

Without boundary : [brochure] seventeen ways of looking : the Museum of Modern Art, February 26-May 22, 2006

[Fereshteh Daftari]

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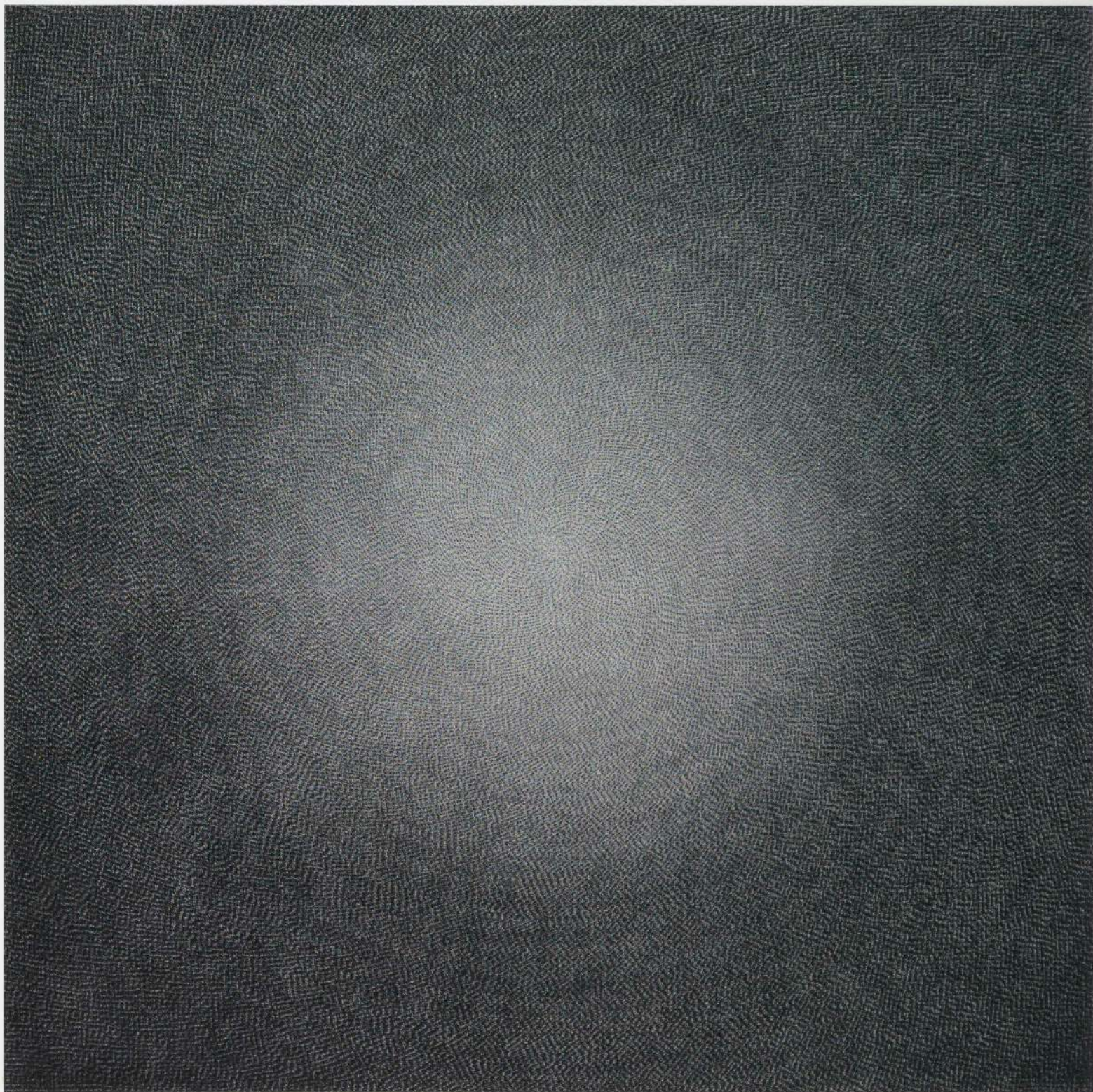
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without boundary
seventeen ways of looking

The Museum of Modern Art February 26 – May 22, 2006

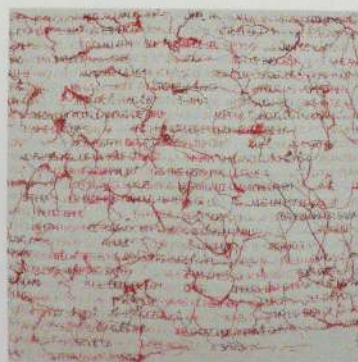
The core group of artists represented in *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* come from the Islamic world but live for the most part in Europe and the United States. The exhibition addresses the application of the unexamined rubric "Islamic" to these artists—Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat, and Shahzia Sikan-der, for example, who are of Palestinian, Iranian, and Pakistani origin respectively but who have studied in Europe and the United States, live and work in London and New York, and share neither nationality nor religion. The application of a term without clear definition to artists exhibiting in the global mainstream needs closer scrutiny. One might for instance ask: should a work be considered Islamic because it refers to an aesthetic practice such as the craft of carpet-making, or because it is infused with the thinking of the thirteenth-century Persian mystic poet Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi? When the artist is Mike Kelley or Bill Viola, the answer would seem to be in the negative—but what if the artist was born in Beirut or Tehran? In picking and choosing their refer-ences, whether inherited, acquired, or absorbed, the artists in *Without Boundary* present such complex and faceted personalities that a polarized mode of thinking—Islamic or not, Western or not—becomes simplistic.

To make this argument, *Without Boundary* approaches its sub-ject from a variety of perspectives, the first of them formal. One of the classic traditions of Islamic art that have become well-known in

the West, for example, is calligraphy; accordingly the show explores works that use text, in an attempt to measure their degree of continuity or rupture, revision or subversion, in relation to the calligraphic tradition. It does the same with miniature painting and carpets. In addition to these aesthetic categories associated with Islamic art, the exhibition tunes in to what the artists them-selves have to say about identity. And since some would claim that in the context of Islam, one of the world's major religions, expres-sions of identity are linked to faith, the final area of investigation is spirituality.

Text versus Calligraphy

Instead of Islamic calligraphy—the aestheticized writing of Arabic script according to certain stylistic canons—the contemporary artists in *Without Boundary* offer us a variety of different kinds of text. Through repetition and erasure, **Shirazeh Houshiary's** paint-ings (front cover) transform a word that she writes on the canvas with a pencil into marks that dissolve into formless abstractions. The script, she tells us, is Arabic, but the identity of the text is not divulged. The kind of thinking in which form or outer appear-ance is understood as a veil hiding a deeper reality is something Houshiary shares with mystics such as Rumi. Discussion of this artist is incomplete, however, unless it also acknowledges a tradition of abstract painting with mystical aspects, explored by Western



Front cover: Shirazeh Houshiary. Born 1955 in Shiraz, Iran. Lives and works in London. **Fine Frenzy**. 2004. Black and white Aquacryl, white pencil, and ink on canvas, 6'2 $\frac{3}{16}$ " x 6'2 $\frac{3}{16}$ " (190 x 190 cm). Private collection. © Shirazeh Houshiary. Photograph: courtesy Lisson Gallery, London

1. Rachid Koraichi. Born 1947 in Ain Beida, Algeria. Lives and works in Paris. **Salome**. 1993. Gold and indigo handwoven silk, 10'2 $\frac{7}{16}$ " x 6'2" (311 x 188 cm). Collection the artist. © Rachid Koraichi. Photograph: Westimage

2. Ghada Amer. Born 1963 in Cairo, Egypt. Lives and works in New York. **The Definition of Love according to Le Petit Robert**. 1993. Embroidery and gel on canvas, 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (100 x 100 cm). Collection FRAC Auvergne, France. © FRAC Auvergne

3. Shirin Neshat. Born in Qazvin, Iran. Lives and works in New York. **Speechless**. 1996. RC print and ink, 66 x 52 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (168 x 133 cm). Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York. © Shirin Neshat. Photograph: Larry Barns. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York

artists such as Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, and Agnes Martin.

Rachid Koraichi plays similarly with ideas of veiling and revealing: the invented script in *Salome* (fig. 1) hides a coded text about a passionate personal relationship, but is set in gold embroidery on a large banner as if it were a public statement. (Only the signature and date are written in the conventional Arabic alphabet and numerals, and these are in reverse.) Public and private come together. Formally the work bears affinities with the Islamic banners of North Africa, which display religious content, but Koraichi's narrative is secular—even though, in a naming that both refers to a veil and is one, it is named after the Bible story of Salome and her infamous dance. Christian and Islamic references and personal autobiography are inextricably woven in this silk embroidery.

When **Ghada Amer** was studying at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Nice, this Egyptian-born artist defied a teacher's expectation that she might use Islamic calligraphy in her work. Instead she turned to Roman letters and to French, the language she grew up speaking after moving to France at the age of eleven. *The Definition of Love according to Le Petit Robert* (fig. 2) spells out in embroidered letters a French dictionary's definition of love. The choice of the medium of embroidery valorizes what is traditionally considered women's work, while the thread simulates the drip painting of Abstract Expressionism, feminizing that allegedly male territory.

Both **Kutlug Ataman** and **Shirin Neshat** remove writing from its traditional habitat. Ataman's animations set calligraphy in motion, so that the image and therefore the meaning constantly shift. Also, unlike the tradition he draws from, his text, consisting in these three works of the Turkish words for "beautiful" and "world," is fully secularized. In this unfolding narrative, a marginal Islamic tradition of calligraphy that morphs into image turns into a metaphor for the moving image, or cinema.

In her own handwriting Neshat inscribes poetry over the surface of photographs, a medium of mechanical reproduction. Having left her native Iran in 1974, as a teenager, Neshat created these works after a return visit there in 1990, sixteen years later—a period in which a revolution had drastically changed the society's dominant values and norms. In one of the works, Neshat notes the social class newly empowered by the revolution through the image of a veiled woman wearing a gun barrel as an ornament (fig. 3). She inscribes on this photograph a eulogy to martyrdom by the fervently religious contemporary poet Tahereh Saffarzadeh (born 1936). In the other photograph she quotes a poem by a woman of a very different persuasion, the free-spirited Forough Farrokhzad (1935–1967), who on the contrary laments people's lack of care and concern for life. Together these images reflect a diasporic artist's perception of contradictory forces at work in her native country.



4. Shahzia Sikander. Born 1969 in Lahore, Pakistan. Lives and works in New York. *Perilous Order*. 1997. Vegetable pigment, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea water on paper, 10 3/8 x 8 7/8" (26.4 x 20.8 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee, 1997. © Shahzia Sikander. Photograph: Sheldon C. Collins. © Whitney Museum of American Art

5. Raqib Shaw. Born 1974 in Calcutta, India. Lives and works in London. *The Garden of Earthly Delights III*. 2003. Mixed media on board, three panels, overall: 10 x 15' (305 x 457.5 cm), each panel: 10 x 5' (305 x 152.5 cm). Private collection, courtesy Victoria Miro Gallery, London. © Raqib Shaw. Photograph: courtesy Victoria Miro Gallery, London

Beyond Miniature Painting

In 1988, as an art student living in Lahore, **Shahzia Sikander** decided to study the painting of miniatures. For a Pakistani artist of this time and place, the choice was neither natural nor logical but an act of defiance. Sikander has endowed this anachronistic genre with what she calls "open-ended possibilities." In *Perilous Order* (fig. 4), for instance, she juxtaposes a portrait of a friend in the guise of a Mughal prince or emperor, drawn from the Islamic art of India, with an entourage of *gopis*—female worshipers of the Hindu god Krishna—lifted from an eighteenth-century illustration of the *Bhagavata Purana*. Sikander adds to this Islamic and Hindu mixture her own invented sign: a shadowy, hovering female figure with roots for feet, suggesting her ability to sustain herself in whatever soil she stands. Finally Sikander marks the entire surface with dots, which she associates with a regime of repetition derived from Minimalism. Layering replaces linear narrative in this image. Elsewhere Sikander may also pursue abstraction via Islamic ornamentation, modernist monochrome, or even residual figuration, as when she animates a sign derived from the coiffure of the *gopis* and multiplies it into a vortex.

As meticulously crafted and detailed as Sikander's paintings based on the miniature tradition, **Raqib Shaw's** *Garden of Earthly Delights III* (fig. 5) is, however, fifteen feet wide. Despite its large scale, which requires the viewer to move away in order to grasp the

whole, the painting also demands scrutiny at close range, like the images in an illuminated manuscript. Shaw is a student of Persian miniatures, which often feature a paradisaical setting, but his direct inspiration here is Hieronymous Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1510–15)—although his Eden, unlike Bosch's, is free of taboos and retributions. Shaw also acknowledges sources including Japanese decorative arts and prints, jewelry, the shawls of his native Kashmir, and museums and libraries. His work is equally in dialogue with the all-over fields of Jackson Pollock; with his scattered minutiae drawing attention to every inch of the painting, Shaw creates an effect reminiscent not only of Persian miniatures but also of abstract art. Saturated with detail to the point where identification is strained, Shaw's painting remains open to both abstraction and the impulse of storytelling.

Looking under the Carpet

The carpets in this exhibition are unorthodox by traditional standards. Those conceived by the Iranian-born artist **Shirana Shahbazi** (fig. 6), for example, are so reduced in size that they do not function as floor coverings, and although they are made in Iran, they mimic the enduring genres of Western painting—portraiture, still life, landscape—rather than the gardens and geometric designs of traditional Islamic carpets. Shahbazi's practice begins with photography but transforms its images into various other mediums,



6. Shirana Shahbazi. Born 1974 in Tehran, Iran. Lives and works in Zurich. [Farsh-01-2004]. 2004. Hand-knotted wool and silk carpet, 27³/₁₆ x 19¹³/₁₆" (70 x 50 cm). Courtesy Gallery Bob van Orsouw, Zurich. © Shirana Shahbazi. Photograph: courtesy Gallery Bob van Orsouw, Zurich

7. Mike Kelley. Born 1954 in Detroit, Michigan. Lives and works in Los Angeles. *Untitled*. 1996–97. Hand-woven silk (made in Ghom, Iran), 60 x 40" (152.4 x 101.6 cm). Courtesy Brian Butler, Los Angeles. © Mike Kelley

from mural painting to carpet weaving. This kind of border-crossing also appears in a carpet by the American artist **Mike Kelley** (fig. 7), a work that at first glance appears to be the most conventionally Islamic-looking object in the show, and for good reason: it is based on a carpet Kelley found illustrated in the *Bulletin of The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, which identified it as coming from the Ottoman Turkey of the late sixteenth century. Kelly had his version of the carpet handwoven in Iran, but tampered with the original design by changing the background color from red to the green of his own Irish background, and by replacing the motifs in the central medallion with Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs. The juxtaposition of Shahbazi and Kelley begs the question why any of these cross-pollinated works should be considered examples of Islamic art.

Just as Kelley personalizes a reference to the Islamic world, **Mona Hatoum** turns her *Prayer Mat* (1995) into a meditation on exile. In this mat, a hostile terrain made of pins, is embedded a compass, such as Muslims sometimes use to orient themselves toward Mecca. In the context of Hatoum's biography—a Palestinian Christian born in Beirut, Lebanon, and living in exile in Europe—the compass poignantly conveys a search for or loss of orientation. On a formal level, in that this geometric floor piece is made of readymade objects, it suggests a critique of Minimalism, a system-based movement that embraced abstract geometry and proscribed referential content. In this respect Hatoum's approach is close to

that of Kelley, whose use of an ornamental handmade object similarly distances him from Minimalism.

Identity in Question

When the artists in *Without Boundary* tackle identity, they recalibrate the perception of the world with which they are identified. *Untitled I and II* (1996), a photographic installation by the London-based, half-Irish, half-Iraqi artist **Jananne Al-Ani**, shows five women—herself, her three sisters, and her Irish mother—performing for the camera (fig. 8). For Al-Ani this enactment points out orientalist photography's dependence on performance, and its inability to convey any truths about the subjects it portrayed. **Emily Jacir** also deflects the popular perception of Palestinians with a twin installation of scenes from Ramallah and New York that negates the difference between the two cultures commonly asserted by the media (fig. 9).

Amer's portrayals of women contradict expectations as well, rejecting conformity to any dress code. In her embroideries, figure and ground often vie for attention, and the women, even when they disappear into the overall pattern of threads, remain present through the association of this technique with feminine labor. Hatoum exploits the same association in her *Keffieh* (back cover), in which long strands of women's hair are embroidered into a kind of scarf worn by Arab men. Among the many layers of meaning



8. Jananne Al-Ani. Born 1966 in Kirkuk, Iraq. Lives and works in London. *Untitled I and II*. 1996. Two gelatin silver prints, each 47 1/4" x 70 7/8" (120 x 180 cm). Courtesy the artist and Union, London. © Jananne Al-Ani. Photograph: courtesy Union, London

9. Emily Jacir. Born 1970 in Memphis, Tennessee. Lives and works in Ramallah and New York. *Ramallah/New York*. 2004-5. Two-channel video installation on DVD, dimensions variable. 38 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Alexander and Bonin, New York. © Emily Jacir. Photograph: courtesy Alexander and Bonin Gallery, New York

this garment proposes is the insertion of women's voices into a territory tinted with machismo. **Marjane Satrapi** chooses the comic book to stage her battle of identities; the inspiration for her comic book *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (fig. 10), which she created in exile in Paris, was Art Spiegelman's classic graphic novel *Maus* (1986). The story is set in the Iran of the early 1980s, and the drawings reveal the clash between a teenager's fantasies of Western popular culture and the postrevolutionary Iranian reality in which such inclinations were suppressed. Drawing from her personal experiences, Satrapi depicts a situation with little tolerance for diversity. Neshat does the same thing in her photograph *The Last Word* (2003), in which a woman sits accused of some unspecified ideological breach.

Taking the identity debate in the direction of fiction, **Walid Raad** conceals himself behind a putative collective, The Atlas Group, founded to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon and in particular the civil wars of 1975–91. Raad takes the impartial approach of a scholar or archivist to question the truth that history and its documents are supposed to reveal. Civilizational-ly, *We Do Not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves* (fig. 11) supposedly consists of photographic self-portraits made by a certain Dr. Fakhouri, a possibly fictitious Lebanese historian, during his trips to Europe in 1958 and 1959. While Raad's gesture of situating a Lebanese scholar in the metropolises of the great colonizing powers remains clear

and available to analysis, the "real" identity of the man in these photographs is unknowable.

On Spirituality

While the works discussed above question perceptions of fixed identities, other works destabilize divisive notions based on culture or ethnicity by concentrating on the common human fabric. Houshiary, the Iranian-born artist **Y.Z. Kami**, and the American artist **Bill Viola** all convey a deep sense of spirituality without necessarily rooting it in a specific faith. They draw their inspiration from various spiritual masters and poets. In the grand themes they pursue, all three hint at a reality beyond the world of appearances. They proceed with an eye turned inward.

Kami's portraits of an ordinary man and woman (fig. 12) engaged in meditation treat his subjects with the reverence that old master painters showed for saints and sages. He photographed these "quotidian mystics," as Homi Bhabha calls them, at a meditation center in Vermont. One figure in clear focus and the other slightly blurred, as if to announce his withdrawal, the two together encourage meditation on the flow between presence and absence, impermanence and change.

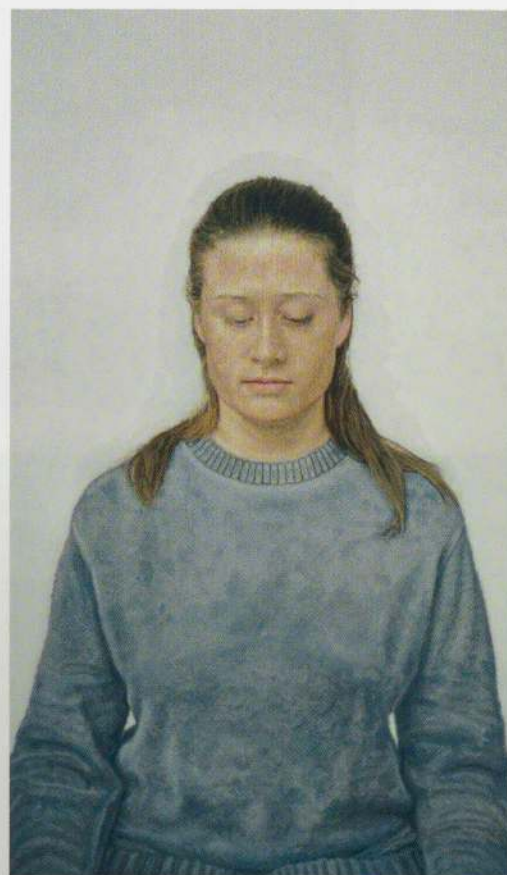
Houshiary evokes the state of flux through abstraction. *White Shadow* (fig. 13), a tall tower executed with the British architect **Pip Horne**, exists between being and not being. The form soars



10. Marjane Satrapi. Born 1969 in Rasht, Iran. Lives and works in Paris. *Persepolis* ("Kim Wilde" chapter; detail). 2001. Ink on paper, nine drawings, each 16 7/16 x 11 1/16" (42 x 29.7 cm). Courtesy the artist. © Marjane Satrapi. Photograph: Westimage



11. The Atlas Group/Walid Raad. The Atlas Group founded New York, 1999, by Raad, who was born in Chbanieh, Lebanon, and lives and works in Brooklyn and Beirut. Civilizational-ly, *We Do Not Dig Holes To Bury Ourselves* (detail). 2003. Twenty-four framed archival ink-jet prints with accompanying wall text, each print (framed): 12 3/8 x 10 3/16" (31.5 x 25.8 cm), wall text: 39 3/8 x 25 3/8" (100 x 60 cm). Courtesy The Atlas Group and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg-Beirut. © The Atlas Group. Photographs: courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg-Beirut



into space only to seem to remove itself and melt into the background as a ghost. This skeletal structure, whose shape recalls the double helix of human genetics, appears to whirl around its axis as if engaged in the *sama*, the mystical Sufi dance. It fuses not only science and spirituality but formal confluences, evoking both modernist sculpture such as Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1937) in Romania and the ninth-century minaret of the Great Mosque in Samarra, Iraq.

Mystical thinking has influenced the American artist Bill Viola as profoundly as it has Kami and Houshiary. Viola considers the poet Rumi a "supreme source of inspiration." The two figures in his video diptych *Surrender* (fig. 14) bow in each other's direction until they finally seem to touch—at which point the images dissolve in ripples, allowing us to realize that we have been looking at reflections in water. As Rumi wrote, "He who sees only his own reflection in the water is not a lover." Viola too searches beyond the reflection.

The exhibition continues in the media gallery on the second floor with a dramatic video installation reconfigured by Ataman for this space. An uncharacteristic work for this Turkish artist, whose documentary-style videos generally record loquacious interviewees, *99 Names* (fig. 15) presents a panting, speechless protagonist in a state of self-induced trance. The work, a visceral response to 9/11, is best left open to the viewer's interpretation.

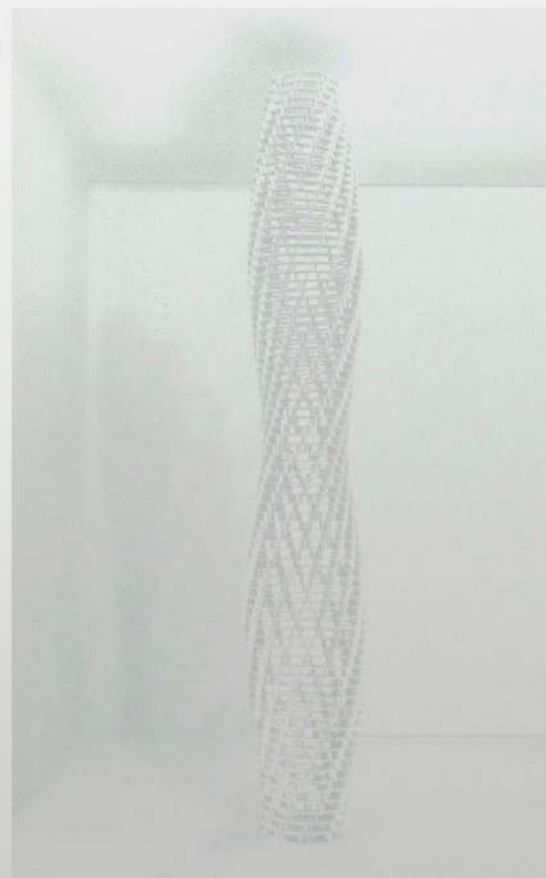
A widespread, disparate group, the artists in *Without Boundary* come from Algeria, Egypt, India, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, and Turkey. They belong to no school or movement, share no ethnicity or religion. Their commonality lies in their way of revising, subverting, and challenging the aesthetic traditions they deal with and especially in bringing preconceived notions of cultural homogeneity to ruin. *Without Boundary* highlights personal approaches and idiosyncrasies rather than a single collective difference. Maintaining the freedom to criticize as well as to celebrate, these artists belie the mentality of division and the binary oppositions of present-day politics.

Fereshteh Daftari

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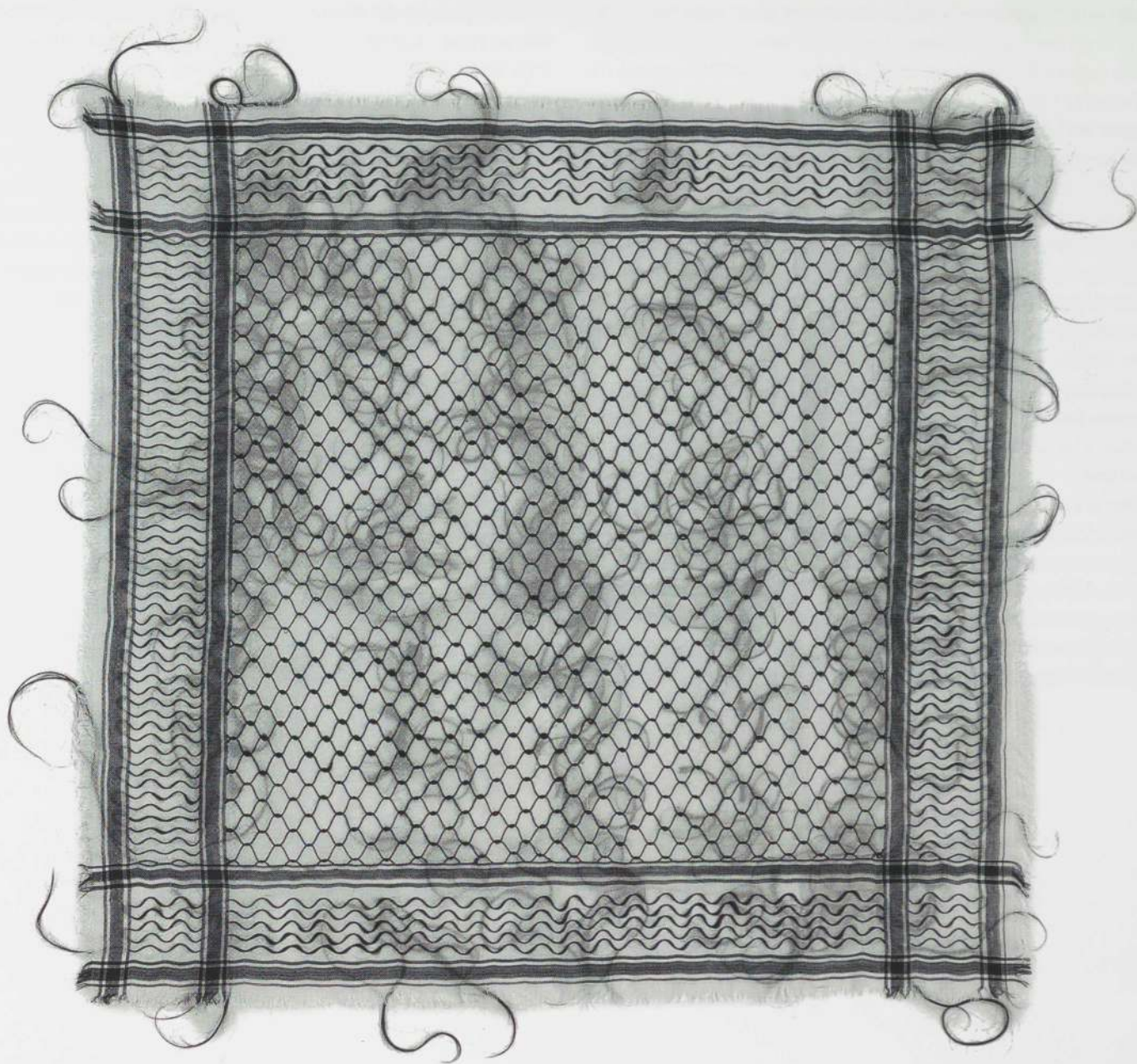


12. Y.Z. Kami. Born 1956 in Tehran, Iran. Lives and works in New York. *Untitled*. 2004–5. Oil on linen, 11'2" x 6'6" (340.4 x 198.1 cm). Courtesy the artist and Gagosian Gallery, New York. © Y.Z. Kami. Photograph: courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York

13. Shirazeh Houshiary and Pip Horne. Houshiary born 1955 in Shiraz, Iran; Horne born 1951 in Birmingham, England. Live and work in London. *White Shadow*. 2005. Anodized aluminum, height: 13'1" x 5'7" (398.8 x 170.2 cm). Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London, and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York. © Shirazeh Houshiary and Pip Horne

14. Bill Viola. Born 1951 in New York. Lives and works in Long Beach, Calif. *Surrender*. 2001. Color video diptych on two plasma displays mounted vertically on wall, 6'8 3/8" x 24" x 3 1/2" (204.2 x 61 x 8.9 cm). Private collection, New York. © Bill Viola Studio. Photograph: Kira Perov

15. Kutlug Ataman. Born 1961 in Istanbul, Turkey. Lives and works in Buenos Aires and Istanbul. *99 Names* (detail). 2002. Five-screen video installation: five DVDs, five DVD players, five LCD projectors, five speakers, five reflective screens, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York. © Kutlug Ataman. Photograph: courtesy Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York



Mona Hatoum. Born 1952 in Beirut, Lebanon. Lives and works in London and Berlin. *Keffieh*. 1993-99. Human hair on cotton, 45 1/4 x 45 1/4" (114.9 x 114.9 cm). Collection Peter Norton, Santa Monica. © Mona Hatoum. Photograph: Hugo Glendinning. Courtesy White Cube, London

Adult and Academic Programs

Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking

Work by artists who come from the Islamic world raises complex questions, especially when examined within a postcolonial and Western context. In two panels, *Home and Away* and *Meditations on Truths*, writers, cultural theorists, and select artists from the exhibition discuss how they review, revise, and subvert received understandings of the Islamic world as well as other experiences that inform their work.

Please check www.moma.org/thinkmodern for an updated list of artists on the panels.

Home and Away

Wednesday, March 8

6:00 P.M.

Titus Theater 2

This panel examines reactions to "home," diaspora, and the effects of exile. Panelists include: Homi Bhabha, Chair of the Program in History and Literature, Harvard University; Shirazeh Houshiary, artist; and Shahzia Sikander, artist.

Meditations on Truths

Thursday, May 4

6:00 P.M.

Titus Theater 2

This panel focuses on diverse interpretations of truth. Panelists include the artists Shirin Neshat, Kutlug Ataman, and Walid Raad, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities, Columbia University.

Brown Bag Lunch Lectures

Join us for informal lectures on modern and contemporary art. You may bring your own lunch.

April 3 & 6*

12:30-1:15 P.M.

Education Classroom B

Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking

Fereshteh Daftari

*On April 6, sign language interpretation is provided. FM headsets and neck loops for sound amplification are available for all lectures.

Tickets are available at the Information Desk in the Main Lobby of the Museum, and at the Film and Media Desk. Tickets are also available online at www.moma.org/thinkmodern.

MoMAudio: Special Exhibitions

Hear contemporary artists including Jananne Al-Ani, Shirazeh Houshiary, Shirin Neshat, Walid Raad, Raqib Shaw, and Shahzia Sikander speak about aesthetics, identity, and spirituality in relation to their works in the exhibition.

MoMAudio is offered free of charge, courtesy of Bloomberg. MoMAudio is also available for download at www.moma.org/audio.

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