





## Jameel Prize 2011 shortlist develops art from craftwork


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### Summary

An exhibition of work by artists up for the the Victoria and Albert's biennial award for contemporary design rooted in Islamic art opens at the London museum next week.

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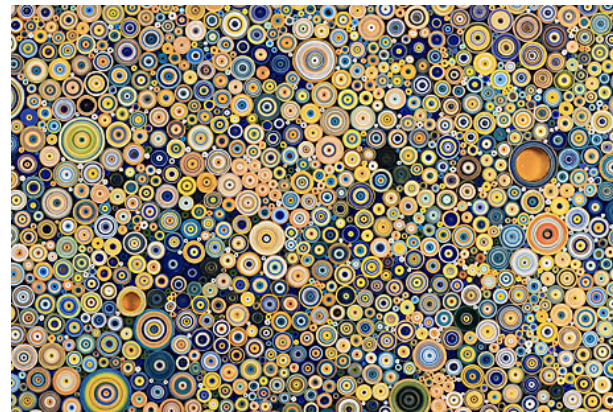
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Shortlisted work for the Jameel Prize 2011 will go on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London on July 21. The winner is to be announced in September, but even before that, an agenda and narrative beyond the typical parameters of an art prize have emerged.

Rather than deconstructing a conceptual conundrum or focusing on the hazy boundaries of regions and place, the exhibition of artists nominated for this year's prize — touring Europe and America over the next few months — examines something more tactile.

Simply put, this is a celebration of the handmade. There are 10 artists shortlisted for this year's £25,000 (Dh147,180) biennial award for contemporary art and design inspired by the Islamic tradition.

Each artist responds to what Salma Tuqan, a curator in the V&A's Middle East department, calls an engagement with "Islamic craft, art and design", noting that such processes have played an intrinsic part in art from the Islamic world.

"The Jameel Prize is not solely about contemporary art," Tuqan says, "but about the craft element and opening the viewer's eyes to what constitutes Islamic art."

Much of what we might refer to as "Islamic art" are objects that are as useful and functional as they are aesthetically pleasing. This spans illuminated religious manuscripts, ceramics, mosaic and textiles through to architecture and its ornamentation. Often, works of "Islamic art" are less for contemplation in themselves than for use as tools that awaken and heighten a sense of contemplation in the viewer. Calligraphy - a means of artfully communicating lines or even a single word from the Quran - sums this up perfectly.

The shortlist has been selected by key players in the Middle East's art scene, including the 2009 winner, Afruz Amighi. Some nominated artists are familiar names - the likes of Monir Farmanfarmaian, a key figure in Iranian art who creates stunning mirror mosaics, and Hayy Kahraman, here turning her nuanced style of painting solemn, ethereal female figures to creating a deck of playing cards that depicts the lives of Iraqi exiles.

But there is ample space given to more emerging talent. Noor Ali Chagani, for instance, applies the intensive education in miniature painting he gleaned from Pakistan's art colleges and applies it to tiny terracotta bricks. With the same intricacy and exactitude of this Mughal style of painting, normally reserved for illuminating religious texts and poetic epics, Chagani hand-fires thousands of these small bricks and mortars them together to create an undulating form.

Despite the hardness of the material, the sheer number of bricks, like the tiny dots of paint found in miniatures, creates a knitted-together impression. A mass of terracotta appears as malleable as crumpled silk in the hands of the miniaturist.

Yet no artist takes his or her inspirations literally. Instead, we see sensitive subversions, and interrogations of craft forms. Aisha Khalid - another Pakistani artist in the shortlist - examines the tradition of weaving in rural Kashmir. Khalid worked with the women of communities there to create a pashmina shawl, but subverts this by piercing the material with long, gold-plated pins. On one side of the pashmina, only the delicate paisley pattern is visible - flashing with the gold of the pinheads. On the other, the steel shafts of the pins protrude to create a menacing reverse: a nod to the violence that underpins life in this contested borderland.

The hook in the Jameel Prize is this emphasis on making; it offers a refreshing

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alternative to an increasingly concept-driven landscape of art prizes. Process, and the idea that an artist should roll up his or her sleeves and engage with a craft hands-on, seems to be a key feature of the work that has made it into the final lineup.

In this way, Bitu Ghezelayagh has developed a near-obsession with felt. She trained as an architect in Paris but returned to Iran at 28 to find the country of her memories irretrievably lost. The traditions and nuanced way of life she'd longed for while away seemed to have been brushed away in the cumulative carnage of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. [Next page](#)

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