

HAMRA ABBAS



Misprint Star, 2020

Archival pigment print

243.8 x 243.8 cm

Courtesy of COMO Museum
of Art, Lahore

Photograph by Amna Zuberi

FOREWORD

**HAMRA ABBAS:
WORLDS
MADE FROM
FRAGMENTS**

Hammad Nasar



Garden, 2021

Marble, lapis lazuli, granite,
serpentine, pink calcite,
jasper

975 x 914 cm

© Hamra Abbas 2021

Commissioned by Expo 2020
Dubai

Expo 2020 Dubai Collection

Photograph by
Roman Mensing and Thorsten
Arendt

For more than twenty years Hamra Abbas has been constructing imaginary worlds from which to pose questions to the one we share. The questions she wrestles with are ones that niggle – like pebbles in a shoe. Her exploratory approach towards them, however, is constantly changing across material, technical and affective registers.

Let us consider three recent works.

Garden (2021), commissioned for Dubai Expo 2020, is a monumental floor sculpture built using traditional marble and stone inlay techniques. Its details of foliage from painted landscapes in Indo-Persian miniature paintings and architectural embellishments found in the historical buildings of her native Lahore have literally been assembled from fragments of nature. A permanent installation in a public square, the work is completed by people walking upon it; inhabiting it.

Every Color (2020) is a series of tiny portraits of members of the transgender community in Lahore painted on silk using a combination of miniature and Gongbi techniques. The intimate portrayal, the tiny scale and the translucent material embody the vulnerability of this long-established community, who were part of the everyday life of the Lahore I recall from my childhood, but who now seem increasingly on society's fringes.

Kaaba Picture as a Misprint (2014) is a series of print and lightbox works that show the recognizably iconic black form of the Ka'ba alongside a variety of visually manipulated misalignments of the same form in cyan, yellow and magenta. When perfectly aligned, the three colors combine to form black. The conceit of the 'printer's error' pries open the possibility for a diversity of positions and interpretations, and the space for human fallibility, in the search for truth.

Hamra Abbas majored in sculpture at Lahore's National College of Arts with a minor in miniature painting, before receiving her Meisterschueler degree from Universität der Künste in Berlin. But as the three examples above suggest, these qualifications and institutional pathways are inadequate descriptors for a tentacular practice that overflows any banks that try to contain it. Her commitment to making is one of the few common threads that runs across her work. Another is her enchantment with, and belief in, the transformative potential of everyday objects and images. She has made work inspired by the souvenirs bought as gifts from a family pilgrimage to Mecca; the mythical winged horse painted on trucks as a good luck charm; the figure of the baby boy on the packaging for Woodward's Gripe Water; and the chevrons used to depict waterfalls on mosque minarets.

The art historian Anna Sloan saw the optimistic possibilities of Abbas's practice in the artist's engagement with what the sociologist C. Wright Mills called the 'sociological imagination'; a yearning to connect us as individuals to the world around us through "the curious objects we share":

The promise within Abbas's work is in its potential to draw together and contain disparate truths that are the hallmark of a fractured universe.¹

To this conceptual pillar of the 'sociological imagination', I would suggest adding another – that of Professor Stuart Hall's formulation of a 'political imaginary'² – to better account for her abiding interest in the axes along which power continues to function socially, while maintaining a critical dialogue with the past. A third (and more unusual for contemporary art) pillar of Abbas's practice is her open engagement with questions of religious faith – as spiritual belief and everyday ritual.

1. Anna Sloan, "Object Lessons" in *Hamra Abbas: Object Lessons* eds. Anita Dawood & Sharmine Pereira, (London: Green Cardamom, 2009), 16.

2. Stuart Hall, "Jeremy Deller: Joy in People, 2012" in *Fifty Year of Great Art Writing*, (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2018), 440.

This publication, *Every Color is a Shade of Black*, provides a kaleidoscopic guide to Abbas's expansive and varied practice. It offers multiple, fragmentary views through a polyphony of voices belonging to writers, curators and scholars who have followed Abbas's work from disparate vantage points across different times.

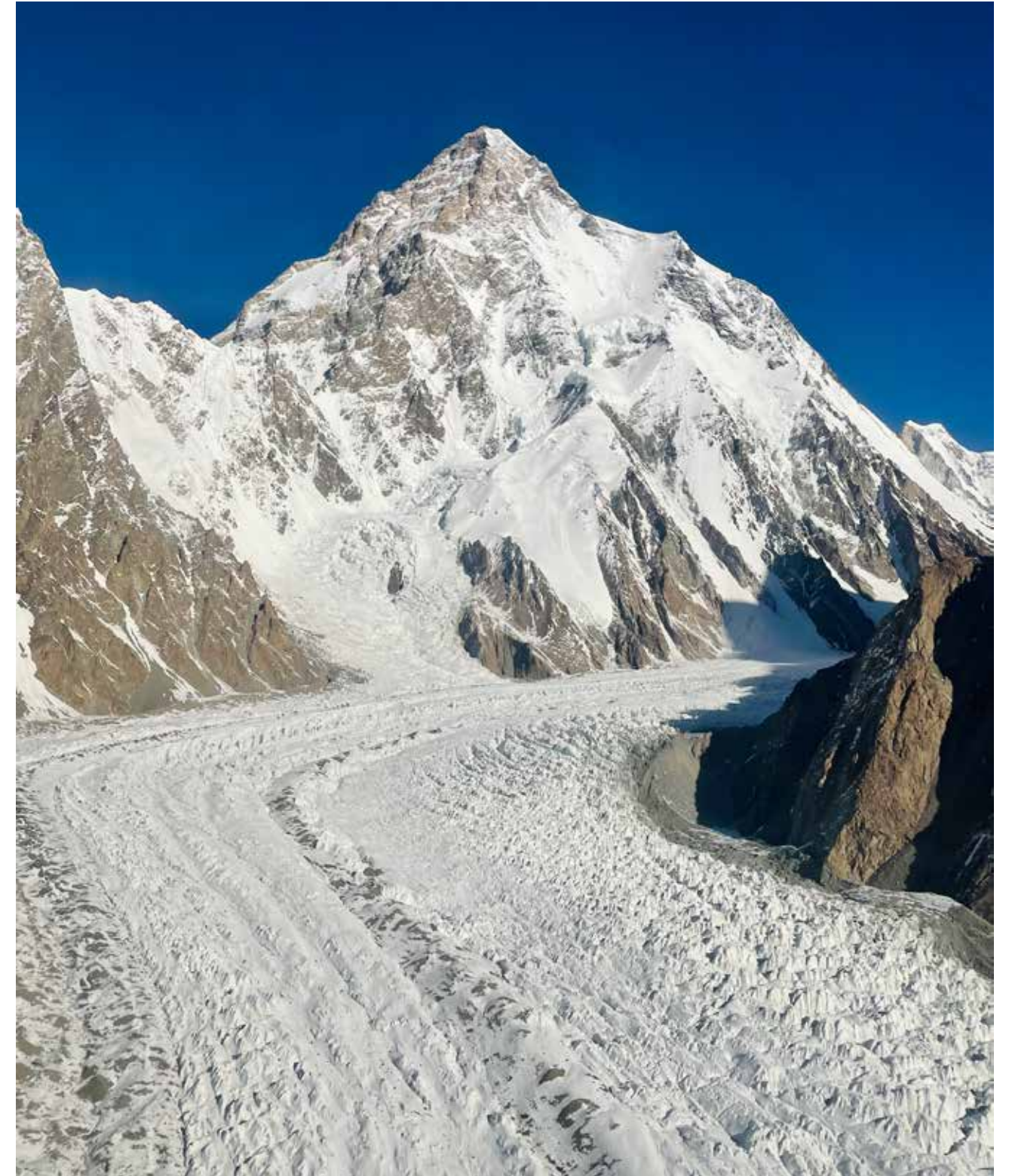
Hamra Abbas's art, however, resists a formulaic 'how to' approach, or a convenient division by time, geography or medium. In approaching this book, and Abbas's work in general, I would suggest borrowing from the tenth century polymath, Al-Biruni's powerful concept of the 'egocentric map' that is still used for aeronautical navigation. On an egocentric map, one's location becomes the center, and the rest of the world is viewed and measured from it. I would encourage us to dip into Abbas's practice through different 'centers' every time we open its pages.

Through portraits, for instance, we can travel along an axis that may start at the culture collecting practices of colonial conquests (*The Making of English Portraits*, 2006) and move on to the post-9/11 fetishization of the madrassah in certain Western imaginations (*God Grows on Trees*, 2008) before alighting at the changing realities of living with difference (*Every Color*, 2020) – all through closely observed and exquisitely rendered portraits of people who Abbas came across in London, Lahore and northern Pakistan.

On city life, we could start in Islamabad, witnessing burka-clad women yielding sticks as weapons and resisting government troops in their storming of the Red Mosque seminary (*Woman in Black*, 2011), before moving on to picture postcard images of an Istanbul without its minarets (*Cityscapes 1*, 2010) and finish in the company of ordinary citizens in a walk through London's Hyde Park,

shortly after the re-election of Tony Blair's Labour government made them complicit in the invasion of Iraq (*Battle Scenes*, 2006).

This book is a portal into Hamra Abbas's many worlds. Prepare for a full-body experience.



A View of K2, northern Pakistan

Photograph by Hamra Abbas

TWELVE POINTS ON HAMRA ABBAS

Mohsin Hamid



Work in progress, 2020
Photograph by Hamra Abbas

1

When Hamra Abbas speaks it is as though she is almost bursting, as though each word she says triggers two more she needs to say, and, listening to her, this seems to me appropriate, for she returns again and again to the idea that she seeks not to close but to open, not to define but to make possible, not to complete but to journey, not to perfect but to puncture.

2

I am often reminded by her work of the Sufi notion of transcendence, of gazing out upon the infinite and seeing reflections of oneself, or of gazing into oneself and seeing reflections of the infinite, but, perhaps more surprisingly (at least to me), I am reminded also of Douglas Adams, who writes that the secret to flying is throwing yourself at the ground and missing.

3

She opened black up for me, showing me that black can be made out of three colors, and that from those three colors can be made every color, and so black is not no color but every color, or rather black is both no color and every color, and these seemingly contradictory words are not a misprint, though her work, of course, is (and, of course, isn't).

4

If we relax the constraint on black, we see three colors skewed, if we relax the constraint on a cube, we see two squares floating, one above the other, and if we skew the square, we arrive, like astronauts of vision,

through the black, through the color, upon a distant star, a twelve-pointed star, Hamra's star.

5

The wormholes of Hamra's work often seem to function upon me like this: changing my perspective while I am stationary, changing my sense of stationary until I am perspective.

6

Inlay, marble: for me these connote funerals, the gravestones not of the immediately deceased, but of those lying beside them who have been gone longer, those for whom enough time has passed for such laborious heaviness to have been enacted, and so Hamra's inlay and marble, her waterfalls and fruits, speak, in a language I associate with stories of death, of images I associate with stories of paradise, like gravestones that promise instead of commemorate, like birthstones, if there were such a thing, weighty lightnesses.

7

She has spoken to me of the pleasures of marble: marble is heaviness, and heaviness is important, it grounds us, reminds us of the reality of gravity, the reality of place, or at least of the possibility of gravity, the possibility of place, for Hamra herself is often between places, and when she shows me her work it is often on the screen of a computer or a phone, where the work is data, weighing nothing at all, tugged forth from the cloud, a placeless place of servers I know must exist yet can neither locate nor touch.

8

She paints very little but she loves to paint, and her silk paintings are both very little and loved by her, and they appear to come into existence out of nothingness, on a surface so sheer it is only partially a barrier to light, accreted layer upon layer, as though a painting has been painted on a painting, like a river flooding, year after year, as it winds through a landscape composed entirely of air, until it has deposited enough soil for plants to grow, enacting a scene both normal and impossible, all at once.

9

In her silk paintings she can create in isolation, and she says there is pleasure in this, and I understand, being a writer, that this is a different pleasure than the pleasure of creating in collaboration with others, and certainly the heaviness in her silk paintings is different than, say, the heaviness in her marble inlays, but there is heaviness in both, for on silk even paint is heavy, tugging insistently, a minute heaviness made massive by the delicacy of the structure tasked to bear it.

10

Errors, mistakes, misprints: these are terms that crop up in Hamra's speech, in her work, and I come to understand that they do not mean what I normally think of them as meaning, but rather that they are a fertility, a potency, much as nature's seemingly chance transcription errors on strands of DNA result in what we have come to call evolution.

11

Mistakes are universal, I feel after speaking with her, and so to imagine that anything is other than a mistake is to be doubly mistaken, to have taken a mistake and skewed it with another.

12

Hamra's writing, which is to say the writing that appears in her works, takes different forms, running along the floor in marble, or forming an intricate paper lattice, but regardless of the form it takes I recognize it too must be a version of error, mistake, misprint – as must be anything written about it, as must be these words, my writing and your reading of them, here and now, there and then, mistaken, deliberate, but mistaken, one only hopes openingly so.

THE SACRED AND THE EVERYDAY: THE MATERIALITY OF ISLAM

Karen Greenwalt



Read, 2007

Sound, wood, jute

61 x 335 cm (diameter)

Courtesy of Royal Ontario
Museum, Toronto

A maze-like structure is suspended from the ceiling, the sounds of children reciting the Qur'an break the silence of the gallery space. As viewers navigate the structure, they are confronted with the sounds of madrassas; the cacophony of voices disrupting any notion of order and rigidity that one might associate with these spaces of religious education. In a series of prints, the form of the Ka'ba is reduced to its most basic, but it is repeated so often that the structure and meaning of the most sacred site in Islam is interrogated in manifold ways. Finally, the Islamic garden is explored through marble inlay—a technique closely associated with the Mughal Empire. The images engage with not only the material history of Pakistan, but also histories of art and imperialism. In all these works, Hamra Abbas interrogates the structures and materiality of Islamic art and culture, questioning and disrupting how they are historicized, visualized, valued, and understood. The traditional and sacred forms Abbas references enable her to examine how the Islamic is framed in contemporary discourse—broadly speaking, as a construction of identity, an art historical classification, a religious category, and a political tool. Her practice is—put simply—one of reinvigoration and reinvention.

In *Read* (2007), a minimalist, wooden, maze-like structure is suspended from the ceiling at roughly eye level (fig. 5). Here, Abbas evokes a history of minimalism with her sculpture—its size and repeating geometric forms make you immediately aware of your body and its relationship to the work and surrounding space. As viewers walk through the sculpture, they hear children reciting the Qur'an as they memorize its verses. Played through speakers concealed within the structure, the sounds underscore the importance of rote memorization to the educational structure of madrassas. But while rote emphasizes the standardization of religious content, the discordant voices disrupt any notion of order.

Abbas spent months visiting madrassas across Pakistan to confront stereotypes perpetuated not only in the Western media, but throughout the country as well. What emerged was an engagement with these sites that, for many viewers, will be their only encounter with them.

The work is partly in response to the fallout after the September 11 attack on the United States and the so-called 'War on Terror.' After which, countries around the world had to define their relationship to the US, as voiced by then-President George W. Bush, "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists."¹ Madrassas became a particular scapegoat in the wave of Islamophobia that emerged after 9/11. In 2003, for example, then US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked in a leaked memorandum: "Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?"² The following year, Secretary of State Colin Powell would describe madrassas as "breeding grounds for 'fundamentalists and terrorists.'"³ Similarly, after the 7/7 London Tube attack, then-Prime Minister Tony Blair stated in a speech, the roots of Islamic extremism are "not superficial, but deep," and found "in the madrassas of Pakistan" and other such locales across the Islamic world.⁴ These positions have contributed to a widespread belief throughout the West that madrassas are nothing more than places of uniformity that recruit and train would-be terrorists. Abbas has in fact compared madrassas to their colonial counterpart, the harem, saying: "As an artist, I see the world's current fascination with the madrassah as similar to the Orientalist painters' fascination with the harem in the 19th and early 20th

1. "CNN.com - Transcript of President Bush's Address - September 21, 2001," accessed January 16, 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/>.

2. msnbc.com, "Rumsfeld's Memo on Iraq, Afghanistan," msnbc.com, December 5, 2003, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/3225926/ns/us_news-security/t/rumsfelds-memo-iraq-afghanistan/.

3. Peter Bergen and Swati Pandey, "The Madrassa Myth," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2005, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/14/opinion/the-madrassa-myth.html>.

4. Tony Blair, "Full Text: Blair Speech on Terror," BBC, July 16, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4689363.stm.

century, which is needless to say, quite reduced and sensationalized. And my determination to work in this manner was a response to this sensationalism.”⁵ Abbas thus underscores how the practice of othering has continued into the global, neo-imperial world. In reality, madrassas—at their most fundamental—are places of religious education that are particularly appealing because of the free housing, meals, and education they provide. While madrassas are typically made up of the children of devout villagers, in truth only a small percentage of Pakistani children are enrolled in madrassas.⁶ In spite of what the global media might have us believe, the majority of children in Pakistan are not educated in madrassas, and even the most conservative madrassas are not producing the technically literate individuals capable of an attack like September 11. The reality, in other words, is far from the global narrative.

In *Read*, as viewers navigate through the labyrinth-like structure, they are, in a sense, immersed in a space where outsiders are typically not allowed. Abbas facilitates an experience of Pakistan’s madrassas that avoids a sensationalized point of view. Viewers are asked to reconcile politically motivated views of madrassas as sites of terrorist education juxtaposed with the emotions of hearing many children’s voices—a sound that is hardly threatening. Moreover, as viewers enter and walk through the space, they can no longer see outside of the structure, and those outside cannot see the faces of those within. This experience echoes the reality that madrassas cannot be experienced by an outsider—for non-Westerners and many in the Islamic world who are not educated in madrassas, the sounds, sites, and experiences inside can only be imagined. Abbas’s creation of a structure that viewers enter and hear the sounds of madrassa education provides an encounter with these institutions, which is otherwise only viewed from the outside, from a distance.

5. Sharmini Pereira, “In Conversation: Hamra Abbas and Sharmini Pereira,” in *Object Lessons*, ed. Anita Dawood and Sharmini Pereira (London: Green Cardamom, 2009), 62.

6. In her 2018 book, Madiha Afzal details that in truth just seven percent of Pakistani villages even have madrassas, and only four percent of the population live in a village where madrassas are the only educational opportunity. In places where other educational opportunities do exist, less than one percent of enrolled children attend a madrassa. A majority of Pakistanis do not, in fact, educate their children in madrassas. While there is evidence showing that the curricula of many madrassas foster extremist attitudes with anti-Western, anti-India, and anti-minority sentiments, in truth there is little a correlation between attitudes and actions, or perhaps between attitude and ability to organize large-scale terror attacks. See Madiha Afzal, *Pakistan Under Siege: Extremism, Society, and the State* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2018). See also Peter L. Bergen and Swati Pandey, “The Madrassa Scapegoat,” *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2006): 117–125.

The sculpture evokes a labyrinth that has been reduced in scale. A labyrinth—a maze-like structure that one must navigate—has its roots in Greek mythology. Daedalus created the labyrinth for King Minos to hold the Minotaur, a terrifying monster that indiscriminately murdered people. Abbas uses this form in her evocation of the madrassa—a similarly confusing space to her viewers. Labyrinths are a contradiction in terms—they are dynamic from the inside, but static if seen from the outside; they represent both order and disorder; they might be inextricable or impenetrable. Labyrinths are, in the words of Penelope Reed Doob, “intrinsically unstable: change your perspective and the labyrinth seems to change.”⁷ Abbas has created a similarly unstable experience in which she invites viewers to change their perspective on madrassas and Islam more broadly. Mazes come in two forms: multicursal and unicursal. Multicursal mazes are confusing and meant to frustrate, they have many choices that lead to nowhere. The labyrinth that Abbas has created is a unicursal maze in miniature—a path that twists and turns but has no dead ends. This type of maze dates to prehistory but is also common in medieval churches across Europe.⁸ Abbas does not seek to frustrate, but rather encourages her viewers to go on this symbolic pilgrimage in order to confront a new truth by engaging with the most fearsome would-be monster in the sensationalized media of the global north: the Islamic terrorist.

While madrassas are not what they have been portrayed to be in popular media, some are nevertheless tied to extremism, particularly to attacks on the Pakistani state.⁹ The suspicion that clouds madrassas is not, in other words, limited to the West. In fact, it is not only Westerners who are uninformed about madrassas, but many Muslims as well—there is a cultural, class-based awareness of what they are and the type of education they provide.¹⁰ It is therefore worth considering the class

7. Penelope Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth: From Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 1.

8. *Ibid.*, 48–51, 117–132.

9. Madiha Afzal, *Pakistan Under Siege: Extremism, Society, and the State* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 131.

10. Ebrahim Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 11.

distinctions between an art-going audience and those who rely on madrassa education. There is, of course, no way of knowing which madrassa these children attend, nor are we provided any details about sectarian difference among the children we hear.¹¹ In so doing, Abbas urges her viewers to reflect on the reality of these spaces and wonder what will happen to these children after their religious education. Will they emerge having absorbed the compassionate lessons of Islam, or will the extreme attitudes taught in some madrassa textbooks prevail?¹² Put another way, viewers might wonder how—and by whom—Pakistan’s future is being shaped.

The result is an intimate encounter with these sites of religious education that is simultaneously a response to skewed understandings of Islam in the West, as well as to the cultural, class-based awareness of madrassas in Pakistan. Abbas’s work is a rejoinder to the ways that Islam has been claimed and positioned by a variety of forces, from sensationalist portrayals in the global media, to reactionary politicians, and Islamic fundamentalists. Through an exploration of the materiality of Islam, she interrogates the ways Islam is represented, challenges art historical narratives and categories, and opens a space for discussions about globalization.

Madrassas exist across the world, different in each of its manifestations. Yet in the global media, despite their variation, they are reduced to stereotype: always the same picture of uniformity. In the series *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint* (2014) Abbas explores the opposite: a structure that is absolutely unique in the world yet reproduced infinitely (fig. 6). And, while madrassas are viewed by many as mysterious and unknown, the Ka’ba is among the most visible and recognizable structures in the world. The work here is perhaps less about how the Islamic is framed socio-politically and engages more with our mind’s ability to frame iconic images even when they are miscolored, blurred, or otherwise distorted.

11. *In God Grows on Trees* (2008), Abbas further explored madrassas by depicting the likeness of 99 children from madrassas across Pakistan. Painted with meticulous detail using the Persian miniature technique, each child is depicted with such careful detail that she forces viewers to engage with their individuality. Abbas also resists markers of difference in the portraits, depicting only the children’s faces, removing their caps and scarves, only a shadow of these signifiers of their Islamic identity remains. In *God Grows on Trees* and *Read*, Abbas thus allows viewers an intimate engagement with both the sights and sounds of madrassas. To read more on *God Grows on Trees* and Abbas’s interrogation of the miniature, see Karen Greenwalt, “Translating Mughal History: Hamra Abbas and the Contemporary Miniature,” in *Deconstructing the Myths of Islamic Art* (London: Routledge, 2022), 163–175.

12. Afzal, *Pakistan Under Siege*, 134.

Although the symbolic heart of the Islamic world, the Ka’ba has a long history that predates its role as a sacred site in Islam. When the prophet Muhammad and his followers reentered Mecca in the year 630 CE, one of his first actions was to purge the Ka’ba of all its idols—before this, it was a major site of pilgrimage for the polytheistic religious traditions of the Arabian Peninsula, and it contained numerous idols of pagan gods. An almost perfect cube, the Ka’ba is believed to have been built by Abraham and his son, Ishmael. One of the most important sites in Islam, it is the focus of pilgrimage, or Hajj, which is one of the five pillars of Islam. Annually, in the last month of the Islamic calendar, millions of Muslims from around the world make the pilgrimage to Mecca (in contemporary Saudi Arabia). From the eighth through the thirteenth in the month of Dhu-al-Hijja, these pilgrims complete several rites that follow in the footsteps of Muhammad and Abraham and connect them to the religion’s earliest days. Among the rites that make up Hajj is the Tawaf, or the counterclockwise circumambulation of the Ka’ba seven times.¹³

In *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint*, Abbas plays with the signification of this iconic structure. Throughout the series of prints, she has reduced the structure to its most basic—two stacked rectangular forms. In so doing, she explores how much a sign can be reduced and still convey meaning—in particular, one of the most recognizable images in Islam. Abbas continues to engage with important questions about perception, questions around how we see and understand. But unlike her engagement with madrassas—sites that are at best mysterious to much of the global population—here, she deconstructs an iconic image that is part of a collective memory for many. The ability to engage with these images is, in some respects, dependent on one’s cultural knowledge. In a very real way then, Abbas privileges a viewer rarely afforded that status in art historical

13. For a more expansive conversation on Hajj, see Luitgard Mols and Marjo Buitelaar, eds., *Hajj: Global Interactions through Pilgrimage* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2015).



Kaaba Picture as a Misprint,
2014

Archival pigment prints

137 x 110 cm each

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi,
Dubai

discourse and global narratives.

As a misprint, the images reflect a print in which the plates were not in the correct position. A misprint speaks to unintended consequences, a result that falls outside the margin of error. But the title—*Kaaba Picture as a Misprint*—draws attention to the intentionality of this misprint. These misprints were not unintended consequences, instead Abbas highlights her purposeful mistake. In this way, she conjures the history of Islamic art in which intentional flaws are key. The deliberate imperfection in Islamic art's history—on mosaics and carpets, for example—is meant to represent the idea that nothing is perfect except God. We might therefore see a tension begin to unfold between the idea of the limit of acceptable errors in screen printing and required or intentional errors in Islamic art. Moreover, in calling the work a misprint, she suggests ideas of inaccuracy, of falsehoods. For the artist, this connects the work to larger questions about the pursuit of truth in religion, and the myriad ways that truth can be understood or interpreted.¹⁴

The work is printed in cyan, magenta, and yellow; and where they overlap different colors emerge—green, orange, shades of blue, black. The image varies depending on which colors overlap. Despite this, it still retains its essence and remains, for the most part, immediately recognizable. Our mind works to make sense of the images and fill in the detail when there is overlapping and blurring. The Ka'ba is annually covered with a cloth called the Kiswa. Created by craftsman in Saudi Arabia, the cloth is raw silk that is died black and decorated with Qur'anic verses. In this way, when all the colors overlap to create black, it suggests the 'true' color of the Ka'ba. But while the fabric is uniformly black, art historian Oleg Grabar notes that it is believed to have been different colors in its earlier days.¹⁵ Abbas's

14. "Kaaba Picture as a Misprint" 26 April - 27 May 2014," Lawrie Shabibi, accessed November 16, 2022, <https://www.lawrieshabibi.com/exhibitions/36-kaaba-picture-as-a-misprint-hamra-abbas/overview/>.

15. Oleg Grabar, "Observations on Pilgrimage and Art in the Islamic World," in *Pilgrimage and Faith: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Virginia C. Raguin, Dina Bangdel, and F. E. Peters (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2010), 293.

overlapping and intersecting colors might therefore speak to this larger history, and draw our attention to the artist's queries into history, truth, and our relationship to these ideas.

Kaaba Picture as a Misprint further speaks to a history of souvenirs, or the objects collected to mark the pilgrimage. Souvenirs prompt memory: they provide some kind of link to the past, and souvenirs from Hajj bear witness to completion of one of the five pillars. They act as a sort of testimonial or record of completion and such objects can be found within homes across Pakistan, in memory of this most sacred ritual.¹⁶ Her work thus simultaneously evokes the sacred, and among the most holy sites in Islam, while also drawing our attention to its objecthood and the proliferation of such commodities in the global market. Many such souvenirs are readily available on sites like Amazon or Etsy, and in her own Duchampian gesture, Abbas continues her exploration of colors, souvenirs, and memory in the work *One Rug Any Color*. These rugs further draw our attention to the pictorial conventions of the Ka'ba that ensure its immediate recognizability despite variations in color. In this work, the color in each representation of the Ka'ba is the color of the prayer rug. As the artist describes the series, the rugs were purchased on Amazon from a vendor with the username "One Rug Any Color." The rugs were made in Egypt, and Abbas purchased them while she was living in Boston; from there, they were shipped to London, and then Dubai to ultimately realize the work.¹⁷ In this way, we can perhaps see how even the most sacred sites cannot avoid commodification and globalization.

Her investigation of the Ka'ba also reduces the image to art's most basic: a conversation between color and form. Throughout the series, Abbas is clearly evoking a history of modernism and its attendant debates.

16. Ibid.

17. "Hamra Abbas, *One Rug, Any Color*, 2016," Lawrie Shabibi, accessed November 16, 2022, <https://www.lawrieshabibi.com/artists/59-hamra-abbas/works/2448-hamra-abbas-one-rug-any-color-2016/>.



One Rug, Any Color, 2016

Travel prayer rugs

179 x 330 cm

Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi
Art Collection

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi,
Dubai

A number of modern artists spring to mind when looking at the series, in particular, Josef Albers and Ad Reinhardt. *Homage to the Square*—Albers’s series of paintings, prints, drawings, and more—is an investigation in color and form. As you view these works, you start to consider the relationship between the forms, and how that relationship changes in different versions. Like Abbas’s series, key to Albers’s works is not just the form of the square, but also how the colors relate to each other. In much the same way, Abbas’s structures—all the same in shape and size—urge us to consider the changing relationship of the forms and how the colors relate to each other throughout. Abbas thus reminds us that meaning is determined by its place in a system of structures. In other words, meaning does not exist in the object or idea itself, but through its relationship to other ideas, objects, and histories: this is as true for the Ka’ba as it is narratives of Islamic art history and modernism.

The series is also reminiscent of Ad Reinhardt’s exploration of the color black. With Reinhardt, as you look at the seemingly all black canvas, a grid of different shades of black begins to emerge. The careful viewer who takes the time to sit with Reinhardt’s paintings might start to question what is on the canvas, to question if they are in fact seeing several shades of black. This engagement with perception, site, and reality, points us to Abbas’s exploration of truth in these works. But Reinhardt describes the square as “neutral,” as trying to achieve a “pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relation-less, disinterested painting—an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness) ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but art.”¹⁸ Abbas’s work does the opposite, as if to remind us that *no thing* is in fact neutral, not a square, not art, not religion, and certainly not our relationship to any of these objects and histories.

18. David Zwirner. “Ad Reinhardt Press Release,” 2013. <https://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/2013/ad-reinhardt/press-release>.

Abbas’s most recent works, *Gardens of Paradise*, are an engagement with the structures and materiality of Pakistan, and the ways that history is marked through Islam, the Mughals, and the colonial encounter. After returning to Lahore following nearly a decade spent in Boston, Abbas describes a kind of rediscovery of these motifs so ubiquitous in Mughal architecture.¹⁹ In her marble inlay works, Abbas thus speaks to the materiality of Pakistan specifically, and Islamic culture and identity more broadly. In works like *Trees: Gardens of Paradise* and *Fruits: Gardens of Paradise 3* (both 2020), Abbas engages with the role and importance of the garden in Islamic architectural spaces.

In the Qur’an, paradise is imagined as a garden full of fruit, trees, flowers, plants, and water. This imagery of paradise is reflected in Islamic architecture in two principal ways: first, the profusion of actual gardens. Gardens are a critical component in Islamic architecture broadly speaking, but particularly in Mughal architecture. Persianate Chahar Bagh—or quadrilateral gardens evoking the four gardens of paradise—are found throughout West and South Asian countries. Although similar in style, the Mughals would transform these gardens into unique spaces that achieved their zenith at the Taj Mahal. While the garden is an important part of Islamic architectural history broadly, it exists as a critical component to Mughal history. Its presence is extensive across the Indian subcontinent. Second, imagery of paradise is reflected through the abundance of garden motifs in Mughal architectural facades, which serve as a reflection of the physical garden spaces. Indeed, by the 17th century, floral and plant decoration had largely replaced geometric patterns.²⁰ This imagery is not purely aesthetic, but also reflects a desire to conjure the afterlife, to place the viewer in those gardens of paradise. Abbas’s marble inlay work is a direct evocation of this Mughal history.

19. Olivia Burt, “Every Color At COMO: Hamra Abbas,” FRONTRUNNER (blog), May 13, 2020, <https://frontrunnergazine.com/posts/every-color-at-como-hamra-abbas/>.

20. Ebba Koch, *The Complete Taj Mahal* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), 217.



Tree: Gardens of Paradise, 2020

Marble, lapis lazuli

213.3 x 152.4 cm

Courtesy of COMO Museum of Art, Lahore

Photograph by Asif Khan



Fruit: Gardens of Paradise 1 & 2, 2020

Marble

Variable dimensions

Flower, 2022

Marble, lapis lazuli, serpentine

106.6 x 76.2 cm

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai

Photograph by Ismail Noor



But the history Abbas recalls is more global than it might initially appear. The Mughals likely learned marble inlay techniques—or *pietra dura*—from European artists employed at court, as well as from Italian works that were gifted to the emperor. In time, the skill of the Mughal artists surpassed their European counterparts. Moreover, books describing herbs and their culinary and medicinal properties were also brought from Europe to the Mughal courts. These books inspired many of the floral designs at Mughal sites across the Indian subcontinent.²¹ Art historian Virginia Whiles has argued that a “positive blueprint for globalization exists in the Mughal period, which was a time of intense intercultural exchange and spiritual eclecticism.”²² Far from having a static cultural tradition, as art historical discourse might otherwise have us believe, the Mughals embraced myriad global influences, transforming them into their own. This syncretism of the Mughals is reflected in Abbas’s own borrowing of European forms and blending of historical moments. In her *Flowers* series, Abbas recalls Van Gogh’s flower paintings, in particular his exploration of sunflowers and irises. So not only do these works evoke the long history of exchange, but also draw our attention to the illusory borders of art historical categories.

The discipline of art history emerged alongside colonialism and, as such, remains haunted by the legacy of colonial rhetoric. Islamic art is a bounded, but insufficient category in art history. Perhaps more than any other, it highlights the failures of disciplinary thinking. Abbas confronts art historical framings of the Islamic, but she does so while simultaneously interrogating key moments in discourses of Western modernism. Her work engages with a number of art historical moments to challenge narratives; she draws attention to the discipline’s history of epistemic violence, its omissions, and orientalist legacies. Under the Mughals, the visual arts were a means of circulating imperial ideology. In

21. *Ibid.*, 91–92.

22: Virginia Whiles, *Art and Polemic in Pakistan: Cultural Politics and Tradition in Contemporary Miniature Painting* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 20.

much the same way, art historical discourses circulate and perpetuate colonial constructs. Abbas’s employment of Mughal artforms interrogates one way the arts have been mobilized for centuries.

To create these intricate mosaic works, the stones are cut into thin pieces of differing sizes and shapes, and then fit together. The composition is secured into the opening with glue and finally polished, so the seams are no longer visible.²³ There is an element of surprise to each of these works: it is only after polishing that the finished artwork is revealed. In Abbas’s *Mountain 1* (2022), for example, the artist depicts the famous K2 Mountain in lapis lazuli. Because the final image is only revealed once it has been polished, working entirely in shades of lapis speaks not only to her talent, but also confidence in her craftsmanship. The mountain ranges in the north of Pakistan account for the largest share of the country’s tourism, and the K2 Mountain has been photographed innumerable times. The image of the snow-capped mountain surrounded by perfect blue skies reflects a contemporary paradise, a touristic gaze that furthers Abbas’s inquiry into motifs of paradise.²⁴

Beyond reflecting on ideas of paradise, Abbas writes “Mountains appear to be still to our gaze—and sometimes, under stormy conditions, look menacing—yet their stillness conceals tremendous flux or movement that is experienced in intimate proximity—mountains play an important role in sustaining and regulating the earth’s ecology.”²⁵ So the revelation of the work only after polishing might here be understood as an ecological metaphor: our actions are not immediately apparent, but only become so after the passage of time. This becomes especially poignant at this moment in time: heat waves and global warming have caused the rapid melting of glaciers on mountains. The impact has been severe in Pakistan, with flooding submerging farmland and cities,

23. Koch, *The Complete Taj Mahal*, 91.

24: Not to mention the fact that these touristic images of paradise sit in Kashmir, one of the most contested regions of Pakistan in the wake of colonialism.

25. Hamra Abbas (@hamra_abbas), “I naturally gravitate towards images of the northern landscape of Pakistan...” Instagram, October 1, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJKRLRIMqt9/>.



Mountain 1, 2022

Lapis lazuli

182.8 x 243.8 cm

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi,
Dubai

and affecting millions of people. Abbas thus cleaves marble inlay techniques from their historical past to infuse them with contemporary meaning: in *Mountain 1*, she begins conversations around questions of paradise, ecology, and globalism.

Abbas's reinvigoration of this Mughal artform speaks to the reality of globalization and contemporary geo-politics. Indeed, the history of lapis lazuli is connected to its extensive global influence: when ground into a powder, it creates the historically prized ultramarine, once reserved for the most important figures in Renaissance painting. While it can be found elsewhere, the ultramarine used throughout Western and Eastern art history all came from the mines of Afghanistan.²⁶ Because of its popularity in not only Western Renaissance painting, but Egyptian and East Asian art as well, this rock's movement around the globe speaks to a long history of global interconnection. Lapis lazuli still comes from mines in Afghanistan, and the stones today are smuggled across the Pakistan-Afghan border and sold in the Namak Mandi bazaar of Peshawar. To make her works, Abbas buys raw lapis lazuli stones, which are sectioned, cut, shaped and polished in her studio in Lahore.²⁷ This long history of lapis draws our attention to the fact that global exchange is not a modern condition. Abbas's contemporary use, however, addresses the reality that globalization in neoliberal discourse—the notion of a more connected world marked by uninhibited travel, open communication, and freedom of capital—is in truth reserved for a privileged few. For most, the world is marked by borders, as demonstrated by the movement of lapis. In this way, a subtle conversation emerges in these works about borders, movement, and nations in the globalized, contemporary world.

26. Victoria Finlay, *Color: A Natural History of the Palette* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 281–82.

27. Hamra Abbas (@hamra_abbas), "Someone asked me if I buy lapis in slabs. ..." Instagram, August 24, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChplmhHlbht/>.

In 2009, curator Anna Sloan wrote about Hamra Abbas's practice, saying that "as opposed to most artists today who maintain something akin to a formal and conceptual 'brand' identifiable as their own, Abbas devises a new language for each project she begins."²⁸ In the intervening decade, Abbas has solidified this reputation; with each new project, she develops a new language—from miniature painting, large-scale installation, sculpture, print-making, and more. But while she is perhaps devising a new language for each project, it seems clear that she is nevertheless striving to translate the same message. The traditional and sacred forms that Abbas references enable her to interrogate and disrupt how the Islamic, and its culture, are framed.

Resisting conventional art historical categories, Abbas's work exists in a productive space of liminality. As art historian James Elkins writes, a majority of art historians think in terms of Western art historical categories.²⁹ But Abbas manages to simultaneously exist within and explode those categories—creating works that evoke histories of marble inlay, monumental Islamic architecture, minimalist sculpture, institutional critique, and more. Claire Bishop acknowledges the restrictiveness of art historical categories, writing "the attempt to periodize contemporary art is dysfunctional, [and] unable to accommodate global diversity."³⁰ Abbas's own resistance of categorization speaks to her larger critique of Western frames of reference.

It is perhaps her syncretism that most clearly asserts Abbas as one of the foremost contemporary thinkers. In his essay, "What Is the Contemporary?" Giorgio Agamben writes that "Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism.*"

28. Anna J. Sloan, "Object Lessons," in *Hamra Abbas: Object Lessons*, ed. Anita Dawood and Sharmini Pereira (London: Green Cardamom, 2009), 8.

29. James Elkins, *Stories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 19.

30. Claire Bishop, ed., *Radical Museology: Or What's Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (London: Walther König, Köln, 2014), 18.

Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it.”³¹ Abbas is easily described as an artist who adheres to the contemporary moment through disjunction and anachronism. She explores a body of objects that exist in two concurrent realms: on the one hand, the architectural spaces she explores—madrassas, the Ka’ba, Islamic gardens, and Mughal architectural facades—hold immense meaning, they are some of the most sacred architectural spaces in Islam. On the other hand, these objects also mark the everyday, they define Islamic life in a number of ways. Moreover, they exist in the past, while simultaneously being part of and defining the contemporary, globalized world. Abbas thus conceives of a global contemporary art that places the many framings of the Islamic at the center, upending centuries of art historical narratives and facilitating a space for a truly global contemporary discourse.

31. Giorgio Agamben, “What Is the Contemporary?,” in *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 41. Emphasis in the original.

Lapis lazuli storage in artist’s studio

Photograph by Hamra Abbas



HAMRA ABBAS: PARADISE LOST / A PARADISE GAINED

Sara Raza



Every Color (detail), 2020

Gouache on silk

38.5 x 35 cm

Every Color (installation view), 2020

Gouache on silk

38.5 x 35 cm

Courtesy of Asia Society
Museum, New York

Every Color (details), 2020

Gouache on silk

38.5 x 35 cm



Where imperialism has touched, where neocolonialism continues, the force of flattening can be found. If one can render another body faceless and unrecognizable, if one can pin another as subhuman, it becomes easier for one group to establish a position of supremacy over another.¹

The boomeranging effects of the remnants of British and European imperialism and patriarchy in the Indian-subcontinent continue to linger in post-partition modern Pakistan more than seventy years on. Imperial fragments that are imbued with the values of the male colonial heterosexual inherited mindset still wield their desires and influences over the lives of women and femme and queer identifying groups, a process that has intertwined with conservative forms of local religious dogma.

Historically, this form of control was foundational to the Western “civilizing mission” as it relied on biblical definitions of the sacred and the profane, and part of an unfortunate condition that has continued to replay itself in the post-colonial realm by continuing to classify and sometimes re-classify bodies in accordance with limited and narrow definitions of gender and their perceived roles in modern and contemporary society. Bearing witness to these changing and divided social norms in Pakistan, Lahore based artist Hamra Abbas’s poignant multifaceted art documents and re-centers the peripheral at the core of her practice and she actively explores the marginalization of women and femme identifying citizens from a variety of conceptual angles. As such in this essay and the art and ideas that it refers to focus on Abbas’s interest in the *Khwajasaras*,² community of transgender and queer individuals who were historically employed as service workers and administrators in the Indian Subcontinent during the Mughal era, and were an active part of Lahore’s social fabric up until recent years.

1. Russell Legacy, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, Verso Books, London and New York, 2020, 21.

2. *Khwajasaras* derives from the Persian given term to describe male gender with an absence/ or non-functioning sexual organs.

The community has however steadily declined due to an uptick in dogmatic expressions of religion coupled with preexisting colonial and imperial era values. In her portrait series *Every Color* (2020) Abbas illuminates and ascribes value to the slowly eroding *Khwajasaras* community in light of their declining access to liberty and central urban public space and time. This powerful body of work serves as the basis of a philosophical discussion on Abbas’s anti-colonial and anti-imperial, socialist and feminist/femme concerns, which are imperative to understanding her creative and intellectual approach to art making which responds to urgent issues through a non-didactic and deliberate approach.

Over the course of the last decade Abbas’s art has sought to explore the complex matrix of social, economic, and political ideas inside Pakistan, which she poetically explores through the metaphor of the garden. The notion of the garden in Persian pre-Islamic culture represented four components: sky, earth, water and plants. In Islamic culture the garden is a manifestation of heaven on earth and can be thought of as a conceptual corridor between the two realms and held an important status in the Eastern imagination. During this period Mughal art and culture enmeshed with indigenous Indian tropes to create highly progressive forms of miniature painting, landscaping, literature and music which consisted of varied and complex combinations of history, culture and gender participation and being, that Abbas touches upon within her curious practice. For Abbas the garden represents a conceptual reading of paradise that is both gained and lost after the advent of colonialism and imperialism. Gardens were originally transplanted to the Indian-subcontinent from Persian and Turkic lands during the 16-18th centuries, when 16th century Mughal emperor Babur recreated landscape gardens that based upon the blueprint of Herat and Samarkand (modern day Afghanistan and Uzbekistan).

Gardens continued to be part of regional urban planning throughout the Mughal period as examples of Muslim monarchic rule carried out by Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan. This notion of 'paradise' was a fluid idea including various social groups including the *khwajasaras* whose inability to pose as a threat to society enabled them to move freely between genders and social classes with relative ease. Moving between private and public spaces they functioned as interlocutors exchanging information and informal education through the fluid forms of poetry, song and dance. The Mughal idea of 'paradise' eventually came under jeopardy and collapsed, as a direct result of British and European colonial interventions between 15-20th centuries which were executed in a bid to increase their own wealth and notion of empire. In particular, India was frequently referred to as the 'jewel in the crown' of the British empire given the subcontinent's vast resources that were to be extracted and mined. The imposition of Western superiority over local culture maintained a watchful eye over the *khwajasaras*, which it deemed them as a threat, this was largely due to their ability to shape-shift across class and gender and simultaneously translate classified information which posed as a hindrance to the colonizing mission.

The body is routinely made 'normative' - consistent and whole, the property of one person who has one gender, and one proper name, one self - by virtue of becoming anti theatrical. This schooling in making the body requires both a positive and negative other.³

To research *Every Color* (2020) Abbas employed a technique known as Gongbi painting, which Abbas learnt during an arts residency at the NTU Center for Contemporary Art in Singapore. Gongbi is an ancient Chinese style of figurate colorful painting that involves the use of very fine and detailed brush work in a realist style. Abbas used this technique as a departure to her training in Indo-Persian miniature painting to depict

the remaining *Khwajasaras* community from the streets of Lahore that she encountered. Incidentally, Gongbi painting was born out of the visual culture of the Chinese Han dynasty and draws an interesting parallel with the Mughal court. By focusing solely on facial portraits that are deliberately unattached from the body Abbas creates an airy floating tableau atop the canvas which renders the individuals "genderless" freeing them of the architectural context of the gendered body. On the canvas these portraits exist in a third space, and problematize the Orientalist constructs that have been manufactured by the colonial imagination.

Abbas initially trained as a sculptor taking courses in painting at Lahore's acclaimed National College of Arts, which is renowned for its rigorous curriculum and development of the Indo-Persian painterly tradition, and has remained inquisitive about the medium of painting. Her early exposure and education in figurative painting is essential to understanding her practice and its ability to question representational ideas and fantasies and reexamine them within the context of the theoretical study of Orientalism. Her use of subversive artistic methodologies have served to trouble the very definitions of Orientalism, a Western imaginary construct, which as popular intellectual, writer and post-colonial scholar Edward Said laid bare in his seminal text *Orientalism* (1978). In the context of the Indian-subcontinent Said's analysis functions as the means for the British to define and shape themselves as central arbiters around which everything else orbited and was 'measured'. Therefore, by extension Orientalism upheld the core values of racially constructed 'whiteness' which essentially functioned on the belief '[...] that white discourse implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject, not allowing her/him space or autonomy, permitting neither the recognition of similarities nor the acceptance of

3. Phelan Peggy, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, Routledge, London 1997, 81.

differences except as a means for knowing the white self.⁴ Abbas's centering of the *khwajasaras* questions the artificial nature of "whiteness" by interrogating and revealing its arbitrary nature and systematic use as a barometer to measure everything that is not 'white.' Interestingly, in physics white light is the color that contains the full color spectrum which is ironically echoed in the title of the project *Every Color*. By contrast, the color black is considered an amalgamation of all colors and reverts back to Abbas's earlier explorations in color theory in the print-based work *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint* (2014). This body of work evokes the spirit of the mistake that is inherent in Islamic art and craft to highlight that logic that resides in the illogical and only god is perfect. Furthermore, in this work she also examines the sacred black square through methods of distortion, deconstructing the image of the Kaaba into two layered rectangles which are printed in black ink and morph into experimental works that break down the syntax of black ink to create cyan, magenta and yellow rectangular shapes, which then return to a black color when they are placed atop of one another. The piece further extends itself as a complex analogy for questioning race and bias imbued within the rites of passage where ideas mix and interrupt cultures and traditions.

We will find life, joy, and longevity in breaking what needs to be broken. We will be persistent in our failure to perform in pursuit of a future that does want us, enduring in our refusal to protest the idea, the institution of "body" that alienates us.⁵

In *Every Color* Abbas probes the concept of the body within the frames of fraught political space and time. Her conceptually dense work reveals a complex cultural and historical map on otherness highlighting how differing and competing historical, political, religious, and social factions have impacted contemporary Pakistan.

4. Dyer Richard, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, Routledge, New York, 1997, 13.

5. Russell Legacy, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, Verso Books, London and New York, 2020, 152.

Kaaba Picture as a Misprint
5, 2014

Archival pigment print
137 x 110 cm



HAMRA ABBAS

Jonathan Bloom



Cityscapes, 2010

Archival pigment print

50 x 230 cm

Kadist Collection, Paris | San
Francisco

Courtesy of Pilot Gallery,
Istanbul

Twelve years ago (2012) an undergraduate student introduced me to the art of Hamra Abbas, who was then living in the Boston area. The student was writing on the art of two contemporary artists and their relationship to the traditional arts of Islam. Upon seeing Abbas's work, I was immediately struck by her uncanny ability to combine a contemporary twenty-first century artistic sensibility with a deep appreciation and understanding of the variety of materials, forms, and techniques associated with the visual arts produced in the lands of Islam over the past fourteen centuries, my field of professional expertise. My admiration for her work has only deepened over time.

At that time, I was revising *The Minaret*, a new edition of *Minaret: Symbol of Islam*, a book that I had written twenty years earlier. It told the story of how the minaret, a tall, slender tower attached to a mosque, became the quintessential symbol marking the presence of Islam. Much to my amazement and delight, I discovered that Abbas had produced *Cityscapes* (2010), a series of seemingly ordinary tourist photographs of the Istanbul skyline taken at dawn. Abbas's digital photos initially reminded me of the 16th century Danish artist Melchior Lorck's panoramic drawings and prints of the city after it had ceased to be capital of the Christian Byzantine empire and became Istanbul, capital city of the Ottoman empire. In that process, the Ottomans had transformed the city by building dozens of mosques, most of them with one or more slender pencil-shaped minarets that have given the city's skyline its distinctive silhouette for more than five hundred years. In her photos, however, Abbas had digitally removed all of the minarets from the skyline, effectively erasing its Islamic history and character.

Abbas allowed me to publish one of her photos as the final picture in my book, to illustrate my discussion

of the spate of anti-minaret (and anti-Muslim) protests that erupted in Switzerland, the UK, and the US in the early twenty-first century. The minarets, she wrote, "are silent spectators to the bustling market places around listening from the heights to the daily conversations of the multitudes scattered on the ground. The minarets of Istanbul are its memory organs that allow the city to recognize itself at each sunrise." Since then I have avidly followed Abbas's work, and it gives me the greatest pleasure to write this essay for the publication accompanying an exhibition of her recent work.

My next encounter with Abbas's work was in a 2013 group exhibition at the De Cordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts. She exhibited several prints inspired by popular imagery of the Ka'ba, the central shrine of Islam in Mecca, to which every Muslim should make a pilgrimage, if he or she is able. This cubic stone shrine, which Muslims believe Ibrahim/Abraham constructed as God's house, is normally enveloped in a gold-embroidered black cloth called the kiswa. In her series *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint* (2014) Abbas transformed several popular images of the holy structure typically sold to pilgrims as souvenirs, into art. She manipulated her fluorescent colors to produce works reminiscent of hippie-era psychedelic images of rock stars, thereby combining sacred imagery with international consumer and popular culture.

Her large-scale wall hanging made in 2013 for Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum was inspired by the design of the silk and gold embroidered textile that hangs over the Ka'ba's entrance. The textile design had been reproduced in molded plaster as a souvenir plaque, which Abbas had seen suspended slightly askew in her parents' house. She adapted the rectangular design, which is composed of various shaped panels filled with calligraphed verses from the Quran, into

both a large-scale image she had printed on lengths of cloth to hang on the Museum's exterior, as well as in an edition of smaller prints. While the design of the original plaque is carefully reproduced to make all the calligraphy perfectly legible, so is the slight angle at which she first saw the plaster plaque displayed, thereby inviting the viewer to contemplate the difference between an object of religious significance and its casual display.

In her series, the *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint*, she took a somewhat more intellectual and art historical approach, abstracting the image of the kiswa-covered Ka'ba into two rectangular blocks forming a square separated by a narrow white band. On the one hand, for the Muslim viewer the two rectangles immediately convey the essential shape of the Ka'ba seen from the side; yet on the other hand, for the museum-goer the shape recalls the German-born artist Josef Albers' famous series, *Homage to the Square*, begun in 1949 in which he explored the optical effects of interacting colors, by manipulating the hue, tone, and intensity of nested squares. Like Albers, Abbas created a series of variations on the same image, but where Albers varied the colors according to his theories about the interactions of colors, Abbas uses her image to explore the nature of modern color-printing technology. Color printers make black, the color of the kiswa, by combining the three subtractive primary ink colors of cyan (a turquoise-like blue), yellow, and magenta. When all three colors are printed exactly over each other, pure black results, but if the different colors of ink are not in perfect alignment ("registration"), three secondary colors (red, blue, and green) can be produced from where two colors overlap. In Abbas's series, she intentionally varies the registration of the three colors, thereby inviting the viewer to bring her abstracted images of the Ka'ba into focus. In a related series, *Misprint Star* (2020), Abbas replaced the abstract image of the Ka'ba with a triangle, a square,

Wall Hanging, 2013

Banner

1584.9 x 487.6 cm

Commissioned by Isabella
Stewart Gardner Museum,
Boston



and a hexagon, which she printed in rotated registration in cyan, yellow, and magenta, creating a central black polygon surrounded by small colored triangles.

Inspired by several everyday objects she had acquired in gift shops near the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Abbas returned to popular Islamic imagery. These were the kind of things pilgrims buy as souvenirs or gifts for their loved ones when they returned from the pilgrimage. One of her works was inspired by a figurine of *Buraq*, the human-headed winged horse-like steed that carried the Prophet Muhammad on the Miraj or mystical Night Journey from the Nearest to the Furthest Mosque, as mentioned in the Quran. Abbas transformed the figurine into a 2-meter-high shiny pink fiberglass sculpture on a rounded base reminiscent of a child's rocking horse. Another piece, entitled *Barakah Gifts* (2016), was commissioned by the US Department of State "Art in Embassies" program for the US Embassy in Islamabad. The inspiration came from the type of small metal flask that pilgrims use to bring home water from Mecca's Zamzam well. Abbas made a 3.5-meter-high replica of the flask in gold-plated fiberglass, decorated just like the original with arabesque designs. Like the American sculptor Claes Oldenburg, who made oversize versions of everyday objects to comment on contemporary society, Abbas transformed an ordinary pilgrim's souvenir to invite meditation on the role of material culture in religious contexts.

In 2009 Abbas was short-listed for the Jameel Prize, an international award for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic tradition that is awarded by the V&A Museum in London. Her submission, *Loss of a Magnificent Story*, was installed on the floor of the gallery. Consisting of strips of paper printed with the phrase, "Please do not step," which were woven into geometric patterns inspired by Islamic designs, the

Barakah Gifts (Water Bottle),
2016

Fiberglass

365 x 152.4 x 76.2 cm

Commissioned by Art in
Embassies: U.S. Department
of State

Courtesy of Angelino
Artworks, Pinerolo



I wanted to tell you my story in person, but I do not like the weather in your country. I am therefore sending it to you in this letter. Once there was a time when everyone was intertwined with my magnificent threads spun of fire and thunder, inlaid with a multitude of stories, abounding with love, beauty, romance, lust, betrayal, and power. I flew at terrifying speeds, traversing distances unimaginable. On one such journey, carrying 32,000 families, I had to make an emergency landing on water due to turbulent weather. According to the plan, I was divided into multiple parts, each part forming a separate raft. The families drifted in the ocean for uncounted years. Beset with melancholy and desire, they fed on secrets divulged by the deepest layers of the ocean. Returning to land the survivors began trading their secrets to buy time. Until one such day, there were no secrets anymore, and more time...



Please Do Not Step: Loss of a Magnificent Story, 2009

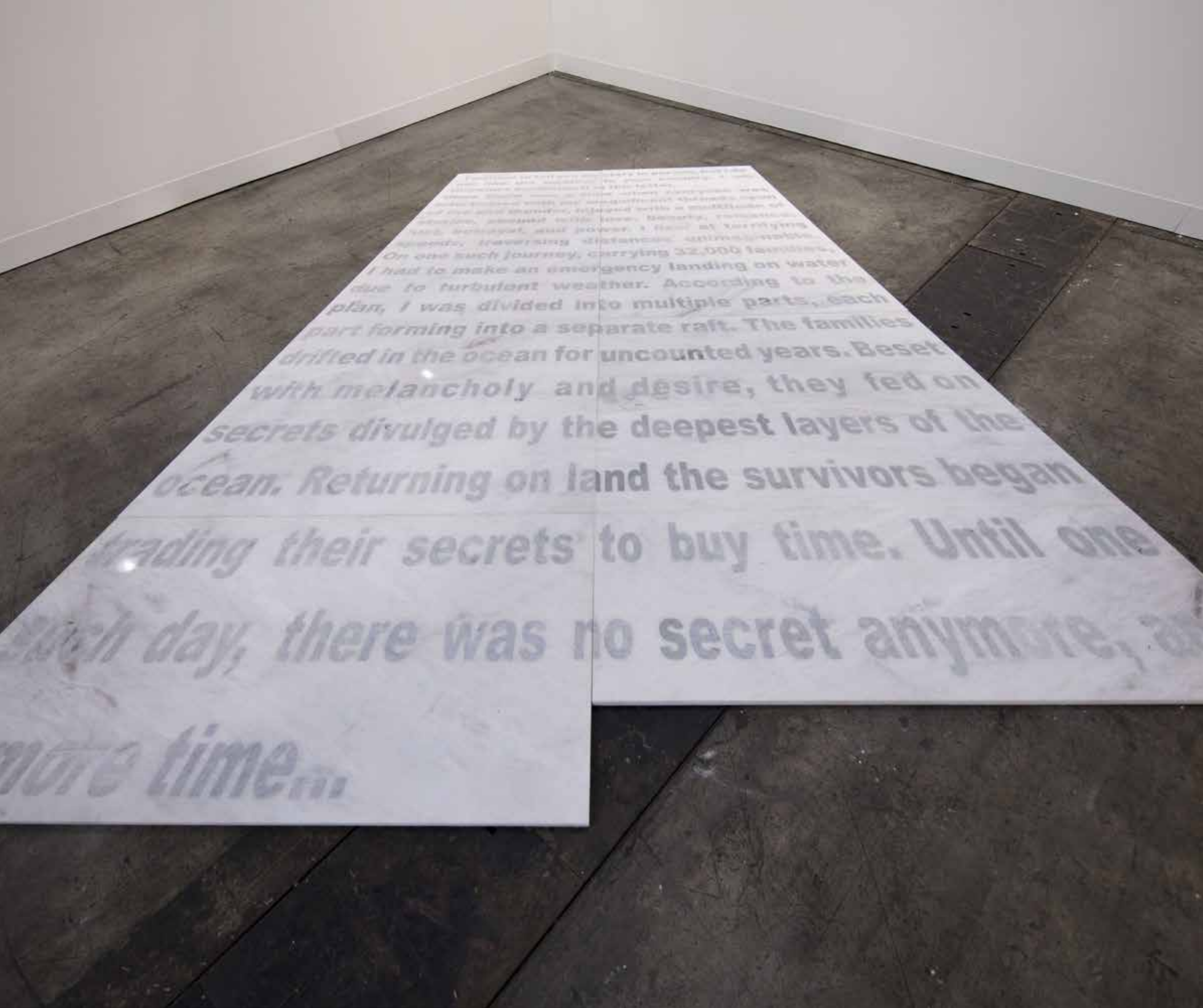
Printed paper

274 x 274 cm

Courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Please Do Not Step: Loss of a Magnificent Story, 2009 (Detail)

Photograph by Vipul Sangoi



Please Do Not Step: Loss of a Magnificent Story, 2017

Marble

274 x 274 cm

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi,
Dubai

Photograph by Kitmin Lee

Please Do Not Step: Loss of a Magnificent Story, 2017
(Detail)

woven paper was then cut to form the letters spelling out a florid and obscure story itself inspired by Islamic narratives. Visitors to the gallery had to step on the paper letters spelling out the story, thereby eventually destroying them, just as the artist had originally intended. A related piece, *Paper Plates*, was made from strips of paper printed with the phrase, "Please get served," and formed into geometric patterns then pressed to form paper "plates." But the plates couldn't possibly hold food because they were not solid.

While Abbas's use of text connects her work to that of such conceptual artists as Jenny Holzer, the use of geometric patterns references designs encountered in many forms of Islamic art, from the window screens (jalis) of Mughal architecture to the tile patterns decorating the walls of Moroccan mosques.

Two years later, in 2017, in *Please Do Not Step: Loss of a Magnificent Story*, Abbas transformed the original, evanescent version into a new work which, despite its title, invited the viewer to walk on it like the flying carpet of the *Thousand and One Nights*, whisking the viewer/reader/rider off to a distant destination. Inspired by her own move from the US to Pakistan, Abbas made her work from thin slabs of Ziarat marble quarried in Baluchistan. The text of the story was inlaid in the marble using a laborious technique known in Italian as *pietra dura* and in Persian and Urdu as parchinkari (inlay-work).

In this technique, the design is cut out from the substrate—in this case marble slabs—and inlaid with differently colored thin slices of stone, finely fitted and polished so precisely that the joins between the pieces are virtually undetectable. The technique, ultimately derived from ancient Roman pavements with geometric and figural designs, had been extensively developed in

Italy during the medieval and Renaissance periods, where it was used not only for pavements, but also for panels used to decorate walls and furniture.

In the 17th century, Italian ambassadors and merchants brought examples of *pietra dura* work to the Mughal court, where they were readily appreciated by a culture which already had a strong tradition of building and decorating in colored stone. Already in the 15th century red sandstone buildings had been inlaid with white marble decoration, and the use of this technique only increased in the 16th century during the reigns of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605) and his successors Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Not only were additional types and colors of stones employed, but designs also became more complex, combining elaborate floral and geometric patterns with elegant inlaid inscriptions in Arabic script. Mughal artists' encounter with European modes of representation introduced a new realism into their work, as traditional arabesque patterns—in which vegetation grew according to the laws of geometry rather than nature—were supplemented by images of plants and flowers growing out of the earth. The culmination of these developments can be seen in such monuments as the Taj Mahal, where the white marble walls and floors are decorated with the entire gamut of vegetal, geometric, epigraphic, and naturalistic ornament worked in an astounding variety of colored and semiprecious stones.

In her *Waterfall* (2019) series Abbas combined the parchinkari technique with the zigzag motif she had seen on many of the minarets in Pakistan, where their shafts are often decorated with bands of this wave-like pattern made of contrasting colors of stone. In one version, she assembled dozens of triangular and rhomboidal tiles made from an astounding range of naturally-colored stones into two seven-by-seven grids of

squares, each containing a V-shaped unit. The exuberant play of colors creates an almost kaleidoscopic effect, in which the extraordinary gamut of natural colors of stone contrasts against the rigid geometry of the zig-zags and the smoothly polished surface of the finished work. In her more austere *Waterfall: Gardens of Paradise* (2017), Abbas selects a very carefully-modulated range of colored stones—from pale grey through salmon and rust, brown, green, ochre, yellow, blue and black to create six matched panels of zigzags separated by narrow white and black bands within a rectangular frame. Mounted on a wall, the design on these panels immediately references the traditional *salsabil* fountain of Islamic architecture, in which a stream of water is designed to flow over a gently inclined surface carved with zigzags. The shimmering water flowing over the zigzags carved into the stone makes them seem to ripple in the light. This type of fountain which takes its name from the fountain in the garden of paradise mentioned in the Quran (76:17-18), is found from Spain to the Indian subcontinent, including a 17th century example in Lahore Fort. Not only does the *salsabil* cool the surrounding air by maximizing the exposed surface of water but its burbling provides a gentle and refreshing sound.

In her series *Rivers: Gardens of Paradise* (2020) Abbas created four similar panels (each 70 x 30 in), each decorated with a different color: white, blue, red, and yellow. The natural variation and careful selection of the colors of stones employed transforms and encourages the viewer to look back on the earlier *salsabil* fountains and see them also as art. Abbas further explored the possibilities of marble inlay in a series of other works inspired by the longstanding affinity in Islamic cultures for gardens and flowers as symbolic representations of the Paradise that awaits Believers after death. *Flowers: Gardens of Paradise* (2021) consists of a “carpet” 144” x



Flowers: Gardens of Paradise,
2021

Marble, lapis lazuli, onyx,
calcite, jasper

366 x 243 cm

Commissioned by Art Mill
Museum, Doha

96" formed from nine individual panels. The naturalistic design of a flower-filled vase flanked by plants within an arched niche was borrowed from seventeenth-century wall paintings in Lahore, but the scale and technique, let alone the placement on the floor, tie it to her other works, as well as her initial artistic training in the Indo-Persian tradition of manuscript painting. The green, yellow, white, brown, black and blue stones are meticulously fitted together to create virtual garden carpet.

Another work, *Trees: Gardens of Paradise 1*, is a block of 8 feet square and 12 feet high, commissioned for the second edition of Karachi Biennale and installed in the Bagh Ibn-e-Qasim in Karachi. Each side is composed of 12 panels of white marble inlaid with an image in grey stone of a central fruit-bearing tree. *Trees: Gardens of Paradise 2* (2020) is composed of eight white marble panels inlaid with a representation of a tree with a black trunk, green leaves, and brilliant blue flowers made from lapis lazuli. At the same time Abbas was using the parchinkari technique to reinterpret the work of the American minimalist artist, Sol LeWitt (1928-2007), whose *Open Cube* series of 1974 she had seen at Mass MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts in 2016. LeWitt had identified multiple variations on a drawing of an incomplete cube, and Abbas produced nine marble "drawings" based on LeWitt's line drawings. Each 24" x 24" drawing executes LeWitt's designs in black marble inlaid in white, much as LeWitt himself had created "wall drawings" which were actually instructions that he intended other artists to execute.

Abbas then created a larger (96" x 96") floor piece, *Open Cube* (2019) in tan, brown and white marble and lapis lazuli, adding color to make one of LeWitt's open cubes even more visually arresting as the images of two squares appear to float above each other. In her

Open Cube, 2019

Marble, lapis lazuli

243.8 x 243.8 cm

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi,
Dubai





Open Cube: After LeWitt 1-9,
2019

Marble

61 x 61 cm each

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi,
Dubai



Waterfall: Gardens of Paradise, 2019

Marble, lapis lazuli, onyx

177.5 x 77.2 cm

Courtesy of Canvas Gallery,
Karachi



Abshar (waterfall), Lahore Fort, 1631-32 AD

Minaret, Pakistan

Photographs by Hamra Abbas

Construction Drawing series of 2019, she made finished works of art by transforming the kind of preliminary drawings that generations of artisans in the Islamic lands had used to create complex geometric patterns. Executed in black granite inlaid into white marble, these “drawings,” in which a set number of equidistant points on a circle are connected by all possible straight lines, contrast the seemingly evanescent technique of drawing with the meticulous execution demanded of the medium. These images also recall Abbas’s earlier *Mispaint Star* series.

In two later works Abbas has returned to representation in the parchinkari technique. Her monumental floor piece, *Garden* (2020), measuring 33 x 30 feet, was made for Dubai EXPO 2020. Inspired by Indo-Persian miniature painting, the piece depicts an imaginary landscape with a large bare tree, flowers, plants and fruits, standing against a rocky landscape with flowing mountain streams, snow-capped mountains in the distance, and Chinese-inspired clouds floating through the sky, all executed in a rich variety of colored stones including, marble, granite, calcite, jasper, serpentine and lapis lazuli. In contrast to the Mughal miniatures which inspired it, however, there are no figures—either human or animal—depicted, but the size and placement of the piece invites the viewer to walk across it and become a participant in the scene and part of the story itself.

Another recent work of Abbas, *Mountain 1* (2022) is composed of four large rectangular panels of various shades of lapis lazuli fitted together to form an iconic representation of Pakistan’s highest mountain and the second-highest mountain on earth. It is a wonderful conceit to use lapis lazuli, a semiprecious stone mined in Afghanistan, to depict one of the world’s most famous mountains.

The work of Hamra Abbas invites a viewer to think. It is often witty and playful, conscious of multiple artistic traditions and of the roles that art can play in people’s lives. Her work will continue to evolve in new and unpredictable ways.



Garden (in progress), 2021

Photographs by Amna Zuberi

**A RELENTLESS
SEEKING -
THE ART OF
HAMRA ABBAS**

Salima Hashmi

Questions of positioning are critical to investigating the manifold trajectories of Hamra Abbas's art practice. The centers morph—often in correspondence to her migrations. These physical transfers and relocations appear to ignite change; fresh narratives emerge and metamorphose with rapidity, sometimes retaining traces of previous thought processes. Scrutiny of these multifarious chapters advocates a repositioning for the individual familiar with Abbas's work. Themes shape-shift, as do pivotal interactions with mediums which demand acquisition of new skill sets and expanded visual vocabularies. This unremitting restlessness lies at the core of Abbas's personality and "making". At each turn, the conceptual and the visual are subjected to the unyielding rigor of the "making". The realization of the work emerges after what Shakir Ali once described as "lovemaking between these two components".¹ On examining Abbas's oeuvre from its inception, one assumes there would be ruptures in their seeking, but there are instead clues of meshing and negotiations which pre-empt fractures and cul-de-sacs. This appears to contradict the artist's own admission that she has lived disconnected lives "like a nomad, moving from place to place and year to year".²

Categorizations have been elusive in describing Abbas's practice—even when she was a student at the National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore, insatiably curious as she was about all aspects of the disciplines on offer. Ostensibly pursuing sculpture, she was equally dedicated to learning the intricacies of miniature painting, to studying photography and associated darkroom procedures; in other words, all that was available on the feasting tables of art making at NCA.

As a graduate student at NCA, she engaged in circuitous reflections on text and its potential to be reincarnated off the page. Two words culled from a text

by Arundhati Roy about burning firewood developed into meticulously designed strips of text wrapped around firewood to be burnt in an old fireplace of a very cold sculpture studio at NCA! Abbas photographed the burning process, printed the images in the darkroom herself, underscoring the trait of taking matters to their logical conclusion. This insistence on controlling every step of the process of "making" was an early indication of characteristics which would mark diverse journeys of the future—the query into what precisely the fire was annihilating leading to other quests, interrogations, and riddles. The manipulation of strips of texts separated from their original moorings hints at subliminal messages of defiance.

By the time Abbas left Pakistan for Berlin in 2002 for further studies at the Universität der Künste, this tightrope balance between defiance and tender susceptibility had become deeply rooted. It was mirrored in the transitory nature of her nomadic life and time in Berlin, where she deliberately disengaged herself from future plans, an identifiable abode, or address of any permanent nature.

Please Do not Step—the title and text of floor pieces made during this time which gained international attention—was brimming with subliminal ironies and admonishment among other connotations. The text summed up her time as a student in Berlin, a test of her mettle to which she responded with a steely determination to prove her credentials. Learning German, being the only South Asian at her university, and encountering the deeply embedded Orientalism in the faculty were only a few of the challenges. Rebecca Horn was one of the iconic figures who admitted Abbas into her teaching studio after viewing her video works. Yet her response to Abbas's miniature works was "you people should not leave your roots"³, a statement symptomatic

1. Shakir Ali (pioneer modernist Pakistani painter) in Pakistan television interview. 1970s.

2. Artist's interview with the author, November 2022.

3. Virginia Whiles, *Art and Polemic in Pakistan: Cultural Politics and Tradition in Contemporary Miniature Painting*. (2010). London: Tauris Academic Studies, 209.

of the contrary attitudes Abbas encountered to her practice. Horn has earlier suggested that she “open up and explode”⁴ and travel around Europe. Tony Craig has dismissed her claim to being a sculptor on examining her hand. Abbas’s counteroffensive was her work which earned a teaching position at the same university.

The many lives of *Please Do Not Step* metamorphosed in consonance with its sites. The carefully organized geometric layouts were linked to its architectural/spatial settings, altering meaning and context as it located from Kassel to Cetinje, to Sydney.

Viewed against the backdrop of Abbas’s career, the long life of this piece is not accidental. Abbas was never apologetic about her origins or how that played into her practice. She moved from the teaching studio of one eminent professor to the next, gleaning what she needed and dismissing the rest. They, in turn, were unable to pigeonhole her or plumb the complexity of her many selves. Traversing cultures in tandem with traversing medium one sees things in a new light. These crossovers can be demanding as the claims on the artist’s practice and self-reflection are multifarious. Who makes what, and where it comes from is the inevitable line of questioning. Ethnic identity and language smelted into one troublesome sentence—“Please Do Not Step”—which can be interpreted as a gentle request, a half-completed observation, a warning or a command. Or is it just a textured surface on the way to elsewhere?

Abbas’s subsequent unfolding took up the artistic gauntlet flung down during her student years. From the conviction that there is no single position “assigned” to an artist from which to contextualize their offering, Abbas strove to confront the viewer. Yet contrarily, she took the opportunity of designing a course on miniature painting, utilizing the knowhow acquired from NCA to stay on



4. Artist’s interview with the author, November 2022.

Please Do Not Step, 2004

Gouache on wasli, printed paper

Variable dimensions

Courtesy of Fridericianum, Kassel

Please Do Not Step, 2004
(Detail)



God Grows on Trees
(installation view), 2008

Gouache on wasli, archival
pigment print

Variable dimensions

Kiran Nader Museum of Art
Collection, New Delhi

Courtesy of Sharjah Art
Foundation

and teach after she had completed her Meisterschueler. Winning the Meisterschueler Prize and the winning project being seen simultaneously at two biennales gave her the opportunity to travel.

She had also set her compass in a different direction which culminated in her meeting her soon-to-be husband in Lahore. Travels within Pakistan and new circumstances allowed her to reconnect, rethink, and reflect on the depth of encounters which overlapped with a new beginning and diverse bodies of work. This was parallel to the reincarnation of *Do Not Step* in various locations.

In Pakistan, religious faith has become a pervasive presence, something unavoidable to be contemplated afresh. Her predilection for focusing on the ubiquitous made her deliberate on the profusion of madrassas that had sprung up in her absence. Two separate bodies of work resulted: *Read* (2007) and *God Grows on Trees* (2008).

The former, a sound piece, was installed at the inauguration of the National Gallery of Pakistan in Islamabad. It encircled the visitor with children chanting the Holy Quran in unison—a familiar madrassa experience. In *God Grows on Trees*, the very same children had been the subject of her attention, painted in cameo-like miniatures. Her ability to craft and employ the miniature technique in a photorealistic style, as observed by Virginia Whiles, “is achieved through the coming together of two very different periods of realism, demonstrating a historical continuity in the naturalist representation of the subject”.⁵ It is also a manifestation of Abbas’s desire to revel in the sheer exquisiteness of the rendition of the portraits, quite apart from their socio-political context and content. She was equally gleeful and critical of the reception accorded to the contemporary

miniature!

In *God Grows on Trees*, these meticulously painted portraits, ninety-nine in all, were juxtaposed with photographs of trees in Lahore, each displaying a post with one of the ninety-nine attributes of Allah. This was a routine initiated during General Zia-ul-Haq’s regime, an addition to the environment of visible piety in the city. The artist was drawing on two palpable streams within her consciousness.

Iftikhar Dadi notes these juxtapositions and dialogues thus: “This project shows her striking miniature skills in dialogue with German conceptual figuration to comment on the dilemmas of subjectivity of the madrassa children, caught between their repetitive training (which for the artist also has Sufi dimensions) and their demonization as potential faceless terrorists in the global media.”⁶

However, Abbas’s own position seems to be changing, reinforced by her subsequent probing in which, as she succinctly puts it, “I see the world’s current fascination with madrassas as similar to the orientalist painters’ fascination with the harem in the nineteenth century... reduced and sensationalized.”⁷

These shiftings include a fascination with the mundane for the artist: “I am interested in exploring this intersection, and even paradox, of the potent religious sentiment expressed in these objects and what they may yield in their everydayness.”⁸

The engagement with the mundane is therefore what galvanizes the artist rather than Dadi’s assertion that “contemporary practice is beginning to look at the significance of discursive and scripturalist Islam itself”.⁹ In 2012, Abbas went on Umrah with her mother-in-

6. Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. (2010). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 227.

7. Virginia Whiles, *Art and Polemic in Pakistan: Cultural Politics and Tradition in Contemporary Miniature Painting*. (2010). London: Tauris Academic Studies, 133. Citing artist’s interview with Sharmini Pareira. Green Cardamom Catalogue, 2009.

8. Artist’s interview with Laura Egerton. ‘Kaaba Magic: An Investigation of Works by Hamra Abbas’. www.lawrieshahibi.com. March 2015.

9. Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 227.

5. *Ibid.*, 132.

law, husband, and one-year-old son. As they wandered in the vicinity of the Holy Ka'ba they stopped to buy souvenirs or "Barrakah Gifts" as they are known. Pilgrims carrying back memories of the sacred site, with their value-added objects, are consigned to make their lives purposeful post-pilgrimage. Abbas does not aspire to sanctimony, but muses on these material manifestations of religion which are embedded with multiple interpretations. One of these objects was a water bottle purchased by the artist to carry the holy spring water (ZamZam), which took on monumental proportions as a gigantic bottle to instigate both awe and a friendly approachability, perhaps summing up the artist's own reflection on this matter.

A similar sentiment carries over in the earlier *Kaaba pictures* (2014) arising from the many keepsakes of the Holy Ka'ba—keyrings, body ornaments, calendars, diaries, and prayer rugs—often manufactured in China. The results can be unpredictable with the dark hue of the Ka'ba subject to misprints and misalignments. Seizing upon this insignificant detail the artist explored the shift on many levels. Formal probing can have multiple forebears, including Josef Albers' color studies. Vibrating and vanishing boundaries, the illusion of transparency, and intensity of color all resonate. Cyan, yellow and magenta fuse to become black. Lifting the edges of the cube which is the Ka'ba, one sees the layers one by one revealing its inner essence (*Kaaba Picture as a Misprint*, 2014). The form of the Ka'ba and the form of the Lahore Fort resonated with Abbas during her visit to the Sol LeWitt exhibit at MASS MoCA Boston, a retrospective of his wall drawings. Her penchant for connecting disparate sources of imagery, form, and memory occurs again and again in her oeuvre. This may owe something to the agitated, intuitive energies driving her insights. Her own inquiries into the cube and its expanding avatars paralleled Sol LeWitt's revelations of the multiplicity of



Kaaba Pictures
(installation view), 2013

Archival pigment prints

Variable dimensions

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi,
Dubai



*Barakah Gifts 2 (Pen Holder),
2016*

Painted fibreglass

Variable dimensions

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi,
Dubai

cubic formations, which lent her strength, as did her study of Malevich's *Black Square*.

The cube literally opens up on its axis, disclosing the presence of the triangle, square and hexagon. For Abbas, who reveled in these underlying universal relationships, it provided the opportunity to dig deep into these simplest of propositions. At an intuitive level thus, the artist seeks to connect her practice to universal principles. The monumental scale of the water flask for example, while being the outcome of a religious pilgrimage, might embody overtones of secular fundamentals.

Road trips with her husband in Pakistan entailed travelling behind trucks and donkey carts with their tantalizing, profusely fecund images, among which was the flying horse with the female face—the Buraq, steed of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Research found the image to be present more widely in popular culture than in classical manuscripts. It gave the artist an impetus to convert it into three-dimensional form, which had never been tried before. The Buraq hinted at a connection with horses in the fairground merry-go-round and so *Ride* (2009) appeared. Fabricated in the NCA sculpture studio in Islamabad through a carefully detailed process which involved a double-cast to arrive at a stunningly reflective porcelain-like surface, it is curiously reminiscent of intensely colored “truck paintings”, bringing the image full circle. The Buraq, a culturally loaded icon, achieved a naive humility and a grandeur all its own when installed in *Hanging Fire*, an exhibition of Pakistani contemporary art at Asia Society Museum, New York in 2009 or, as Abbas put it in the accompanying catalogue, it was her “interpretation of traditional narratives and motifs of religious self-expression at their alleged crossroads with ‘modernity’ along different registers that range from the absurd to the somber”.¹⁰



Black Square: After Malevich, 2020

Lightbox, plexiglass

76.2 x 76.2 cm

Courtesy of COMO Museum of Art, Lahore

Ride, 2008

Painted fiberglass

185 x 238 x 99 cm

Art in Embassies: U.S. Department of State Collection

Courtesy of Asia Society Museum, New York



Unremitting in her seeking, the artist storyteller follows an entirely dissimilar trajectory and alights on a perfect site for a sardonic narrative about orientalism—*Paradise Bath*, a performance which took place in the first Ottoman bathhouse built in 1444 in Thessaloniki, Greece. A set of nine photographs documented the brown earring girl (the artist) pouring bath water over her white-skinned mistress. An act not only of servitude but also of possible tenderness occurring in an unequal relationship, involving a cleansing symbolic of regaining purity in Islamic ritual.

This interplay of ironic meanings and religious piety is a continuous thread to which the artist returns. In each instance, she weaves new stories brimming with unexpected liaisons and traces of remembrance.

Her residency at the Isabella Gardner Museum, Boston in 2011 culminated in a large body of work on *wasli* inspired by an image of the *kiswah*, the embroidered velvet covering of the door of the Holy Ka'ba (her mother's home had a plastic facsimile of this which hung almost unnoticed, not particularly revered). As noted by Laura Egerton, "she is interested in the distillation from the purely sacred to the mundane, and how people translate iconography to fill it with their own system of beliefs and ways of living; how they individually understand the purpose of objects and the dogma of instruction".¹¹

The artist takes pleasure in such ironies; a waspish sense of humor instigates an irreverent investment in apparent contradiction with startling outcomes. *Lessons on Love* (2007), unabashedly based on the Kamasutra, was incubated after Abbas chanced upon the image in a coffee table book on miniatures in Leipzig. As she recalls, "I saw this miniature which was a love scene, while the guy was hunting a deer - which I thought was

an interesting dichotomy and a paradox since love and killing was happening at the same time, simultaneously within one act".¹²

Originally modelled in plasticine for the 10th Istanbul Biennale (2007), the work surprisingly escaped the wrath of the fast growing religious conservatism in Muslim Turkey. The malleable medium of plasticine enhanced the sensuousness of the figures, "the making of objects articulates relationships between concepts of skill, virtue, inventiveness, resourcefulness, and magic powers".¹³ Abbas's earlier attempts at realizing these lovemaking figures were unsuccessful, but in plasticine they were enticing. She describes enjoying the manner in which viewers responded, even poking their fingers into the softness of the bodies.

The tradition of depicting lovemaking as part of religious sculptural iconography is renowned because of the temples at Khajuraho in India. The artist also likens the couples locked in passionate dissonant embrace as a reference to the India-Pakistan relationship. Indeed, like many of Abbas's courageous works, it is an invitation to ponder, admire, and interpret for oneself.

Lessons on Love was acquired by a collector in Brussels, who suggested taking the works to a fabrication studio in Turin, Italy. Here they were remade by scanning and milling into sculpture, which replicated the colorful softness of the originals. Abbas has continued to work with the same team who fabricated her 'water bottle' with 3-D molds; polished and recast in fiberglass. She describes the process as "in my studio practice, I don't particularly focus on terms like the artist, artisan, art, and the crafts. For example, I see a team of studio assistants working with me in Lahore, similar to the team of people making my work in Italy".¹⁴ Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story. The acceptance

10. Salima Hashmi, 'Hanging Fire-Contemporary Art from Pakistan'. Asia Society Museum New York. Yale University Press. 2009, 78.

11. Artist's interview with Laura Egerton 'Kaaba Magic - An Investigation of Works by Hamra Abbas'.

12. Artist's interview with the author. November 2022, Lahore.

13. Sue Rowley, 'There once lived...': craft and narrative traditions.' *In Craft and Contemporary Theory*. (1997). Ed. Sue Rowley. St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 80.



Left

Waterfall 1, 2022

Marble, lapis lazuli, sodalite,
jasper

180.3 x 60.9 cm

Right

Every Color 2, 2022

Archival pigment prints

137 x 110 cm each

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi,
Dubai

Photograph by Ismail Noor

and willingness to collaborate as an intrinsic part of her practice has blossomed exponentially. It dovetails and meshes with the notion of finally putting down her roots and “coming home”. “Home” is where seeing a marble inlay waterfall in Lahore Fort “can be the genesis of novel imaginings”. This was a revolutionizing moment on a visit to Pakistan—the label said *abshar* (waterfall), a word with its own music, its own lure of yet-to-be-discovered meanings. It fell into place with the Sol LeWitt experience in Boston, where the chevron in the *abshar* made three or four hundred years ago became as one with LeWitt’s kernel. As the artist articulated, “it was an out of body experience.” It quite fortuitously became the artist’s first “paradise-piece”. She marvels today at the sequence that followed.

“After making *Waterfall: Gardens of Paradise*, everything to me appeared as a depiction of the garden (of paradise) - the entrance gate of Badshahi Mosque, the fresco paintings of Wazir Khan Mosque, the tree, the flower, the fruit—it was always the garden”.¹⁵

Abbas went on to make a large body of work inspired by Mughal gardens, which became the series *Gardens of Paradise*. Alongside her was her team of artisans in Lahore, translating her ideas into form, apparently with a construction background and long experience of marble inlay. Her “paint by numbers” routine with labels for names and intensities made it easy for the artisans to follow her drawings and forms. As a result some of them have become experts in various forms such as flowers almost by default. As she puts it, “they tell me when one piece is better than the other—and sometimes they also surprise themselves after completing a work!”¹⁶

But mechanical proficiency is not enough, the artist admits. “We’ve learned so many things along the

process. When we started working, they had years of experience of marble inlay and I had zero knowledge. I started by learning to cut the shapes and inlay, grinding and polishing, which are part of the sculptural process and vocabulary. But stone is different. It has varied densities that requires different kinds of cutting, polish, etc. So I’m always learning.”¹⁷ Deepening her understanding and whetting her appetite were her readings of texts by Ebba Koch and Jonathan Bloom.

The relationship to the traditions which emanated from the Taj Mahal and Agra remain the pinnacle of perfection, of course, which the artist admits is not replicable. But, as she comments, “while that perfection may not be possible today, my work is as close as it gets.”¹⁸

The passion which drives Abbas in this body of work is invested in the scale of the inlay works. Her magnum opus was for the Expo 2020 at Dubai—an ambitious 32x30 feet long work which took over a year to complete. After this monumental *Garden* (2021) was moved from her studio, Abbas was left with its largest unused component—a massive drawing of K2, too large to find a niche in *Garden*. Abbas had gazed long and hard at the Pakistani landscape while preparing for her *Gardens of Paradise*, and this emblematic had presented itself only to be set aside. She dwelt upon it now, just as she pondered over the large piece of lapis left over from the project. The two were destined to be brought together as more lapis was sought for *Mountain 1* (2022) to come into being.

For Abbas lapis lazuli is an enigmatic material. She says that apart from its beauty it has great force and energy. Procuring lapis from the basements of Peshawar city has engrossed her. Imbued with legends of power and mystery, the rock moves with her and her desire for

14. Artist’s interview with the author. November 2022.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.



the pursuit of beauty and the universality that comes from nature.

How long will Hamra Abbas be engulfed by mountains and their vastness? Her ambition and her relentless seeking is both demanding and integrally bound up with her sense of identity, and equally with a belief in the unresolved nature of life itself.

She continues to transform hard rock which is Lapis Lazuli in ways unfamiliar and poetic. It appears to succumb to the artist's desire to change its very essence.

New possibilities take shape in Hamra Abbas' relentless seekings.

Garden (detail), 2021

Marble, lapis lazuli, granite, serpentine, pink calcite, jasper

975 x 914 cm

© Hamra Abbas 2021

Commissioned by Expo 2020 Dubai

Expo 2020 Dubai Collection

Photograph by Roman Mensing and Thorsten Arendt

**CONSTRUCTING
(AND
DE-CONSTRUCTING)
THE GARDEN**

Ainsley M. Cameron



Garden (detail), 2021

Marble, lapis lazuli, granite,
serpentine, pink calcite,
jasper

975 x 914 cm

© Hamra Abbas 2021

Commissioned by Expo 2020
Dubai

Expo 2020 Dubai Collection

Photograph by
Roman Mensing and Thorsten
Arendt

Garden (drawing), 2021

Photograph by Irfan Moeen
Khan

In *Garden* and *Garden 2* Hamra Abbas has created disrupted landscapes in tessellated stone. Both compositions combine references to natural elements – flowers, running water, trees, and earth – to create individualized environments thoughtfully constructed in marble inlay. For Abbas, the garden is a utopia; it represents an idyllic landscape. The garden also acts as a physical and symbolic threshold; between desire and devotion, love and death, reason and freedom. Her inspiration often comes from the detailed embellishments found in historic architecture in Lahore, places of historic power as well as religious devotion. Historically and in Muslim-majority cultures, botanical forms have long been interpreted as literal or symbolic depictions of the *Garden of Paradise*. Visualizations of the garden often incorporate floral and vegetal forms into architectural surfaces, textiles, carpets, metalwork, and manuscript painting.¹ Descriptions of the garden abound, including in Qur’anic scriptures, where paradise is portrayed as a garden full of trees, flowers, plants, and running rivers of milk, honey, water, and wine. For those who do deeds of righteousness, heavenly gardens await: “The likeness of paradise promised the pious and devout is (of a garden) with streams of rippling water, everlasting fruits, and shade.”²

Upon Abbas’s return to Lahore in 2015 after a decade in Berlin and then Boston, the artist discovered anew the use of the garden and associated imagery throughout the city – imagery that was suddenly and remarkably evident to her in the frescos and stone inlay that cover the historic gardens, fort, mosques, and shrines of the city. These images of natural abundance incorporated into the built landscape aroused in her the symbolism of this heavenly garden. She has put it aptly: “I see gardens in everything.”³ This way of seeing and categorizing the individual architectural elements of Lahore was driven by her personal, poetic, aesthetic

1. By the 8th century, mosaic depictions of idealized landscapes and flowering plants decorated the interior of some mosques, including the Great Mosque of Damascus. See Denny Walter, ‘Reflections on Paradise in Islamic Art,’ in Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art*, Hanover: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 1991, 35. Garden imagery was adapted and adopted into other visual forms over time.

2. Qur’an (13: verse 35); translation from *Al-Qur’an: A Contemporary Translation* by Ahmed Ali, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 215–6.

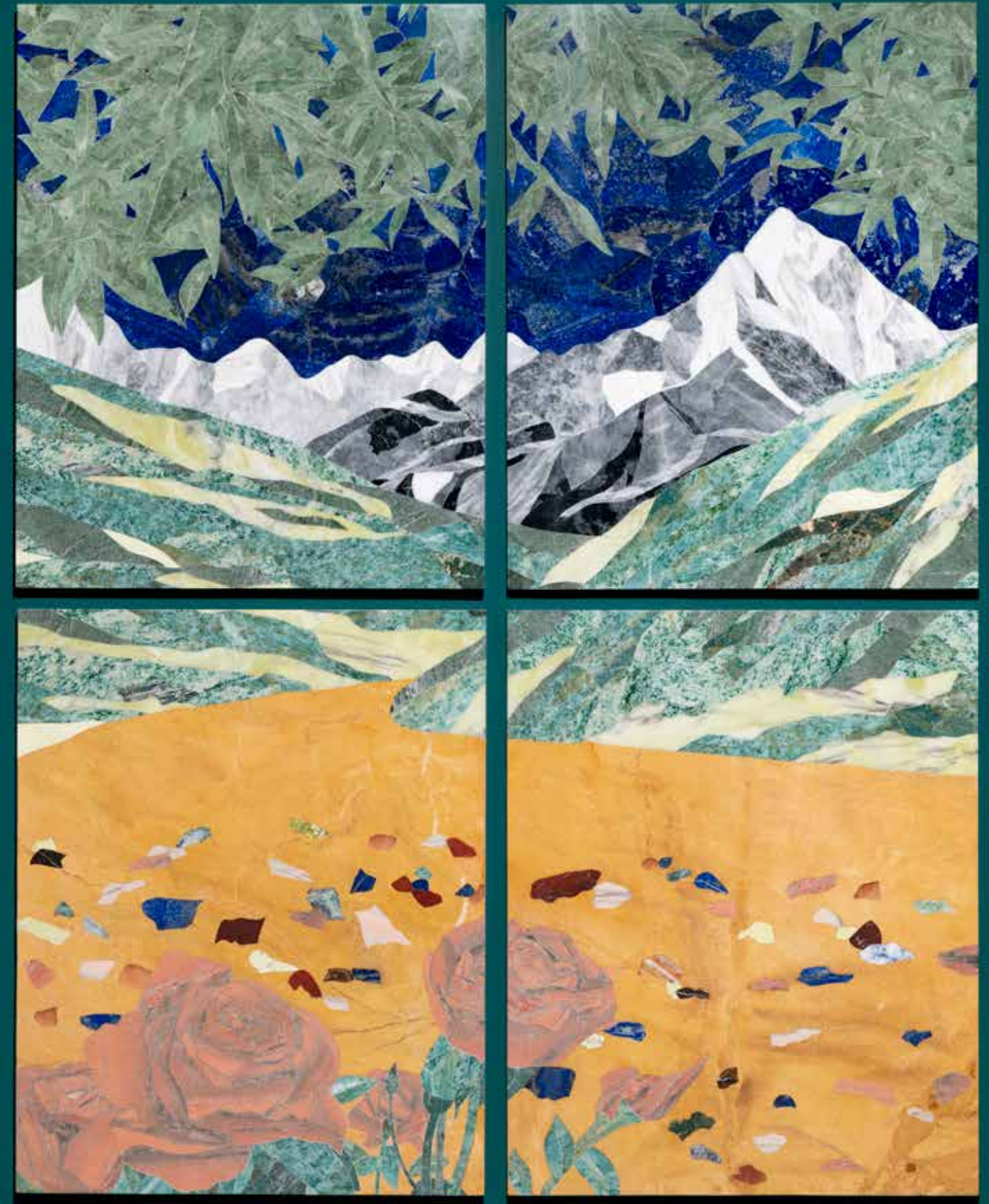
3. Zoom conversation with Hamra Abbas, 15 April 2022.

Garden 2, 2022

Marble, lapis lazuli, serpentine, jasper

152.4 x 121.9 cm

Commissioned by Cincinnati Art Museum, Alice Bimel Endowment of Asian Art, 2022.83





and academic observations and life encounters. The works that followed, *Construction Drawing 1* (square) and the series *Open Cube: After LeWitt 1 to 9* are forays into the artist's use of marble as a medium and her ongoing practice of deconstructing forms. These works are influenced by an array of sources, including Sol LeWitt's abstraction, the poetic ideals of the garden, and South Asian histories, empire, and artistic forms. Since then, through the manipulation, repetition, and subtle abstraction of individual forms, Abbas has begun to address the aesthetics of garden symbolism more directly, creating such works as *Tree: Gardens of Paradise* (2020) and *Fruits: Gardens of Paradise 3* (2020).

Commissioned by Expo 2020 Dubai, *Garden* is the first work where the different and distinct elements of the garden Abbas has previously deconstructed, abstracted, and explored coalesce into a singular monumental work. Individual elements such as trees, a waterfall, blooming flowers, and mountains fuse together to create an idyllic image of paradise that transcends earthly realms. This monumental work incorporates both realistic and highly abstracted elements into an experiential whole. Viewers of *Garden* are welcome to walk over the inlaid marble slabs, so that the physical presence is an integral part of each encounter; a personal symbolic journey towards an idealized garden. The garden, for Abbas, is a bright and ebullient space. Yellow marble has become Abbas's self-proclaimed trademark material and is seen in *Garden* as the ground, and in *Garden 2* as the yellow river of paradisaical honey flowing between the mountains. Abbas believes yellow marble adds a density to her work, by bringing marble inlay into conversation with painting traditions.⁴ Both artistic practices, marble inlay and painting, require an intuitive use of color and use layering to create density and variety in form. Indeed, color is used exuberantly in many of Abbas's works. In *Garden* and *Garden 2*, vibrant stones pulsate when placed with



Construction Drawing 1,2,3,
(installation view), 2019

Marble, granite

121.9 x 121.9 cm each

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi,
Dubai

Tree: Gardens of Paradise,
2020

Marble, lapis lazuli

213.3 x 152.4 cm

Courtesy of COMO Museum
of Art, Lahore

4. Ibid.

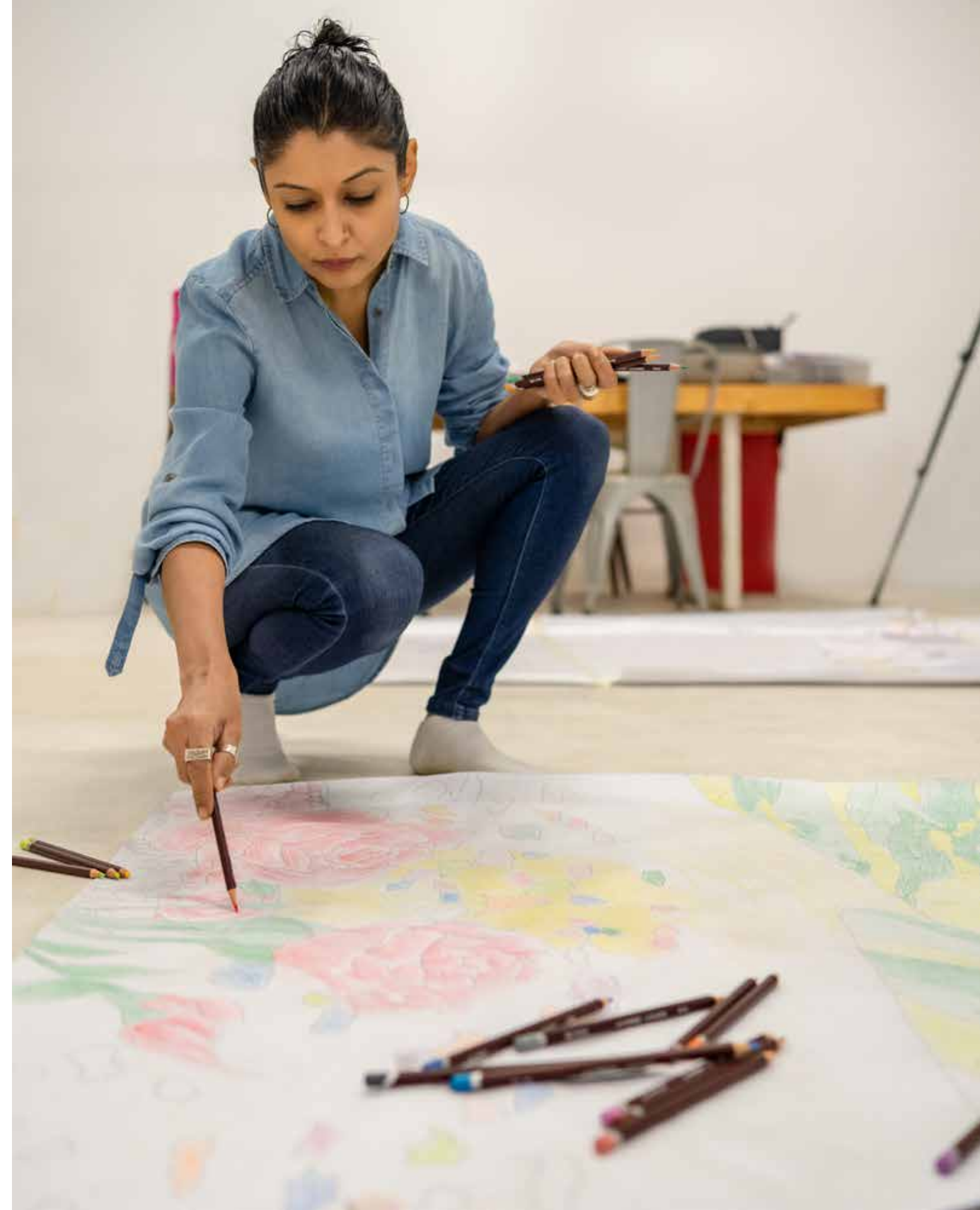
either contrasting or complementary hues; other works, like the series *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint*, overlay bright blocks of color that morph and change through relation.

While *Garden 2* is a continuation of the artist's meditation on the garden, it can also be explored through the lens of colonial encounter and the broader representation of landscape in the history of art. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British and other European artists recorded the landscapes of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in photographs, watercolors, and oil paintings that were disseminated widely. These works followed artistic conventions prescribed by European art academies, including the clear delineating of foreground, middle, and background. The foreground was often populated by isolated individuals, often unconnected to (but integrated within) the larger scene. The middle featured a building (often in ruin) representative of the conquered lands, and the background was often a romanticized version of a lush natural landscape. Through a profusion of such images and their wide dissemination, this way of seeing and presenting the landscape of South Asia became a pictorial language of power. The images contained systemized perspectival techniques used to resolve unknown landscapes and create a sense of knowing through repetition. Geographical incursions by colonial agents to the far reaches of empire are hence recorded, and once unruly landscapes are then tamed. Yet here Abbas has broken into that plane of recession, and she has rooted local materials and metaphors that brush up against these imperialist histories. The foreground in *Garden 2* is punctuated by multiple luscious blooming roses.⁵ Positioned as they are in the foreground and with a profusion of leaves above, there is an intentional disruption to the expected compositional language. The viewer is simultaneously drawn in towards the mountain pass and barred from entry by these isolated, fragmented

5. The rose carries symbolic weight in many cultural readings. Within Ottoman visual languages, hadiths (calligraphic collections of saying that relate to the Prophet Muhammad) are often decorated with images of roses to symbolize the Prophet. Within Christian Gothic architectural forms and modern Catholic thought, the rose signifies Mary, the mother of Jesus. Roses feature in Persian poetry as a symbol of love and are also understood as love lost and found in Victorian aesthetics. Thanks are due to Hamra Abbas and Walter Denny for discussing the many permutations of the rose with the author; recorded here are but a few.

Garden 2 (in progress), 2022

Photograph by Amna Zuberi



elements. This use and manipulation of space again connects to the idea of the garden in Islamic thought and writing, where gardens are often walled, and access is limited.

The mountainous pass in the middle ground similarly disrupts our encounter with landscape. Within Islamic thought, mountains are frequently associated with formidable might; physical as well as mental strength, they are seen as barriers as well as passages with the potential to unite: “And We placed firm mountains on earth lest it should sway with them, and We made wide paths in them that they may find their way.”⁶ Symbolically, mountains are the connecting point between earth and heaven; they nurture, give, and sustain life as the source from which rivers originate. Read this way, mountains are often romanticized locales of profound beauty. Yet physically, mountains are imposing, they obstruct space, and often exist on the edge of civilization, and of empire. The mountain ranges that bridge Pakistan with both Afghanistan and India create passages that connect, but which have been and continue to be politically fraught. So, while mountains are synonymous with masculinity, heroism, and national identity in modern Pakistan, they are also geographical boundaries that physically and spiritually disrupt. These boundaries are immediately present in *Garden 2*, where the mountainous landscape has been divided and hung in four panels, one inch apart. Through multiple fractured elements – the physical break between the marble panels, the mountains that create and obstruct space with a subtle sense of recession, and the leaves and roses that abruptly distort space – Abbas has complicated histories of territorial expansion by actively disrupting the plane on which they are seen. She has reclaimed the natural world by constructing, and deconstructing, her own version of the ideal.

6. Qur'an (21: verse 31); translation from Surah Anbiya Ayat 31 (21:31 Quran) With Tafsir - My Islam (accessed 16 November 2022). With thanks to Haroon Moghul for discussing the labyrinthine symbolism of mountains and for sharing this verse; Haroon Moghul, email to the author, August 26, 2022.

To create these large-scale marble inlay works, which are often monumental in scale and physical presence, Abbas begins with delicate drawings drawn to scale. These are then coded with numbers that indicate stone selection. She then carefully selects slabs of stone based on size and tonality and physically populates the drawing with their forms. The stones are then sliced into sections, then cut, then shaped by hand. Each stone brings a subtle variation in tone, which Abbas manipulates through placement and polishing, creating both texture and effect. At the same time, a marble base is carved into so that the cut stone can be inlaid into the pockets or indentations. This involved and multilayered process is only complete once the stones have endured a final grinding and polishing stage, which significantly alters and often increases the vibrancy of the selected stones.

The materiality of each stone selected for inlay is imbued with meaning – both personally to Abbas and within a larger context of economic and political trade. Lapis lazuli, a gemstone believed to have been mined at Sar-e Sang in Badakhshan, Afghanistan for over 6000 years comes to Pakistan via Peshawar. It is transported across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and sold at the Namak Mandi bazaar, where Abbas purchases this and several of her other stones.⁷ Lapis, when ground, creates a luxurious pigment that was long favored by painters at the Persian and Mughal courts, as well as throughout Europe, at least from the medieval period onwards. The stone travelled via geopolitical trade routes, then as well as today, and has long contributed to the economic, artistic, and political histories of Afghanistan. Abbas herself participates in this economic transfer as she journeys from Lahore to Peshawar.

Garden and *Garden 2* are as much about the thoughtful manipulation of material, light, and color to

7. Jasper, the dark red stone of various floral elements in *Garden* and *Garden 2*, also comes from Peshawar, while the other stones are mined and purchased in Pakistan and India.

create naturalistic compositions out of hard stone as they are symbolic of garden imagery overall. The hyper-realistic flowers in *Garden* rival their counterparts in nature (“what they lack in smell they make up with color”⁸) and the deep, rich lapis blue of the sky in *Garden 2* creates a sense of expansiveness through variety of tone. The rolling hills and distant mountains create densely packed and ruggedly beautiful landscapes as each stone abuts against the next. The technique of marble inlay – a technique that combines, even multiplies, individual elements into a whole – has a long history connecting Europe and South Asia.⁹ Within the expansive boundaries of the Mughal Empire, the Taj Mahal stands as the quintessential architectural representation of the use of marble inlay.¹⁰ Conceived of as a funerary monument and a symbol of powerful rule, the Emperor Shah Jahan created the Taj Mahal as a physical manifestation of an otherworldly site, the Garden of Paradise. To paraphrase the scholar Ebba Koch, nature is impermanent and a flower’s bloom ephemeral. Yet a building’s floral embellishment offers a paradisiacal quality with flowers that bloom eternally.¹¹ This fascination with botanical elements and the wider natural world also abounds in the decorative motifs of other Mughal monuments, including the Lahore Fort, Fatehpur Sikri, Agra Fort, and more. Abbas’s manipulation of marble inlay pulls the historic practice into the present, taking what are often small, detailed individual embellishments and creating expansive, integrated compositions.

The history of floral ornamentation within Mughal artistic traditions is complex. By the seventeenth century, the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals – arguably the three great empires of the Islamic world – had each adopted a lexicon of floral ornamentation that flourished at court.¹² Scholars have attributed the profusion of flowering plants in the Mughal decorative repertoire to

8. Abu Talib Kalim, *Padshahnama*, BL, Persian ms Ethe 1570, fol. 164a margin, translated in Ebba Koch, “*Mughal Palace Gardens from Babur to Shah Jahan (1526-1648)*,” *Muqarnas* 14, 1997, 159.

9. Marble inlay, also known as *pietra dura* and in Pakistan as *parchin kari*, was likely adapted by the artisans at the Mughal Empire from the Florentine work *commesso di pietre dure*, examples of which were in the collection of Shah Jahan and likely brought to the court by European visitors as presents for the emperor. See Koch, “*Mughal Palace Gardens*,” for details.

10. The Agra tomb of Jahangir’s father-in-law, I’timad al-Daula that was finished for the Queen Nur Jahan in 1619 is the first Mughal building that uses the technique; however the tomb is mostly decorated with geometric designs and lacks the flowering plants of later buildings. See Skelton, Robert, “*A Decorative Motif in Mughal Art*” in P.Pal, ed., *Aspects of Indian Art*, Leiden: EJ Brill, 1972, 148.

11. See Ebba Koch, “*Flowers in Mughal Architecture*,” *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts*, (Vol. 70, issue 2), Dec 2018 for a thoughtful and poetic discussion of this form.



Garden 2 (drawing), 2022

a combination of sources, including: Mughal Emperor Jahangir's visit to Kashmir in 1620, a fascination with European herbals (which were very likely known at the Mughal court from the many Europeans visiting at the time), and the influence of Persian painting.¹³ While artists at the Mughal court may have looked to Europe for precise scientific illustration of botanical forms, they then adapted, freely altered, and combined these forms with the symbolic ideal. Within the manuscript tradition, flowers were playfully adapted in composition to render the front and sides of a flower, often showing progression from bud to full blossom in a single composition.¹⁴ These adapted or abstracted flower studies then moved into textile and carpet design, jades, metalwork, bookbinding, etc., as well as onto architectural surfaces. As the imagery moved between mediums, the plant forms became less specific, with expressive manipulations of the natural form combined with other, hybridized versions.¹⁵ From appreciating nature's aesthetic to scientific realism to abstracted design, the construction and de-construction of floral imagery has a long history within South Asia, creating an artistic trajectory within which to situate Hamra Abbas's approach.

The constructed landscapes of both *Garden* and *Garden 2* blend hyper-realistic elements with the symbolic to create compositions that embody the rich and varied histories of South Asia. Through material, technique, and color, both works are infused with multiple visual and metaphorical languages, where meaning is shaped and co-mingled much like each inlaid stone. But these works are not nostalgic views of empires past. Nor are they situated solely within the aesthetic world of garden imagery. They instead offer a critical engagement with political, religious, and artistic histories that then morph into an idealized present. These constructed landscapes are Hamra Abbas's visualization of personal aesthetic encounters with desire, devotion,

and place. These constructed landscapes engage the senses, all senses, and are carefully, and meaningfully, articulated in stone.

12. Koch, "Flowers in Mughal Architecture," and Gulru Necipoglu, "Early Modern Floral: The Agency of Ornament in Ottoman and Safavid Visual Cultures," in Gulru Necipoglu and Alina Payne (eds.) *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016, 132-55.

13. Koch, "Flowers in Mughal Architecture" and Skelton, "A Decorative Motif in Mughal Art," 146-52.

14. A painting that resides in the Cincinnati Art Museum's collection demonstrates this approach: *Tulip*, c. 1650, India, Mughal Empire (1526–1858), opaque watercolor on paper, mounted on an 18th century album page, Cincinnati Art Museum, John J. Emery Memorial Fund and John J. Emery Fund, 1983.15.

15. A shaped carpet that resides in the Cincinnati Art Museum's collection incorporates rows of different varieties of flowers (irises, tulips, poppies) with hybridized forms: *Shaped Carpet*, c. 1640-50, India; Rajasthan, Jaipur; or Pakistan; Lahore, Mughal Empire (1526–1858), wool pile on cotton and silk foundation, Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Audrey Emery, 1952.201.

THIS BLAZING LIGHT OF BLACK

Quddus Mirza



Black Square 1, 2018

Lightbox, plexiglass

182.8 x 243.8 cm

Courtesy of Lahore Biennale
Foundation

Photograph by Amna Zuberi

“One day in London, in the thick of a smog, when you could not see your hand in front of your face, a man was summoned by phone to a hospital at the other end of town where his child was seriously ill. The man opened his front door and stood in the murky darkness, calling out for help, but there were no cars, no passers-by. Suddenly a hand landed on his shoulder and a voice said, ‘I will take you.’ And the stranger did indeed lead the anxious father right across London, unfalteringly, saying confidently from time to time ‘turn left here’, ‘mind the steps’, ‘careful, there’s a ramp’. When they reached the hospital, the man asked the stranger how he could possibly find his way through such a dense fog. ‘Darkness and fog do not bother me,’ the other replied, ‘because I am blind’”.¹

One feels that the passage from Amos Oz’s book *Under this Blazing Light*, relates to the presence, power and depth of black (a color normally connected to darkness) as seen in the art of Hamra Abbas. The protagonist of the Israeli author’s account was surrounded by black, the absence of all colors, but that state provided him the capacity to view the world beyond the veil of fog. The seminal work of Abbas, *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint* (2014), is an attempt to discover/display other colors within the dominating black of the most holy structure for the Muslims.

Color of any shade has multiple readings and associations across time and place. Just as ‘color’ and ‘colour’ do not match, no two colors correspond in terms of linguistic definition, cultural context, religious connotations, symbolic meanings, and everyday usage. Green is identified with Islam, as much as linked with the environmentalists (*Green Party*). Red signifies Communism, the Red Cross, violence, Valentine Day, Hindu ritualistic paste on the forehead, the bride’s dress in the Indian subcontinent; and many more.

1. Amos Oz, *Under this Blazing Light*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press: 1995, 15.

In comparisons to other hues, the black, being the most dense, mysterious and awe-inspiring color on a shade-chart, embodies a vast range of interpretations. Black is usually assumed with darkness, disappearance, death, and equated with negative consequences. A black cat crossing your path is a sign of ill fortune, someone is accused of possessing the dark soul, illegal trade is called black-marketing, and the act of exploiting a person is described blackmailing.

On the other hand, if revered for its religious connections, like the *Hijr-e-Aswad* (the *Black Stone*) and Ka’ba; black is also a substance for regaining the lost youth (dyeing hair in that shade, one defies advancing age, and remains regularly young). Powder to beautify one’s eyes (kohl), flag of ISIS, a paint discarded from the Impressionists’ palette, black holds innumerable explanations; “if a woman wears a black dress to a funeral it would clearly symbolize mourning and death, but if she jumped into a taxi and attended a cocktail party, the same garment would signify stylish sophistication”².

Black, paradoxically was not always associated with dark, or darkness – or negative qualities attached with it. “The word ‘black’ itself (like many other European words for the color) comes from the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European *bhelg*, *bhel* or *bhelg*, a term originally used to describe the appearance of fire. It meant ‘burn’, ‘gleam’, ‘shine’ or ‘flash’ and evolved into a number of words we might think of as black’s opposite – such as ‘bleach’, ‘blank’, ‘blond’, and ‘blaze’”³.

Faithful from across the world: the Middle East, South Asia, China, Africa, Central Asia, Far East Asia, and parts of Europe and North America travel to Mecca for Hajj. Pilgrims of diverse complexions, tongues, attires are clad in white to participate in the most sacred act/duty for Muslims – but they also take part in a ritual against

2. James Fox, *The World According to Colour*. London: Allen Lane, UK, 2021, 10.

3. *Ibid.*, 25.

'color'. Men and women covered in white robes/attires circle around the huge cube of black. And if translated in terms of pictorial practices, *white next to black, and circle around the cube*, embodying the pure geometry. Or Art. In a sense reminding of *Black Square*, the canvas of Kazimir Malevich. Perhaps the aim of Russian abstract artist and the desire of Hajj pilgrims collide – to attain a state of sublime. Liberating from the confusion, contradiction and complications of multiple streaks of everyday life/hue; and to levitate from this physical existence for a supreme and higher realm.

A perfect pursuit toward diminishing differences and attaining the unity of faith or of spiritual experience. Though in the present Islamic world, the matter of unity and diversity has assumed another dimension. From the earliest history of Islam, the *Umma* got split into two groups, later into a number of varying sects. For an ordinary Muslim, and mullah, this situation causes complexities and confrontations. The religion in its nature supports unity and uniformity. One God, one prophet, one book – and the one house of God. However, believers belonging to this *singular* religion, follow separate practices, subscribe to diverse interpretations, and adopt contradictory rituals.

Often at war with each other. The outcome is witnessed by the Muslim population across the continents, and the world at large. Bombs exploding in the mosques of opposing fractions. Target killings of another sect's religious procession, suicide attacks in the localities of differing believers; so much so that Pakistan probably is the only country where Muslims offer their prayers in public spaces, surrounded by armed personnel, security guards, and police cops. To protect them from other Muslims!

Besides multiple other factors, one reason is that

each school of religious thought is convinced of being the single possessor of singular truth, rightness of its ideas and interpretations, in contrast to the rest. This singularity of approach coincides and (comfortably) coexists with the institution of a sole ruler: a Caliph, an Emir, a king, subsequently emerging into dictators and autocrats; military generals and ayatollahs. A legacy that demanded and evolved into central command, an undisputed account of the past, a standard mode of worship – a design that snubs any dissident voice/position. On the other hand, the present Muslim population is surviving in the multiplicity of scattered sects, political systems, judicial codes, and social norms.

For a contemporary Muslim the crucial concern – and solution, is to recognize and reaffirm the existence and legitimacy of diverse points of view, understandings and practices. Hamra Abbas in her art alludes to that crisis, its cause and conclusion. *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint* could be a means to realize and respect differences. The holiest black rectangular structure that signifies *one* abode of God, *one* center of annual pilgrimage, *one* seat of the Holy Prophet – when reveals its anatomy, is comprised rectangles of other colors (which are mechanically superimposed for attaining the black hue). Abbas approaches the image of Ka'ba in a formal way, layering shapes of flat colors, which, once overlapped turn *pure* black. For her black is not the absence but accumulation of all colors. This pictorial statement, and subsequently her declaration that 'Every Color is a Shade of Black' can be traced to Ibn Arabi's doctrine of *Wahdat ul Wujud*, in which the external world of sensible objects is but a fleeting shadow of the Real (al-Haq), God.

In the general theory of optics, we see each color when it is reflected from the surface of an object, and if all colors bounce back, we get white, and when nothing

reflected, it is the sensation of black. So, in *reality*, black is not an absence of color, but an accumulation of the entire spectrum. The material has *absorbed* all colors. In Hamra Abbas's series of works *Every Color is a Shade of Black*, black becomes a primordial substance amid superimposed sheets of plexiglass of three primary hues for printing (cyan, magenta, yellow). Overlapped, rotated, these tints produce a range of shades, including black (the fourth primary color in printing) as the central square.

This body of works indicates another aspect of Abbas's aesthetics. Investigation into the Islamic geometry and how nature was transformed into the language of abstraction. The great contribution of artists from the Muslim world was not to imitate nature by following the canon of classical Greek sculptors or examples of the great masters of Renaissance – but to meditate on this world uttered by the almighty, and to deviate from it. Artists from the Muslim societies did not replicate what they looked at, but transformed it into ideal forms, higher, perfect and permanent. (A flower observed by an Ottoman miniaturist soon withered, but the painter's version stayed, till this day – unaltered, unwilted, uncorrupted). An addition to God's creation; a phenomenon the poet Dr Muhammad Iqbal talks about in one of his Farsi verses: *"You created night/I forged the lamp. You produced dust/I shaped the pot. You made deserts, mountains and ravens/Gardens, parks and meadows are my work."*

In that context the art of Muslim image makers was not in obedience of the Creator, nor trying to mimic Him, but an act of digression. In nature one cannot normally have a cube, a rectangle, a triangle, or a perfect circle; these shapes are the human inventions; and so are patterns, and script/calligraphy. Which replace but do not replicate forms created by the Supreme, and introduce a mortal's version/vision. Also, a surge to reveal the reality/essence of an optical encounter. Take a flower. It appears

different from its varying viewing positions; it changes from full bloom to its decayed stage; it looks different in varying amount/angle of light. So what is a flower? Response to this, the Muslim image makers calculated the soul of a flower. An essence that does not rely on the ephemeral states/stages of the species.

The question of essence has haunted writers, artists, thinkers across cultures, continents and centuries. Amos Oz in his book of interviews ponders, "Take an apple. What makes an apple? Water, earth, sun, an apple tree, and a bit of fertilizer. But it doesn't look like any of those things. It's made of them but it is not like them"⁴. The elements of nature appearing in the miniature paintings, mosaics, pietra dura, rugs, vases, embroidery are not the morphs of what we look at, but what we observe beyond appearances. These aspects of nature are modified, tamed and edited through a device called geometry. Translating the diversity of flora and fauna, colors and textures into simple, yet complex structure of forms, the Muslim artists, artisans and craftsmen produced a range of works which, if on the one level refer to world outside, in actuality represent the divine being; the soul.

Flower, in the art of a society that relies on the eternity of souls – in contrast to the demise of a temporary body – is not a blossoming, wilting or withering affair, but a division and distribution of shapes and colors, an architecture that ensures permanent life. Based upon the elementary geometry, Abbas's imagery is a cross between the color wheel and a floral motif, which expands from the central point – like a 12 sided black polygon, created through the interlays of three elementary hues. In these relief sculptures, color emerges as light and object, it enters a viewer's gaze, occupies his brain, and unravels a set of cultural messages. But on a physical level, her translucent sections of Plexiglas with LED lights seem to be intermingling and emanating

4. Amos Oz, & Shira Hadad, *What Makes an Apple?*. Princeton & Oxford; Princeton University Press: 2022, 3.



Every Color is Shade of Black
1, 2, 3, 2020

Lightbox, plexiglass

121.9 cm (diameter)

Courtesy of COMO Museum
of Art, Lahore

a range of shades – ultimately a black circle, square, a 12-sided polygon, a 6-petal flower formed in the middle of the work.

Overlapping three elementary colors, cyan, magenta, yellow, other hues are generated in her *Color Wheel Series 1 to 5*, which – in reality – are not present. The work addresses the distance between what is real and what is illusionistic, diminishing the difference. In its physical manifestation, this body of work transcends its material/spatial reference; since it survives as a manifestation of light. Light, which in the ecclesiastical understanding, from the Gothic Art to the Islamic aesthetics, is a segment of divine presence (*nour*). Moses, the only mortal who had the privilege of encountering God saw Him as a great fire. Abbas creates this light through its ingredients, but once in front of these bright, blazing and brilliant works, a viewer could not focus on anything else but the central black shape, which erupts as vivid, luminous, and palpating. A density that travels from here to a deeper end, and vis-versa. An experience closer to watching a strong light for a while and then shutting your eyes, to find the light's residue as a black spot behind the closed eyelids.

The question remains, *why black?* If the rainbow does not have black color, and many modernist painters do not prefer it; yet black is essential, and plays a pivotal part in Abbas's aesthetics. One can understand an Impressionist painter's attitude in secluding black pigment from his palette, but for an artist belonging to the Muslim culture, black is not merely a color, it is the packaging which brings the words of God to humans. The Holy Quran is inscribed in black ink, and so are majority of sacred texts. A child in traditional societies like India, China and the Middle East learns to pen his/her first letters in black. So, the word, not separate or dissimilar from the world, is transcribed in black.

Significant Pakistani artists of an earlier generation, including Anwar Jalal Shemza, Sadequain, and Zahoor ul Akhlaq, had the ingredient of writing embedded in their image making, through their initial learning/exposure to calligraphy (putting characters in black ink on grey wooden tablets, *takhti*).

The lines of black in the Islamic pictorial practices became a means to define the outside world – much like words that describe the external reality. Hamra Abbas investigates images from the Mughal history in the South India, which denote reality on several levels. Mundane, spiritual, eternal. For example, the garden: An accumulation of trees, plants, hedges, shrubs, bushes, flowers, grass that may last just a few days/months/years, but in another context, these never die due to their cycle of reincarnation with each season/year/age.

In the Islamic scripture, if there is one *place* extensively narrated, it is the garden – the Garden of Eden. In the Sura *Al-rahman*, God delineates flowers, fruits, streams, and other details of the Paradise. So, for Muslims, garden was/is not merely an exercise in landscaping, but a means to attain the primordial heaven, existed before the fall of Adam and Eve. In Persian, Central Asian and Afghan carpets, in traditional Mughal miniature paintings, and in Muslim architecture/town planning, there have been attempts to concoct the image of garden. *Chahar Bagh* was a replica of heavenly garden, split into a quadrilateral by four streams of the Paradise: water, milk, honey, and wine. Mughal Emperors preferred to have their mausoleums in the middle of these gardens, affirming their eternal place of rest in the Paradise.

Hamra Abbas has documented the stone-inlay of Mughal buildings in Lahore, collecting images of heaven, streams, trees, fruits and recreated them in stone.



River: Gardens of Paradise,
2020

Marble, lapis lazuli

193 x 76 cm each

Courtesy of COMO Museum
of Art, Lahore

Transforming, mainly not their material, scale, function, but their pictorial sensibility. Inspired from the historic sources, her work suggests the originality of an artist who draws references from the past, but turns them into something new, relevant and lasting.

The art in its essence is a means to produce a parallel, perhaps a purer truth. A reality that resists the passage of time, or skepticism of non-believers. No living being has ever witnessed the heaven, but the belief of many followers of Islam is reaffirmed by recognizing its substitute in their surroundings – like the Taliban militants motivated by gazing at the beautified scenarios of Paradise decorating the walls of their narrow cubicles/dormitories – or an ordinary believer listening to the recital of Sura *Al-rahman*. Art contributes in convincing and confirming the presence and permanence of the unseen. It has been a tool employed by religions like Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism to convert stones into divine entities. Indicating this, Muhammad Iqbal, in his long poem *Shikwah*, complains to God: “*Khugar-e-paiker-e-mehsoos thhi insaan ki nazar/Maanta phir koi undekhay khuda ko kionkar*”⁵, (human eye, accustomed of perceiving physical manifestations/Found it hard to believe in an unseen God).

In a way, the history of art is the history of religion, from the prehistoric caves to the post-modern videos produced by the Taliban bombers prior to a suicide attack or by the militants of ISIS before beheading their captives. In the past a religion such as Islam resisted the replication of living beings in art, hence produced innumerable examples of geometric patterns. A form of stylization, or a means to control and convert one’s surroundings in shapes (like the act of writing/language). Interestingly these works, which in today’s art lingo could be termed as ‘post-human’ have something in common with the art of Kazimir Malevich, Joseph Albers and

Sol LeWitt, with their minimal language invoking the sensation of sublime (reconnecting to the statements of Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt).

Hamra Abbas translates the already translated version of reality – a synthesis of physical and the optical world. Her stone inlay works – of lines echoing the flow of heavenly water (derived from the samples of historic structures) are created with stones. Substance collected from diverse locations, but the work is a pact between the heaven and the earth, between the sublime and the mundane, between the high and the low. Different stones (i.e., marble, jasper, calcite, serpentine, lapis lazuli) are excavated from the pit of a mine, mountain, yet these eventually serve to denote a perfect, pure – and higher destination/destiny.

The voyage between earthen and heavenly, raw and sophisticated, human and supreme, is the story of all art, and the art of Hamra Abbas. In her series of *Prayer Rugs*, Abbas has created prayer mats with Islamic symbols – manufactured in China (like prayer rosaries). This meeting of pedestrian and profound is best explored in her series of portraits, of transgender persons. Painted with extreme precision using Gongbi technique on silk (a technique Abbas learnt during her Research Residency at NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore in 2015), these are pictures of characters, may be crowding roadsides for alms, but here it is not just about gender. Abbas has portrayed them as if wearing a dupatta. Looking at the contours of these faces, one senses the absence/presence of head scarf; and how the dogma of orthodoxy could contrast with their *chosen* profession or the gender expression.

We live in a society where contradictions comfortably coexist, as denoted in Hamra Abbas’s work; in which medieval Muslim India and the Minimalism of

5. Mohammad Iqbal, *Kulliyat-e-Iqbal*, Lahore: Ferozsons Limited, 2008, 175.

modern age cohabit, where Ka'ba, the most reverent structure of Islam can be connected to abstract art, and where spiritual mixes with physical. Her mapping of faces of transgender individuals through (absent) head scarves become a peculiar point where frivolity and fervor collide to the extent of believability. Reminding me of a transgender person I came across asking for money at a traffic signal in Lahore, not hiding the hair in a dupatta type loose fabric, but tightly concealed in a typical Wahhabi hijab – transcending his/her fiction into reality.



Every Color (detail), 2020

Gouache on silk

46.4 x 41.4 cm

FINDING PARADISE

Irfan Moeen Khan

Why do humans yearn for Paradise?¹ The symbolic significance of Paradise as a garden is undeniably intriguing. What is it about the garden form that readily serves as a representation of Paradise? Moreover, what aspects of the garden in human experience make it an apt metaphor for Paradise? In various religious traditions, the concept of Paradise, or at least a semblance, is present. This suggests that at the core of this concept lies the human desire to live in a state of eternal peace and love, even if the realities of our world often fall short of such aspirations.² Its power may lie in the fact that the everyday world of human existence is absent of just such a certainty. The power of the idea of Paradise lies in its ability to make our present existence bearable, offering hope for a future free from suffering. After all, the everyday world we inhabit lacks the certainty and tranquility that Paradise represents.

Parallel to Paradise's traditional association with the otherworldly realm, the human quest for finding or replication Paradise on earth has manifested through ideologies of empire and science.³ Dismissing Paradise as a fantastical idea without any basis in reality overlooks its performative role. This essay avoids delving into epistemology, metaphysics or the ontological debate regarding the existence of non-existence of Paradise.⁴ Instead, it focuses on exploring the profound desire, or eros, for Paradise.⁵

1. Harry B. Partin, "Paradise," Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* vol. 10 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 6983:

A Freudian interpretation would speak of wish fulfillment and the desire to return to the womb, but such an interpretation would be both limited and reductive. More significant than wishes, although they may be present, is the nostalgia, the haunting sense of loss and the powerful desire for recovery. The nostalgia for paradise is among the powerful nostalgias that seem to haunt human beings.

2. Muslim philosophers, known as *faylasūf*, maintained that descriptions of Paradise as a realm of sensual delights in the Qur'ān should be understood metaphorically. They believed that ordinary individuals lacked the capacity to live a disciplined life guided by reason, which is necessary to attain a deeper and more accurate understanding of religious scripture. Consequently, philosophers viewed the sensual promises of Paradise as symbolic rather than literal. However, they recognized the importance of a literal interpretation of such imagery, particularly when it comes to guiding the ordinary, providing them with a framework of rewards and punishments for moral guidance.

3. Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 90:

Christopher Columbus did not doubt that he had come near the Earthly Paradise. He believed that



Garden (in progress), 2021

Photograph by Amna Zuberi



the fresh water currents he encountered in the Gulf of Paria originated in the four rivers of the Garden of Eden. For Columbus, the search for the Earthly Paradise was not a chimera. The great navigator accorded an eschatological significance to this geographic discovery.

4. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Paradise Mislaid: How We Lost Heaven—How We Can Regain It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2:

A history of heaven, then, is a history of the human concept of heaven, and that is true whether or not heaven exists in itself. If heaven does not exist in itself and is nothing more than an idea that the mind invented, then it can be studied only in human terms. If on the other hand heaven does exist in itself—in God—it is still revealed to us only in terms that humans can understand. In either case, human concepts of heaven are the key.

5. Harry B. Partin, "Paradise," Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* vol. 10, 6981: The word *paradise* originated from Old Persian *pairidaeza*, which meant "walled enclosure, pleasure park, garden." *Pairidaeza* came into Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek retaining its original meanings. It appears three times in the Hebrew scriptures (*Neh.* 2:8, *Eccl.* 2:5, *Sg.* 4:13) and also in later rabbinic literature. In the Septuagint, the Hebrew

Engaging in an endless debate over the material existence of Paradise serves little purpose. Instead, it is more fruitful to consider its affective power.⁶ The concept of heaven provides humans with a vision of the potential to establish a utopia in the present world.⁷ Contrary to common perception, the association between the image of the garden and the otherworldly Paradise is not arbitrary. There exists a meaningful correspondence between the two, offering insights into the symbolic significance of the garden as a representation of Paradise. This is because “gardens, in short, are both entities within themselves and a focus of human speculations, propositions and negotiations, concerning what it is to live in the world.”⁸ Harry B. Partin’s explanation about the inherent efficacy of the image is a compelling one:

It is not difficult to understand why the garden has often provided the setting for the primordial paradise and, as well, the paradise of the dead. Whether cultivated (as it was after the discovery of agriculture) or provided by nature, a garden is a striking phenomenon. Typically, it is in evident contrast with the surrounding territory, sometimes dramatically. It seems to constitute another world, different from the ordinary one, a world in which seed, soil, and water combine in evident manifestation of fertility, vitality, and abundance. For humans it provides refreshment as well as nourishment, and signalizes an alluring mode of human existence.⁹

The allure of Paradise holds a greater influence within our political and cultural framework than we typically acknowledge. Its power extends beyond what is commonly attributed to it:

I submit that the dominant, Augustinian interpretation of the Garden of Eden myth can be usefully read as a pedagogical metaphor, as a “reigning paradigm” which shapes and informs contemporary educational and political thought and practice far more than we may realize. However, because this mythic structure refers to the deep past, it is difficult to identify its active presence and influence within our educational and political culture.¹⁰

word for “garden” was usually translated by the Greek *paradeisos*. In *Genesis* 2–3 *paradeisos* refers to the original Garden of Eden (lit., “delight”).” Harry B. Partin, “Paradise,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 6984: “The garden is the most common representation of paradise. This representation is not limited to religions originating in the Middle East. There is, for example, a Mahāyāna Buddhist paradise, Sukhāvati, the “pure land” of the Buddha Amitābha. In the *Sukhāvativyūha*, the paradise of Amitābha is described as fertile, rich, comfortable, and delightful.”

6. Christine Raffini, “The Passion for Place: Medieval and Renaissance Re-Creations of Paradise,” in Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (ed.), *The Elemental Passion for Place in the Ontopoiesis of Life: Passions of the Soul in the Imaginatio Creatrix* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 229:

Re-creations of paradise were motivated by something more than mere greed or the desire for glory, and even something other than the love of God. Behind the collective efforts that for so many centuries gave rise to architecture, theater, the voyages of discovery, and the great gardens of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, was the elemental passion for place, the desire for the innocence of Eden and the perfection of heaven.

7. Don Ihde, *Technology and The Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 20:

This detour into the



Garden as an imaginative contrast to the actual world of human-technology interactions has been taken for heuristic and suggestive purposes. A “return” to such a Garden is likely neither desirable nor possible. Given the extent and magnitude of the human population of the earth, were we to lose our technological capacity tomorrow, the result of the ensuing crisis would approximate, perhaps more slowly and painfully, precisely the likely outcome of a nuclear war in human devastation. The survivors would be those who somehow found themselves in the few garden spots of the tropics noted in our first excursions from the Garden. In this sense, a non-technological end of the world is not terribly different in result from a technological one, even though the former is merely an imaginative possibility and the latter something stronger. We have left the Garden and inherited the Earth.

8. John Dixon Hunt, *A World of Gardens* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 12.

9. Harry B. Partin, “Paradise,” 6985.

10. Kerry T. Burch, “Eros Denied: The Garden of Eden Myth as a Pedagogical Metaphor.” *Counterpoints* 114 (2000), 80.

Garden (in progress), 2021

Photograph by Amna Zuberi

In the realm of modern intellectual thought, two prominent and opposing forces, Marxism and Capitalism, embody the promise of liberation. Both ideologies offer a vision of progress for humanity. The prevailing belief in the modern age is that through continuous exploration, innovation, and scientific advancements, we can overcome the challenges that afflict us and even attain a semblance of immortality.¹¹ As a consequence, “idea of Progress has replaced a vision of Paradise as the central concern of modern man”¹² Nevertheless, the idea of progress is driven by the vision of Paradise. However, despite our remarkable technological achievements, the impending ecological crisis poses a severe threat to the world. Our connection to the natural world, once seen through the lens of romanticism, has transformed into an urgent concern. Forests, mountains, glaciers, rivers, trees, and flowers once taken for granted, now hold a crucial significance as their preservation becomes vital for the well-being of our planet and ourselves.

What kind of philosophy would work best in this human quest for a paradisiacal existence for all?¹³ What kind of imagination would succeed in such a recovery?¹⁴ That is, a universal garden, beyond its traditional (or, say, imperial) meaning as an enclosure.¹⁵ What kind of work does transforming this world into an earthly paradise require from us? The archetypical image of Paradise offers us a template of human existence; it explains the need for language, civilization, and more.¹⁶ This is because “at a deeper level, the garden represents the interdependence of humans and other parts of the natural world. The garden is a space designated for a partnership between human activity and a compliant natural world.”¹⁷

After the cataclysmic events of the French Revolution, which led to the dismantling the old theocratic order, a pressing need emerged for a

11. Jonathan Weiner, *Long for This World: The Strange Science of Immortality* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010), 13:

The study of longevity is now in an almost feverish state. Twenty years ago, not many biologists worked on the problem. The field was small. It seemed odd. You might say the science of eternal youth was looking and feeling its age. Efforts to extend the human life span in any serious, deliberate way had gotten nowhere since the studies of the ancient Greeks and Babylonians; since the tomb-builders and tomb-robbers of Egypt; since the glory days of the Taoist deep breathers, extreme dieters, and sexual athletes of China (“He who is able to have coitus several tens of times in a single day and night without allowing his essence to escape will be cured of all maladies...”). But today the science of longevity is growing fast.

12. Bruce Mazlish, “The Idea of Progress,” *Daedalus* 92.3 (1963), 447.

13. Moloney, Pat. “Leaving the Garden of Eden: Linguistic and Political Authority in Thomas Hobbes.” *History of Political Thought* 18.2 (1997), 245:

[Hobbes] state-of-nature discourse shared the ahistorical and hypothetical character of the Edenic one. Eden was, in an important sense, out of time. Salvation history began only at, and on account of, the Fall. In the Garden, Adam and Eve, sustained as they were by the tree of life, suffered no decay or aging of their bodies. Immortality would have

reimagined social structure to govern the affairs of the state. With the once-dominant relationship between the monarchy and the church severed, the French revolutionaries sought to elevate reason to a position of prominence. They recognized that society needed a fresh moral framework to guide its functioning. Ironically, “there was plenty of ritual. The *révolutionnaires* deliberately created secular saints: the remains of Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were transferred to the Panthéon with elaborate processions and ceremonies.”¹⁸ Robert Owen, a staunch advocate of socialism, set up model communities in New Lanark free of theological ideas yet found himself delivering ethical lectures on Sundays, “presided over “naming” ceremonies for children...built “Halls of Science” across the country.”¹⁹

I end the essay by sharing a passage from Richard Gerber’s *Utopian Fantasy: A Study of English Fiction Since the End of the Nineteenth Century* about our dilemma. The idea of Paradise is woven into our collective unconsciousness. Hence, irrespective of the concern over its existence or non-existence:

In pursuing their search for the best possible society, the utopians have generally adopted two conflicting attitudes, two traditionally opposed views of man’s position in this world: some of them hold that man is created and conditioned by his surrounding, others hold that the man’s mind is free. In the materialistic view, improving the environment will predominate since, with improved surroundings, man’s mental progress will follow as a matter of course. If everybody is materially satisfied, everybody will be happy and behave like a Christian. The idealists on the other hand always insist on a primary of man’s mental and moral improvement. If all the people are good, all will love each other, and material satisfaction will be the almost automatic consequence. These two extremes are often mixed in utopian practice. Moral, intellectual, and material improvement are seen working together and contributing to each other. All the same two clearly distinct types of utopias emerge, for the two fundamentally different aims require different initial conditions, which in their turn lead to diametrically opposite societies. These two types can be called arcadian and scientific.²⁰

During the American-Vietnam War, John Lennon’s

been their reward had they not sinned. That their stay in Paradise was in fact remarkably short meant that reflection on what life would have been like had they not sinned was highly speculative. With scripture silent on these matters, Eden became a ‘possible world’ in which to text the implications of the epistemological and political premises that applied in the world of fallen human nature. Like the state-of-nature discourse that replaced it, what life would have been like in Eden was a philosophical exercise, a thought exercise.

14. Catherine Wolfe, *Beyond: How Humankind Thinks About Heaven* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2021), 8:

The workings of the imagination are mysterious. Samuel Taylor Coleridge described the imagination as the power “to shape into one,” so that unconscious elements emerge into consciousness, making a meaningful whole of sensations, language, memory and perceptions.” Coleridge offers us a more robust perspective on the epistemological role of imagination compared to what scientific positivism provides.

15. Anne van Erp-Houtepen, “The Etymological Origin of the Garden.” *Journal of Garden History* 6.3 (2012), 227:

A garden then is fenced and cultivated. This is entirely in accordance with the descriptions we find in dictionaries which tell us that a garden is an enclosure, cultivated in some way. And indeed, from an etymological point of view the garden defines itself by its fence. This is manifested in an intertwined set of relations between words for garden and town

1971 anthem 'Imagine' expressed a fervent longing for a paradisiacal state of innocence in his "Imagine." Decades later, the song's soul lyrics still possess the power to grant even the staunchest of pessimists, be they literary or otherwise, a fleeting respite. Other wars have erupted since then. New projects of scientific wonders of our age are to be revealed soon. Yet, in all the progress, the colors and scents of the garden call us back to an enchanting stillness, beckoning us to pause and seek solace from the turmoil within ourselves. A matter of mythology or not, the desire for Paradise represents a fundamental yearning to comprehend the essence of our humanity. The quest will persist as long as we can experience a mysterious, ineffable repose in the presence of a garden. In essence, the desire to return to Paradisiacal innocence is perhaps located somewhere between the midsection area of the mind and the heart.

(another enclosure) in European languages, as a: history of these words makes clear.

16. Francis Landy, "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98.4 (1979), 524:

As an etiological myth it is extraordinarily comprehensive. It explains the creation of vegetation, man, animals, and woman; the origin of language; the prohibition of incest; the beginning of history and necessity for culture, as well as lesser details, such as the cause of pain in childbirth and enmity between serpents and women. Other consequences of the fall are the subservience of women to men, the hostility of the earth, and, most of all, human morality; its concomitants are moral awareness and sexual shame, and hence the origin of clothes. The impulse that causes the catastrophe is man's ambition, his wish to be like God. The myth idealizes prehistory, when nature spontaneously provided man with all his needs; his emergence into history and culture is forced on him by the withdrawal of nature's bounty, the loss of paradise.

17. Gordon Campbell. *Garden History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 25.

18. John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge (eds.), *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 36.

19. John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge (eds.), *God is Back*, 36.



20. Richard Gerber, *Utopian Fantasy: A Study of English Utopian Fiction Since the End of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), 46.

Garden (in progress), 2021

**HAMRA ABBAS:
THE FORMATION
OF A
CONTEMPORARY
ARTIST**

Zena Khan

In 2020 COMO Museum of Art held a solo exhibition for Hamra Abbas titled "Every Color Is A Shade of Black" in Lahore. The exhibition featured a diverse array of recently made artworks that showcased Abbas's interdisciplinary practice as well as the multi-valent philosophies she engages in. Among those philosophies on display were the question of how pigment might act as object in its own right, as first seen in "Color" (2017) a solo show held at Canvas Gallery, Karachi, miniatures as a contemporary reflection on portraiture, and a newer turn towards marble inlay, inspired by the ornamentation of Mughal architecture. Brought together in a single space these artworks revealed the current state of Abbas's practice while hinting at the threads that have always run through her art. These threads focus on the value of geography for artistic production, spiritualism and identity politics.

In the contemporary world, knowledge and experiences are often broad and thorough. An increase in travel and migration aids this by allowing individuals to experience several cultures at close quarters. Certainly, this holds true for Abbas, whose lived life directly impacts her creative work both technically and conceptually. Over the years she has inhabited a multitude of cities with distinct cultural identities and histories that, when merged with her own ethnic, gender and spiritual identity, have shaped a complex way of thinking through art.

These formative experiences provide a sense of Abbas having lived much of her life both in the thick of things as well as inhabiting a space that might be known as "inter". When we talk about a formative experience, we may refer to a moment, event or period in time that deeply impacts an individual. For Hamra it seems that there have been several which are woven together to create the complex, multi-disciplinary artist she is.

Every Color is Shade of Black
3 (exhibition view), 2020

Lightbox, plexiglass

121.9 cm (diameter)

Courtesy of COMO Museum
of Art, Lahore

Photograph by Asif Khan



as Understanding the notion of “inter” as a position between two things - be it two genres of art or two cultures - begins to clarify how and why Abbas’s art is not confined to a single mode of making or philosophy. Instead, her aesthetic and conceptual diversity evokes her life story. It is the aesthetic of purposeful cultural dislocation.

The formative experiences Abbas is associated with have been discussed in terms of geographies- that is the cities in which she has lived. There is strong accuracy to this angle. We see that location often ties in to her modes of working or medium. Take for example her marble-inlay artworks such as *Gardens of Paradise* that could only be made in Lahore. It was inspired by the marble inlay at Mughal monument, and the materials and craftsmen involved are situated in Lahore. Another reason geography is significant for Abbas is because each space she has inhabited has infused new knowledge into her, via what she has seen, heard and discussed. Thus, it becomes apparent that to develop an accurate reading of Abbas, in all her fullness, traversing her biography and understanding the physical, intellectual and visual experiences she has had up till today is vital.

Hamra Abbas was born in Kuwait, and lived there before the family moved back to Lahore in 1986, where she completed her studies. Living in and being educated in this historic city during the rapidly developing post-colonial era was revelatory as Abbas gained an intimate understanding of the past and present. Later she studied Fine Art at National College of Arts (NCA), and in her undergraduate years from 1996 to 1999 Abbas majored in Sculpture with a minor in Miniature Painting, two disciplines that have vast differences in approach and scale, and whose influence vertebrate through her works.

The term “Miniature Painting” automatically

conjures up connotations of scale. In the small size miniatures possess perspective, composition and palette pose a wholly separate challenge to larger canvases. Intricacy is paramount, often emphasized via techniques such as hatching, stippling and glazing. Pre-production is intricate too, and the preparation that goes into readying the papers can be seen as embodying a sculptural act through its treatment as an object. Stepping back to discover Hamra Abbas’s initial training was in disciplines that favor object making and attention to detail, audiences can better understand her current practice where all aspects of form, scale, composition, palette and perspective are considered with equal weight, and in relation to conceptual concerns.

It may be posited that this training in Miniature Painting held an invaluable conceptual value for Abbas too. Concurrent to her training was the growing decentralizing of the art world as global art histories were being remapped to include the values and stories of those areas typically considered away from the Global Western centers of art. Along with an increasing flexible way of considering artistic production in terms of art academia, artists in emerging ecologies were examining artistic production tied to their own identities. Miniature Painting fell firmly into this realm as a mode of painting that was deeply entrenched in South Asian history as a way to illustrate religious stories, histories of empire, scientific texts, poetry or folklore of the region. By learning a distinctly South Asian mode of painting Abbas was learning how art was made in her own heritage, and became able to intertwine Pakistani pictorial traditions with Western formalism.

Soon after her BFA, Hamra Abbas was enrolled in the MA (Hons.) Visual Arts, at her alma mater. The program director Lala Rukh was an artist, activist and academic whose own practice often raised awareness on



social and human rights issues in Pakistan and a founding member of Women's Action Forum in 1981. Under Lala Rukh's mentorship, Abbas was introduced to the fundamentals of several artistic aspects, from architecture and music, to painting, sculpture or performance, often with professionals in each field invited as speakers. The resulting multi-valent artistic discourse influenced the inter-disciplinary tone we see in Hamra Abbas's own artistic voice today. Her works take on diverse modes of production and aesthetic, all finely produced to high technical standards, to make conceptual, socio-political and personal thinking concrete.

Critical thinking and reading were another bedrock of the MA (Hons.) Visual Arts. One of the key texts Lala Rukh would center critical discourse around was Rasheed Araeen's "Third Text". "Third Text" is held up as a leading journal on art in the global context and challenges notions of art practice, art history, popular media and cultural theory while maintaining a critical perspective on contemporary art and culture around the world. Intellectual discourse such as this became vital in a period Hamra Abbas was studying the politics of race, place and postcolonialism.

Studying the art of Araeen was yet another avenue of influence on the young MA student, in particular Araeen's early works which stunned with their hard-hitting examination of hierarchies and politics. These works and their philosophies differed vastly from the other material that Abbas and her compatriots had access to previously, which several of Araeen's works are exemplary to his Western institutional critique. Hamra Abbas cites *Green Painting* (1985-86) as an example. The 9 parts grids of this work in which Araeen had four corner panels painted in green employed color and geometric compositions as tools to visually heighten his questioning on the Eurocentric boundaries of art discourse at the time.

Structurally *Green Painting* riffed off parallels between Eastern and Western philosophies and thought patterns, making links to the frameworks within which social institutions or aesthetics were understood - and offering radically alternate avenues of thinking.

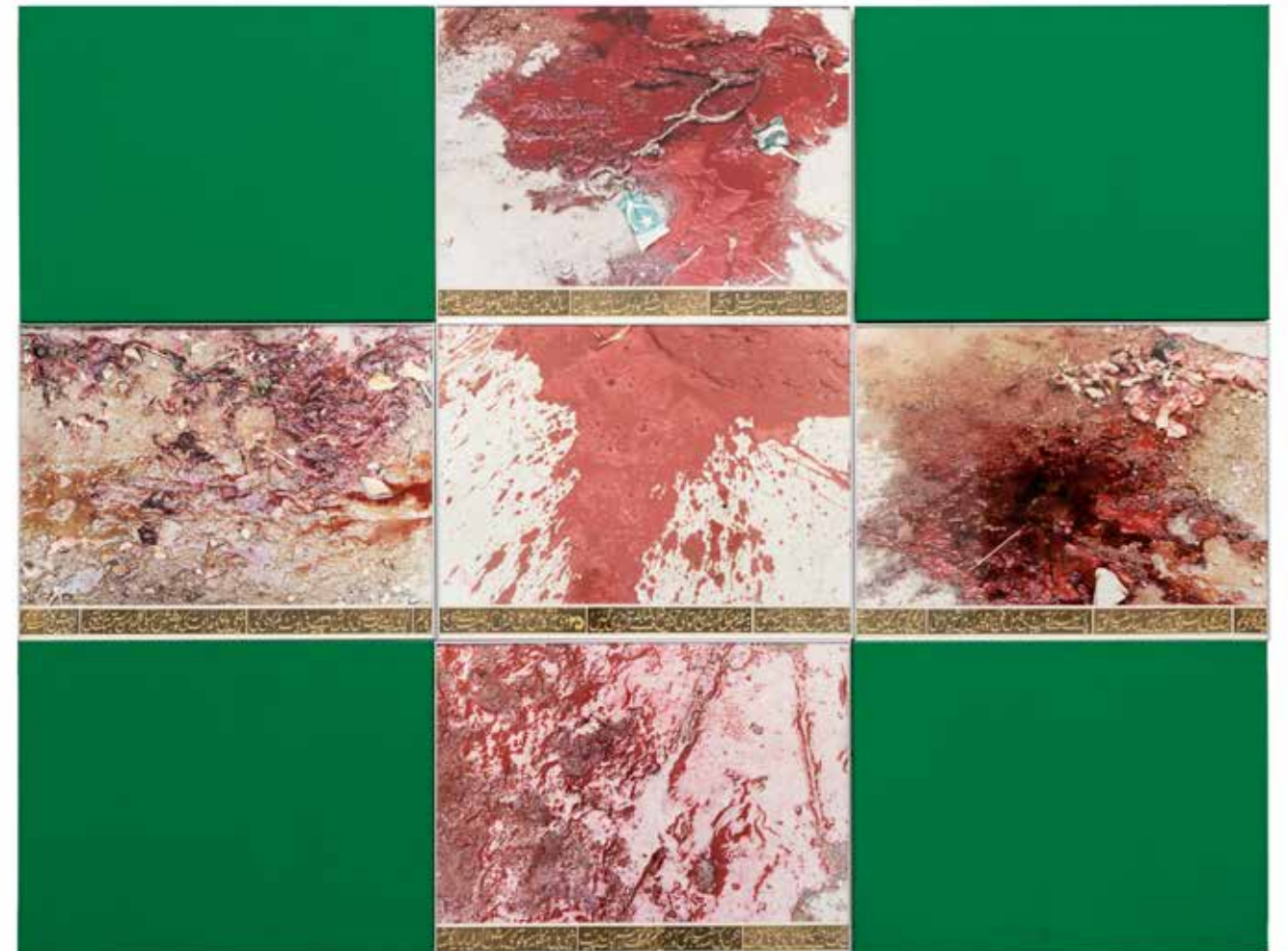
Art is, at its core, primarily visual. The act of seeing art, of experiencing art with one's own senses, is vital. Viewing Araeen's ground breaking works, discussing not only their impact but using them as a sparking point for discourse on politics and social or racial issues was a formative visceral experience for Hamra Abbas as she transitioned from student to full-time artist. Another formative experience which she has spoken of with great emphasis was the first international exhibition she ever saw, Documenta 11, which ran from June to September 2002. This edition was curated by the Nigerian born Okwui Enwezor, the first non-European director of a Documenta. The staging of what was seen as the first truly global, postcolonial Documenta exhibition was coincided with Abbas's move to Berlin for her post graduate studies at Universität der Künste. Its impact on the young artist was profound, emerging strongly in the vibrant presentations she makes when exhibiting her monumental artworks.

The year 2002 not only marked Abbas's move to Berlin but was the beginning of an extended period of living away from Lahore. Looking back at this period from 2002 to 2015 at this current moment in time, Abbas has reflected that it represents the bulk of her working life to date. Every year brought with it the unknown. Where would she live, what would she experience and consequently what art would she make? Embracing the opportunities this fluid, nomadic existence, Abbas undertook several global residencies to refine her practice. Chief amongst these is the Fellowship Award, Artist-in-Residence at Vermont Studio Centre (2003),

Green Painting 1, 1987

© Rasheed Araeen, 1987

Courtesy of Grosvenor
Gallery, London



Residency with Gasworks, V&A and Green Cardamom, London (2006), Triangle Artist Residency in Brooklyn, New York (2010), and Artist-in-Residence at NTU Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore (2015).

The adventurous spirit that runs through this decade and a half brought forward a body of work in extremely fresh and experimental forms. These works learnt first on her learnings during her time at NCA and Universität der Künste and then on the skills honed during her residencies, and would go on to act as stepping stones for consequential works. Her success in this time was affirmed via a series of global art awards, including Meisterschueler Prize, Universität der Künste Berlin (2004), Jury Prize, Sharjah Biennale 9 (2009), Abraaj Capital Art Prize Winner (2011) and the Asia Society Game Changer Award (2021), and the invitation to exhibit her work at several international exhibitions. It was becoming clear that her work in that period resonated with the global art community for its relevance to the critical discourse that was emerging in that moment.

A prominent and consistent feature of Hamra Abbas from this early period until today has been sculpture, the area she specialized in as a student. The influence of the three-dimensional object and her interest in how objects inform and demonstrate thought has held firm, even in works that would not immediately be considered as sculpture. A prime example is her early performance piece *Paradise Bath* (2009). While this work is site specific and performative, it relies strongly on the use of objects and space in its realization.

The origin of *Paradise Bath* is multi-faceted, as might be expected of Abbas's lively and curious mind that is constantly making intellectual connections. The project was instigated on a visit in tandem with the residency Abbas undertook as part of the Thessaloniki

Biennale where she was taken to visit Thessaloniki in Greece. The Biennale and residency provided ample interaction with the coastal city via tours of historic sites and contemporary art spaces and studios, along with lectures on the city's history from ancient times to present day. One moment that especially stood out for Abbas was a visit to the Bey Hammam, the city's first Ottoman bath house dating back to 1444.

The Thessaloniki trip and visit to Bey Hammam occurred in a period when the artist was working closely with PILOT Gallery in Istanbul. Connections between this key historic Greek site and Turkey, through the shared Ottoman histories and the prevalence of the bath house, immediately came to mind and became a lens through which she could explore memory and power as well as rituals of washing and cleansing which are associated with regaining purity and prevalent in Islamic culture. PILOT Gallery aided Abbas in learning the ritual of performing a Turkish bath and acquiring the necessary paraphernalia, from soaps and scrubs to loofahs, pots and brushes in Istanbul. From here she was able to enact the second part of her Thessaloniki Biennale work by returning to Bey Hammam and perform the rituals of a Turkish bath on a performer named Angeliki.

In auditioning for *Paradise Bath* Angeliki said to Abbas "My name means Angel and so I am perfect for your paradise bath." This statement is revelatory. The piece, which comprises both performance and a series of nine photographs shot by Serkan Taycan who was also invited from Turkey to photograph Abbas's performance, is an early insight into her repeated conceptual turn towards notions of Paradise. The work itself references overlaps between Greece and Turkey, the Muslim past of the Ottoman Empire, water and paradise, two recurrent themes for Abbas, and Orientalism. In holding several notions within this site-specific piece, filled with objects

and actions, *Paradise Bath* set the tone on a wider stage for Abbas's artistic intentions: to weave a multitude of ideologies together in single frameworks exploding with meaning.

Diverse objects and actions, such as sculpture and photography or text meet often in Abbas's works. *Please Do Not Step: Loss of a Magnificent Story* (2017) for example presents a fantastical poem Abbas writes about migration across the surface of a marble floor slab. This piece has roots in temporary version, commissioned in 2009 by Victoria & Albert Museum London in 2009 as part of the Jameel prize. In this earlier version paper was cut into words and Islamic geometric patterns and set across an area of floor. As museum visitors traversed over it, they eventually obliterated the work. During this period, she produced the ephemeral geometric and text focused work for the V&A she also began work on an impactful miniature installation *God Grows on Trees* (2008). This set of 99 miniature portraits and a C Print photograph, was the beginning of Abbas's signature format of miniature portraiture where only the face is presented, neatly cropped against the hairlines. *God Grows on Trees* was exhibited at Sharjah Biennale 9 (2009).

Over the span of a year Hamra Abbas visited *Madrassahs* (religious schools) in Pakistan and painted 99 portraits of young children studying there. Several modes of production are found in *God Grows on Trees*; in attempting to faithfully recreate the children's faces Abbas married techniques of miniature and realism. Accompanying the paintings is a C-Print, the photograph of trees along a road in Lahore onto which metal plates inscribed with the 99 names of Allah are nailed. By merging these techniques together Abbas updates traditional South Asian painting, allowing for a visual reading of the marriage of deep-rooted heritage and

contemporary developments.

The explosive meanings embedded in Abbas's art often unfold over time. We might return to the term 'inter' here. There exists what is said directly, for example the shared histories of Greece and Turkey and the Ottoman Empire in *Paradise Bath*. At times this has been through the socio-political realities of being a Muslim in the twenty-first century, as seen in *God Grows on Trees*. At other times, it is more personal, as expressed in the *Barakah Gifts* series.

Hamra Abbas based the *Barakah Gifts* series on the commercial souvenirs pilgrims to Makkah and Medina buy to adorn their homes or distribute as gifts on their return home. Her fascination with the way an object's meaning extends past its production and use through a viewer's lens and interpretation appears strongly in this series. The souvenirs that inspired Abbas move past functionality both by way of where they were acquired, in Makkah and Medina, and by the decorations on them, which include images of the Kaaba, the mosque at Medina or timepieces. Abbas had undertaken the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina with her husband and then one-year old son in 2012 and was fascinated by the markets adjoining the main mosques. Viewing these sites as a meeting point of devotion and commerce she became interested in the paradox of representing religious sentiment via casual objects. Exaggerating these gift items into larger scale sculptures, often in bright or shiny finishes, emphasizes that the ephemeral value of these objects resides beyond the commercial. As a result, Abbas moved the existence of the *Barakah Gift* series past being objects, turning them into sites for critical discourse. Through these she again raises the notion of intersections, and the meanings that can be found in the spaces between several parallel or oppositional thoughts.



Various Waterfalls (in progress), 2022

Marble, lapis lazuli, serpentine, jasper

Barakah Gifts - Water Bottle (2016) demonstrates how scale was becoming a key tool for Abbas. Standing at 12 feet tall and installed in the American embassy in Islamabad this work, which was commissioned by the American Art in Embassies Program, draws viewers in immediately through its monumental scale and mirror-like finish. In attracting visual attention, it raises the questions “what is that? What does it mean?” amongst audiences, prompting thought and discourse.

The production of *Barakah Gifts - Water Bottle* is an example of the technical stepping stones that exist throughout Abbas’s practice. During the production of *Lessons on Love* (2009) for the Istanbul Biennale she began a working relationship with fabricators in a town outside Turin, Italy, who transformed her soft sculptures into resin and fiberglass, often on sizeable scales. Developing this relationship with makers marked a technical turning point which broke down even more barriers within Abbas’s practice, shoring up the diversity across which she produces.

2014 brought a complete shift with *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint* in her art practice. It demonstrates Abbas’s ability to encompass conceptual diversities in a single artwork. Made up of six archival pigment digital prints this work has several points of instigation, including the Minimalistic practices of Sol LeWitt, Richard Serra and Tony Smith; the Kaaba as iconography; and color theory. Perhaps the most elevated concept becomes the one to tie *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint* into Abbas’s wider practice, as she explored how subtle reorientations of form would alter the way in which an object is read, and thus how knowledge is submitted and received.

In constructing the Kaaba via two stacked rectangles Abbas’s employed Minimalism to spark a dialogue between rational geometry and faith-based

devotion. This links back to *Barakah Gifts - Water Bottle* where she comments that the flasks used for carrying Zam Zam water could in fact hold any water source, holy or not, resulting in a hybridity of “non-religious, religious objects.” Following on from *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint* Hamra Abbas wondered if the three colors that she used are the basis of all colors, then aren’t all colors a shade of black? This phrase guided several artistic decisions she made subsequent to *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint* in the period she lived between Massachusetts and Lahore. Misprint Star extended her investigations into Minimalism, scale and geometry by substituting the rectangles of the original work with a triangle, hexagon and square. In being influenced by *Sol LeWitt’s Drawing #343* (1980) Abbas highlights the conceptual aspect of her minimal prints, reminding audiences to return to the core thinking that gave rise to the work. Each shape she made was filled in solid black thanks to the perfect alignment of cyan, magenta and yellow. Rotating these shapes on their axis generated a polysemy of colors, manifested in triangular peaks. This “misprint” gave rise to a new star form and colors, and may be seen as an embodiment of Abbas’s voice as a new one in the contemporary art world, where emerging markets such as Pakistan command great weight as global art history is being re-navigated.

Every Color which come from Hamra Abbas’s 2022 solo “Color/Garden” at Lawrie Shabibi in Dubai have pushed the idea of color and color theory further by releasing them from the idea of connection. The set of prints is made up of six colors, three primary colors and three mixed colors that resulted from mixing the primary shades. The mixed colors become a metaphor for illusion, questioning if reality is absolute or simply what one chooses to see? That viewpoints are multiple, particularly across areas of politics, faith and rituals in our increasingly global world, is made plain.

Tracing through Abbas's practice, her affection for the three-dimensional object is clear. It might be speculated that her treatment of two-dimensional formats as sculpture or installation was at times due to the specific nature of producing sculpture, often due to studio concerns or space restraints. Following the birth of Abbas's second son in 2015 the family began to split their time more evenly between the US and Pakistan, allowing Abbas to set up a studio in Lahore. Following the Covid-19 pandemic and global lockdowns in 2020 the family chose to base themselves out of Lahore, a decision that must have partly been made from the freedom Abbas felt to produce the large-scale marble sculptures she had been working on since her return to Lahore.

Much like the miniature painting Hamra Abbas studied as a student at NCA, marble inlay is a classical South Asian craft, and is one of Mughal architecture's most remarkable features. The city of Lahore has a multitude of Mughal structures adorned with marble inlay, rendering the city one of the important centers for this historic process up until modern times.

Abbas's familiarity with the decorative aspects of Mughal architecture, namely frescos and inlay, emerged through her first monumental marble inlay work *Gardens of Paradise* (2017), which she began work on as soon as she returned from Boston. Subsequent to her extended absence from the city that had been her home for so many years she noticed aesthetic references to Paradise (Al-Janna), from Mughal gardens to patterns depicting trees, fruits, flowers and waterfalls. These observations formed a rediscovery, not only of Lahore, but in what associations these botanical references held in spiritual and socio-cultural terms.

Gardens of Paradise examines the heavenly

promise of eternal life in a garden that repeats throughout several religious traditions. Yet a wider premise exists in this work that extends through Abbas's subsequent marble inlay pieces. The ornamentation that informed Abbas's pattern imagery is drawn from a historic site. Its original function was dual; one to be a form of decoration and two to establish a link between the physical world and the afterlife—to situate the viewer in a simulation of the Heavenly abode itself. Abbas's examination of the pattern's usage and presentation asks her audience to pay attention to the affective power of imagery. By producing the work in a century's old tradition of marble inlay, aided by craftsmen from Lahore, Abbas grounds the sculpture and her line of questioning in history and place.

Several motifs exist across the Mughal structures that have had varying influences and impacts on Hamra Abbas. She recognizes that as they strove to create an immersive experience that would stir yearning for the blissful hereafter in the beholder, these patterns became complex sites for the aesthetics of desire. Furthermore, each individual design held its own narrative which, when reproduced, would encourage a viewer to either examine that motif in detail and discover specialized knowledge on one area, or to think of broader stories by marrying several images together in a single scene. A parallel exists here with the way in which knowledge itself may be learnt; either one can fully study a single subject to its most minute detail or in the digital era one is exposed to several branches of broad knowledge all at once.

Waterfall: Gardens of Paradise (2017) is an example of a work in which Abbas studied a single pattern in extreme detail, becoming an expert on its history, construction and making those stories available to contemporary audiences by repurposing it in her contemporary practice. *Garden*, which was commissioned

for the Expo 2020 Dubai, has been her most monumental marble inlay piece to date and demonstrates the multi-faceted thoughts that Hamra Abbas had worked on since the early 2000's.

Constructed from marble, lapis lazuli, granite, serpentine, pink calcite, jasper, and measuring an astounding 32 x 30 feet, *Garden* is a floor sculpture inspired both by Mughal gardens as well as the idyllic scenes found in miniature paintings. At first glance the work's layout appears recognizable from the historic sources it references yet via composition and perspective it reaches into completely fresh contemporary visuals. Unlike in traditional gardens Abbas has removed vertical and horizontal axis that act as enclosures, allowing the earthly waterfalls, rocks, flowers and the tree that stretches into the stars to intertwine. As the viewers walk over the work, they become part of it, emphasizing notions of connectivity that might refer to this life and the next, or between different geographies through the advent of technology and travel, or to the symbolic significance of gardens to architecture in both Western and Eastern tradition. As with much of her work in *Garden* Hamra Abbas provides several conceptual avenues to show how art has the ability to communicate past what words can describe, via atmosphere and aesthetic.

Garden (detail), 2021

Marble, lapis lazuli, granite,
serpentine, pink calcite,
jasper

975 x 914 cm

© Hamra Abbas 2021

Commissioned by Expo 2020
Dubai

Expo 2020 Dubai Collection

Photograph by
Roman Mensing and Thorsten
Arendt





Mountain 4, 2023

Lapis lazuli, granite

152.4 x 609.6 cm

Commissioned by Kiran
Nader Museum of Art, New
Delhi

Courtesy of Canvas Gallery,
Karachi



HAMRA ABBAS

EVERY COLOR IS A SHADE OF BLACK

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BOOK COVER IMAGE

Kaaba Picture as a Misprint, 2014

LEFT

Every Color Is a Shade of Black, 2024

Banner

1080 x 860 cm

Commissioned by Alserkal Avenue for Quoz Arts Fest, 2024

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai

Photograph by Bukhash Brothers

INSIDE FRONT COVER

Mountain 3, 2023

Marble

182.9 x 304.8 cm

Courtesy of Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai

Photograph by Ismail Noor

INSIDE BACK COVER

Lapis Lazuli storage, Peshawar