

Queering Islamic Aesthetics:
Embodied Aesthetics and Queer Phenomenology

by

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B.F.A. (Sculpture Installation), Ontario College of Art & Design University, 2010

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in the

School for the Contemporary Arts
Faculty of Communications, Art and Technology

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Fall 2013

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Abstract

This work explores the collision of two seemingly disparate interests: the notion of queering, and Islamic Aesthetics. By critically engaging tropes from Islamic aesthetics and culture (i.e. architectural geometry, crocheting, carpets, and the Ezan – the Islamic call to prayer), and combining these with abstracted and figurative representations of the body, the work produced for this MFA thesis project suggests the forbidden nature of queer desire and its relationship to Islamic culture and spirituality. Employing video installation, sound, drawing, painting, Ebru and sculpture, *Queering Islamic Aesthetics* attempts to capture the complex and nuanced negotiations involved in the embodied experience of transcultural queerness.

Keywords: queer; Islamic aesthetics; Islamic art; embodied experience; video installation; contemporary art;

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to Laura U. Marks and Allyson Clay for their continued support, thought-provoking conversations, and for pushing me. I have been very lucky to have them both on my supervisory committee.

Thank you to Nikolai Gauer for your technical support, and critical feedback, and to all my friends, family and colleagues who have supported me through out this challenging process.

I would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and Simon Frasier University for their generous financial support, both of which have enabled me to pursue and present my research.

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1. ***Queering Islamic Aesthetics:*** **Artist Statement**

Queering Islamic Aesthetics is a body of work that attempts to articulate a phenomenological experience of transcultural queerness. Through critically engaging audio-visual tropes from Islamic aesthetics and culture (i.e. architectural geometry, crocheting, carpets, and the Ezan – the Islamic call to prayer), and combining these with both abstracted and figurative representations of the body, the work attempts to suggest the forbidden nature of queer desire and its relationship to Islamic culture and spirituality. Through strategic interventions with objects, geometry, video and sound, this work endeavors to generate queer affects, experiences of disorientation, and detours in syntax, as means of communicating embodied experiences of transcultural queerness.

Underlying this project is my own lived experience. As a Turkish-Canadian, queer-identified woman, I am continually navigating different cultural contexts and the expectations that go with them. Through this work, I am attempting to speak the truth of this experience; articulating the manner in which desire pushes against normative expectations, and the embodied (often emotional) experience of this intersection. My queerness is fueled by desire, which through its very existence is transgressive.

Queering, or ‘to queer’ has various connotations, but at its core, it is to “...deviate from expected norm, to make strange.”¹ This characterization of queering has proven useful in how I conceptualize the various ways in which I intervene and interfere in aesthetic and cultural systems (i.e. formal abstraction, objects, the Ezan) in ways that re-orient perception. For example, in my *Interventions in geometry* series I seek to highlight “queer shapes”, or shapes which exist within the boundaries of the geometric system

¹ Verena Andermatt, “Thirty-Six Thousand Forms of Love.” *Queer Theory and Deleuze*. Eds. Nigianni and Storr. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 24

that underlies the pattern, but which push against its structure—deviating from our expectations of regularity, conformity, and repetition. I conceive of this process as a non-representational form of queering.

Verena Andermatt argues that queering is a form of “becoming”, and that by its very nature, becoming is about desire.² She proposes that “Queering produces becomings that go beyond normative couplings to invent new connections...”³ To queer is to produce new sensations, desires, and becomings that are continually shifting. This reflects in theory, my attempts to create works, that produce new sensations and desires that transform the original source material such that it is no longer perceived as what it was, but rather, proposes something new. Considering this in relationship to *Your touch unsettles how I see*, the abstracted floral pattern in the carpet becomes representational through gesture, and through gesture suggests an embodied experience that is both uncomfortable and unsettling while being simultaneously pleasurable.

Sarah Ahmed’s conceptualization of queer phenomenology as an experience of disorientation has also been instrumental in the production of this work, and echoes the above feeling of unsettlement. According to Ahmed, “Disorientation could be described here as the becoming oblique of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given its new angle.”⁴ This idea of the world becoming oblique has been very influential in my work, manifesting both literally in oblique angles and orientations in the work, but also conceptually as a way of thinking through how queerness situates you at an angle to what is normative.⁵ Queer desire aligns one’s experience along different meridians. One’s way of being in the world becomes unhinged as a result of desire. Ahmed further describes disorientation as an occurrence that “can be a bodily experience of losing one’s place,

² Andermatt, *Thirty-Six*, 25

³ Ibid. 25

⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, (London: Duke University Press 2006), 162

⁵ Here I am thinking about, *Forbidden my lips* and *Between here and there*.

an effect of the loss of place....”⁶ This speaks directly to transcultural experiences of queerness, where one’s place and adherence to codes of appropriate behavior etc. are constantly shifting based on context. Ahmed also suggests that disorientation occurs when things “fail to cohere,” and this is a sensation I hope to convey.⁷

Throughout the process of developing this work, I have sought to explore queering through means which privilege embodied affective sensations. Dina Georgis’ conceptualization of “queer affect” has been particularly useful in considering this. Georgis argues, “queer affects unsettle us,” that “queer affect exceeds language, it haunts and disquiets and refuses endings”⁸. I hope this body of work is able to generate queer affects— what Simon O’Sullivan describes as “moments of intensity, a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter” as something existing “beneath, beyond or even parallel to signification”.⁹ I have had great difficulty articulating through language what an embodied experience of transcultural queerness is, because, for me, it is an emotional experience that exceeds language; It is beauty, and pain, longing, and love, belonging, rejection, and desire.

In order to convey the complexity of this experience, I have turned to using my body, as well as video and sound, as key mediums through which to generate queer affects. The direct engagement of my body in the work has become pivotal, as it is the key site upon which queerness plays out. In various works I have employed my body in a manner where its gestures and representation interfere in aesthetic and cultural systems, as well as being interfered upon—processes through which both the body and that which it is engaged with are transformed. Works like *Forbidden My Lips* enact this process. My body becoming the means through which I interfere with the Ezan (Islamic call to prayer), destroying the original call with my flesh, while the representation of my

⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 160

⁷ Ibid, 170

⁸ Dina Georgis, *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013), 11

⁹ O’Sullivan, Simon. “The Aesthetics of Affect”. *Angelaki* Vol. 6. No. 3. (December 2001), 126

body and the geometry embedded in its skin are fragmented through interference. Both the video and sound in this work enact a violence, an interference in continuity that shifts the work between representation and abstraction. The installation of this work also attempts to create moments that unsettle, hinting at disorientation. The deep drone that accompanies *Inheritance* attempts to communicate stifled desire, resistance, longing and love through sound.

I see my work as being part of a conversation with other transcultural artists, who may or may not conceive of themselves as engaging in a process of queering, but whose work, like my own, engages with traditional methodologies in ways that transform them. There are a number of artists I have argued are queering Islamic aesthetics, including Shahzia Sikander, Kutlug Attaman, and Faig Ahmed, each of whom work with traditional methodologies or tropes from Islamic aesthetics, but transgress their rules in various ways. I am also greatly inspired by Mona Hatoum, an artist whose work speaks to transcultural experiences of disorientation.

This body of work attempts to suggest both interior and exterior contexts in which disorientation occurs. Moving between representation and abstraction, it reveals, and conceals, conveying the complex ways in which transcultural experiences of queerness re-orient relationships to the world.

2. *Queering Islamic Aesthetics:* Project Documentation

Video Files

Please consult Appendix B. Video: *Queering Islamic Aesthetics*.

Gallery Installation

The Following photographs document my MFA graduating project as it was showcased at the Audain Gallery from August 28th-September 6th 2013.

Figure 1. *Gallery Installation View 1*



Figure 2. *Ebru 2013*

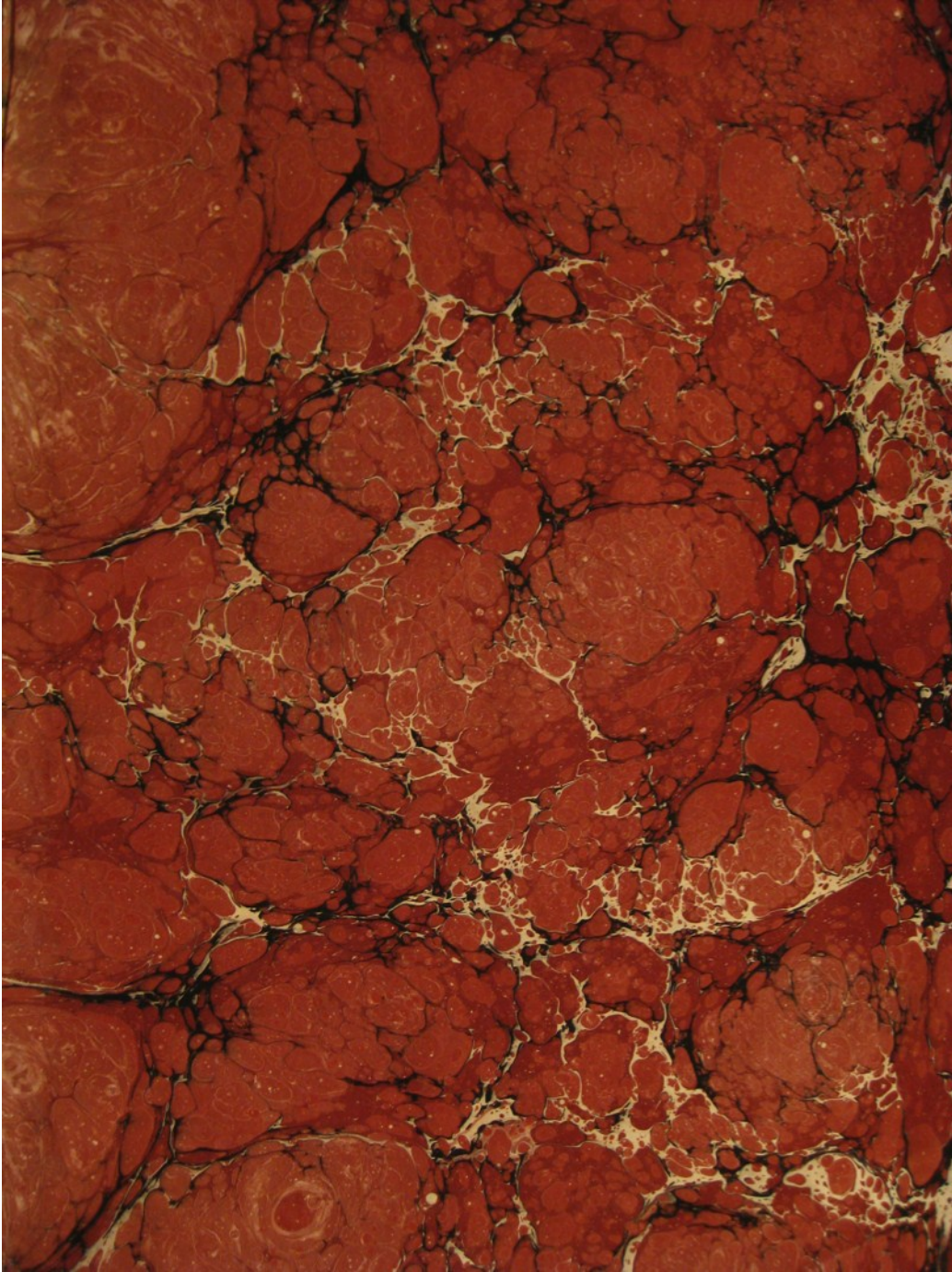


Figure 3. *Interventions in Geometry 31 2013*



Figure 4. *Between Here and There 2013*



Figure 5. *Your Touch Unsettles How I see 2013*



Figure 6. *Inheritance 1 2013*

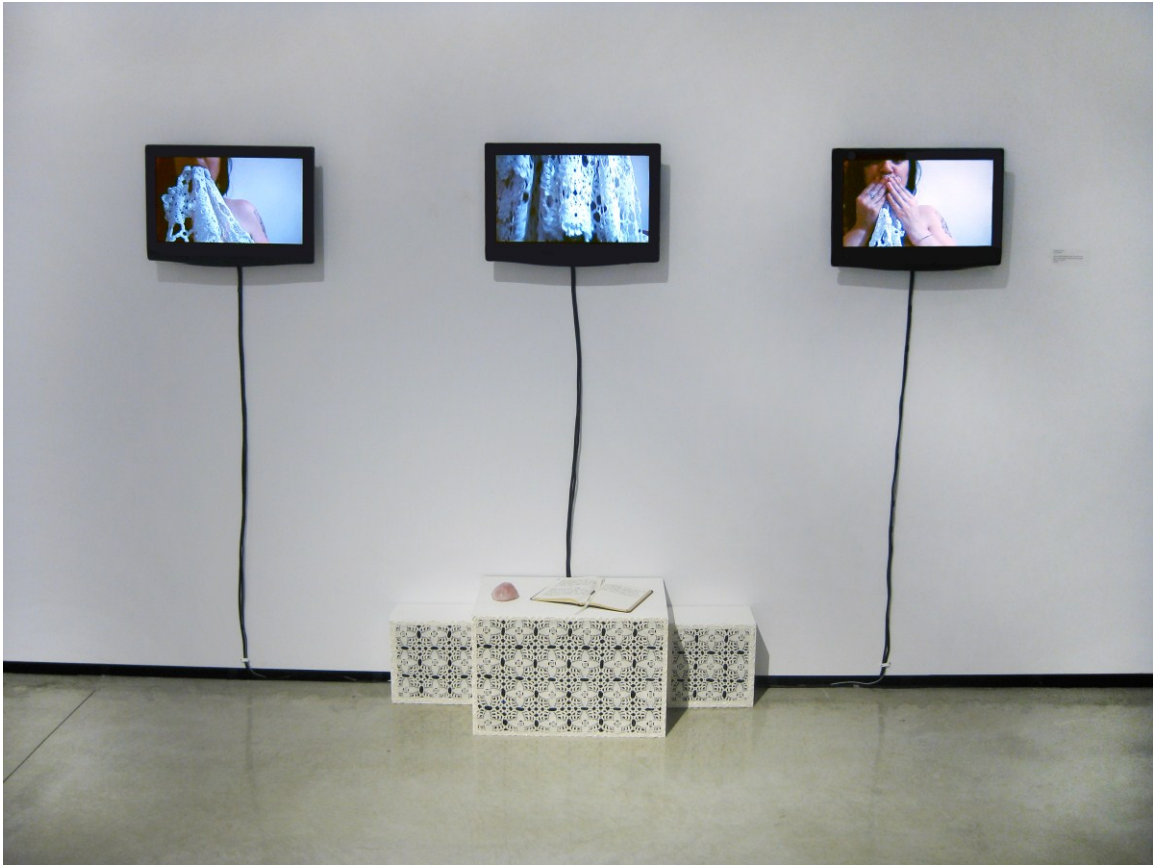


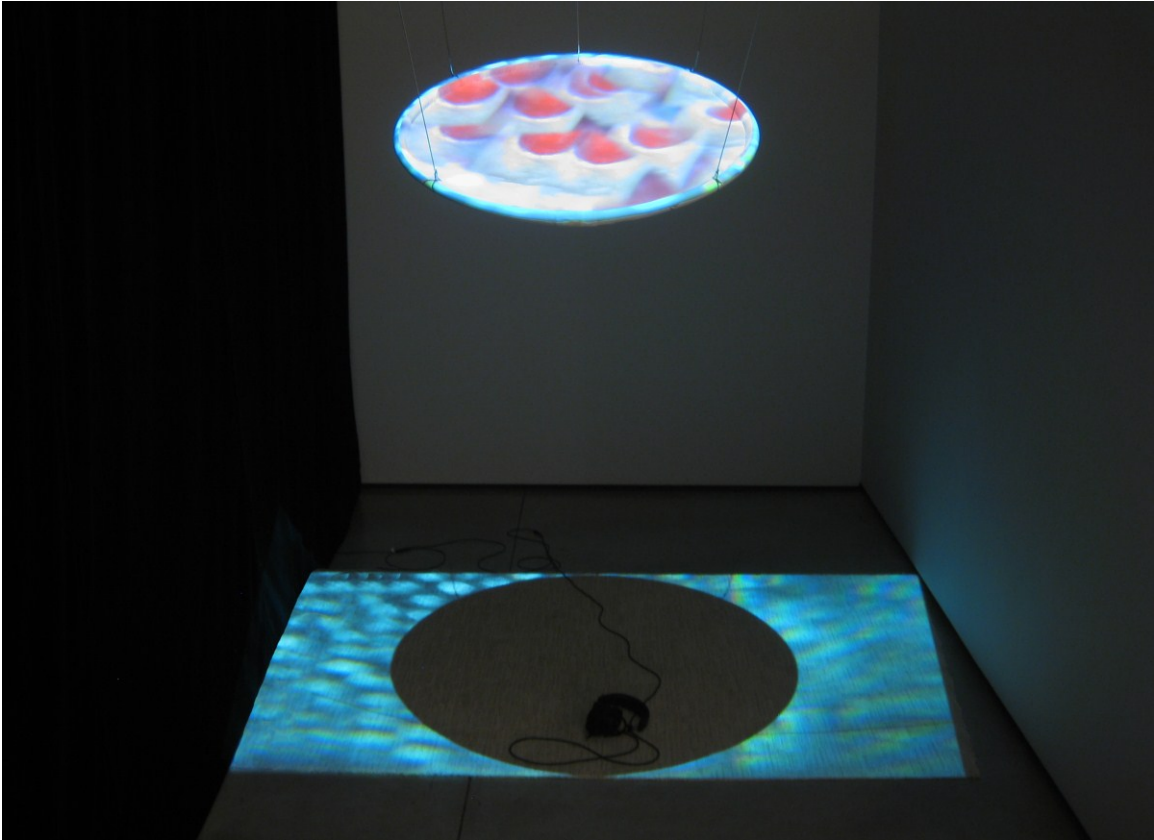
Figure 7. Inheritance 2013



Figure 8. *What She Brought Back from the Hajj 2013*



Figure 9. *Forbidden My Lips 2013*



Appendices

Appendix A.

***Queering Islamic Aesthetics:* Embodied Aesthetics and Queer Phenomenology**

The present paper was written in the Fall 2012 semester, roughly 1 year before the presentation of my thesis project. Accordingly, the ideas explored in this paper relate to an earlier stage in my research process and may not necessarily explain the work as manifested in its final form. This paper does not explicitly address the aesthetic and conceptual underpinnings of the work as it was presented in my final thesis exhibition (at the Audain Gallery) rather, it points to the aesthetic interests and conceptual concerns which have informed the evolution of this body of work. It should therefore not be approached as a direct reflection upon the work presented, but as something which can provide insight into the thought processes that lead to the production of my final thesis project.

As a contemporary queer artist who works with motifs and patterns culled from Islamic architecture and aesthetics, I come to this paper with an interest in exploring what initially may appear to be a collision between seemingly incongruent discourses—namely queer theory—and what I will refer to as Islamicate aesthetics. Upon initial reflection, the consideration of Islamicate aesthetics in relationship to queer theory may seem a strange pairing, however, I hope to demonstrate that queer theory, and the notion of queering specifically, provides an interesting framework through which to critically consider examples of both historical Islamicate aesthetics, as well as their contemporary permutations. This paper considers the embodied perception involved in apprehending patterns common to Islamicate aesthetics, and how this relates to queerness. Examining Islamicate aesthetics through Ahmed's queer phenomenological approach/framework reveals their capacity to produce disorientating affects, or what she refers to as 'queer moments'. I will discuss the ways in which new and compelling readings of Islamicate aesthetics emerge from this encounter with queer theory/phenomenology, and how in turn, these readings affect the dialogue we imagine contemporary artists working with Islamicate aesthetics to be having with tradition.

As scholars, we are often faced with the troubling task of working within an out-dated or outmoded set of vocabulary, as is the case with my own research and the term *Islamic art*. The term Islamic is inadequately broad, as it refers to both the faith of Islam and the culture, which is very diverse in its cultural practices and is associated with an extensive geographic area.¹⁰ One has to ask, what makes Islamic Aesthetics Islamic? Aside from the specific practice of calligraphy, whose content is explicitly derived from the Islamic faith, it is problematic to assume, as suggested by scholars of Islamic art Oleg Grabar and Laura Marks that any relationship necessarily exists between the faith of Islam and the formal qualities of Islamic Aesthetics.¹¹

I have deliberately chosen to use the terms ‘aesthetics’ and ‘pattern’, rather than ‘Arabesque’ or ‘ornament’ for a number of reasons. The Arabesque is a type of ornament in which intertwining vines and curving lines are predominant, but in some instances it has also been used to describe more geometric forms of ornament.¹² The term Arabesque, “an exclusively western term” was invented around 1600 and “...came to be associated with an intricate type of design based primarily on vegetal motifs”.¹³ Oleg Grabar traces the term Arabesque to the “Arabic root ‘*ajaba*’ “to wonder”, which feels quite apt, considering this is one of the most compelling aspects of Islamic aesthetics—their capacity to produce an experience of wonder.¹⁴ While poetic and moving, the term *Arabesque* would limit the scope of my discussion, and evokes an orientalist romanticism that I would like to avoid.

¹⁰ Fereshteh Daftari, “Islamic or Not” *Beyond Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* Exhibition Catalogue, (Museum of Modern Art New York, 2006), 10

¹¹ Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*. (Massachusetts MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010), 30

¹² Markus Brudlerin, Munich, “The Dissection of the Arabesque and its Transplantation into Abstraction” *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between Non-Western, Modern and Contemporary Art*. (Riehen/ Basel: Fondation Beyeler, 2001) 11

¹³ Oleg, Grabar, *Islamic Art and Beyond* (Hampshire England: Asgate Publishing Ltd. 2006) 345

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 345. I will explore affects (like wonder) which are produced by Islamic aesthetics in more depth later in the paper.

For my purposes, I have chosen to use the term *Islamicate* as an alternative to Islamic. Borrowed from Marshal G.S. Hodgson, *Islamicate* is taken up by authors Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*. For their purposes,

...*Islamicate* was intended to highlight a complex of attitudes and practices that pertain to cultures and societies that live by various versions of the religion of Islam. *Islamicate*, with its double adjectival ending, was conceived as a parallel to the term *Italianate*, which refers not only to what is historically understood as Italian, but all that is associated with Italian styles and modes of cultural expression.¹⁵

I have found *Islamicate* a useful term when paired with ‘aesthetics’ and ‘pattern’ to refer broadly to a set of artistic practices, which commonly appear in contexts where the dominant religion is, or has been Islam.

Gülru Necipoğlu, who is the author of *The Topkapi Scroll*, argues against the tendency in western scholarship to universalize *Islamicate* aesthetics by insisting that they share no unified essence. She critiques the characterization of the arabesque as pan-Islamic, existing outside of space and time, as being “singled out as the primary essence of Islamic visual culture”.¹⁶ She points to the failure of much of this scholarship to ground itself in specific historical contexts or time periods, relying instead on “sweeping generalizations unsubstantiated by concrete data”.¹⁷ She further critiques this generalizing tendency by emphasizing how the “decorative skins” that embellish the surfaces of architectural structures in the Islamic world constitute “distinctive decorative idioms” that function as “emblematic identity markers visually expressing shifting cultural, sectarian and political boundaries,” associated with specific dynastic identities.¹⁸ Thus,

¹⁵ Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, ed. *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*. (USA: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2008) ix

¹⁶ Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and Architecture in the Humanities, 1995), 76

¹⁷ Ibid. 74, 80

¹⁸ Ibid, 221

different dynastic periods and regional dynasties identified their boundaries through the visual idioms employed in their architecture and aesthetics.

Despite using the term Islamicate aesthetics in my paper, I concede that there is no unified Islamicate Aesthetics: there has always been a huge diversity of approaches and styles throughout the regions of the world where Islam has been a major religious and cultural force. Although I am unable to address all stylistic modes that comprise Islamic aesthetics in this paper, I will briefly outline what I regard to be the major stylistic approaches. These include variable styles of calligraphy, geometric patterns, the arabesque—or vegetal-based patterns, and miniatures. While its styles vary considerably, calligraphy may be the only truly Islamic art, as its content is specifically derived from the Qur'an and other religious texts. In their seemingly infinite variation, repetition and scope, geometric-based patterns, along with Arabesque patterns, have been widely interpreted as representing the central Islamic tenet of *Tawhid*, (the absolute unity of Allah).¹⁹

Despite various exceptions, including the presence of animals and people in dishes from Fatimid Cairo, Umayyad Spain, Persia and Afghanistan (to name a few), Islamic art and aesthetics are frequently characterized by their aniconic or non-representational nature.²⁰ Art that is specifically religious does not often depict living things, (especially as is the case with works emerging from Sunni contexts), but there are many exceptions and forms that cannot not easily be categorized as either religious or otherwise. The tradition of miniature painting is often marginalized within discussions of Islamic art and aesthetics because the characteristic content of this art form (with figuration being a dominant motif) steps outside the boundaries of an aniconic characterization of Islamic art. According to Laura Marks,

¹⁹ Laura Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 38, Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Topkapi Scroll*, 76. I will revisit these styles later in the paper in my discussion of embodied perception and the apprehension of patterns as they relate to Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology.

²⁰ Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 49

Aniconism has its basis in the Qur'an's privileging of speech, the hadiths that warned against imitating God's creation, and according to some doctrines, the impossibility of representing the divine. The Qur'an prohibits representing God, but does not mention figurative representation in general. The point is that God is the only fashioner (al-musawwir) with whom humans cannot compete.²¹

So while aniconism is derived from the Qur'an, it is not clear whether the prohibition of representing the divine extends to other beings, including humans, animals and even plants, or is meant exclusively to refer to the representation of Allah.

It seems reasonable to posit that the degree to which different regional styles have conformed to this tenet of aniconism reflects the cultural diversity of the Islamic world, and more broadly, the non-uniformity of its aesthetics. As Islamic empires expanded across vast cultural and geographic regions, their aesthetic practices both absorbed and transformed the practices of cultures that were conquered in this process.²² In light of this, one could argue that the history of Islamicate aesthetics reveals a process of constant mutation and transformation.

This mutability and constant transformation is where there exists a pivotal connection between Islamicate aesthetics and queer theory, as "queerness" is indeterminate and ambiguous by definition.²³ According to queer theorist Annamarie Jagose, the ambiguity or indeterminate nature of queerness is informed by its "commitment to denaturalization."²⁴ This commitment suggests a necessary resistance to any "foundational logic or consistent set of characteristics."²⁵ I interpret this commitment to denaturalization as a response to the manner in which identities, or definitions that are initially radical or resistive, often undergo a process of naturalization

²¹ Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 51

²² *Ibid.*, Chapters 4-5

²³ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. (New York University Press.1996), 96

²⁴ *Ibid.* 96

²⁵ *Ibid.* 96

over time wherein they become rigid and restrictive. They become the new “norm” against which we push.

Queerness is fundamentally concerned with resisting what is considered normative. According to Verena Andermatt, “To Queer, [is to] to deviate from expecting norm, to make strange.”²⁶ This assumes that we have a clear sense of what the norm is. Andermatt is referring to deviant sexuality, or sexualities, which deviate from heteronormative expectations. Thus, sexualities and desires that exist outside of the boundaries of heteronormative relations, can be characterized as queer. This inevitably leads one to question what constitutes heteronormative desire and sexuality. There is an expansive spectrum, but broadly speaking, heteronormativity assumes sexual relations between biological men and women; relations or encounters that conform to normative expectations of sexuality and desire. Queer, as an identity/category emerged as a direct response to the use of the terms ‘Gay’ and ‘Lesbian,’ which became restrictive, normative categories in and of themselves, excluding those who did not conform to their boundaries.²⁷ Thus the term ‘queer’ emerged out of a desire to push against normative categories.

Queer desire is polymorphous in nature; a desire that takes many forms. The ever changing, and constantly fluctuating nature of the object of desire suggests that queer desire itself is never fixed. Verena Andermatt argues that queering is a form of “becoming”, and that by its very nature, becoming is about desire.²⁸ She proposes that “Queering produces becomings that go beyond normative couplings to invent new connections...”²⁹ To queer is to produce new sensations, desires, and becomings. This

²⁶ Andermatt, “Thirty-Six”, 24

²⁷ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 98

²⁸ Andermatt, “Thirty-Six”, 25

²⁹ Ibid. 25

desire is never fixed, but is always transforming, engaged in an “an ongoing differing of difference”.³⁰

This characterization of queer desire is particularly useful to my analysis of Islamicate aesthetics, as I liken the constantly shifting nature of perception that may take place when viewing Islamicate patterns to the polymorphous nature of queer desire. Many patterns found in Islamicate aesthetics can be described in terms of becoming—as undergoing continual processes of transformation, and resisting attempts to fix the movement they suggest, even in their stillness.

I would like you to take a moment and imagine yourself standing beneath the vaulted ceiling of a mosque, whose surface is decorated with intricately detailed patterns of vines and flowers (similar to those in Fig. 10).³¹ Now, imagine that the pattern in Fig. 1 extends beyond the frame of the image, and covers the entirety of the inner concave of the dome. You are standing beneath it, head tilted back, looking up. Your eyes follow what appears to be the undulating flows of a vine, which sprouts an elegantly rendered flower, which produces a leaf, whose tip generates another blossom, whose delicately rendered petals give birth to another vine. Its mirror twin, which flows in symmetrical harmony alongside it, weaving in and out of each other, their tendrils entangle in an infinitely repeating dance. You struggle to ascertain the beginning or end of the line, both of which elude your probing gaze. Eyes roving over the surface, your gaze continues to travel, seeking rest—but there is no rest, and so, you desire. Your body and mind unite in their longing to unfold the pattern, whose vertiginous nature resists all attempts to apprehend it in its entirety. The movement implied in the continuous crawl of the pattern along the surface of the dome is echoed by the movement of your eyes and body as you drink in the composition.

Laura Marks suggests that the form of perception described above, that which is involved in the apprehension of Islamic patterns, engages haptically, inviting “...not

³⁰ Ibid. 24

³¹ Image of Iznik tile.

distant contemplation but intimate involvement, the eyes moving over the surface as though touching it.”³² What I find so compelling in this description is that it suggests a look, or gaze that caresses, an action imbued with desire. Referring to William Hogarth’s “line of beauty,” she suggests that the types of lines found in patterns such as the one described above “have an implicit movement that elicits a beholder’s creative act of perception and thus imagination...”³³ Her description of Hogarth’s serpentine line provides further depth about the manner in which the imagination and pleasure are involved in this perceptual experience.

...waving and winding at the same time different ways, the serpentine line flirts with the imagination, calling on it pleasurably even as the line itself becomes invisible. It is not only in motion, but in tension, between controlled beauty and the uncontrollable force of the sublime.³⁴

Activating the viewer’s imagination through their confounding nature, these patterns invite an intimate perceptual experience, which is both receptive and creative.

The receptivity of the body, and its active involvement in the experience of perception involved in ascertaining Islamicate patterns, is central to the conception of embodied perception that I am interested in. According to Laura Marks, “Islamic art invite(s) a kind of attention that is embodied, subjective, and performative. The body is important in aniconic Islamic art, not as something to be represented but as a medium of reception.”³⁵ When viewing Islamicate patterns that decorate the expansive skins of architectural surfaces, viewers are involved in a performative activity, our imaginations and the manner in which our bodies are deployed in space combine in a complex perceptual experience.

³² Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 54

³³ Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 54

³⁴ *Ibid.* 54

³⁵ *Ibid.* 61

The vertiginous nature of Iznik tile patterns is a particularly profound example of an Islamicate aesthetic style that engages this embodied form of perception. Iznik refers to a type of decorative ceramic pottery and tile work that originated in Western Anatolia in a town of its namesake.³⁶ This traditional ceramic methodology spanned the period between the last quarter of the 15th century and the end of the 17th century (but variations on this practice still continue in contemporary Turkey).³⁷ Most famously, these patterns adorn the walls of the Topkapi palace in Istanbul, which housed the sultans and their families for approximately 400 years (1465-1856).³⁸ The patterns involved in this decorative practice are generally composed of vines, flowers and sometimes animals (see Fig 10 and Fig 11.).³⁹ They are traditionally composed from a very simple colour palette - white and cobalt blue, which was influenced by its encounter with Chinese porcelain.⁴⁰ As their style evolved and ceramic technology developed, artisans began to incorporate more colours, including turquoise, rust, and green, which continues to be the main colour palette to this day. Though Iznik motifs are also found in pottery and earthenware, I am particularly interested in Iznik tiles, and their use in the decoration of extensive surface areas.

Iznik tile patterns are very sensual; their curving lines suggesting fluidity and movement; their shimmering glaze seductive and alluring. The floral patterns often resemble female anatomy – vulvas, ovaries and clitorises proliferate, giving birth to each other over and over again. Laura Marks has elaborated upon the sensual and anatomical nature of many 16th Century Persian carpet motifs in her latest book *Enfoldment and Infinity: an Islamic Genealogy of New Media*, in which she details the manner in which,

The flowers seem to appear in cross-section, revealing what is inside their swollen ovaries, the lilies have a motif that looks like fallopian tubes.

³⁶ Gerard Degeorge, Yves Porter, *The Art of the Islamic Tile*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), 203

³⁷ Gerard Degeorge, Yves Porter, *The Art of*, 201-202

³⁸ Ibid. 202

³⁹ Ibid. 202

⁴⁰ Ibid. 204

Seeds or germs ripen inside each flower's capacious interior; small disks; tiny daisy-like forms that could be pistils or miniature flowers; an array of small tulips inside the larger tulip; floral homunculi. These floral female forms call to mind their functional parallel to human life-giving anatomy.⁴¹

Although she is referring to carpet patterns in this passage, the same argument can be made for the imagery that proliferates in Iznik tile work. Their resemblance to female anatomy imbues these patterns with an erotic sensibility that is powerful and evocative. The suggestion of the body, coupled with their desire-inducing, repetitive structure, makes Iznik patterns particularly enticing.

Iznik patterns suggest queerness on two fronts; firstly, through the manner in which they defy the laws of nature, and secondly, through their capacity to produce disorienting effects. I would like to draw your attention to Fig 12. which is a photo taken of a famous Iznik panel in the Topkapi Palace's circumcision room.⁴² Not only does the presence of the animals at the base of the panel push against the aniconic tenet of Islamicate aesthetics, but other elements also point to a disruption of the natural order. There is one panel in particular which interests me. Take the bird in the top right-hand side of the right-most panel, for example, and the leaf, or feather, which seems to grow out of its tail and penetrate the flower beside it; its stem pushing clear through. The bird can be read as a sign of virility, and the blossom as quite feminine, so this might not initially seem to be a queer intersection. What is queer about this particular moment in the panel is the manner in which this steps outside of the boundaries of the natural order, or normative rules of nature. Laura Marks' description of the arabesque points out the way in which the style pushes against the rules of nature. Referring to Reigl, she writes:

...while the classical tendril terminated in flowers as real plants do, the arabesque disregards botany and allows new tendrils to grow out of

⁴¹ Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 301

⁴² Gerard Degeorge, Yves Porter, *The Art of*, 202

flowers, as though new life could spring from any point—an example of what Riegl calls the “principle of infinite rapport.”⁴³

This description echoes my own thinking, and points to what I would argue is a queerness, imbued in the style. This disregard for the rules of botany might suggest some other plane of existence, an idealized, divine spiritual plane that exists outside of the rules of the physical world. I see this as a potentially resistive, or queer gesture, which interferes with normative expectations of the natural order. In order to address the manner in which Iznik tiles can be considered queer in relation to their capacity to elicit an experience of *disorientation*, I will now turn to Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology.

Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology, and her conceptualization of disorientation in particular, provide a potentially fruitful framework through which to examine how one can read Islamic aesthetics in relation to queerness. She proposes two definitions of queerness in her book *Queer Phenomenology*, both of which hinge on the idea of the oblique. The definition of primary interest to me relates to her characterization of disorientation. According to Ahmed,

Disorientation could be described here as the becoming oblique of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given its new angle.⁴⁴

This conception of disorientation, and its involvement in making the world oblique, is useful to my discussion about the manner in which Islamicate patterns elicit an embodied perceptual experience that simultaneously engages both cognitive and physical faculties in their apprehension. Ahmed further describes disorientation as an occurrence that “can be a bodily experience of losing one’s place, an effect of the loss of place...”⁴⁵ Here she is speaking of disorientation as a bodily experience that has the capacity to shift one’s place in relation to normative orders. I relate this to how an

⁴³ Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, 54

⁴⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, (London: Duke University Press, 2006) 162

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 160

embodied perceptual experience of Islamicate patterns has the capacity to not only physically shift one's posture (how one propels one's body through space), but also how this can potentially shift one's relationship to the world.

Ahmed's conceptualization of what she refers to as "queer moments" is also relevant to my discussion of Islamicate patterns, as these moments reflect the perceptual experience of observing something (an intricate pattern for example) that appears to be in flux. For Ahmed, "Queer moments happen when things fail to cohere. In such moments of failure, when things do not stay in place or cohere as place, disorientation happens".⁴⁶ The idea that disorientation happens as a result of something failing to cohere is interesting to consider in relation to how some Islamicate patterns seem to be in a state of perpetual movement or transformation. For instance, consider the intricate multi-coloured geometric tile patterns that encircle the main courtyard of the 10th Century Umayyad palace complex of the Alhambra in Granada (See Fig 13.). A densely decorated wall, whose multi-coloured geometric patterns move in a continuous flow around the entire space, encircles this courtyard. While the underlying geometric structure of the pattern remains the same throughout the surface, as one surveys the space it becomes apparent that the ordering, or position selection of the colours is not constant. Rather, the positioning of the colours shifts and changes, creating a dazzling and dizzying affect that is perceptually confounding; one is challenged to make the imagery cohere into a predictable pattern. Valerie Gonzales refers to this type of geometric pattern as 'kinetic geometry'. She explains that "...the perceptual content of these ornaments and their formal structure constitute visual manifestations of the principle of movement."⁴⁷ This kinetic geometry, and the feeling of movement induced by its complex ordering of colours within the pattern, is truly awe-inspiring. Such patterns, and the perceptual experience they elicit, produce disorienting affects, and with them queer moments that have the potential to shift our relationship to existing orders.

⁴⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 170

⁴⁷ Valerie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*. (New York/London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001), 84

The link I have drawn between historical examples of Islamicate aesthetics and queer theory demonstrates the manner in which they can be perceived as being imbued with queerness. Their capacity to elicit an embodied perceptual experience that is full of desire, and has the potential to create disorienting affects, points to their embedded queerness.

In light of this characterization of Islamicate aesthetics as “already queer”, how then are we to read the art of contemporary artists who are queering, or working within, against, and through Islamicate aesthetics? I would like to note here, that historical Islamicate art practices continue to be employed in canonical ways in Mosques, public buildings and decorative objects such as carpets etc, and many contemporary artists work with these practices, as both a means of responding to their historical relevance as well as their contemporary persistence. I would like to discuss a selection of contemporary artists, whose work variously incorporates and rejects different elements of Islamicate aesthetics. I will look at specific works by Shahzia Sikander, Kutlug Ataman, and Faig Ahmed in particular. Creating a dialogue with tradition that is not simply transgressive, or in continuity with traditional practices, these contemporary artists speak back to tradition in complex ways, highlighting both its limitations and enduring presence in contemporary artistic practices.

Shahzia Zikander is a contemporary artist of Pakistani origin currently living in New York, who has trained both in the traditional practice of miniature painting and at the Rhode Island School of Design in.⁴⁸ In her essay *Islamic or Not*, Fereshteh Daftari explains that,

Right from the beginning, her transformation of the miniature capitalized on its innate, pre-existing hybridity, which, however, she extended by incorporating in it both personal content and references to Western Modernism.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Fereshteh Daftari, “Islamic or Not” *Beyond Boundary*, 14-15

⁴⁹ Ibid. 14

This is perhaps most abundantly clear in her 2001 work *Pleasure Pillars* (See Figure 14) This work is populated by female figures that recall such diverse cultural sources as the Mughal miniature tradition, classical sculpture, and the Hindu Goddess Devi.⁵⁰ Also incorporated into this work are repeating circles, images of fighter planes, and a bird with human hands. While certain aspects of this work recall an Islamicate aesthetic tradition, her incorporation of elements such as the dots and fighter planes transgresses our expectations of the medium. Another work of hers that appears to be particularly *queer* is *Narrative as Dissolution* (See Figure 16). This work takes up the Islamicate tradition of calligraphy, but as suggested by the title, its narrative capacity is dissolved by the deliberate abstraction of the text. Mixing both Arabic and Hindu scripts, the text is indecipherable, and is made even more incomprehensible through the complete abstraction in the middle section of the painting. Here the lines begin to move in snaking, irregular directions, undulating in a frenzied mass that comes to resemble something like worms more than words. This work combines both familiar motifs and elements that exceed our perceptual expectations.

Kutlug Ataman's work is perhaps the most explicitly queer of the artists I have chosen to highlight in this paper. His video work *World* (see Figure 16), from the 2003 series *Animated Words*, is a particularly compelling example of work by a contemporary artist who is queering Islamicate aesthetics.⁵¹ *World* is a video that consists of graphic white calligraphy atop a black background, in which the calligraphy is animated. Along with others in the series, this work was "inspired by the Islamic tradition of *had*, wherein artists carefully concealed an image within a written text or sentence."⁵² *World* is particularly *queer* in that the calligraphy resembles two erect phalluses, whose rotation brings them into alignment for a brief moment when they merge as one, before the rotation separates them again. They rise upward toward each other, merge, and fall away; becoming one for a brief moment they suggest both the physical cycles of arousal

⁵⁰ Ibid. 14

⁵¹ <http://www.saatleriyarlamaenstitusu.com/site/artworks/work/62/>

⁵² <http://www.saatleriyarlamaenstitusu.com/site/artworks/work/62/>

and release, as well as the waxing and waning of homosexual love. This work is a beautiful example of how the work of contemporary artists working with Islamicate aesthetics often combines traditional aesthetic approaches with contemporary methodologies and content. Employing video animation and the tradition of *had*, Ataman has created a queer work, which is not only transgressive of normative tradition, but is also an example of how the lasting presence of these practices is manifested in contemporary contexts.

Faig Ahmed's perceptually confounding carpet works are another example of an artist working with a traditional methodological approach in a contemporary manner, enacts a queering. An Azerbaijani artist, Ahmed's carpet works are crafted with incredible skill by carpet weavers. When one first encounters images of these works, it is hard to believe they are actually woven carpets. The example I have chosen (*Ledge*, 2011, see Fig 8) adheres to traditional carpet patterns, but the bulbous, morphed spherical incursion into the flatness of the carpet creates a dimensionality and depth which push against the normative structure of the weave. Pressing against the border around the edge, the spherical incursion squishes and constrains the pattern, which lines the edge of the carpet. Though they are generally exhibited hung on a wall, the fact that they are carpets suggests their horizontal placement on the floor. Engaging the mind's creativity, they invite us to imagine standing on them, our feet sinking into their plush fibers. Looking down, the morphed imagery challenges our sense of depth and surface, producing what I would argue could be related to Sara Ahmed's conception a queer effect, and with it, a queer moment; a moment where things fail to cohere, creating an "orientation towards that which slips."⁵³ The phenomenological experience of these carpets is such that the ground upon which it rests begins to lose its solidity, and with it our sense of how we stand. Referring to the phenomenological experience of disorientation, Sara Ahmed suggests that,

We lose ground, we lose our sense of how we stand; we might even lose our standing. It is not only that queer surfaces support action, but also

⁵³ Sara Ahmed, 166, 172

that the action they support involves shifting grounds, or even clearing a new ground, which allows us to tread a different ground.⁵⁴

Faig Ahmed's carpets elicit an embodied perceptual experience, which shift the ground beneath one's feet. These works disrupt an experience of flatness; embedded both within traditional carpet weaving, and Greenbergian modernism. Ahmed's carpets queer a traditional Islamicate Aesthetic, demonstrating a reverence for the endurance of its craft, while intervening in its normative structure.

The manner in which the above-mentioned contemporary artists engage with traditional Islamicate aesthetics of various kinds reflects a reverence for the traditions with which they are engaging, while simultaneously transgressing their boundaries. This combination reflects what I believe to be the complex relationship many contemporary artists have with aesthetic traditions. As an artist who works through similar means as the above mentioned artists, arguably queering Islamicate aesthetics, I propose that we are engaging with tradition in a way that reflects a history or continuity of reverence and transgression. For if it can be argued that Islamic Aesthetics have always exhibited queer attributes—as I hope I have been able to demonstrate through the body of this paper—this suggests that we (contemporary artists working with this aesthetic tradition) are queering what is already queer; that we are part of a tradition of transgression.

Proposing that contemporary artists working with Islamicate aesthetics are part of a history of transgression challenges Western discourses, which often characterize Islamicate cultures and specifically queerness within Islamicate cultural contexts in terms of their encounter with Western modernity.⁵⁵ It is crucial to acknowledge that queerness in Islamicate contexts is not the sole result of Western influence; there is a long and well recorded history of homosociality and homosexuality in Islamic societies.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Sara Ahmed 170

⁵⁵ Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, ed. *Islamicate Sexualities*, 8-9

⁵⁶ Writers like Rumi and Hafez come to mind here – though their writing speaks of queer desire through poetic language which skirts explicit reference to homosexuality.

...the seemingly canonical narrative of emergence of homosexual identity as a function of modern discourses, institutions and practices necessarily positions the non-West as premodern, traditional, anterior, even archeological. Whether this “present pastness” is lamented as primitive and lacking or, conversely, is celebrated as polymorphously perverse and exotic, the results, they imply, are the same: as sexual categories and epistemologies travel across borders, all efforts at cross-cultural translation and comparison are imbued with politically loaded significations of tradition and modernity.⁵⁷

The characterization of historical Islamicate aesthetics as potentially queer, transgressive, and subject to constant transformation over time disrupts this relegation of Islamicate cultures to an atemporal position, where they are forever premodern - existing outside of time, never changing, static, etc.⁵⁸ The proposition that queerness can be observed in historical Islamicate aesthetics signals the variety of forms that queerness has, and continues to manifest in non-Western contexts, recognizing how queerness and transgression are embedded within Islamicate contexts in ways that might not conform to Western discourses. As contemporary artists queering Islamicate aesthetics, we are necessarily engaged in a discourse that concerns tradition and modernity. It is crucial therefore, to remember our relationship to an aesthetic tradition that has always been transgressive.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 8-9

⁵⁸ Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, ed. *Islamicate Sexualities*, 2

Images

Figure 10. *Iznik Panel from Topkapi Palace*



Source. Getty Images, WEB: November 5, 2012
<http://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/photo/famous-blue-and-white-iznik-ceramics-turkey-high-res-stock-photography/143557380?Language=en-US>

Figure 11. Iznik Panel from Topkapi Palace



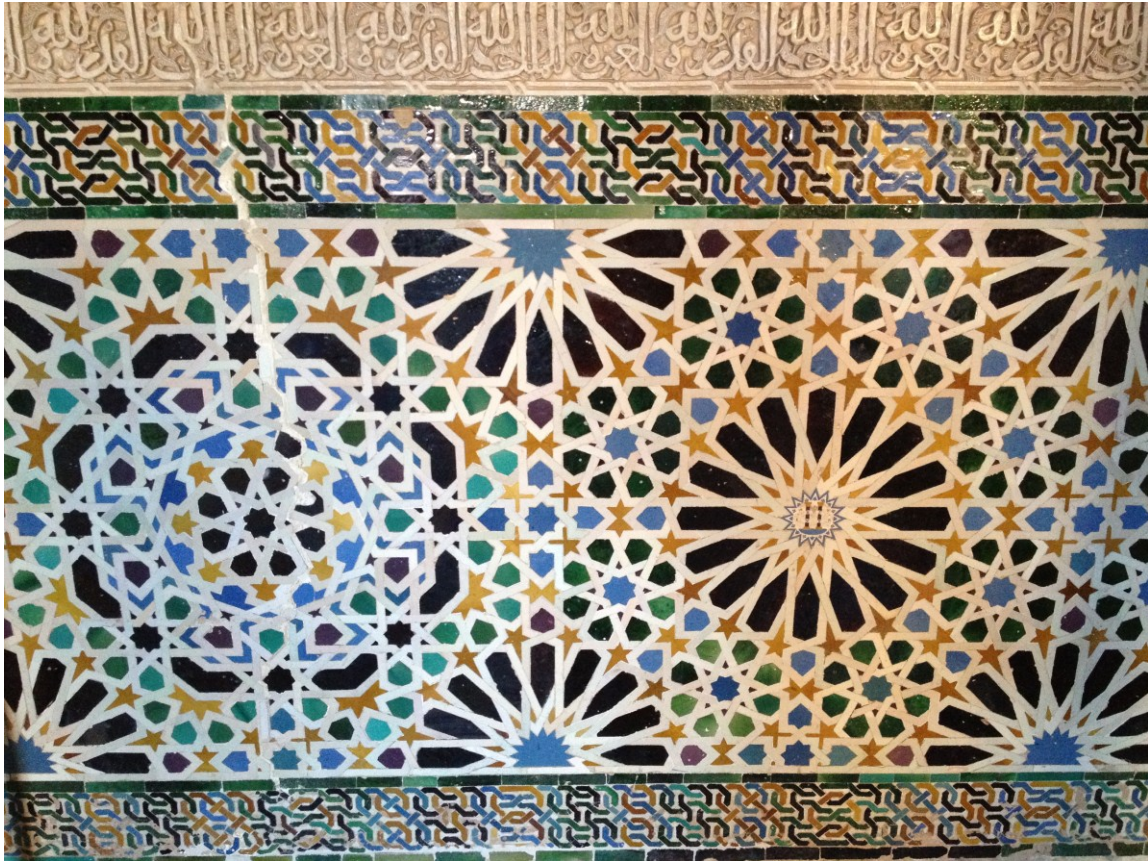
Source. Trace Pattern, WEB: December 1, 2012 <http://tracepattern.wordpress.com/2012/02/page/2/>

Figure 12. Iznik Panel from Topkapi Palace's Circumcision Room



Source. Flickr, WEB: November 5, 2012 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/zug55/6200217187/>

Figure 13. Geometric Pattern from Alhambra Palace Courtyard



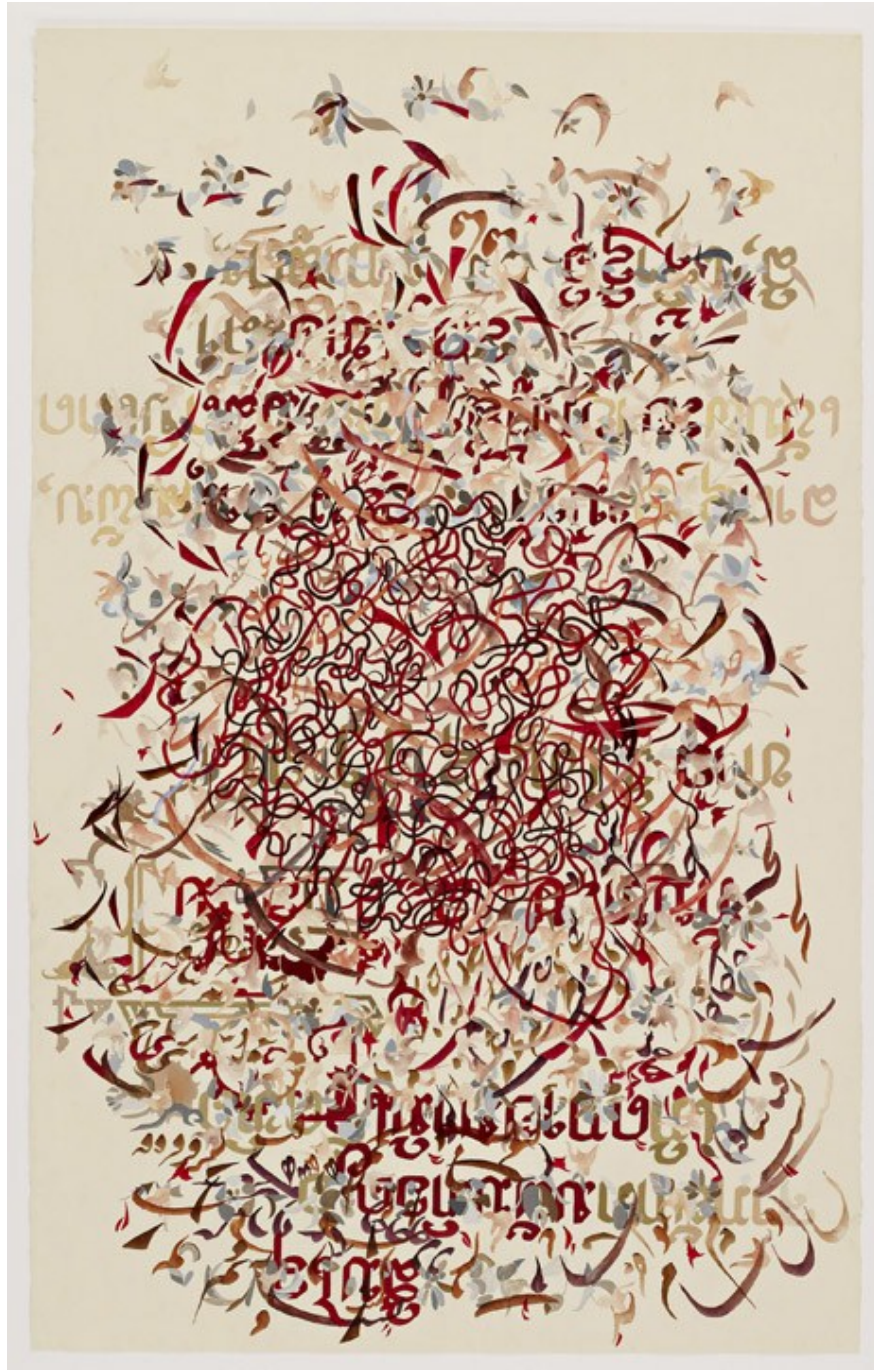
Source. Flickr, WEB November 5, 2012 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/photography-franca/7011299493/>

Figure 14. *Shahzia Sikander, Pleasure Pillars, 2001*



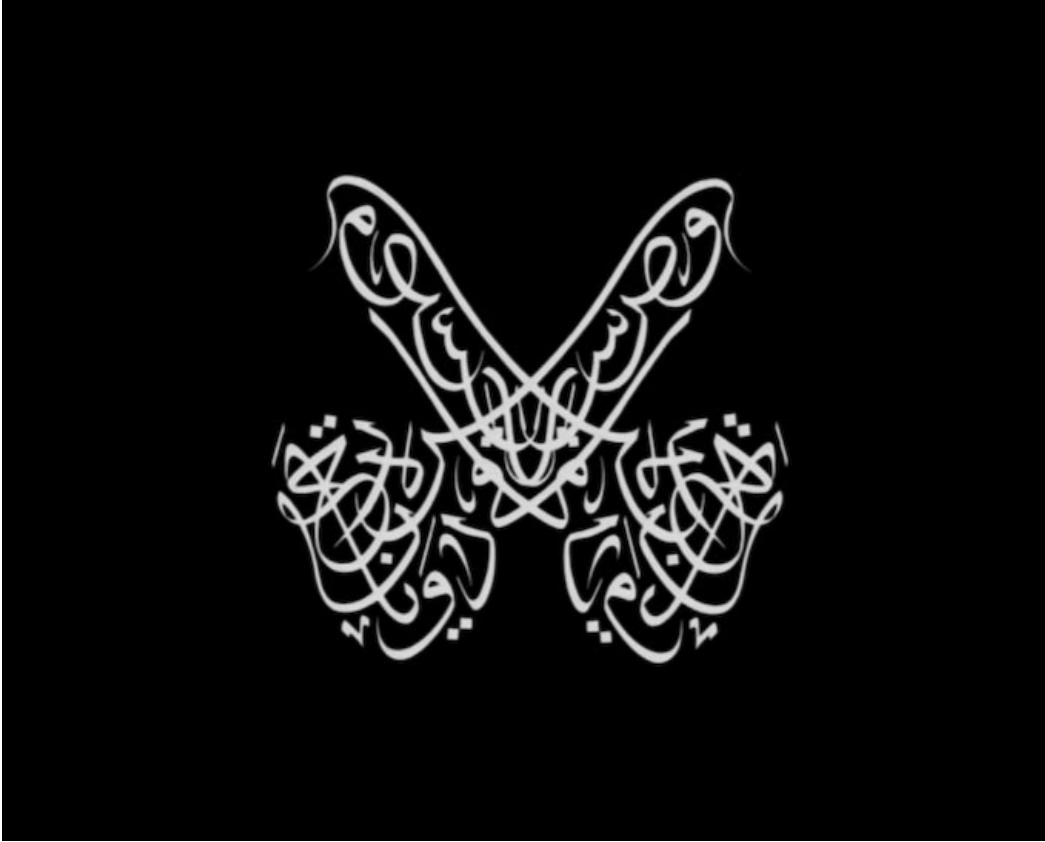
Source. Desi People, WEB: December 5, 2012
<http://brownpeople.tumblr.com/post/1622247859/jeevermadness-pleasure-pillars-2001->

Figure 15. *Shahzia Sikander, Narrative as Dissolution*



Source. The Public Professor, WEB: September 17, 2013 <http://www.thepublicprofessor.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Shahzia-Sikander-Sinxay-Narrative-as-Dissolution-1-20081.jpg>

Figure 16. *Kutlug Ataman, World Institute for the Readjustment of Clocks*



Source. WEB: November 5, 2012
<http://www.saatleriyarlamaenstitusu.com/site/artworks/work/62/>

Figure 17. Faig Ahmed, Ledge, 2011



Source. Faig Ahmed - Personal Website, WEB: November, 1 2012.
<http://www.faigahmed.com/carpet.html>

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Appendix B.

Video: *Queering Islamic Aesthetics*

This DVD contains the videos featured in *Queering Islamic Aesthetics*. These videos are from three different works: *Forbidden My Lips*, *Inheritance*, and *Your Touch Unsettles How I See*.

- Video 01: *Forbidden My Lips*, Alize Zorlutuna, Video installation, 8:17 min. loop, 2012.
- Video 02: *Inheritance 1*, 1st video of 3-channel video installation, 6:12 min., 2013.
- Video 03: *Inheritance 2*, 2nd video of 3-channel video installation, 7:35 min., 2013
- Video 04: *Inheritance 3*, 3rd video of 3-channel video installation, 6:05 min., 2013
- Video 05: *Your Touch Unsettles How I See*, 9 min., 2013.