

KAABA MAGIC - AN INVESTIGATION OF WORKS BY HAMRA ABBAS

By: Laura Egerton

In 2012 the artist Hamra Abbas undertook the pilgrimage of Umrah with her husband and one-year-old son, spending seven days in Mecca and Medina. They found a souvenir shop in the bazaar adjacent to Al-Masjid al Nabawi (the Prophets Mosque) in Medina, called 'Barakah Gifts' which has inspired a new series of monumental sculptures. Fascinated by the meeting point between commerce and devotion, the artist collected a number of objects from various gift shops around the two holy mosques that are available for sale across the world, such as perfume bottles or clocks, but here are additionally infused with spiritual iconography and are indeed 'blessed'. She comments: "Through this work 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". These objects casually circulate the globe as faithful representations of sacred icons, fuelling Islam's economic, social and devotional reach.

The first in the series, Barakah Gifts 1, produced in Italy, will go on permanent display at the American Embassy in Islamabad in 2015. It is a giant representation in shining fibreglass of a water bottle or flask that is commonly used by pilgrims to carry holy water for their daily consumption. The detailing on the sculpture is exquisite, by aggrandising an object she plays with its importance and function. Three or four more sculptures in this series will be made in June when Abbas returns to Lahore and starts working in her new studio. Mostly based out of Boston where her husband is in the process of completing his Doctorate degree, she understands her fortune in having the option of working out of multiple centres, for example since spending time producing new work in Istanbul she has maintained strong relationships with suppliers there, still sourcing her paper for photographic and sculptural works from the city.

It feels right to be producing the remaining sculptures in the Barakah Gifts series in Lahore, where she returned after Umrah and where her family are

still based. The series relates to an earlier work Wall Hanging I, which was commissioned by the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum in Boston as part of a residency she undertook there in 2011, but is directly inspired by spending time in her mother's living space in Pakistan. The work is a large-scale print of a painting created by Abbas with gouache on Wasli paper which depicts the silk and gold embroidered "Kiswa" that covers the "Kaaba" door - not the original but taken from a plaster facsimile hung on the wall of her mother's house. Exploring the translation of an image through different media Abbas shows how the spiritual significance of such an inspiration can be retained, although perhaps somewhat altered to be reflective of personal belief. The wall hanging in her mother's house is covered in dust, hung askew in a place not particularly looked at, it has become part of the fabric of everyday life. Abbas was brought up with casual religion; she is interested in the distillation from the purely sacred to the mundane and how people translate iconography to fit in with their own system of beliefs and way of living; how they individually understand the purpose of objects and the dogma of art instruction. It is also a comment on ownership and the relationship you form with objects bought as souvenirs, which are innately representative of something else, something greater. It is all about context of course - seeing the wall hanging hung at an angle in her mother's house to Abbas signifies "an optical illusion". She goes on: "Such ornamentation is hardly ever removed due its devotional value, but one may also see signs of neglect upon closer inspection, that is, in the layer of dust, or the slight tilt that plays a mild optical illusion to the first time viewer. Does this illusion open up a gap between theory and practice? For me these small imperfections reveal the human element that co-exists with the seemingly monolithic ideals of truth and perfection."

Frequently in her practice Abbas likes to point out seemingly mundane differences and even errors - often by initially working on an intimate scale in one medium (she majored in sculpture and miniature painting in her



Kaaba Picture as a Misprint 6, 2014, archival pigment print, edition of 5 + 2 AP, 137x110cm. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery.

undergraduate studies at the National College of Arts, Lahore) and then displaying as the finished artwork a blown-up photograph of the initial creation. One such series, Kaaba Pictures were displayed at the 2013 de Cordova Biennial in Lincoln, USA. Again inspired by the trinkets pilgrims purchase as a memory of Hajj or Umrah, this time Abbas has created miniature paintings of scenes of the Kaaba and surrounding area, which she found on such small, devotional trinkets. Mass produced and often of inferior quality, the colors in such depictions are brash and childlike, sometimes even inverted with an ominous black sky above a luminous green Kaaba. Works that take the image of the Kaaba as their central theme have dominated Abbas' practice over the past year. As she is quick to explain, they are not about the Kaaba itself, but the representation of the Kaaba, as found in various contexts.

Two of her most recent projects are almost like magic tricks. They have taken the artist months to work out how to perform, but once she has found the secret knack, they can be repeated again and again in different combinations and are beautiful in their simplicity of form, whilst still revealing a complexity and multiple layers of meaning. The title series in her solo exhibition at her Dubai Gallery earlier in 2014 Kaaba Picture as a Misprint is made up of six archival pigment prints, which are abstract and minimalist in the extreme. Akin to a Donald Judd sculpture or a Sol LeWitt creation, Abbas has broken the familiar form of the Kaaba down to its bare minimal shape: two rectangles placed one above the other, using the four main primary colors of offset printing, cyan, magenta and yellow; which converge to make the fourth 'color', black. The first in the series in a perfect depiction of the Kaaba in black - which Abbas reveals (through showing the work in Photoshop, an essential tool for a twenty-first century artist conjurer) she has created by layering the three colors on top of each other. Each progressive work in the series represents a gradation from that perfect image, starting off as a slight misalignment as is common in printing and getting more and more extreme as the rectangles sit further and further apart. The borders blur and create new colors as different combinations are seen on top of each other. It is through these misprints or errors that the works take on a new form of beauty, in their variety and lack of uniformity. Through this work, Abbas succinctly shows a way in which human or mechanical intervention can coexist with the perfect, ideal image as presented through faith.

Kaaba Pop-Ups make their debut at the second edition of the Kochi-Biennale, where 24 of these hand-made paper sculptures will be on display, in various shades of blue (a signifier of nature as the color of the seas and the sky and also faithfulness and infinity). Intricately folded into Islamic stalactite patterns, at the centre of each piece of paper a three-dimensional boxlike space reminiscent of the Kaaba pops out. Abbas initially wanted the work to be seen in 99 varieties, which she calls an idea more than a number and has used before in her work (God Grows on Trees, exhibited in Sharjah Biennial 9, 2009). 99 represents infinity as the God of Islam has 99 names which are recited and represented throughout the Islamic world. Abbas comments:

"when you come to 99 there is a possibility to just escape, it presents itself as a fantasy world, you enter another dimension". The title and the fragility of the material suggest temporality and impermanence, which is at odds with the Kaaba as an iconic, timeless structure. This reoccurring dichotomy comes through many works of Abbas - between something that is stationary and monolithic and something that has movement and is temporary and versatile. Divulging the 'magic trick' element of the work, Abbas admits she spent several months perfecting the way the sculptural form would pop out. It is not as simple as it first appears - mainly because the Kaaba is not a cube, it is a rectangle which has to be seen on an angle, so you need to see the corner in the pop up. In the end she worked it out, producing a perfect object: a flat paper collage from which you pop up a precise, scale version of the Kaaba. Comparing the need to turn the shape of the Kaaba just a little, to Wall Hanging I hung slightly off-kilter.

Visitors to Art Dubai 2011 will remember her monumental Woman in Black, commissioned by the Abraaj Capital Art Prize, one of the five winners of that year. Made in traditional stained glass at John Hardman & Co in Birmingham UK, the only surviving business from Pugin's Gothic Revival era, the work, at three metres high, depicts a fictional super-heroine and her subjects in a scene of conflict. The piece replicates a church window from which worshippers in the middle ages and onwards sought spiritual guidance and doctrinal interpretation.

Hamra Abbas could be described as the ultimate 'multi-media artist'. Using so many types of media across her practice it almost becomes irrelevant, but it is also fascinating as she is purposefully always transforming, re-orienting and manipulating initial creations into other media, often many times over. She feels it is the role of contemporary art to re-align and re-consider objects and cultural signifiers from the past, to question their power and authority. Her approach is both scholastic and formal, yet never loses touch with one's position in the contemporary world, where faith is still a terrifyingly potent motivating factor.

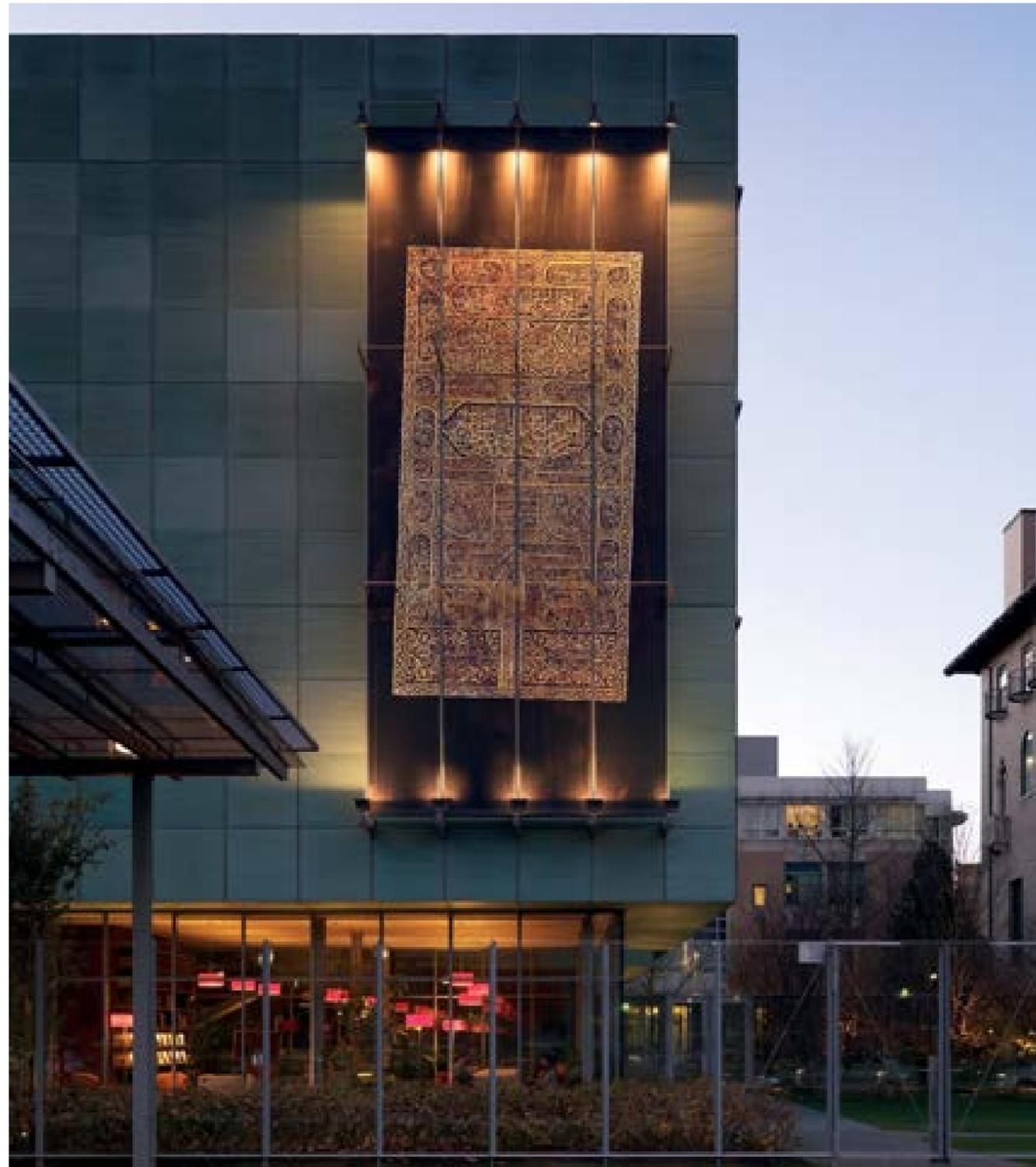
About the Writer

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Barakah Gifts 1, 2014, fibreglass and steel, 366cm high. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery.



Wall Hanging 1, 2012, archival pigment print, edition of 5 + 2 AP, 200x122cm. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery. Photo by Stewart Clement at Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum.



This Piece Might Be Abstract. But its Made of Rubber and Looks Like the Male Organ, 2012, stained-glass, 90x60cm. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi Gallery.