Permitted memories and ornamentation

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PERMITTED MEMORIES AND ORNAMENTATION

A Thesis

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Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

In

The School of Art

By
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May 2012
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..............................................................................................................................ii

LIST OF FIGURES...........................................................................................................................................iv

ABSTRACT......................................................................................................................................................v

PERMITTED MEMORIES AND
ORNAMENTATION.....................................................................................................................................1

VITA............................................................................................................................................................18
LIST OF FIGURES

1  Daniah, oil on canvas, 36”x36”, 2012
2  Ehbie, oil on canvas, 36”x40”, 2012
3  Ahmed, oil on canvas, 36”x36”, 2012
4  Jadatey, oil on canvas, 36”x36”, 2012
5  Sarah, oil on canvas, 40”x37”, 2012
6  Jaseem, oil on canvas, 35”x40”, 2012
7  Hanin, oil on canvas, 48”x38”, 2012
8  Jadey, oil on canvas, 46”x36”, 2012
9  Hoiydah, oil on canvas, 32”x32”, 2012
10  Ohmie, oil on canvas, 42”x32”, 2012
11  wurood, oil on canvas, 36”x36”, 2012
12  Zaynab, oil on canvas, 36x36, 2012
ABSTRACT

My thesis project is a collection of paintings and drawings that juxtapose iconic Islamic ornamentation with portraits of members of my family, both living and dead. The creation of images of living beings, particularly people, has long been banned in Islam and, as a result, the faces of my loved ones have long lived only in my memory. For my sake and theirs, I have liberated them onto the canvas, combining them with the intricate patterns of my youth. In doing so, I drew upon influences from renowned portrait painters such as Rembrandt, Lucian Freud, and Celia Paul. The result is both immediate and nostalgic, abstract and concrete: a combination uncommon in Islamic art.
PERMITTED MEMORIES AND ORNAMENTATION

Overview

In Islam, there has long been a ban against the production of images of humans and other living beings (especially religious figures). The result is an artistic tradition historically dominated by calligraphy, geometric patterns, and other types of abstract ornamentation, such as the Arabesque. As a child growing up in Baghdad, I saw these patterns everywhere I went. They were painted on homes and storefronts, stained into the glass domes of mosques, wrought into headboards and kitchen tables, and woven into pajamas, scarves, and carpets. When I close my eyes, I can see the tendrils of an Arabesque mosaic or the interlacing strands of the Islamic star. These images, among many others, are etched into the walls of my memory, as much a part of me as they are of my country.

Alongside these permitted memories are the forbidden images of people close to me—my father, my mother, my children. I say forbidden because, though no one is censoring the contents of my memory, it would be considered by some to be un-Islamic of me to express these images externally as portraits. My crowded memory, though, cannot contain them all, and I must permit some
of them to go free. In doing so, I am able to grant myself some degree of liberation as well. Many of my memories reflect the pain, suffering, and struggle of living in a war-torn country. In permitting them to escape onto the canvas, I am able to experience not only relief but also a bittersweet joy at seeing the faces of those I’ve lost again.

These memories are the source of my thesis project, which is a collection of paintings and drawings that combine the repetition and complexity of Arabic design with portraiture that captures the physical complexity of the human form and also reveals the inner character of the subjects. These works reflect my personal experiences with the subjects, all of whom are members of my family. In these works, the anatomical detail of the human subject mimics the beauty and intricacy of the abstract design. Though the human figures in my work are considered distasteful in a religious context, they, like the ornamental patterns with which they are juxtaposed, are perfectly permitted in my memory.

**Process and Technique**

Much of my early training and artistic interest was in the portrayal of the human form. In some ways, the process by which I came to paint members of my own family was accidental. While a student at the University of South Alabama, I
discovered that professional models held no meaning for me. I did not know them, and I could not paint them. I could reproduce their anatomy but could not capture their essence. My solution to this, I noticed, was to unconsciously imbue the likenesses of people I knew into the paintings. I would set out to paint a stranger and end up with a portrait of my mother, my daughter, or even myself. My memory, it seemed, was bursting at the seams. As Austrian psychoanalyst and one of Sigmund Freud’s first students, Theodor Reik, say, “The repressed memory is like a noisy intruder being thrown out of the concert hall. You can throw him out, but he will bang on the door and continue to disturb the concert.” In my case, the concert is my everyday life, and the intruders are the faces of my family. Instead of fighting it, though, I took this as a cue and, like Rembrandt, Lucian Freud, and Celia Paul (artists by whom I have been heavily influenced); I began choosing as my subject only people close to me. Freud says:

“[My] subject matter is autobiographical; it’s all to do with hope and memory...really.” In my experience, nothing could be truer. According to Freud:

“I want paint to work as flesh... I would wish my portraits to be of the people, not like them. Not having a look of the sitter, being they. As far as I am concerned the paint is the person, I want it to work for me as the flesh does.”

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Each of these artists portrays an extraordinary degree of emotional complexity. The viewer is able to connect sympathetically to the person in the Portrait. This desire to capture the true person in the portrait, to manifest the sitter’s inner self through intense, detailed depiction of his or her physical form, is something I strive to do in my work. The techniques Freud uses, which are impasto, natural light, and thick layers of oil—have all played a part in my experimentation process and have contributed to my art in significant ways. Without these influences, for example, I might not have explored the *alla prima* technique that characterizes much of my recent work.

As with Freud, when viewing my art, certain demands are made on the viewer through the emotional intensity of the images. This is accomplished in part through shadow, texture, brushstroke, and medium, and through choosing people close to me as my subjects. But, like Celia Paul (one of my favorite figure painters) I am also able to communicate a distinct emotional atmosphere through visual tonality. According to critic, Laura Cumming, Paul’s work is almost “monochrome” and “reflects back a hazy brightness”\(^4\). This sort of restraint is evident in my work as well. There is a sense of reservation in my art; the people in my portraits are not quite willing to reveal their emotions. This feeling of reticence is partially created through a distinctly restricted tonal register.

Conclusion

These influences and the distinct material of my memory have combined to create this collection of portraits of people I love, some of who are still here, others of whom are gone. Although moving around so much growing up has exposed me to many faces throughout my life, these are the ones I see when I close my eyes. In my portraits, one will find these images juxtaposed with iconic Islamic ornamentation. These designs have long been the ultimate expression of beauty and truth in Islamic art. Since imagistic representations were banned, the divine had to be hinted at through the beauty and infinity of complex designs. They are sacred patterns, permitted and embraced when images were forbidden. By juxtaposing these patterns with images of my family, I am not only providing a historical context for my subjects, I am liberating them from outdated Islamic proscriptions and transforming them from forbidden images to permitted memories.
1. *Daniah*, oil on canvas, 36”x36”, 2012
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5. *Sarah*, oil on canvas, 40”x37”, 2012
6. *Jaseem*, oil on canvas, 35”x40”, 2012
7. Hanin, oil on canvas, 48”x38”, 2012
8. Jadey, oil on canvas, 46”x36”, 2012
9. Hoiydah, oil on canvas, 32”x32”, 2012
10. Ohmie, oil on canvas, 42”x32”, 2012
11. wurood, oil on canvas, 36”x36”, 2012
12. Zaynab, oil on canvas, 36x36, 2012
VITA

Salma Hasan was born in Basrah, Iraq. In 1988, she graduated from the University of Baghdad with a Bachelor of Art degree. She then worked for nine years as an art teacher at Basrah High School. Due to the tragic losses of many close relatives, she was forced to move to Jordan in 1998, where she worked as a freelance artist until her case was approved and she was granted status as a civilian refugee in the United States.

In 2001, she arrived to Mobile, Alabama, and had her first show in the Morison Gallery. She tried to achieve her dream and teach again, but was unable to obtain a position with her existing credentials. From 2001-2007, she focused on raising her three children and supporting them by working in a wood shop. Her dream, though, never died and, in 2004, she enrolled in the University of South Alabama, graduating in 2009 with Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting and drawing. After graduating from the University of South Alabama, Salma moved to Baton Rouge to begin a Master of Fine Arts program at Louisiana State University. She will graduate in May of 2012.