

What Pretty Art!

While the goal of rational, thoughtful artists from Pakistan remains the articulation of relevant concerns, some artists are producing art rendered into what we may call delectable morsels of dessert for western audiences to lap up and savor. A new wave of art of the aesthetically sensuous kind has swept the galleries of Europe and North America bringing success and quick fortune to artists and we are left to wonder at the compulsion of the artist and the happy collusion of the galleries who are thrilled at the success of these artists. In recent years, the ideas of Islamic art and Sufism are both notions that have been fully employed as panacea to counter the narrative of violent Islam that dominates the airwaves and it works like a charm, specially if the picture is 'lovely' to look at. Take Anila Qayyum Agha's installation 'Intersections' of 2013, a filigreed cube with a light source inside, radiating "Moorish" (the newspapers reviewing the piece inadequately referred to the ornamentation as Moorish) patterns on the walls, sending audiences into raptures and awarding her the \$300,000 prize for both the public and jury prize at the ArtPrize competition in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 2014.



Shimmering Mirage

Lacquered steel and halogen bulb

36" x 36" x 36"

2016

cris worley
FINE ARTS

According to Agha, who lives in Indianapolis, Indiana, a visit to Alhambra, Spain inspired her to re-create some of the glory of Muslim grandeur here in the US. But in essence, the cube consists of nothing more than the mundane reapplication of cutouts of arabesques of Islamic patterning created without context or meaning for the sake of drawing sensuous pleasure and inciting favor with uninformed onlookers. Agha would have us believe that all the research dedicated to the patterns found in Islamic Art including Titus Burckhardt's statement that in the arabesque "we discover the two poles of all artistic expression in Islam: the sense of rhythm and the sense of geometry" is to be found in the path to her work and her installation is the culmination of all the learning. However, we can be quite sure that none of it matters to the artist. She was only seeking the next big serendipitous idea.



Anila Qayyum Agha Rights of Passage, Detail, Embroidery, Screen Printing, Graphite Drawing and Beads on Paper
Individual Pieces: 10" x 10", Install of 100 pieces: 25' x 5' 2011

A look at her previous practice, which is humdrum and ubiquitous at best does not point to any evidence that she may have been a contemplative, ruminative artist exploring the complexities of her heritage and searching for clues to express her concerns, convinces us of her superficial objectives. Except for this one installation

Imagined City – After The Deluge II
Mixed Media on Paper (includes Cutting, Ink, Graphite, Charcoal
Powder, and Wax)
29" x 40"
2012



which bedazzled audiences, she would have forever remained in the shadows of the commonplace. If we believe that Agha took the idea of Islamic ornamentation a step further by creating a cube to mimic the Ka'aba and the light to suggest inner effulgence, then that is as far as she takes the idea. But is it enough? Perhaps it is for audiences who are only looking for a sensuous response in the art they view

Another artist Simeen Farhat who lives in Dallas has in fact spent her entire practice based on a visually enticing device — the Arabic alphabet. Created in three dimension usually in resin in bright colours, she has created vast installations of great ornamental value, stringing together random alphabets. There are instances in art when the visual motif you choose works for you versus a situation wherein the artist exerts to build the idea. This is one of those instances when the idea of language itself is so vast, complex and nuanced that the artist does little else to intervene and allows the calligraphic splendor of the alphabet to captivate the audience.



Simeen Farhat A Heated Debate Enamel on Resin with Screws 2012

The Arabic language if considered in today's politically charged circumstances speaks volumes. So the question arises whether we may allow the artist a pass on this ability to sit back and let the visual imagery take its internal course of semiotic action. In the 60's two major modernists in Pakistan used the Urdu/Arabic alphabet in their paintings – Rashid Arshed and Anwar Jalal Shemza. Rashid Arshed used the form of the alphabet inventively by taking away meaning from it and using it in a non-religious non-traditional manner. Iftikhar Dadi explains Shemza's calligraphic output thus "Not only were earlier attitudes to Arabic calligraphy decisively modified, but modern western genres such as academic realism in portraiture, landscape and still life (which were still in vogue in the 1950s) were also reshaped by a renewed concern with the abstract and expressive possibilities of the Arabic script".



Simeen Farhat Morphed Cast Resin 2011

These artists began a discourse with their subject and their materiality which extended their entire practice and defined their legacy as artists. What Farhat does as an artist is shop-and-use with no thoughtful intervention. True, she has conceived the idea of using the alphabet in three dimension and added brilliant colors to the resin. In some installations she has made the effort to jumble the words of a poem so that meaning is destroyed and alphabets remain. That is indeed an interesting intervention. But for the most part, her practice remains a very attractive, tactile formulation of objects.



Simeen Farhat We Won't Kill You
fabric, painted-wood, wire, monofilament
2008

Simeen Farhat has even endeavored to add new elements into her practice. She creates ghoulish figures that are seemingly empty and shrouds them with white shroud like cloth and a white hijab. She then poses adolescent rhetoric to accompany them *“Can the work be considered figurative Islamic art? (They appear to be figurative, yet there are no human figures but emptiness.) Do the images threaten non-Muslim westerners? Are these empty, veiled figures Feminist art, representing emerging freedom to think?”* Threatening to non Muslim westerners? Seriously!

Diasporic artists inadvertently and unwittingly become ambassadors of their country and their heritage, specially if they reference either in their work. They can afford to be mediocre, vapid or inconsequential — there are no standard bearers in the world of art. What becomes problematic is when they become peddlers of their heritage for the sake of provoking the wow factor, an element every artist covets.

— Artemisia