

ART

Islamic tradition meets modern world in exhibit

By Elda Silva

Past and present come together seamlessly in Soody Sharifi's collages. Still, something seems off.

In "Fashion Week," contemporary women who have been digitally dropped into an ancient Persian court scene strut a catwalk that leads to an empty throne. Modestly dressed in street clothes, the ersatz models' heads are covered by hijabs of varying lengths. Meanwhile, their precursors enjoy the show free of head scarves.

The piece by Iranian-born, Houston-based Sharifi is one of 20 works featured in "The Jameel Prize: Art Inspired by Islamic Tradition." The traveling exhibit organized by London's Victoria and Albert Museum is currently at the San Antonio Museum of Art.

Inaugurated in 2009, the international biennial prize recognizes contemporary artists and designers who draw on Islamic traditions of art and craft. Some of the pieces, such as Sharifi's, touch on social and cultural issues.

The works in the exhibit are not, strictly speaking, "Islamic art," says Tim Stanley, senior curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

"Visually, you sense things pulled from Islam-

ic culture and reworked in a way that's relevant to the contemporary world," Stanley says. "So I think it's really good because it allows you that very quick understanding that there is actually a relevance of Islamic tradition to contemporary art."

The exhibit features works by 10 artists in all — nine finalists and winner Rachid Koraichi. Almost all of them either live or have lived abroad.

The Algerian-born Koraichi, who divides his time between Tunisia and France, won for his embroidered cotton banners from a series titled "The Invisible Masters." The large-scale textile works, which celebrate the lives of Sufi masters, such as the poet Rumi, feature elaborate Arabic calligraphy and symbols from other cultures in black appliqué on a white background.

Born into a family of Sufi mystics, Koraichi was inspired by banners carried in ritual processions. Although the series is "enormous," the exhibit could only accommodate seven banners, Stanley says.

Other artists take inspiration from a more concrete source, namely architecture. Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, an Iranian artist who lives in Tehran, uses

mirror mosaic in "Birds of Paradise," a technique employed in architectural decoration since the 1600s. The wall work consists of two panels.

At the center of each, an arched, windowlike form is made up of small pieces of cut mirror that suggest wings. The play of light on the silvery surface animates the piece.

Like Sharifi, other artists explore political issues in their work. In "Kashmiri Shawl," Pakistani artist Aisha Khalid alludes to the strife in India-occupied Kashmir in what Stanley describes as "a very evocative, subtle way." With the help of assistants, the artist created an elaborate paisley design on a black pashmina scarf using 300,000 gold-plated steel pins that jut from the back like rows of bristles. Hayv Kahraman, an Iraqi-born artist who lives in Oakland, Calif., explores the difficulties exiles like herself face in large-scale paintings of playing cards. The works reference the "archaeology awareness" decks issued to American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Along with demonstrating the influence of Islamic tradition on contemporary art, the work in the exhibit shows how

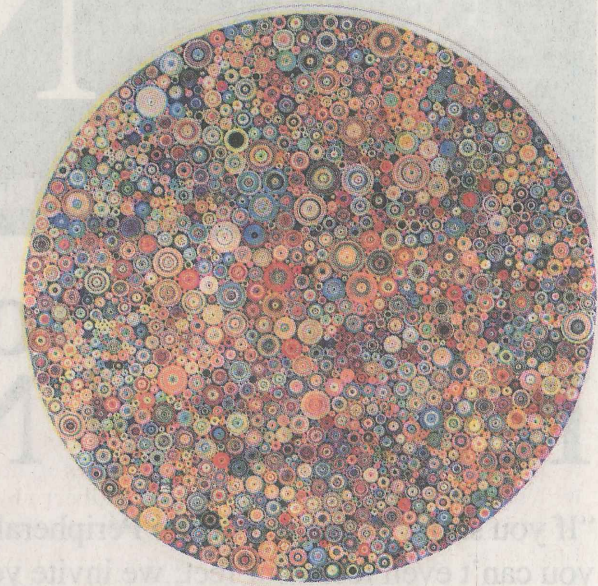
On exhibit

"The Jameel Prize: Art Inspired by Islamic Tradition" continues through Aug. 11 at the San Antonio Museum of Art, 200 W. Jones. Call 210-978-8100 or go to www.samuseum.org.

the culture continues to evolve, Stanley says.

There is a tendency to lump in Islamic culture with the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome "as something in the past," Stanley says. "And actually, that's not true, because there's a continuous tradition that's very much alive today."

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"22500 Pages," by Hadieh Shafie

Courtesy photo



Courtesy of LTMH Gallery

"Frolicking Women in the Pool," by Soody Sharifi