

Muslim Women Visual Artists' Online Organizations: A Study of IMAN and MWIA

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Abstract

This study examines two American online organizations established as networks of support for Muslim women artists: Muslim Women in the Arts (MWIA) and the International Muslimah Artists' Network (IMAN). While the broader context is to explore the intersections of three important identity markers, namely, gender (woman), occupation (artist) and religion (Muslim) often overlooked in identity theory (Peek 2005), the more specific aim is to probe the effects of these digital culturescapes on Muslim women's artistic agency and success. The data collected from interviews with member artists confirm the necessity of such organizations, offer suggestions on how they could be improved and outline the difficulties they face due to their largely volunteer and online nature.

Keywords

Muslim women artists – Muslim art associations – Islam and the internet – Muslim women and the internet – Islam and art – online art communities – religion and art – alternative art communities – contemporary Islamic art – contemporary Islamic culture

Introduction

I feel that Muslims are too often placed in a box labeled “other” and “strange”, and I hope that my work can help to remove that box and allow non-Muslims to see us simply as people, trying to live our lives the best way we can.

AMEENA KHAN, *Muslim Women in the Arts member, interview extract*

Islam first and foremost defines my entire worldview, and it is through this lens that my womanhood and artistry are developed, interpreted, and defined.

TASLIM VAN HATTUM, *Muslim Women in the Arts member, interview extract*

There is not only “the art world” but rather several art worlds aimed at different publics and serving different needs. A growing number of contemporary women artists of Muslim descent operate within the mainstream art system, many having achieved international recognition therein. Others choose to exhibit their work in alternative venues often, but not exclusively, related to the Muslim community such as the myriad Muslim art festivals that have emerged in recent years across Europe and North America. In addition, a number of art exhibitions in both established and less established galleries have, post-9/11, specifically showcased Muslim women. Muslim women artists living in western countries have themselves also begun to form their own grassroots art communities, often online. Such cyber platforms exist for Muslim women writers (MWA) and musicians (Sisterhood, Ulfah Arts) and two effectively cater to visual artists: Muslim Women in the Arts (MWIA) and the International Muslimah Artists’ Network (IMAN). Both are American initiatives and both possess the double mandate of creating a network of support for and of enhancing the visibility and professional success of Muslim women artists. This article will examine the emergence, function and effects of these digital culturescapes, exploring the ways in which they assist or attempt to assist the personal and artistic agency of their members. In order to determine the efficacy of MWIA and IMAN, I will examine the nature and functions of the MWIA and IMAN websites and analyze the data provided by the semi-directed interviews which I conducted with the directors of the two organizations as well as that collected from surveys filled out by their members which effectively form the cornerstone of the study.

Because the self-identity—which also here acts as the public identity—of MWIA and IMAN and by extension that of their members is premised on the convergence of three important identity markers, namely, religion, gender and occupation, a wider aim of the research is to situate and understand the specific threefold identity of Muslim, woman and artist. This is particularly vital with regards to religion because if “Islam” and “Muslim” have become increasingly consolidated as classificatory terms since 9/11, including in the visual arts (Jiwa 2010; Behiery 2012b), identity theory has yet to sufficiently treat the increasing role of Islam—and religion more generally—in the formation of contemporary, both subjective and collective, identities (Peek 2005:217). Moreover, art, artists and art associations claiming attachment to an organized

religion are, knowingly or not, radical in that they challenge a principle tenet of modernity that posits the unquestionable precedence of secularism over religiously-based worldviews. Modernity, despite the multiple theorizations of postmodernism and postsecularism, continues to underwrite the dominant discourses of western societies; its establishment upon the idea of religion's obsolescence has, as a result, fractured and rendered antithetical the domains of religion and art (Elkins 2004). Interestingly the nascent scholarship on "the postsecular turn" evident in contemporary art mainly addresses Christianity (Eckart, Philbrick, and Romberg 2000; Dyrness 2001; De Gruchy 2001) despite the growing presence of and interest in art containing Islam-related signs in North America and Europe. Art dealers and curators now sometimes use the expression "contemporary Islamic art" although it usually functions as a practical descriptor to signify contemporary art produced in the Muslim world regardless of the work's content.

The present study possesses a strong interdisciplinary dimension in that it overlaps with a number of areas of research addressing the contemporary Muslim world and diaspora. It obviously relates to the burgeoning scholarship on cyber-Islam concerned with the transnational and political effects of the Internet on the production and reproduction of Islamic knowledge (Bunt 2000; Mandaville 2001) and on discourse on women's rights (Piela 2010b). An examination of MWIA and IMAN must in effect be positioned within research undertaken on what Bunt calls "female Cyber Islamic environments" although those dedicated to the creative arts have yet to be addressed. The last decade has equally witnessed an exponential increase in literature on contemporary women artists hailing from Muslim-majority countries although it generally only treats artists who have earned success and legitimacy through institutions and norms recognized by and in effect composing what is considered "the art world". For now, there appears to exist but little crossover between these artists and those choosing community-oriented, virtual, denominational or, in short, alternative systems of artistic distribution. I foresee this changing for a host of reasons. The explosion of attentiveness to and the flourishing art market for contemporary art from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, coupled with the growing transnationalization of Islamic identities has, in effect, already begun to create a greater openness in western publics to styles, genres and motifs associated with Islamic artistic traditions. Nonetheless, any inquiry into grassroots-type art organizations must take into account the differences existing between the various art worlds. Because MWIA and IMAN also involve a marginalized social group, often triply marginalized through religion, gender and race, the asymmetry of power between mainstream and alternative art apparatuses and systems of validation is only intensified. If the current

proliferation and capitalization of Islamic or Islam-related cultural products suggested above may somewhat mitigate the uneven playing field, the latter is only further consolidated by the nefarious effects of geopolitical circumstances on North American and European Muslims.

The focus on present-day Muslim women artists also leads to other cross-disciplinary entanglements. The reality that many, even a majority of member artists employ visual vocabularies rooted in Islamic art and iconography raises another critical issue that has yet to be dealt with satisfactorily by Islamic art historians, namely, the relationship between gender and Islamic art. If the study touches upon, albeit only briefly, how contemporary women perceive this relationship as well as their appropriation of Islamic visual signs, it nonetheless raises the larger issue of the role of women in the formation and development of Islamic art and its subsequent occlusion in Islamic art historical scholarship (Behiery 2013). However, because Islam-related signs are often present in Middle Eastern and South Asian artistic modernities that have only just begun to be addressed in western scholarship and encompass numerous women artists, contemporary visual references to Islam might sometimes be best traced back to modern and not pre-modern traditions. The question of whether the self-identification as Muslim women artists is understood by MWIA and IMAN members as a novel “invented tradition” attributable to modernity or, on the contrary, as a continuation of an artistic genealogy will be answered by the data compiled from the surveys. While the present research relates and will hopefully contribute to the above-mentioned areas of study, its examination of the intersection of Muslim women, the visual arts and cyberspace seeks to initiate a new discussion and establish a new fertile area of research investigating the relationship between the online production and performance of Muslim identities and visual culture.

The focus on gender affords itself certain caveats. Any research on Muslim women as a category must be cautious as the very study of “Women in Islam” possesses colonial roots as Ahmed (Ahmed 1992:245) and many others since have forcefully argued. The trope of “the Muslim woman” with its long loaded history in western discourse is intimately related to colonialism and neo-colonialism and the production of western identity and modernity, acting in fact as a signifier exposing the link between the two projects (Yeğenoğlu 1998; Behiery 2012a). Nonetheless, western preoccupation with the plight, imagined or real, of Muslim women has facilitated the financing of women’s creative expressions from film (“Women’s Voices from the Muslim World” film festival) to travelling exhibits of Muslim women artists (*Cover Girl: The Female Body and Islam in Contemporary Art, Breaking the Veils: Women Artists from the Islamic World*,

or *Sheherazade: Risking the Passage, Contemporary Art by Muslim Women*)¹ or to government sponsored initiatives, for instance, Australia's Muslim woman's art collective "Crooked Rib", involved in community arts projects such as urban art events, exhibits and school programs. It is thus tempting to attribute the self-ascription of a Muslim female identity to the process and terms of the internalization of othering that glosses over ethnic, cultural and various other in-group differences. However, the charters of both MWIA and IMAN evince awareness of western mainstream perceptions of Muslim women and in fact clearly articulate that challenging these constitutes part of their mandate. Moreover, the diasporic experience often leads to ethnic and cultural differences being subsumed under the larger shared identity marker provided by a loosely understood Islam, not to mention that the notion of a global Muslim community (the *umma*) is rooted in classical Islam, thereby predating by more than ten centuries contemporary theories on transnational Islam (Cooke and Lawrence 2005; 2). In short, despite the western art world's "demand for identity" (Oguibe 2004:166) of its non-western actors, it is important not to lose sight of the agency and self-representation of the actors of the study.

Who are IMAN and MWIA?

While I knew of both MWIA and IMAN before undertaking the present research, further investigation did not uncover additional online collectives of Muslim women visual artists. The one exception is a Flickr group of Muslim female photographers that I came across too late to include in the study.² If Flickr groups constitute a different and more individualistic type of online community, this particular one should not be ignored, especially, in light of the fact that it has over nine hundred members. As my searches were limited to English and French, it is possible, even probable, that other online Muslim women's art collectives exist. It should also be noted that until relatively recently, women's

1 *Cover Girl: The Female Body and Islam in Contemporary Art* was an exhibit that took place between September 17 to October 23, 2004 at the Ise Cultural Foundation, New York. *Sheherazade: Risking the Passage, Contemporary Art by Muslim Women* was held at the El Colegio Gallery in Minneapolis from February 12 through March 15, 2003, while *Breaking the Veils: Women Artists from the Islamic World* was a travelling exhibit that toured Europe and the United States from 2002 to 2011.

2 I also only recently discovered Piela's examination of Muslim women's representation and self-representation on the Flickr site. See Piela (2010a) in bibliography.

art groups and exhibits in both the West and Muslim-majority countries were established along national or cultural lines, a tendency which continues today. The consolidation of Islam as an identity marker was crystallized by 9/11 but it must not be solely ascribed to a single historical moment. It is also due to the continued relevance and prevalence of identity politics in contemporary culture, the growing visibility of Islam in Europe and North America, the Islamic revival begun in the late 20th century, global politics, the war on terror and the concomitant increasing Islamophobia that effectively ghettoizes Muslims and, more simply, the shared experiences, ideas and concerns of Muslims and Muslim diasporic communities.

Both MWIA and IMAN were established in the United States although Australia and Britain would seem more propitious terrains for such projects as both countries are at the forefront in terms of hosting, encouraging and financing Muslim art events. Perhaps precisely because Muslim women artists in these countries possess more outlets to exhibit their work, no need was felt to create collectives communities, online or otherwise. A British chapter of IMAN was set up in 2003 by digital calligraphy artist Rafia Hussain but is no longer very active. The website financed by Hussain herself lists only one other member artist, Mazzy Malik. When I asked Hussain why IMAN did not “take”, she responded by saying that it was “difficult to recruit members as there was no selling point other than that it [website] served as a forum” (personal communication, July 23, 2011). She also mentioned the fact that she herself found little time to devote to IMAN because she was busy with her “own responsibilities as an artist, a mother, a wife, et cetera, as well as having a day job to manage”.

IMAN was founded by Noura Hammoude and Sylvia Godlas in 1997. Hammoude is a pharmacist by training with a passion for cartooning and computer animation and Godlas, an artist who, if now involved in painting and sculpture, specialized at the time in beautiful Islamic-style ceramics. Hammoude ran the organization until she returned to Syria in 2005, a move which created a lull in activity and afforded a disengagement of members. Busy with her new life, unable to attend to IMAN but also loath to see it free-fall, she convinced IMAN member Reem Hammad, a Syrian-American like Hammoude and a gifted ceramic artist like Godlas, to take over as president. Beginning her tenure in 2006, Hammad told me that she had, in essence, “to start from scratch” (personal communication, May 16, 2011). She created a new website, set up a Facebook page, albeit one limited to IMAN members and exerted a tremendous amount of energy in outreach. However, if there had been hundreds of members or subscribers to the group’s e-mail as late as 2005, at least according to Godlas (Mohiuddin 2008), technical and administrative difficulties made it impossible for Hammad to access the full list. Instead, she had to search out fellow group members she knew or had once met, gather their

e-mail addresses and find new members. The Listserv now counts 61 members. Hammad has put in much energy and time in her attempts to reinvigorate the group. Up until 2007, IMAN had only organized one exhibit: it was in Michigan in 1997, the year IMAN was founded. Under her leadership, in both 2007 and 2008, IMAN co-sponsored with Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV), *God Loves Beauty, an Interfaith Visual and Performing Arts Festival* held conjointly at the Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation and St. James' Episcopal Church in Los Angeles. IMAN also co-sponsored and was involved in the planning and logistics of the 2010 International Muslim Artist Exhibition (IMAE) organized by Haitham Eid and on view at the Zeitgeist Multidisciplinary Arts Center in New Orleans. Over half of the 19 artists shown were IMAN members. In 2010, IMAN sponsored member artist Huda Totonji's lecture on Arabic calligraphy at the Levantine Cultural Center, an institution dedicated to the arts and cultures of the Middle East and North Africa. IMAN members and director have also been invited to speak and present their work to Islamic art history students at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB).

Thirty-two artists are featured on the website including one musician and board member, Ani Zonnefeld, and two artists, Salma Arastu and Huda Totonji, who are equally members of MWIA. The majority of members live in the United States although one resides in Algeria (Mounira Lalalli), one in France (Imane), two in Britain (Rafia Hussain, Nihal Khan) and two in Turkey (Müzehher Özdallı Bice, Nilgün Tasci). While seven of the hyperlinks in the members' gallery are broken reducing the number of members to 25, there are member artists whose work does not appear on the site. Only one of these, artist and graphic designer Elvira Bojadžić, whom I know in her capacity as the co-founder and art director of *Islamic Arts Magazine*, kindly filled in and sent me the questionnaire. The IMAN online "Members' Gallery" consists of one web page carrying a work of each artist whose name appears below. Clicking on the image will bring the viewer to a page showing more of the artist's work or to her personal website. The IMAN website lists events in which IMAN members are taking part as well as, although only intermittently, exhibitions of interest, and opportunities for artist members (call for submissions, et cetera). Like that of MWIA, it offers public visibility to women artists who may otherwise not get it.

MWIA was founded in 1999 by Siham Eldadah, an artist based in Maryland, who ran the organization until 2010, when Ms. Eldadah asked the dynamic young artist and architect, Nadia Janjua, to take over the reins of the organization. Up until then, MWIA had focused exclusively on the annual exhibit which had had been held for 11 years at the Montgomery County or MoCo Executive Office Building. Janjua completely overhauled the whole organization after she became coordinator on January 1, 2011. As she told me: "I wanted to give it

a wider presence beyond MoCo so I created a website, a Facebook fan page, a Google Calendar, and a Twitter account” (personal communication, May 19, 2011). She also created logo competitions, put out a call for and found volunteer interns and organized meetings with guest speakers that garnered high attendance. Janjua also brought innovation to the annual show by making the fight against violence against women its theme. Widening the scope of the exhibit also meant that mainstream community organizations became involved in the project. In April 2011, *Healing & Empowerment: Violence, Women & Art* was exhibited at the Silver Spring Civic Building but travelled to other cities in the U.S., another first for MWIA. Also indicative of Janjua’s vision of the social possibilities of art is that she organized for herself and fellow MWIA artists to take part in various fundraisers for different causes by donating artwork.

There are 50 artists showcased in the MWIA site’s “Global Database of Artists” including a profile of Janjua herself although many of the approximately 40 members of the Washington, D.C. area never had profiles and, because of the overwhelming response to Janjua’s call for members, MWIA stopped accepting membership applications. The profiles consist of a photo of the artist, a biographical note and, at least in most cases, a link to a website. Although the mandates of both organizations are open to all forms of artistic expression, MWIA artists exhibit a greater diversity. There are not only visual artists but also architects (Maryam Eskandari, Jenine Kotob), filmmakers (Nushmia Khan, Labeeda Malik, Iman Zawahry), jewellery makers (Mawadda Alaswadi, Taslim Van Hattum, Noshin Qaisrani), textile artists (Rabia Naeem, Bano Makhdoom), designers (Sayedah Kasmai-Nazeran, Sonia, Zaufishan), writers (Naima Alam, Sofia Baig, Rashida James-Saadiya, Farheen Khan, Rohina Malik, Samar Najia, Rabia Saida Spiker) and many photographers (Afiaa Alwazir, Maha Alkhateeb, Nadiya El-Khatib, Nama Khalil, Zoshia Minto, Sadaf Syed, Nicole Queen). Akin to IMAN, membership to MWIA is open to all who self-identify as Muslim women artists and therefore both organizations encompass women at very different stages of their careers and working in different artistic genres. Also parallel to IMAN, most MWIA members are American although four are Canadian (Sofia Baig, Tahsin Dhirani, Farheen Khan, Sehar Shahzad) and three live and work in Britain (Lateefa Spiker, Umm Aisha, Zaufishan).

Several elements converged and bestowed upon MWIA greater visibility than IMAN after Janjua became coordinator and before it unfortunately folded in the fall of 2011. The website was more contemporary in design and being a WordPress blog, it allowed for interactivity and visitor comments. It was more active, posting many announcements as seen, for example, from December 2010 through May 2011. Janjua, during her tenure, devoted herself intensively and exclusively to MWIA events and outreach, including the use of social net-

works such as Facebook and Twitter. The organization's Facebook page was open to all and therefore more active with close to eight hundred fans as opposed to the ten members for the IMAN one. Janjua also managed to attract more interest in the press and blogosphere. If a more sustained pro-active outreach, a greater number of activities and a better use of new media help explain the greater interest of Muslim women artists and online visitors for MWIA, a simple semantic factor may also elucidate the discrepancy. IMAN stands for International Muslimah Artist Network. Because it uses the Arabic word for Muslim woman (*muslimah*), the organization does not appear when undertaking a Google search for Muslim women artists or art associations. I would also suggest that timing gave the advantage to MWIA: the surge and renewal of the organization's online activity and presence occurred at a time when the notion of "Muslim creative expression" and the economic viability of the Muslim cultural industry had become better established. It is also important to note that the sudden peak in interest in MWIA was not consistently sustained: there was a noted drop of activity on the website, for example, in June 2011. Moreover, if IMAN remains the smaller and seemingly less active organization of the two, this does not necessarily translate into members being less happy. Only the data to which I will now turn will reveal member satisfaction with and the benefits they derive from their affiliation with the online collectives.

Religion, Gender and Occupation: What Does the Data Tell Us?

The survey-questionnaire sent out to the IMAN and MWIA directors consisted of twenty open-ended questions. Those sent out to the members carried thirty-two, in majority "yes or no" questions; it is these that provide the data compiled below. Everyone was offered the possibility of doing the survey over the phone and three responded to this request, one director and two member artists. Calls to answer the questionnaires were sent out three times to both the IMAN and MWIA members. The third time they were sent out individually by me rather than as a group e-mail via the groups' mailing lists. In total, 18 MWIA members out of the total 70 filled out and sent in the questionnaire although one in which an insufficient number of questions had been answered had to be discarded, bringing the number of respondents down to 17. From IMAN, 11 members out of approximately 40 responded. The survey addressed such issues as why the women had joined Islam-related art organizations, how they self-represented, what type of art they produced, what their ambitions were, whether they participated in the groups' exhibits and events and how, if at all, they benefited from their affiliation to either IMAN or MWIA. The present

study, as noted in the introduction, focuses on understanding the link among the members' identities as Muslims, women and artists as well as the relationship of members to the organizations to which they adhere, highlighting the differences and similarities between the two.

The first and most apparent difference resides in the age of members and the length of their affiliation. IMAN members are older, ranging from 33 to 60 years old, and have been members for longer, with two having been members for more than five years and two for more than ten. In contrast, MWIA members range from 22 to 49 years old with 12 of the 17 responders having been members for less than a year, undoubtedly evidence of Janjua's leadership in increasing membership. In fact, when members were asked how they had discovered the organizations, 5 MWIA artists specified that Janjua had contacted them directly and personally asked them to join. However, the answer garnering the greatest response from all respondents was "through a friend or family member": 9 in the case of MWIA and 5 in the case of IMAN. Interestingly, while MWIA and IMAN are both online communities, only 1 MWIA member and 3 IMAN members actually found them through an Internet search. All but 2 IMAN members belong to other arts organizations as opposed to only 6 out of 17 for MWIA members, a difference that may be attributable to age. Members tend to be active professionally. All IMAN and all but one MWIA members take part in art events not organized by their respective associations; in the case of MWIA artists, these are twice as likely to be Islam-related whereas in the case of IMAN, they are more often mainstream.

Several questions aimed at elucidating the qualifier "Muslim woman artist" and its significance or not in the women's self-representation. Question 3 listed seven possible reasons for which members had joined the associations, respondents then had to rank them from most important to least important although some members opted simply to write "yes" or nothing. "To connect with other Muslim women artists" overwhelmingly came first. In the case of MWIA, 12 members ranked it first with another giving it a yes and in the case of IMAN, 4 cited it as the primary reason for joining with another 5 giving it a yes. Clearly corroborating the need for such online artistic communities, the figures would seem to point to a straightforward definition and acceptance of the set of terms "Muslim woman artist". However, additional questions or rather their responses reveal that the members' relationship with the latter is far more complex. For example, when members were asked whether their identity as a "Muslim woman artist" as opposed to "woman artist" or "simply artist" was important to them, less than half of the respondents agreed. In the case of IMAN, 5 members said yes, 6 said no; as for MWIA, 7 members said yes, 8 said no and 2 intriguingly said yes and no. The single most common reason cited for disagreeing was that members did not want to be restricted to or

solely defined by this label, a position exemplified by veteran painter Halide Salam who writes: "I want to be recognized for my work and not my religious or ethnic identity" or the younger Kinda Hibrawi who simply states: "I don't want to be pigeonholed". On the other hand, those for whom the identity meshing religion, gender and occupation was important submitted several reasons why. Some members strongly identified with the set of terms, putting forth that being Muslim or a Muslim woman was central to both their selfhood and art. For example, IMAN's Lallali Mounira explains that "first . . . there is no contradiction between the three [terms], second . . . as a Muslim woman artist my message is a mixture of being a woman, artist and a human being living and acting accordingly with Islamic values and principles." However, several other artists understood the use of the label as a critical tool in combating stereotypes, an idea aptly articulated by a MWIA artist:

Internally, identifying as a Muslim woman artist is unimportant, as my emphasis is on creating art for the sake of art, as opposed to trying to fit my art into a lens that can only be viewed through the eye of a Muslim woman. However, I am sensitive to popular stereotypes against Muslims and in an effort to dispel them I do want to be known as a Muslim woman artist—hence thwarting ideas of Muslim women as uneducated, passive, dull, et cetera, human beings.

Sophia Sattar also expresses the idea that claiming a Muslim identity might help combat Islamophobia: "I want to be known as a Muslim artist. We are living in a time and place where Muslims are a target of hate and suspicion and I want to give a different perspective of Muslim value and identity." This position, while premised on the awareness that identity categories are often shaped from without, is also often tied to the idea that art can serve as a catalyst for social change, an idea most clearly voiced by Maliha Ilias:

Art is a universal language. I feel that in a post-9/11 world, Muslims need to come forward and show the world who we are, what our world view is and what is important to us. Art can help us do that in a non-threatening and creative manner. I feel strongly that our youth needs to be encouraged to use art to express themselves and to communicate with people of various faiths.

Sama Wareh confirmed the validity of this position. When asked to describe the positive effects of her art, she wrote: "My art truly inspires dialogue in a non-threatening sort of way. My exhibit that I had entitled *Muslim American Woman* had a lot of pieces that made people see us in a different light."

Conversely, artists such as Ameena Khan also articulated the frustration experienced at inevitably being categorized as Muslim:

I am painfully aware that most of my work will be scrutinized as being made by a “female Muslim artist.” This is particularly true these days, as I have been submitting my work to mainstream shows. So although in some ways I want to expand beyond the boundaries of working as a “Muslim artist,” I know that THAT is how I am categorized by society, and THAT is how my work will be viewed.

The statements above would appear to suggest that the threefold identity marker is sometimes less about self-identity and more about what Spivak calls “strategic essentialism” in which minoritized groups appropriate the terms used to describe them as a strategy to contest stereotypes and access voice (Spivak 1988:205). It is interesting to note that two artists perceive the label as a means to challenge the bias not of mainstream society toward Muslims and Islam but of the Muslim community toward art. Mediha Sandhu notes: “In Islam not many people give art credit. They feel it is a pastime for housewives. So I think it’s important to say I am a Muslim artist.” Similarly, Salena Lee, puts forth that:

Islamic art, which was once such an integral part of our community, has taken a back burner to parents pushing their children into careers like medicine, finance, et cetera. While these roles are crucial, they downplay the importance of thinking creatively as well as logically or rationally.

The heterogeneity of views expressed above evidently reflects the diversity present amongst IMAN and MWIA members and testifies to the inherent difficulties of using the term “Muslim” as an all-encompassing signifier. Furthermore, the ambiguity which respondents show toward accepting their self-identity as a “Muslim woman artist” as well as the idea of doing so to unpack stereotypes points to the members’ awareness of the process of othering or, stated differently, of being automatically classified as Muslims by the societies in which they live, drawing attention to the tension plotted between externally and internally ascribed identities. How else can one explain that only less than half of members who have joined organizations established to bring Muslim women artists together openly acknowledge self-identifying as such?

Question 7, also pertaining to self-representation, asked respondents to rank terms corresponding to their self-identity. “Human being” ranked first the greatest number of times: 7 MWIA and 5 IMAN members, that is, just under

half, privileged it over “Muslim”, “Woman”, “Muslim woman” or “Other”. Muslim identity markers came in a close second. MWIA members classed “Muslim” and “Muslim woman” first a total of 6 times and second for a total of 8. IMAN members listed them first three times and second twice. Moreover, out of the three who made “Other” first, accepting in each case no other response, two proposed “Muslim woman artist” and “Muslim American woman” both Islam-related while the third being simply wrote “painter”. Three MWIA members also made use of the other category three times. It ranked second once for “Pakistani” and third once for “mother”. Only in one case did a member mark it as the only answer. Tahsin Dhirani put forth: “This is tough! I know I said above that I am an artist, but for some reason, it’s not as easy as that. Ranking and labelling what I am is easier said than done. I am me.” The young Toronto-based digital artist’s answer to the previous question about self-identifying as a Muslim woman artist also underscores the fact that identity is multifaceted and difficult to hierarchize and articulate: “I think of myself firstly as an artist, simple as that. But I am a woman and I am a visibly identifiable Muslim, so the other two labels are part and parcel of who I am.”

The question of gender as a specific taxonomic category or marker could not be here sufficiently fleshed out as the emphasis was on shedding light on the threefold identity of Muslim woman artist. However, how the women positioned themselves historically with regards to gender and art only complicates this plural identity further by suggesting that it can itself carry different inflections. Feminist art history and art historians have always been understandably concerned with re-creating or rather recovering female artistic genealogies to mitigate the gaps in the history of women artists, especially, because genealogy is so central to the discipline of art history and the transmission of knowledge more generally. Seeing oneself as part of a historically rooted female artistic tradition was more present amongst IMAN members. Seven of the 11 members opined that women played an important role in Islamic art with the same number stipulating that they saw themselves as part of a female artistic lineage. Responses from MWIA members were more hesitant. Only 8 felt that women had historically had a role in Islamic art with 4 saying “maybe” and 6 “don’t know”. Consequently, 8 or just less of half MWIA felt a part of a specifically female lineage. While one must take into account that many members admitted uncertainty with regard to the question, the difference in responses between the two groups might reflect a generational difference in terms of shifting attitudes toward gender and, effectively, IMAN members showed overall more knowledge of recent scholarship reassessing the role of women in Islamic history, including in the arts. Just over half or 9 MWIA artists perceive the emergence of Muslim women artists as a modern phenomenon as opposed

to only 5 IMAN members. That religious-cultural identification indeed takes precedence over gender in the younger generation of Muslims would require to be ascertained by further study, highlighting the need for more research.

Identities are obviously complex, produced through the constant interactions between internal and external realities and inflected by class, gender, culture, religion, personal experience and undoubtedly a whole host of other factors. What I want to draw attention to here is that a significant number of respondents expressed ambivalence toward being identified first and foremost as Muslim and Muslim women artists and that this ambiguity markedly contrasts with both the nature of the art produced by member artists and the latter's perceptions of the role Islam plays therein, only further demonstrating the difficulty in disentangling identity—what we say we are publicly and what others call us—from selfhood and subjectivity—who we are and what we say we are to ourselves. When members were asked if their art was indebted to Islamic artistic traditions, 9 out of the 11 IMAN respondents answered yes although one of these was a “yes and no” answer; in the case of MWIA, 11 out of 17 said yes, including two “yes and no” answers. Probed further to discover whether their art displayed some of the key features associated with historical and, to a certain degree, modern Islamic visual art, the response was equally surprising although the question was evidently not applicable for the one MWIA writer and the one IMAN musician, bringing our total of respondents down to 16 and 10 respectively. Over half of MWIA members and all but one IMAN member integrate Islamic calligraphy into their work. A clear majority, 12 MWIA and 7 IMAN members also incorporate pattern. Geometry came in third, employed by 9 MWIA and 6 IMAN artists, followed by henna, textile and weaving motifs adopted by only 6 MWIA members but nonetheless 5 or half of IMAN respondents.

The numbers speak for themselves. Moreover, when respondents were asked in Question 14 to specify how Islam informs their work, all answered the question although one artist simply wrote yes and their responses demonstrate much less hesitation toward voicing an Islamic identity. Even artists who claimed not to identify themselves as Muslim women artists or as Muslim above all else readily narrate how Islam informs their work, seeming to point to a difference in the assumptions and associations surrounding the epithets Muslim or Islamic when these apply to art and not personhood. Islamic art has largely retained its aura of beauty in the western imaginary and thus does not carry the negative connotations surrounding Islam and Muslims. It continues moreover to be considered apolitical even if the presence of Muslim-related architecture in Europe and North America is now also being construed and framed as a threat.

When the women describe the influence of Islam on their art, general notions like Islamic values, Islamic philosophy and Islamic spirituality recur; effectively, in a separate question, all IMAN members and all but one MWIA member agreed that art was an intrinsically spiritual activity. However, much more specific concepts like the Qur'an, Qur'anic verses and the *hadith* were also frequently cited as sources of inspiration or guidance for the artists' work. For example, architect Maryam Eskanderi states: "My art and architecture is usually influenced by verses from the Qur'an or by hadiths from the Prophet." This type of response is much more prevalent amongst the MWIA artists and parallels their greater participation in Islam-related exhibits. That these are younger than the IMAN members would seem to corroborate recent studies on the growing emergence and consolidation of a clearly assumed Muslim identity amongst second and third generation citizens of Muslim descent in North America and Europe as well as the attendant transnationalization of Islam.

Two artists specifically compare the process of making art to *dhikr* consisting of repeatedly reciting specific expressions drawn from the Islamic tradition and best translated perhaps as prayerful remembrance. The comparison makes clear the enmeshment of Islam and art for many of the respondents. However, it also implies a notion of repetition and a non-linear cyclical notion of time both of which can of course shape the mode of visuality of the art produced, a subject which unfortunately remains beyond the parameters of the present study. The MWIA member Taslim van Hattum who draws a parallel between *dhikr* and art offers up a cogent portrait of how Islam can inflect content, process and manner:

Spiritually Islam defines my art in that much of it contains religious content, such as calligraphic work, or aspects of recreating sacred geometry utilized in mosques and other holy places. Working with such content requires an understanding of what one is incorporating in a piece, what it means to utilize, appreciate, and reproduce the words of God in different mediums, and how to appropriately present such content with a beautiful aesthetic. Because many things incorporated are deemed to be holy, working with them takes on a spiritual dimension, a form of *dhikr* (remembrance) in creation that is present on the mind throughout the entire creative process. This makes the entire process of creation an Islamic experience, and its own form of artistic devotion for the pleasure of God.

The concept of beauty is central to Islamic art and aesthetics and even in Middle Eastern modern and contemporary art, beauty has remained an

acceptable aim and vehicle of art. And, in effect, beauty and the beautiful were the most cited notion, mentioned a total of 5 times, when members answering Question 14 related how Islam informed their art. Beauty is seen as a link between creation and its creator or nature and God and often relates to the concept of gratitude and devotion, a point of view candidly expressed by Dhirani: "The initial concept of beauty was created by Allah. Color, pattern, his words, all of it has been divinely created for us and my work is just to pay homage to and remember in an alternate way, Allah's great gifts to us." This spiritual perspective on art is also expressed in answers to Question 29 in which members were asked to describe the potential positive effects of their art on others as witnessed by textile artist Lubna Zahid who writes: "There is no one in the world who is not touched by the color, form and shapes in nature. For me it is glorifying Allah SWT, as His canvas shows us His level of perfection. The beauty lies even in the crumpled and dry leaves and leaves us human beings in awe." In short, this viewpoint is not tangential among respondents.

The portrait painted of the members' art as well as of members' views on their work, the art making process and the relationship of Islam to these in contrast to the responses pertaining to self-representation better clarify the set of terms "Muslim women artist" and clearly emphasize the unique nature and critical importance of organizations such as IMAN and MWIA. Whether members benefit from their affiliation or not is addressed in the next section.

Member Views on Affiliation

Active professionally beyond the parameters of MWIA and IMAN, the majority of members earn money from their art, 12 out of 17 in the case of MWIA and 9 out of 11 in the case of IMAN. And, in effect, the second most important reason members say they joined IMAN and MWIA was to improve their art career, begging the question of whether or not the organizations have been successful in this respect. Most members voice positive opinions about their affiliation. Eleven MWIA and 7 IMAN artists posit that it has helped them professionally. When asked in Question 20 to specify how, responses tend to fall into three categories. Respondents cite actual tangible outcomes like participating in group shows organized by the associations or their members, the benefits of networking allowing them to share information and stay up to date on events and the inspiration they experience by belonging to such communities. The empowering nature of belonging to what members perceive as a community is mentioned as frequently as the more concrete effects of membership. MWIA's Aameena Khan writes: "Just knowing that there is a group of women support-

ing each other's creative efforts has been a great source of emotional support for me." Echoing the same sentiment are Ilias: "It is greatly helping me build confidence and gain inspiration from my fellow members" and Naima Alam: "The biographies of and the encouragement from fellow MWIA artists inspires me to keep writing poetry." Further corroborating the idea that the sense of belonging which affiliation provides to the members is a significant factor in member satisfaction is the fact that most respondents—11 MWIA and 9 IMAN members—have actually been in contact whether in person or via e-mail with fellow members.

If members also generally felt that their organizations would become more active in the near future, 15 for MWIA and 8 for IMAN, they also proffered multiple suggestions on how IMAN and MWIA could do more to help their respective members professionally. The ambitious aspirations the artists hold for IMAN and MWIA here poured forth with one artist providing an almost page long answer. Limitations of length make it impossible in the context of the present article to adequately discuss the numerous ideas articulated. The request for more exhibitions was put forward the most often, 14 times in all, and outweighed by far any other suggestion. Member artists voiced their desire that IMAN and MWIA organize more exhibits and make them more international in scope as well as participate more in mainstream art exhibits and venues, including in major American cities, galleries and museums. The importance accorded to partaking in mainstream art events appears in the answers to other questions as well. When members were asked in Question 30 what more could IMAN and MWIA do to "help change the dominant society's negative perceptions of Islam", one member suggests: "Perhaps find a presence for MWIA in notable galleries, smaller museums, art in the embassies program, highly trafficked public locations, et cetera." Fellow MWIA artist, Nama Khalil for her part says: "Try to branch out to more non-Muslim venues and include MWIA artists in the mainstream art . . . galleries." IMAN members concur. Uzma Mirza simply writes: "More exhibits in non-Muslim domains . . . mainstream," echoing Salam's: "More exhibitions in established galleries and museums." While these answers, in light of the question asked, implicitly assume the transformational capacity of art, other responses voice the latter explicitly further buttressing the notion mentioned in the preceding section that for many members art possesses the ability to build bridges and bring about social change. Hayat Gul declares: "I think we could connect more with mainstream exhibits to show we do not just want to connect with each other but with the world" while Nida Mohiuddin frames the notion in these terms: "I personally believe that by expressing [the] teachings of Islam through contemporary art we can change the false perception of our religion in this society." Khan, for her part,

recognized the steps taken by Janjua in that direction: "The exhibit addressing violence against women was an amazing step in the right direction."

The second most frequent suggestion cited in the answers to Question 20 on how IMAN and MWIA could do more for their members professionally was that members should find ways of meeting face to face. This was singled out overtly several times in terms such as by Gul: "Finding ways to meet, even if we are far away, to network, to see what we could do" or by Khalil: "Create an even stronger network, where the members can actually meet each other." The same idea also underwrites the only two drawbacks or regrets repeated by several women, namely, that members were not able to meet each other and participate in the associations' group shows; for example, Salam comments: "Most of us don't know each other and live too far apart to make any real connection" while Lee submits: "It would be great to have regional directors who could organize events throughout the country. I would love to attend some of the events, but they're too far from me to be realistic." The issue of distance and the concomitant one of cost are important factors that the organizations need to address as they effectively constitute the most cited reasons given to explain why just about half, 8 MWIA and 5 IMAN members, do not participate in the organizations' sponsored events while all IMAN and all but one MWIA member take part in non-affiliated exhibits or events.

Many other of the ideas submitted on how the associations could improve themselves equally evince the desire for increased offline communication like the notion of setting up workshops which is the third most cited response. For example, multimedia artist and arts administrator Rashida James-Saadiya puts forth: "I would suggest weekend retreats or art centered workshops geared toward increasing community support and the progressive tools needed to foster confident artists." The idea of workshops listed in the answers usually includes learning from other members, having members present their work and bringing in speakers from the mainstream art world whether artists, curators or dealers. Monthly meetings, a regular newsletter, a book on the organizations and their members, the establishment of scholarships, mentoring services and educational sessions were also amongst the suggestions proffered.

Several respondents showed cognizance of the organizational and financial difficulties of MWIA and IMAN, both of which are run by one volunteer with no budget. As a remedy, one IMAN member [Salma] proposes "charging fees and hiring staff", an idea mirroring MWIA's Zahid who notes that "there is a need of more people in the management to help the person in-charge so that the burden and responsibility is divided". Another MWIA member takes the opportunity to recognize Janjua's efforts and talents as did other members in answers to various other questions: "Of course I understand the complexi-

ties (namely time and resources) of putting on such events, particularly, on a monthly basis and given that MWIA does not have money to support regular staff, I think Nadia's approach (and the substantial amount of time and effort she has put into it) is incredible." It was however, IMAN's Gul who advocated the necessity of making the organization a non-profit and this, I contend, constitutes the necessary first step which both IMAN and MWIA must take before anything else if they are to survive let alone expand, the sad proof of which was the dismantling of the once active MWIA in late 2011.

Question 24 asked members if they saw advantages to IMAN or MWIA "having a strong online presence". All member artists except for one who did not provide an answer considered the online nature of the organizations beneficial and a "no-brainer" because of the prevalence and boundless global nature of the web and because the sites are, as photographer Khalil says, "useful for search engines and those who are looking to find out more information about Muslim women or want information about artists". However, despite the fact that as Anum Malik claims "the world is now sadly run by Facebook", in the suggestions offered up on how MWIA and IMAN could further abet the women's careers, only two artists mention better exploiting the Internet and the actual online platform to the members' benefit. MIT graduate Eskanderi enthusiastically notes:

There are a lot of AMAZING artists on the website, if each month one of them were featured and interviewed for the amazing research and art that they are working on, allowing them to get more exposure, it would help get the concept of Muslim Women IN the Arts out in the public eye, the Internet is a great resources for one to exhibit work, and we should take advantage of that.

Award-winning graphic designer Bojadžić, who is also obviously cyber savvy as a co-founder of an online magazine, elaborates further: "More online presence, more connection (Facebook, Twitter), blogs about activities, media coverage in different magazines, pitching their artists for different online galleries and blogs." It would be interesting to investigate why so few members advocated maximizing the potential of being an online community. Was the omission simply an oversight on the part of members or was it, on the contrary, due to the fact that the art world, like the art object, still remains contingent to a large degree on the material world of shows and publications and also the fact that many of the artists already sell work from their own websites or still yet, that even major art galleries and art institutions have not yet completely figured out how to best derive financial advantages from the Internet and new

media? Needless to say, because of the ubiquity and ever-growing importance of the Internet and social media, online organizations, especially as members are often oceans apart, would only benefit from fully exploiting the possibilities of cyberspace, not only by increased online media exposure and traffic but also by in effect using the web as a curatorial space. Bojadžić recommends connecting with the now numerous online galleries which is a judicious idea as the increased interconnectivity would do much to bring people to the IMAN or MWIA websites raising both awareness and the profiles of the two organizations. More to the point, it might also help with sales, a non-negligible factor as all members who already earn money from their art would like to earn more with the exception of 1 MWIA artist who did not provide an answer while the few members, 6 in total, who did not yet earn money from their work stipulated wanting to do so. Collaborating with virtual art museums like the International Museum of Women (IMOW) and pioneering specific online projects by, for example, inviting a curator or established artist to curate an online show of member artists' work also constitute ideas to explore.³ However, while there is a tremendous need to rethink these online communities creatively, particularly, if they do become more global, in ways that provide further tangible and intangible benefits for the artists and there is certainly no shortage of ideas, both IMAN and MWIA are hindered by their lack of funding and financial viability. However, in spite of this, the examination of member views on affiliation demonstrates that members both derive satisfaction from their affiliation and remain hopeful that their respective organizations will become more active. The differences between MWIA and IMAN, whether in terms of their members, the number of events organized, the degree of exposure and press coverage do not seem to affect member satisfaction.

Where Do IMAN and MWIA Go from Here: Sites for Sale?

Studies have attributed the consolidation of "Muslim" as a specific socio-cultural category in western discourse to the ongoing backlash 9/11 has provoked against Muslims (Peek 2005:233), to the experience of marginalization (Husain and O'Brien 2000:4) and to the present "ideological polarization" between East and West (Moghissi, Rahnema and Goodman 2009:12). The epithet remains

3 In 2013, following the writing of this paper, IMOW did host an online exhibit showcasing Muslim women including dozens of artists. The show curated by writer Samina Ali was very successful and can still be seen at <http://muslima.imow.org>. I was actively involved in the project as an art and outreach advisor as well as writer.

problematic as an identity marker because underwritten by the notion of an archaic, violent and misogynistic Islam. This certainly elucidates the ambiguity a number of IMAN and MWIA members showed toward it and why the women artists spoke much more freely about Islam and being Muslim when discussing their art as opposed to themselves. However, the data as a whole points to the term's complexities and nuances and emphasizes how language always needs to be situated. Words evidently change and are colored by who is speaking, to whom one is speaking, who is thought to be speaking or listening and what one is speaking about. In effect, terms like "Muslim" should indeed be used with the necessary caution including here. Both IMAN and MWIA are communities that are open to all women artists who self-identify as Muslim and neither ever question their members on the assiduity of their religious practice; therefore the adjective cannot be automatically conflated with religiosity as is often done in the media and popular discourse. Except for one member who was not sure whether she was "indeed a Muslim in God's eyes", no member artist whether practising or not felt it important to parse Islam and Muslim into cultural and religious components or spheres. And so while IMAN and MWIA can, in some sense, be said to be cultural more than religious organizations, their examination reveals that such divisions are often culturally specific and do not necessarily translate across cultures or communities. Alternatively, the fact that much of the art discussed is indebted to Islamic art, Islamic spirituality or both confers upon the expression "contemporary Islamic art", a new, less generic and more apt meaning. It equally demonstrates the mainstreaming and capitalization of contemporary Islamic culture in Europe and North America.

The study testifies how, despite the heterogeneity of the actors and even the art they produce, organizations such as IMAN and MWIA play a vital role in providing a sense of belonging and community to Muslim women artists. Members have chosen to join these organizations to both improve their careers and feel part of a like-minded community. Their assertion that they derive professional and personal benefits from them provides, at least in my eyes, the proof of their necessity and usefulness. That members only saw advantages to belonging to online communities while mostly advocating offline activities for the organizations to become more relevant is not surprising, especially, as many of the latter would involve the members having the opportunity to meet one another. However, it could be read also as paralleling a tension articulated in scholarship on "virtual Islam". Bunt, discussing the potential of cyber-Islamic websites supplanting traditional networks of religious authority, recognizes the limitations of the former stating that "even in a virtual world, not everything can be accomplished electronically... Those promoting an

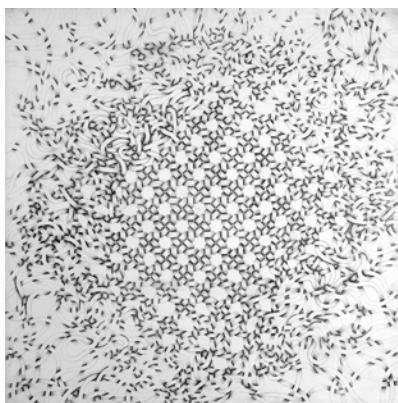
electronic *umma* may stress the communality of the web. However, can this replace human action?" (Bunt 2009:134). But opposing the boundless online and bounded offline worlds cancels out the numerous relationships and dependencies existing between them. Siapera, in an essay examining the role of the Internet in the shaping of transnational Islam, recognizes "that although transnationalism exists as an imaginary, action and experience are very much localised" (Siapera 2007:98) but does not posit these as antagonistic. Rather, she proposes "transnationalism and locality in fact correspond to different planes of existence" (110). Even if the author is here distinguishing between different types of Internet networks and discourses, her idea proves useful to move beyond binarism and consider the many intersections between the virtual and the material worlds and the types of community they afford. Further research could set out to map these interactions. Moreover, words such as "Islam", "Muslim" and *umma* are signifiers in which the conceptual and the material, the transnational and the local and even the religious and the secular coexist, providing a further reminder of the requirement to be reflective of the terms, theoretical frameworks and underlying assumptions employed in research on non-western and bicultural western actors.

While there exist many solutions both online and offline for improving the personal and professional benefits which affiliation provides to member artists, I posit that the fundamental structural flaw lying at the heart of IMAN and MWIA needs to be addressed first before any new ideas can be envisaged. The fact that the two organizations rest upon the shoulders of one volunteer president or coordinator, usually unassisted by members, constitutes an unfortunate and untenable situation. With the exception of 1 artist who found IMAN to be presently a "passive" organization, member artists displayed on the whole hope for the future of both associations revealing a confidence that is diametrically opposed to the perspectives of the two directors. Both Hammad and Janjua, who have as many ideas as their members with regards to how to improve the associations, spoke to me of their fatigue and the burden or weight of trying to get things done with no financial or logistical help. Hammad, much like Janjua, had a burst of energy upon taking over in 2006 but is now considering passing on the responsibility to someone else. She would like, as she told me, to "pass on the baton" (personal communication, May 16, 2011). Janjua who spoke so convincingly of "living, breathing, and dreaming MWIA" also admitted that "I'm still a one woman show managing a global network of 600 and a local one of approx 40 artists with no team, so things are often unmanageable". She has, regrettably but understandably, during the process of writing this paper recently resigned as coordinator, staying on only temporarily until October 2011 as the coordinator of the travelling MWIA show. When I last wrote

to her using the MWIA e-mail address, I received a prewritten response stating how Janjua was no longer coordinator and that “the position of Coordinator is open and available for anyone who would like to show their dedication to Muslimah Artists, and help them exhibit their work” (personal communication, August 13, 2011).

The time dedicated to getting to know the directors of IMAN and MWIA, their members and the art they produce helped me step outside the huge apparatus of global contemporary art and its specific system of legitimization and consider art and its makers from an alternative and more community oriented perspective. I not only discovered a number of artists whose work and talent I admire but was also reminded of the power of art and its capacity as a language that is a complex system of signs which simultaneously produces subjectivities and makes possible intersubjectivity. This constitutive and therefore political power of voice that underwrites the visual arts is cogently expressed by Oguibe: “It is enunciation, the ability to reiterate *our* power over *our* selves that subjectivizes us. It is this ability and freedom to enounce, too, which precludes us from dominance by others, which takes us, as it were, beyond the bounds of power” (Oguibe 2004:13). For this very reason, I certainly hope that someone will heed Janjua’s and Hammad’s calls so that these online female artistic digital geographies can indeed survive and flourish.

Images



L: Lateefa Spiker, Unraveling, 2009. Pencil on paper, 65 × 90 cm. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

R: Lateefa Spiker, Geo Moon Wave, 2010, oil paint plaster ground on board, 70 × 70 cm. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.



L: Hayat Gul, Blue Fort, 2011, Glass and Mixed Media on Canvas, 48" × 48". Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

R: Hayat Gul, Red and Blue Fort, 2011, Glass and Mixed Media on Canvas, 36" × 48". Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.



L: Elvira Bojadžić, 2000, from the Harf series, acrylic on paper, 50 × 70 cm. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.



R: Elvira Bojadžić, 2000, from the Harf series, acrylic on paper, 50 × 70 cm. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.



L: Nama Khalil, 2008, *Mediha, Pakistan*, *Where Are You From? Series*, 22 × 32 in. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

R: Nama Khalil, 2008, *Sabrine, Algeria*, *Where Are You From? Series*, 22 × 32 in. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

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