

Madad: An Artistic Supplication to the Supplier

By Max Dugan

In her latest show at 12 Gates Arts, 'Madad', Amina Ahmed employs a minimalist, Islamic spiritual aesthetic to saturate her pieces with themes, questions, and Islamic feminism instead of pigments, textures, and shapes. The polysemous title itself symbolizes the coexistence of many ideas, with *madad* meaning variously “a supplication intended to seek the extension of divine grace” (Urdu), “to extend or stretch” (Arabic), or “measurement” (Hebrew). Like the multiplicity of the show’s title, the individual works simultaneously explore different themes; specifically, art-making as spiritual orthopraxy, Islamic feminist theory, and the infinite (the Divine) and the finite (the rest of it all). Experiencing a show as rich as ‘Madad’ is akin to undertaking a long meditation: even days after seeing the works, the personal truths that emerged still resonate.

Curation and Method

Madad itself is a collection of twenty-five pieces divided between two walls and a short platform—the walls each house ten pieces and the platform five. Most of the pieces adorning the walls are on paper—watercolor, handmade, architectural, and gessoed—using a variety of media, including fire, to create patterns and designs. In addition to guiding the show, the word *madad*/ ددم also composes many of the patterns and forms; for example, *madad*/ ددم is the central design for the Islamic geometric pattern in *The Meeting*. Similarly, in *Extend Your Saving Grace*, *madad*/ ددم is repeated over and over again to create a feminine form—the meaning of this piece will be explored further in the next section.

Ahmed’s formal training in traditional Islamic geometry is apparent after a close look at her work, exemplifying the Hebrew meaning of *madad*: measurement. The tick marks and straight lines connecting intersections of loose, but perfectly circular curves give away Ahmed’s essential tools: a compass and a straight edge. While her exploration of artistic media and the show’s progressive themes are strikingly contemporary, many of the techniques that produced the works existed a millennium ago. In this blending of tradition and innovation, Ahmed makes her Islamicate heritage relevant and responsive to our time.

Art-Making as Islamic Orthopraxy

While analysis of Ahmed’s method could consist of technical details, her art is packed with a spiritual awareness that reveals a profoundly religious artistic

practice. To guide the viewer to consider this, Ahmed introduces the show's catalogue with the following statement:

One arrives at a state of beholdenness when one sees deeply into everything that is given. Being beholden binds one to the Giver, leaving one in a state of ecstatic bindingness. The binding can never be whole while one lives, and so one is filled with longing. A longingness that leads once again to the joy of beholdenness. One's work becomes a gift to the Giver, made from and of this eternal cycle.

This passage elucidates that for Ahmed the art-making process is necessarily intertwined with devotion, the two actions dialectically developing one another in the same way that one's work is "a gift to the Giver." In this sense it is orthopraxy, a righteous, pious action. Viewed through this lens, the art transforms from beautiful objects into an exploration of (or perhaps for) the Beautiful or the Essence that resides in sublime beauty.

Rahma and the Feminine

In addition to *madad*, another word informs much of the exhibit: *rahma*. Although the word itself only appears in one piece in the form *rahman*, it elucidates the Islamic feminism underlying much of Ahmed's work. *Rahma*, derived from *rahm*, which means "womb," is for many Muslims associated with mercy and compassion because of the phrase that precedes recitation of the Qur'an and, for many externally-observant Muslims, any public address: *bismi-llah ar-rahman ar-rahim*, which translates to "in the name of God, the merciful and compassionate." That one of the most frequently repeated Islamic phrases contains words directly connected to an exclusively feminine function, childrearing, is an important consideration for Islamic feminist theory.

Viewing Ahmed's work through a lens of *rahm* (again, "womb" with all of its Muslim connotations) enables the viewer to see the pious femininity dripping from the pieces. The elliptical flower petals created in the constructions of geometry are transformed into vulvic symbols created by this sacred practice of geometry. The ambiguous collection of *madad* in "Extending Your Saving Grace" becomes the feminine form that wears a crown composed of the words *ya Allah ya rahman ya rahman* ("Oh God, oh the most merciful, oh the most merciful"). Through this subtle, layered allusion, Ahmed extols the holiness of the feminine, and invokes a concept, *rahm*/womb, that some Islamic feminists, such as Amina Wadud, have employed to assert the spiritual superiority of the muslima to the muslim.

The infinite and the Finite

Ahmed also explores the infinite and the finite. One of the principal ideas underlying The sacred practice of geometry is that the patterns created in the constructions of geometry could continue on infinitely, in the same way that the Divine is infinite. Even the *The Meeting*, which only contains four *madad*/ ددم, could be extended on indefinitely. Many of Ahmed's works continue this theme. For example, the circular patterns created in *Raindrop Reverberation: A Wound is Where the Light Enters You* could continue on indefinitely—just, as it seems when viewing them, the ripples created by a droplet striking surface of water.

However much potential there is for the infinite, Ahmed includes limits in all of the pieces. There is, of course, the fundamental limit of the frame or paper's end. Rejecting those natural limits, Ahmed deliberately imposes borders in all of the pieces. In *The Meeting*, the patterns conspicuously end after one iteration. Similarly, in *Raindrop Reverberation: A Wound is Where the Light Enters You*, the endless ripples are impeded by a circumscription. Considering the frequent emphasis in Islamic geometry on the infinite potential of these designs, Ahmed's choice to restrict her patterns seems anything but incidental.

Perhaps the omnipresence of limits in *madad* is a reminder that we humans are fundamentally limited in this life. We seem to have the capacity to be infinite—we were, after all, made in the image of and filled with the breath (*ruh*) of God—but very much do not. Still, in the presence of 'Madad' one feels they are somehow closer to the Essence. In the same way that looking into a room filled with sunlight intimates the sun, Ahmed's work provides insight into the sublime, beautiful Divine.

'Madad' was held in 2016 at 12 Gates Art (Philadelphia) and was Amina Ahmed's first solo exhibition in the U.S.