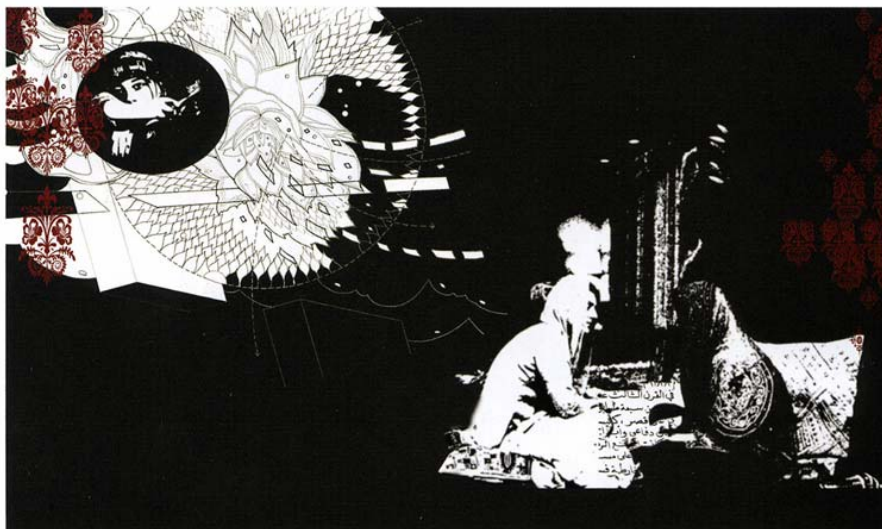




COVER: SHEILA PREE BRIGHT'S CLASS PERFORMANCE

ARTIST: AND NARRATIVE: MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN

CONTRIBUTOR: THOMAS LAWSON ON AESTHETIC THOUGHT



CHANGING CLIMATE, CHANGING COLORS: 24 MUSLIM ARTISTS

NEW YORK

Nowadays, news reports linking Muslims with terrorism, oppression of women, hatred of Americans, and other ills are so ubiquitous that even the most culturally enlightened among us may develop a slight case of xenophobia. In the context of this seemingly endless war-on-terror news cycle, an exhibition that promotes a more nuanced understanding of the complexity and diversity of the culture of Islam is a worthy endeavor.

This is of course not the first such exhibition but it remains worth a look, if only for its determined avoidance of any facile exhortations about the brotherhood of man, the transcendence of our differences, or simply trying to get along. Instead, curator Mareena W. Daredia has selected work by artists from South Asia as well as the Middle and Far East who ultimately have no more in common than one would expect of twenty-four Christian or Jewish artists. These include many challenging works: some whose cultural coding is complex enough to defeat Western understanding, some whose exploration of Muslim identity includes self-definition in opposition to the West, and some with a decidedly critical view of American culture [Abrons Arts Center / Henry Street Art Settlement; January 16—March 16, 2007].

In terms of pure visual appeal, the work of Sa'dia Rehman, a Brooklyn-based non-practicing Muslim, clearly stands out. This artist is probably best known for *Lotah Stories*, 2005. Shown at the Queens Museum of Art, this piece introduced many Western visitors to the *Lotah*—a vessel used by many Muslims for bathroom cleansing, and a veritable shibboleth for many Muslim immigrants, who have either adapted to the Western custom of using toilet paper or keep their *Lotah* use a well-guarded secret. Here, in *Stained and Tainted*,

2006, she invokes the Pakistani tradition whereby women prepare and serve tea for their male relatives—a minor act of domestic servility that slowly erodes their independence. Each of Rehman's lovely china teacups is inscribed with a woman's name. Some are whole and new, other are cracked, stained, and broken—varying states representing the destructive weight of traditional roles.

Yasamin Keshtkar's *Dollface*, 2006, stands in contrast to Rehman's work as a pop-infused take on Western gender roles. These, the artist seems to say, can be every bit as confining and distorting as gender prescriptions in the most traditional of Muslim cultures. Her creamy-candy-sweet acrylic image presents two dolls in a romantic embrace. The arched neck and back of the girl-doll as well as her limp, helpless arms could just as easily represent death throes as the body language of passion.

In contrast to these broad examinations of gender and societal roles, Masood Kamandy's photographic series *Factory*, 2002, goes specific, telling a searingly personal tale in images. The artist took the images on a visit to Afghanistan during which he attempted to make sense of a family tragedy: the disappearance of his grandfather, who was later executed by the secret police in Kabul. Abandoned and filled with the dust and debris of war, his grandfather's factory makes for a haunting and elegiac group of images.

Kamandy's tale of the personal impact of war and destruction is balanced, in another corner of the gallery, by one of the most interesting works in the show. It is a typical contemporary carpet woven by an anonymous artist from Afghanistan who, living in a war-torn region,

has seamlessly integrated the iconography of war—tanks, helicopters, grenades, and so on—into the familiar patterns of a woven rug.

Tahera Seher Shah's *The Meeting*, 2006, from her *Jihad Pop* series, mingles acid-trippy distortion and patterns with a crisply contemporary graphic sensibility. With its exploration of Islamic iconography—a complicated concept for a religious tradition that often equates images with idol-worship—and the conflict between public and private realms, the work brings a cross-cultural sophistication to bear on the question of religious identity.

The exhibition's strength is also its weakness: the inclusion of works by twenty-four artists with widely diverse practices and points of view makes for a sprawling installation that, in places, doesn't entirely cohere. Khadija Daya's *Iqbal se poochte [Ask Iqbal]*, 2006, an unwieldy assemblage of breathing tubes and latex gloves, looms near Kamandy's delicate photographs and overwhelms Samira Abbassy's deliberately naive *Birds of Intoxication*, 2006. Ultimately, however, the exhibition succeeds in the difficult task of paying tribute to the diversity of cultures that flourish under Islam.

—Lara Kristin Lentini

ABOVE: Tahera Seher Shah, *The Meeting*, 2006, digital print, 13 x 19 inches (© the artist)