

PLEASE RETURN FOR OTHERS TO READ IF YOU DO NOT WANT TO TAKE AWAY
Shared Space: A Muslim and Jewish Art Exhibition Produced by Salaam Shalom
21st–24th May 2015 at The Old Foyer, Colston Hall, Bristol.
Curated by Rebecca Bellamy & Karan Sahota

On what is The World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue, we launch Salaam Shalom's first Muslim and Jewish Art exhibition and what is the first British Muslim and Jewish Art exhibition of its kind in the UK. Salaam Shalom is a small but strong and passionate team, supported by its network of local communities and the dedication of volunteers; many who have shown exceptional commitment, from producing radio shows to supporting our work with schools and other creative projects, since it began in 2006.

Salaam Shalom was founded to bring about dialogue between Muslims and Jews in Bristol. Since then it has expanded its remit to include bringing about dialogue between these communities as well as the wider communities that they are a part of and equipping young people with the skills to counter prejudice and discrimination. Salaam Shalom's projects utilize Education, Media and the Arts to foster dialogue between communities.

Salaam Shalom is not a campaign group, as an organisation we do not make statements on political situations, because we are a collective network of people with widely varying views. Our role is to foster dialogue and understanding. And we champion creative approaches to achieving this. Shared Space is not an illustration on commonalities, nor a politically laden examination on conflict. It's much more subtle and personal. It showcases the work of contemporary British Muslim and Jewish artists. Some clearly link to Artists' faith and cultural identities and some are more ambiguous and open to interpretation.

We hope that the art exhibition will provoke and inspire conversations that raise awareness and understanding, of the cultural connections between Muslims and Jews, which go beyond the current politics of the middle east. With our accompanying programme of workshops, talks and performances to facilitate dialogue, cooperation and learning.

This is now my fifth year working for Salaam Shalom and as an independent freelance curator, as well as Manager of Salaam Shalom, it has been a particularly exciting opportunity for me to be able to combine two of my greatest passions– humanity and art.

I believe that art can be a powerful tool for building community. It can bring us together, to share spaces, experiences and conversations. You glimpse into someone's inner world. And you find connections with your own. This is the beginning of dialogue.

We want to make new contacts and expand our network, so please join our mailing list and look out for future opportunities, including to build on this dialogue further.

Rebecca Bellamy, Programme & Development Manager

We are grateful for any donations (Charity #1121252) , you can donate here:
www.thebiggive.org.uk/donation/to/10247 www.salaamshalom.org.uk info@salaamshalom.org.uk

Tracing Differences: Jewish–Muslim Art and Dialogue

A Foreword written for Shared Space by Dr. Aaron Rosen

Calls for interfaith dialogue usually begin with the claim that what binds together Jews, Christians, and Muslims is their common identity as 'people of the book.' Yet practitioners of these faiths are also people of the image. While Jews and Muslims in particular are often typecast as fierce opponents of 'graven images,' they share a much more complicated, and in many cases much more positive, relation to visual art than frequently assumed. Both the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an do display anxiety over the misuse of figurative images, especially when it comes to the practice of idolatry. Yet neither sacred text condemns art in toto. And while there have certainly been periods of iconoclasm in both faiths, both Jewish and Islamic culture have also experienced great flowerings of art, both figurative and abstract.

Not only have Jewish and Muslim artists faced similar theological dilemmas, they have also shared themes, styles, and even artisans. In medieval Persian manuscripts, Jews and Muslims sometimes borrowed motifs from one another, or rendered the same stories—whether of Abraham, Joseph, or Esther—in strikingly similar ways. In medieval Spain, Jews and Muslims enjoyed a period of such productive cross-pollination that one thirteenth century Toledo synagogue is almost indistinguishable from mosques of that period (in a further twist, it later became a church). In the modern period, Jewish and Muslim artists have participated in an ever more international art world, sharing in the avant-garde trends of their times, from Cubism to Abstract Expressionism.

Despite these frequent and fruitful crossovers, little has been done to investigate what roles visual art might play in inter-religious dialogue. There have been exciting efforts over the past couple decades, especially in Britain, to use texts as a device to bring Jews and Muslims to the same table. Today, groups throughout Britain join together for 'Scriptural Reasoning' sessions where Jews, Christians, and Muslims discuss related selections from the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur'an. It is high time we begin to use images in a similar fashion, as Salaam Shalom have adroitly recognized in this timely exhibition. In fact, it is possible that art might open up conversations that Scripture cannot. Whereas Scripture comes freighted with a host of traditional interpretations and preconceptions, art can sometimes provide a more neutral terrain, where Jews and Muslims can feel free to extemporize, and find fresh meanings together.

A brief look at some of the marvelous pieces in this exhibition reveals exciting possibilities for conversation between faiths. An essential, yet often ignored element of dialogue is ambiguity, which runs as a refreshing undercurrent through this show. In Effie Romain's Tabernacle, for example, it is unclear whether the entry to the building is itself a tabernacle, or whether the entire edifice might be a tabernacle. Is the home itself sacred, she seems to ask? Or is this little crimson cottage in fact a church or a synagogue? Perhaps we are peering into a neglected corner of the Vermont woods, or maybe a Russian forest (there is more than a touch of Chagall here). In another twist on the theme of ambiguity, Louise Block crafts amorphous ceramic forms which hover between figuration and abstraction, never quite becoming 'graven images.' This is creation in motion, on the very verge of

existence. We might recall that in the Bible, God compares himself to a potter, shaping the course of life (Jeremiah 18.6).

Creation also announces itself in the various patterned works in this exhibition. In Hasret Brown's intricate geometry, perhaps most powerfully in *The Complete Journey*, we sense a map of the unfolding cosmos. In fact, while her main reference points are clearly the arabesques of Islamic art, Jewish viewers might also find parallels with diagrams of cosmic energy in kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism.

Maryam Golubeva's magnificent paper-cut, *Flying Carpet*, is a feat of assiduous craftsmanship, recalling such famous precursors as the Ardabil Carpet from Iran (1539/40) at the Victoria & Albert Museum. And yet, as much as one might marvel at Golubeva's stunning, labyrinthine forms, even her slight imperfections might bear an important message. Historically, Muslim weavers intentionally created imperfections in their carpets as a reminder that only Allah was capable of conjuring true perfection. In the patterns of Peter Brill, we have an equally important reminder about the nature of creation: not only can it be glorious, it can also be joyful, even whimsical. In one of his signature glass etchings he riffs on the apotropaic tradition of the 'evil eye,' common across the Middle East. We can safely assume, as he puns in the title, *The Eyes Have It!* There's no room for evil spirits or bad luck with all these eyeballs on patrol.

In addition to geometry, several artists also take up calligraphy, another important strand in Jewish, and especially Islamic art. Ayesha Gamiet channels a long Muslim tradition of accentuating the organic qualities of Arabic script, presenting a *Flower Bismillah*, in which the words "in the name of Allah" bloom outwards. In *Ya Rabb*, Rizwan Ahmed continues the highly successful Hurufiyyah movement, in which modern Muslim artists have used the formal properties of Arabic calligraphy to address both their Islamic heritage and modern art, especially the gestural school of Abstract Expressionism (often closely associated with Jewish artists from New York). *The Repenter* is a particularly compelling image, which combines the expressive power of text with a figurative image. The words on the figure's spine—"There is no God but Allah"—literally bend the penitent to God's will. I cannot help but wonder what Kafka—in whose "Penal Colony" perpetrators suffer the tattooing of their crimes onto their flesh—might have made of this work. Was there any room in his dystopian vision for the kind of redemptive transformation pictured by Ahmed?

In *So You Think You Can Tell*, Rachel Garfield introduces questions that resonate through the works of many artists in this exhibition, and beyond. She interviews a black woman who grew up in a white middle-class environment and had a daughter with a Jewish man, as well as the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi, who describes parting ways with the strict religious traditions of her upbringing. At one point, the first interviewee declares that after years of people, both black and white, urging her to find her roots, she realized, "I'm never going to belong. What does it matter." Where in the mouths of some people these words might feel hopeless or dejected, when Garfield's protagonist pronounces them, they possess a certain power. Jews and Muslims in this country know the experience of un-belonging all too well, of feeling disconnected from non-Jews and non-Muslims, but at times also from their 'own' communities. Rather than becoming a source of tension, perhaps these shared

sensations of difference might instead become a wellspring of mutual creativity. This exhibition is a start.

Dr. Aaron Rosen is the Lecturer in Sacred Traditions and the Arts at King's College London. He is the author of Imagining Jewish Art (Legenda, 2009) and Art and Religion in the 21st Century (Thames and Hudson, 2015). He is also the curator of a series of inter-cultural exhibitions at the Jewish Museum London, entitled Your Jewish Museum.

Special thanks to our Trustees, staff and volunteers past and present. And for the tremendous support of The Tudor Trust towards organisational costs since 2010.

Many thanks to participating Artists: Effie Romain, Ayesha Gamiet, Louise Block, Rizwan Ahmed, Rachel Garfield, Peter Brill, Hasret Brown and Maryam Gobuleva. As well as performers Mark Smulian and Shagufta Iqbal.



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Curated by Salaam Shalom staff;
(Rebecca Bellamy & Karan Sahota)
www.rebeccabellamy.co.uk

Dialogue • Education • Media • Arts

Accompanying Programme:

Thursday 21st May Poetry Performance Shagufta Iqbal & Oud Performance Mark Smulian 16.00-16.45 Venue: The Exhibition	Saturday 23rd May Music Across the Muslim-Jewish Divide: A musical and inspiring, true life story Mark Smulian 14.45-15.45 Venue: The Exhibition
Friday 22nd May Salaam Shalom and the Muslim-Jewish Encounter Across the Ages Martin Vegoda 16.00-16.30 Venue: The Exhibition	Sunday 24th May Islamic Art Workshop All ages Hasret Brown 15.00-16.00 The Phoenix Cafe (All Saints St, BS1 2LZ) info@salaamshalom.org.uk

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