



CASE STUDY: Having faith in the arts

Hassan Mahamdallie and Abid Hussain profile the work of Arts and Islam and draw out the diverse range of work that falls under that heading.

The diversity team at Arts Council England has been running an ‘Arts and Islam’ programme for the past four years. Its purpose is to use informed debate and interventions to explore the issues between artistic practice, religious belief and contemporary society. For all the controversy generated around Muslims and their religion, there is at least an equal thirst to explore Muslim cultures, to grasp Islam’s historic and contemporary relationship to artistic expression, and, above all, to participate in fruitful dialogue. We are fortunate that there exists in Britain a burgeoning and talented group of artists whose work is informed by their Islamic belief, although we hesitate to label them ‘Muslim artists’, as that would lump together a disparate group. It would also be wrong to describe their art as purely religious or traditional. That would be to miss out on the subtle and rich interplay between the individual artist, the society they live in, their training and talent, and the religion they practice.

There are barriers to surmount. The arts in Britain, reflecting wider society, can demonstrate uneasiness when religious belief is linked with artistic expression. We have to some extent ‘secularised’ religion in art – for example separating iconic Christian imagery such as the crucifixion from its religious content. Seven out of ten Muslims in Britain are from the Pakistani or Bangladeshi communities, two of the most economically impoverished groups in society. The remaining 30% include Somalis and working class North and West Africans. It is a struggle for many young Muslims to overcome class disadvantage and prejudice to make a living in what remains a middle class profession. The graffiti artist and founder of Soul City Arts, Mohammed ‘Aerosol Arabic’ Ali, explained that “Our parents from the Indian subcontinent

came here for economic benefit, to give to their families what they never got. That's why my dad worked in restaurants until four in the morning. The arts is not a well paid sector and my dad did not want me to struggle like he did." There are also barriers towards understanding where artists interested in their Muslim cultural heritage are coming from. Contemporary visual artist Zarah Hussain says that she experienced a lack of support and understanding from art teachers and colleges, and in some cases the art world: "I wanted to explore art from an eastern perspective and was very interested in Islamic art. I have often been discouraged, mainly because many people do not understand it... religious art is looked down upon and heavily criticised."

There is resistance amongst elements of the Muslim community to participation in some of the arts, although it is not always clear whether this stems from religious, cultural or ideological roots. There is also a danger that artists from Muslim backgrounds are diverted from their path of artistic development towards becoming ready-made proxies for other agendas. As Hussain observes, "I have often been encouraged to make work that is critical of Islam and particularly work that is critical of Islam's supposed injustice towards women". Arts and Islam has been active in opening up all of these debates and putting the interests of artists and their art foremost. To that end we have organised educational seminars, debates, artists' workshops, film tours and live performances both here, in Europe and in the USA. We have been hosted by arts organisations, universities and mosque authorities. Our explorations range from the architecture of mosques to the vibrant world of Muslim hip hop. As Hussain says, "Arts and Islam has... provided a community of like-minded people that you can talk to and share experiences and support each other." Perhaps one of our most rewarding moments so far came after a film showing in Lewisham Mosque in South London, when a hijab-wearing woman came up to us and said, "That was wonderful. How can I get my little girl interested in art?"

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