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# No Looking Back

## Islam and Identity in Contemporary Australian Art

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## NO LOOKING BACK: ISLAM AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPOARY AUSTRALIAN ART

Sam Bowker\*

**Abstract:** This is a critical review of changes in the two years since I wrote “The Invisibility of Islamic Art in Australia” for *The Conversation* in 2016. This includes the National Museum of Australia’s collaborative exhibition *So That You May Know Each Other* (2018), and the rise of the ‘Eleven Collective’ through their exhibitions *We are all Affected* (2017) in Sydney and *Waqt al-Tagheer – Time of Change* (2018) in Adelaide. It considers the representation of Australian contemporary artists in the documentary *You See Monsters* (2017) by Tony Jackson and Chemical Media, and the exhibition *Khalas! Enough!* (2018) at the UNSW.

These initiatives demonstrate the momentum of generational change within contemporary Australian art and literary performance cultures. These creative practitioners have articulated their work through formidable public networks. They include well-established and emerging artists, driven to engage with political and social contexts that have defined their peers by antagonism or marginalisation.

There has never been a ‘Golden Age’ for ‘Islamic’ arts in Australia. But as the Eleven Collective have argued, we are living in a time of change. This is an exceptional period for the creation and mobilisation of artworks that articulate what it means to be Muslim in Australia.

**Keywords:** *Islam, Australian, Art, Contemporary, Muslim, Eleven Collective*

### INTRODUCTION

In 2016, my article “The Invisibility of Islamic Art in Australia” in *The Conversation* claimed that Islamic art in Australia was “inaccessible and overlooked”. In the two years since, some changes have occurred in the representation of historically driven ‘Islamic’ art, but radically challenging collective actions have taken place in contemporary art. This article considers the scope and coordination of exhibitions that have recently engaged with themes of Islamic identity in Australia. These include the 2017-2018 work of the Eleven Collective, the 2017 documentary *You See Monsters*, the long-term touring exhibition *Faith, Fashion, Fusion* (Museum of Art and Applied Sciences, 2012-2018), the collaborative exhibition *So That You*

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*May Know Each Other* (National Museum of Australia, 2018), as well as the ongoing work of the 'Ilm Gallery in the Asian Art section of the Art Gallery of South Australia and the Islamic Museum of Australia.

These case studies provide a challenging, critical, contested and active foundation for Australian forms of Islamic identity in visual arts and design. They situate local differences within global contexts, argue for their own definitions, engage with diverse audiences (national and international), and reject the problematic inheritances of the term 'Islamic art'. Their comparison highlights what Australians can contribute to this vast field, working without the shadow of a 'Golden Age,' in a time of extraordinary and unpredictable change.

Beyond the ongoing problems of nomenclature, as Wendy Shaw argued in 2012, the global field of Islamic art "should, wholeheartedly and with critical self-awareness, take on the public and political role that has been foisted upon it by socio-political imperatives"<sup>1</sup> in order to engage with the contemporary world. Australian artists and scholars are in an ideal position to rise to this challenge. These practitioners and advocates do not create 'Islamic art'; they create art that engages with what it means to be Muslim in Australia today.

This brief survey of recent Australian art demonstrates that these artists are driven by the needs of the present and their anticipated futures, not the preservation of legacies such as calligraphy, iconographic or geometric design. This is a generation of artists that acknowledges precedents from elsewhere, but does not seek to maintain conservative principles in the creation of their artwork. This is a notable contrast from concurrent international exhibitions that repeat and/or reinforce Orientalist paradigms by uncritically perpetuating restrictions on figuration, among other characteristics of what has been described as contemporary Islamic art.

For example, the historic field of Islamic art has been characterised by the rich use of geometric principles and calligraphy. These continue to inform many contemporary artists globally in the creation of new work. However, none of the Australian case studies in this survey engage closely with either of these specialist fields of visual culture. Those who apply the visual principles of geometry to their creative practice do so in subtle or understated ways. Those who work with words apply value to their meaning as performed poetry and critical prose in English, not the visual forms in which they are written and not typically in languages associated with Islamic identity beyond Australia. These are socially and politically engaged creative practices, using references that can be recognised by those unfamiliar with historic practices.

## AUSTRALIAN CONTEXTS

Scholars of Indigenous Australian sociology and history are familiar with 'deficit narratives.' These situate discussion of marginal groups in terms of deprivation against the mean, rather like demographic disabilities. If we view Australia as a contributing partner to the

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Shaw, "The Islam in Islamic Art History: Secularism and Public Discourse," *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012): 2.

global field of Islamic art, then we may be tempted to apply a deficit narrative. The traces of the Makassans or relics of the cameleers are firmly vernacular, not spectacular. There is nothing ostentatious in their design, lavish in their materials or monumental in their scale. But they are unique in their migration narratives, exceptional in their resilience and highly engaged with landscapes and industries.

These histories are referenced by Shireen Taweel's copper sculpture, *mushallah* (2017). This suspended loop, derived from the wallpapers found within the cameleer's mosque at Broken Hill, acknowledges historic precedents within Australia as well as the global heritage of copper-smithing.<sup>2</sup> Her practice as a sculptor is informed by the material cultural heritage of hammered and pierced copper, but references to specifically Islamic concepts of presence, absence, decorative forms and implicit values of hand-crafted metal objects for ritual and secular purposes.

There is no such thing as a Golden Age within Australian art for contribution to an international Islamic art narrative. In historic terms, the closest thing we have is a blend of ochre and rust, like the beach-strewn fragments of an iron Makassan boiling pot buried in the sand of an isolated northern beach or the corrugated tin sheets of shed-like cameleer mosques in remote outback towns. These are literally worlds apart from the canonical objects of Islamic arts created under the splendid patronage of imperial courts.

These Australian case studies were prominently displayed as the concluding statements of the National Museum of Australia's collaborative exhibition *So That You May Know Each Other* (2018). The planning included global perspectives often marginalised, such as Islam in East Africa, the pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Gulf cities and the Philippines. The Australian section aligned with broader 'nationhood' narratives of resilience and hardship, working in challenging climatic conditions, remote landscapes and the valuing of functional purpose over embellished ornament.

This exhibition was ambitious, notably in the collaboration between the Vatican Amina Mundi Museum, Sharjah Museums Authority and National Museum of Australia. As the objects were sourced from three collections, the impetus behind each collection was evident and this gave rise to criticisms of the display as "enigmatic", using "isolated presentation" reminiscent of "cabinets of curiosities." Ana Silkavetcha praised the Australian component and acknowledged the diversity within the scope of this exhibition, but hoped to see an approach in which cultural contexts were interpreted, rather than displaying objects independently:

In our current political climate, making culture relevant and comprehensible is especially important for exhibitions of Islamic art, and exhibition audiences need more "scaffolding" in interpretation to foster the active development of those necessary connections.

Given the tendency for Islamic art to be all but invisible in this country, the National Museum must be applauded for its initiative in displaying Islamic art and culture within the Australian cultural sphere. But the sobering figures on Australian attitudes to Muslims and Islam highlight the need for interpretation and engagement around Islamic art to be carefully

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://shireentaweel.com/> (accessed March 2019).

constructed. If displays are crafted in ways that assist exhibition audiences to understand the message, our community only stands to benefit.<sup>3</sup>

This recalls the work of Louise Ryan, who critically reviewed responses to the *Treasures of Islam* exhibition loaned from the Nasser D. Khalili collection to the Art Gallery of NSW from June-September 2007, while acknowledging the impact of the Cronulla Riots on 11 December 2005.<sup>4</sup> Both scholars situate the need for increased visibility of Australian artists who critically engage with themes drawn from the current perception and representation of Muslim identities. To its credit, the National Museum of Australia achieved this with an off-site exhibition by Shireen Taweel, Hoda Afshar and Leila Al Rayes in the Nishi Gallery, and they also held a series of public lectures by academics on aspects of Islam.<sup>5</sup> This exhibition highlighted the global work of these artists, their connection to diasporic and ongoing communities overseas, and the subtleties of distinguishing their personal histories against the capricious and primarily historic concept of Islamic art.

Matthew Boyd Goldie, in his study of the Antipodes, called upon Eve Sedgwick's book *Touching Feeling*, to note that we are "beside" the narrative, which is more nuanced than simply being oppositional to the 'other.'<sup>6</sup> This history should not be seen as an absence of grandeur, but a different story for a different place. Instead of searching for golden ages from elsewhere to provide a standard of excellence or point of departure, we should focus on the present day. This is exactly what Australian artists are doing right now.

Muslim history in Australia includes at least three centuries of diasporic interaction, as documented by ongoing research projects such as Charles Sturt University's "Australian Muslim Voices" project, as well as many other groups and individuals. The scope is vast, but before the end of the White Australia policy in 1973, the architectural structures and metropolitan presence of Australian Muslim communities was minimal. Following this socio-political milestone, we encounter many new stories of immigration, education and business development across generations. It was unusual to find artists in those first generations post-1973. It was the subsequent generations raised in Australia, whose parents or grandparents migrated to Australia, who were afforded the opportunities to study and pursue careers in visual art and other creative industries.

As experienced by the émigré generation of European modernists in Melbourne and Sydney after 1945, the post-1970s contributions of artists like Hossein Valamanesh stood out within contemporary Australian art for their perceived 'exotic' backgrounds, accentuated by the varied ways in which his Iranian heritage and Indigenous perspectives have mutually informed

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<sup>3</sup> Ana Silkavetcha, "Islamic Art at the National Museum is Spectacular, but Misses Opportunities to Bridge a Cultural Gap," *The Conversation*, July 5, 2018, accessed February 2019, <https://theconversation.com/islamic-art-at-the-national-museum-is-spectacular-but-misses-opportunities-to-bridge-a-cultural-gap-99364>.

<sup>4</sup> Louise Ryan, "Negotiating Difference: Islamic Identity on Display" (paper presented at the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Conference, Adelaide, November 22-24, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> This author also contributed to two of these lectures for the National Museum of Australia, including "A Dialogue of Objects" and a keynote lecture for a public *iftar* held during the exhibition.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Boyd Goldie, *Imagining the Antipodes: Place, People and Voices* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

his art practice. (Such as *Longing, Belonging* (1997), which was created after travelling with Indigenous elders in Central Australia).<sup>7</sup> His key contribution for this discussion is that his artwork is shaped by his Iranian heritage, Australian landscapes and his relationships with Indigenous Australians.

## COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

The 1990s saw Australian artists of many cultural backgrounds begin contributing to the growth of Australian contemporary art as pluralistic, cosmopolitan and critically postcolonial, though it remains persistently monolingual. The emergence of individual and collective art practices from second and third generation Australians shares some of the socio-political concerns of contemporary Indigenous Australian and Torres Strait Islander art, notably the mutual pursuit of decolonisation and aspirations towards intersectional feminism in visual culture.<sup>8</sup> These general observations can be seen through the work of the Eleven Collective, which was formed in response to Indigenous art collectives like proppaNOW, and other Australian artists whose work is informed by their contemporary urban identity and Muslim heritage. Subsequently, both movements seek to be disruptive and challenge institutions to provide more inclusive leadership – and not just within art spaces.

For Indigenous Australian and Muslim Australian artists, these are movements that focus on lived experiences, acknowledging heritage and individuation against majority media or national discourses. Collectives provide a powerful means of amplifying and co-ordinating diverse voices, particularly as noted by Indigenous curator Margo Neale:

Collectivisation (coming together to form long term, resource-sharing, mutually beneficial groups) is a particularly useful strategy for artists coming from communities who are historically poor, voiceless, marginalised and lacking access to resources and representation enjoyed by the mainstream.<sup>9</sup>

These approaches are shared by the Eleven Collective. Their mission statement states their belief that contemporary art can:

...disrupt the hegemonic discourse whilst interrogating issues of identity, religiosity, politics, gender, colour, race and class... [and] make provision for the agency of the artist's personal narratives to elucidate, inspire and transcend the ordinary.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Mary Knights, "From Nothingness to Belonging," *The Australian*, September 21, 2011, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/visual-arts/out-of-nothingness/news-story/0dd835431ddbaba814697fc199101e21>; Hossein Valamanesh, *Longing Belonging*, 1997, mixed media, direct colour positive photograph, carpet, velvet, Sydney, Art Gallery of NSW, accessed February 2019, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/207.2002.a-b/>.

<sup>8</sup> Paola Balla, "Work to Be Done," *Frieze* 199 (2018), accessed October 31, 2018, <https://frieze.com/article/across-australia-artists-are-disrupting-colonial-mindset>. See also Kimberley Moulton, "Sovereign Art and the Colonial Canon: Are We Lost Until We Are Found?" in *Sovereignty*, eds. Paola Balla and Max Delany (Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017), 31.

<sup>9</sup> Margo Neale, "Learning to be Proppa," *ArtLink*, March 2010, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3359/learning-to-be-proppa-aboriginal-artists-collecti/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Projects," Eleven, 2018, <https://eleven-collective.com/projects/>.

By comparison, the “Deep Dirt Collective” (a group of seven Australian women artists of colour, including Zeina Iaali of the Eleven Collective) offers a pertinent parallel to these goals, in which they share a common interest in identity, migration and colonialism:

We are telling our own stories and resisting dominant culture.

We are activating our intuition and healing historical traumas.

We are honouring our ancestral roots on our own terms and in our own languages.

We are sparking strategies for dismantling the constructs of gender and colonialism.

We are transgressive makers of culture.

We are Idil Abdullahi, Nicole Barakat, Salwa El-Shaikh, Zeina Iaali, Priya Panchalingam, Samara Shehata & Samia Sayed.<sup>11</sup>

The need for collectives representing Australian Muslim and Indigenous artists is ongoing and can take many forms. These can be taken as responses to the legacies of colonisation and the former White Australia policy, as well as other systemic narratives that continue to shape the identity and interactions of these artists. To account for the empowered activism of these groups through visual art, Paola Balla reminded us that:

Decolonization also calls for Aboriginal artists to remind the public that they are continuing to resist colonization and racism by speaking about trans-generational traumas, rebuking colonial narratives in public spaces and addressing institutional whiteness and privileges.<sup>2</sup>

Within these frameworks, gender plays important roles – notably that of women and less conspicuously for LGBTIQI perspectives. The Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, a leading forum for multicultural contemporary Australian art, hosted the group exhibition *No Added Sugar* in 2012, featuring the self-determined work of Australian Muslim women artists.<sup>12</sup> (This was followed by the current exhibition *Landless Bodies* by Moroccan-Australian artists in 2018.) This ground-breaking and perception-shifting project was supported by the Australia Council and the Australian Human Rights Commission, with the objective of “developing cultural sensibilities through active relationships with the community, rather than retreating into a history lesson.”<sup>13</sup> Curated by Rusaila Bazlamit with Alissa Chidiac, these included Idil Abdullahi, Resala Alazzawi, Marwa Charmand, Asiya Sian Davidson, Zeina Iaali, Mehwsih

<sup>11</sup> Deep Dirt Collective, “You Will Not Be Easily Erased,” Artspace, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.artspace.org.au/program/ideas-platform/2016/deep-dirt-collective-you-will-not-be-easily-erased/>.

<sup>12</sup> Casula Powerhouse, *No Added Sugar* [exhibition catalogue] (Sydney: Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, 2012), <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/32338026/no-added-sugar-catalogue-casula-powerhouse>.

<sup>13</sup> Julie Lien, “No Added Sugar: Engagement and Self-Determination,” *Artlink*, September 2012, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3860/no-added-sugar-engagement-and-self-determination/>.

Iqbal, Fatima Killeen, the poet Eugenia Flynn (also of the Eleven) and the Melbourne-based Crooked Rib Art Collective.<sup>14</sup>

The Crooked Rib Collective includes the artists Sumaya Asvat, Reeham Hakem, Sara El Agha, Hosna Saleem, Pesuri Ahmad, Saffiah El Attar, Faza Firdayu, Nour Sukkar, Sarah Mahri and Lauren Thomas. Beyond their own members, they have also collaborated with American artist Harrell Fletcher, contributing the work *Ramman* (Pomegranate) to an exhibition at the NGV in 2010, as well as the ‘Aerosol Arabic’ mural project with graffiti artist Mohammed Ali of Birmingham (*Thirst for Change*, 2009).<sup>15</sup> Though containing up to 14 members in 2009, they were most active between 2007 and 2010 with the support of the Muslim Women’s Council of Victoria and the City of Melbourne’s Community Cultural Development program. Their work has also been supported by the design company desypher, which was also instrumental in the development of the Islamic Museum of Australia and related initiatives.

## THE ELEVEN COLLECTIVE

The Eleven Collective continues and revitalises the work of these initiatives by drawing together Australian artists, academics and curators of Muslim heritage. They debuted in 2017 with the exhibition *We are all Affected* (Sydney), but *Waqt al-Tagheer* (*Time of Change*) at the ACE Open galleries in Adelaide was widely received and reviewed, accompanied by an extensive catalogue of interviews and essays.<sup>16</sup> Founded by visual artist Khaled Sabsabi and co-ordinated by curator Nur Shkembi with Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, the Eleven Collective was inspired by the proppaNOW collective, led by Richard Bell and Vernon Ah Kee (among others),<sup>17</sup> who created a new group to represent contemporary Indigenous Australian artists on their own terms.

Political, philosophical and aesthetic considerations unify the diversity of the Eleven Collective. The participants include Abdul Abdullah, Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, Idil Abdullahi, Hoda Afshar, Safdar Ahmed, Khadim Ali, Rusaila Bazlamit, Eugenia Flynn, Zeina Iaali, Khaled Sabsabi, Nur Shkembi, Abdullah M.I. Syed and Shireen Taweel.<sup>18</sup> Other artists were invited, though some chose not to participate, resulting in the voluntary group we see today. Ranging from the well-known to the emergent, these artists and academics set their own agendas in a volatile climate regarding Muslim voices in Australian public life. The formation of this group sets a valuable landmark for the ongoing assessment of Australian contemporary art.

<sup>14</sup> The name ‘Crooked Rib’ refers to the hadith describing women as the rib that protects the heart and encourages audiences to seek more information to understand the art produced by this collective. It also adheres to the description “If you try to straighten it by force, it will break”. See <http://crooked-rib.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>15</sup> Alexandra Patrikios, “Crooked Rib Art,” *Broadsheet*, September 30, 2010, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.broadsheet.com.au/melbourne/art-and-design/crooked-rib>.

<sup>16</sup> “Projects.”

<sup>17</sup> “About Us,” proppaNOW, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://proppanow.wordpress.com/about-us/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Members,” Eleven, n.d., accessed September 2018, <https://eleven-collective.com/blog/>.



*Waqt al-Tagheer* was a poetic, complex and compelling exhibition that attracted almost unanimously positive critical attention.<sup>19</sup> As Gina Fairley noted, it was an erudite and nuanced survey that identified an “unresolved zeitgeist” within Australian art through sensitive and dramatic juxtaposition. She also warned these voices should not be seen when isolated as clearly as this exhibition enabled; rather, these artists should “be woven into the complexity of contemporary Australian art.”<sup>20</sup> John Neylon made a similar observation of the coherence of this exhibition, despite the variety of contributing voices:

Consequently, in this exhibit, there are no ‘add water and mix’ Islamic art/architecture mashups and homages but rather a line-up of distinctive, individual voices and artistic talents. And yet, despite the diversity of media and formats there is a sense of a shared aesthetic. It’s not coercive, more of an adumbration of delivery that finds expression in a mood of restraint, order and appreciation of the ritual power of form and pattern.<sup>21</sup>

Some works drew from relatively esoteric concepts within Islam, notably the Sufi-inspired work of Khaled Sabsabi, blending video technologies and printmaking processes to form the installation *At the Speed of Light*. This time-based work is informed by the concept of *kashf*, knowledge of the heart, and meditates on scientific modes of perception. Abdul-Rahman Abdullah’s *500 Books* also relates to his childhood discovery of a crate of Sufist books destined to be pulped but rescued by his father, now sculpted with illusionistic virtuosity from a single block of wood. Safdar Ahmed’s use of immersive virtual reality integrates agendas posed by conspiracy theorists to create disturbing realisations of anti-immigration narratives – his “frenetic comic-style drawings” are unlike any other in the exhibition.<sup>22</sup>

Several artists directly addressed issues within Islam as part of quotidian and private life. Zeina Iaali’s *Sweetly Moulded* (2012) (a series of mirror-set confectionary presses), also displayed in the exhibitions *No Added Sugar* and *Halas!*, is a reflection on women’s conditioning that extends themes raised by her work *You Complete Half your Religion When You Get Married* (2012), which is a reflection on the cultural structures and consequences of divorce. Similar criticisms of the perception and depiction of women inform the vibrant photographs of Hoda Afshar. *Under Western Eyes* (2013-2014) situates five women as active agents in their own representation, held within various frameworks from exploitation under hedonistic pop culture to the labour of a sewing machine.

These artworks do not usually engage with events in Australian politics or local histories, but address the broader situation of global identities in which all surveyed artists operate, starting from their diasporic autobiographies. For example, Abdullah M. Syed’s work represents collaborations with textile weavers using US currency, evoking collaborative

<sup>19</sup> Christine Nicholls, “Waqt al-Tagheer: Time of Change,” *The Conversation*, March 2, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/waqt-al-tagheer-time-of-change-explores-the-diversity-of-muslim-australian-identities-91916>.

<sup>20</sup> Gina Fairley, “Review: Waqt al-Tagheer - Time of Change,” *ArtsHub*, March 14, 2018, <http://visual.artsHub.com.au/news-article/reviews/visual-arts/gina-fairley/review-waqt-al-tagheer-time-of-change-255369>.

<sup>21</sup> John Neylon, “ACE Open Welcomes Patterns of Change with Waqt al-Tagheer,” *Adelaide Review*, March 6, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Daniela Frangos, “A Time of Change,” *Broadsheet*, February 26, 2018.

processes that are also seen in the work of Kadim Ali's tapestries from Pakistan and the tapestries commissioned by Abdullah Abdullah in Indonesia (which are not displayed in the exhibitions by the Eleven Collective to date). These artists all draw on complex heritages between Pakistan, Afghanistan, Malaysia and Australia (respectively), noting the perception and type-casting of refugees and adolescent males – especially those who appear 'foreign' – as potential criminals or "existential threats" in tabloid media.<sup>23</sup>

The development of the Eleven Collective was also fraught with political, philosophical and aesthetic considerations. It is a voluntary initiative for the artists, who set their own agendas in a volatile climate regarding Muslim voices in Australian public life. The formation of this group sets a valuable landmark for the ongoing assessment of Islamic art in Australia – they survey cultural production of high calibre and across many visual disciplines, essentially creating Australia's answer to the Victoria & Albert Museum's Jameel Prize, but without the need for a 'winner' – and supporting all levels of practitioner from emergent to established.

To date, no Australian artist has yet been selected for representation in the Jameel Prize, although several have been nominated.<sup>24</sup> This event is a global survey of contemporary art in relation to Islamic artisanal heritage and philosophy, so Australia's absence is conspicuous. Should an Australian artist be featured (or 'win'), then it is more likely that a public museum or gallery will sponsor the tour of a Jameel Prize exhibition to Australia. Australians have a fascination with art prizes – the announcement of the Archibald Prize for Portraiture has been front-page news since the Second World War. Arguably the closest equivalent is the Blake Prize for Spiritual Art (since 1949), coordinated by the Casula Powerhouse in Sydney, which is a leading organisation for the representation of culturally diverse Australian artists. This exhibition features the work of Muslim artists, but historically lent towards either Christian or secular conceptions of 'spirituality' due to the demographics of Australian artists.<sup>25</sup>

## OTHER RECENT INITIATIVES

By comparison, the exhibition *Khalas! Enough!* of the UNSW Art Gallery (Sydney) in early 2018 was not by the Eleven Collective, though it closely resembled it due to the participation of many of the same artists and several of the same artworks. Curated by Philip George of UNSW, it felt more urgent, critical and confronting than *Waqf al-Tagheer*, described by Belinda Aucott as possessing "a sense of otherness that is very ugly and brutal," and effective precisely because "it does not feel Australian."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Steve Dow, "I have a Post 9-11 Mentality: Creating Art while Muslim in Australia," *The Guardian*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/mar/01/i-have-a-post-911-mentality-creating-art-while-muslim-in-australia>.

<sup>24</sup> "Jameel Prize," Victoria & Albert Museum, accessed September 2018, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/jameel-prize>.

<sup>25</sup> "The Blake Prize," Casula Powerhouse, accessed September 2018, <http://www.casulapowerhouse.com/get-involved/prizes/prizes/blake-prize>.

<sup>26</sup> Belinda Aucott, "Review: Enough! Khalas! UNSW Galleries," *ArtsHub*, July 6, 2018, <https://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/reviews/visual-arts/belinda-aucott/review-enough-%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%B5-khalas-unsw-galleries-256030>.

New works were featured by Alia Gabres, Karam Hussein, Ms Saffaa, Mehwish Iqbal and Fatma Mawas, in addition to other works by members of the Eleven Collective. The exhibition once again featured spoken word poetry in performance by Eugenia Flynn, as well as a video of a performance conducted in Palestine by Fatima Mawas (*Fiddler on the Roof*, 2014).

These collectives and curatorial efforts built on the post-2001 zeitgeist that also prompted the foundation of the Islamic Museum of Australia in Melbourne, among a broader global revival of interest in the contemporary representation of Muslim identities in visual culture. Given Nur Shkembi was initially the curator of this museum, their links to the representation of contemporary Islamic identity in Australia are aligned but not identical. The Islamic Museum of Australia has a unique and ongoing commitment to display the work of contemporary Muslim artists in Australia. However, the collection-based art exhibition has only slightly changed in the four years since it opened in 2014 and it has not collaborated in the display of the first two exhibitions by the Eleven Collective nor the *Khalas!* exhibition.

This observation is based on the appearance of noteworthy potential acquisitions in contemporary art exhibitions, postgraduate creative practice research projects and major public forums such as the Archibald Prize. The Islamic Museum of Australia is a relatively small museum, founded in 2010 by the Fahour family with Victorian government support, and has quite limited space for art exhibitions. The budget for operations focuses on engaging with schools and other public groups, as well as annual exhibitions by local artists rather than the ongoing acquisition of new artworks. Despite this, it has been criticised as “white-washed,” overlooking the frustrations of recently lived experiences.<sup>27</sup> This emphasis on the ‘excluded,’ disaffected and marginalised is based on genuine expressions by artists and others, but others have noted, as a particularly vocal group within Australian Muslim communities, these voices may overlook others who feel more included within institutional discourses.<sup>28</sup>

The representation of Muslim Australians within the forum of the Archibald Prize (along with other major portrait awards, such as the National Photographic Portrait Prize, the Portia Geach Award and others) is indicative of ongoing public interest and recognition of these individuals, though it places emphasis on those who are already well-known in their communities or national celebrities. For example, the compelling self-portrait by Amani Haydar (a self-taught artist and practicing lawyer) was a finalist in the Archibald Prize of 2018, hosted by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Featuring her murdered mother’s photograph in her hands, it would be a powerful acquisition or loan for the Islamic Museum of Australia, as it is a confronting and intimate public reflection on her heritage as a second-generation Australian and survivor of domestic violence. Similarly, the portrait of Dr Susan Carland by Andrew Lloyd Greensmith from this same exhibition could be a timely acquisition (if possible). The portrait of Waleed Aly, who is Susan Carland’s partner, by Abdullah Abdullah is a former Archibald Prize-winning portrait that deservedly takes a dominant position in the central

<sup>27</sup> Yassir Morsi, “Melbourne’s Islamic Museum of Australia: The White Washed ‘I’ as an Apollonian Celebration of Liberal Myths,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 35, no. 2 (2015).

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Dunn et al., *The Resilience and Ordinarity of Australian Muslims* (Sydney: Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia and Western Sydney University, 2015), <http://apo.org.au/node/59176>.

exhibition space of the Islamic Museum of Australia. Pensively bearing the weight of the world like Atlas upon his shoulders, this introspective portrait assesses the responsibility taken by Waleed as one of the most visible journalists within Australian media as well as an academic of political science.

## YOU SEE MONSTERS

Beyond the Eleven Collective and Islamic Museum of Australia, perhaps the most accessible curated assembly of Australian contemporary Muslim artists was the feature-length film *You See Monsters*. This 2017 documentary by Thomas Jackson and Chemical Media explores similar themes in contemporary Australian art, noting the work of Abdul Abdullah, Cigdem Aydemir, Safdar Ahmed, Sara Mansour, Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, Aamer Rahman and Zohab Zee Khan. Though these include artists associated with the Eleven Collective, they have been assembled independently for this documentary.

This film also situates the work of these artists in response to Australian politicians, media commentary and the repercussions of the Cronulla Riots of 11 December 2007. Safdar Ahmed's satirical cartoons of blood-thirsty and brain-hungry 'Muslim zombies' embrace these negative stereotypes to inform a horror-comic 'exploitation' genre, though the film does not articulate his erudite reflective practice as much as highlight the shock value of his work (including his music).

The ongoing interrogation of veiling practices by Cigdem Aydemir has resonated strongly with intersectional feminists, particularly the undergraduate students in the subject ART240 at Charles Sturt University. Her performances and video work draw from the pressures faced by Muslim women in everyday public life, such as *Smile* (2014) or *The Ride* (2017), which is a response to the hashtag *#Illridewithyou* that trended as a gesture of solidarity on social media following the Lindt Café siege in 2014. In this scenario, Aydemir rides a motorbike wearing a niqab that dramatically trails in the breeze (in the manner of *Thelma and Louise*) as a passenger sits behind her, inverting the expectation connoted by the hashtag that the Muslim woman 'rider' is less empowered than the non-Muslim person they are 'riding' with.<sup>29</sup> Her most recent work articulates comparable issues of visibility for male figures in public sculpture and women in Australian sport.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Hamida Novakovich is a curator and director of the *Rekindling* initiative, which is a federally funded (Council for Arab-Australia Relations) project to re-introduce craft skills that could enable more Australian artists to use the legacies of Islamic material heritage in their

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<sup>29</sup> Barnaby Smith, "Cigdem Aydemir on Race Relations and Cultural Identity," *Art Guide Australia*, December 1, 2017, <https://artguide.com.au/cigdem-aydemir-on-race-relations-and-cultural-identity>.

creative practice.<sup>30</sup> Following her curatorial survey of Western Australian artists with Muslim heritage, *GenYM*, she saw cause for optimism in the work of a new generation of artists. Her work builds from her critical observation that “liberal institutions are careful to give a platform for only certain kinds of Muslim voice, which cleave to a very specific criteria of western principles,” a view likely shared by many artists in this survey.<sup>31</sup>

Her current project focuses on the development and empowerment of craft skills in tandem with social commentary.<sup>32</sup> This in-progress initiative has enabled artists to travel through Morocco to study with master artisans in leatherwork, metalsmithing, *zillige* ceramics and other specialised disciplines not otherwise accessible in Australia. If these technical skills and collaborations can support the realisation of critical reflections on Australian politics, gender relations, power relations or other global aspects of identity, then these skills and networks will provide a valuable foundation for future Australian artists.

## CONCLUSION

These exhibitions and initiatives present an extraordinary period of momentum and generational change within contemporary Australian art and literary performance cultures. In the last two years, these creative practitioners have articulated their work through formidable public networks. They include well-established and emerging artists, coordinated independent of institutional support and driven to engage with political and social contexts that have defined their peers by antagonism or marginalisation. There has never been a “Golden Age” for Islamic art in Australia. But as the Eleven Collective and the other artists surveyed here have argued, we are living in a time of change.

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<sup>30</sup> “Rekindling: An Australian Islamic Artisans Tour of Morocco,” DFAT/CAAR, September 7, 2018 <https://dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/foundations-councils-institutes/caar/grants/grantees/Pages/rekindling-an-australian-islamic-artisans-tour-of-morocco.aspx>.

<sup>31</sup> “There is no one kind of Muslim Art: Words with Curator Hamida Novakovich,” *Pelican Magazine*, August 12, 2016, <http://pelicanmagazine.com.au/2016/08/12/no-one-kind-muslim-art-words-curator-hamida-novakovich/>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

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