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'Islam Contemporary' shines at Lichtenstein, Whitney centers



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A detail of 'Charmeur de Serpent' by Abdel Aziz Haounati glows with bright color.

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By Kate Abbott, Berkshires Week Editor

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PITTSFIELD -- A gentle man who puts up posters for a local cinema leaves a film one day -- a movie he has seen a dozen times -- to find protesters shouting outside the doors. Thinking of super heroes and of his young daughter, he walks into a familiar street and finds it changed.

On a rainy afternoon in the Berkshires, Kashmiri artist Malik Sajad explains a short story he has written in a series of scenes in ink wash. An editorial cartoonist and graphic artist, Sajad is at work now on a memoir in the style of a graphic novel about growing up in the Kashmir Valley.

"Kashmir is a conflict zone," he said, "but the book is not really about that. It's about life, community, how you get used to a situation and cope with it."

In his short story, too, he is "talking about family and things everyone goes through, having a daughter, going to the theater. It's not different from the rest of the world," he said. "It's how life works everywhere. You live their life, you feel it -- and then all of a sudden, the unexpected happens."

Around Sajad's story, paintings, sculpture, lanterns and photographs gather to show how life works in Islamic families and communities from New York to Cairo. Looking at them, the unexpected and familiar come together with a glad shock of recognition, like suddenly meeting a childhood friend.

In the same show, on Valerie Hird's panels, bright crowds stream together in Islamic Spain, where Muslims, Jews and Christians lived in comparative peace for 700 years.

The sound of a stringed instrument plays in the background to a film, and Moroccan snake charmers play flute and drum, painted in abstract, almost Cubist planes of red and gold.

"Islam Contemporary," at The Lichtenstein Center for the Arts and the Whitney Center for the Arts, has gathered 24 artists from around the world, from Australia, Morocco, Pakistan, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Canada and the Berkshires, and one artist collective, from Bahrain.

The show will run through Aug. 31, and on Saturday the Whitney Center will host a community Eid celebration to honor and celebrate the end of the holy month of Ramadan. All are welcome for a free potluck gathering.

The show begins with Abdul Aziz Sohail, an intern this summer with the Pittsfield Office of Cultural Development, who suggested it and curated it and has brought in artists he has worked with before.

He has come to America from Pakistan as a student at Brandeis. In the spring he interned in with the American Islamic Congress in Boston and was living and working there this spring during the Boston Marathon. He curated several exhibits with the congress. Here he has brought some by invitation, and some through an open call for new work.

Some artists in the show wrestle with politics. Daisy Rockwell, Norman Rockwell's grand-daughter, paints women soldiers in Muammar Gaddafi's guard. She lived in south Asia for many years, Sohail said, is fluent in Hindi and speaks Urdu, he said, better than he does.

In answer, some artists look past tense events in recent years to connect with each other. An artists' collective in Bahrain takes Instagram photographs of ordinary life, games, chores in their neighborhood.

And some let all politics go and walk out into the world, simply alive, teenagers in secular Istanbul and Muslim Americans putting their children to bed children in Michigan.

In a Springfield Mosque, sunlight touches a front hall and message board as simple as a college dorm, and the tower of a minaret shimmers across it, reflected in a window, from a poster of Mecca.

The photographer, George Awde, is Lebanese-American. Sohail sees contemporary Islam in these works "as an identity, a way of being, an encounter," he said.

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He sees changes in Islam, like the Coca Cola signs in Julia Morgan Leamon's paintings of Cairo: traditional culture intersecting with traditional ways of living.

And he sees local cultures interacting with one another, bringing African patterns of color to Middle Eastern calligraphy.

"We don't want to be judged by one aspect of our lives," he said. "These artists may be very different kinds of Muslims."

And not all are Muslim. While some are Muslim artists thinking about their daily lives, their homes and their faith, some artists are not Muslim but live in countries influenced by the faith, and some non-muslim artists touch the Muslim world in their work.

He wants to give a nuanced and complex view of these people and places. Arab and Muslim are not the same. Many people in Arabic-speaking countries are not Muslim, and Muslims in many countries across the world, in many communities, including the Berkshires.

"The artists are excited that this isn't an urban area," said Megan Whilden, director of the Pittsfield Cultural Development Center.

They were comforted and glad to find a small city in a rural area reaching out to them to explore Islamic culture and heritage in a positive way, she said.

After the Boston Marathon bombing, she explained, a study by the Pew Charitable Trust found Muslims more discriminated against than any other group in the country.

"We wanted to put a call out to Muslims in the Berkshires to be welcoming -- to say 'we celebrate you and are happy to have you as part of our community,' " she said.

And they want to show the diversity in contemporary Islam, and in contemporary Islamic art.

In America, "People think of carpets, geometry and miniatures," Sohail said.

He has responded with jewelry, photographs, superheroes, a story in graphic novel form -- and Persian-style paintings with the vivid color of 14th-century Indian paintings and the force of contemporary people.

Here are people playing music, struggling with violence, telling stories, looking forward to holidays, and living as best they can the lives they are given -- like the family in Sajad's story.

The daughter is studying medicine, and her father, a gentle, daydreaming man, is proud of her. But as the conflict goes on outside their home, they have sold everything they own to buy food -- until they have to sell their carved, walnut wood front door for charcoal. It is beautiful, and it has survived many years, and now it is fuel.

"When you're fighting for survival, things like culture, heritage and art are left out," he said. "That's where community suffers the most."

If you go ...

What: Community Eid celebration -- sweets, snacks, conversation

When: Saturday, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Where: Whitney Center for the Arts, 42 Wendell Ave., Pittsfield

Admission: Free

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