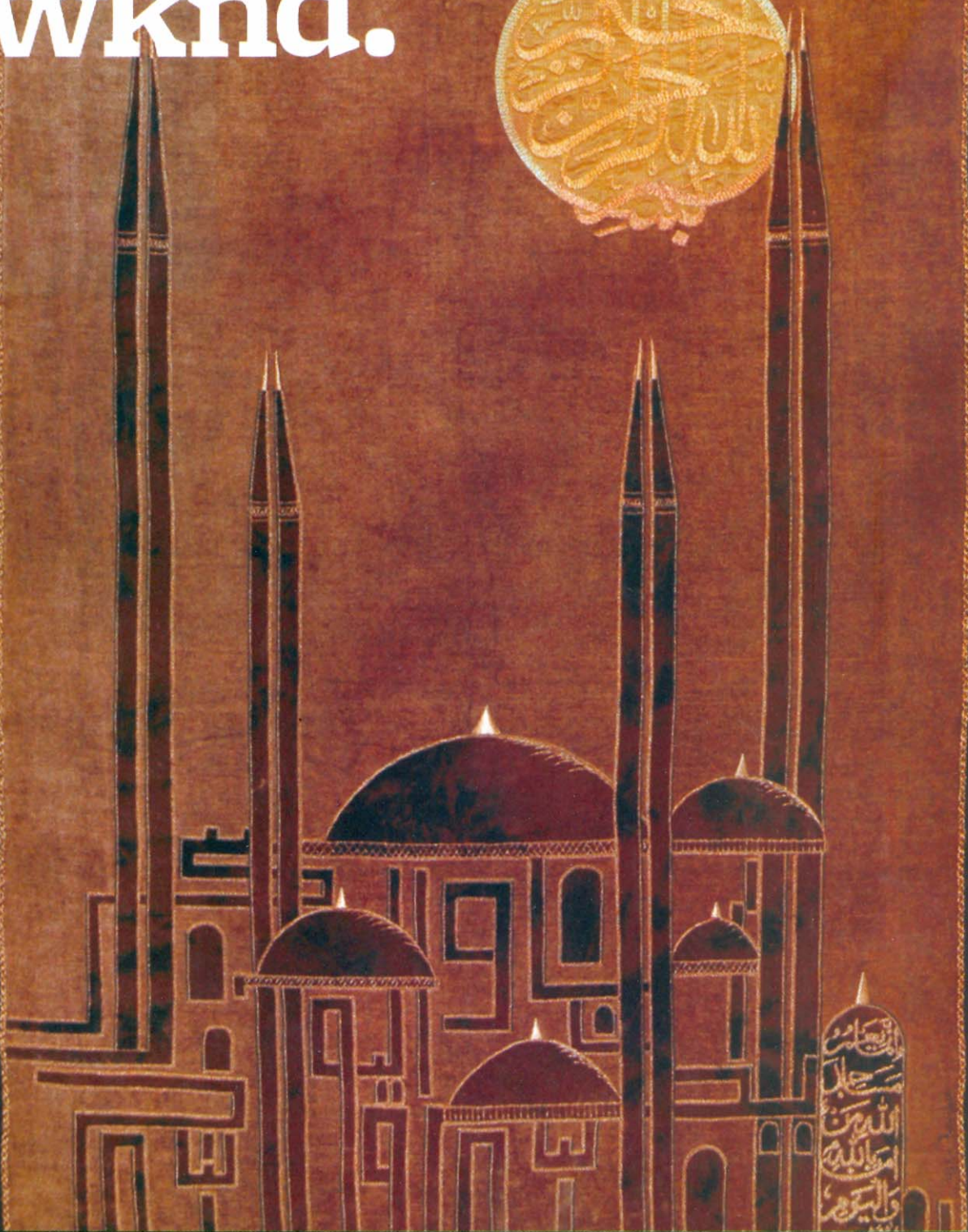


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traces of a calligrapher

Raziqeh Hussain talks to an artist whose at-home embroidery became an international business

A mostly black scroll hangs on the wall as a grouping of abstract ideas. It has the words of God.

A motif of Arabesque on one tapestry has intricate ornamental patterns of interlaced lines and forms, in botanical shapes such as stems, foliage and buds. The flora lends itself to the structural subtlety of lines and space of the written words, adding grace and luster.

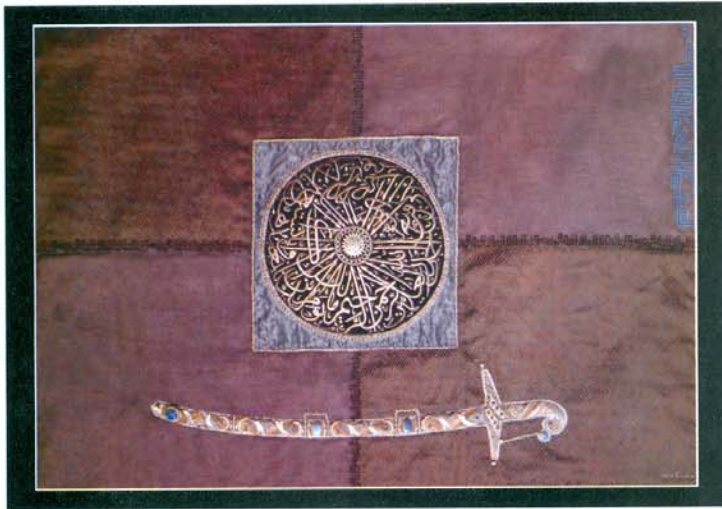
The internal spacious frames, small motifs and an-nuqat, or grammatical dots, contain sporadic dots of bright colours. All of these components are harmonised in a single integrative structure to present the work as one unit. This is calligraphy.

One evocative piece has a traditional solid black background and silver silk embroidery of the 99 names of Allah. Another highlight from the collection is the Ayat, cloth embroidered with copper and metallic silken thread that is treated in the very same style and colour as on the Kiswah, the black cloth covering the Holy Kabbah in Mecca.

This week, former fashion designer Adilah Bundakji makes her international solo debut with an exhibition at Mondo Arte Gallery in Dubai.

Bundakji is a Saudi Arabian citizen who was born in South Africa and now divides her time between Jeddah and Pakistan. Her work draw upon her life long experiences, her heritage and love for the diverse Muslim communities who





helped shape her life.

She makes embroideries based on verses from the holy Quran and the Kiswah. Though she's had no gallery representation until now, she has had a huge clientele in Saudi Arabia for the past 12 years. "It was my sister Zakiah who sowed the seeds of this art form in my mind."

Bundakji was designing clothes and interiors for clients in Saudi Arabia until one day she thought of creating a small piece of tapestry with Bismillah Hir Rehmanir Raheem (I begin in the name of Allah) and the Kalma for a Ramadhan gift for her sister. Zakiah loved it so much that Bundakji was inspired to begin making more and started giving them as gifts to friends and family. "I also give credit to my brothers, especially Shuckri Bundakji, who's the first person to hang my works on all the walls in his home," she says.

Initially she began stitching the pieces herself and when it became a fully-fledged business, she hired workers in Pakistan to stitch for her. Bundakji's treatment of Quranic scripts evokes musical notes, rich in tone and texture. It is in these works that one senses the call of a Qa'ari, Quran reciter frozen in time and form. "I make it a point to have Quran recitation classes for my workers. In this way they are learning what they are weaving. It's a spiritual and physical exercise for them. I also get them to have lessons in the hadith or teachings of the holy Prophet [peace be upon him]

especially on the role of women in Islam and their responsibilities towards their wives," she says.

It hasn't been an easy road as she has to divide her time between her children who are settled in US and Kuwait, and her workmen in Pakistan. "The most difficult part of the process is to discipline the workers to get them to work intricately and on time. I can be an irritatingly detailed person. I just can't let go of shabby work in front of me. The piece has to be exactly the way I've perceived it and I may add to it or take things away, but the end result has to be exquisite," she says.

The embroideries are woven with silk threads on tapestry cloth using a variety of techniques. All pieces are handmade and hand stitched. Some of them include the Marori stitch, a twisted gold thread work of Gujarat, embroidered as a motif on cloth. Others feature the Mughlai Parisha stitch, an intricate silk thread woven with precious and semi-precious stones. The Wasli stitch, which is Turkish and looks like a thick rope, is also used, and the full padded Dough stitch is used on the Kiswah. "I come up with my own stitches time and again. It is mostly through trial and error," says Bundakji.

Design, texture colour and form are harnessed in her works that seek to express the strong bond between Islam and art. Bundakji strives to overcome the differences in language, culture and creed and at the



same time, creatively express the uplifting message of the Islamic faith. "My works have no nationality. Yes, the calligraphy is Islamic but the designs are universal.

"Like Islam, the holy Quran is also universal. It's there not only for Muslims, but for everyone to read. So, I'm influenced a lot by Austrian landscapes, Italian frescos, French windows and Indo-Saracen architecture for my motifs."

Bundakji recently exhibited for the first time outside of Saudi Arabia at the Dubai Haughton Design Fair in February this year. When her work was put on display at the Art Antiques Design Dubai event, the organisers from the Dubai Ladies Club said they believed that her participation was an excellent step forward in promoting GCC women to take up a larger role in collecting and designing quality art.

"We are keen to encourage this growing awareness in art and antiques among women," Muna bin Kalli, executive director of Dubai Ladies Club said at the exhibition. "The growing inclusion of art into community lifestyle, and even as a career choice, are clear indicatives of the maturing interest among women in this field."

Bundakji's work is full of passion. It's also very spiritual. "Apart from being visually appealing, reciting the verses from the holy Quran brings in a lot of barakah (good luck). When you look at the piece you also read it aloud and then it lifts up your spirits and brings in good luck to your home. I

only hope to get blessings of Allah in return for it," she says.

Each tapestry is priced around USD10-12,000. Her works are sought-after by serious art collectors for their authenticity, heritage and history and as heirlooms for posterity. Over the last 12 years Bundakji has been commissioned by members of the Saudi royal family, leading Middle-Eastern merchant families and discreet art collectors, whose walls are adorned by her works. "Apart from the Saudi royal family, many of my works are also with the Crown Prince of Malaysia and the Abu Dhabi royal family," she says.

Bundakji delights in the moments when she sees her work displayed in homes all over the world. "I remember when my niece called me from Los Angeles and said she'd attended a friend's dinner party and saw one of my tapestries hanging on a wall in her house," she says. "And just yesterday, I opened my Facebook account and saw a child's birthday party pictures and, would you believe it, in the background I saw one of my pieces on the wall. It gives me real pleasure to know that my work is hanging on someone's wall miles away from where it was created."

Adilah Bundakji's exhibition is on at Mondo Arte Gallery in Mall of the Emirates from July 5 -25; 04-3724288