

Hume with a view: *You Am I*

VIRGINIA FRASER

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'.

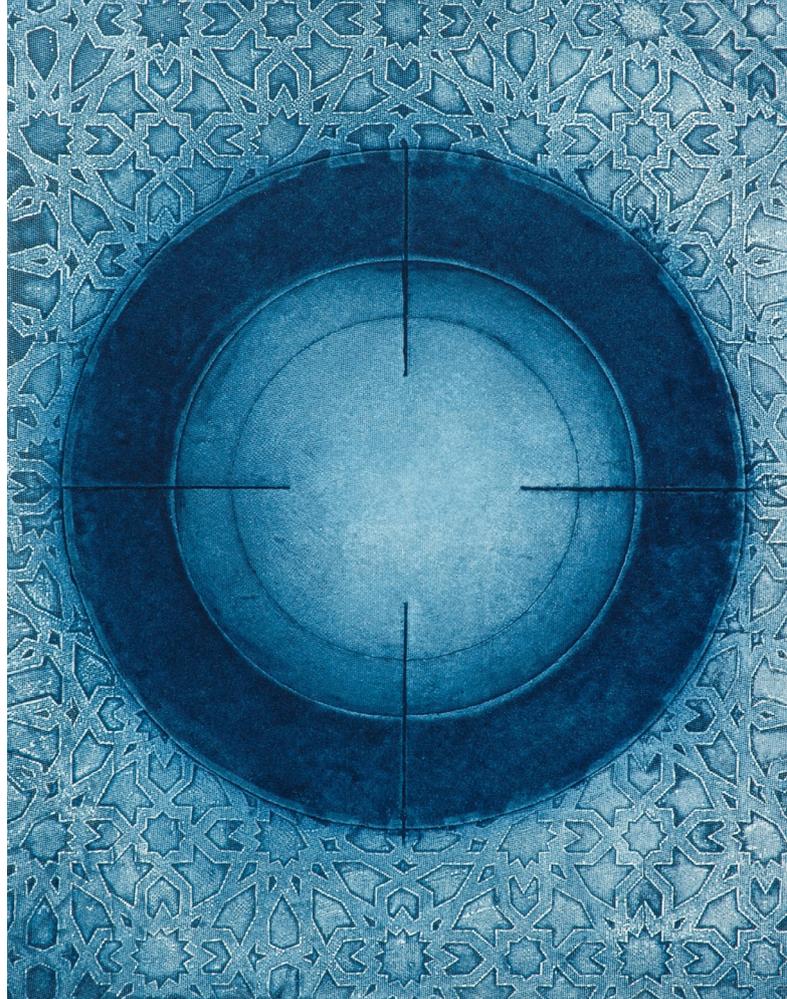
Installed at the Hume Global Learning Centre in Broadmeadows, it was the only exhibition listed for the City of Hume in the issue of *Art Almanac* for the month it opened. The centre's exhibition area is seemingly the only regular public art space in the municipality besides the library upstairs where 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, nearly 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,



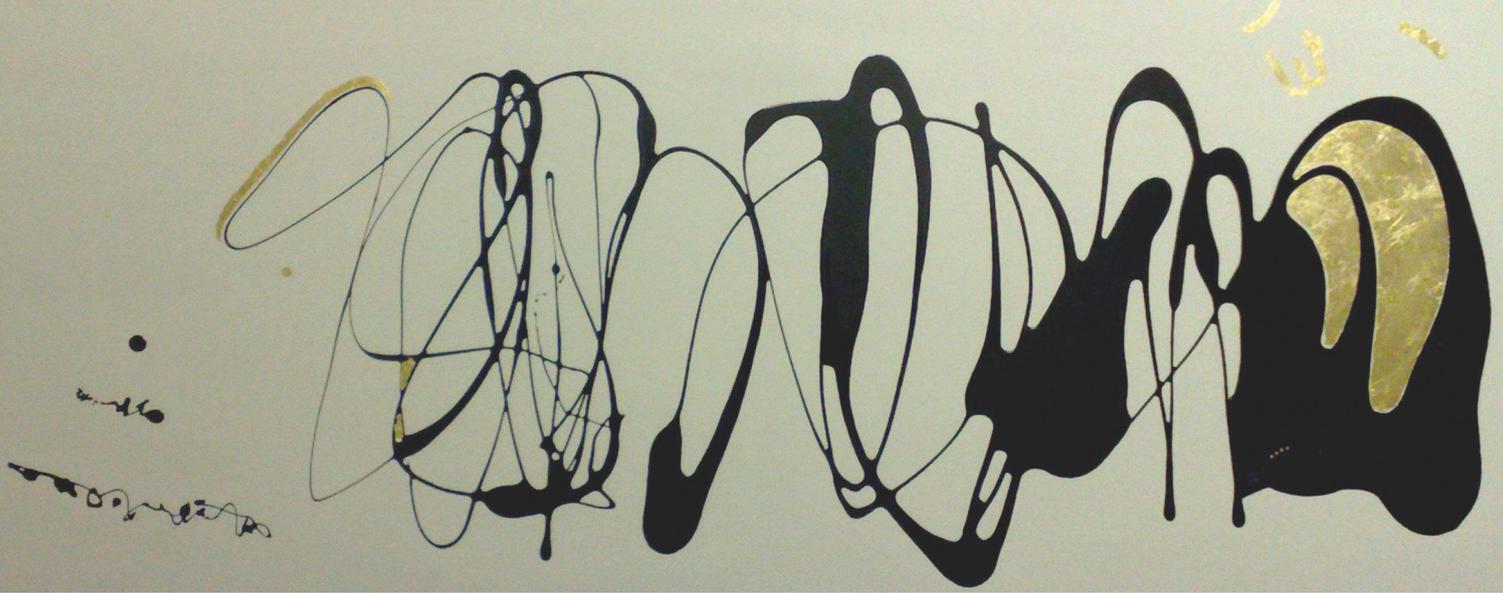
Fatima Killeen, *Laparoscopy*, 2005, colour collograph, 42 x 54cm. Image courtesy the artist.

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 i]deal 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 Shkemi, 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'.¹

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



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 Shkemi'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

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

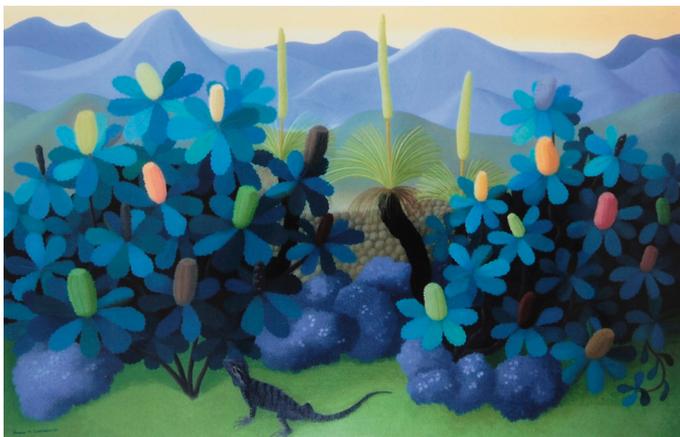
cause or symptom that cannot be diagnosed by ordinary questioning and examination' as one medical website suggestively puts it.³

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 Irfanspace⁴ 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 Kavar⁵). There was a certain amount of what you might call Muslim kitsch.



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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 Shkemi 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?'⁶ This exhibition gave various answers to that question.

Shkemi'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.

Shkemi 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'.⁷ 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



OPPOSITE: Nur Shkemi, *Urban Calligraphy*, 2008, acrylic, enamel and gold leaf on canvas, 155 x 60cm. Image courtesy the artist. TOP: Mark Pedersen, *The Empty Quarter*, 2005, Giclee print on professional satin photo paper, 52 x 65cm. Image courtesy the artist. ABOVE: Natalia Gould, *A Call to Play*, 2005, Giclee print on professional satin photo paper, 42 x 52cm. Image courtesy the artist.



Re-Collections
DONNA MARCUS

11 April to 17 May 2009

This exhibition continues Donna Marcus' fascination with reinterpreting domestic objects. A compelling body of work by this highly-awarded Brisbane-based artist.

Donna Marcus is represented by Dianne Tanzer Gallery

Spareroom, 2006, aluminium. Photograph by Andrew Noble



In the Unlikely Event
PETER GREENAWAY

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In the Unlikely Event (detail)

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TOP: Shazia Fiaz, *Australia's Muslim Women* (detail), 2004, still image from 11-minute digital video. Image courtesy the artist. ABOVE LEFT: Nafisa Hattingh, *The 99 Most Beautiful Names of Allah* (detail), 2008, painted tiles, total area when laid out: 154 x110cm. Image courtesy the artist. Photography by Rania Gouda. ABOVE RIGHT: Anisa Sharif, *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.

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.'
3. <http://www.thewomens.org.au/Laparoscopy>
4. At www.irfanspace.net
5. Rose Issa, Ruyin Pakbaz, Daryush Shayegan, *Iranian Contemporary Art*, Booth Clibborn Editions, London, 2001.
6. *Contemporary Islamic Art and the Shackles of 'Tradition'* at www.creativemuslims.com.au/nur-article.html
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.

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-frosted 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 Moroccan Kitchen*, of an interior seen through a door; by the small scale and subject matter of the various photographs of people, nature and architectural details; by poems pressed with artificial flowers under glass; by Houda Merhi's and Dilshad Moosajee's Australian landscapes, and Shazia Fiaz's videos – a wedding narrated by the bride's non-Muslim friend from a bedroom, and women talking about their choice to cover or not cover their hair in public.⁸

This show had to do quite a lot of work for a lot of people: the municipality,