TO AVOID CONFUSION, THE YOU AM I BEING CONSIDERED
here is an exhibition of works by Australian Muslim artists
who responded to an invitation from the Islamic Council of
Victoria (ICV), not the Australian rock band with an opposite
feel that’s been promoting its album Dilettantes on a Let’s Be
Dreadful tour.

You Am I, the exhibition, included a quiet, seemingly
uncontentious, unpretentious assortment of photographs,
paintings, prints, video, poetry, ceramics, and mosaic with a
stated aim of ‘celebrating the diversity and uniqueness of
the Australian Muslim identity’.

Installed at the Hume Global Learning Centre in
Broadmeadows, it was the only exhibition listed for the City
of Hume in the issue of Art Almanac for the month it
opened. The centre’s exhibition area is seemingly the only
regular public art space in the municipality besides the
library upstairs where there are some works with a ‘living
together’ theme, and nearby Northern Health, which
displays paintings sending a culturally inclusive message;
art with a job to do.

The City of Hume is about 20 kilometres from
Melbourne’s CBD, partly suburban, partly rural; including
Melbourne Airport, the Calder Raceway, a Ford factory, Note
Printing Australia, and Organ Pipes National Park. In 2007,
neely thirty per cent of its residents were born overseas,
thirty-one per cent were under eighteen, and thirty-nine per
cent between thirty-five and sixty-four. According to the
2006 census, Hume had the largest Muslim population of
any municipality in Australia after Bankstown, NSW.

The Learning Centre’s neighbours include a service
station, a huge shopping centre with a mall and megastores,
and a long straight railway line running for kilometres
between the western suburbs flatlands and their big sky.
The Centre’s light, cheerful, colourfully accented building
was completed in 2003. It houses Broadmeadow’s first-ever
public library (though not the first in the municipality), a
food café, well-patronised Internet café, a large up-to-date
noticeboard for events, classes, groups and services, and
seminar and meeting rooms, as well as the exhibition space.

The exhibition space itself is a carpeted, wedge-
shaped corridor between the building’s main foyer and a
concealed passage leading discreetly to toilets. Its primary
function is as an access way for offices and a spill area for
the several meeting and conference rooms whose dark grey
doors interrupt the walls. These rooms provide a large part
of the audience – and often large audiences – for anything in
the exhibition space.

The day after You Am I’s opening, an apparently
permanently placed S-shaped table with red pleated skirt,
piles of white cups and saucers, sachets of tea and coffee,
and a big electric urn still stood at the far end of the space
in front of three mosaics. The location behind the urn of the
largest, Anisa Sharif’s The Jewelled Peacock, and its position
on an easel (being too heavy for the wall) somehow conferred
on it a faint suggestion of menu board. Yet the colour-
saturated glass and mirror images by Sharif and her
daughter, Rania Gouda, show their makers to be technical
virtuosi in their slightly dangerous medium.

A trio of round tables, also with red skirts and white
cloths, were lined up along another wall, each with an
arrangement of red and black artificial flowers interrupting
the view of photographs and paintings behind. Boxed red
paper serviettes on the tables predicted quite a crowd,
bearing out the City of Hume website’s claim, that ‘… the
gallery area [is an] ideal location for product displays,
presentations or as a function area’.

What it loses in artistic amenity, this space obviously
makes up in passing trade and captive audiences. The ICV’s
Arts Officer, Nur Shkembi, said the multiple use of the space
(which confused me at first!) … has played a huge role in
the number and variety of people that have been able to view
the exhibition, people that readily confess that they wouldn’t
ordinarily attend a gallery’.

The show started in the foyer with a work by
Nafisa Hattingh – a large, heavy glass case with layers of
variegated, gold-edged tiles inscribed in Arabic calligraphy
enumerating, one by one, as its title says, The 99 Most
Beautiful Names of Allah. Making do with ambient light, the
quiet, shaded block of air inside the case seemed all of a

Fatima Killeen. Laparoscopy, 2005, colour collograph, 42 x 54cm. Image courtesy the artist.
cause or symptom that cannot be diagnosed by ordinary questioning and examination’ as one medical website suggestively puts it.3

Another of Fatima Killeen’s images, Looted, used on the exhibition invitation, has a similar patterned background, this time dominated by a huge, overlaid thumbprint.

Opposite these works and their quiet, intense, political charges, was a small selection of travel photographs from a much larger photo, video and sound work by Mark Pedersen, Natalia Gould and Nazid Kimmie, previously exhibited at Kinross House gallery and café at the Uniting Church Toorak. Kinross House is a stop on the inter-faith circuit where art, music and food are thrown out as bridges to friendship and mutual understanding. That show was also supported by the ICV.

The large joint work, including a photographic journey on the number 8 tram from Arabic speaking Sydney Road, Brunswick to the Uniting Church in posher, more Anglo Toorak (via Indonesia, Yemen and Oman) still exists in digital form at Irfanspace where, interestingly, some of the least familiar looking images are of the Australian suburbs, and the most familiar those from the Middle East and South Asia.

There was, in fact, quite a lot in this exhibition that seemed familiar – some rather well-worn imagery, some nostalgia for untranslated historical forms, not necessarily used ‘to freeze time in order to trace its path to the past’ (as curator Rose Issa wrote of Iranian artist Mahmoud Kavir4). There was a certain amount of what you might call Muslim kitsch.

Back near the entrance were Fatima Killeen’s collographs and paintings. The collographs, printed from relief plates built up with hand-cut collaged elements, can be read as semi-abstract compositions referring to perforated screen and tile patterns, but their titles and not so abstract elements lead into deeper waters. The cool, blue-toned Laparoscopy takes its name from a medical procedure performed under general anaesthetic, allowing visual inspection of the pelvic organs without opening the abdomen. The idea of probing, peeping, and investigating the intimate spaces of an insensible body are sinisterly intensified by a big round hole cut into the patterned background, simultaneously suggesting gun barrel, gun sight and peephole. Laparoscopy may be used ‘to find a piece with the floating slices of illuminated text (though this dimness made the English language key on the bottom shelf hard to read).

At the opposite end of the gallery, next to the refreshments table, was Nur Shkembi’s painting of looping lines in thick, glossy, edible-looking paint, adding a hundredth to Hattingh’s list of names, but in an exuberant invented calligraphy. Nur has no Arabic, the original language of the Quran, while her husband, a convert, picked it up easily, she said, and her children learn it at school.

It may be inferred from the explanatory note beside the work, that in its title, Urban Calligraphy, the word ‘urban’ functions the way it sometimes does in the phrase ‘urban Aboriginal art’; not just as a sociological locator with connotations of modernity, but an assertion of authenticity for an identity without ‘traditional’ language.2

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Image: Water Dragon and Butterflies, 2008, oil on canvas, 106 x 150cm
At first, as is probably obvious, the exhibition space bothered me. It seemed, despite the stated aim of expressing diversity, that the actually quite varied exhibition was absorbed whole into the space’s other functions and architecture, becoming a sort of aggregated buzz of pattern and subdued colour on the walls, with a Middle Eastern (rather than specifically Islamic) inflection.

In an essay titled *Contemporary Islamic Art and the Shackles of ‘Tradition’* on the Creative Muslims website, Nur Shkembi asks: ‘Why do we feel so obliged to repeat the past when all the past ever is, is the expression of the present ... a now that simply comes to pass?’ This exhibition gave various answers to that question.

Shkembi’s Arts Officer position is relatively new and was initiated by the ICV’s CEO, Ahmed Imam, to meet a perceived need. Imam compered the clever, funny and sometimes naughty TV panel show *Salam Café*, which had a fourth season on SBS last year, after three seasons on Channel 31. Waleed Aly, a former ICV board member, was a panellist.

Shkembi said her job’s brief is to ‘serve the community as a whole and provide easy and reasonable access for others to resource Muslim artists of all backgrounds and specialties’. She described *You Am I* as ‘another baby step forward for the Muslim community through which issues and themes could be put forward through the arts’.

Interest in this show from other organisations has apparently led to more of Australia’s Muslim artists coming out of the woodwork.

Near the end of the exhibition’s run, I went back for another look, to...
check out the rest of the Learning Centre, and to read the visitors’ book on a table near the entrance where the words ‘amazing!’ ‘inspiring!’ ‘excellent’ and ‘beautiful’ appeared often. ‘Extremely brilliant – especially the peacock.’ 'Excellent. I’m proud of the young Muslim women.'

There was a new set of oblong, red-frocked tables lined up, but this time I read the room differently; not as a gallery full of extraneous furniture and distracting details, but as a rather familiar kind of semi-public space, part restaurant, part reception room, almost domestic in its casual mix of carpet, furniture, video monitors, crockery, doors and framed pictures. This somewhat homey feel was accentuated by Anisa Sharif’s large painting, *The Jewelled Peacock*, 2008, hand-made glass mosaic featuring super heated and fused layers of system 96 dichroic glass, 90 x120cm. Image courtesy the artist. Photograph by Rania Gouda.

This show had to do quite a lot of work for a lot of people: the municipality, the Learning Centre, the Islamic Council of Victoria and all their constituencies, plus the artists and visitors. It’s precisely the ordinariness of the space and the familiarity of a lot of the imagery that does the heavy lifting. With its mixture of inspiration and banality, generosity and cautiousness, utilitarianism and aspiration, it’s what that particular small piece of shared ground looks like right now.

**Notes**

1. Email, 18.03.09.

2. The note for this work reads: ‘Inspired by the tradition and beauty of classical Arabic calligraphy, contemporary movements spill forth onto the canvas in celebration of the *dhikr* (praising and remembrance of the Divine) expressed so profoundly in the arts in Islam ... Contemporary Australian Islamic art is a unique and natural consequence of the great tradition and beauty of the Islamic arts expressed through the Australian Muslim’s experiences with modern urban culture and the deeply felt spiritual appreciation of the land and traditional Indigenous Australia.’


4. At www.irfanspace.net


7. Email, 18.03.09.

8. Respectively *A Colourful Cultural Celebration* and *Australia’s Muslim Women*.

**You Am I: An Exhibition of Contemporary Muslim Artists** was shown at Hume Global Learning Centre, Broadmeadows, Victoria, 9 February to 9 April. More details at www.icv.org.au and www.creativemuslims.com.au

**Virginia Fraser** is an artist and writer who lives in Melbourne. This wasn’t her first trip to Broadmeadows.