, a 'step up' which makes it possible... to approach more nearly and penetrate more deeply the divine substance of Islamic Art" (1987, p. 19). Such spiritual properties associated with calligraphy are appealing to both the eye and the soul of truth seekers.

Calligraphy as ornament is better understood by our modern society, yet the abstract nature of its brush strokes and geometric patterns of aesthetics on scrolls, pottery, and other items possesses spiritual powers. Each stroke is meticulous, though seemingly created on a whim, and the attention to detail is obvious to those practicing Islam. Thus, art created becomes sacred because there exists a natural link to God's words, making calligraphy a spiritual

transmission. An examination of calligraphy taken out of context focuses on its natural brush strokes (thick or thin), angles, colors, and semantics, while examined as a cohesive unit it provides spiritual guidance and avenues of thought pertaining to the earliest Islamic culture (Nasr, 1987, p. 22).

The ability to appreciate this form of Islamic art does not necessarily come from the ability to understand the calligraphic inscriptions, but rather to understand the purpose behind them. Many earthenware pots used for ritual or daily living express Arabic scripture (see Fig. 4). This may or may not have been understood by every class of Islamic individuals dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which provides a constant reflection to Allah. The constant link, which is provided by artistic expression, even in small doses, creates a comprehensive picture of this spiritual art which allows believers to understand and appreciate its beauty.

Calligraphy is woven into a piece of artwork using a form of Qur'anic transmission that truly combines art and spirituality; as such, it serves as a unique component of religious culture.



Figure 4. Bowl, 10<sup>th</sup> century .

Source: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/65.106.2>

Islamic calligraphy has evolved over the years to incorporate other languages such as English and French. While this demonstrates its staying power as an aesthetic form, the concept that it holds religious powers makes it more than just pattern-work; it is sacred to the Islamic nation. Religious ideas may be passed through the centuries and across continents, but the specific method through which religion was established has never changed, due to its beauty and its honour.

Contemporary western artists, such as Julian Breton from France, realized the aesthetic beauty of this spiritual art and integrated it with the Latin alphabet to create his own new form of calligraphy which combines both

scriptures. He brought a new and contemporary approach to this historical discipline in what he calls “Light Calligraphy,” creating powerful long-exposure photographs of precise movements and strokes of Arabic calligraphy using only a camera and a flashlight (see Fig. 5). Such creative explorations are evidence of the esthetic powers such art possesses. It is still alive and viable 1400 years after its creation. And people all over the world are inspired by it.



Figure 5. Poésie – Pol’n, Nantes, 2007

Source: <http://www.behance.net/Kaalam>

To me, all media fall short when attempting to represent the truth. The truth is not a simple matter; it is deep and complex, and no man-made attempts can make it visible. Searching for the truth takes a lifetime of spirituality and devotion, and the truth may never be fully understood. In my own search for the truth, I chose the divine substance of the Qur’anic texts as a pathway for

my journey, as its spiritual substances have survived within all aspects of Islamic calligraphy. I plan to further this exploration of the possibilities of ceasing the power of spiritual recollection, of the remembrance of Allah through different forms other than calligraphy. In contemplating forms in the outline of the formless, I chose the Qur'an to be both my subject and my tool, as "only that which comes from the One can lead back to the One" (Nasr, 1987, p. 11).

### **Understanding Aniconism**

When I first decided to explore other representational methods of this holy text, Aniconism came to mind. As a child in elementary school back home in Saudi Arabia, I had been taught that visual representations of Allah or his prophet Muhammad were completely forbidden, in addition to any other picture of anything Allah had created. Islamic teachers who followed the Wahhabi fundamentalist sect would tell us students stories about how angels do not enter a house that contains images; anyone who made an image would be punished on the day of resurrection, and it would be said to them "Bring life to what you have created" (as cited in Elias, 2012, p. 9). Again, I was living in a conflict: in my home, my mother filled the walls with lovely pictures and paintings as she was an artist and proudly hung her art to decorate the walls of our house. Living and growing up in Saudi Arabia, we were not taught about the rich history of Islamic art that dealt with representation, such as the world of miniatures from Persia and the Ottoman Empire, and its presence in Islamic art history since the Umayyad Dynasty (see Figs. 6 and 7)

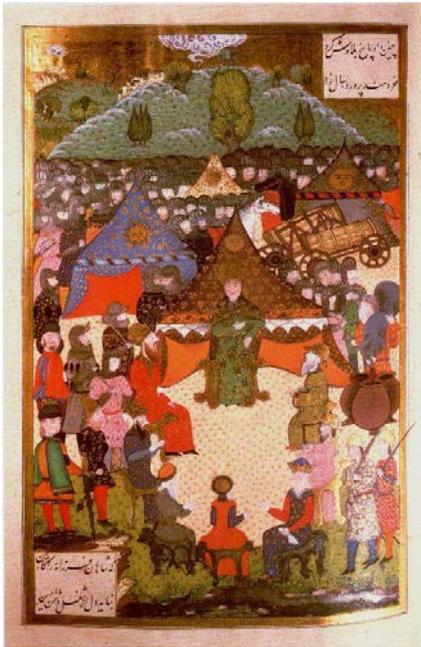


Figure 6. The King of Hungary, Lajos II, in council before the Battle of Mohacs  
Suleymanname, Ali, Amir Beg Shirwani, Istanbul, 1558.

*Source: Topkapi Museum collection.*

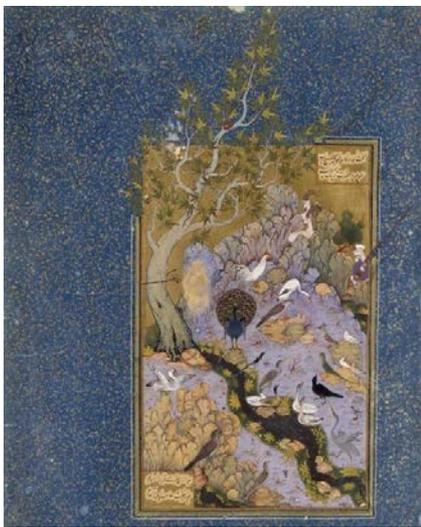


Figure 7. *Mantiq Al-Tayr (The Language of the Birds)*, Habib Allah, Safavid dynasty, Persia,  
circa 1600.

*Source: Topkapi Museum collection.*

Obviously, throughout history, Muslims have had mixed views on this topic, ranging from the destruction the Bamiyan Buddhas by the former Taliban government of Afghanistan in 2001—defined by many as “Islamic iconoclasm” (Flood, 2002), which extended their own Islamic Iconoclasm to another religion’s objects of devotion—to the establishment of the Aga Khan Museum of Islamic Arts in Toronto, due to open in 2014. This museum holds a vast number of Islamic miniature art pieces that are full of representations (Aga Khan Museum, 2007). The subject of Islamic iconoclasm is explored in detail in Jamal Elias’ work *Aisha’s Cushion* (2012).

With regard to my artwork, I realized that I was positioning myself and my artwork in a grey area: I am a contemporary artist from Saudi Arabia, dealing with religious content, in a Sufi context, interested in visually representing God and his words. I understand the sensitivity of my position, and how historically rooted and complex this issue is, but in terms of my artwork, I have restricted myself to the use of abstract forms when representing such dense religious content. In this specific body of work, and at this point in time, it is not my intention to defy the prohibition against creating idols. Instead, I am interested in seeking the abstract truths in visual form and in exploring how that influences me spiritually.

### **III.   INSPIRATIONS AND PRECEDENTS**

#### **The Teachings of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali**

Numerous scholars from all over the world have contributed to the field of beauty and aesthetics in Islamic scholarship throughout history; however, in my journey of seeking truth through art making, I have been influenced primarily by one of the most important medieval Islamic thinkers who addressed the issue from the Islamic–Sufi perspective, the Sufi philosopher Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (Elias, 2012). The direct influence of Al-Ghazali is evident in the way in which I think about my artwork, and the way in which I make it. Al-Ghazali believed that all forms of work, including art, should symbolize one’s worship. In his words, “For the traditional artist, art is not a gift, but knowledge to be acquired and, therefore, traditional art is not in any current sense of the word self-expressive” (Al-Ghazali, 1909; trans. Field, 2011).

Al-Ghazali divides his perception of beauty into three parts: the external, the moral, and the spiritual (Ali, 2001). Giving little regard to the former, he equates the latter two with one’s character and truth, respectively. For Al-Ghazali, the spiritual dimension was the most important, as it represented the most sublime form of beauty through its connection to the Almighty Allah (Ali, 2001). In my art making I adhere to Al-Ghazali’s intellectual position on beauty regarding the value of its essence rather than of its outward form. As such, the essence of my art creations is to seek a path to the only creator.

Al-Ghazali says, “Love for a created thing is defective. To love a creation is a sign of ignorance. But one who knows Him with knowledge of certainty knows of no beauty except the Creator of beauty” (as cited in Ali, 2001). It is his belief that only those who seek a path to the truth can recognize the futility of seeing beauty only as love for a thing that has been created. Furthermore, only the true seeker recognizes that Allah is the creator of all things, and that it is only He who should be worshipped through workmanship.

Al-Ghazali is quoted as saying, “For the next world is a world of Spirit and of the manifestation of the Beauty of Allah; happy is that man who has aimed at and acquired affinity with it” (Elias, 2012, p. 170). He firmly believes the principle that the outward appearance of an object does not encapsulate its beauty; its beauty lies in its creation, which highlights the work of Allah, and so serves no purpose for worship.

Thus, the ability to trust in the Islamic faith and the truths provided by internalizing the principles of Islam outweigh the need for such specific art, so the beauty lies in the abstract. The abstract concept intrinsic to Islam, such as truth, is therefore manifested in Islamic art as having a cyclical nature: if there is truth in art, art is therefore true. Al-Ghazali’s concept of beauty reflects my own beliefs as a Sufi, through the internal realization of what is beautiful to the external application of such beliefs. Such a specific definition of beauty within the Islamic faith is reinforced by the combined nature of beauty and purpose found in calligraphy and artistic works, for the aesthetic holds Arabic, Islamic sentiment for those to always acknowledge the presence of Allah and

the Qur'an. Thus, artistic expression is merely an extension of knowing the Islamic faith, which is unnecessary when faith is properly internalized, and Allah is honoured for spiritual reasons rather than through artistic presentation.

In my artistic path of finding the truth I am strongly influenced by this great Sufi scholar. I believe that true beauty is of an inner kind, and it is weak-minded to focus exclusively on outward forms. I also believe that the essence of my art lies within the truths revealed by the Qur'an, and that beauty cannot be contemplated physically. Therefore, to me, the representational quality of my work is based on a complex system of spirituality, belief, and imperfect human perceptions of the divine (Elias, 2012); what I am trying to accomplish here is, as Nasr puts it, "a casting of the divine realities upon the plane of material manifestation" (1987, p. 13).

### **Brain Activity, Creativity, and Meditation**

People in creative states exhibit a particular pattern of brain activity, stemming from an uninhibited source of "neurological underpinnings" (Limb, 2008, p. 1). Jazz musicians who embark on spontaneous melodic riffs, for instance, create from a place of inhibition, a trance-like state where music flows and cannot be shut off from worldly interference (Limb, 2008). Researchers at Johns Hopkins University conducted a study where jazz musicians were placed in an fMRI machine to view brain activity during spontaneous musical creations. In the study, researchers determined that the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (in charge of inhibition) visibly slowed down during this time; simultaneously, the medial frontal cortex experienced periods

of increase, emphasizing a surge in self-expression (Limb, 2008, p. 1). According to Limb (2008), “brain activity may also be present during other types of improvisational behavior that are integral parts of life for artists and non-artists alike...Without this type of creativity, humans wouldn’t have advanced as a species. It’s an integral part of who we are” (Limb, 2008, para. 18). Therefore, because this brain activity has also been linked to other aspects of our lives, it can be likewise associated with the world of meditation.

Like creating jazz music, meditating involves “transcending the common state of consciousness” (Braboszcz et al., 2010, p. 1910). Thus, there exists a self-awareness and a challenge to the practitioner to accept all emotions that may pass through; this is similar to how a jazz musician’s playing is based on self-expression, rather than on memorized worldly music. Specifically, the Buddhist monks, who practice peaceful meditation to clear the mind, actually find an increase in self-awareness; and brain patterns show an increase in areas like the medial frontal cortex that suggest a blocking out of the outside world to create a true internal experience (Pizzella et al., 2009). According to Braboszcz et al. (2010), “This function is managed by the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, structures that have also been shown to be activated when one is self-conscious (p. 1915).

Thus, those individuals involved in creative expression and states of meditation possess similar brain functioning which suggests an increase in mental control, uninhibited by the constraints of the outside world. The jazz musician is able to compose without any interruptions, and the monk is able to meditate for long stretches of time without breaking a peaceful state. These are

two creative processes—which are scientifically linked by similar brain activity—demonstrate how people engage in self-reflective activities, utilizing similar areas of the brain (Pizzella et al., 2009; Brabaszcz et al, 2010).

This is how spirituality and art making are linked in my own artistic experience. My spiritual states that led to creative output came from similar places in my brain, and allowed me to have more mental and creative control in my private art-making sessions. The similar feeling I had when engaged in both artistic and spiritual activities led to the realization that they must be related in some way, and research in this area led me to these interesting studies that scientifically support the connection I had made between spiritual states and creativity.

When creating artwork, especially artwork that is related to religion or spirituality, I certainly am not alone. A vast number of artists have spent their lives devoted to creating art that is spiritual, or art that expressed their spiritual states. Here I will discuss two artists who influenced my work and my practice, and who helped me shape my visual verse to what it is today.

### ***Ontology Is the Language of Existence***

Lulwah Al-Homoud, a leading contemporary female artist from Saudi Arabia, works with context and methods that are similar to mine. Her body of work, *Ontology is the Language of Existence*, recalculates the essential words of creation through Islamic geometry and mathematics (“Greenbox dictionary of Saudi Arabian artists: Lulwah Al-Homoud,” n.d.). She visualizes 14 of the

99 holy names of Allah by running them through computer software that generates geometric designs made up of the deconstructed names (see Fig. 8). Her context and method are very similar to my own; Al-Homoud deals with holy content and attempts to visualize it in ways other than traditional calligraphy (pers. comm.), and that is what I attempt to do with my own artwork. While I cannot comment on whether or not Al-Homoud considers her art work a spiritual practice, both she and her work are nevertheless important inspirations for me.

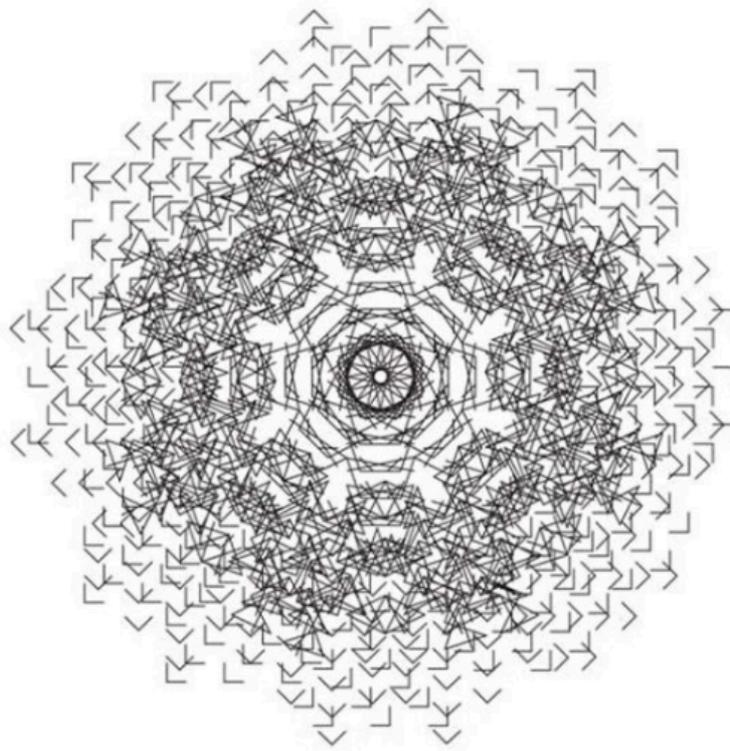


Figure 8. *Allah*, by Lulwah Al-Homoud

Source: <http://www.alriwaqartspace.com/events/ontolgoy/>

### ***The Forty-Part Motet***

Janet Cardiff has been one of the main influences and inspirations for me since I moved to Toronto. I first came across her work in the Art Gallery of Ontario, at the show *Lost in the Memory Palace: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller*, and that show marked the beginning of my fascination with sound installations. Cardiff's work, the *Forty-Part Motet* (2001), is a sound installation where 40 recorded voices are played back from 40 individual speakers that are meticulously placed in a space (see Fig. 9). The presence of the *Forty-Part Motet*, which contained religious content in a contemporary context, had an enormous impact on me, as I had already started to become aware of the separation between religion and art that is happening in the west. Seeing such a work made me feel more confident in my own art work. The *Forty-Part Motet* is extremely powerful, and it had a deep impact on me personally; I felt as if I understood each word, without understanding it. Justin Davidson calls it "a colorful expeditionary force of Chinese monks, Sufi Musicians, Latvian choristers, and professional virtuosos to strike into the interior vastness of the soul" (2010, "Polyphonic Spree"). The spiritual essence of this work is what I aim to achieve with my own work; Janet Cardiff truly is a major influence on me and my work.



Figure 9. The *Forty-Part Motet*, by Janet Cardiff

Source: <http://www.preview-art.com/>

The following section will show how I am inspired by the theoretical foundations and artistic precedents outlined above in the creation of my own body of work, *Visual Verses*.

#### **IV. VISUAL VERSES: THE CREATION OF A BODY OF WORK**

The methodological foundation of *Visual Verses* is based on interdisciplinary interactions between verse interpretation (*Ta'wil*), sonification, sound explorations, studio experimentation as a form of worship, and finally deep and frequent reflexive sessions. It uses mainly the Qur'an as a platform of spiritual seeking and exploration of this new context in which I find myself.

## *Ta'wil*

The act of choosing verses to represent in a visual format is a complex process that is not random. I rely on *Ta'wil* in making such decisions, as it is the branch of Qur'anic interpretation that deals with the more mystical and symbolic meanings of the holy text. This esoteric interpretation is central to the understanding and interpretations of the *Mo'awil* (the person applying *Ta'wil* on a specific verse); this branch can be subjective, depending on the *Mo'awil* and his or her own understanding of the texts (von Denffer, n/d).

The Qur'an has many levels of meanings; in fact, Sufis believe that it has seven different layers of meanings. The use of *Ta'wil* can help the reader to extract layers of meaning that are hidden in the sacred text (Nasr, 1987, p. 14). This is my approach in learning and discovering the hidden truths in this complex text, and this approach informs my art-making journey. Here I consider myself a *Mo'awil*: by closely learning about the Qur'an, and by reciting and understanding this holy text, layers of meanings are revealed to me through my practice of *Ta'wil*. I might not properly fit the criteria of a *Mo'awil* of the Wahhabi school, but I personally believe that the Qur'an is accessible to all, and that each individual should become close to it, read it, and interact with it in ways that are revealed to the individual. This should take place in addition to consulting with writings and experts in the field.

The use of *Ta'wil* allows me to fully understand the context and content of the verses, to gain insight and extensive information on the verses content, to extract any laws or rules that are in the verses, and to investigate

deeper mystic meanings that are implied in the verses. These insights might influence the mode of representation, although some materials are suitable for a broader frame of representation and do not fall under such strict rules. *Ta'wil* allows me to understand various Islamic texts and generate an interpretation based on my knowledge of the religious culture and my own understanding of the text.

It is also important to understand the verses fully in order to choose the right media of representation, as well as to decide which medium best conveys the message at the root of each verse. Some media are specific to some verses, while other media and representations are general and do not adhere to a specific verse or meaning. Some are more concerned with materials and outcome.

Moreover, *Ta'wil* is important in my process because it adds to the materiality of the work. Not all interpretations address the same topic; therefore, after I have understood each layer of interpretation deeply, I have more insight to represent the verse visually, choosing the materials that best fit the interpretation. Each material holds in it specific attributes and characteristics which may or may not attend to or work with the verses. Thus, at the heart of this project is the task of deciding which materials honour the word of Allah and what I understand Allah is saying in each verse.

In the art piece *Saba'a*, which translates to *Seven*, I used ink as a transcending medium to visually represent verse 31:27 (Fig. 10), which discusses ideas around ink, pens, and the words of Allah.

وَلَوْ أَنَّ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ أَقْلَمَ وَالْبَحْرُ يَمُدُّهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ سَبْعَةَ أَبْحُرٍ مَا  
نَفَدَتْ كَلِمَاتُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٢٧﴾

“And if all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean (were ink), with seven oceans behind it to add to its (supply), yet would not the words of Allah be exhausted (in the writing): for Allah is Exalted in Power, full of Wisdom” (31:27, sūrat luq'mān).

Figure 10. Qur'an, Verse 31:27

This work demonstrates the importance of using the materials (ink) and the verse, which adds another level of meaning to the artwork itself, just like the multiple layers of the Qur'an, when materials and verses relate to one another. This is why *Ta'wil* is an essential part of my practice and process. The ability to 'explain' and expound upon verses from Islamic culture is intrinsic within Islam; the two concepts encourage those to explore the unfamiliar and generate paths to explore truth based on the found truths of the past.

## Sound Visualization

Nasr (1987) states that the original creative act was a primordial word, which was the origin of all sound and of the noble Qur'an as a sonorous universe. To capture the word of God in material form, Muslims created calligraphy, which Nasr says is the “visual embodiment of the crystallization of the spiritual realities, contained in the Islamic revelation” (1987, p. 18). In other words, beautiful calligraphy was the human soul's reaction to the Qur'an. My aim is to create a new vessel in which the spiritual realities can come through, and this is where sound visualization comes into play. In my art work I rely on transferring sound from a sonorous universe to a visual one in abstract form, like sound waves and ink vibration. An example is shown in Fig. 11.

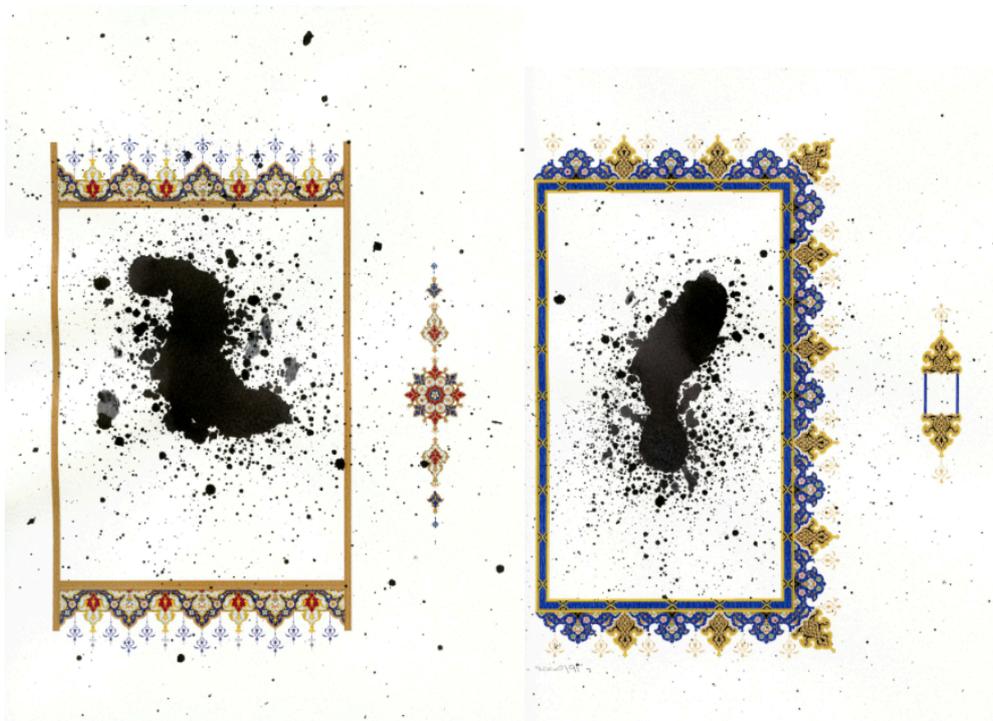


Figure 11. *Sab'ah*, 2013. Ink, printed borders

In *Sab'ah*, molecules of ink react to the soundwaves of the Qur'anic verses, creating a visual expression of the word of Allah. This gives the Qur'an the ability to visually represent itself with minimal intervention from me—I only control the volume and ink—so that the forms created are mere expressions of the verses itself. This guarantees that the visual representation of the verse conveys not only the beauty of the created artwork but also the spiritual state of the verse; it is as if the ink is charged with the task of representing the word of Allah through spiritual conveyance.

### **Meditation, Experimentation, and Art Making as Spiritual Practice**

*“Art is the visualization of the invisible inwardness of all things”*

*(David Morgan, 2009, p.30).*

As a means of coping with my change in location—my move from Saudi Arabia to Canada—I went through a process of adaptation; the most significant change was related to my spirituality and modes of worship. I found myself spending more time making art than praying. Gradually, I found that the spiritual state I sought was more evident while I made art than during my five daily prayers. I realized that my art-making explorations and art processes had become my spiritual practices. Pat Allen, in her book *Art is a Spiritual Path*, agrees. She says, “Artmaking is a spiritual path through which we are most able to explore divinity by participating in the act of creating” (2005, p. 15). Through the act of creating, I found myself exposed to moments of seeking truth, and these moments both inspired my methodologies of creating and helped me to understand my intentions behind each creation.

Allen also states, “The first act of initiating an art experience, before making a single mark, is the creation of an intention to guide our work” (2005, p. 25). After many hours in my studio, I realized that the intention of my work was to establish a practice of spirituality or worship, and that my practice was in both ways working as intention and inspiration.

My material exploration, therefore, was led by a journey in search of spirituality. I sought to discover which medium best channeled spirituality for me, and which mediums best expressed these intangible relations that derive from the art-making process. At some point I lost focus on the end result, especially while playing with materials and focusing more on the process of making and meditation. Christine Valters Paintner (2007) writes about the process of art making in her article ‘The Relationship between Spirituality and Artistic Expression,’ in which she argues the following:

The focus in the expressive arts is on the process of art-making rather than the art product itself. In this way, art-making becomes accessible to anyone, for the creative process is central to the journey of discovery rather than what the final product will look like. The focus of the expressive arts is not on a specific technique or the quality of the product itself. It is on the power and process of symbolic expression in any of the arts for healing and integration (2007, p. 4).

My work relies on choosing media that allow for the visual representation of sound, and my studio process is exactly that. I take time to decide on which medium best channels this spirituality, paying attention to detailed movements and trying different approaches that are interrupted by sessions of meditation and worship. In this manner I create what is beautiful, inspired by the most beautiful, Allah.

## V. REFLECTIONS

*The aim is not to quench your thirst.*

*The aim is to develop the perfect thirst,*

*So that you never stop drinking.*

*Shams-e Tabrizi*

Five times a day I stand on my prayer mat and recite, recite the opening chapter of the Qur'an, which includes the phrase "Guide us upon the straight path" (Qur'an 1:6). I have realized that I was guided to the path of art, and through it I can ascend to divine realities. Adopting spiritual Sufi methodologies in art creation has transformed my art making and has created a link that binds me directly to God; in this way, I have found God and spirituality since moving to Canada. As Rumi said, "There is a link, without asking how, without analogy, Between the Lord of man and the soul of man" (Helminski, Ed., 2005, p. 54).

*Visual Verses: From the Form of Spirit to the Spirit of Form* is a transformative journey in two different contexts. My state, or my spiritual condition, throughout the project varied from experiencing expansions and contractions of this embodied and spatial experience. But I felt that my duty was to adhere to this spiritual practice though all the states I was in, just as a Sufi would.

On a final note, I constantly asked myself how work that is centered on spiritual beliefs might be perceived in Canada.

I am very interested in the reactions of the public here in Canada towards my spiritual art and art practices, as I am taking something quite personal and situating it in a public setting—away from my sacred studio and my own spiritual seeking, and into the art gallery, where I ask people to interact and explore my art. David Morgan talks about art and religion in a modern age and says, “We are strongly disposed today to speak of “Art” and “Religion” as if they were discreet cultural forms” (Elkins and Morgan, 2009, p. 26). And I did notice that the few times I showed my pieces in classroom critiques, some teachers and guest critics refused to comment on my art pieces because of the heavy religious content that my art represents. I personally felt that some were bothered by it; in some instances, I was asked to eliminate Qur’anic recitations from one of my installations that largely depended on the chants, because the content was too spiritual.

Morgan responds to the reactions I got from some people who attach themselves to the academic institution when he says, “Religion need not be understood in the institutional sense of an organized creed or cult, but in terms of mystical or hermetic knowledge and ritual practices that occupied many artists” (Elkins and Morgan, 2009, p. 35). In the future, especially when its time for my thesis show, I think I will have an important role to play, in encouraging people to talk about my artwork and critique it. I anticipate, however, that few observers will do so, for two reasons. First, they may not want to say anything to offend me and my belief system; and second, they

may not want to appear ignorant and uneducated on issues that concern my part of the world.

what I found in this show is that the members of my audience connected with my work, even though they may have little familiarity with the content. As I hoped for while making the work, many experience what art critic Bernard Berenson calls the “aesthetic moment,” which he explains as follows: “In visual art, the aesthetic moment is that flitting instance, so brief as to be almost timeless, when the spectator is at one with the work of art he is looking at, or with actuality of any kind that the spectator himself sees in terms of art” (1948/1954, p. 93).

Showing my artwork in a Canadian context was an extremely new experience and I enjoyed how people connected with the work even though they had minimal information about The Sufi culture the work was based on, specially in a context where I once thought that religion no longer belong in the gallery.

Maybe art and religion in the west have gone their separate ways, and that might be the reason why people no longer know how to react to or talk about art in contemporary times; on the other hand, where I come from, religion was, and still is, the fuel and motive that moves artists like myself to make and love art. Despite this, I still believe that my artwork might have a much better chance of being accepted here in Canada than back home, due to the enormous influence Sufism and the Sufi way of life have on me and on my work. I anticipate that, like our celebrations and rituals, this artwork would have to be kept a secret back home.

Finally, there is a big discussion around the type of art that is familiar in the art world, and that which is hidden, personal and public. Faith and spirituality are private, and I am looking forward to seeing this spiritual body of work in the real worlds after the end of this Masters chapter.

For images of work please find attached CD.

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