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ISLAM CONTEMPORARY? A JOURNEY INTO PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE, AND ACTION

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By Nichole Dupont Don't let the New England landscape fool you as you ascend the corner steps to Pittsfield's Lichtenstein Center for the Arts. There is nothing about what's happening inside — the recently opened *Islam Contemporary* curated by Brandeis graduate and native of Pakistan, Aziz Sohail — that is reminiscent of an airy summer season in the Berkshires' prime cultural district. This exhibit, which runs through August 31 (and has many featured events including an August 10, Eid Celebration, marking the end of Ramadan), is an aesthetic baptism by fire. And an overwhelming, albeit much-needed, cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic view of Muslim art as seen through the eyes of Occidentals and Islamic artists alike. “What really struck me when I was thinking about this exhibit was that it's the right show at the right time,” says Pittsfield's cultural director Megan Whilden. “There was a **PEW survey** conducted that asked who Americans thought were the most discriminated against. Muslims were the highest by far, higher than African-Americans, higher than Hispanics, higher than women



even. I think showing this kind of art reveals the diverse cultures of Islam, that we aren't even aware of." *Islam Contemporary* is a carefully culled exhibit of nearly 25 artists — some juried, some by invitation — each with a different lens trained on their interpretation of Islamic culture. In the case of Phil Webster, a Pittsfield

resident who spent much of last year in India, the focus is on patterns and rich mosaics. Webster creates mathematically precise geometric models (right) using a 3d printer. The result is a multi-angled collection of “lamps” that project mandala-esque designs out into a given space. “There is so much happening geometrically in Islamic patterns,” he says. “And to think that these designs were produced hundreds of years ago. It blows the whole primitive thing out of the water. The patterns are inspiration. And people's reaction to my work is that there's a meditative aspect to it.” The serene modernity of Webster's work is in stark contrast to the more politically motivated pieces — paintings, photographs, silkscreen prints — that are scattered throughout the exhibit. Pieces such as Daisy Rockwell's (yes, she is Norman's granddaughter, and very talented) small acrylic on wood panel portraits. Painted in vibrant pinks and yellows and blues, they depict images of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi's all-female revolutionary guard (described in the media as his 'army of Amazons') as well as a newly-wed couple standing in Egypt's Tahrir Square during the 2011 revolution (pictured left). The bride in white, of course. “We're dealing with ideas of contested histories,” says Sohail of Rockwell's work. “She [Daisy] speaks better Urdu than me. Her work brings the major issues forward. Who's to say who is correct in these revolutions and uprisings?” The literal blurred lines of identity among Islamic peoples and cultures is tackled head on with a series of photograph portraits by Inzajeano Latif. The subjects in these pictures (right), each infused with a hazy, almost smokey foreground, are Palestinian refugees now living in London. Their melancholy expressions speak to a tough existence on





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me that is interwoven in many of the works spotlighting displacement, whether it is a Saudi family living in the suburbs of Detroit or a Bahraini arts collaborative commenting on uprisings via streetwise Instagram photos. "We don't have a curatorial statement," Sohail says of

the exhibit, which shares the Lichtenstein as well as the Whitney Center for the Arts on Wendell Avenue. "I wanted to put a question mark at the end of the title because the idea is constantly evolving. This idea of knowing your place as your own." The amalgamation of videos, prints, collages, and even jewelry just barely scratches the surface of the politically charged, aesthetically adoring Islamic art world. From a Moroccan cubist subtly condemning western stereotypes to a New England gal taking a critical observer's stance on gender roles, *Islam Contemporary* is not an exhibit that easily falls away after leaving the building. It is a process, and, as Whilden believes, a progress. "My sense is that there is this new chrysalis being born," she says. "It is taking shape and getting ready to break free." **Islam Contemporary** At the Lichtenstein, 28 Renne Ave.; and the Whitney Center, 42 Wendell Ave. Pittsfield, MA (413) 499-9348 Gallery hours: Wednesday - Saturday, noon to 5 p.m.

