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Nur: Jamelie Hassan's History of the Present

Jamelie Hassan, whose parents came to Canada in 1914 and 1939 from Lebanon, grew up in an Arabic-speaking household. Yet she is not merely nostalgic about the place of origin. She sees it as a place in the history of the present, not just in the history of her own displaced migration.

– Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak¹

One enters the library at the Great Mosque of Xi'an through one of two doors, inside each of which Jamelie Hassan has hung an Egyptian glass mosque lamp—contemporary versions of traditional mosque lamps from a factory in Cairo. Their presence, like a little visual gift, subtly contrasts with the traditional Chinese architecture on the outside of the structure and the more modern features of the library's interior space. Time in this context cannot be treated as linear or progressive, but must be understood as different ways of thinking—and Hassan's installation *Nur* powerfully reflects this approach to time and history.

When I studied traditional ink painting in South Korea (from 1996 to 1997), one of the key ideas I had to learn was the manner of treating histories as overlapping, even as simultaneous. I experienced this directly while visiting the small temple of Hongryeonam at the Naksansa Temple complex in Sokcho.² The original temple dates from the Later or Unified Silla period, from 668 to 935, and was built by a Korean ambassador to Tang Dynasty China, who studied Buddhism there. Yet, although it has been destroyed numerous times since then, and what exists now was mainly rebuilt in 1953, the historical information on the Hongryeonam temple still identifies it as having been built in the Silla period. I asked my Korean painting Master, Lee Young Hwan, about this discrepancy—here in North America, if a building is destroyed and another built in its place, it is considered to have existed from the date it was rebuilt, not the date of the building it replaces—and he was confused by the question. “But it is the *same* temple,” he answered plainly. I had many experiences similar to this in Korea, teaching me a new way of seeing time that is not fragmentary, but a new manner of experiencing the space of temporality based within the continuing dialogues of material and knowledge through histories.

From this perspective, what we encounter in the Great Mosque library in Xi'an is a coming together of time periods that are all present in different ways: materially in the objects and documents, architecturally in the structures of the Mosque complex—extending out into the city of Xi'an—and bodily in the practices and shared beliefs of the people

Jamelie Hassan, *Nur*, 2014, entrance to the library of the Great Mosque of Xi'an. Photo: Shi Xinhang. Courtesy of the artist.





who use the space. By entering the library we become part of a history that Hassan, beginning with the introduction of the Egyptian mosque lamps, connects to the larger cultural and intellectual history of the Silk Road. Under the rule of the early Tang emperors,

Sign giving directions to the Great Mosque of Xi'an. Photo: Ron Benner and Jamelie Hassan.

China “grew into the largest and most powerful country in the medieval world,” Wu Hung tells us. He continues:

Territorial expansion brought central Asia into the empire and protected caravan routes to the west. The capital, Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), became a cosmopolitan centre with a population of more than a million. People of almost every ethnicity, color, and belief found their way to this city, sharing in and contributing to the expanding economy, the enthusiastic acceptance of various religious and cultural traditions, and highly developed literature and art.³



Exterior of the library of the Great Mosque of Xi'an. Photo: Shi Xinhang. Courtesy of Jamelie Hassan.

In a real sense, the Silk Road made ancient Chang'an a moment in which cultural practices and beliefs were allowed to exist simultaneously, when all major forms of religious practice and ways of thinking about the world were able to co-exist in dialogue with each other. It is within this context that the Great Mosque of Xi'an was first founded and where our historical experience of it can be seen to begin.

For this reason, I want to suggest that we consider our encounter with Hassan's *Nur* as originating both in the contemporary world *and* in the early Tang dynasty—a period, 618 to 907, that overlaps with the death of the Prophet Muhammed in 632 and the establishment of the caliphate or Islamic Empire. In 750, the Abbasid Era begins; this is often called the Islamic Golden Age, during which there is an extensive drive to translate into Arabic “almost *all* non-literary and non-historical secular Greek books that were available throughout the Eastern Byzantine Empire and the Near East.”⁴ Because of this remarkable undertaking, known as the Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement, a vast amount of ancient knowledge is available to us, some of which has not survived except through the translations of these early Arabic scholars. *Nur* enacts this history as an

experience of the present. Created specifically to be installed within the space of a library (Hassan is in fact the first artist—not just Western artist but the first contemporary artist—to be given permission to work in the space), this artwork exists in and through its relation to, on the one hand, the historical legacy connecting Chinese and Arabic culture and, on the other hand, the artist’s contemporary engagements with this history as a person of Arabic background living in Canada. The more one is aware of these cultural and historical dialogues, the greater one’s appreciation for the power of this work.

Print based on an ink drawing of a map of the Great Mosque of Xi’an. A gift to Jamelie Hassan from Haji Yusaf Ma Jianchun, 2013. Courtesy of Jamelie Hassan.

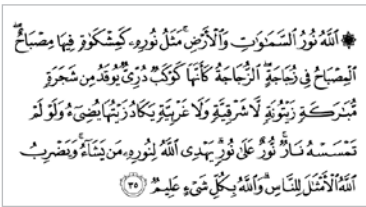


In Hassan’s installation, the past is continually re-experienced as the present—as a moment we can live in—with, in turn, the present anachronically becoming a moment of the past histories that have made it possible. We see this especially in the calligraphy of the *Nur* sura, in which Hassan restages in the present the nineteenth-century calligrapher Kazasker Mustafa izzet Efendi’s rendering of the Qur’anic text onto the interior of the central dome of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. In an English translation, this text reads as:

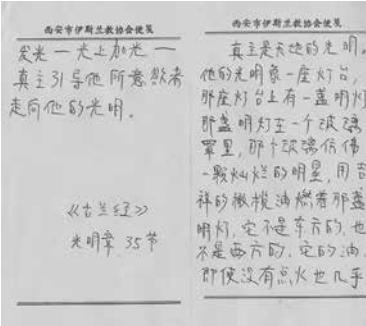
God *is* the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light *is* as a niche in which there *is* a lamp. The lamp *is* in a glass. The glass *is* as if it had been a glittering star, kindled from the blessed olive tree, neither eastern nor western, whose oil *is* about to illuminate although no fire touches it. Light on light, God guides to His Light whom He wills! And God propounds parables for humanity and God *is* Knowing of everything. (Qur’an 24:35)

It is important to see Hassan’s use of this calligraphy not so much as imitation or copying, but, instead, as a bringing into the present of this historical vision of the Qur’an verse. This approach directly parallels the practice of Qur’anic recitation as described by Navid Kermani: “in the case of the Qur’an, the nature of reception as an occurrence in the present moment is more than just an inevitability: by defining the mode of its reception as listening to recitation, the text itself suggests and emphasizes the nature of its actualization as an event. The text *is* when it is recited—and that means it is when *a person* recites it.”⁵

Within the small library, viewers make Hassan’s *Nur* present as they view the repeated calligraphic motif that moves quietly across the ceiling, overlooking the books and documents, including an arrangement of



Original Arabic of sura 24:35 (The Light Verse), Qur'an. Chinese translation by Imam Jia Xiping. Courtesy of Jamelie Hassan.



photographs of dignitaries who have visited the mosque that dominate the walls. The functionality of the space as a place of study, including a large wooden table, prevents a purely aesthetic or removed experience of the installation, which instead must be understood and appreciated within this broader context. The overtly subtle presence of *Nur* does not demand our attention and certainly is not lessened by those visitors who may not recognize it as an artwork. Even the act of seeing it is not enough: as

the Qur'anic text it envisions, Hassan's work *is* when a person experiences it—"the word *is* an act."⁶ And *Nur* actively invites people, even those of us who cannot read the Arabic script, to share in the possibility of knowledge that depends on a willingness to seek knowledge.



Jamelie Hassan, *Nur*, 2014, yellow ink and gold paint on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Entering the library, passing underneath one of the Egyptian mosque lamps, and looking up at the circles of yellow ink and gold paint—like manuscript illuminations—repeated, like one repeatedly recites the suras. One experiences a meditative quality to Hassan's installation that is at once profound and beautiful. The visual presence of the work brings the space of the library in contact with its own extended history, in some cases quite literally. As an expression of the beauty of the *Nur* sura, Hassan brings the historical calligraphy of the Hagia Sophia into contemporary lived experience: her calligraphy speaks to us now, in the present. Walking around the room and looking at each of the fourteen occurrences of *Nur* (each composed of four panels), we experience this text both visually and bodily; the repeated patterns invite ever-greater moments of realization, moments of recognizing a beauty that reflects the poetic nature of the

Jamelie Hassan, *Nur*, 2014, installation view in the library of the Great Mosque of Xi'an, 2014. Photo: Shi Xinhang. Courtesy of the artist.



Qur'an. It is significant to me that when Kermani describes this beauty, specifically in relation to the Sufi response to the Qur'an, he calls upon the words of Surrealist author André Breton: "Beauty will be CONVULSIVE, or it will not be at all."⁷ It is not enough simply to say that *Nur* is beautiful; its beauty must be felt on a profound and personal level—the work must have consequence in your life.

The importance of *Nur* within the history of Jamelie Hassan's artistic practice is undeniable. On a basic level, this work brings together numerous elements that she has worked with throughout most of her career—the politics of language, Arabic text, questions of the local *and* global, dialogues of knowledge, to name a few. In the library of the Great Mosque of Xi'an we experience a convergence of many of the questions that are of consequence to Hassan, with *Nur* as a nexus that repeatedly signals the possibility of something more—of a belief in the beauty of knowledge. This installation is an act of disclosure on her part, a moment in which she questions her present relationship to the world and to the histories she engages with. *Nur* is an expression of Hassan's own unique vision of belief as lived, of believing as nothing less than a willingness to create one's own time and place in the world.

This text was originally published in Jamelie Hassan: *Nur* (Qur'an, sura 24.35; The Light Verse), *Blue Medium Press, London, Ontario, Canada.*

Notes

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in "Inscriptions of Truth to Size," *Inscriptions*, exh. cat. (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 1990), 9.
2. There is an extraordinary feature about Hongryeonam. Within this modest little temple, which is built overlooking the sea (of Japan), there is a small metal ring located in the centre of the floor that allows you to pull out a small square of the wooden flooring, revealing a view straight down the cliff below to the water. From a Buddhist perspective, it is a moment of *satori*: realizing literally where you stand in the world.
3. Wu Hung, "The Origins of Chinese Painting (Paleolithic Period to Tang Dynasty)," in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, eds. Yang Xin et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 59.
4. Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1.
5. Navid Kermani, *God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Qur'an*, trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 156.
6. Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 54.
7. André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 160. Quoted in Kermani, *God Is Beautiful*, 293.