





*Nur* (Qur'an, sura 24:35; The Light Verse)  
Library of the Great Mosque of Xi'an  
2014  
Photographs by Shi Xinhang

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Quote on opposite page: from Shu Yang's text "The Changing Landscapes of Contemporary Art," in the exhibition catalogue *The Transformation of Canadian Landscape Art: Inside and Outside of Being* (2014).

Xi'an was known by the name Chang'an in ancient times, the renowned historical ancient capital of China, now a days also a cosmopolitan city of which its inhabitants are immensely proud. The ancient "Silk Road" started here, setting up a bridge for exchanges between Asia and Europe. The locality of Qingling, next to Xi'an, also gave birth to the historically famous Chinese landscape painting style that came to influence later generations in a great manner. The glorious legacy of a city not only lies in its heritage, but also needs to reflect on the vitality of innovation. Xi'an's rich traditional culture can also become a rich creative resource for a modernization of tradition, creating a new value for the city.

— *Shu Yang*, Artist and Director of Eshu Art House, Beijing and former Art Director, Xi'an Art Museum, Xi'an, China



*Seek Knowledge Even Onto China*  
vinyl calligraphy and painted wall  
1993-95  
Photograph by Shi Xinhang

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Installed in the Art and Living Bookstore & Gift Shop of the Xi'an Art Museum,  
2014. Collection of the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Lethbridge, Alberta.

## Introduction

Jamelie Hassan

During my stay in China, whenever I saw Muslims I always felt as though I were meeting my own family and close kinsmen.

— *Ibn Battuta*

**A**lbert Hourani in his comprehensive *A History of the Arab Peoples* describes how peoples travelled in search of not only goods but also learning. “A network of routes ran through the world of Islam and beyond it. Along them moved not only caravans of camels or donkeys carrying silks, spices, glass and precious metals, but ideas, news, fashions, patterns of thought and behaviour.”<sup>1</sup> He writes of the celebrated fourteenth-century traveller, Ibn Battuta (1304 -1377 c.), that the scholar-traveller was a highly esteemed visitor by these communities in this period in the Islamic world and that great honours were conferred upon him, demonstrating the prestige attached to knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

The routes Ibn Battuta travelled along were part of what is known as the Silk Road, which refers to how silk reached the Western World overland “along a long, time-honoured merchant route” and, as it is known to the world today, it “connects three continents, Asia, Europe and Africa, runs through China, Afghanistan, India, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey and finally stops at Rome in Italy.”<sup>3</sup> Beyond significant trade links, the Silk Road was a major land route for diplomatic missions as well as traveller/scholars and artisans who shared and exchanged their knowledge and technological innovations from other significant cultural capitals. Hourani notes that these links could also serve another purpose: one, of which, most of us, are remote witnesses: “From time to time more violent movements would pass down the routes, as an army carried the power of another ruler or of a challenger to the existing power.”<sup>4</sup> The Silk Road begins in Xi’an, known as Chang’an (meaning ‘perpetual peace’) before the Ming Dynasty, the ancient capital of numerous Dynasties in Chinese history – and the location of my installation *Nur*.

Questions of how we learn, how we communicate and how we can challenge systems that have power over us are at the centre of my thinking. Language and the politics of language continue to be a strong aspect of my work. My frequent use of Arabic calligraphy (and other languages) raises questions of the political and issues of translation. As I stated in an email to my friend, artist and fellow traveller, Andy Patton:

I accept & love Arabic even with my limitations – its sounds, movement and its written script. I have no answers for those who want everything to be “understandable”. (translations are limited & approximate too – as we know). I guess that is an aspect of the political.<sup>5</sup>

Andy Patton gave me the modest brochure of the Great Mosque in Xi’an, which he brought back for me from his first visit to this city in 2012. He wrote back to me after the completion of the Xi’an art exhibition, in one of our email exchanges:

Two things struck me when I read this. First, I like you saying that you’re at odds with the demand that everything be understandable. I think that demand is a demand that nothing be resistant. How appalling! And everything is easily translatable, from one language to another, from one context to another, so much of value would completely disappear. The other is just this: I depend so much on translators of poetry, novels, learned books – as you do. And yet the more I learn of Italian, the more obvious it becomes that everything of value escapes, that nothing can really be translated.<sup>6</sup>

While secular and often political in my approach, I also try to consider a larger cultural legacy. I view this legacy as being part of a tradition reflected in the philosophical principles of Islam and Arabic culture, which is a result of family history, connections and discussions which prevailed in our extensive household and later in my travels.

From the time I was a child, the idea of China has been a significant geographic and cultural presence. I recall my mother had vividly coloured embroidered satin cushions from China, treasured gifts, which she kept in their original distinct packaging in her cedar chest in our home in London, Ontario. My father’s words repeated to us from

the hadith “Seek knowledge even onto China” remained an instructive teaching well into my imaginative and creative life as an artist.

In the 1980’s I had already begun research and created artworks that reflected this particular cultural focus, even before visiting China. My first journey to China was not until 1993, when I attended a North African and Asian Studies conference in Hong Kong and presented my 1991 collaborative book with Jamila Ismail, *the jamelie•jamila project*. At that time I was able to make a short trip to mainland China, fulfilling these words that my father had repeated to his children, as we were growing up in Canada. Not unexpectedly, this trip in 1993 resulted in several important artworks that moved from my own self-directed research to installation projects that reflected the immediacy of this travel experience.

My 1995 installation *Seek Knowledge Even Onto China* directly references the Arabic saying that my father repeated to us, his Canadian-born children, growing up in a Muslim household in a small city in southern Ontario. This work was created during my solo exhibition at Art Speak Gallery in Vancouver. I invited two people from the Vancouver community to participate in the installation: Hanna Kawas, who was skilled in Arabic calligraphy, and Jin Li, who was skilled in Chinese calligraphy. Each was asked to comment on the meaning of this Arabic expression and then write the saying in their respective scripts on the wall of the gallery. Subsequent installations involved working from this original writing of the text in Vancouver. *Seek Knowledge Even Onto China* was one of two works included in the group exhibition *The Transformation of Landscape Art in Canada: Inside & Outside of Being*, which opened at the Xi’an Art Museum in 2014. The second was the site-specific installation *Nur*.

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In the fall of 2013, I was first approached by Toronto-based curators Zhou Yan and Christine Platt about the possibility of participating in an exhibition in Xi’an, China. This invitation offered me the unique opportunity to create a new work that directly engaged with the significant and historical *Hui* (Chinese Muslim) presence in Xi’an. I proposed an off-site installation in the library of the Great Mosque





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Photograph by Ron Benner and Jamelie Hassan of the *Hui* quarter in the old city of Xi'an, including the Hua Jue Xiang Antique Market (with traditional bread stand in foreground on left).





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Photographs by Ron Benner and Jamelie Hassan of the *Hui* quarter and the outside wall of the Great Mosque of Xi'an, which includes carved Arabic text. Also pictured are a sign (on the opposite page) requesting people to keep the area clean and a sign (above) directing people towards the entrance of the mosque.

of Xi'an, which was supported by the Xi'an Art Museum and the *Hui* community, including the Imam. As with my previous installation works, *Nur* attempts to address the histories, both personal and public, of the architectural aspect of the space in which the work exists, in this case in the library of a mosque situated in Xi'an – the beginning of the Silk Road.

Installation works are dependent on many factors, but the site and its context are fundamental – what one might call the hospitality of the site to embrace the idea. The Great Mosque has a quiet beauty with its Chinese architecture and gardens. Islamic inscriptions and Chinese motifs are aesthetically combined throughout the site. These dual cultural elements create an extraordinary presence throughout the city's vibrant *Hui* quarter. The entry into the library of the Great Mosque of Xi'an is quite modest. This library is one part of a series of pavilions, which includes a prayer hall that was built in Tang Dynasty architecture. It was founded in 742, which is quite amazing. It is the compelling history and location offered by this site that was the inspiration for *Nur*.

In this installation I worked with the Arabic calligraphy of the verse *Nur (Light)* in the Qur'an. The Arabic script painted with ink and gold paint on paper and mounted onto 56 individual archival panels were inserted into the existing ceiling grid of the library. This Arabic calligraphy is based on the calligraphy in the central cupola of the ceiling of the Hagia Sophia (16<sup>th</sup> c.) in Istanbul, Turkey. I have used it as a repeat motif that moves across the space. In addition to these panels, I also installed Egyptian glass lamps in the two entryways into the space, which I had used in another project and decided to take to Xi'an. There is also something beautiful about these mosque lamps in that they are from Cairo, Egypt and this particular factory has been making the glass mosque lamps from the Fatima era continuously, in similar sorts of ways, up to the present day. As with most installation art, *Nur* involves a process, rather than an act of completion. This work will continue to remain in the library, a gift to the mosque.

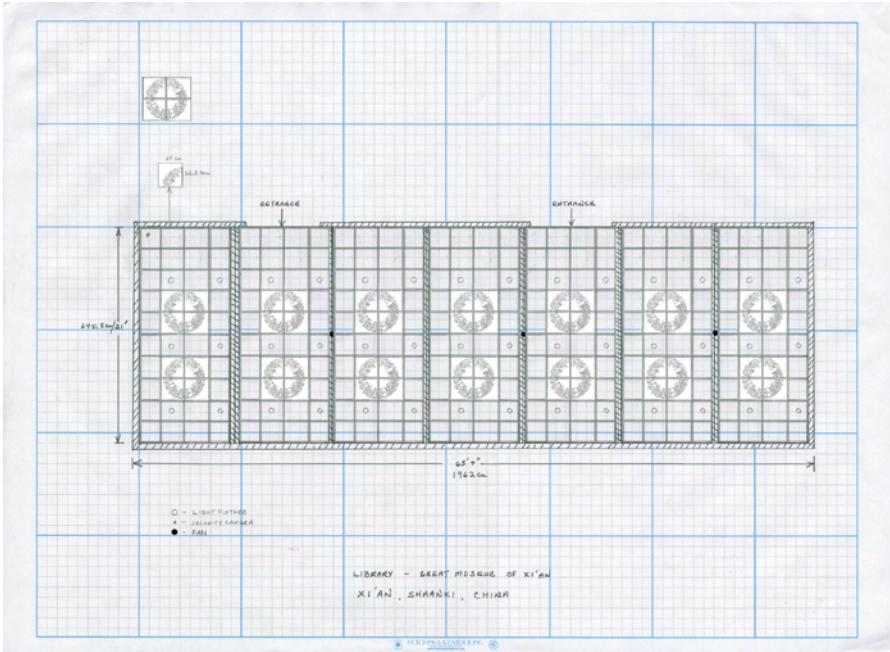
That this installation is very significant for me needs little explanation. The idea of the library, a space of study and reflection within the larger complex of the meditative spaces of the gardens and pavilions of the Great Mosque are uniquely suited to my on-going



*Drawing for Nur*  
ink on paper  
2014

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This calligraphy is based on the calligraphy that adorns the ceiling of the central cupola of the Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey.



*Plan for the ceiling of Nur*  
pencil on paper  
2014

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Jamelie Hassan's proposal *Nur*, for the ceiling of the library of the Great Mosque of Xi'an. Plan drawn by Ron Benner with calligraphy by Jamelie Hassan. The plan shows 56 panels (4 for each sura) as they were proposed to be installed (the actual installation was slightly modified).

interest in libraries, language and learning. The idea of the Silk Road was an important element in developing my project *Nur*, a connection that is very much a part of the reason why I feel this work is significant as it speaks to the community of *Hui* (Muslims), who originated from the countries that were partners in these earlier cultural and philosophical exchanges and is a continuation of many of those links – including the two mosque lamps from Cairo and the Arabic calligraphy inspired from Istanbul. *Nur* expresses the inner and outer of being, the private and the public, the solitary and the collective and reflects an imperative to pursue knowledge across great distances and landscapes.

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**A** project of this nature owes its existence to many people: my thanks to Andy Patton, friend, artist and scholar, for his confidence in the initial concept – that I could do a work for a mosque in Xi'an; to Zhou Yan, who had the idea that my work should be presented in Xi'an and initiated the process to realize this project; to Christine Platt, assistant curator of the exhibition, who was steadfast in her commitment to this project.

In Xi'an, my thanks to Yang Chao, the director and founder of Xian Art Museum and one of the curators with Zhou Yan for the group exhibition who had a strong desire to see this partnership with the Great Mosque realized; Hao Yi, curator of Xi'an Art Museum, and Shu Yang, former Art Director both gave willingly of their time and considerable efforts to negotiate through the approval stages; Zhang Naiqi, director of technical and installation, and all the team at the Xi'an Art Museum for their work and commitment to this exhibition and all aspects of the installation. The team, including numerous volunteers, dedicated many hours to this project, which was beyond the scope of what the Xi'an Art Museum had previously been involved in. Shi Xinhang (Stone Photography) generously offered to become the official photographer for this and other works in the exhibition including Ron Benner's photographic/garden installation. Webster Li and Alice Wu, worked many volunteer hours and translated for a number of the artists and are counted among a community of friends in Xi'an. My deep gratitude to Nadia Ma for her companionship and translation throughout.

Her determination to be involved in the realization of this project is without a doubt a reason for its eventual approval and success with the mosque community. My thanks to the Imam Haji Mohammad You Nousri Ma Liang Ji, his wisdom and ability to protect the mosque and the old city from destructive forces that at various times threatened the site; to Haji Yusaf Ma Jianchun for his welcome, kindness and support and his gift of the map of the Great Mosque site; to committee director Haji Yusaf Ma Bao Xuan and the Great Mosque committee who approved my plan; to Imam Jia Xiping for his translation of the *Light* verse from Arabic into Mandarin. Any traveller would be fortunate to find a social space like Jessica's Cafe, where owner Jessica Lee offered delicious teas and coffees, as well as, travel advice and assistance.

I owe my profound thanks to Ron Benner, both in our home in London and as we travelled together to Xi'an to do research, to learn about Xi'an's culture and together to participate in the group exhibition. His skills included making the drawing of the plan of the ceiling of the library to navigating us through the laneways of the old city to the mosque and help in many ways in thinking through ideas on this project and the work of installing the ceiling panels, and contributing his photographs of Xi'an, all, with good humour and generosity.

My thanks to Blue Medium Press, Julian Haladyn and Miriam Jordan-Haladyn for their vision to encourage me to create this publication and their desire to work together to contribute texts dedicated to this installation. Thanks to the publication's two other authors Christine Platt and Nadia Ma who have written down their insights regarding the process as this installation was developing in Xi'an, further contributing to the life of this work. I express my heartfelt thanks to all in Xi'an who have helped to make this installation possible and to those who have given me this honour to create a work for this exceptional heritage site in China.

Additional thanks for their professional support and friendship to Ross Bell, Janette Cousins Ewan and Brian Meehan at Museum London, Ruba Kana'an at the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Myra and Roland Schubert at Colour by Schubert, Tony Why at Why Design, Salah Bachir and Jacob Yerex, Terry Dietz, Mireya Folch-Serra, Janice Gurney, Silvia Langer, Judith and Wilson Rodger, Jean and Michael Spence. At the Embassy of Canada, Beijing, China my thanks to Ambassador

Guy Saint-Jacques, Sarah Taylor, Deputy Head of Mission, Mary Anne Dehler, Counsellor, Public Diplomacy Section and Zengyue Lui, Cultural Relations Officer.

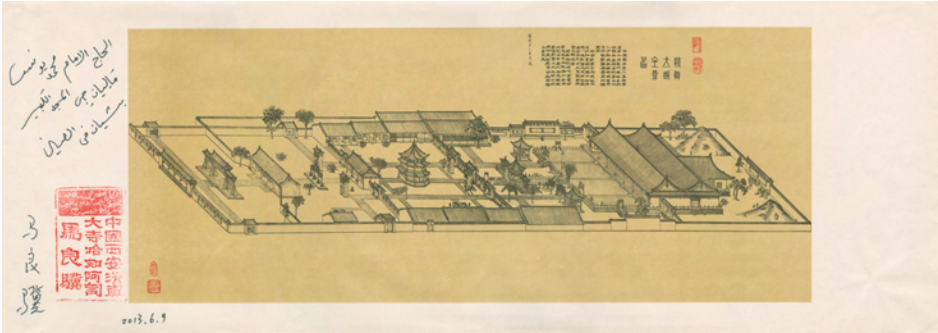
My thanks to my family, my parents, Ayshi and Alex, who gave me the real meaning of education in our home, to Tariq and Hala and my two young grandsons, Zein and Kian, who were happy studio companions on one of their visits to London, and to my sisters and brothers, their partners and their children and grandchildren who have been generous and enthusiastic supporters of my art through their advice and advocacy over the years.

The artist gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Ontario Arts Council and Hassan Law, London, Ontario.

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### Notes

1. Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 128.
2. Evidence of the significant cultural exchanges which took place between countries from West Asia and sites in China are found in artifacts that are in collections in museums throughout the world. One notable example is a blue and white porcelain ablution basin (AKM722) in the collection of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto. In the central medallion of this basin is written a single Arabic word in Thuluth calligraphy: *taharat*, meaning 'purity'. The wide rim is embellished with floral motifs and with other words related to the ritual of ablutions (*al wudu'*). This artifact dates from Emperor Zengde's reign 1506-1521. According to stories transmitted by Arab travellers, Emperor Zengde and his inner circle were very sympathetic to Islam. On the bottom of the basin in red glaze in Chinese script is the stamp of Zengde.
3. Zhang Yiping, *The Story of the Silk Road*, trans. Jia Zongyi (China International Press, 2005), 9.
4. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 128.
5. Email from Jamelie Hassan to Andy Patton, 9 November 2014.
6. Email from Andy Patton to Jamelie Hassan, 9 November 2014.



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

## ***Nur: Jamelie Hassan's History of the Present***

**Julian Haladyn**

Hassan “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 Spivak*<sup>1</sup>

**W**e enter the library at the Great Mosque of Xi'an through one of two doors, inside each of which Jamelie Hassan has hung a glass Egyptian mosque lamp – contemporary versions of traditional mosque lamps from a factory in Cairo – that greets us. Their presence, like a little visual gift, subtly contrasts with the traditional Chinese architecture of the outside 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 studying 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.<sup>2</sup> The original temple dates from the Later or Unified Silla period, from 668 to 935 – 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 was mainly rebuilt in 1953, the historical information on the Hongryeonam temple still identified it as having been built in the Silla period. I asked my Korean painting Master, Lee Young Hwan, about this discrepancy – here, if a building is destroyed and another built in its place, we consider it existing from the date it was rebuilt, not the date of the building it replaces – and he was confused by the



*Map of the Silk Road, during the Tang and Abbasid Empires, (Circa 820)*  
 hand-painted glazed porcelain tile, concrete and metal  
 2015

Photograph by Roland Schubert

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This collaborative artwork by Jamelie Hassan and Ron Benner was commissioned for a private garden in Canada. Collection of Salah Bachir and Jacob Yerex.

question. “But it is the same temple,” he said plainly. I had many experiences similar to this, teaching me a new way of seeing time that is not fragmentary, 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 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 who have used the space. By entering the library we become part of a history that Jamelie, 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, 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 center 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.<sup>3</sup>

In a real sense, the Silk Road made ancient Chang’an a moment in time when 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 is first founded, and where our historical experience of it can be seen to begin.

For this reason, I want to suggest that we must consider our encounter with Hassan’s *Nur* as originating both in the contemporary world *and* in the early Tang Dynasty – a time period, from 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, what 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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 dialogues, the greater one’s appreciation for the power of this work.

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**I**n 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 19th century calligrapher Kazasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi’s rendering of the Qur’anic text onto the interior of the central dome of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. It is important to see Hassan’s use of this calligraphy not only as imitation or copying, but also 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: “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.”<sup>5</sup>



*Nur*  
2014  
Photograph by Shi Xinhang

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Installation view of *Nur* in the library of the Great Mosque of Xi'an, with a woman reading at the table.





*Nur*  
2014  
Photographs by Shi Xinhang

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Installation view of *Nur* in the library of the Great Mosque of Xi'an. Detail (following page) of one sura and a mosque lamp in front of the partially open library door.



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 photographs that dominate one of 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 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 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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 our willingness to seek knowledge.

We enter the library, pass underneath one of the Egyptian mosque lamps and look up at the circles of yellow ink and gold paint – like manuscript illuminations – repeated, like one repeatedly recites the suras. There is 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. Walking around the room and looking at each of the 14 occurrences of *Nur* (each composed of 4 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 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 the Surrealist author André Breton: “Beauty will be CONVULSIVE, or it will not be at all.”<sup>7</sup> 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 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 relation 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.

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### Notes

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Inscriptions of Truth to Size,” *Inscriptions* [exhibition catalogue] (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 1990), 9.
2. There is an extraordinary feature about Hongryeonam that is the reason why I am drawn to talk about it. Built overlooking the sea, 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.
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.

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*Nur*  
yellow ink and gold paint on paper  
2014

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This calligraphy is based on the calligraphy that adorns the ceiling of the central cupola of the Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey.