

Joumana Medley

AVAILABLE ARTWORKS



All pieces are one-offs or limited editions, shipped with a certificate of authenticity. They are shown in order of completion, from newest to oldest.

www.majnouna.com
joumana@majnouna.com
+44 (0)7900484609

Last updated: February 2024

Artist Statement

The first seeds of my artistic practice were planted in the darkness of the civil war that defined my childhood. I escaped the chaos and fear by turning inwards; there I found order and permanence, a deeper reality that still sustains me. This is now the core of my work: I look for the greater truths behind personal feelings and outer events, and translate them into form to give the viewer a taste of the wholeness and mystery that underly our brittle world. I use a visual language rooted in my native culture: an ancient Arabic script which I shape to create images made of meaning. Free from iconography, but not obviously legible, the work bypasses the mind to engage a deeper recognition and hold the viewer in stillness.

I have used a variety of mediums, but now prioritise sustainability and respect for the living world. By hand-preparing or even foraging natural colours, I'm involved in the creative act from its earliest starting point, the alchemical process of transforming matter for the sake of Beauty.

With my Artist Books, I take art off the wall so it can tell more complex stories that unfold in multiple, tactile dimensions. My Treasure Boxes involve all the senses along with non-linear storytelling; in their context, objects we consider trivial become centres of meaning, their simple beauty revealed. But while the boxes hint at meaning, they never actually tell: the tension between not-knowing and longing to know is held, the sense of mystery preserved.

Bio

Joumana Medlej is an artist, author and educator from Lebanon, best known for her work with early Arabic calligraphy, from which her visual language is derived. After an early career in graphic design, illustration, comics and even digital games, her deep connection to the Kufi tradition was awakened during the years she assisted master Samir Sayegh in his Beirut studio. She also specialises in the art materials of that period: having abandoned store-bought paints for the old ways of natural colour-making, she prepares her own supplies using medieval techniques, and forages for pigments and dyes wherever she finds herself. She draws on her practitioner's experience to translate early Arabic handbooks into English and bring the voices of past masters to a general audience.

Joumana is now based in East London and works out of her Hackney Wick studio. Her work is found in private and public collections in Europe, the USA and the Middle East. She teaches Kufi calligraphy and inkmaking at the Arab British Centre, the Prince's School of Traditional Arts, and other institutions upon request. She's collaborated on educational projects with the Aga Khan Museum and the Goethe Institut, and has done work for the Royal Mint, Apple, Amnesty, BBC Arabic, and the Royal Hashemite Court of Jordan. She has authored two books on art technology: *Inks & Paints of the Middle East* and *Wild Inks & Paints*.

CV

Born 1979 in Beirut, Lebanon.
Lives and works in London, UK.

Education

- Diploma in Traditional Arts from the Prince's School of Traditional Arts, 2013
- Assistant and apprentice to Master Samir Sayegh, Beirut, 2007-2012
- BGD (Bachelors of Graphic Design), American University of Beirut, 2001

Solo & Trio Exhibitions

- 2022 *The Written Word*, The Woolf Institute, Cambridge, UK
- 2019 *In So Many Words*, Pictorem Gallery, London
- 2017 *Art in Times of Crisis*, The Crafts Center at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, USA
- 2015 *Lighting the Darkness*, The Crypt Gallery, London, UK
- 2012 *Maktoob: Contemporary Calligraphy*, Art Lounge, Maasser Beiteddine, Lebanon

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2023 *Highlights*, Ithra Museum, King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia
- 2023 *Through the Looking Glass*, Swanfall Art, Mall Galleries, London, UK
- 2023 *Lebanon / Untitled*, Janet Rady Fine Art x Artscoops, Cromwell Place, London, UK

- 2023 *The Future of Traditions, Writing Pictures: Contemporary Art from the Middle East*, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London
- 2022–23 *The Handmade Book*, Stanford Libraries, USA
- 2020 Work selected for the *Sharjah Biennale 2020* (cancelled due to the pandemic)
- 2019– *Treasures of the British Library*, The British Library, London, UK
- 2018 *The Society of Women Artists Exhibition*, Mall Galleries, London, UK
- 2015 *Signs, Traces and Calligraphy*, Rose Issa Projects, Beirut, Lebanon
- 2014 *Great Lebanese Painters of the Jihad and Farouk Abillama Collection*, Beirut, Lebanon
- 2014 *Fifth Summer Art Festival*, Sharjah Art Museum, UAE
- 2013–14 *Kuwait's sixth International Islamic Arts Convention*, Kuwait

Collections

- Princeton University Firestone Library Special Collections, Princeton, USA
- The Psyche Collection, Paris, France
- Harvard Fine Arts Library Special Collections, Cambridge, USA
- Stanford Libraries Gunst Collection, Stanford, USA
- Contemporary British Published Collections, The British Library, London, UK
- The Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, Raleigh, USA
- Gallery One, King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia
- The Jihad and Farouk Abillama Collection, Beirut, Lebanon

Residencies

- 2023 Arteventura, Aracena, Spain
- 2017 Artist in Residence, The Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, Raleigh, USA

Publications & Press

- Press for *Lebanon* / *Untitled*: Arab News, The National, L'Orient-Le Jour, Al-Sharq al-Awsat.
- Press for *The Future of Traditions*: The National, Because Magazine.
- Press for *The Written Word*: BBC, Cambridge Independent, iTV Anglia (12 June 22), BBC One Sunday Morning (25 July 22).
- The New Arab, July 2023
- The Dark Mountain Project, June 2023
- The Anglo-Arab Voice podcast, March 2022
- Art Fervour, Nov. 2020
- Middle East Eye, 2019
- Art Illuminated podcast, 2018
- Al Kashaf, Al Araby TV, 5 April 2016
- Femme Magazine, 2015
- El-Iktisad, 2015

Teaching & Talks

- 2024 Workshops in making paints and inks from natural materials at the School of Calligraphy and Ornamentation, Fujairah, UAE
- 2023 *Translation through Praxis*, lecture with demonstration for 'Decoding Recipes' conference, University of Sheffield, Sheffield
- 2023 *My Journey with Kufi: Freedom in Restriction*, online lecture, Letterform Archive
- 2023 *The Art of Letting Go*, keynote lecture for the Collegium 'Uncertainty and the Handmade', Stanford Libraries, USA
- 2023 *A Conversation Between Calligraphers*, panel, Prince's School of Traditional Arts, London
- 2023 *Magical Inks of Ghāyat al-Hakim*, workshop for 'Science & Craft' conference, London
- 2022– Tutor in medieval Islamic art technology and calligraphy, Prince's School of Traditional Arts, London
- 2022 *Al-Qalalusi's Colour Palette*, lecture, Prince's School of Traditional Arts, London
- 2022 *Introduction to Manuscript Kufi*, online workshop, Aga Khan Museum
- 2022 Mentor for Circular Design Training Program, Goethe Institute
- 2019 *Artist Books Now*, panel, British Library, London
- 2017 *Art in Times of Crisis*, lecture, The Crafts Center at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, USA
- 2016 *Living With Mystery*, panel, St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, London
- 2014– Tutor in Kufi scripts, Arab-British Centre, London





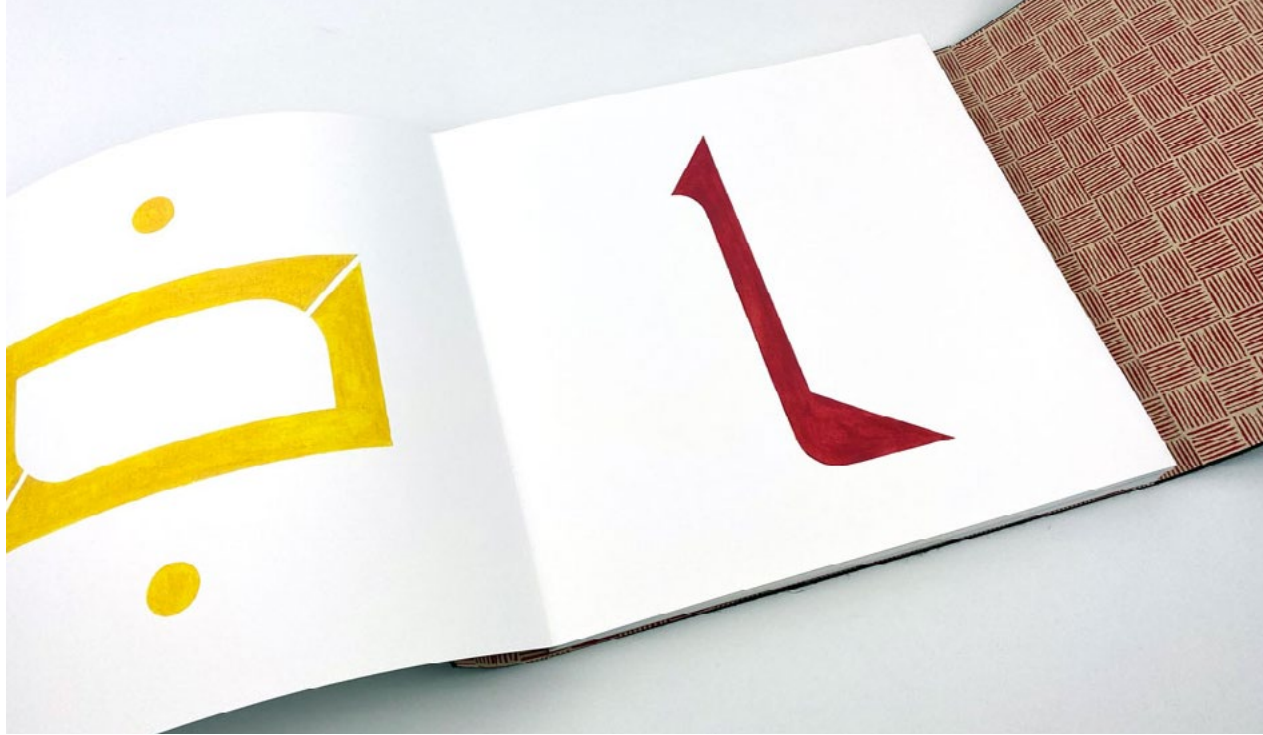
Unforeseen

Lapis lazuli and red earth in gum tempera on paper, hand-cut. 56x56 cm. 2023. £2,250.

Uncertainty is now our constant companion; making plans no longer means anything. Anxiety is the usual response, but we can also see this moment where we have no knowledge or control as pregnant with possibility - because what uncertainty really means is "anything can happen", including blessings un hoped for and opportunities we never imagined.

In this piece, the background square is made up of a word for "making plans", *khitat*. Through this solid and safe-looking ground, the unforeseen bursts with a chaotic but vital design of its own, opening doors for something new.



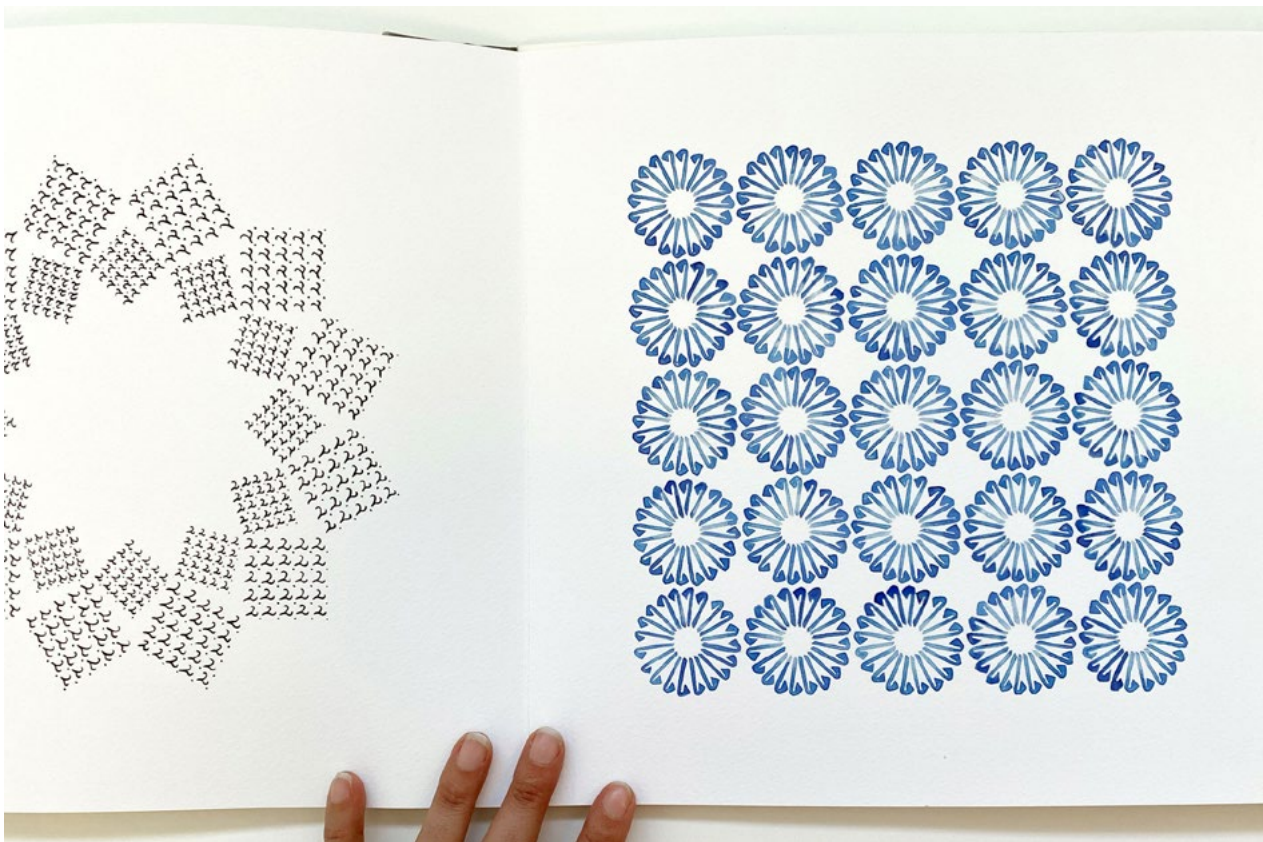


The Book of Abjad

Artist book in Limited Edition of 28. Giclée printing, hand-finished with mineral pigments, hand-bound with linen thread and waxed lokta paper. 28x29x2.5cm. 2023. £800.

In this majestic handmade codex, the forgotten relationship between Arabic letters and numbers is expressed through geometry, which is number unfolding in space.

The Book of Abjad refers to the Arabic alphabet, but is short for *abjad hawaz*: a mnemonic sentence to remember the original order of the letters, and thereby their numerical value according to the Semitic origin of this system. The book features a numerical composition for each of the 28 letters, unfolding one group at a time. Lamalif is not forgotten, and each edition features a different design for the 29th letter.





Blessings Everlasting

Specially prepared plant-based inks and earth pigments on paper, exposed to natural light over 1 year. 100x100 cm. 2023. £4,000.

Blessings Everlasting is part of my ongoing meditation on things passing and things enduring, and how natural art materials can reflect this.

The subject was inspired by the Islamic tradition of decorating surfaces with words expressing blessings and good wishes, as seen from the walls of Alhambra to Khorasan metalware and Nishapur ceramics. Researching this practice, I collected a long list of wishes, some of them I've worked with before: health, joy, well-being. But as the inscribed objects were often meant for rulers or would-be rulers, most of the words used were along the lines of: victory, dominion, influence, wealth, status, luxury, power, praise... Empty pursuits in my book, but they provided the idea.

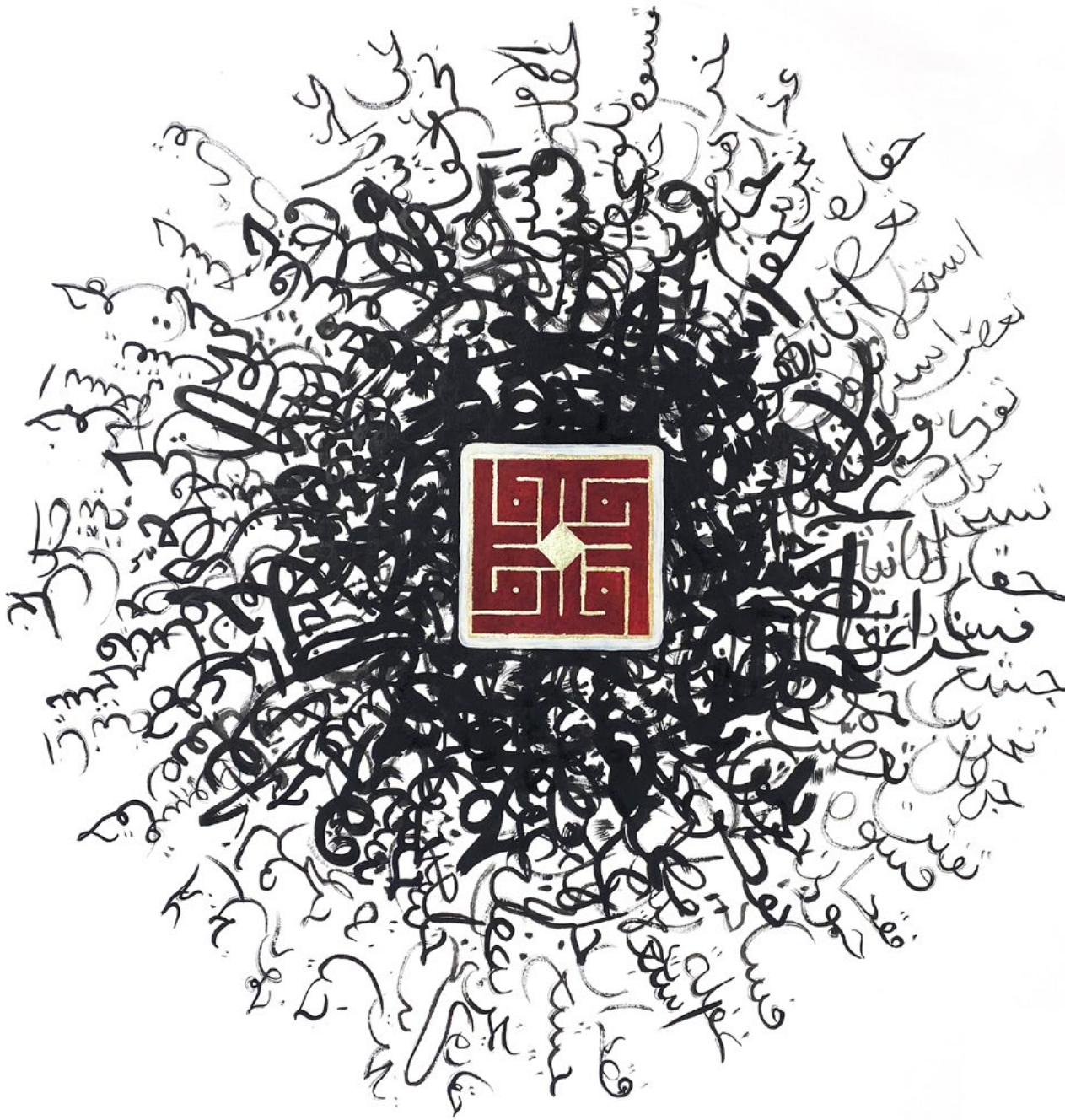
The composition is made up of eleven historically used words: kindness, power, charm, glory, joy, goodness, victory, praise, authority, health, luck. They are painted in light-sensitive plant colours, with earth pigment added to some parts of the composition so that it will fade or degrade selectively. Three words only will endure and remain bright...

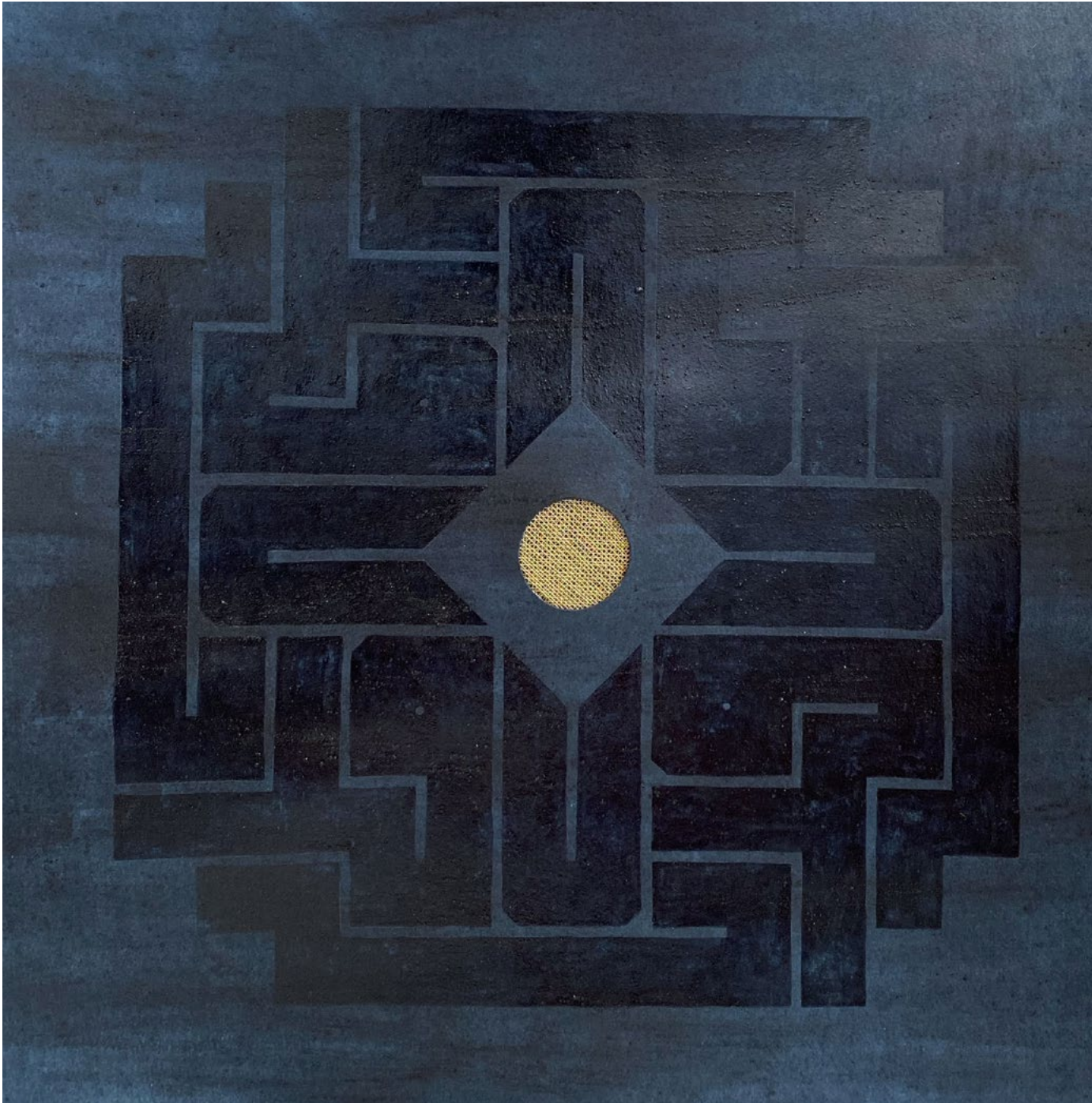
Fortress of the Heart

Historical pigments in gum tempera, lamp black ink and gold leaf on watercolour paper. 56x56 cm. 2023. £2,000.

An unusually spontaneous piece, born of a day of feeling overwhelmed by the bad news coming from around the world. On the way to the studio, a question formed in her mind: Where to go when everything became too much? This title and image came in answer.

The central design is made up of the word "heart" *qalb*. The darkness attacking it is made up of words that it isn't necessary to describe - think of everything out there that make you anxious, angry or sorrowful, and you'll be able to guess them.





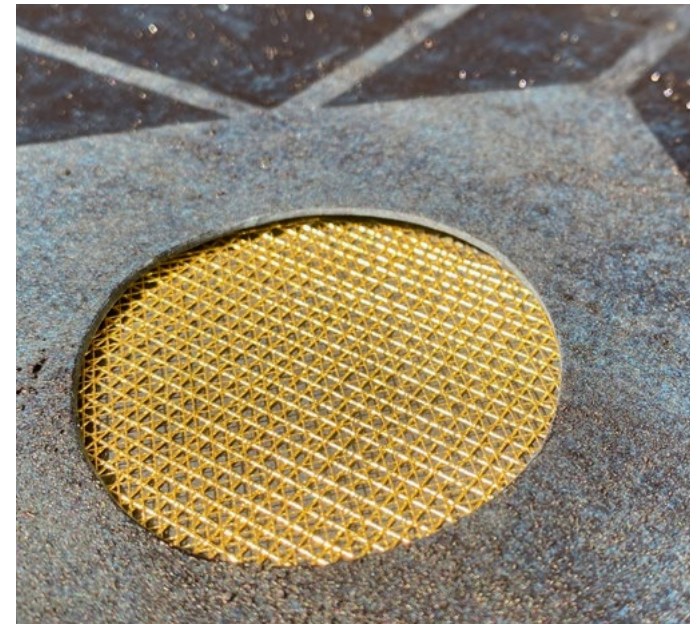
Offering قربان

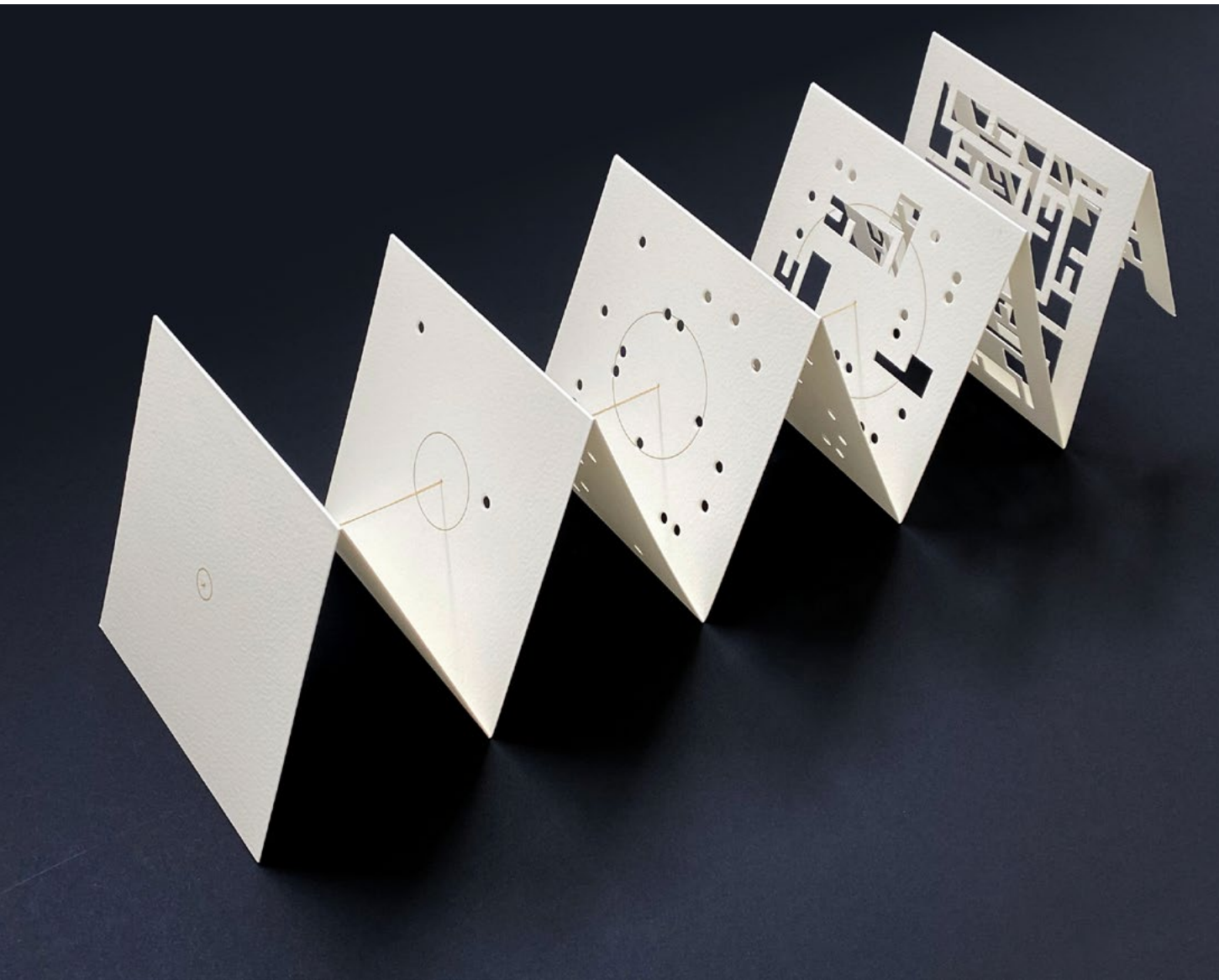
Gold embroidery thread, genuine indigo pigment in gum tempera and egg glair on watercolour paper. 55x55 cm. 2023. £2,200.

Although a number of Arabic words carry the meaning of "offering", I was specially drawn by the etymology of *qirbān*: from the root QRB, "nearness", for a literal meaning of "something to bring one closer [to the Divine]". It's also an ecumenical word, prominent both in the Qur'an and in Christian rites.

The rough granulation of the indigo pigment and variegation of the natural materials balance out the strict geometric precision of the composition, but also offer an extra layer of contrast with the purity of the painstakingly woven, golden centre.

This piece can look very different under various lighting conditions and angles.





Ruination ۛۛۛ

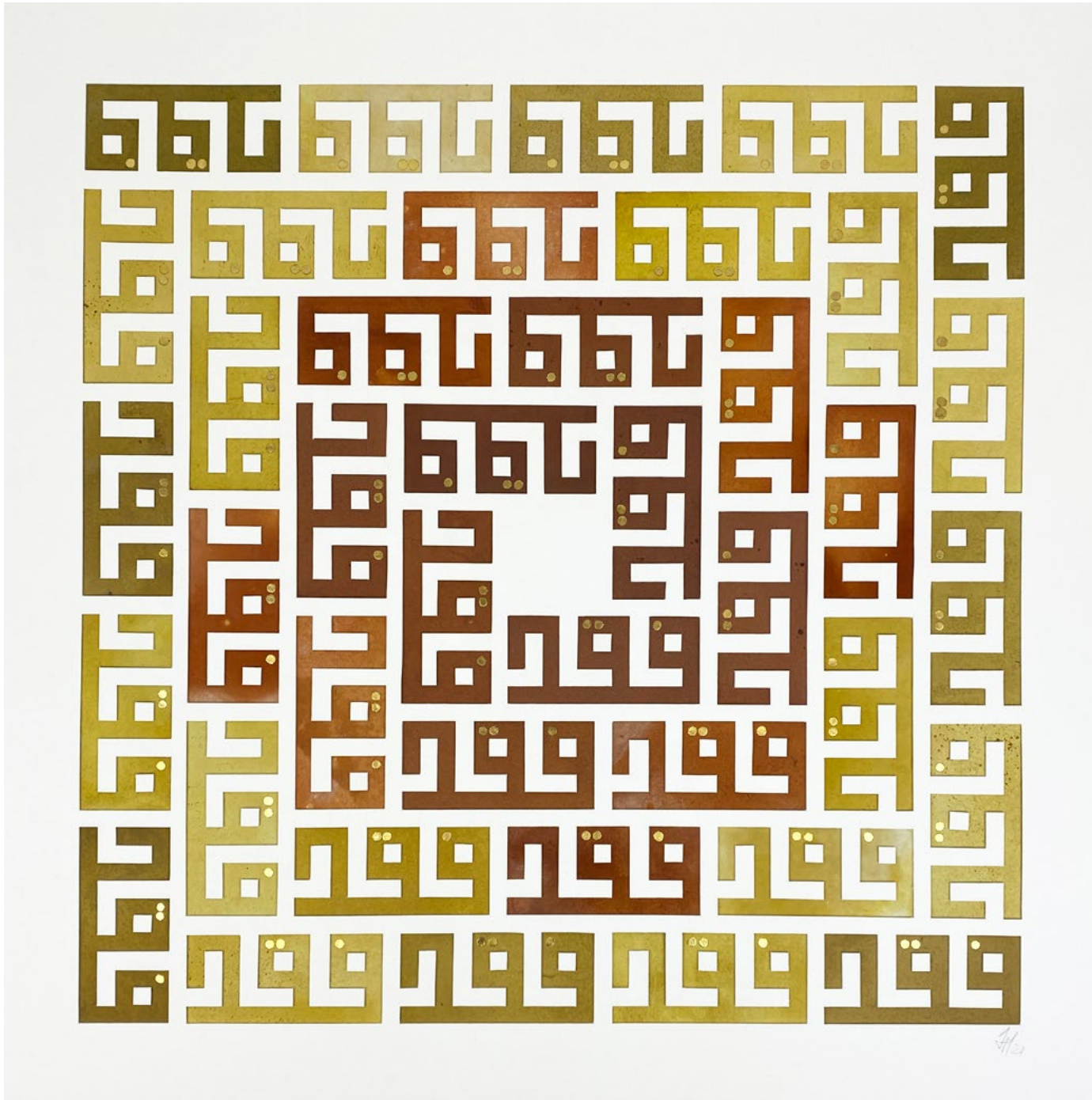
Artist book × paper sculpture. Gold on hand-cut paper, gold-plated chain. 15x15x2 cm in handmade slipcase. Limited Edition of 12. 2023. £550.

Ruination: "the action or fact of ruining someone or something or of being ruined"

I wanted to make a beautiful but stark sculptural object telling a story gone wrong. The piece is a functional book that can live in its slipcase, but is designed to be displayed as a paper sculpture; both formats tell the story equally.

The story: Here we have a small point of light piercing the darkness and beginning to expand, but this growth is undermined - chunks of the ground removed - before it can become an encompassing circle of wholeness. As structural integrity decreases, the word *hadm* ("ruination") becomes visible in absentia as the circle quietly disappears. A golden chain, functioning on a different plane, continues to keep the whole standing - up until there is no longer a centre that can hold.





Loss فقد

Plant-dyed paper, gold leaf and handcut card, 50x50 cm.
2021-22. £2,000 framed.

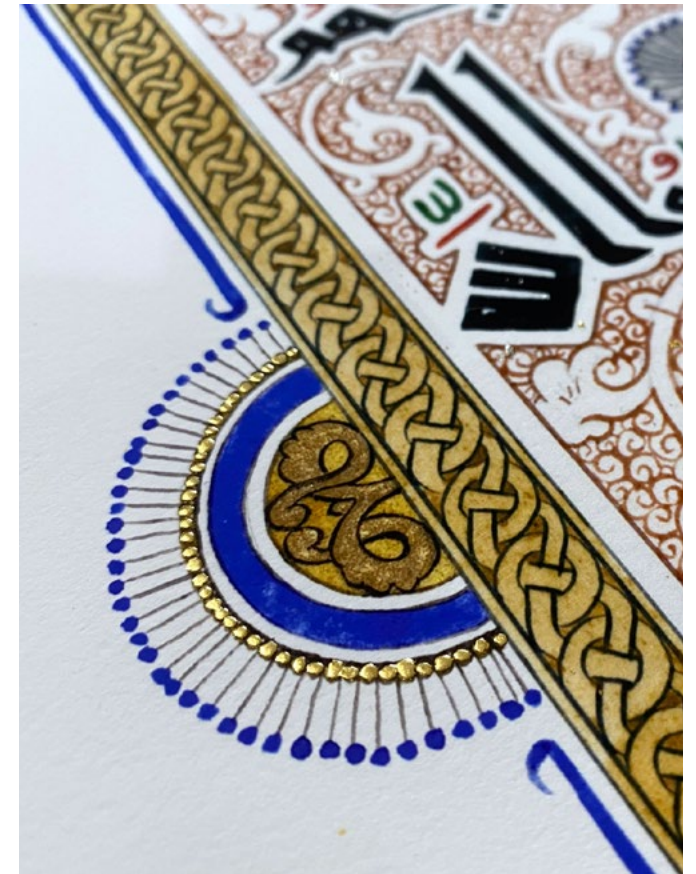
Loss is illustrated here by a composition that will fade over time. The paper is dyed with plants gathered as summer was starting to wane. The piece was then left exposed to natural light for a year. The organic colours fade, each in its own way — but the genuine gold of the seed-like dots will neither fade nor tarnish.



The Canticle of Creatures

Limited edition Artist Book: gold leaf on giclée print, waxed paper cover embroidered with gold, codex-bound by hand. Signed and numbered out of 15. 25x30 cm, 6 spreads plus endpapers. £315.

A rendering of St Francis of Assisi's Canticle of Creatures in Arabic, in the style of the Qarmatian Qur'an.



Birthing

Historical pigments in egg tempera, silk thread on Khadi paper. Ø 56 cm. 2020. £2,200.

Something between an image and a feeling, but less tangible than either, pushes through its way into my consciousness. I then endeavour to translate it materially, without losing that original signature of which the only record is a sensation. There is something self-referential about this image, describing the very process by which it came into being. Where previously there was Nothing, Something is suddenly there, striving to come into existence, pulsating with irresistible life force that will destroy what doesn't make way. The vesica shape is the intersection of two circles, two worlds, through which something can be born. The caterpillar binding stitch is a solid boundary that does much to convey the impression of a passage opening in the paper. Though beautiful, it is uncomfortable, evoking stitches on a wound.



Emptiness i, ii

Pencil, mineral pigments, linen thread and gold on circular Khadi paper. ø 56 cm. 2019. £1,600 each.

How can you paint emptiness? These pieces attempt to depict what is not there, each with a different energy to the emptiness. The tiny five-pointed star, symbolising a human being, transforms the piece completely by creating a sensation of scale that grabs the viewer with almost physical impact.



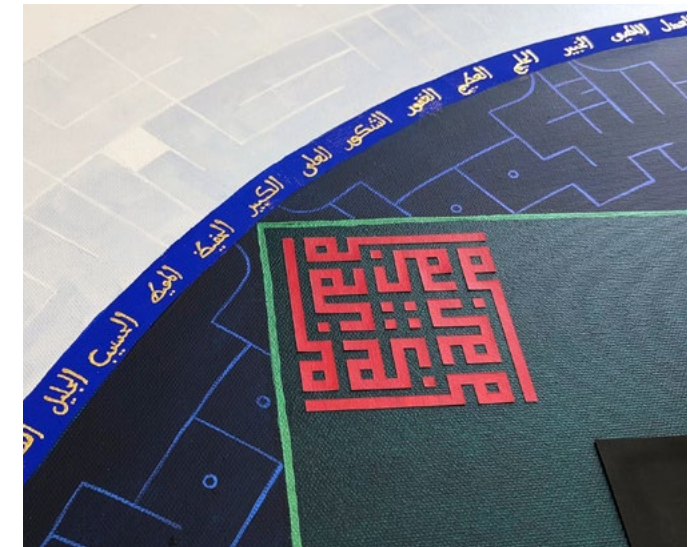


The Throne العرش

Acrylic, interference medium, cut paper and 23.75ct gold on canvas, 122 x 122 cm. 2019. £4,800.

One step up the cosmic ladder from the Celestial Gardens takes us to the level of the Throne, at the very outer reaches of cosmic reality. The Throne encompasses the entire physical world, although at this point 'physical' simply means that the idea of dimensional forms is present.

The Throne is described as emerald, made of divine Light and surrounded by angels. Its four corners are supported by "ruby pillars". But four more corners, unsupported at this time, await the remaking of the world, when the Throne will change from square to octagram. The symbolism is described in more detail on majnouna.com/portfolio/throne.

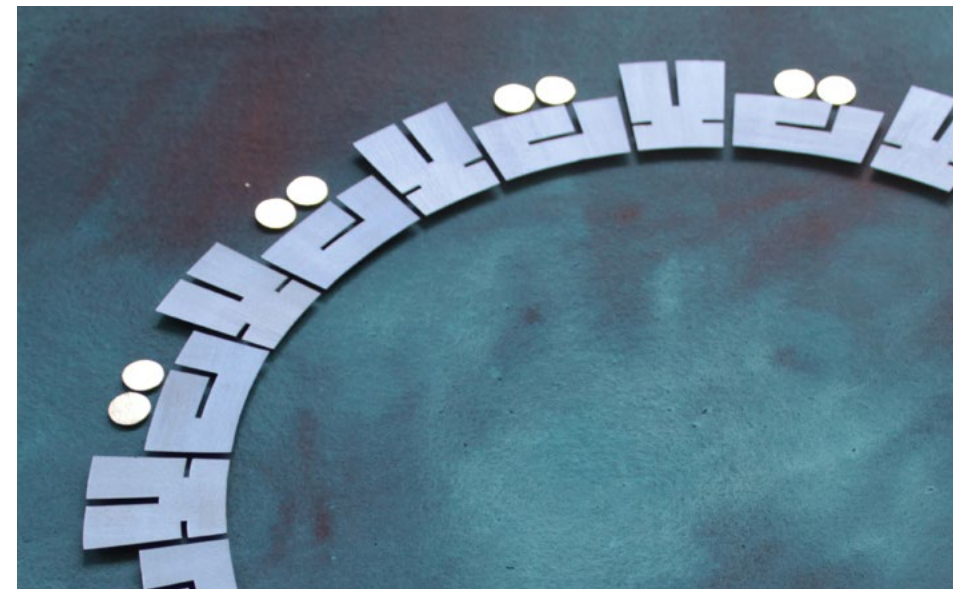
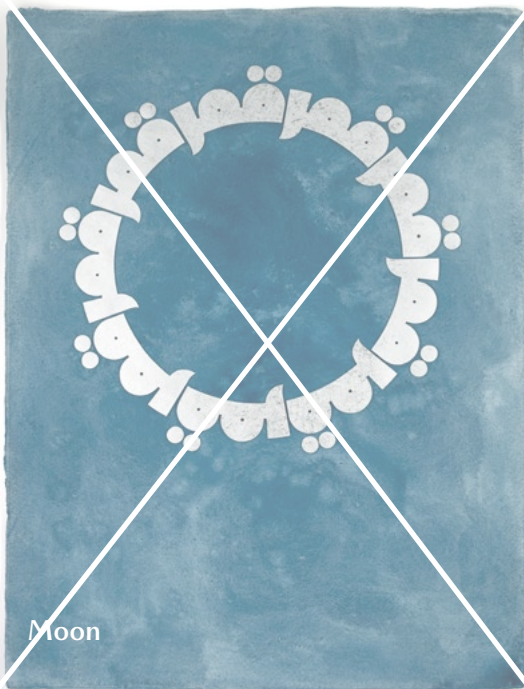
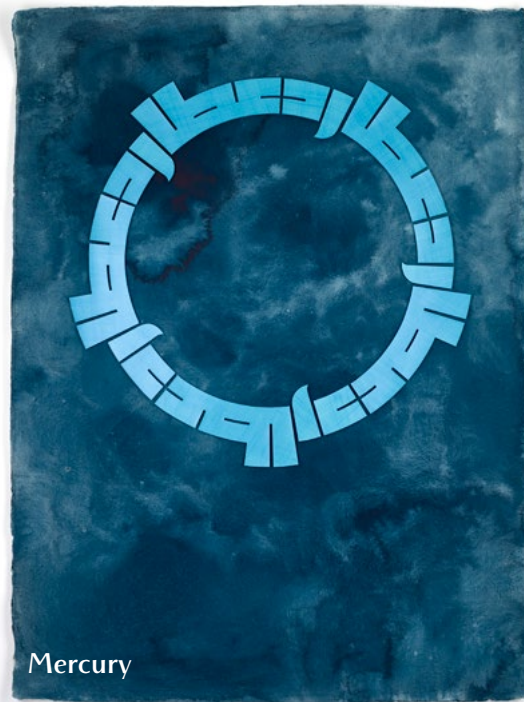


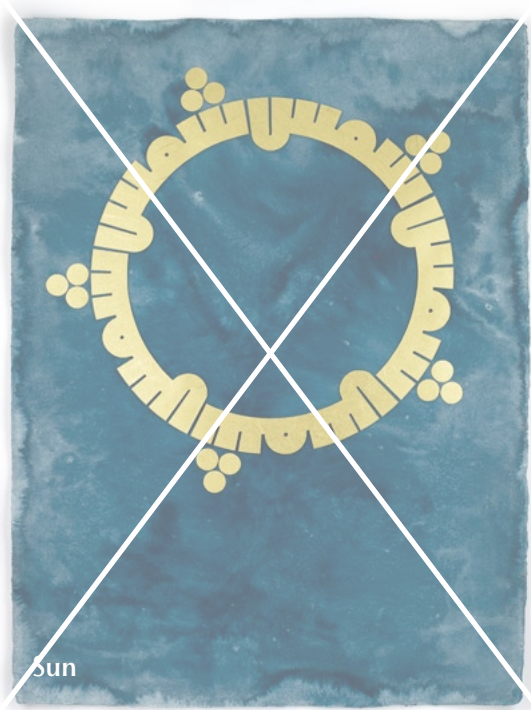
Planetary Spheres كواكب

Acrylic or watercolour on cut paper, assembled on Khadi paper 650gsm, 56x76 cm each. 2016. £2,000 each.

In the context of my work on cosmological themes, I decided to create a series for the planets individually, so they could be seen as individual bodies in their own right. Because the last three planets (Uranus, Neptune, Pluto) did not have proper Arabic names, I had to assign ones that carry on the pattern of the much older Arabic astronomical names, which correspond to pre-Islamic deities.

The number 10 also brings the solar system to a perfect completion, being, in Pythagorean thought, the all-embracing, all-limiting "mother". A full discussion of the research and symbolism behind this series can be found on majnouna.com/portfolio/planets.

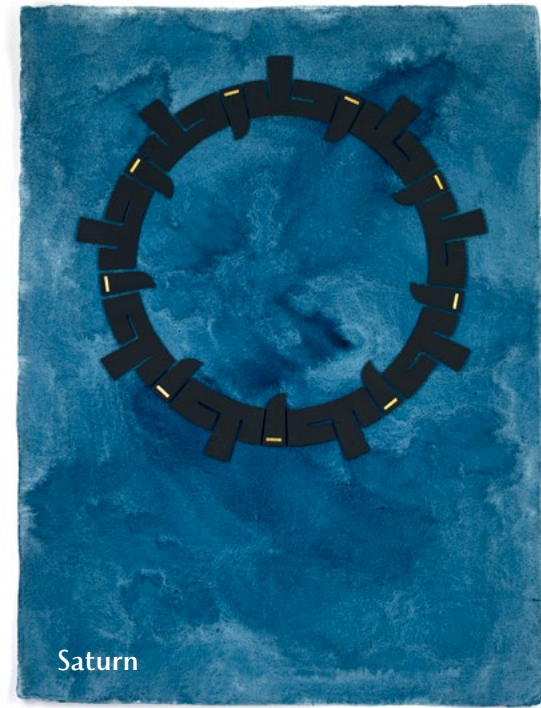




Sun



Jupiter



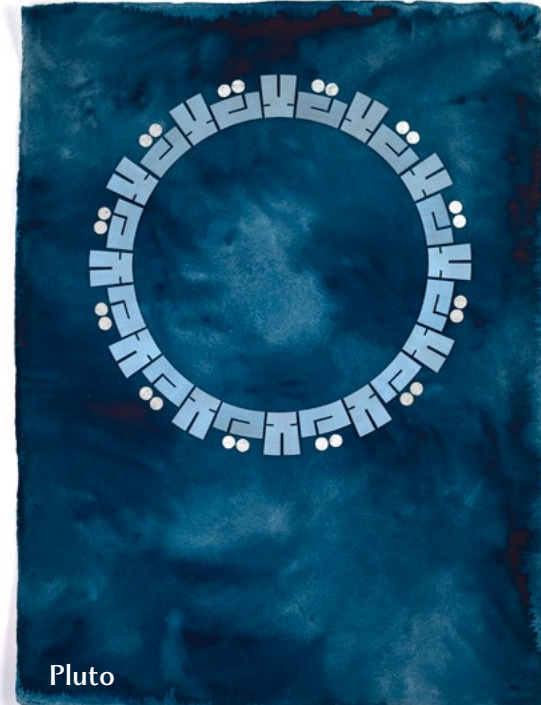
Saturn



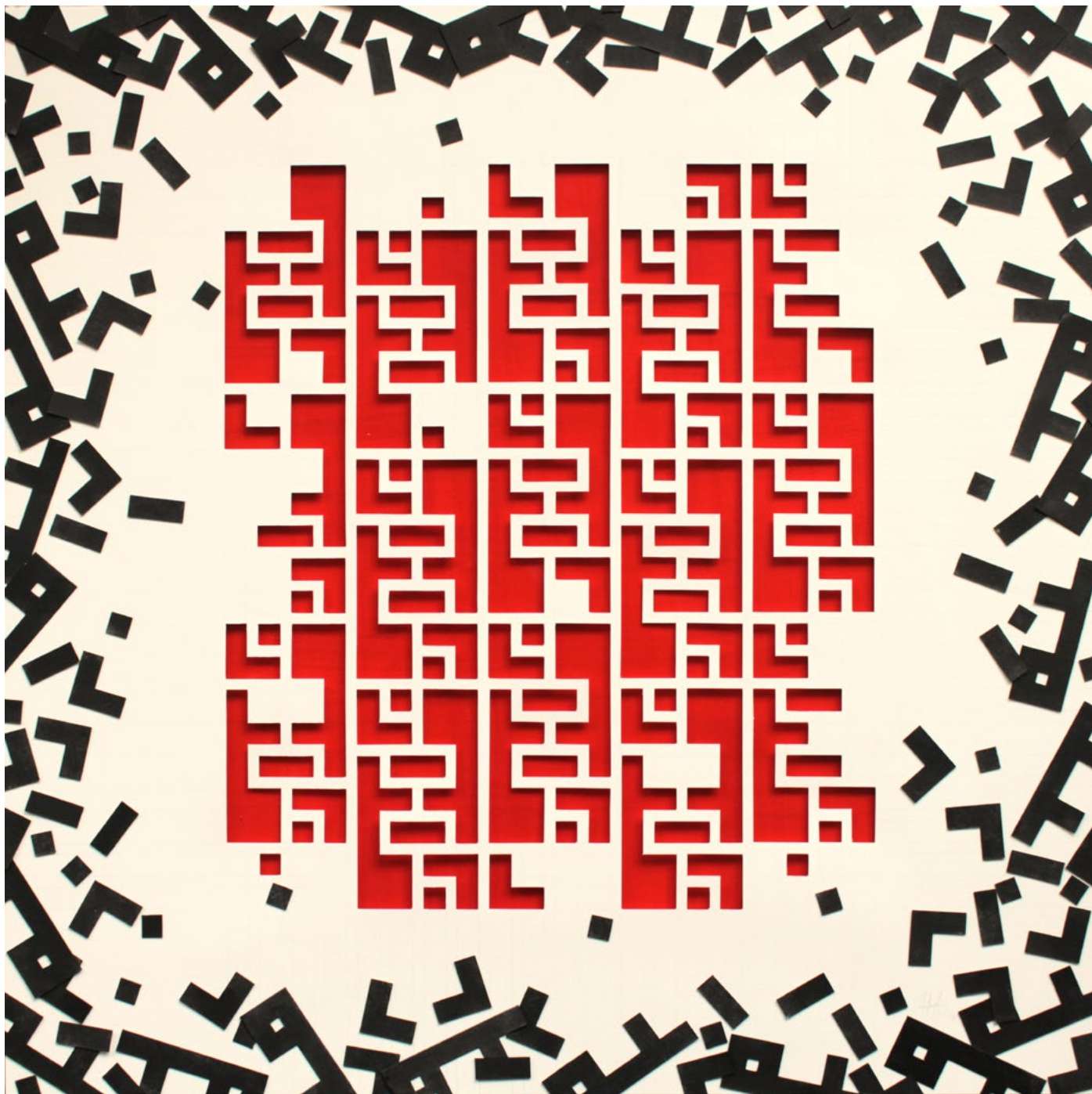
Uranus



Neptune



Pluto

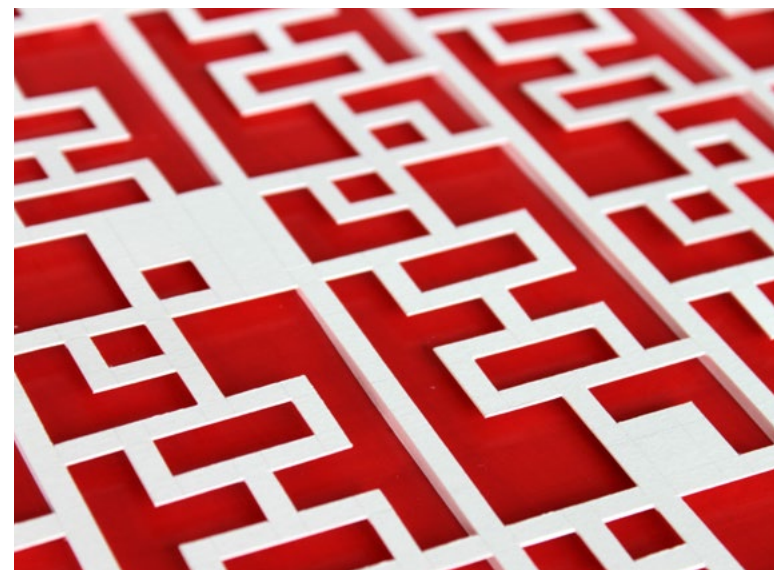


Flight & Refuge

Diptych. Acrylic and sumi ink on Saunders Waterford paper, hand-cut, assembled on mount board. 55x55 cm framed each. 2017. £4,200 together.

A response to the ongoing refugee tragedy. As is my practice, the work doesn't specifically refer to the current situation but reflects back to the timeless story of fleeing and seeking refuge, enacted continually through human history.

Flight **فرار**: Chunks of paper are cut out of the gentle pencil grid of peaceful society, and moving away in such a disorderly manner it feels like there has been an explosion. They leave behind a gutted grid, evoking gutted buildings with the red of fire and blood. The more pieces are removed, the more fragile the grid left behind.





Refuge **لِياذ**: The word evokes to me ships finding a safe harbour. This is expressed here with lost letters finding a space to moor – a space that is available and reserved for them, being left by the cut out letter. The fragmented space of Flight has given way to the circle of wholeness. The previously threatening red now radiates at the heart of the composition like a warm sun or hearth fire.





Lovesickness دلگ

Watercolour and metal leaf on paper. 50x50 cm. 2017.
£1,500.

"Sweeter than this poison I did not see any drink,
Lovelier than this illness I did not see any health."

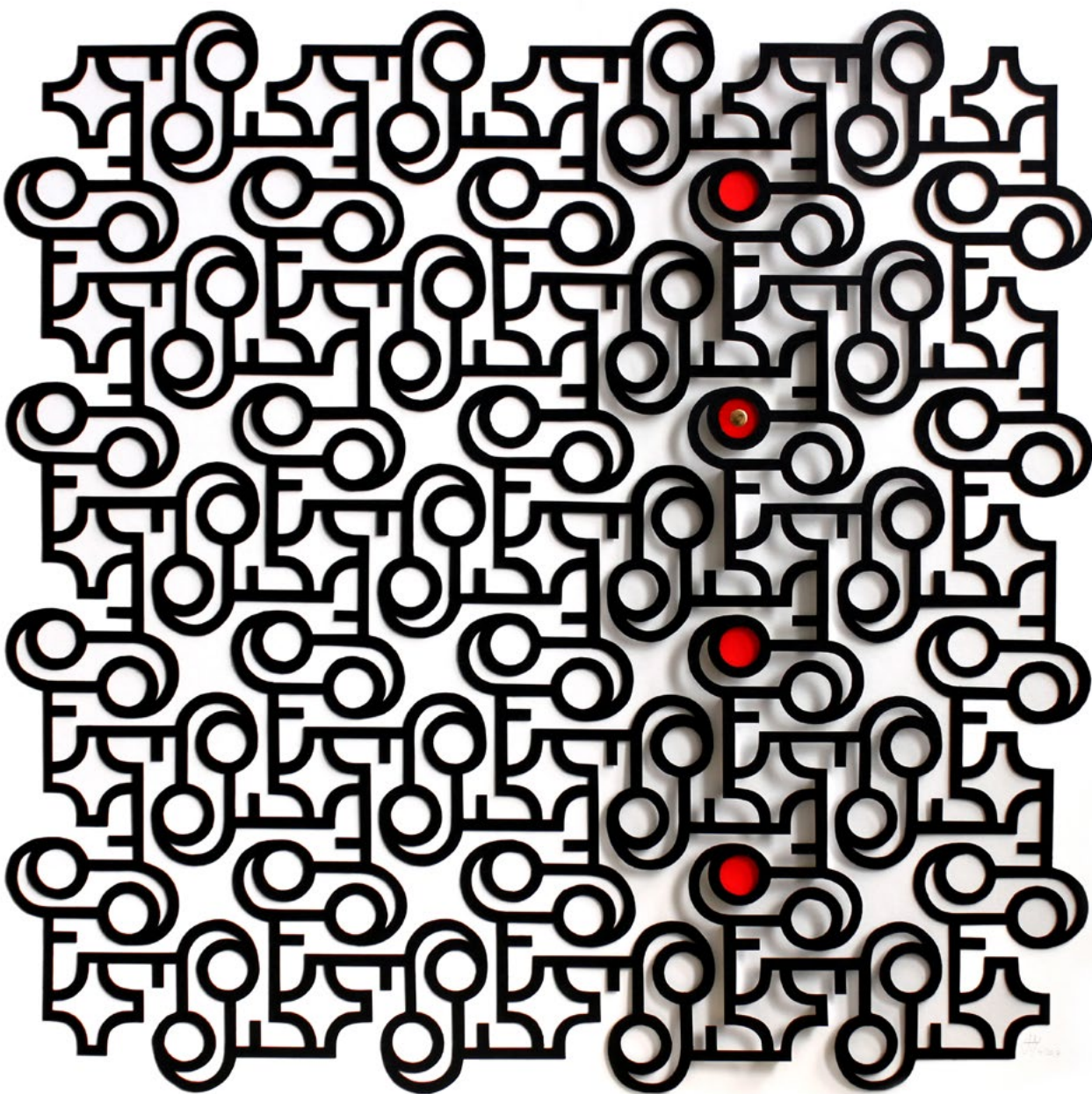
— Rûmi



Fancy هوو

Watercolour and metal leaf on paper. 50x50 cm. 2017.
£1,500.

The Arabic word *Hawâ* shares with the English "fancy" the double meaning of "infatuation, sudden passion" and "whim, caprice".

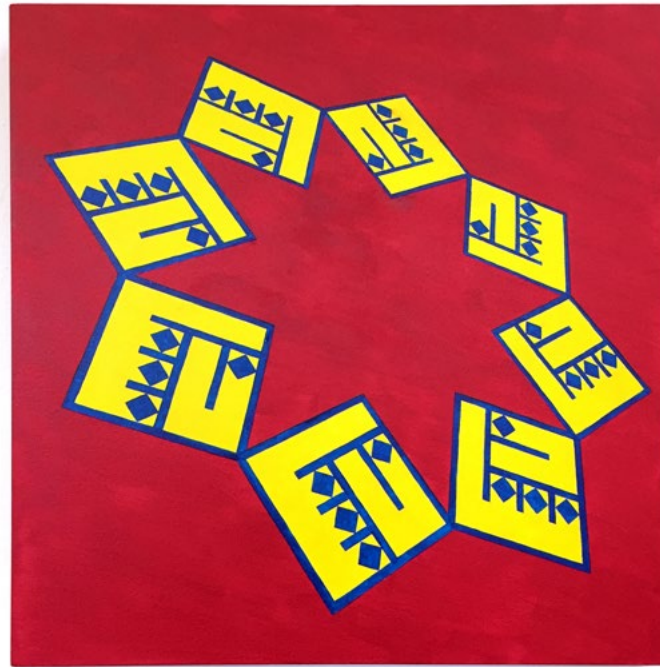


Perplexity حيرة

Acrylic and Gold leaf 23.75ct on paper, hand-cut, assembled on mount board. 64x64 cm. 2017. £2,000.

The word here eludes any recognition unless you know it's there. The pattern was cut out from a single sheet of black card, which casts even more confusing shadows where it is lifted, and enhanced with red dots and a single gold point.



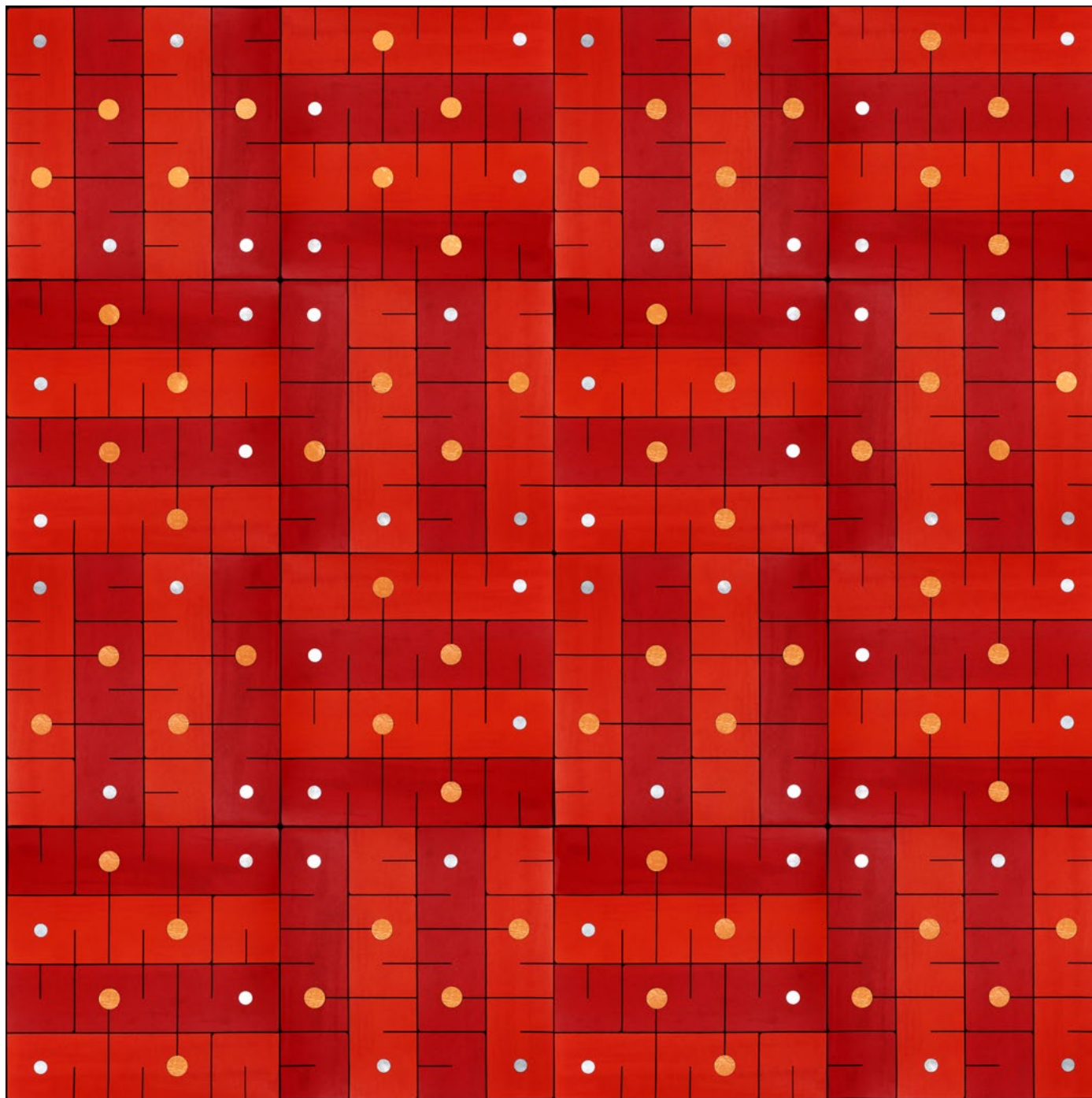


شاذ Eccentric I, II, III

Acrylic on wooden panel. 50 x 50 x 4.5 cm each. 2016.
£2,500 each.

Shâdh literally means: "isolated, separated, anomalous, irregular, extraordinary, exceptional, curious, odd, eccentric, noncanonical." Basically, off-centre, which is the idea explored in this series where the designs are seen by a viewer who is not centered (spatially or psychologically), but positioned on their outer edge. Not only do they spell out "deviant", but they deviate from my usual work both by their perspective and their colour scheme.

In earlier days the word *shâdh* was applied to Sufis, referring to the ecstatic utterances that resulted from an overpowering mystical state. Such exclamations were non-rational and controversial, going beyond the pale of conventional religion.



Ecstasy عَجْز

Acrylic and metal leaf on paper. 192 x 192 cm (made up of 16 pieces of 48 x 48 cm each). 2015. £5,800.

The word stylised here in Kufic, a geometric style of arabic calligraphy, is Ecstasy (*wajd*). While the design appears static at first, movement comes from contemplation: then swirling patterns appear and begin their dance, with the dots seeming to float over the paper from which they are lifted by their metallic sheen.

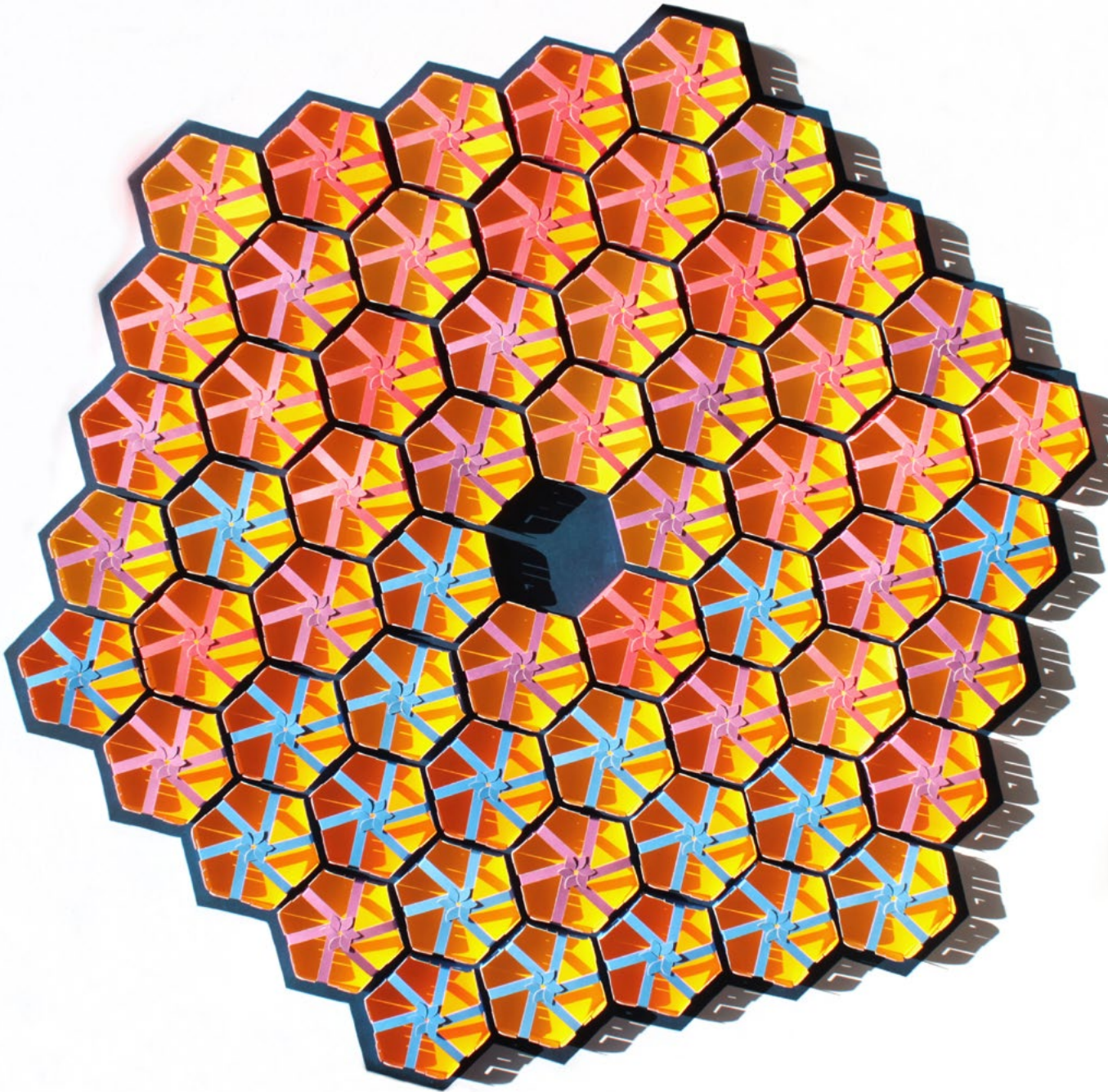
Please note this piece is made up of 16 pieces measuring 48x48cm each. This makes it simple to ship but they need to be mounted or framed before the piece can be hung.



Cells خلايا

Acrylic on paper, hand cut, scored, folded, assembled on canvas. 122x122 cm. 2015. £4,800.

The word *khalya*, pl. *khalâya*, from a root which means "void, empty space", refers to the cell, both in the body or in the beehive. The latter is the dominant note for this modular piece, which evokes simultaneously the cells filled with honey and the flowers that provided it. The geometry is relieved by the irregular gradation of the colours and by the variation within each hue. At the centre, an empty space reminds us of the core meaning of the word; the whole piece is in itself one cell. The shadows, which change with the angle and intensity of the light, are a key element bringing the piece to life.





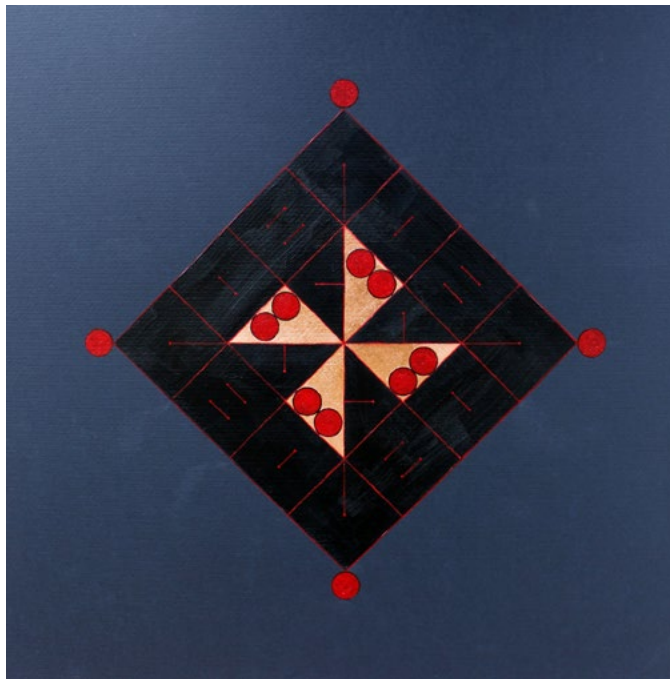
Truth Without Form حَقّ بدون شكل

Acrylic, pigment, metal leaf on wood, laser-cut and assembled on wood. 122 x 122 cm. 2014. £6,000.

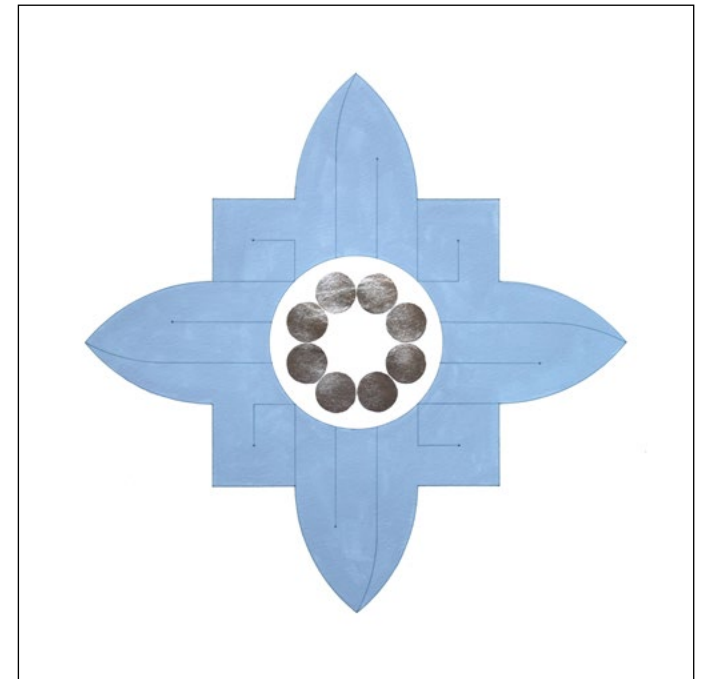
"Truth Without Form" is a Sufi expression also found in Buddhism. Here the word *Haqq*, "truth" is deconstructed into its two component letters, made into the same shape, and scattered widely on a background with which they blend. But a hidden form can be guessed behind the apparent randomness, and a change of perspective makes the letters appear sharply as their golden edges are revealed... Forms hidden over a hidden form.



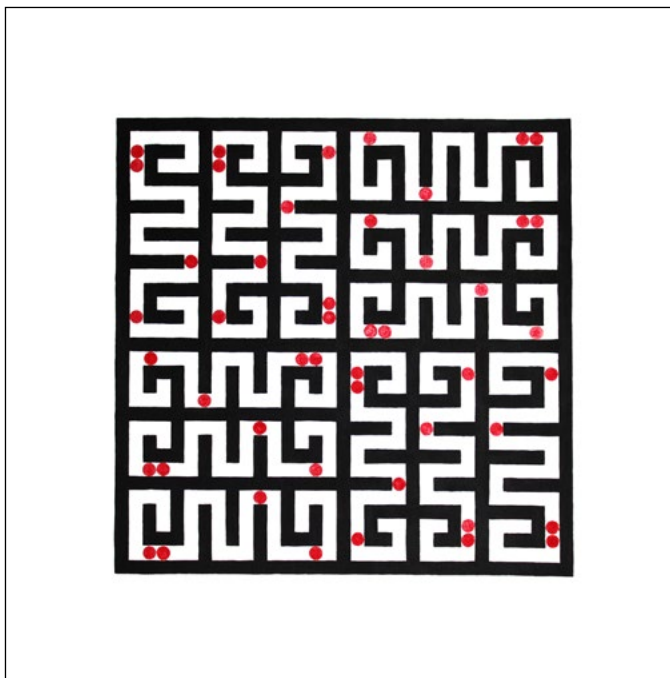
Early works (2011-2013) in acrylic or watercolour with metal leaf on paper, 50x50.



Dread £1,000 رهبة



Sorrow £800 حزن



Jinn £1,000 جنّ



Poverty of the Heart £800 فقر