CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Presence of the Absence

A graduate project in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Art,
Visual Arts

By

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California State University, Northridge
Dedication

For my mother’s hands,
my father’s eyes.
They were dressmakers.
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Abstract

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My multimedia work explores cultural and religious degressions. Beginning with culturally and religiously familiar themes, I synthesize space through installation and objects to manifest my critique of these institutions. The geometric shape of the Noghteh (point, dot), the fundamental character in Persian calligraphy, and other traditional motifs, become the aesthetic foundations that inform my work, which distorts, expands, and recontextualizes these historically laden forms into implausible two and three-dimensional installations.

In my work, the most basic manmade module, the cube, embodies Kaaba, a religious landmark considered to be the house of God in Islam. I augment, multiply, and arrange it
to critique social structures driven by religion. I use a variety of substantial materials, including wood, plastic, concrete, metal, and ice. Some works are rigid and static while others corrode and melt in time. The disparity between large quantities and quotidian materials echoes the distinction between infinite versus temporal, manmade versus natural, anonymous versus attributed, and secular versus religious.
Introduction

My migration from Iran to the United States was my first real interaction with non-Iranian people. I travelled to other countries before, but visiting another country as a tourist for a short time does not have the same impact as leaving your homeland to live in another place. What I experienced, as the most profound difference, was the interaction with people from diverse cultures and religions. I grew up in a country where dominant societal and governmental powers were driven by the Islamic religion. I witnessed many levels of societal degression. From my perspective, however, this backward sliding progression is not simply rooted in a belief system that stems from religion. There is cultural corruption present at all levels of its community, from inside individual homes to the most exterior levels of society. For instance, the majority of Iranians have a double life; what they hide in their private lives and what they exhibit in public. No one is allowed to acknowledge, publicly, if they participate in a mixed gender party/wedding, or drinking alcohol. No one is allowed to express his or her opinion freely against governmental policy anywhere. But, at a personal level, they wear what they like, watch media that is prohibited, drink what is forbidden, and say what is not allowed. Iranians behave in ways that are against Iranian government’ laws, but done so in private.

The Iranian people are one of the proudest people in the world, largely because of their long history, spanning back to Cyrus the Great and his human rights cylinder in 550BC. With respect to this history, with no objection to the culture they had before, Iranians now must ask, “Do we Iranians have pride in our international image?” The tourism rate has changed dramatically in the last four decades, and still Iran is losing
tourism opportunities to other countries in the Middle East, because of its perceived negative image in the world. Surely, media has a significant impact on the spread of this image. The best example of this was the Green Movement. While protesters were trying to claim their votes within the corrupt system, most media and news agencies tried to spread the claim that protesters were trying to change the regime. But, one should remember, the origins of this perception originate from Iran and the Iranian people. As an Iranian, I found that this goes against all human progress and has roots in cultural conflict and religious fervor. When the government tries to gain all its power through religious influence instead of political means, they force all the laws and rules through a religious filter. It may work for short amount of time, but progressive thinkers and young people start to question and object to these notions. Ordinary Iranian citizens succumb to a double life in order to survive in society and, at the same time, fulfill their private lives.

Through my project, I explore an individual’s conflict of reconciling personal belief with societal structures through my own experiences. In my personal and social life, I had the chance to live closely and interact with four different religions including Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Baha’i. I found enough similarities among all of them to be sure that dogmatism and blind belief is not a unique to a single religious system. However, in my work I focus on Islam due to the high number of Muslims (98%) among the Iranian population.

Geometry, Minimalism and Religion

It is common to see a variety of scientific and knowledge-based concepts in art works that have roots in religious beliefs. Since the Middle Ages, mathematics and science have been integrated into art, especially in its practical forms. We can hardly find a church without mathematical-based designs or decoration in the Gothic era. Science has played a considerable part in changing spaces from the mundane to awe inspiring. It may be read in two different levels; first, at the personal level, and secondly, in a wider scope, at a societal level. The craftsman (artist), by creating his/her product, tries to find that divine moment and expresses himself/herself within given restrictions, found in a specific structures. The second divine moment comes when an audience gathers (for prayers) and experiences that moment together. In architecture, handcrafted artwork, manuscripts, and many decorative objects, we can see forms deriving from scientific and mathematical concepts. In this case, Islam is not an exception. The Islamic craftsman was not just versed in science in the geometric sense, but mathematics was also indispensable to his specialty, as it was a universal framework used to support a natural application of knowledge portrayed in all pure art. “As the most important factor in Islamic art is the religious it is not surprising that these designs and patterns reach their highest degree of development in religious architectural decoration. From early days mosques have always been devoid of figural painting and statuary, so abstract pattern and calligraphy have been the only form of art permitted.”2 As a result, this class of design has found general

acceptance as the most stable artistic form in Islamic world. We should keep in mind that Islamic artists were limited by Aniconism, due to their belief system. Many artists in this craft were positively driven by and versed in spiritual disciplines that gave both substance and intention to their work, and put it in the convention of supporting the viewer in raising his or her spiritual understanding. Islam's focus on geometric patterns draws consideration well away from the representational world, but to one of original form, balanced strains, and dynamic symmetry, giving auxiliary knowledge into the workings of the divine and its appearance in the universe.

“Islamic art is predominantly a balance between pure geometric form and what can be called fundamental biomorphic form: a polarization that has associative values with the four philosophical and experiential qualities of cold and dry - representing the crystallization in geometric form — and hot and moist — representing the formative forces behind vegetative and vascular form.”


Studying art history and approaching western art for me, as someone who is not western-born, has a double impact when I consider geometry and Minimalism. The most accessible example is the comparison of Minimalism to Persian calligraphy, which is based on nib width of bamboo as a writing instrument, resulting in a square shaped mark. From the basic shape of the square on plain paper, to the all geometric rug/carpet designs,

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3 Aniconism is the absence of material representations of the natural and supernatural world in various cultures, particularly in the monotheistic Abrahamic religions. It may extend from only God and deities to saint characters, all living beings, and everything that exists.

to the mosaic decorations in all mosques, to the Arabesque designs in holy shrines, and finally, to the *Kaaba* (House of God, meaning cube), relates to the squares and cubes found in western Minimalism, conflating my two primary cultural associations. The artists Donald Judd and Carl Andre closely correlate formally and conceptually to this reference. Judd was installing his work in a direct and deliberate relationship to the original space in which they reside. In his formal language, he used rectangular forms and boxes, installing them individually, stacking them vertically, or placing them side by side.


b. Donald Judd, from series of concrete pieces in Marfa, Texas. Each individual measurements of 8.2’ x 8.2’ x 16.4’ meters, and are made from concrete slabs that are each 0.8” thick

Although western artists must have had a different route in their approach to geometric art, it is fascinating to me to find similar results with Eastern artists. The reason might be hidden in common subtle structures, unspoken rules, and intuitive rituals.
Materiality

“Material, space, and color are the main aspects of visual art. Everyone knows that there is material that can be picked up and sold, but no one sees space and color. Two of the main aspects of art are invisible; the basic nature of art is invisible.”\(^5\)

The carpet is considered as an art form, which is traditionally used to floor an area. Today’s Iran—as part of the Islamic world—still plays a large role in Islamic carpet production. The “oriental carpet” is used with the same purpose, while it has less political weight. Throughout its history, this heavy textile product was made with many types of usage in mind. Schools, courts, individual dwellings, mosques, holy shrines are the most recognizable places to see many varieties of carpets and rugs. Among all the ranges of techniques, materials, patterns, styles, and functions, my focus is on design. Because design and pattern are the sole visual characteristics, they produce visual unity across all different types of art works; from architecture to decorative woven fabric. Unfortunately, throughout the years, Iranians living the said “double life” have changed their use of carpets as well.

As textiles, carpets may be simple, unwoven felt or woven in techniques, ranging from tapestry weave, to brocade, to the most familiar technique of all, pile. The materials in a carpet may range from familiar sheep’s wool, linen, cotton, silk, metal-wrapped thread, and *pashm* (the soft and delicate cashmere from Central Asian goat). The designs used in carpets may be simple geometric forms that reflect tribal or village traditions passed down for generations, or they may be elaborate versions of designs created by

professional artists working for royal patrons. Carpets are used by individuals from all social and economic levels, from nomads and villagers, who weave their carpets themselves, to monarchs and court functionaries, who commission them from highly trained and high-status professional artists working at the court.6

Apart from their cultural and social origins, the functions of carpets vary widely, from the strictly utilitarian—carrier bags; floor covering for tents, homes, and palaces—to the highly symbolic—decorations for nomadic weddings; Islamic sajjadah (prayer rugs); Jewish parokhet (Torah covers, Christian altar furnishings—to high-status secular examples of royal largess and conspicuous consumption. In this project I use the terms “rug” and “carpet”, with the understanding that “carpet” tends to refer to rectangular textiles, usually meant to be used on a flat floor surface. Although in this short text and limited project I will not discuss all Islamic carpet complexity regarding techniques, my focus would be on a specific design and function of prayer rugs.

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Description of Works

Cat Tree

My work, Cat Tree (Figure 3), is a hybrid sculpture consisting of a western pet product, the cat tree, and an eastern religious object, the Persian Prayer Rug. The content of the work, which is a marked critique, is revealed once the viewer learns that cats are not allowed to walk on Persian carpets because their hair and feces are Makruh. The Law of Islam regards dogs as ritually Najis, and regards cats as unclean, thus it is better keep them out of the house.

It is on Hadith, a Muslim cannot pray if s/he has a single hair of cat on her/his clothes.7 There is a certain irony in the fact that Persian cats are a coveted pure breed pet and Persian carpets are the most desired in the world, and yet they cannot reside in the same place because of a belief system.

The piece goes further than a simple irony by talking about hierarchy and power. The decorations on the columns replicate a mosque’s mosaics by moving from three at the bottom to a single level at the top.

Qibla, Northridge, CA

(See Figure 13) The Qibla, Northridge, CA is the actual direction that a Muslim should face when s/he is praying. It is a fixed path toward the Kaaba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Kaaba is known as the house of the God and the reason all Muslims should face the same way when praying, this is perceived as a unity among all Muslims, wherever they reside in the world. In addition to facing the Kaaba during prayer times, it has another function as well. For example after death, Muslims should be buried with the body at a right angle to Qibla, and to slaughter animals (sheep, cow, camel, etc.) in compliance with Halal, they must be aligned with Qibla during slaughter.

The piece was installed in the pathway of the viewer with the intention of blocking their way and their sight. As the piece appeared on an ordinary morning without any notice in advance, having been installed in the small hours of the morning, when nobody was present to witness. Once installed, I noted that some would pay attention to it, and some passed by with no objection. Considering the monumental size of the installation (10ft cubed) and its installation in the middle of pathway, it was difficult to avoid. The structure was installed in one night to purposely to hide the hardship and intensive labor of its creation from the audience. Like the worshipful Monolith in 2001, A Space Dessey, it both appeared and disappeared without notice, and remained a mystery.

The title, Qibla, is a direct reference to the concept a unique direction, but is augmented with the name of its location (in this case, the city of Northridge, California). The piece clearly compromises the afore mentioned unity of praying Muslims, as it introduces itself
by declaring a secondary location. Is this a replica or I can rely on it as a local Qibla and pray toward this Kaaba? What difference it would make if all the Muslims in Northridge prayed toward a local Kaaba, something that does not exist, aside from this work of art?

What would it be like if I could have a small scale personal Kaaba and take it with me as a portable direction? Are we allowed to have multiple Kaaba/Qibla and rely on local versions and not necessarily the original Kaaba? What makes the original one so special when most never have the chance to experience it or see it in person? Why it does it need to be a singular place where all gather and unite? Isn’t it a separating action in some other way? Why is there a need to be exclusive as opposed to inclusive? In order to address these questions, the piece will travel and will be installed temporarily in order to challenge the blind unity that can lead to separation.
Presence

*Presence* (Figure1) is exhibited in the 2016 Graduate Exhibition at the CSUN Art Galleries. There is no material involved in this particular piece, as I was drawing the viewers’ attention to the title as well; absence of material and only the presence of audience. The piece is comprised of a square space that I constructed within the gallery to reference most of my previous works as well as the interior of the *Kaaba* itself. The installation has a single dim spotlight aimed directly onto the far wall, where the only visual element, a prayer rug, carved into the wall, exists. The small doorway is inviting; but narrow. You are not allowed to go inside of the real *Kaaba*, but you are welcome here. The house of God should be open to everyone who is willing to go inside. While the hominids in Stanley Kubrik's *2001, A Space Odessey* never learn the origin of the Monolith, the Muslim pilgrim likewise never has chance to see inside the black cube of the *Kaaba* in Saudi Arabia. In my work, *Presence*, there is a chance to see there is nothing inside. The immediate existence after you enter is your presence and that is the only material that matters.

The design of the prayer carpet on the wall is carved, and in contrast with its physical counterpart, has rough and unsmooth surface. The audience might see the illusion of a golden color or floating pattern, but all this information is an optical illusion. The object (prayer rug) has a functional purpose; it is placed on the floor while praying to God. If you made this functional object out of expensive material (like silk) and transform it into a decorative object on the wall to show social status, it loses its purpose. It doesn’t need
to exist anymore. It can melt to the air. Using a functional object in a decorative manner is not limited to Iran; therefore I carved a design originated from Lebanon in order to broaden the scope of the work.⁸

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**Conclusion**

I encourage everyone to ask questions about their supposed answers; in particular, the long known and premade answers whose origin is never questioned. I object to blind faith, to knowledge we have not earned, that is passively received and accepted it as is. I urge everyone to consider themselves to be part of everyone else, and to not be an exception. I try to blend with everyone as much as possible while respecting personal and individual characteristics toward others and myself. It must be possible to recognize the value of individual existence as well as the idea that “one” is part of the “many”. I am not separate, I am a presence, and my viewer is as well. The absence of presence can lead to disagreement. The absence of individual existence will result in a vacuum, allowing other powers to fill the void with negativity.

It will not happen if we do not want it to.
Works Cited


Appendix

Images of Work

Figure 1

*Presence (Installation)*

Reductive marks, Gallery space

Site-specific Installation, 16ft x 16ft x 16ft
Figure 2

*Manyness of Reality (Installation)*

Mixed media

Site-specific Installation, 25ft x 35ft x 14ft
Figure 3

*Untitled (Cat Tree)*

Mixed media

18”x18”x60”
Figure 4

This is 1436
Mixed media
48”x48”x8”
Figure 5

Dialogue
Mixed media
18”x18”x18”
Figure 6

Rousseau
Mixed media
25”x12”x8”
Figure 7

_Gone_
Mixed media
55”x12”x4”
Figure 8

*And the Lord smelled a sweet savor*

High-density sponge foam, waffle cone, shelf
4” x 6” x 31”
Figure 9

_Bless_

Silk Screen on CD - Car mirror
12”x12”x5”
Figure 10

*Tanit*

Beer bowl, vinyl, air
18”x18”x18”
Figure 11

*Tawaf*

Still image from Installation

Mixed media, video
Figure 12

*Ihram*

still image from video

4 videos strip on single screen playing simultaneously, on loop
Figure 13

*Qibla, Northridge, CA*

Concrete Block

size varies – site-specific installation