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THE CURIOUS ISSUE

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MEASURED MEANING

by Danna Lorch

Dana Awartani's minimalist illuminations place her in a rare and illustrious art circle

Dana Awartani regards herself as a contemporary Islamic artist. Her illuminations are distinguishable by their minimalism, and she may very well be the only artist working strictly within the medium in Saudi Arabia today. Ironically, as all university programmes in the visual arts in her home country focused on Western arts, she had to go to London to study at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts, one of the only institutions in the world that offers training in geometry and illumination.

We met for a conversation on a windy hotel terrace one morning before Art Dubai's opening.

Selections/Danna Lorch (DL): Your practice incorporates sacred geometry. How would you explain the underlying theory to a beginner?

Dana Awartani (DA): First of all, geometry is not exclusively Islamic. You see it in Buddhist mandalas and churches' stained glass windows, but because Islamic art is non-figurative, geometry has developed tremendously. I wrote my dissertation on the eight-pointed star. Ibn Arabi relates the number eight to the throne of God. Sufis believe in an eight-fold path towards perfection. These designs weren't originally meant to be decorative.

Dana Awartani, *He Who Created The Heavens and Earth In Six Days*, 2013, natural pigments shell gold and pen on mount board

DL: Who is your mentor?

DA: I'm the apprentice to a master illuminator in Turkey. She holds certificates (ijaza), in illumination and calligraphy. It's a very technique-based, old school way of learning. Within one year I anticipate receiving an ijaza myself.

DL: How much room for innovation is there within your medium?

DA: I stick one hundred percent to traditional techniques. With illuminations, you can experiment in terms of concept and design, but when it comes to execution there's a system: transfer the design, add gold and a basecoat, make the outline, next the rendering, and finally the background colour. I don't use a computer at all, just my hands and sometimes a compass or a ruler.

DL: You have your first solo show coming up at Athr Gallery in Jeddah this summer. What will you be introducing?

DA: The work has to do with Abjad (Arabic numerology). Every letter of the alphabet has a value attached to it. Alef is 1, Ba is 2, and so on. Numbers are regarded as a gateway to the truth. I find geometry everywhere in nature. If you cut an apple width-wise, there is a perfect star inside.

DL: There is a strong element of progression in everything you create. Perhaps the best example of this was *He Is Who Created The Heavens and Earth In Six Days*. What are the reasons for this?

DA: In that specific piece, I demonstrated each of the steps of the illumination process. Today, the technique behind Islamic art is under-appreciated. I want people to understand the system as well as the beauty.

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