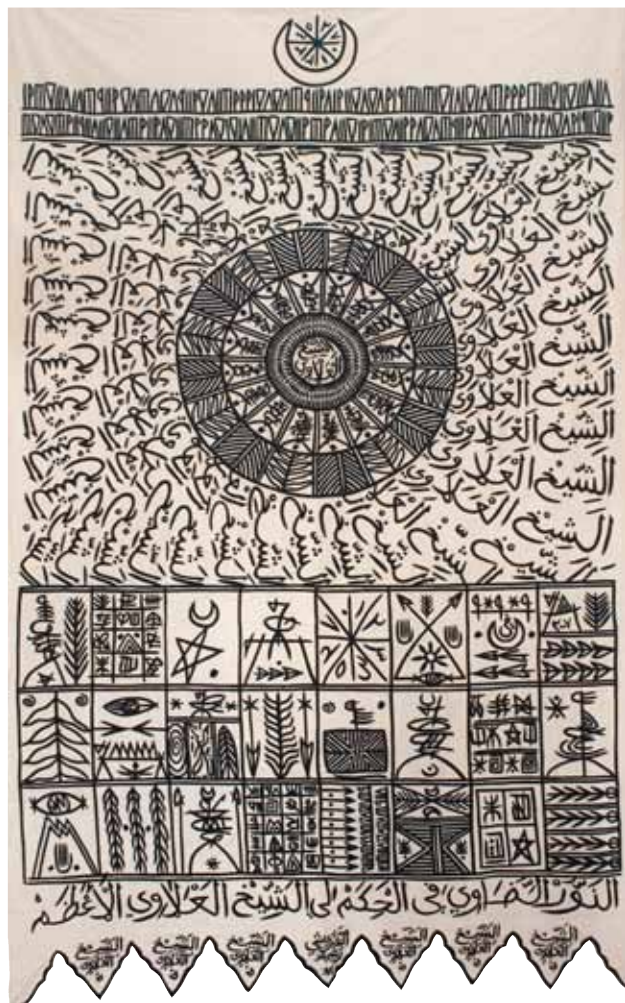


## Jameel Prize 2011

*By Janet Rady*



**Rachid Korasichi**, *the Invisible Master*, 2008, Cotton Applique, 348x200cm - Courtesy of October Gallery.

London has long been recognised and appreciated for its historic and cultural ties to the Islamic world and with all eyes focused upon the unfolding of the Arab Spring this year, the second iteration of the biennial Jameel Prize, on view from 21st July to 25th September at the Victoria and Albert Museum attracted much attention. For those who missed Charles Merewether's review of the first prize in CP, vol. V, the following is an overview of

its history. Established in 2009, in partnership with the Saudi based Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives, the prize was conceived as a result of the extensive renovations funded by the generosity of the Jameel family to the Islamic, now Jameel Galleries, at the V&A in 2006. Mindful of the richness of Islamic heritage, the aim of the Jameel Prize is fundamentally to explore the relationship between Islamic traditions of art, craft and design and contemporary work as part of a wider debate about Islamic culture and its role in globalised society today. In other words, contemporising the V&A's original vision when it began collecting Islamic art shortly after the Museum opened in the 1850s. Its aim, as now, was to bring Islamic art and design to a wider audience, the success of which was so perfectly achieved in the paradigm of William Morris' Arts and Crafts movement. With a cash value of GBP25,000 (USD38,500), the prize, unlike other more narrowly defined comparables (think Dubai's Abraaj or London's MOPCAP), is awarded to a living artist or designer of any age, nationality or creed whose work (from the last five years) is inspired by Islamic traditions in craft and design. This, you might think, would bring out derivative products by a dying breed of carpet weavers, copper beaters, potters or manuscript illuminators. But no! Entry to the prize is by nomination only; the process for the current prize, commencing as far back as May 2010. Although only in its second year, the enormous popularity of this prize was evidenced by the vast number of nominations received from leading curators, artists and specialists in the field. Works by over 200 international artists (more than double the first year), from countries as diverse as the United States, Spain, Nigeria, China, Australia, Egypt, Iran and Pakistan, were submitted for consideration.

These were then reviewed in the context of each artist's practice by a panel of five judges under the Patronage of the renowned Iraqi architect, Zaha Hadid. Chaired by the V&A's Director (originally Sir Mark Jones



**Aisha Khalid**, *Name, Class, Subject*, 2009, Wasli paper and gold leaf, 25 x 19cm, Courtesy of the artist, Corvi-Mora, Gallery and Raking Leaves.

and subsequently, the recently appointed Professor Martin Roth), this year's panel comprised such varied luminaries as Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Director, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar; Navid Akhtar, Executive Director, Gazelle Media; Dina Bakhoun, Conservation Programme Manager, The Agha Khan Trust for Culture, and the winner of the 2009 prize, Afruz Amighi. Fresh from finishing touring the 2009 prize exhibition around six venues in the Middle East, this year's short list was then announced at Art Dubai 2011. Of the 200 nominations, these were whittled down to just ten artists and designers - Noor Ali Chagani, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Bitá Ghezelayagh, Babak Golkar, Hayv Kahraman, Aisha Khalid, Rachid Koraïchi, Hazem El Mestikawy, Hadieh Shafie and Soody Sharifi – or to summarise geographically, five from Iran, two from Pakistan and one each from Egypt, Algeria and Iraq.

Drawing on the formalistic conventions of Islamic religious and vernacular decorative arts -celebrating objects of beauty - the selected works ranged from handmade, craft based items such as: textiles in the form of Ghezelayagh's felt costumes and Khalid's embroidered shawls, Koraïchi's cloth banners and a carpet model

by Golkar, to Farmanfarmaian's mirror mosaic and Khalid's manuscript illustration and Shafie's calligraphy, to Chagani's sculptural brickwork and El Mestikawy's geometric papier maché installation, and to Sharafi's more contemporary forms of miniature inspired digital collage, Kahraman's conceptually conceived paintings and Khalid's video.

With such a variety of shortlisted work, the task fell to the two V&A Curators, Tim Stanley, senior curator of the museum's Middle Eastern collections and his colleague, contemporary art curator, Salma Tuqan (formerly on the Art Dubai team) to put the exhibition together in a cohesive form. This culminated in the showing of twenty pieces, split (regrettably in the eyes of some commentators) between the Jameel Galleries themselves (interspersed amongst the 400 objects of metalwork, ceramics, glass and woodwork dating from the 8th and 9th centuries up to the early 20th century displayed around the focal point of the gallery, the Ardebil carpet) and a separate room, the Studio Gallery, dedicated to the shortlisted prize work.

Commenting on the selection, Tuqan notes "I think what's interesting about the prize is that even though the artists span such a huge geographic region, there



**Hadieh Shafie**, 22500 and Two scroll books, 2011, Ink on paper with printed and hand written Farsi text, 122x122 x 6.5cm, Courtesy of the artist.

are common threads and strands when you look around and wander around the exhibition and I think that's because the common denominators between all of that is really the kind of basis of Islamic tradition. I think the attention to detail, the handmade and the idea that the materials become part of the work is quite important in these artists' work."

Unlike the previous edition, when the winner was announced at the beginning of the exhibition, the formal announcement this year was not made until 12th September, at a Gala Reception at the Museum. In front of a packed room, the Chair of the Judges accompanied by members of the Jameel family and the British Minister of Culture, awarded Rachid Koraïchi with the accolade for his series of cloth banners *Les Maitres invisibles* (The Invisible Masters), 2008. In announcing the winner, Professor Martin Roth explained that "Rachid's work stood out because his banners have a universal appeal. They work in the white space of a contemporary art gallery, but they also hold their own in historical settings – from Parisian palaces to simple Sufi shrines." In true vox pop spirit, however, members of the public had also been given the chance to vote on their favourite artist, who significantly, differed in their opinion from that of the judges, with their choice going to Aisha Khalid for her *Name, Class, Subject*, 2009 and Kashmiri Shawl, 2011 (the latter also being shown at

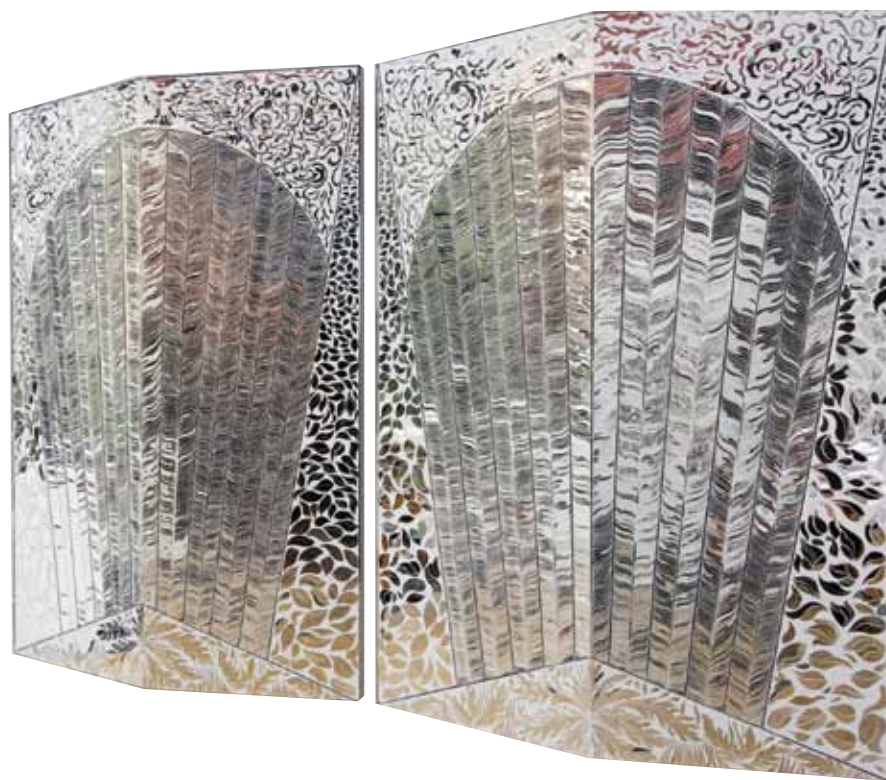
this year's Sharjah Biennial).

Underlying all the works was a certain common theme, that of the artist's own cultural hybridity. Ranging in age from eighty eight to twenty nine and either living in their homeland or in exile, by means of abstracted or representational imagery, each took the traditional form and content of their craft one stage further, balancing old and new, ornament and minimalism, infinite and absolute. By examining the works individually and by referencing these parallels in more detail, it is possible to draw out further linear connections between each artist's lexicon. Starting from the fundamental elements of craft, the most striking works are those of the strictly process grounded works of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Bitā Ghezelayagh and Rachid Koraïchi.

Born in Qazvin in Iran in 1923, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian is one of Iran's most celebrated artists with a career spanning more than five decades and two continents. Now living in Iran, she exhibited the diptych *Birds of Paradise*, 2008, a work that demonstrates her distinctive style of adapting and combining Iranian traditions of mirror mosaic and reverse glass painting techniques with a modern aesthetic. Mirrors are cut and set in geometric patterns and integrated with coloured glass, referencing a range of influences in Islamic art, architecture and science. Mirror mosaics have decorated the interiors of Iranian shrines and palaces since the 16th century and Farmanfarmaian explains how she became fascinated with the technique. "Around 1971, I went to a certain shrine [Shāh-é-Chérāgh in Isfahan, Iran]," she says, "and I became very awed with the way the mirror pieces were reflecting back images of the people there – the beggars, the holy men. It was so beautiful, so magnificent. I was crying like a baby." Having removed the strictly sacred connotations from her work, this particular piece (inspired by the many feathers left by sparrows on her balcony in Tehran) in which curved strips of mirror, aligned in vertical chevron, are delineated by a shield form against the backdrop of leaves, nevertheless symbolises the attributes of heaven in a more abstract language.

Similarly from Iran and with a strong link to architecture through her training as an architect in Paris, Ghezelayagh's work also alludes to heaven but from a rather different angle. Saddened by the





**Monir Shahroudy**, Farmanfarmaian Birds of Paradise, 2008, Mirror mosaic and reverse glass painting, 180x129cm (each), Courtesy of Rose Issa Projects.

disappearance of traditional crafts in Iran after the Revolution, Ghezelayagh determined to work in the traditional Iranian craft of felt-making. Fascinated by the Turkomen of the north of Iran she started felt-making with the women there about eight years ago. For the Jameel Prize, she showed three pieces from her Felt Memories series (2007-9), inspired by the courtly Islamic tradition of luxurious talismanic coats, worn to protect the wearer in battle. Influenced by post-revolutionary visual popular culture, and in much the same way as the Saqqakhaneh artists of the 1960s and 70s were infusing modernist art forms with traditional Shi'ite imagery, Ghezelayagh, by using metal keys, crowns, tulips (symbols of martyrdom), machine guns and other street symbols combined with printed Persian calligraphic phrases to cover the surface of her pieces, subverts this exclusivity. The juxtaposition of urban imagery with a rural craft tradition thereby creates a new contemporary visual language, which embraces both tradition and modernity. Equally talismanic and inspired by the loss of traditional

craftsmanship are prize winning Koraïchi's Les Maîtres Invisibles (The Invisible Masters) series of which six were exhibited in the museum as part of a long-term project dealing with the lives and legacies of the fourteen great mystics of Islam. Born into a Sufi family in Ain Beida in Algeria, 67 year old Koraïchi has been heavily influenced by both the form and practice of this mystical philosophy. By creating traditional banners, redesigned with a combination of Sufi symbolism in the shape of the square, pyramids, circles, whirling dervishes, Arabic calligraphy and other asemic forms of writing and pictograms, Koraïchi's mix of representation and interpretation traces the historical development of the broad world of Islam, from the western fringes of Andalucía via the Middle East and on to the Levant. Through drawing together threads in the lives of such great Sufi masters as Jalaluddin Rumi and Ibn El Arabi, the artist aims to demonstrate that "the world of Islam, in contrast to contemporary perceptions of crisis and violence, has another side entirely, evident in the tolerant, sophisticated writings of the great Muslim



**Soody Sharifi**, *Fashion Week*, 2010, Digital collage, 101.6 x 152.4cm, Courtesy of the artist.

thinkers and poets.” Whilst these ‘Masters’ may no longer be present, as Korāichi states, “I want to show how they left an imprint on succeeding generations, and bequeathed us a message as relevant today as it was when first written down.”

The textile theme is continued by Pakistani, Aisha Khalid. Trained as a miniature painter at Lahore’s celebrated National College of Art, Khalid’s Kashmiri Shawl, draws on her training and interest in pattern and repetition to create a deceptively decorative cashmere shawl. Pierced with 300,000 gold-plated pins, which when viewed from one side, displays a traditional Scottish paisley pattern, whilst on the other, a more menacing form appears. For Khalid, this contrasting symbolism is a potent cipher for the agony of the people in occupied Kashmir. Khalid’s other selected work *Name, Class, Subject*, 2009 depicts an imaginary

school notebook, inspired by those she used in her youth. This book, however, is entirely fabricated by the artist, each line being meticulously painted, errors and all, mimicking those of the original examples.

Also trained at Lahore’s NCA, the youngest artist, Noor Ali Chagani’s adaptation of the miniature technique has resulted in a quite different form from that of Khalid’s. The tiny *par dokht* dots, which are used to make up the surfaces of Mughal paintings, are in *Infinity* 2009 and *Life Line* 2010 transformed in substance and with the same attention to detail into miniature fired terracotta bricks woven together on wires into a tactile, seemingly pliable fabric. With similar dichotomy of form and concept to Khalid, Chagani’s bricks serve on one level as protection, shelter and wrapping, as clothes provide a second skin, yet through their brittleness and fragility, they also define the toughness and hardships of life’s daily struggle. Complimenting the politics of struggle negotiated through reinterpretation are the Iraqi artist, Hayv Kahraman’s two paintings are from her *Waraq’* series (*Playing Cards*), *Migrant 1* and *Migrant 8*, 2010, and her new work, *Asad Babil* 2011, inspired by her experience of living in Baghdad, Europe and the USA. *Waraq* means ‘paper cards’ in Arabic and references a popular Iraqi pastime. Kahraman has invented a suit of cards to explore the lives of people who personify the Iraqi Diaspora and their stories of assimilation, alienation and discovery in their new homes. The work also references so called ‘Archaeology awareness playing cards’ - 40,000 decks of cards which were sent to American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2007 to highlight important archaeological sites and to discourage illegal trade in artefacts.

*Asad Babil* depicts an injured, life-sized lion painted in Islamic geometric patterns and black and red paint. A set of ‘diasporic’ playing cards gushes from the lion’s mouth, instead of blood, referencing the fall of Iraq and the wounded people as its victims and prey. The work parallels Mesopotamian motifs as well as events from Iraqi political history. During the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussein developed a battle tank he named *Asad Babil*, or the Lion of Babylon. Utterly outclassed by the American forces it was ironically named after an ancient basalt monument depicting a man being trampled by a lion. By interweaving significant historical scenarios

these pieces are a manifestation of the pandemonium and depression that arise from a tragic loss of solidarity in thought and culture.

Returning to the theme of architecture, the Egyptian artist Hazem El Mestikawy, exhibited a sculptural installation made from recycled cardboard and newspaper entitled *Bridge*, 2009. The work is a continuation of his exploration of the socio-political issues of North versus South, and East versus West. El Mestikawy defines the space between different regions, both geographically and metaphorically. The building and pattern of the work depend on the equity of all the edges; there are no stronger and no weaker edges; the parts are equal and occupy an equal amount of space. His practice assimilates ancient Egyptian and Islamic art and architecture, as well as contemporary and minimal art philosophies. Comparable juxtapositions of textile and architecture appear in the American born, Iranian artist, Babak Golkar's sculpture. Conceived as a Tabriz rug superimposed on the footprint of the design with architectural models, the work recalls the high rises springing up in Dubai, only truly visible when viewed from above. With a title sounding like a utopian town planner's blueprint, combined with a metaphysical statement *Negotiating the Space for Possible Coexistences No.5*, 2009, Golkar fuses the Iranian traditions of its textile industry with an altogether more philosophical examination of viewer and viewed from a Western perspective. He creates bodies of work which attempt to negotiate an enigmatic coexistence in the space between these cultures. More specifically, his work manoeuvres between seemingly opposing realms such as East and West, modernity and antiquity, minimalism and ornament.

Co-existence on a temporal plane is the theme of US based Soody Sharifi's playful 'maxiatures', or Persian miniatures writ large. In *Fashion Week*, 2010, and *Frolicking Women*, 2007, Sharifi creates digital collages using enlarged scans of original courtly Persian miniatures in which she inserts her own photographic images of an imaginary contemporary Iranian fashion show in the midst of an imperial audience setting or manteau clad girls frolicking in a pool with the Timurid princesses. Humorously negotiating the clash of Iran's traditional cultures with modernity and tropes of youth,

Sharifi seeks to demystify contemporary life in Iran by opening up scenes of private life and blurring the line between reality and fiction as well as reflecting on the ironic dialogue between East and West.

The last artist in the line up, Tehran born Hadieh Shafie's two new works, *22500*, 2011 and *26000*, 2011 are a continuation of her signature paper scroll works. In Hadieh Shafie's work, the notion of meditative process, repetition and time as found in Islamic art, craft and architecture is a constant element.

Made up of 22,500 and 26,000 strips of paper, each scroll is marked with printed and hand written Persian calligraphy, tightly rolled into concentric circles, concealing or revealing different elements of the text. Like the symbols used in Koräichi's work, the concentric forms of both text and material take their inspiration from the dance of the whirling dervish. Shafie's paper scroll works, which on the one hand remind one of American Kinetic Op Art or an ophthalmologist's colour vision chart, demonstrate a constant element of her work which is the significance of process, repetition and time, all rooted in the influence of Islamic art and craft. Hadieh seeks to create work which is rich in layers of meaning and gives the viewer an opportunity for contemplation and reflection. In summing up this rapid survey of the works of the ten artists, there seems no better conclusion than that presented by the Patron of the Board of Judges, Zaha Hadid.

*"It is a very exciting time for artists working in Islamic art tradition; there is a real spirit of innovation and creativity in the air. Their work now goes beyond established painting, sculpture and calligraphy to explore new media and reflect the diverse cultures and histories of the region. This work has evolved with its own characteristic voice, exploring future possibilities, yet is derived from rich cultural traditions and a timeless history."*

*For millennia, the Islamic arts and sciences have bridged the cultural divide between East and West, teaching us that these worlds are not mutually exclusive, but rather layered upon each other and profoundly interlinked. The Jameel Prize gives us a very promising outlook to the future and I am pleased to see the region's artists pushing new boundaries."*