

Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being

By

Fareena Chanda

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University
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for the degree of

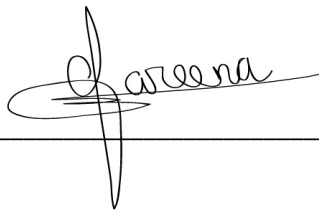
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Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being

Master of Fine Arts, 2012

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Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

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Abstract

Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being is a multi-faceted research project questioning the definition and teleology of the term Islamic art while positioning a contemporary practice of art and design within the historical discipline. The investigation emphasizes the need for a re-interpretation and expansion of the disciplinary canon of Islamic art through the methodological use of the Islamic concept of *ijtihad* (reform). Situated within the interstitial space of traditional, art historical and contemporary Islamic art practices, *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being* specifically explores the concept of *zahir* (exoteric) and *batin* (esoteric) as described in the Sufi tradition. The project combines hermeneutics with an interdisciplinary studio practice, utilizing intuition and the body as vehicles for attaining esoteric knowledge. The studio-practice explores the concept of the body in Islamic tradition, phenomenology, installation art practices, critical design and time-based media.

Keywords: Islamic art, *ijtihad* (reform), *zahir* (exoteric), *batin* (esoteric), hermeneutics, embodiment, installation art and critical design

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Dedication

To my family for always letting me *be*.

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Fig 1. Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, Egypt. 2008

The visible world was made to correspond to the world invisible and there is nothing in this world [that isn't] but a symbol of something in that other world.¹

I. INTRODUCTION

Defining a Practice of Being

The perennial question of who we are, where we come from and what is our purpose in this world are ontological debates that continue to occupy the minds of people in multiple disciplines, explored through various theoretical frameworks, one of them being theological. Every religion offers its followers insights into the nature of being and gives them a path to follow in attaining an understanding of their existence and in turn of The Divine.² The religion of Islam is no different where the ascent towards God goes back to the origin of the tradition of Islam, encapsulated in the Holy Book, the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad.³ In order to begin the journey towards God, the spiritual dimension of Islam emphasizes the importance of a harmonious relationship between the visible world and the invisible world.

The essence of my being has been shaped through my embodied experience in multiple worlds, encompassing the religion of Islam, womanhood, a South Asian background and global citizenry. In order to understand and contend with the questions that have arisen through my lived experience, I often turn to my life as an artist. I began

my practice as a photographer where my natural disposition has been to see and frame the world through my camera's viewfinder, which I consider a mechanical extension of my eye (Fig.1). The act of photographing has cultivated in my work a substantial attention to detail. A curiosity of such detail has prompted me to not only explore the ideological frameworks of an image and its content but also the hidden paradigms within the image, often missed by the naked eye.

A true understanding of a photograph, I believe, requires a comprehensive knowledge of the multi-dimensional contexts under which the image is taken. The relationship between the visible and the hidden has compelled me to go beyond the two-dimensionality of the image surface and move the narrative into three-dimensional space. My impulse to depict the essence of an image has its roots in the theoretical framework of conceptual art practices where the emphasis on the thought component is considered to be the object itself. Following the trajectory of conceptual art practices, the research methodology and studio-based practice depicted in this thesis project follows a process of inquiry inspired by what Mary J. Jacob describes as:

The process of art-making in which the artist does not know the outcome, what the work of art will look like ... a process with shifts and changes, one of simultaneously seeing and finding a new way ... This insight is not so much knowing as sensing another knowledge that runs deeply, though obscurely, within the human psyche, and bringing it into consciousness. It leads us to what we already know but did not know we knew.⁴

Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being is an interdisciplinary thesis project that combines hermeneutics and studio-based research to explore the Sufi concept of *zahir* (exoteric) and *batin* (esoteric) as described by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. In the Sufi tradition, the dynamic

relationship between *zahir* and *batin* represents the process of acquiring knowledge of God. The characterization of the notion of acquiring knowledge mimics what hermeneutics describes as understanding, i.e. "a way of existing for every human being."⁵ The concept of understanding as described in hermeneutics can also be viewed through phenomenology where the relationship between understanding and/or experience and the physical body is considered to be a single continuum of existence. Being with oneself and moving with one's perceptions allows the unfolding of the hidden paradigms of the inquiry at hand. As Jacob describes, "the work of art derives its presence from the artist's presence of mind ... it is art's quality of presence that draws us in, commanding our attention and inspiring us to look more deeply."⁶

Following a similar framework, to explore the concept of *zahir* and *batin*, I have used intuition and the primacy of my body as exoteric knowledge to delve deep into the esoteric dimension of my own being. Within the context of the body, my thesis project specifically explores the blink of the eye as a metonym for the concept of *zahir* and *batin*. Through my work, I invite the viewer to attune and contemplate to my rhythms of being by making explicit the concept, methodology and process of reaching a certain presence of mind. While this thesis project and its conceptual framework has been influenced by my spiritual being within an Islamic tradition, the dialogic relationship between subject and object, research and studio-practice aims to reflect a narrative which focuses on the universal physiology of being.⁷

* * * *

Context

My research began with the following question, how can an artist situate a contemporary art practice within the historical discipline of Islamic art while remaining conscious of a commitment to a religious tradition? When looking at the issue from within a Muslim tradition, the consideration of the multiple definitions of Islamic art become imperative. In the context of this research, I take a close look at the art historical definition of Islamic art versus the Traditionalist definition of the field. The disparity between multiple definitions raises fundamental questions regarding the understanding of the term Islamic art vis-a-vis contemporary art practices. Through my work, I advocate for the re-interpretation and broadening of the disciplinary canon of Islamic art by considering the relevance and contribution of contemporary art and design practices within the plethora of work that falls under the discipline of Islamic art. Conscious of both traditional and post-modern interpretations of Islamic art, I propose the use of the Islamic concept of *ijtihad* (effort / reform) as a methodological approach to the re-definition and/or expansion of the canon. By positioning my interdisciplinary studio-practice within the interstitial space between traditional and contemporary understandings of Islamic art, I aspire to contribute to the historical and contemporary discourse related to Islamic art practices.

* * * *

Overview

In *Islamic Art: Contemporary Context*, the complex genealogy of the term Islamic art is placed within a socio-politico-religious context. In this chapter, I explore the art historical and Traditionalist definition of the term Islamic art. I question the relevance and applicability of multiple definitions of the term Islamic art to the practice of a contemporary artist. As a conclusion to the chapter, I emphasize the need for a re-interpretation and expansion of the disciplinary canon of Islamic art in light of the Islamic concept of *ijtihad* (effort / reform). Following this chapter, *Methodology: Interdisciplinary Hermeneutics* describes the interdisciplinary methodology and research questions explored in this thesis project. The methodology borrows its framework from Alvesson and Sköldberg's description of hermeneutics. I give an overview of the methodological foundation of my project by describing how I have appropriated hermeneutics in the context of a studio practice. At the end of the chapter, I give an overview of the artists whose works have influenced my thought process and studio practice. In the subsequent chapter, *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being - Theoretical Framework*, I explain *zahir* and *batin* using Seyyed Hossein Nasr's detailed description of the concept. I also highlight other fundamental concepts that are intrinsic to the development of my project, including the concept of the body in Islamic tradition and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. In the following chapter, *Zahir & Batin: Rhythm of Being - Studio Practice*, I break down the metonymical interpretations of the concept of *zahir* and *batin* explored in the project. I conclude the chapter by explaining the material and conceptual specificities of the studio explorations. In the final chapter *Zahir & Batin: Rhythm of Being*, I discuss the production, structure and final outcome of the thesis

exhibition describing each installation work in detail. I conclude with an *Afterword*, a reflective narrative on the culmination of the thesis project.

* * * *

II. ISLAMIC ART: CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Islamic Art and the Contemporary Artist

What is the definition and teleology of the term Islamic art? What is the applicability of multiple definitions of the term Islamic art to the practice of a contemporary artist? Can the practice of a contemporary artist re-define the term Islamic art? The academic and institutional frameworks defining the field of Islamic art have made it difficult for a contemporary artist to situate an art-making practice within the larger historical context of Islamic art practices. The difficulty in situating a contemporary art-practice within the field of Islamic art is furthered when juxtaposed against the Traditionalist interpretation of Islamic art. Consequently, how does a contemporary artist begin to reconcile tradition with modernity while remaining conscious of a commitment to a religious tradition?⁸

The topicality of the definition and re-definition of the term Islamic art has gained particular relevance after September 11, 2001.⁹ Against a contentious political backdrop, Islamic art historians have been entrusted to inform the Islamic ideological struggles and bridge the gap between the Islamic world and the West.¹⁰ Commenting

on the deployment of Islamic art and its histories, Islamic art historian Finbarr B. Flood states, “the slippage between categories of religious identity and cultural identification ... is directly relevant to the utility of Islamic art in the high stakes public relations game ... on a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of abstractions (evil, fundamentalism, terror etc.).”¹¹

Subsequently, the impetus of institutions, scholars and artists working in the context of Islamic art has gained rapid momentum. Multiple efforts have been made by major museums, curators and institutions worldwide to showcase the classical works of Islamic art, represent artists from Muslim majority regions in a contemporary context and question the definition of the term Islamic art in an attempt to re-define the parameters of the historical context that comes with it. The establishment of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha in 2008, the re-opening of the Islamic wing at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 2011, the re-opening of the Department of Islamic art at the Louvre in Paris in 2012 and the expected inaugural of the Agha Khan Museum for Islamic art in Toronto in 2013 exemplify the rising historical, cultural and political interests in the field of Islamic art. Other initiatives and recent exhibits include *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* first shown at the British Museum in 2006, *Without Boundaries: Seventeen Ways of Looking* held at the MOMA in New York in 2006 and the Jameel Prize competition held every two years by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London amongst others. While institutional and curatorial efforts are expanding the presence of Islamic art globally, the rhetoric of these exhibitions and the historical genealogy defining Islamic art remains ambiguous, oscillating between cultural and religious identifications.

In April 2011, the Messis Foundation organized an international conference “Presenting ‘Islamic’ Art in Contemporary Context” in Amsterdam in an attempt to re-define the term Islamic art and consider the field’s conceptual aspirations. The conference

brought together museum curators, art historians and cultural strategists to assess the definition of the term Islamic art, and re-evaluate the complexities and contradictions that continue to perpetuate the understanding of the field.¹² While institutional and academic efforts continue to expand the canon of interpretation, I believe that a contemporary artist, conscious of a commitment to a religious tradition, can no longer ignore the need to contribute to the re-definition of the term Islamic art. By sidestepping the historical context that is attached to the term Islamic art, the artist, whose work essentially contributes to the discourse of Islamic art, invariably either adds to the ambiguity of the term itself or is faced with the challenge of adhering to contradictory labels. The need for the artist to contribute to the re-definition of Islamic art is further accentuated by the lack of interpretation and contribution to existing scholarships in the field of Islamic art from within the Islamic world. Oleg Grabar commented on the development of the field of Islamic art almost two decades ago, “the Muslim world did not participate in [the field’s] development, and this immediately raises the fundamental question ... whether any culture can be meaningfully understood through the application of techniques developed outside of it.”¹³

* * * *

The Term Islamic Art: Context and Definitions

As a contemporary artist attempting to situate my work within the larger context of Islamic art, I am particularly interested in the ideological differences between the art historical definition of Islamic art and the Traditionalist understanding of the discipline.

By highlighting some of the shortcomings of these definitions, my goal is to expand the understanding of the definition of Islamic art and assess the possibility of re-conciliating tradition with questions of modernity.

Art Historical Context and Definition

In the West, the study of Islamic art was established as an academic field of inquiry at the end of the nineteenth century following the European colonial domination over much of Muslim majority regions including North Africa, Egypt, Iran and India.¹⁴ The discipline was brought under the umbrella of existing scholarship including the study of Ancient Near Eastern Languages and Antiquities, Orientalism¹⁵, and the history of art.¹⁶ The *Dictionary of Art* defines Islamic art as “art made by artists 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.”¹⁷ Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, renowned art historians of Islamic art and architecture point out that prior to the establishment of the Western inquiry of Islamic art, there was no indigenous scholarship in any of the Muslim majority regions within the field of art or architecture. One of the main arguments against the use of the term Islamic art asserts that it renders a reductive and universal approach to the topic and simplifies the diversity, both geographic and periodical, that encompass the art traditions from Muslim majority regions. Furthermore, attempts to include all genres of art making from painting, illustration, architecture, ceramics and textiles make it difficult to define any one field of Islamic art.¹⁸ The absence of written sources documenting artistic processes has largely isolated the study of Islamic art from its traditional and religious, social and political contexts resulting in a homogenous construction of the discipline.¹⁹

A secondary point of contention in the use of the term Islamic art is the reference to the religion of Islam itself. Blair and Bloom discuss the tenacious and problematic relationship of the academic field of Islamic art to the religion of Islam by pointing out “while some Islamic art may have been made by Muslims for purposes of faith, much of it was not.”²⁰ Blair and Bloom further testify by highlighting the fact that there is no recorded evidence that artists or patrons in the fourteen centuries of Islamic dominion ever thought of their art as particularly Islamic.²¹ This particular argument also differentiates Islamic art from other religious art categories such as Christian or Buddhist art, which are normally understood to refer specifically to religious art. Blair and Bloom qualify that most scholars accept that the “convenient if incorrect term ‘Islamic’ refers not just to the religion of Islam but the larger culture in which Islam was the dominant – but not sole – religion practiced.”²²

Perhaps the convenience of using the term Islamic art at the conception of the academic field was a means of homogenizing the multiplicity of traditions, materials and cultures manifested in the form of art and architecture in Muslim majority regions. However, in most recent times, the universalized definition of the term Islamic art has resulted in tremendous ambiguity in the discourse on the production, interpretation and reception of the work produced by artists with an Islamic background or from Muslim majority regions; thereby, making it difficult for a contemporary artist to situate an art-practice in the larger framework of Islamic art.²³

Traditionalist Context and Definition

The definition of Islamic art from the Traditionalist School vis-a-vis the Western academic and historical canon is radically different. While the Western canon postulates

various definitions and categorizations of Islamic art particularly focusing on the material, social, economic and political contexts of Islamic art practices, the Traditionalist perspective focuses on the 'Islam' in the term Islamic art. In the context of this research, I have used Seyyed Hossein Nasr's description of Traditionalist philosophy from the foreword of *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (1973). Nasr's definition of Traditionalism takes from the 19th century Sufi movement in the West developed by Rene Guenon and Frithjof Schuon amongst other scholars.²⁴ I would like to point out that I am using Traditionalism to contextualize the definition of Islamic art; I am not concerned with the doctrines of the philosophy, which in itself are complex and beyond the scope of this analysis.²⁵ Describing 'tradition', Seyyed Hossein Nasr says:

... to speak of Tradition is to speak of immutable principles of heavenly origin and of their application to different moments of time and space ... Tradition ... is not custom or habit; nor is it the transient style of a passing age. Tradition, of which the most essential element is religion in its universal sense, continues as long as the civilization which it has brought into being and the people for whom it is the guiding principle survive ... Tradition as thus understood is the presiding Idea of a normal society ... Tradition governs every facet of life.²⁶

Therefore, the Traditionalists are first and foremost concerned with the source and origin unifying the principles of Islamic art. The Traditionalists assert their position by emphasizing that the particular genius, distinct characteristics and formal homogeneity within the art-works produced in Muslim majority regions require a singular cause and cannot be reduced to accidental historical factors as often delineated in the art historical definition of the term Islamic art.²⁷ As a result, the Traditionalist School seeks the definition of Islamic art in the religion of Islam itself where the

foundation and teleology of Islamic art is believed to lie in the two main exoteric dimensions of Islam, the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad.²⁸ Therefore, Nasr defines Islamic art as:

... the art of Islam ... is Islamic art not only because it was created by Muslims but because it issues forth from the Islamic revelation ... This art crystallizes in the world of forms the inner realities of the Islamic revelation and ... leads man to the inner chamber of the Divine Revelation. Islamic art is a fruit of Islamic spirituality from the point of view of its genesis and as an aid ... for spiritual life from the vantage point of ... a return to the Origin.²⁹

One of the arguments underlying the Traditionalist definition of Islamic art, in particular to the discipline's inseparable relationship to religion, is its exoteric function of being a spiritual aid. Nasr alludes to this notion when he describes the characteristic of Islamic art as a means of inciting contemplation of The Divine and consequently heightening the spiritual state of a being.³⁰ When viewed through the theoretical framework of Traditionalism, the definition of Islamic art may present itself to be a starting point for an artist to define a contemporary practice of art making in the context of the discipline of Islamic art. The relevance of the Traditionalist definition of Islamic art is brought forward by Oleg Grabar when he observes that an ideology rooted in transcendence and mysticism "for the contemporary artist ... is immensely attractive because it claims to penetrate the whole ethos of a culture."³¹ While Grabar's observation may not apply to all contemporary artists from Muslim majority regions, I believe that there is validity in his observation to the extent of providing an opening to re-interpret the term Islamic art; I will come back to this point shortly.

While there may be validity and value in the definition of Islamic art proposed

by the Traditionalist School, incongruity begins when Traditional assertions become closed finite systems of interpretation. The inflexibility of the definition becomes even more apparent when questions of modernity and technological innovation challenge Traditionalist perspectives. For example, both from an art historical and Traditionalist point of view, the legacy of craftsmanship to the making of Islamic art is undeniable. Titus Burckhardt, scholar and member of the Traditionalist School, states that “art, however cannot exist without the artist or without the craftsman: no distinction is made between the two in traditional Islamic world, where art without craftsmanship, and technical prowess without beauty, are equally inconceivable.”³² Granted the importance of craft, a resistance often follows this kind of statement towards technological innovation. Burckhardt continues, “ ... this means that the progressive elimination of craft as a result of the inroads made by the machine entails the partial or total disappearance of the Islamic arts.”³³ The above statement leads to an assumption that the definition of craft and consequently the definition of Islamic art is static, in-turn presenting inflexibility in the innovation or re-interpretation of the discipline.

At the same time, the ideological inflexibility of the re-interpretation of Islamic art is propagated within the art historical context where the exclusion of art produced in the Islamic world after the end of the 18th century is unanimously missing from art historical surveys.³⁴ As Flood discusses, “the unanimity of exclusion of contemporary works normalizes the location of Islamic art in a valorized past from which living tradition is excluded, inherently reducing its value vis-a-vis the art of Western modernity.”³⁵

* * * *

Re-Defining Islamic Art: Post-Modern Framework and *Ijtihad*

Post-Modern Framework

The question of re-interpretation of the term Islamic art is not a new endeavor. Blair and Bloom have specifically addressed the pitfalls of the term Islamic art by putting emphasis on the idea that the art produced in the Muslim world can be re-framed and approached as the 'visual culture' of a place and time. Blair and Bloom assert that "a more pragmatic way to approach Islamic art would be to define it 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 the leaders) espoused a particular religion, i.e. Islam."³⁶ The re-framing of the discipline of Islamic art as a visual culture can be analyzed through Hal Foster's theoretical framework of a resistive postmodernism where the re-definition is "concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo- historical forms, with a critique of origins, not a return to them. In short, it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations."³⁷ A cultural re-framing gives contemporary artists the opportunity to rethink Islamic art by taking it outside of the confines of established orthodoxy, art historical and/or tradition.³⁸ Therefore, when viewed through Foster's post-modern framework, the work produced by contemporary artists allows for the freedom of a non-aligned space, particularly in relation to the religion of Islam, by seeking both the plurality of a complicated history and the specificity of a global instance.³⁹

I return to my initial question, how does a contemporary artist begin to reconcile traditional art practices with contemporary ones while remaining conscious of a

commitment to a religious tradition? The answer is certainly not simple or singular. While Foster's postmodern framework is a step-forward in re-defining the context of the term Islamic art, it does not resolve the intrinsic reference to the religion of Islam in the term Islamic art itself. The relevance of the 'Islam' in the term Islamic art is further accentuated when considered against the Traditionalist definition of the field.⁴⁰ Following Grabar's call for the importance of the involvement of Muslims in the definition of the field of Islamic art, I suggest the importance of addressing the question of re-definition through a critical framework rooted in an Islamic methodology.

Contemporary Art-Practices and *Ijtihad*

Tariq Ramadan, academic writer and professor of contemporary Islamic studies advocates for the re-interpretation of Islamic texts within the context of modernity when he states that "the will to remain faithful to a religious tradition ... at the heart of modern times, certainly does not mean refusing to live in accord with one's time. It is indeed exactly the opposite: rethinking a tradition – that is anything but a [static] reality ... in relation to the ongoing movement of modernity."⁴¹ The technical Islamic term used by Ramadan is *ijtihad* (effort / reform), a methodology used by Islamic jurists to extract a law or a ruling that is not explicitly available from a scriptural source or for the formulation of a specific legal opinion in the absence of textual reference.⁴² As Ramadan explains, to exercise *ijtihad* requires contextualizing and adapting the implementation of scriptural injunctions with their meaning in relation to the nature of the contemporary environment.⁴³ I would like to clarify that while Ramadan's use of the term *ijtihad* deals specifically with legal injunctions within the Islamic legal system, I am interested in the use of the term as a method of re-visiting the definition of the term Islamic art, it's

historical context and contemporary understanding.⁴⁴

Cognizant of both, the essence distilled by the Traditionalist School in their interpretation of the term Islamic art and the social, political and technological realities of the past two centuries, I propose a methodological use of *ijtihad* to re-interpret the term Islamic art in the context of contemporary art-making practices. In an attempt to re-define the term Islamic art, I advocate the importance of remaining conscious of the 'Islam' in the term itself while simultaneously acknowledging the changing global, political and economic contexts surrounding the historical discipline. To consider a re-interpretation, I believe it is imperative to understand what Ramadan refers to as the 'universality of Islam's message'; a two-fold movement which relies on integrating cultural specificities so long as they do not contradict the religion's formal injunctions and provides the allowance for critical assessment of the surrounding cultural context.⁴⁵ Using Ramadan's definition of the universality of Islam's message as a precedent, I believe that a contemporary artist conscious of a commitment to a religious tradition can begin to push the boundaries of what Islamic art means in a contemporary context by initiating dialogues about values and purposes shared between civilizations.⁴⁶

Following the framework offered by Ramadan, I, a contemporary artist can begin to reconcile the multiplicities discussed in the context of Islamic art by going back to the Traditionalist interpretation of the term, extracting its universal essence and combining it with the cultural, social and political context I live in today. With this intention, I situate my art-practice and the project *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being* within the interstitial space of traditional, art historical and contemporary Islamic art practices.

* * * *

The characteristics of the world ... are created in activity. Understanding is the circular process of activity and cognition. Knowledge cannot be separated from the fact that we live in a world that is inseparable from our body, our language, the history of our society.⁴⁷

III. METHODOLOGY: INTERDISCIPLINARY HERMENEUTICS

Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being's methodological foundation is based on a variation of Alvesson and Sköldbberg's description of alethic and existential hermeneutics. The variation of the methodology is predicated on the nature of an interdisciplinary studio practice using concepts from installation art practices, critical design and time-based media. The project focuses on intuition, embodied experience and understanding as discussed in existential hermeneutics as part of the process of uncovering meaning. I choose alethic and existential hermeneutics based on the intrinsic similarities between the Sufi *Ta'awil* (spiritual hermeneutics) as a methodology of acquiring knowledge and hermeneutics itself. Just like the hermeneutic circle (Fig.2), the process of *Ta'awil* manifests in a spiral, where the relationship and movement between the dimensions of *zahir* (exoteric) and *batin* (esoteric) are continuously renewed and transformed. In this chapter, I discuss the interdisciplinary approach to alethic and existential hermeneutics undertaken in this research project. In the context of *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being* facets of the hermeneutic model branch off into specific sub-methodologies related to art and design practices.

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Alethic and Existential Hermeneutics: an Overview

The development of hermeneutics has its roots in the Renaissance, particularly in the Protestant analysis of the Bible and the humanist study of the ancient classic texts. Hermeneutics is essentially based in the interpretation of text where “the meaning of a part can only be understood if it is related to the whole.”⁴⁸ The definition of hermeneutics is manifested in the hermeneutic circle where the part can only be understood from the whole, and the whole from the part (Fig. 2). The hermeneutic methodology discussed in this project essentially describes understanding as “a way of existing for every human being” based upon the universality of the human need to stay alive.⁴⁹ In order to solve the circular contradiction between part and whole, hermeneutics transforms the circle into a spiral. Therefore, the process of interpretation begins at some point on the circle, which is subsequently related back to the whole. The built relationship sheds new light on the part and by alternating between part and whole a progressively deeper understanding of both part and whole is achieved.

Alethic hermeneutics dissolves the polarity between subject and object into a more elemental understanding, where the basic idea of interpretation concerns the revelation of something hidden, rather than the correspondence between subjective thinking and objective reality as delineated particularly in objectivist hermeneutics. In Alethic hermeneutics the dichotomous constituents of part and whole are changed to pre-understanding and understanding based on the conflicting disciplinary boundaries between natural and cultural sciences where cultural science places an emphasis on understanding versus causality. Therefore, the Alethic School downplays the distinction between subject and object placing foremost attention to the actual process of

understanding where the process itself often becomes the result and / or interpretation.⁵⁰

One of the sub-fields engaged by alethic hermeneutics is that of existential hermeneutics presented by Heidegger which was elaborated upon by his pupil Gadamer under poetic hermeneutics.

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Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being, Hermeneutics and Research Questions

Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being explores the Sufi concept of *zahir* and *batin* as described by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *The Sense of Unity* (1973) and *The Garden of Truth* (2007). The textual exploration of the concept of *zahir* and *batin* mimics the hermeneutic method called 'pattern of interpretation' which refers to the overarching set of interpretations of a certain text, i.e. the coherent whole of the parts. I began my research through linguistic and formal interpretations of the terms *zahir* and *batin* (Fig. 3). Following the whole / part and pre-understanding / understanding concept of hermeneutics, my research process yielded deeper and diverse understandings of Nasr's texts. As I delved deeper into sub-interpretations of the concept, I made interpretative links with other theories, specifically exploring the concept of the body in Islamic tradition and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

In relation to the text, hermeneutics uses the practice of asking questions to the text and listening to it in a dialogic form as a method of inquiry. The questions originally emanate from a pre-understanding of the text and develop or transform during the process of interpretation. Therefore the research questions that I asked at the onset of the

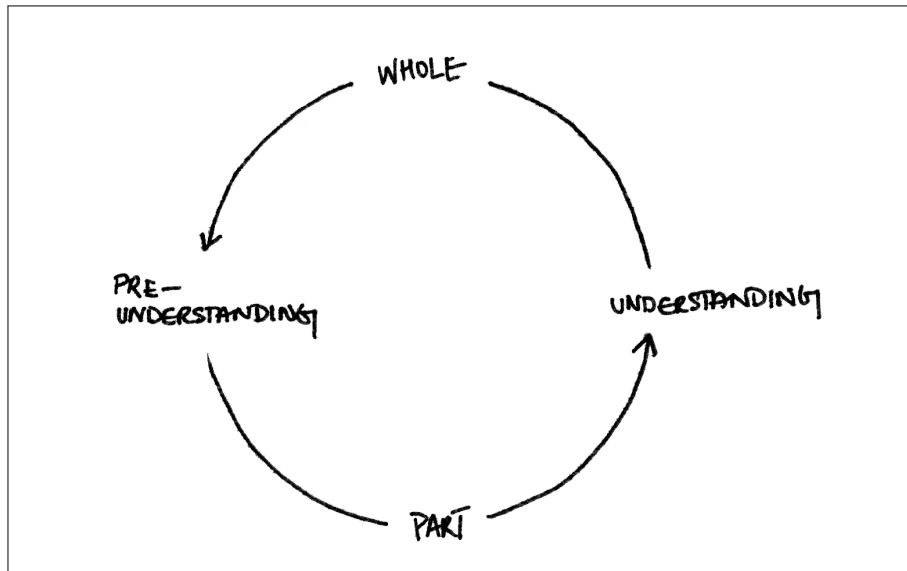


Fig 2. The hermeneutic circle. Source: Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009)

<i>Zahir & Batin</i>		
[Definition]	EXOTERIC	ESOTERIC
	OUTER	INNER
[Interpretation]	SURFACE	UNDERLYING
	EXTERIOR	INTERIOR
	MANIFEST	HIDDEN
	PRESENT	ABSENT
	UNFOLDED	FOLDED
	BODY	SOUL
	UNVEILED	VEILED

Fig 3. The terms *zahir* and *batin*: descriptors and interpretations.

project addressed both theoretical and practice-based frameworks. In the context of my thesis project, it is important to re-iterate that the project is not just a textual interpretation but also a studio-based endeavor, which can be viewed through Schön's analytical framework of reflective practices where design is described as a physical conversation with materials.⁵¹ Therefore, as I delved deeper into my studio practice, a dialogic process of interpretation changed my research questions. In subsequent chapters, I will elaborate on how and why the questions changed.

Original research questions:

1. How does an interdisciplinary artist visualize the concept of *zahir* and *batin* through material and sensory exploration?
2. How does site-specificity affect the design of the object and/or experience created?
3. How can the design of the work and/or exhibition activate the viewer?

Revised research questions:

1. How does an interdisciplinary artist actualize the concept of *zahir* and *batin* through material and sensory exploration?
2. What role can embodiment play in the process of actualization? How can/does embodiment act itself both for the maker and viewer?
3. How can the design of the work and/or exhibition attune the viewer to the rhythms of the artist's actualization?

* * * *

Interdisciplinary Landscape: Precedents

A varied and global pool of artists and designers has inspired the interdisciplinary context of *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being*. The essence of my work follows an ethos of 1960s American Conceptual and Minimalist art practices. My work aims to intertwine body and space through installation-based works where the role of the viewer is intrinsic to the completion of the piece. Therefore, the artists that influence my studio practice and thought process, while radically different from each other, focus on notions of embodiment and spatiality.

In the context of installation art practices and perception, I have been deeply inspired by Olafur Eliasson. Falling in the fluid boundaries between sculpture and site-specific installation, Eliasson's work uses perception, cognition and phenomenology as avenues to experience reality.⁵² Using intangible and ephemeral materials such as light, mirror, glass and steam, the artist creates physical experiences that render cognitive re-appropriation by heightening states of consciousness. Within the context of Eliasson's work, the perceiver is often no longer an optical surveyor; instead located within the physical space of the work, the viewer becomes an active participant.⁵³ Eliasson's exhibition, *Take Your Time* presented at the Museum of Modern Art in 2008 dealt with questions of perception by positioning the viewer inside the work and emphasizing the act of looking as a social experience.

While Eliasson's work is often elemental, Anish Kapoor engages his audience through a materialized corporeal experience. Kapoor overwhelms the viewer through the versatility and use of different materials, the illusionist and associative play with color, the use of spatial interventions challenging customary concepts of space and

scale.⁵⁴ Using complements and contradictions such as stillness vs. motion, order vs. chaos, concave vs. abstract, Kapoor experiments with the viewer's natural perceptions of time and space.⁵⁵ For example, *Memory* (2008) a site-specific installation at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Germany is made from 24 tonnes of corten steel. The piece presents three discrete and non-synchronous faces to museum visitors where the piece as a whole is never visible from any one single point. Each side of the structure presents an obstructed view of the work, making it difficult to imagine the piece holistically. Therefore, Kapoor's biomorphic exploration of abstract space renders sensual, aesthetic, spiritual and contemplative experiences through the overwhelming physical presence of form.⁵⁶

In an attempt to extend my background in photography, I have focused on Mark Lewis's work where he blurs the boundaries between photo, film and painting. Lewis's films rhythmically imbed the stillness of photography with the movement of film. For example, *Algonquin Park, September* (2001) focuses on a composition of a steaming lake under an early morning sun. As the lake starts to clear, an island emerges revealing two people paddling a canoe across the frame. The film, about three minutes long, condenses and unfolds a hidden narrative without moving the camera even once. The flattening of space and the extension of time in Lewis's films heightens the perceptive capability of the viewer through the act of watching the film. I am reminded of Etienne-Jules Marey's work on movement and time where his machinic experiments aim to foreground the activity of perception that is imbedded in the act of seeing itself.⁵⁷ Similarly, Mark Lewis short films use classic cinematic techniques such as slow pans and zooms. The films isolate the narrative by slowing down time and alluring the viewer to enter the image through a sensorial experience.

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's work has been equally inspiring in its

capacity to engage the viewer in an embodied experience. While Cardiff and Miller's work is often audio-based, *The Muriel Lake Incident* (1999) showcases their ability to intertwine high quality audio technology with installation practices, particularly by using scale as a means of altering perception. In *The Muriel Lake Incident*, Cardiff and Miller have constructed a miniature cinema theatre inside a simple plywood box where a film unfolds on a small screen. Standing outside the box looking in, the viewer puts on headphones to listen to the soundtrack. The realism of the quality of binaural sound transports the viewer inside the miniature space. Therefore, the piece alters the public experience of being in a cinema to a personalized viewing experience.

In the advent of situating my own art-practice within the milieu of Islamic art, artists such as Mona Hatoum and Shirazeh Houshiary have inspired the ideological context of my studio practice and research interests. The artists often re-appropriate traditional art and craft practices into a contemporary art-making context. For example, Hatoum uses a diversity of materials and technique to communicate complex socio-political narratives. Her practice encompasses performance, video, sculpture and installation-based works. The ingenious use of everyday materials and domestic objects intertwined with the use of space, scale and light aims to implicate in the viewer a psychological and/or emotional response. For example, Hatoum's piece *Keffieh* (1993 – 1999) intervenes in the representation of the Palestinian struggle through the formal use of the ancient art of embroidery.⁵⁸ *Keffieh* explores the boundaries between familiarity and strangeness by embroidering the traditional headscarf worn by Arab men with strands of women's hair. The piece transmits its imbedded meaning through a formal aesthetic, which engages the past and the present through innovative appropriation of traditional aesthetic form.

Similarly, Shirazeh Houshiary's work elucidates the process of making in a contemporary context. Houshiary's piece *Fine Frenzy* (2004) exhibited at *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* at the MOMA in 2006 relates back to the evolution of the calligraphic tradition. The piece addresses the tension between the relationship of veiling and revealing through insistent and repetitious overwriting and erasure.⁵⁹ The emphasis of *Fine Frenzy* does not lie on the formal attributes or exploration of the Arabic script in the traditional sense, instead the emphasis lies on the engagement of the artist with diverse processes of mediation while exploring the continuity of aesthetic tradition.⁶⁰

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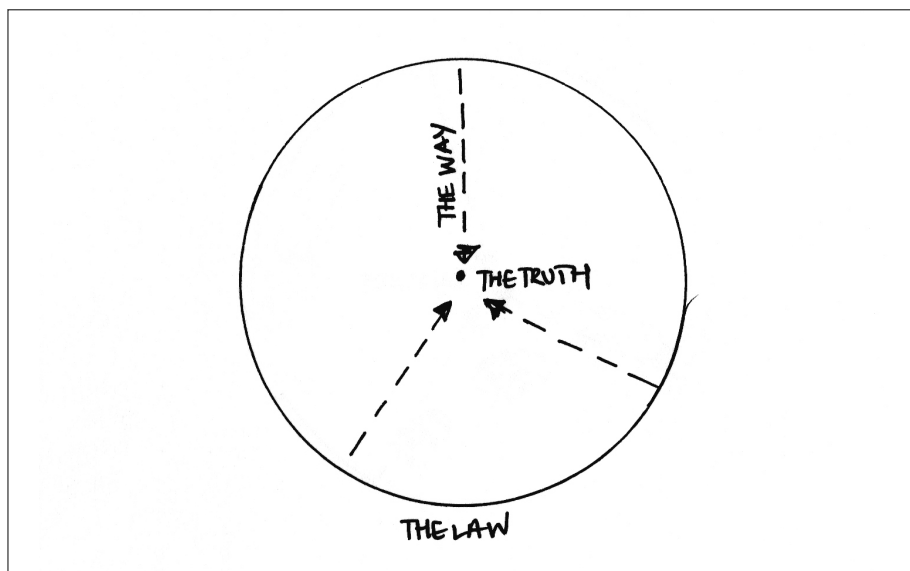


Fig 4. The circle represents the relationship between The Law, The Way and The Truth.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Terms *Zahir* and *Batin*

The word *zahir* (exoteric) represents the sensible form of things emphasizing the quantitative, such as the shape of a building, the human body, or in the Islamic belief system, the outward form of religious practices such as prayer. The word *batin* (esoteric) is the essential or qualitative aspect of things.⁶¹ The state of *batin* is considered to be a hidden entity waiting to be discovered.⁶² Described by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the dynamic movement between states of *zahir* and *batin* in the Sufi tradition is representative of The Way, a journey that moves the being towards a center representative of The Truth.⁶³ Nasr narrates that the central postulate of The Way emphasizes that there is a hidden meaning in all things where every external form is complemented by an inner essence.⁶⁴ Therefore, Nasr postulates that in the Sufi tradition, knowing The Divine is to understand the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of The One.⁶⁵ To know the complementary manifestations of the Divine, the being must refer back to the exoteric dimension provided by The Divine, i.e. the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet. In the Sufi tradition, the process of acquiring knowledge of The Divine is called *Ta'wil* (spiritual hermeneutics). *Ta'wil* bridges the gap between *zahir* and *batin*, where events are

not important as linear developments; rather, through them the being seeks to find an orientation towards the Divine.⁶⁶

As described by Nasr, the Sufi tradition emphasizes the importance of knowing a thing in its 'completeness' constitutive of its exoteric and esoteric dimension. Through hermeneutics, I have interpreted the relationship between *zahir* and *batin* to have a binary co-dependency, where the understanding of one state is dependent on the understanding of the other. For example, to understand *batin*, the hidden and essential reality of a thing, the believer must seek to understand *zahir*, the outward and ephemeral reality of a thing. However, the latter cannot be performed unless the understanding of *zahir* is elicited through an active engagement to seek *batin*. There is a dynamic movement between the states of *zahir* and *batin*; every time the state of *batin* is reached, a new *zahir* emerges and vice-versa. Imagine the shape of an ascending double helix where the two strands of the helix constantly run parallel to each other but are connected through a horizontal rod. The point at which the two strands meet, is the moment of 'completeness' and/or 'unity' where *zahir* and *batin* become one. Therefore, the Way is manifested in the dynamic movement between *zahir* and *batin* where the being continuously seeks to reconcile both dimensions.

Moreover, Nasr describes that the traditional being in Islamic society lives according to the *Shari'ah* (The Divine Law); however, the being with an active vocation to seek *Haqiqah* (The Truth) often follows the *Tariqah* (The Way), which in itself represents the inner dimension of The Law. The relationship between the Truth, the Way and The Law is best expressed through the symbol of the circle (Fig. 4).⁶⁷ As Nasr explains, the circumference of a circle represents The Law. The radii of the circle represent The Way, while the Center represents The Truth.⁶⁸ The Truth is the Source of both, The Law and

The Way, as well as the ultimate destination of the being, who begins his journey on the circumference. The journey of the being is manifested through traversing along one of the radii in pursuit of reaching the center. The impetus for reaching the Center is embedded in the Prophet Muhammad's teachings, where he says, "whoever knows his self, knows his Lord."⁶⁹ The saying indicates that self-knowledge leads to knowledge of The Divine and therefore reaching the Center of the circle also means reaching an answer to the perennial quest for meaning and Truth.

* * * *

The Body in Islamic Tradition, Phenomenology and Embodiment

Described by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the essence of the being in the Sufi tradition consists of the body, the soul and the spirit. The body is considered to be sacred, understood to be the theatre of Divine Presence and the manifestation of Divine Wisdom.⁷⁰ Nasr describes the human body as a representative microcosm of the entire cosmos, as it shares elemental constituents with the cosmos but also because the same Divine Spirit is poured both in the cosmos and the body. This shared reality between the physical body and the cosmos gives the being the ability to get to know the cosmos and to orient the self within it. As Nasr narrates, it is through the physical body that the being encounters both the external world and the internal world of their own self. The body is at once an intrinsic part of the self and an extension of the world of nature, functioning as a bridge between the self and the world. It is through the body that the being becomes conscious of the intrinsic relationship of the self with the world and it is also through the

body that the being distinguishes the self from it.⁷¹

As an extension to the concept of the body as a means of acquiring knowledge, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project, particularly his ideas on sensory perception and embodiment are relevant to the discussion. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has been applied to architectural discourse, where the prevalence of the body's relationship to the environment is considered a means of acquiring knowledge. In relation to the body, Pallasmaa states: "... the percept of the body and the image of the world turn into one single continuous existential experience; there is no body separate from its domicile in space, and there is no space unrelated to the unconscious image of the perceiving self."⁷²

In my opinion, Pallasmaa's interpretation of the perception of the body strikes a similarity with the definition of the body in Islamic tradition where the body and its relationship with the cosmos and experience of the world are not separate phenomenon but instead are one of the same in the process of acquiring knowledge. Nasr describes "it is only in our physical body that we experience directly the order of nature from within, and it is obviously through the body that we are able to encounter the world of nature about us. Our body is at once an extension of the world of nature and part of our self."⁷³

I have explored the complexity of the concept of *zahir* and *batin* by taking the exoteric dimension of my own body as site. As the project unfolded, the relevance of the body became two-fold, the body as a means of actualization and the body as a means of perception. I will elaborate on both concepts in the following section.

* * * *

V. STUDIO PRACTICE

Actualization Process

The exploration of the concept of *zahir* and *batin* is predicated on a series of experiments. At first, each experiment explored the concept through a diversity of materials and forms. As I reflexively viewed the film and photo documentation of my experiments, the prominence of my physical participation in the experiments became visible early on in the process. The importance of my physical presence in the investigation of the concept fundamentally shifted the foundation of my research, and the flexibility of my methodology gave me the opportunity to keep revising my research questions. Consequently, my body became the site of the project where I focused on the notion of ‘actualizing’ the concept versus ‘visualizing’ it. The change in ideology, from visualizing to actualizing follows the hermeneutic process where acquiring knowledge mimics what hermeneutic describes as understanding, i.e. “a way of ‘existing’ for every human being.”⁷⁴ Therefore, my embodied presence in the experiments actualized the concept itself where I lived the dynamic movements from *zahir* to *batin*.

The relationship between the dimensions of *zahir* and *batin* is dynamic, each realm helping to advance the other. If you consider the theoretical interpretation of *zahir* and



Fig 5. Studio exploration: interiority/ exteriority. Video still. 2011

batin described earlier, the process of moving between the two stages is contingent upon that which comes before and that which comes after. Therefore, at the beginning of my thesis, the *batin* of my project was the complete unknowing of the project itself. As I traversed through each stage of the project, the relationship between the two states panned out dynamically. Each decision along the way opened the *batin* of the *zahir* that I was facing. This dichotomy was not only limited to the way I engaged with the process, the methodology of working per say, but it also manifested in the materials that I explored (Fig. 5). As I furthered my research exploration, extrapolating meaning from text and building theoretical frameworks of investigation, formal and conceptual sub-layers of the concept became visible, deepening the relationship between my methodologies and self. Morphed into a personal journey, *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being* essentially explores the quest for knowledge through embodiment, where the acquisition of knowledge is believed to manifest in the dynamic movement between states of *zahir* and *batin*.

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Hermeneutic Text and Critical Design

Alethic hermeneutics describes interpretation not as facts or data but as ‘text’. In Alethic hermeneutics, the text that emerges from a process of interpretation can be literal, consisting of either written or spoken words or it can be figurative.⁷⁵ To explore the figurative aspect of text in a studio-based environment, I have used concepts from critical design⁷⁶ where “reflection is extended as a critical modality ... critical design

provides an analytical stance and design approaches for exploring, conceptualizing and communicating.”⁷⁷

Research by design, one of the methods within the larger framework of critical design, aims at theory-building through activity.⁷⁸ The design process engages a research inquiry through a generative, explorative and innovative approach to design where investigation is conducted within a first person perspective combined with a reflexive and iterative method of working.⁷⁹ The primary emphasis in critical design moves away from the spatial object in and of itself to the concept behind the form and consequently to the knowledge that it refers to. Therefore, *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being* uses research by design to explore and conceptualize the theoretical premise of the concept of *zahir* and *batin* itself. The theoretical exploration is furthered through Seago & Dunne’s methodological framework, which considers the designed objects as materialized forms of discourse. From within the design field, Dunne appropriates the conventional idea of creating working prototypes as a mode of discourse⁸⁰ where the research process becomes the interpreted text itself. In the context of my thesis project, the documentation of my studio-based explorations can be viewed as the text of my interpretations. I have specifically used film as a conceptualization tool, a design material and an experiential space.

* * * *

Material Metonyms

Expanding on Dunne's notion of materialized discourse, *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being* focuses on notions of embodiment, sense perception and hapticity as materials of exploration. The actualization of the concept through multiple dimensions of my body built metonymical associations between each material explored and the concept itself. Through a transformative journey, my investigation led me to focus particularly on the physiological organ of the eye and its characteristic blink as an area of conclusive investigation.⁸¹

Blinking

During my studio explorations, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on perception as a modality of experiencing the world remained at the forefront of my investigation. Subsequently, I explored the idea of experiencing one sense perception through another. Following a formal trajectory of externalizing that which is interior, I asked myself questions like:

Can I visualize my heartbeat?

Can I touch my movement?

Can I hear my blink?

The last question led me to research the phenomenon of blinking. As I started noticing the physiological characteristics of the eye-blink, I became particularly interested in the duality inherent in the temporality of the eye-lid closing and opening and the movement from states of lightness to darkness that subsequently emerged (Fig. 6). As I intuitively continued to formalize these questions through short film-based experiments,



Fig 6. Exploring the blink-of-the-eye with reflecting surfaces. 2011

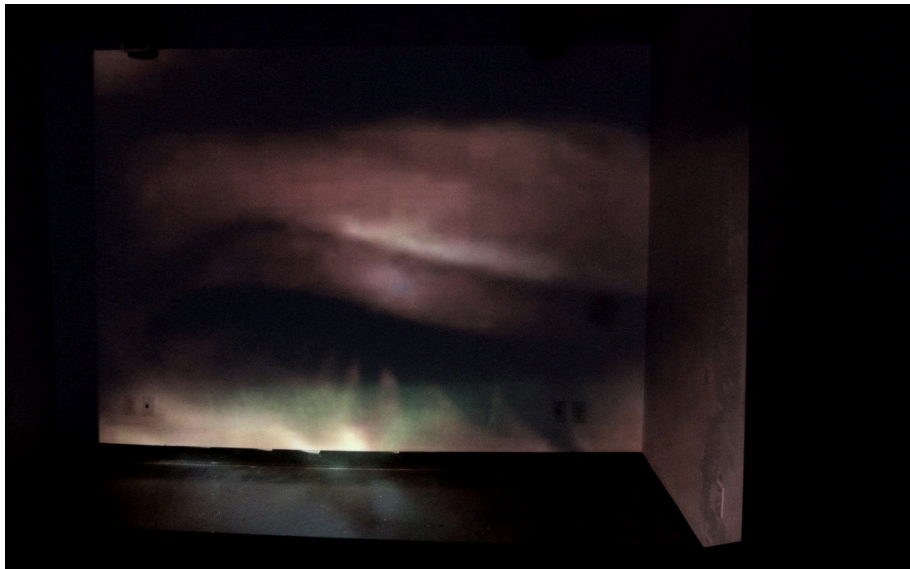


Fig 7. Studio exploration: video of blinking eye projected on wall. Video still. 2012

it quickly became apparent that there was a metonymical association between the dynamic states of *zahir* and *batin* and the formal characteristics of the eye-blink.

To experiment, I filmed myself blinking for a short period of time and edited the video clip such that I cut the film at every moment where my eye-lid closed (Fig. 7). As I was cutting the film, I started noticing that there was no set pattern to the timing and duration of the blink. Walter Murch, *In The Blink Of An Eye* (2001) discusses the very question of what causes people to blink⁸² by considering the relationship of blinking rate to the emotional state of the cognitive mind and the nature and frequency of thought processes. Murch hypothesizes that “the blink is either something that helps an internal separation of thoughts to take place, or it is an involuntary reflex accompanying the mental separation that is taking place anyway.”⁸³

John A. Stern’s⁸⁴ extensive research on the relationship between the processes of the eye-blink and the cognitive mind elucidate an intrinsic relationship to information processing:⁸⁵

The eyeblink is a readily observable behavioral phenomenon ... Neither the immediate physiological needs of the ocular system ... nor indirect defensive needs ... are sufficient to account for the variability in form and frequency of the eyeblink ... available evidence suggests the frequency of occurrence, specific time of production, and mechanics of involuntary blink reflect influence of higher nervous processes. Illustrative of such higher processes are those invoked by the information processing demands on an individual [emphasis added].⁸⁶

Taking into consideration that the movement between states of *zahir* and *batin* is contingent upon the fact that a certain level of understanding about the *zahir* needs to be attained in order to move towards the *batin*, the blink as the thought-separator and/or information processing marker can be considered a metonym for that movement.

Light and Scale

Whatever one's philosophical inclination, light is intrinsic to our physical and spiritual selves. It gives us the power of vision so that looking and consequent 'seeing' is possible ... Not only does it reveal what is around us, it also makes known that which is inside us.⁸⁷

Merleau-Ponty describes natural perception as an act "where to see something is to 'plunge oneself into it' ... it is not that we cognitively assess what is actually happening; rather, the experience is derived from the way we settle ourselves in the world and the position our bodies assume in it."⁸⁸ Inspired by Olafur Eliasson and James Turrell's work on perception and light, I have used scale and light in the context of installation art practices and the role of the viewer.

At the onset of the project, the pertinence of light as a metonym for the concept of *zahir* and *batin* emerged when exploring the physical behavior of the eye-blink. The opening and closing of the eye-lid represented movement from states of lightness to states of darkness. In the context of *zahir* and *batin*, I have correlated these moments of lightness and darkness to the manifestation of *zahir* and *batin* as moments of knowing and unknowing. James Turrell describes light as "one of the revealing elements of life ... [where] it is the most spectacular experience of the senses ... as its powers over the practice of daily living become sufficiently familiar, it is threatened with falling into oblivions."⁸⁹

To extend the metonym of light, I have used scale as a tool to heighten the relationship between states of *zahir* and *batin*. I have focused the exploration of light and scale in the context of the viewer, where the design of the experience and/or installation aims to render an embodied experience. By providing an experience of heightened

consciousness to the viewer through both object-hood and ephemeral experience, *Zahir and Batin: Rhythms of Being* stretches the boundaries of traditional viewing by activating a participatory field where the focus is on the process of perception.

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Hermeneutic Dialogue and Embodiment Through Film

The dialectic process of hermeneutics emphasizes the need to metaphorically 'enter' text as means of interpretation. To extend the hermeneutic dialogue in my studio-based practice, *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being*'s combines Arnall & Martinussen's framework of filmmaking activity within practice-based research with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis of film.

Film as material research

Arnall & Martinussen describe film as 'design material' where the video product is considered to be part of a toolbox of materials used to capture, document and communicate ideas. Effectively a prototyping tool, the video becomes a critical component in a reflexive studio-based practice where ideas can be explored without having to go into their technical details (Fig. 8). Therefore, film allows for a degree of probing, explanation and reflexive understanding of ideas and concepts. Through a process of capturing and documenting ideas, videos reflectively reveal and articulate complex concepts often missed by the naked eye.



Fig 8. Studio exploration: heartbeat and embodiment. Video still. 2011



Fig 9. Studio exploration: embodiment and hapticity. Video still. 2011

My practice follows a similar methodology where I prototype ideas using a diversity of materials such as cardboard, steel tubes, mirrors, lenses, reflective surfaces and paper. I then physically participate in my experiments and film 1 min – 5 min videos as a means of documentation. I follow this process by a reflexive analysis of the videos and further the explorations through an iterative design process. In this way, I ‘enter’ the conceptual space of my work both physically and through film.

Film as immersive and experiential space

Arnall & Martinussen describe film as a “communication media that involves audiovisual representations that have immersive and experiential qualities ...[and] that can be very selective in conveying and framing subject matter.”⁹⁰ By asserting the use of film, the author’s purpose is to relate that film can be used as a purposeful, constructed and designed experience to communicate an idea and/or concept. This analysis brings to the forefront the fact that film can be literally comprehended as ‘conceptual space’ where the audience can enter the concept, i.e. the physical space of the film through embodiment.

The notion of film as an embodied experience is extended through Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological analysis of film where for Merleau-Ponty “films, like phenomenological and existential philosophy are an attempt to make us ‘see’ the bond between subject and world, between subject and others, rather than to explain it.”⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty considers film, just like art, to be a medium that cultivates perception through embodiment. The viewing experience of film accentuates the fact that “our bodies have this enormous capacity to move into new situations ... our eyes become accustomed to a certain way of seeing, a certain way of hearing.”⁹² Therefore, in the

context of my thesis project, film becomes a powerful conceptual space. By designing the experience of the film, both within the film space and the physical space, my goal is to address the notion of hermeneutical empathy described subsequently.

* * * *

Hermeneutic Empathy and Installation Art Practices

A hermeneutic model emphasizes that the process of interpretation is not a private one, or a simple relationship between an isolated researcher and the object studied. The hermeneutic model stresses the importance of discussing arguments and counter-arguments to reach plausible results and interpretations. As an extension to the model above, the role of the reader is related to the concept of ‘empathy’ described as “understanding calls for living (thinking, feeling) by putting oneself into the situation of the acting (writing, speaking) person. With the help of imagination one tries to put oneself in the agent’s (author’s, speaker’s) place, in order to understand the meaning of the act (the written or spoken word) more clearly.”⁹³ In my project, the notion of empathy can be appropriated to mean the ‘role of the viewer’ in the context of installation-art practices. Defined by Claire Bishop, installation art is often described as theatrical, immersive, or experiential. The space and the ensemble of elements in installation art-works are regarded as singular entities where the leading impetus of the work is the desire to heighten the viewer’s awareness and bodily response.⁹⁴

Therefore, *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being* engages installation art practices by taking Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as a frame of reference. I am particularly

interested in Merleau-Ponty's claim that "perception is not simply a question of vision, but involves the whole body."⁹⁵ The phenomenological model has been applied to both the making of the work and the design of the exhibition. In the making process, the exploration of the concept of *zahir* and *batin* has been undertaken by my body as the site of the project (Fig. 9) whilst the design of the exhibition considers the role of the viewer by incorporating sensory immediacy and embodiment as an integral part of the viewing experience.

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Fig 10. *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being: Installation I*. 2012

VI. ZAHIR & BATIN: RHYTHMS OF BEING

Design of Exhibition: Production and Structure

The culminating exhibition *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being* was held at OCAD University from April 10th to April 14th 2012. The exhibition's function and rationale was multi-layered. Each element of the exhibition accentuated the metonymical associations of *zahir* and *batin* explored through sub-projects including the blink of the eye, light, scale and materiality. The goal of the exhibition was to communicate the essence of *zahir* and *batin* by attuning the audience to my actualization process. The conceptual framework and design of the exhibition directly stemmed from my key research question: how can the design of the work and/or exhibition attune the viewer to the rhythms of the artist's actualization? Through an interdisciplinary practice, the design and production of the exhibition followed a systematic method of design inquiry borrowing methods from critical design and installation art-practices. In an attempt to answer my own research question, I used an iterative design process where I constantly questioned the functionality, materiality and viewer-experience in relation to the overall concept. The exploration followed a process of theory-building through activity using a generative and explorative approach to design. I used film as research, as well as sketching and

prototyping as methods of production and experimentation.

The final exhibition occupied three spaces. The main gallery (Fig. 10) held a mixed-media sculptural installation while the second and third space held immersive video-installations. I will briefly describe each installation and contextualize the work in relation to the larger context of my thesis explorations.

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Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being, Installation I

The first sculptural piece encountered by the viewer was a 6' x 6' x 15" raw steel opaque box positioned at the entrance of the gallery space (Fig. 11). The design of the steel box consisted of a t-shaped steel tube placed inside the body of the box with four circular holes on each side of the box, flushed to the surface of the metal plate. The height of the circular viewing holes was positioned at my eye-level. As the viewer entered the space, an encounter with the object was accentuated (Fig. 12). The viewer instantly attuned to the height of the hole in order to peer through it. Subsequently, the viewer could immediately interact with the video installed in the second sculptural piece without having moved more than a few steps into the gallery space (Fig. 13). The relevance of attuning to my eye-level related back to my research questions and invited the viewer to undergo a transformative process of their own. The larger box also functioned to isolate the blink. The design of the object allowed numerous types of interactions (Fig. 14).

The second sculpture piece, a 13" x 9" x 21" raw steel opaque box was designed to allow for an intimate single person experience (Fig. 15). A bio-concave lens was

installed on the façade of the box to allow the viewer to look into a room-like space. Inside the space, a video of my blinking pattern was playing-back in a loop. This particular video was an ephemeral version of the video piece displayed in Installation II. The relationship between the videos in all three spaces refers back to the exploration of light and scale in my work.

The final piece in this space was a narrative / process book. 9.75" x 7.5" in size, the book was placed on a stand which followed the formal look and feel of the steel boxes (Fig. 18). The function of the book in the exhibition was two-fold. It allowed the viewer to engage in a hermeneutic and textual based interaction with the thesis and it functioned as a critical design artifact.

* * * *

Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being, Installation II

The second installation space focused on the methodological and conceptual use of film as explored in my research. Since the underlying theme of the overall exhibition highlighted the blink-of-the-eye as a metonym to the process of acquiring knowledge, Installation II focused specifically on the blink. The installation consisted of two looping videos projected on two facing walls of a long rectangular room, synchronized to play at the same time (Fig. 16). One of the videos was the film documentation of an experiment carried out earlier in the process of discovery and the second video was a close-up of my eye watching the documentation film (Fig. 17).

In line with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis of film, which describes film as a medium cultivating perception through embodiment, Installation II invited the

viewer to 'enter' the conceptual space of my project. By spending some time in the space, the viewer inherently began to attune to the rhythms of my blinking. Similar to Installation I, the attunement factor related back to my research questions while at the same time encouraging the viewer to experience a bodily awareness of their own blinking pattern.

* * * *

Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being, Installation III

The third and final component of the exhibition was an elemental scaling of the blinking video piece embedded in the sculptural work in Installation I. The video piece comprised of white light flickering at every eye-blink. Projected in a room with large windows, the piece was inherently a night exhibition viewable only from street level (Fig. 19). By scaling the presence of my blinking and repeating its rhythms in different modalities, each piece in the exhibition extended the narrative of acquiring knowledge and highlights certain elements of the process of moving between states of *zahir* and *batin*.



Fig 11. *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being: Installation I.* 2012

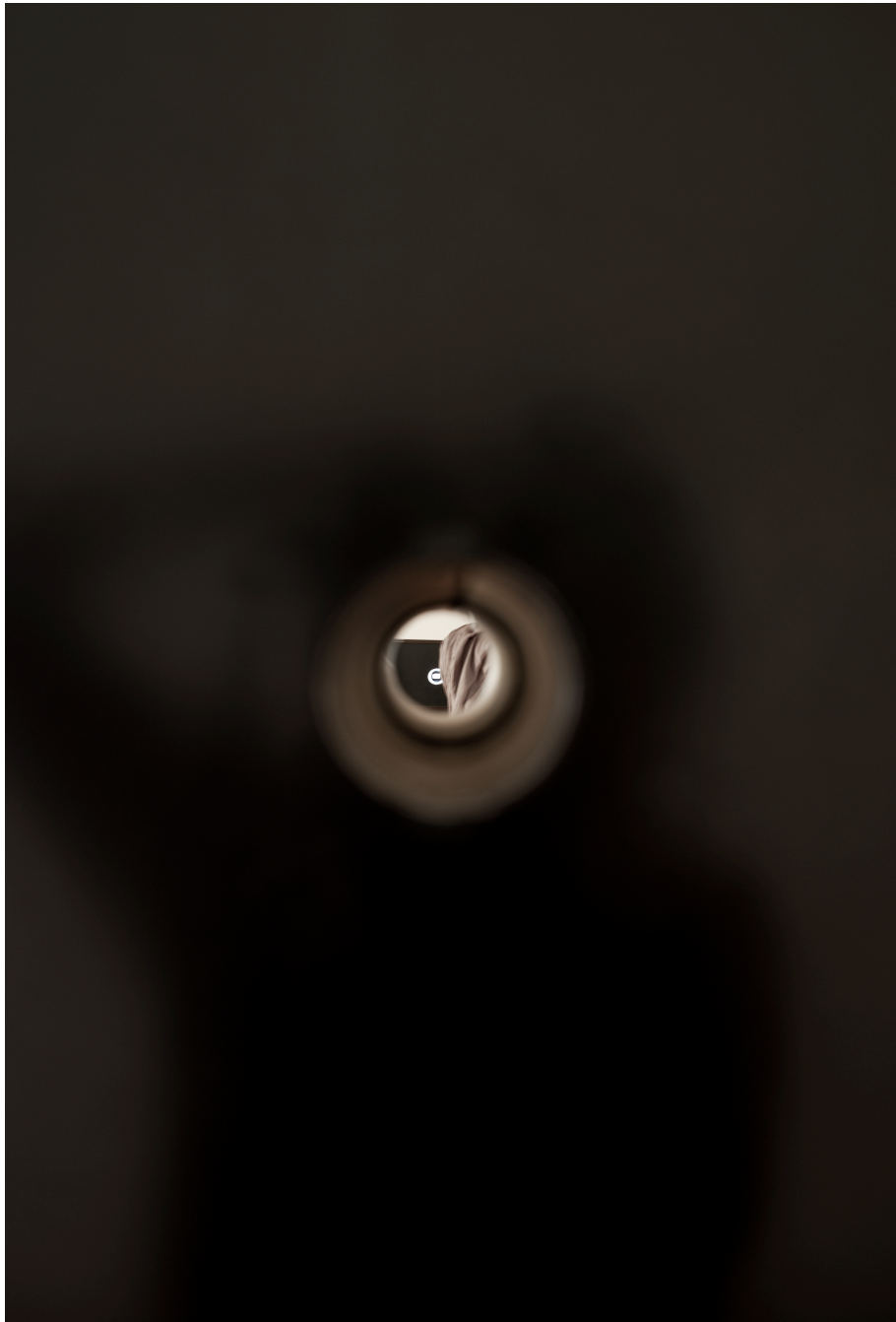


Fig 12. Looking through viewing hole of sculpture I towards sculpture II.



Fig 13. Sculpture II. 13" x 9" x 21" raw steel. 2012



Fig 14. *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being*, Installation I. 2012.



Fig 15. *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being*, Installation I. 2012.



Fig 16. *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being*, Installation II. 2012



Fig 17. *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being*, Installation II. 2012



Fig 18. *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being*, Installation I. 2012



Fig 19. *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being*, Installation III. 2012

* * * *

I brought my mind to bear on the way of the Sufis. I knew that their particular Way is realized only by knowledge and by activity [by the union of theory and practice] ... Then it became clear to me that their most distinctive characteristic is something that can be attained, not by study, but rather by ... experience and the state of ecstasy and the exchange of qualities.⁹⁶

AFTERWORD

Commenting on the way of the Sufi, Al-Ghazali highlights the intertwined relationship between acquisition of knowledge, practice, engagement and exchange. Al-Ghazali's description of Sufism vividly paints a picture of the consciously acknowledged or unconscious lived journey of a being in search of some perennial truth. No journey is the same, nor does every journey lead to the same destination. However, every journey is transformative in its own right and has a distinct path that is manifested in any number of different ways.

* * * *

My art practice is my path.

* * * *

Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being is a transformative journey between states of *zahir* and *batin*. The actualization of the concept is a direct manifestation of my spiritual being within the religion of Islam and has moved my art practice into a paradigm of art and spirituality. The pertinence of an embodied and spatial experience, the consideration of

the viewer in the design of the exhibition and the focus on the transference of a particular concept and its hidden patterns aligns to the way of the Sufi path, if you will, in a layperson's way. In the context of *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being*, the exhibition is considered a space for knowledge exchange. While the design of the exhibition inherently embeds my actualization process, it is the materiality, structure and form of the work that invites the viewer to undergo their own personal journey through the interaction with mine.

* * * *

The premise of my project began by questioning the definition and teleology of the term Islamic art and the applicability of multiple definitions of the term to the practice of a contemporary Muslim artist conscious of a commitment to a religious tradition. By placing *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being* within the interstitial space of traditional, art historical and contemporary understandings of Islamic art, I questioned whether the practice of a contemporary artist can re-define the term Islamic art or widen the canon of the discipline's interpretations and taxonomies on an academic and/or institutional level? While, it remains to be seen how a project like *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being* can impact or re-define the term Islamic art in a contemporary context, what can be stated at this point is the position of the maker and the intention behind the work.

* * * *

Art practice and faith are not opposed.

* * * *

The will to remain faithful to a religious tradition at the heart of modern times requires the will to question the relationship between tradition and modernity. As a global citizen of the world, one that is an equal citizen of both the east and the west, the question of how to integrate a way of being into a complex milieu of identities, politics, ethics and social values is a critical one with no simple or singular answer. However, what is important to realize is that tradition is not static and neither is the movement of modernity where both are constantly shifting paradigms. How one attempts to reconcile both tradition and modernity within their personal journey is an individual quest. My art practice attempts to push the boundaries of these shifting paradigms in the context of Islamic art and questions existing definitions and delineations of the field. By placing my work directly within the context of Islamic art, my work questions what it means to be a contemporary Muslim artist conscious of a commitment to a religious tradition while at the same time engaging in a critical and meaningful exchange with surrounding cultural contexts.

* * * *

My art practice is *ijtihad*.

NOTES

¹ Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973), 3.

² 'The Divine is an attributive term used to reference God in the religion of Islam.

³ Seyyed H. Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism: Islam's Mystical Tradition* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 104-105.

⁴ Jacquelynn Baas and Mary J. Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), 163-164.

⁵ Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2009), 95.

⁶ Ibid., 167.

⁷ In the context of this thesis project, when using the term 'universal physiology of being' I refer to physiological behaviors that are common in most human beings. In particular, I refer to sensory modalities such as sight, touch, hearing etc.

⁸ I would like acknowledge the existing diversity (schools of thought, cultural, ethnic, geographical, etc.) when referring to the "Muslim artist" and therefore would like to clarify that when using the phrase 'commitment to a religious tradition' I am referring to artists who are actively practicing and engaged with the doctrines of a religion. In this particular context, the religion is Islam.

⁹ Finbarr B. Flood, "From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art," in Elizabeth Mansfield, ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., 38.

¹¹ Ibid., 44.

¹² The Mesis Foundation, Presenting 'Islamic Art' in Contemporary Context, <http://www.mesis.nl/en/currentprojects.html> (February 10, 2012).

¹³ Oleg Grabar, "Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art," In *Muqarnas I: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 1.

¹⁴ Blair S. Sheila and Jonathan M. Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field," *The Art Bulletin* 85.1 (2003), 153.

¹⁵ While an extensive critique of Orientalism is beyond the scope of this project, I would like to briefly refer to Edward Said's extrapolation the development of Orientalism in his work *Orientalism Reconsidered* (1985). In his work, Said highlights the changing historical and cultural relationship between Europe and Asia and the ideological suppositions made by Oriental scholarship based on the images and fantasies of a region called the Orient.¹⁹ Said argues that the inadequacies, political, ethical and epistemological within the scholarship of Orientalism deepened the binary relationship between East and West. I would like to extend this premise by highlighting that the ideological framework of Oriental scholarship inevitably affected the study of classical Islamic art and continues to shape the debate of art produced by artists from Muslim majority countries today.

¹⁶ Blair and Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art," 153.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Nada M. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetic* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2007), 14.

²⁰ Blair and Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art," 152.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ I would like to acknowledge that the genealogy of the term Islamic art and its historical context presented in this paper is brief. Moreover, I have not addressed the development of Modern art practices in the Muslim world as they fall out of the scope of the argument presented in this paper. For further reference see: Blair S. Sheila and Jonathan M. Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field," *The Art Bulletin* 85.1 (2003); Nada M. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetic* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2007); Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010); Oleg Grabar, "Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art." *Muqarnas* 1 (1983); Wijdan Ali, "The Status of Islamic Art in the Twentieth Century," *Muqarnas* 9 (1992); Silvia Naef, "Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab world and its Relation to the Artistic Past." *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 43 (2003).

²⁴ Traditionalists.org, Western Sufism and Traditionalism, <http://www.traditionalists.org/write/WSuf.htm> (February 15, 2012).

²⁵ For further reference on the Traditional School of Thought see: Seyyed H. Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World: Challenged by the West, Threatened by Fundamentalism, Keeping Faith with Tradition* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010); Seyyed H. Nasr and William C. Chittick, *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007); Seyyed H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Titus Burckhardt and William Stoddart, *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science & Sacred Art* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987); Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973); Seyyed H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987).

²⁶ Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, xi.

²⁷ Seyyed H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

³¹ Grabar, "Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art," 1.

³² Titus Burckhardt and William Stoddart, *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), 214.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Flood, "From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art," 31-32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁶ Blair and Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art," 153.

³⁷ Hal Foster, *The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: New, 1998), xiii.

³⁸ Charles Merewether, *The Jameel Prize: A Shift of Alternate Worlds* (Contemporary Practices: Visual Arts from the Middle East, 2009), 86.
<http://www.contemporarypractices.net/essaysv5a.html>

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁰ The premise of the Traditionalist definition of Islamic art is often echoed by practitioners of the religion of Islam who advocate that the viewpoint of belief within the context of Islamic art can be varied. For example, at the “Presenting ‘Islamic’ Art in Contemporary Context” conference, a comment by an audience member asserted that being a Muslim, they viewed Islamic art not as a secular entity but as a religious one. Source: Jane Szita, *International Conference Presenting ‘Islamic’ Art in Contemporary Context* held in Amsterdam, 5th April 2011 Report (The Messis Foundation, 2011), 56.

⁴¹ Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 146.

⁴² The word *ijtihad* derives from the arabic word *jahd* which translates as endeavor, attempt, effort. It is conceptually related to the Arabic word *tajdid* which translates as reform. For further detail refer to Ramadan, Tariq. *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴³ Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*, 190.

⁴⁴ The epistemology of the concept of *ijtihad* is specifically related to injunctions within the Islamic legal system. Therefore I would like to specify that the term and field of Islamic art in of itself does not stem from within the religion of Islam or it’s legal system. Consequently, I would like to clarify that I am using the concept as a methodological endeavor to assess the possibility of expanding the canon and understanding of the field of Islamic art.

⁴⁵ Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation*, 188.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁷ Wolfgang Jonas, "Design as Problem-solving? Or: Here Is the Solution - What Was the Problem?" *Design Studies* 14.2 (1993): 166.

⁴⁸ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 92.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 98.

⁵¹ Ibid., 106.

⁵² Olafur Eliasson et al., *Olafur Eliasson* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 38.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Peter Noever and Anish Kapoor, *Anish Kapoor: Shooting into the Corner* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 6.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁷ Erin Manning, "Grace Taking Form: Marey's Movement Machines," *parallax* 14.1 (2008): 84.

⁵⁸ Fereshteh Daftari et al., *Without Boundary Seventeen Ways of Looking* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 34.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 31.

⁶¹ The word *zahir* derives from the arabic word *zahara* which translates as to be or become visible, perceptible, manifest. Secondary meanings also include to gain or have knowledge, to know, to learn. The word *batin* derives from arabic word *batn* which translates as that which is hidden or concealed. Secondary translations also include the belly, stomach and womb. Source: Wehr Hans and Milton J. Cowan, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic: Arabic - English* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979).

⁶² Ardalan and Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, 5.

⁶³ In the context of this paper the terms The One, The Truth and The Divine are used interchangeably to reference God.

⁶⁴ Ardalan and Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, 5.

⁶⁵ The relevance of the term *zahir* and *batin* is further accentuated by the fact that in the religion of Islam *al-Zahir* (The Manifest) and *al-Batin* (The Hidden) are two of the ninety-nine names of God.

⁶⁶ Ardalan and Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, 5.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁸ Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism: Islam's Mystical Tradition*, 5.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁰ Seyyed H. Nasr and William C. Chittick, *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), 222.

⁷¹ Ibid., 225.

⁷² Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: Wiley Academy, 2005), 40.

⁷³ Nasr and Chittick, *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 215.

⁷⁴ Alvesson and Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 95.

⁷⁵ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 100.

⁷⁶ Described by Grace McQuilten, critical design as a field of inquiry is primarily related the critique of art and design practices within a “planned and commercially conceptualized cultural landscape.” I would like to point out that my use of the critical design framework is not related to a critique of a commercial space; however, at a time when an increasing number of artists are using the intersection of art and design as a site for experimentation, I have used specific concepts from critical design as methods of interpretation.

⁷⁷ Arnall and Martinussen, "Depth of Field: Discursive Design Research through Film," 105.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Alex Seago and Anthony Dunne, "New Methodologies in Art and Design Research: The Object as Discourse," *Design Issues* 15.2 (1999), 16.

⁸¹ While I am using the physiological organ of the eye and its characteristic blink as an area of exploration, my research is not concerned with the historical critique of vision, the polarity of subject/ object, the discourse of the hegemonic eye and/or the technological reconfigurations of the act of seeing. In the context of *Zahir & Batin: Rhythms of Being*, the exploration of the eye and eye-blink is limited to an analysis of the organ's physiological characteristics and functions.

⁸² Murch hypothesizes on the relevance of the instance when the blink occurs giving a scenario where two people are conversing. Murch explains that the person listening would most likely blink at the precise moment where he ‘gets’ the idea of what the other person is talking about, not an instant earlier or later.

⁸³ Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing* (Los Angeles: Silman-James, 2001), 62.

⁸⁴ John A. Stern, pioneering psycho-physiologist conducted research at Washington University in St. Louis for over 60 years.

⁸⁵ While Sterns’ research is conducted through scientific methodologies, using discrete quantitative methods of testing, measurement and deduction, some of his conclusions on the endogenous blink deepened the metonymical association between the eye-blink and the concept of *zahir* and *batin* I started to build.

⁸⁶ John A. Stern, Larry C. Walrath, and Robert Goldstein, “The Endogenous Eyeblink,” *Psychophysiology* 21.1 (1984), 22.

⁸⁷ Simon Morley, *The Sublime* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010), 96.

⁸⁸ Fielding, "Maurice Mearleau-Ponty," 82-83.

⁸⁹ Morley, *The Sublime*, 96.

⁹⁰ Arnall and Martinussen, "Depth of Field: Discursive Design Research through Film," 100.

⁹¹ Fielding, "Maurice Mearleau-Ponty," 85.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹³ Alvesson and Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 93.

⁹⁴ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹⁶ Ghazzālī and Richard J. McCarthy, *Al-Ghazālī's Path to Sufism and His Deliverance from Error: An Annotated Translation of Al-Munqidh Min Al-dal'al* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2000), 51.

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