

# Bazaar

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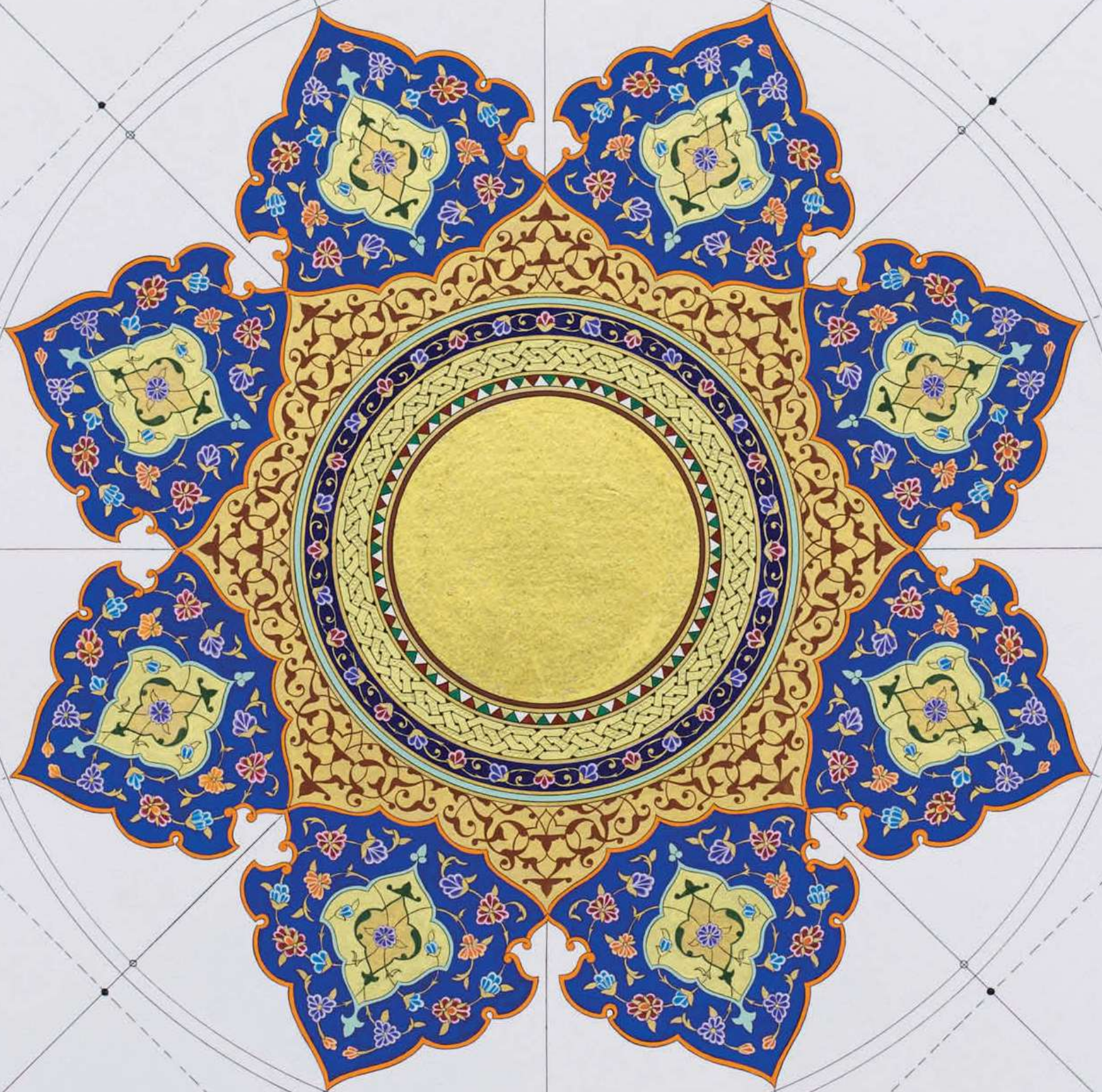
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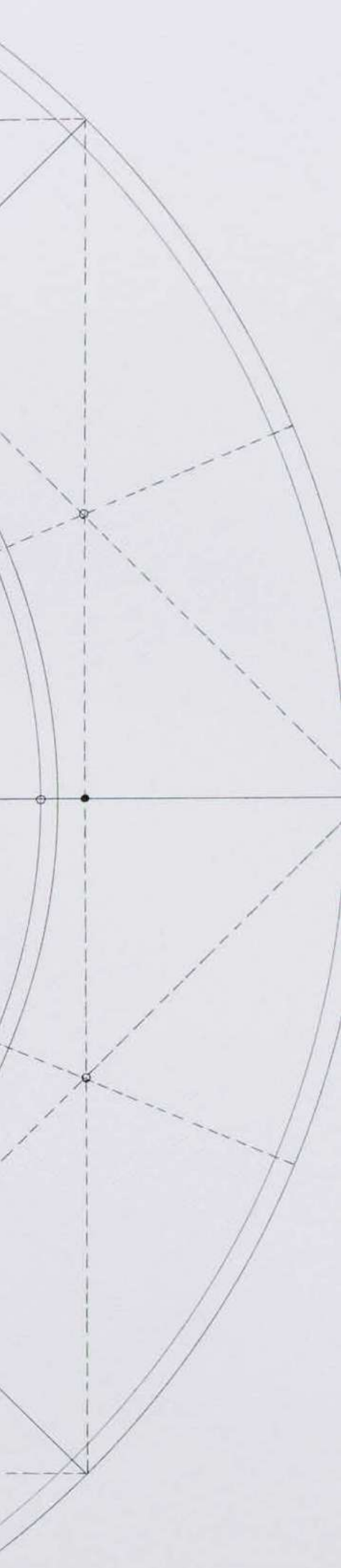
# ART

ISSUE 26

COMPLIMENTARY COPY

ART DUBAI | DANA AWARTANI | SHARJAH BIENNIAL | KAMROOZ ARAM





Dana Awartani.  
*Mamluk from The  
Islamic Caliphates.*  
2016. Shell gold  
and natural  
pigments on  
prepared paper.  
40 x 40 cm.

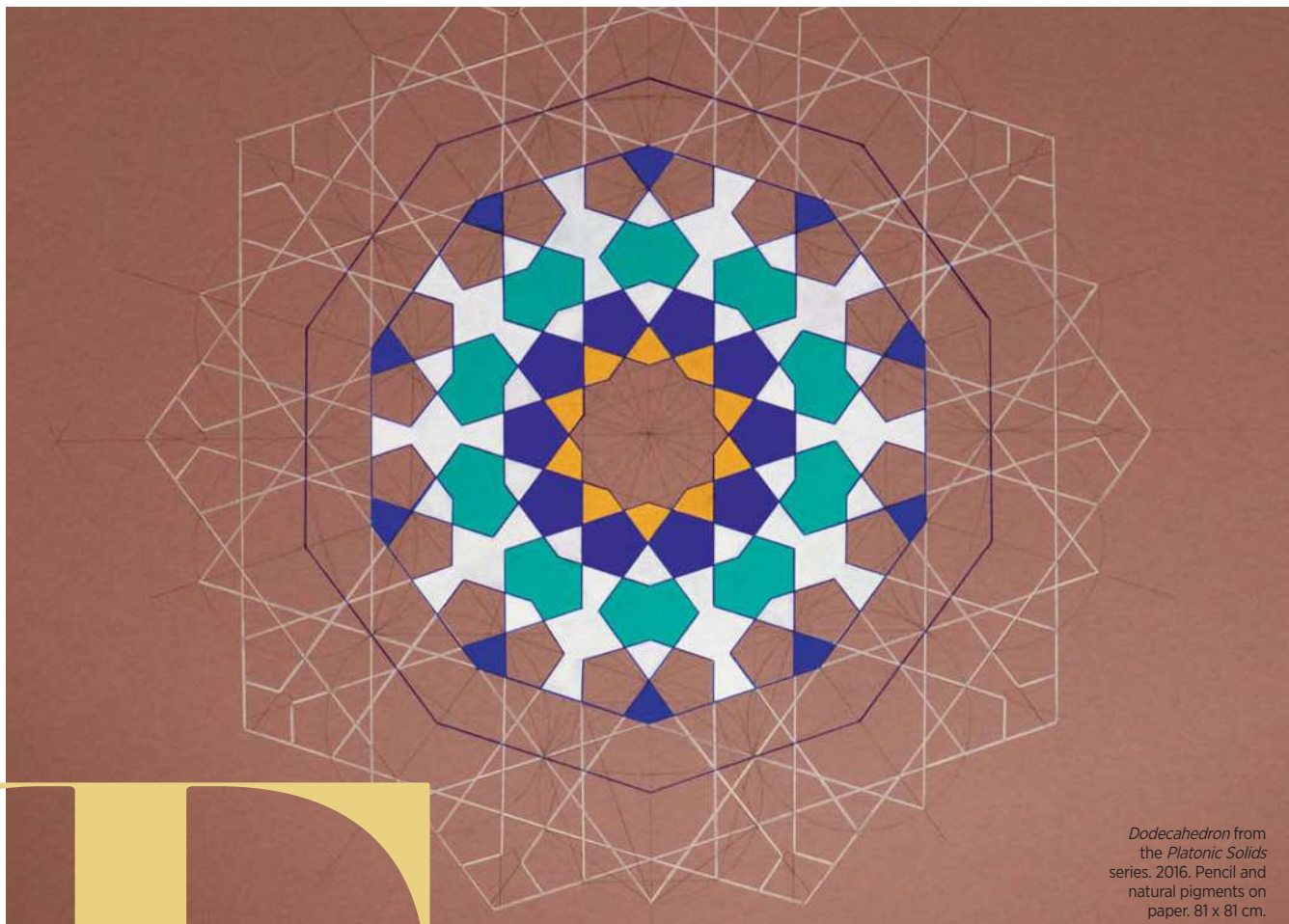
*Towards a Sublime*

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*Saudi-Palestinian artist  
**Dana Awartani** speaks  
with Rebecca Anne Proctor  
about the universality  
inherent in her sacred  
geometric forms*



*Dodecahedron from the Platonic Solids series. 2016. Pencil and natural pigments on paper. 81 x 81 cm.*

The gently swaying forms of a set of eight white embroidered cloth panels come into sight at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale's David Hall in Kerala. They move ever so softly in tune with the South Indian breeze. Entitled *Love is My Law, Love is My Faith* by Jeddah-based Saudi-Palestinian artist Dana Awartani, the work is inspired by the verses of 12th Century Sufi poet Ibn Arabi about his experience in the holy city of Mecca; the white refers also to colour white worn during the hajj pilgrimage. Arranged in a square-like formation in order of decreasing size, the piece is intended as a spiritual journey.

"Every number has a meaning," says Dana. "A common belief in Islamic art is that the eight-point star is a representation of the eight angels that will bear the throne of God on the Day of Judgment." The artist, who

did her thesis on the number eight, says you see the number everywhere but don't know what it means. "What I found the most interesting is that it has the same meaning in many religions. It's the idea of unity within multiplicity. It's also the symbol of rebirth on a higher level. Christians are baptized on an octagonal drum." Even the Dome of the Rock (an ancient shrine in Jerusalem) was built on an eight-figure base. "Also, Buddhists believe in the eightfold path towards in Enlightenment," she adds. "And the Sufis believe in the eightfold path towards the embodiment of various qualities by different prophets." Like Dana's art, such sacred geometric patterning encompasses a religious universality.

Dana's work has been exhibited at major regional and international exhibitions and art fairs, positioned alongside that of Yoko Ono and Anish Kapoor. Her art is unique in that it seeks to

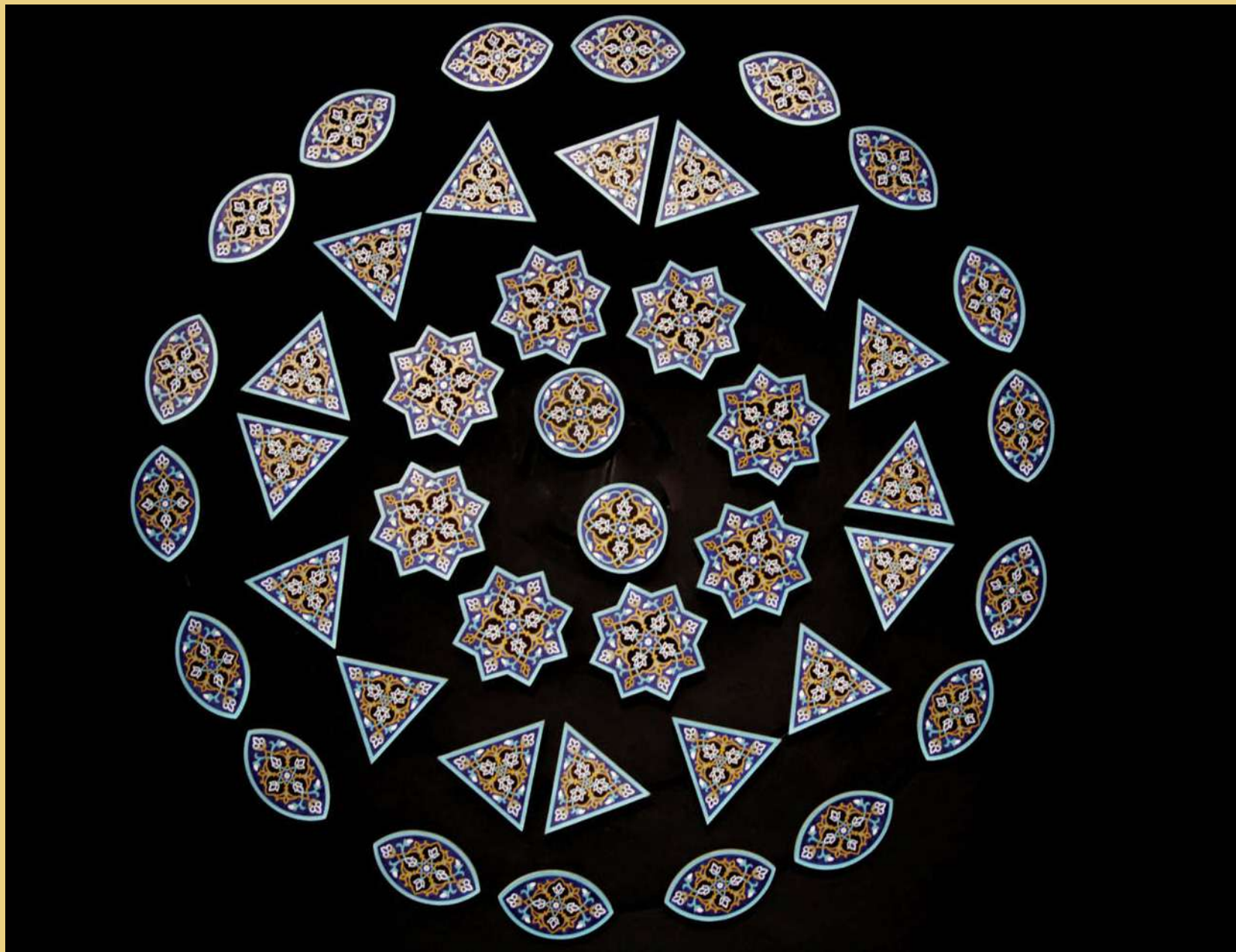
incorporate the traditional methods of Islamic art into a contemporary world. Rich in geometric patterning and the most intricate of details, Dana's work in Islamic art uses geometric patterns to symbolise devotion. Hers is a method that emerged over 1,000 years ago as a substitute for the forbidden depiction of divine figures. It is still being practiced, although less and less, today, by specialists such as Dana. "Everything has a symbolic meaning—even geometry means something," says Dana. "In Islamic art what we focus on is symbolism. Islamic craftsmen humbly tried to depict an element of the divine on earth."

As a child, Dana dreamed of studying in London. When she was ready for college she enrolled in Central Saint Martin's. However, studying there had its downfalls. "I learned to study art from a purely conceptual level but not much in terms of making art," she says. "I was the only Arab there. The aesthetic that was being practiced was very different from what I knew. My teachers also had this Orientalist view of me as well which I didn't like. They used to tell me to research Mona Hatoum and Shirin Neshat—artists who speak regularly about exile and suppression—things that are quite negative in our culture which I didn't want to focus on and I haven't experienced." This is when Dana became more interested in geometric art, an interest that led her to study at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts for her Master's—one of the only schools in the world to teach traditional art. "When I first started, they told me to forget everything I had learned in terms of contemporary art," says Dana. "Traditional art and contemporary art are two entirely different things they told me. Also, at St. Martin's there wasn't an appreciation for craft and beauty that could be made by one's hands."

At the Prince's School she learned how to make stained glass, miniature painting, gilding—various traditional techniques from cultures all over the world. However, she couldn't gain a degree in illumination there. For this Dana needed to study further a field. "I found a master in Turkey to help me become a master in >



*I went away and forgot you. A while ago I remembered. I remembered I'd forgotten you. I was dreaming.* 2017. Video installation, 24 minutes and 47 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Athr Gallery

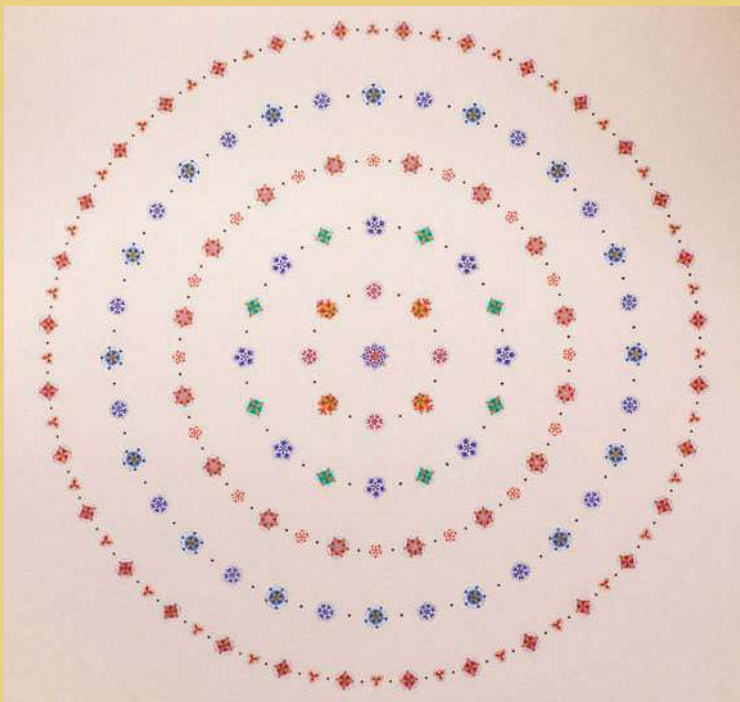


illumination,” she says. “It’s like the master and the apprentice and it is a tradition and way of learning that has been preserved for thousands of years and this was something that I loved. It’s only in Turkey and Iran that you can find such specialists.” In just one or two more visits Dana will be a master in illuminations herself.

Dana’s art is intensely spiritual. She often spends 15-hour days in her studio creating her geometric works. “It’s my happy place,” says Dana referring to her time in the studio, which can be regularly every day of the week up to around midnight. “My professor used to tell me to never do geometry when you are mentally in a bad place or agitated,” she adds. “It doesn’t work. You can completely ruin the work.” This way of work, explains Dana, teaches you how to be in the present and in the now.

“Everything has symbolic meaning—even the numbers in geometry—it’s a sort of visual language,” says Dana. “In Christian art, what they mastered was icon painting and representative of the human body, but as you know in Islamic art that’s one of the lowest things we do in miniature painting. What we focus on is symbolism, geometry and calligraphy. In essence, what they are really a form of embodying the divine creation on earth.” The ancient masters of illuminations would create their works as forms of prayer or *dhikr*, which means remembrance. For them, the idea of creating art was entirely stripped of ego.

“[The art] puts you in a meditative state—that is you are



Above: *All [heavenly bodies] swim along, each in its orbit.* 2016. Mixed media. 150 x 150 cm.  
Left: *Flowers of Paradise.* 2014. Pen, gouache and shell gold on mount board. 82 x 82 cm.



Above: A detail of *I went away and I forgot you. A while ago I remembered I'd forgotten you. I was dreaming*, 2017. Video installation at 21'39 Jeddah Arts. Courtesy of Athr Gallery, Jeddah  
 Right: *Love is My Law, Love is My Faith*. Embroidery on silk. 200 x 200 cm. Exhibited at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale



creating something beautiful that is inspired by the divine," says Dana, who emphasises how the process for her is often more important to the end result. "I really enjoy being fully involved in the process of my work, and when I do get my work produced, I do it with craftsmen," she says. Works that were made by craftsmen include the work at the Kochi-Murzuris Biennale and the last Marrakech Biennale where she created three sculptures one of which featured a dodecahedron within a glass icosahedron.

In Jeddah earlier this year, Dana covered the floor with patterns using local coloured sands. An exquisite piece recalling the decorative motifs found on traditional Islamic tiles, it was also accompanied by a video seen of Dana sweeping away the artwork that had taken her days and days to recreate. The action was akin to Tibetan monks destroying their precious sand mandalas that also portray a divine geometry. No matter how long it took to produce the mandala, the monks pray after it has been completed and then sweep it away, just like Dana, in an offering to the sublime possibility and the idea that nothing is permanent.

"I was inspired by monks destroying the mandalas and throwing the sand back into nature as well," she says. "It's a form of worship for them. But for me I used the idea in a different context." Positioned alongside the floor installation, in the video Dana picked a symbolic now abandoned home in Saudi built in the early 60s—a period when the rich began abandoning their homes in *Al Balad*—buildings with beautiful hijazi architecture—to move to new concrete homes inspired by French and Italian architecture. "They were leaving their Arab heritage and moving



*Dodecahedron within an Icosahedron* from *The Platonic Solids Duals*, 2016. Wood, copper and glass. 91 x 91 x 91 cm.

into these Western homes and in a way it was to show that they were more wealthy, forward and civilised as a society by adopting such homes," she explains. In the home she created her sand work to look like a typical *zellij* style floor that you would see across the Arab and Islamic world. She used sand from the Saudi desert and coloured it herself with natural pigments. "I wanted people to see that it took ages to do and was very time-consuming," says Dana. "It was meant to reflect the manual process involved in the traditional houses that my work refers to, equally made over a long time and now lost to time's obsession with the new." In the video, Dana enters and sweeps away her sand. "The sweeping is controlled and therapeutic," she adds. "For 20 minutes I make my way around the room in total silence sweeping." At the end, a small pile of sand is left and Dana walks out. "It's the idea of the loss of culture, identity and heritage," she emphasises. "It's about how people are literally throwing their culture and heritage away and not carrying with them enough to maintain. This is what I wanted to show."

It's a painful yet enrapturing process to watch. Titled *I Went Away and I Forgot You*, the work is named after a poem by acclaimed Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. In the poem he writes: "I travelled and I forgot you, and then I remembered that I had forgotten you and it felt like a dream." Dreams they are Dana's intricate works that wrestle between the ancient past and the ever more contemporary present. And perhaps through a taste of a long forgotten dream, the past, present and future of a beautiful culture can be reconciled once again. ■ [danaawartani.com](http://danaawartani.com)

"[THE ART] PUTS YOU IN A MEDITATIVE STATE-THAT IS YOU ARE CREATING SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL THAT IS INSPIRED BY THE DIVINE"

*Dana Awartani*