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SPACE

A visual exploration of the space between cultures through
the application of the Arabic calligraphy, *Kufi*, to English writing

MY OWN SPACE

A visual exploration of the space between cultures through
the application of the Arabic calligraphy, *Kufi*, to English writing

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This exegesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology
for the degree of Art and Design



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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgment is made”

MOHAMMED AHMED MOHAMMED ALRIYAMI

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ABSTRACT

My own space : A visual exploration of the space between cultures through the application of Arabic calligraphy, *Kufi*, to English writing.

My practice-based research investigates a hybrid cultural space that involves a person taking on the values and beliefs of a new culture while still holding onto his or her original culture. My investigation is situated in Turner's (1967) concept of liminality, which he defines as the 'betwixt and between', where limits and boundaries disappear and in which an individual is undergoing continuous cultural change.

I approach my investigation of issues surrounding cultural transition and hybrid cultural identities through a creative application of the traditional cultural aesthetics of Arabic calligraphy, *Kufi*, to an English poem written by Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1866), entitled *Between My Country and the Others* – a poem that considers negotiation between the original culture and the new one. Kufi is a form of script consisting of straight lines and angles, often with emphasised vertical or horizontal lines. I chose the Kufi script because of its multiple origins – it was developed and perfected aesthetically from different calligraphic scripts, which makes Kufi a hybrid script form in itself.

As an Omani national living in New Zealand, the designs of the hybrid artefacts reflect and speak of my own lived experience of the liminal space. My project focuses on my creative process of designing the visual hybrid letterforms, and the process of reproducing the artefacts in the medium of printmaking, as a manifestation of my experience of cultural transition to represent *My Own Space*.



INTRODUCTION

My Own Space explores the notion of a changing identity through an engagement with the concepts of cultural differences, hybridity and liminality. This exegesis consists of four chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter one positions myself as the researcher that draws upon subjective experience for inquiry to search for the discovery of meaning. It discusses liminality as a space of transition where I have experienced cultural differences as an Omani student living in New Zealand. The exposure to a foreign culture has formed a conceptual background for this research project.

Chapter two offers a theoretical consideration that conceptualises and guides the understanding of my own space. The space I explore through the creation of my visual artefacts, and in which I build an identity, is the liminal space of the 'betwixt and between'. It also discusses both theoretical ideas such as hybridity and acculturation, as well as cultural differences in order to substantiate the conceptual framework of the liminal space – my own space.

Chapter three discusses the methodology and methods used. A grounded approach is employed as the methodology that develops the studio practice. It enabled me to reflect on my studio practice after analysing the data, taking my exploration further by giving me more flexibility to explore the space in between.

Chapter four offers an analysis of my practice. The artefact that I have produced attempts to offer a visual commentary on issues such as cultural difference and cultural negotiation. Most importantly, it is a self-exploration of my position within the in-between cultural space.

CHAPTER 1



POSITION STATEMENT



POSITION STATEMENT

As an Omani national living in New Zealand, I am in a mental state of being between two cultures. The sense of 'transition' and 'in-between' began when I arrived in New Zealand. Turner (1969) says that "... transition is the key to the shaping of both temporal and social experience" (p. 358).

At home in Oman, I was living in a comfortable and secure environment amongst my family and friends. When I came to New Zealand, I faced the challenge of finding new friends to trust. Studying in the New Zealand environment is very different from my experience of studying in Oman. Communicating my thoughts and feelings has been the most challenging aspect, which has made the process of studying and interacting with the people around me very difficult. This has caused me to feel very strange and alienated in New Zealand.

During the first months in New Zealand, I found myself isolated and remaining separate from others. I began to revalue the sense of belonging that I had when I was in Oman. In this new country, my first friends were Omani who helped me to navigate through the many cultural contradictions. This, in turn, enabled me to become more aware of my own disorientation and confusion. I began to reconsider who I was as a person as well as a designer. Coming from an Islamic background, the values and beliefs of the Islamic culture had a strong influence on my interpretations of my design work.

As two years passed, I adopted different lifestyles. English became easier and friends are now closer. I soon felt at home in New Zealand, yet, sometimes, I still feel dislocated. There is a fusion of confusion and negotiations that is making me contemplative of my perceptions of cultural understanding. It was this strange state of cultural transition that inspired my practical research.

I am in the process of adapting to the New Zealand culture, but at the same time, I am still holding onto my own culture. Therefore, the issues of cultural difference, hybridity and changing identity are the key research themes that are present within my own liminal space. Thus, *My Own Space* is a self-exploration project. The artefacts are a representation of my own experience of what is the 'in-between' space. The visual exploration of the liminal space is inspired by my own experience of cultural negotiation.



CHAPTER 2



THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS



THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

2.1 UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Being aware of the differences that exist between my own culture and the New Zealand culture, and knowing how to act when I am faced with puzzling cross-cultural situations, are important skills for adapting to the New Zealand cultural scene. The two years of living and studying with students from a very different cultural environment to my own have allowed me a unique insider view about cultural differences. For example, students act and deal with their lecturers in a friendlier and much more casual way, which seemed strange to me at the beginning because in Oman students have a more formal relationship with their lecturers. I have realised that I need to adapt to this aspect; however, I am finding it difficult to let go of the customs established by my own culture.

Cross-cultural research suggests that we can examine all cultures by using a basic classification of cultural behaviors, which allows us to see the differences and similarities among cultures. Within this classification we can define what actually makes culture a culture. First, culture is learned, which means we are not born with our culture; instead, we learn about our culture and how to be a member of our culture as we develop as human beings. Second, culture is a set of shared interpretations. “Culture exists in the minds of people” (Reynolds & Valentine, 2004, p. 29). In other words, it is made up of sets of meanings that people communicate to one another. In a way, culture is learned from observing others. Over the last two years, from my own observations and experiences, I have come to realise that meaning and a sense of belonging is established through recognising one another’s daily lives. People from the same culture will share these meanings. People from another culture, like me here in New Zealand, may find certain practices strange because they do not (I do not) share the same meanings of things. Also, culture is made up of beliefs and

values, which influences the behavior of people. The culture in which each of us lives influences and shapes our feelings, attitudes, responses to our experiences and interactions with others.

Developing an understanding of cultural differences is very important to my area of research. Both as a graphic designer and an Omani student living in New Zealand, I am obliged to respond carefully to the culturally different situations taking place so that people around me do not misinterpret or misunderstand my behaviour, I feel the need to document and comment about changes in my daily life and to speak to my peers about my own experience of the cultural differences that I am encountering.



2.2 ADAPTION PROCESS

Chaney and Martin (2007) explains that a person may adapt to the new culture but still hold onto their original culture. The process of struggling to slot to the new culture into your own way of life is known as acculturation. In addition, Chaney and Martin (2007) discuss the four dimensions of acculturation. Firstly, separation is the beginning of separating oneself from the original culture. Secondly, integration is a process involving a person taking on the beliefs and values of a new culture whilst still holding onto their original culture. Thirdly, assimilation is a process which involves a person being interested in another culture, while withdrawing from his original one. Finally, deculturation is a process which involves a person losing his original culture and, at the same time, not yet completely taking on board the new culture.

My reflection on these ideas and on the concept of acculturation raised questions for me as to the nature of my own cultural identity and the process of adaption to the new culture. I studied for my Bachelor's degree at the College of Applied Sciences in Oman, I then came to New Zealand to complete my postgraduate studies. During my studies in New Zealand, I have experienced cultural confusion as I am constantly being pulled back and forth between my Omani and Islamic traditions, and my New Zealand way of life and education.

Avruch (2002) explains that conflict occurring between individuals or social groups that are separated by cultural boundaries can be considered as "cross-cultural conflict" (p. 5). This occurs when the individual does not accept the host culture, thereby ignoring the presence of the host culture and going about his or her daily activities as they would in his or her home culture. For me, the cross-cultural conflict highlights the effect of cultural differences in communicative competence, mutual understanding and perception. Moreover, this provides me with a framework for looking at the real issues and challenges involved in cross-cultural situations such as the negotiation between cultures.

2.3 HYBRIDITY

During the adaption process to the new culture, there is the possibility of creating a hybrid space. Bhabha (1994) argues that society is in “a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce a complex figure of difference and identity” (p. 2). He argues that people in different cultures most often create their own space where they can experience both cultures. He defines this space as a “third space”. He also explains that these in-between spaces are created by “those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural difference” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). Through visual communication and the emotional expression of my own experience of the liminal space, I shall articulate the cultural differences through my practice.

Lustig and Koester (1999) define identity as something that is “based on people’s unique characteristics, which may differ from those of others in their cultural and social groups” (p. 141). In addition, Hall (1996) suggests that the “concept of identity does not initiate a certain fixed core of the self” (p. 3) and Ghorashi (2004) explains that identities can no longer be seen as static, as they are dynamic and in a continuous flow. Therefore, I take the position that a person’s identity is changing constantly and at the same time, my perceptions of my own identity are also changing.

These ideas are highly relevant to the reflection on my practice. As I started to analyse and reflect on my artwork, I became aware of my self-contradictory emotional responses to the artwork and began to understand that I was encountering a different perspective. I had begun the process from the perspective of an Omani identity and my emerging understanding of the concept of hybridity. During the process, I realised that, rather than always being in an in-between, integrated space, I found myself occupying a different cultural position at different times. That is, at certain times, the Islamic influence was very dominant, while on a few other occasions I began to take on a more New Zealand perspective. It was thus



a constant struggle to maintain my own original culture while trying to accommodate the new one. This experience led me to ask myself:

- How does my struggling in between cultural differences influence my creative practice?
- Is the hybrid space temporary?

Hybridity is the process of mixing cultures and feeling both at home and away. Grossberg (1996) describes hybridity as occupying a space that is “neither one nor the other” and is within the boundaries of cultures. I would not like to discuss space in terms of borders, as this would restrict the boundaries between cultures. Instead, I would like to occupy a position where I am able to move backwards and forwards between cultures. I say “between cultures”, since in my situation in New Zealand, my negotiation between my home culture and the Western culture is gradual and it is also sometimes a negotiation of multicultural space. Grossberg (1996) suggests a concept of border crossing that I feel expresses my current perception of hybridity. This concept simplifies the in-between space, which does not create a place of its own but creates a sharing place of different cultures. The amount of sharing is always in transition and keeps changing. Therefore, border crossing affects the formation of identity and has implications for addressing the self and the other.

One of the key ways that the theories within hybridity are operate within my practical work is through the combined application of the aesthetics of the Arabic calligraphy, *Kufi*, to the English written text – a poem by Emily Dickinson (1830-1866), entitled *Between My Country and the Others*. In mixing the Kufi aesthetic with English writing, the moments of creating the artefacts become opportunities to share aspects of cultural differences.



2.4 LIMINALITY

Exploring hybridity and developing my cultural understanding provided me with a strong sense of what Turner (1967) defines as “liminality”. Liminality is derived from the Latin word ‘limen’ which mean “a threshold” where limits and boundaries disappear when an individual is undergoing continuous change. According to Eimke (2010), this word was first used by Arnold von Gennep in his anthropology studies ‘Les rites de passage’. Later on, the Scottish anthropologist, Victor Turner, extended the concept when studying the social processes of large-scale society. Most importantly, Turner advocates that the liminal space is a space of negotiations or actions between the original culture and the new one.

Bhabha (1994) explains that “liminality provides the terrain for developing the strategies of selfhood that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (pp. 1-2)

The envisioned liminal space in my own space relies on the ambiguity of the artwork to hold the attention of the viewer and leaves the viewer with questions rather than answers.

My creative practice begins with questioning myself as an Omani national living in New Zealand. I ask what the changes in identity might be; what does it means to be in between cultures; and how do I experience the liminal space in terms of cultural negotiation and hybridity. Questioning myself not only begins the process of adapting to the new culture but also, at the same time, reveals how to be actively involved in my own culture. I have been studying from a perspective that takes into account the connection between cultures, focusing on my own situation as a student living here in New Zealand, while also being influenced not only by a host culture but also by my own culture.



CHAPTER 3



METHODS & METHODOLOGY



METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This project applies a grounded methodology as the main research tool. Grounded methodology is an empirical research tool to aid the study of social life through qualitative research and analysis (Clarke, 2005, p. 557).

3.1 GROUNDED THEORY

The grounded methodology approach is driven by questions that are based on data collection. Clarke (2005) describes how situations are connected to action and how people build their reality by attaching meaning to situations. In other words, social life is constructed through the ideas that people have and the practices that flow from these ideas. According to Rose (2001) research methods need to flow rationally from the questions one asks. Thus, the purpose behind my research methods is to find ways to become a part of what I am studying. Using more active methods for my research where I am able to interact with my surrounding environment as well as my working materials, for example, photography and screen-printing, helps me to better immerse myself in the process of cultural negotiation so that I am able to answer the research questions with ingenuity and incisiveness. Charmaz (2006) explains that the grounded approach methods increase the flexibility and spontaneity of the research and give you more focus than other methods.

My research project is about the exploration of the liminal space, my changing identity and cultural negotiation. My data collection has helped me to develop my understanding of the New Zealand culture. Through my chosen method of photography, the aim was to observe and reflect on my surrounding environment and people's behaviors. Although I cannot claim to replicate people's views, I can try to

observe and enter their setting and situations as much as possible. Being close to the surroundings gives me a close-up view of the new culture.

This exploration started from collecting visual data and analyzing it; this led me to develop an understanding of the surrounding environment and the experience of my liminal space. I then applied these realisations to my studio practice and then, from reflecting on my studio practice, I re-evaluated my own position within the liminal space (Figure 3.1). Taking these steps allowed me the flexibility to explore new findings and new ideas.

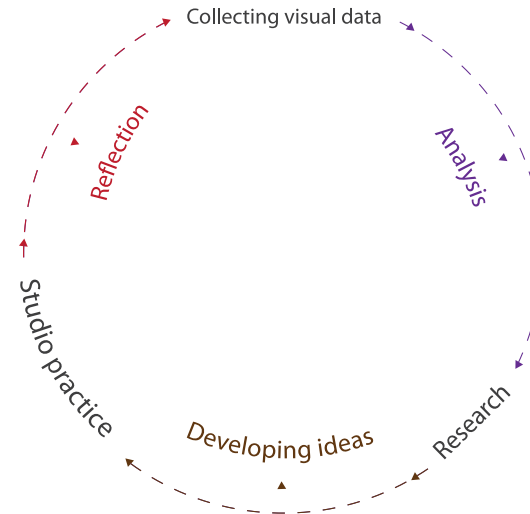


Figure 3.1 (Riyami, M. August 2012). Conceptual mapping of the methodology.

During the initial collection of data, I came across the idea of “self-concept”. Charmaz (2006) states that a self-concept is “the individual beliefs and values of himself or herself including the person’s attributes and who and what the self is” (p. 17). Charmaz explains this concept as a research tool where a researcher thinks about and perceives him or herself from other cultures’ viewpoints and re-evaluates him or herself while he or she is analysing the data. Bringing this concept to my area of research helped me to guide my interest. My own values and beliefs influence what I see as well as the surrounding influences that I encounter.

In the early stages, I collected different types of visual materials which included photographs, both from Oman and New Zealand; Islamic and Western calligraphy, typefaces and poems, which responded to my area of research. This collection has been a central concern of my creative process, not just as a visual medium but also as a method of self-exploration that includes looking into my own culture and the present culture and trying to make sense of the different perspectives that I came across.

While gathering this large quantity of data, I found that ultimately not all of it was relevant and did not affect the final visual of my artworks. So I categorised the most relevant under several subject headlines (Figure 3.2). By this categorisation, I attempted to be systematic in looking into characteristics of the data and I tried to look at how these characteristics were related to my project. Categorisation helps me to focus my research and my studio practice. Charmaz (2006) explained how this approach can shape the methods of your choice and how the research problem may point to one method of data collection. Therefore, as my research focuses on answering how the hybrid letterform could speak of my own lived experience of the liminal space, I selected Arabic calligraphy as the main resource for my data collection, and I will discuss my reasons for doing so in the next chapter on my studio practice.



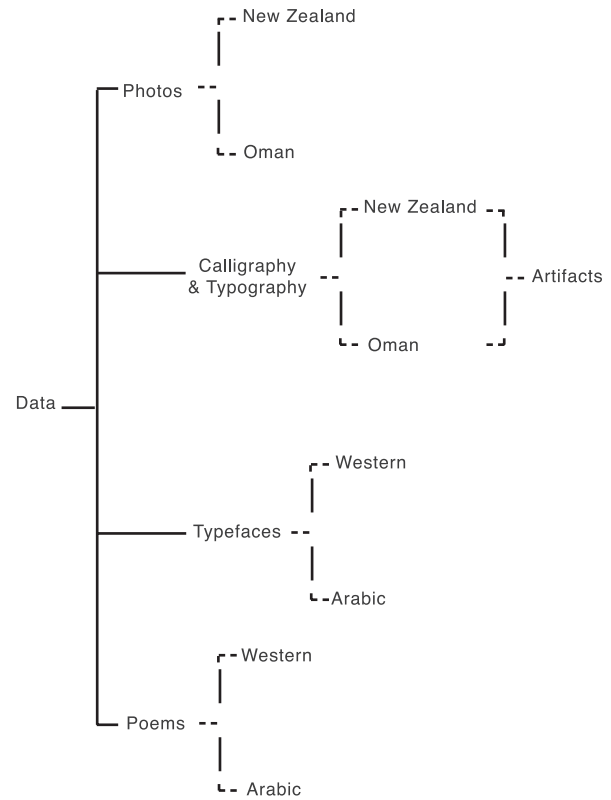


Figure 3.2 (Riyami, M. August 2012). Categorising my visual methodology.

3.2 THE CYCLIC PROCESS OF SELF-EXPLORATION

The 'self' is central to my research process: self-expression, self -presentation and re-presentation (Figure 3.3). Self-expression is about giving voice to one's unique view of the world (Stonge, 2011). Self-presentation is about influencing others' views of oneself (Goffman, 1955). Re-presentation is representing a meaning which already exists (Hall, 1997). Some of the artworks that I produced attempt to give a convincing re-presentation of my own view of what it means to be in between cultures, and what is my new hybrid identity within the liminal space and my negotiation between the cultures. Through exhibiting my artworks, I am also trying to convey something about my own new identity and my own culture which is present in the Arabic calligraphy (Figure 3.4). By undertaking this cyclic process, I realised, for example from my data categorization, that I am always trying to force the categorisation based on my values and beliefs. This could indicate where I am trying to convey something about my own identity and personality. Therefore, I believe that this process provides me with the best tool for reflection and developing the ideas.

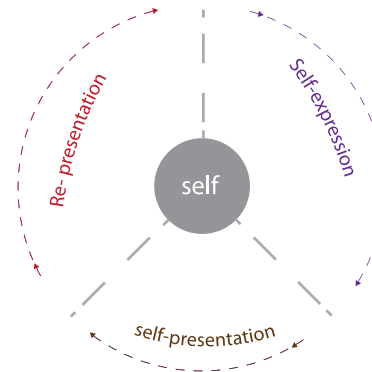


Figure 3.3 (Riyami, M. August 2012). Conceptual mapping of the cyclic process of self-exploration.

In summary, the methodological approaches and research processes allowed for a cyclic process of self-exploration. They offered me access to a range of critical perspectives through reviewing the cultural differences that I experienced. By studying and analysing the data, I am able to respond to and construct visual elements to manifest my own space, the liminal space, through my practice.



Figure 3.4 (Riyami, M. August 2012). A visual exploration of the liminal space.

C H A P T E R 4



S T U D I O P R A C T I C E



STUDIO PRACTICE

In this section I will discuss my studio practice, the outcomes of my experiments and the evaluation of my work with references to other artists works.

4.1 EXPERIMENTATION; REFLECTION; EVALUATION

My studio practice began with extensive experiments on aspects of expressions of both cultures – my original culture and the New Zealand culture – (Figure 4.1). I collected typefaces from my home culture to inspire my creative process and present myself in the new culture. Arabic calligraphy has a variety of typefaces. Of these scripts, the Kufi typeface uses square type, whereas Naski and Thukuth are more rounded. Nastaliq, Maghribi, and Tughra are popular scripts and are highly ornamental. Kufi script appears in different styles, such as “square kufi” that is usually seen on the tiles around walls and circular domes, and is difficult to read. Furthermore, this style uses rectangular lines, making it an appropriate vehicle for transforming alphabetical letters into different geometrical shapes of pentagons, rectangles, circles or squares. Other styles include “old Archaic Kufi” which stands out against a background of floral and geometric designs superimposing the movement of the script over the movement of the underlying pattern. “Floral Geometric Kufi” allows words to flow smoothly and blends aesthetically in a unique way with the movements of the stressed and dense vertical letters. Moustapha and Krishnamurti (2001) say that Arabic calligraphy integrates a cultural language with the language of geometry. The fluidity of the Arabic script offers indefinite possibilities for designing calligraphic expressions, even within a single word, since letters can be stretched and transformed in different ways to create different motifs. As the project investigates a position between cultures, I examined the possibility of applying Arabic calligraphic aesthetics to English writing. Arabic calligraphic script offers potentials to create almost unlimited forms. Figure 4.2 is an example using the words ‘New Zealand’ in a western context. This highlights the possibilities and obstacles

raised by the task of applying Arabic calligraphy aesthetics to English writing. The obstacles in applying the Arabic calligraphy aesthetics to English writing are in their technical and cultural development in relation to visual communication. For example, Latin typography can be perceived as formal, impersonal, rigid, separated, geometric and vertical. On the other hand, Arabic calligraphy can be defined as an unbroken chain of letters.

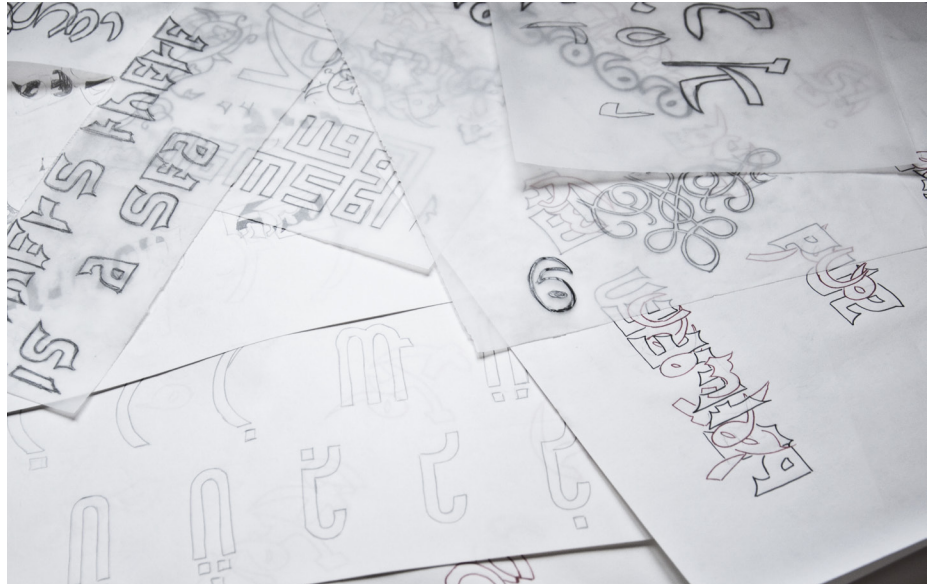


Figure 4.1 (Riyami, M . March, 2012). Initial sketches of experimentations.

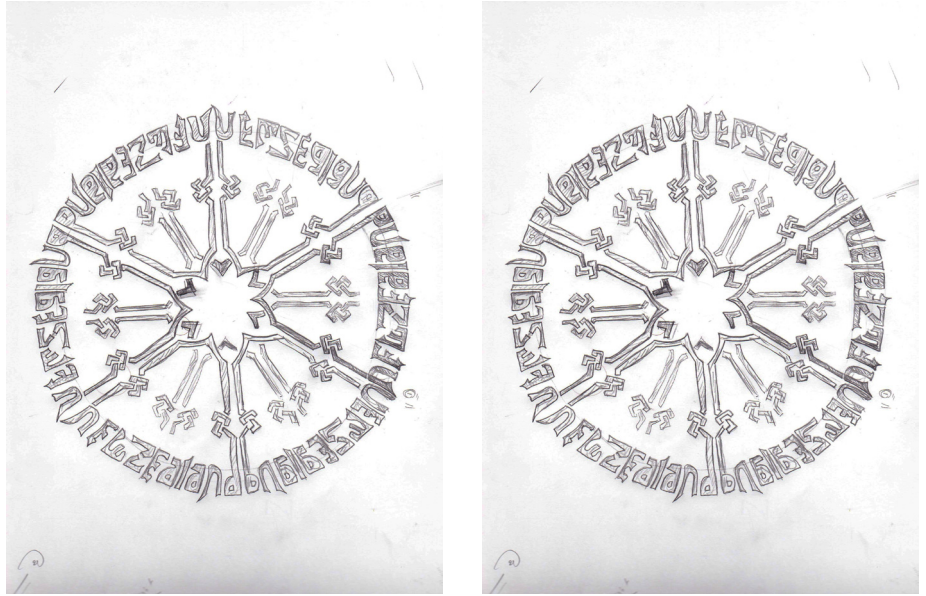


Figure 4.2 (Riyami, M . April 2012). Applying Arabic calligraphy to the words 'New Zealand'.

From these experiments, I realised that Islamic religion, its rituals, its customs and Islamic society are major themes that came to be expressed in my initial practice. My reflection on Islam has a significant role to play and affects my practical work. Most of the initial sketches were highly ornamental. This reflects the idea of Arabic calligraphy as an art form giving rise to expressions of the combined spiritual meaning and aesthetic beauty.

4.2 DECIDING ON A POEM & KUFİ AS THE CONTENT

Geertz (1993) remarks about the place of poetry in traditional Islamic society, and states:

“Poetry, rivaled only by architecture, became the cardinal fine art in Islamic civilization, and especially the Arabic speaking part of it, while treading the edge of gravest forms of blasphemy.”
(p. 111)

In the initial stages of my project, I chose an English poem by Emily Dickinson (1830-1866), *Between My Country and the Others* (Figure 4.3). The content of the poem responds to my area of research and deals with the original culture and the new one, and the confusion between the two. According to Dickinson (1830-1866), the poem’s essential goal stimulates remembrance of family and origins.

Between My Country -- and the Others --
There is a Sea --
But Flowers -- negotiate between us --
As Ministry.

Figure 4.3 Dickinson, E. (n.d.). *Between My Country and the Others*.



Bhabha (1997) describes the confusion between home cultures and the new culture thus:

“ ... what does it mean to be at home in the world? Home may not be where the heart is, nor even the hearth. Home may be a place of estrangement that becomes the necessary space of engagement; it may represent a desire for accommodation marked by an attitude of deep ambivalence toward one's location. Home may be a mode of living made into a metaphor of survival.” (p. 11)

I have been in New Zealand for more than two years now, my country of origin is still considered as home, yet it has become a strange place to be; New Zealand is home now although I sometimes feel dislocated here. This idea of confusion informs my practice, which I attempt to visually express by ambivalent negotiation between the original culture and the new.

Dickinson's English poem provides a western context for negotiation. Initially, I applied a range of Arabic calligraphy scripts such as *Tuluth*, *Nasakh*, *Kufi*, *Diwani* and *Riq'a* to visually express the western contexts of Dickinson's poem and New Zealand (Figure 4.4). Ultimately, not all of the artwork functioned as response to the negotiation of confusion and I reached the point where I decided to use Kufi to represent myself for certain reasons:

- 1- The ambiguity and complexity of reading the written text.
- 2- The unfamiliar shapes of the writing allow unlimited potential forms that emphasize the formal and structured forms of Kufi, which is a quality that is missing in my life. It speaks to me as it connects me back to my homeland,
- 3- It is strongly connected to the Islamic culture as it is used in the Holy Quran to communicate specific messages or common phrases.



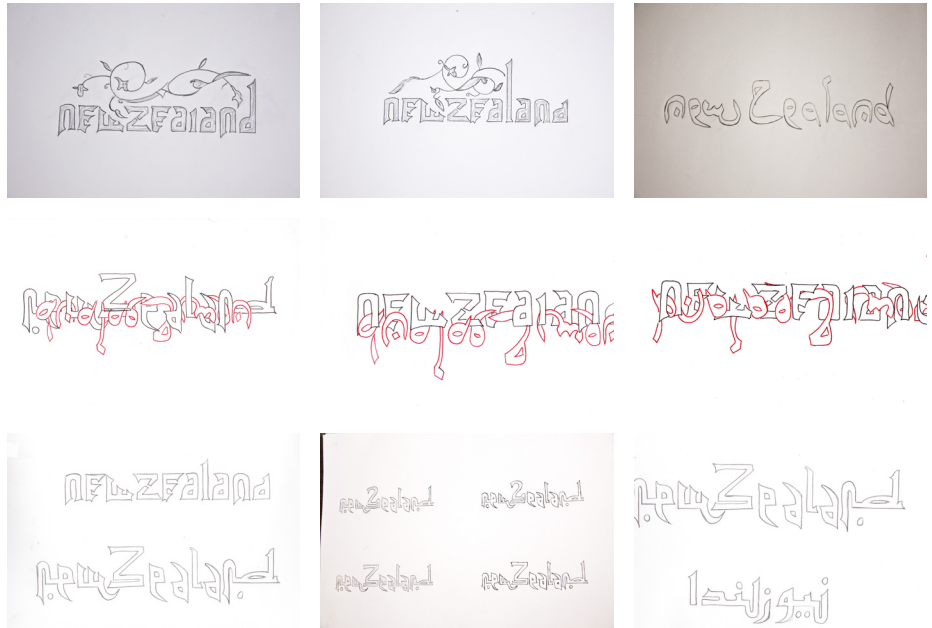


Figure 4.4 (Riyami,M. May 2012). Experiment with different Arabic calligraphic scripts such as Tuluth, Nasakh, Kufi, Diwani and Riq'a.

Kufi is a form of script consisting of straight lines and angles, often with emphasised verticals or horizontals. Ahuja & Loeb (1995) say that Kufi (Figure 4.5) is not just penmanship, but an art with traditions as old as the culture itself. For some it is a serious artistic pursuit, for others, a means of recreation that provides relaxation from the tensions of modern life. This gave me insights into using Kufi to design artefacts that could be used in modern life.



Figur 4.5 (Elaiza, S.2012). Islamic Eye Candy.

4.3 EXPERIMENTING THROUGH COMPUTER GENERATED DESIGN

In my initial experiments, to generate designs, I moved from sketching to using the computer. I designed two forms by applying the Kufi aesthetic to Dickinson's poem (Figure 4.6). During this experiment I followed the Western way of reading and writing the text, from left to right, which contrasts with the Arabic calligraphic way of reading, from right to left. However, reading Kufi can be difficult. Sometimes the letters are interwoven and sometimes whole compositions are made of weaving letters. For example, if you see a piece that looks like a circular shape you usually start reading from the bottom and move up, which is not what you would naturally expect. Straight lines, bold, thick and heavy letters are all Kufi characteristics, which dominate within the artwork. I feel closer to my home culture while looking at this design as it is infused with the Arabic aesthetic. I am still in the initial phase of transition and adaption to the New Zealand culture.

BETWEEN MY COUNTRY
AND THE OTHERS
THERE IS A SEA
BUT FLOWERS
NEGOTIATE BETWEEN US
AS MINISTERS

BETWEEN MY COUNTRY AND THE OTHERS THERE IS A SEA
BUT FLOWERS NEGOTIATE BETWEEN US AS MINISTERS

Figure 4.6 (Riyami, M, July 2012). Applying Kufi calligraphy aesthetic to Dickinson's poem.

Taking my explorations further led me to look at the artists that engage with similar issues. They include L'Atlas, Julien Breton, Mateja Horvat and Khawar Bilal. The French artist L'Atlas (2001) provides useful examples of changing identities and hybrid typographic artwork that references both Arabic calligraphy and English writing in the design of a unique graphic language for global mega-cities.

According to the Surkovic (2010) in the Islamic Art Magazine , L'Atlas' work is as much a language of signs as it is a language of words. L'Atlas combines influences from ancient Greece, Arabic calligraphy and modern tags to suggest a form of universal, contemporary, urban communication. His work takes on a hybrid form that utilises letterforms that are both enigmatic and suggestive. By posting the symbols across the urban landscape, L'Atlas creates intriguing landmarks and questions our sense of meaning and direction. This new language forms a physical and intellectual maze that mirrors the complexity of our modern civilisation (Figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7 (L'Atlas,2001). Artworks which contain the letters of L'Atlas name.

Most importantly, L'Atlas work is of interest to this research project because, like me, he seeks to subvert established symbolic order by applying an Arabic calligraphy aesthetic to his artwork as he searches for new visual signifiers that allow an expansion of understanding of the space in between cultures (Surkovic, 2010, p. 148) .

My initial works mostly deal with the same issues of changing identity and hybridity. I designed different forms of the poem (Figure 4.8) and was interested in applying the Kufi aesthetic to the English poem with the idea of how the reading of the final work could show the ambiguity of the space in between cultures.

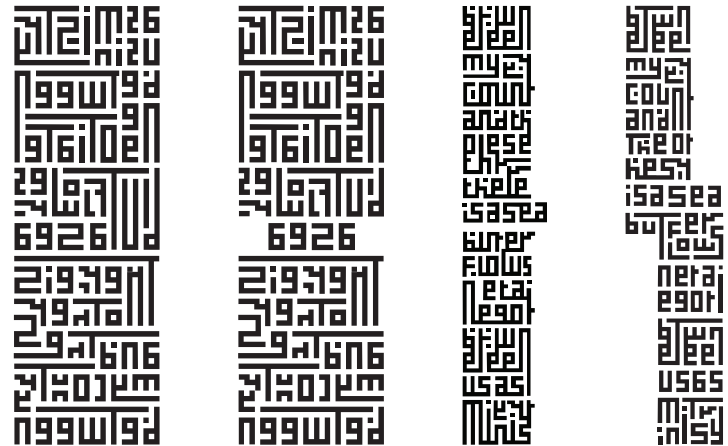


Figure 4.8 (Riyami, M, July 2012). Different forms of the poem exploring the liminal space.

The four different forms can be interpreted as representing myself in the liminal space, where my hybrid identity is always in transition and keeps on changing. The complexity of the composition seeks to hold the viewer's attention. They have to be patient. It takes time to be able to decipher a composition. A certain amount of ambiguity within the artefact is part of bringing a sense of confusion but also negotiation of meaning.

The words of the poem in this artefact (Figure 4.9) are restricted by time and space – this is suggested by the square and rectangular shapes. These shapes imply boundaries and reflect the position that I hold, where I am still afraid to interact with the surrounding environment. At the same time, the crossing of words of the poem (or the compositional flow) can be interpreted as representing the inner self-conflict and negotiation, which are caused by not fully understanding the values, beliefs and practices of the new culture.

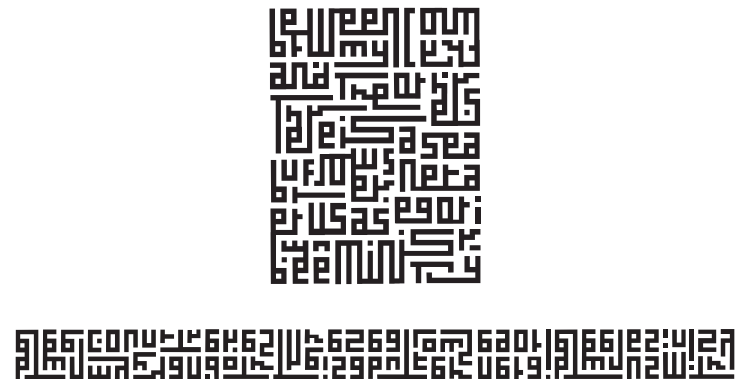


Figure 4.9 (Riyami, M, July 2012) . The words of the poem are restricted by time and space.

Rjeily (2011) explains that vertical movement, because of the upright nature of the letters, characterises the English script, whereas the Arabic is based on a fixed horizontal baseline. Proceeding with my studio practice, I started to explore the underlying aesthetic ideas that contribute to the aesthetics and thinking behind these two languages, in order to find a new approach to their applications and use. In Figure 4.10, by not restricting the poem's words with limited space or boundaries, the artifact became more active and dynamic. Ghorashi (2004) suggests that identities can no longer be seen as static, but are considered as being in constant flow and alteration, “dynamic, complex and hybrid” (p. 330). I believe that I am not losing my original identity, but creating a vivid new one. This new identity is a fusion of my own original culture and the New Zealand culture. This fusion is represented through the hybrid forms of English writing and Arabic calligraphy, Kufi.

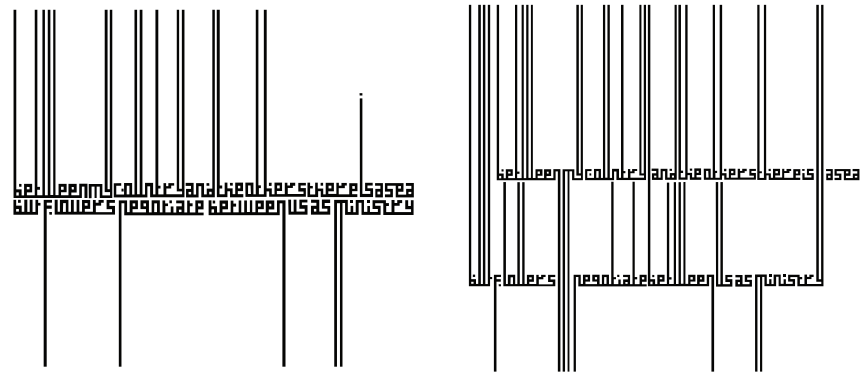


Figure 4.10 (Riyami, M, July 2012). Experiments relating to the dynamic, fluid and complex characteristics of hybridity.

Furthermore, being active and dynamic can be interpreted as representing my position as I have been in New Zealand for a while. I have realised that I must adapt to the situation or otherwise leave. Adjustment has occurred and I have learned how to get used to the cultural norms. In these artefacts, the vertical and horizontal lines represent myself where I started to adapt to the surroundings. Repeating these vertical and horizontal lines indicates the repetition of daily life activities. However, I found that some of these activities conflict with my Omani values and that is where the vertical lines started to cross over the horizontal lines. Therefore, I started to evaluate some of the activities to be accessible in both Omani and New Zealand culture.

Designing artefacts with the computer allows for forms and compositions to be altered easily and to be quickly reproduced. And while there are transitional developments during the creative process, the artefact conveys a controlled and mechanical aesthetic that does not represent a space in flux. However, the controlled application of forms is symbolic of the carefulness with which I approach the daily interactions with my surrounding environment in the new culture. As I am adapting and changing within the new culture, each design evolves to become a new sign of my identity, an identity that is continuously being reviewed and adjusted, which feeds back into the editing process of the design. Alongside these realisations, I wanted to emphasise the fluidity and complexity of the space that I am in. I therefore took the computer-composed digital artefacts to the next phase and began to reproduce them through the medium of printmaking, in order to investigate the creative potentials and the conceptual manifestation of my own space.



4.4 PRINTMAKING AS A WAY OF ADDRESSING MY OWN SPACE

After the initial experiments, I continued to explore my own space with the idea of how the space in between cultures could speak of cultural differences and cultural negotiation. Alshahrani (2008) says that Kufi calligraphy is square, bold and squat, with straight vertical or horizontal lines. Because of these characteristics, Kufi was employed by and embedded within architecture. Applying Kufi calligraphy to a physical material, such as the wall of a mosque, allows the viewer to interact with and feel the artefact. For example, Kufi calligraphy is a form of Islamic art known for its repetitive geometric forms, which create decorations. These geometric shapes often include well-known phrases from the Holy Quran, which are written on walls and ceilings inside and outside mosques, so that the viewers can feel the texture of the written phrases while also sensing the spirituality of the place. Therefore, it is important to note that in my practical work I used screen-printing so that I could interact physically with the process of creating the work so as to give it a sense of life by bringing a textural quality to the artefact (Figure 4.11).

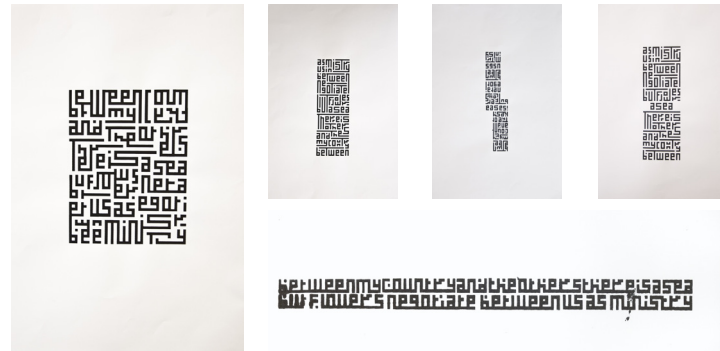


Figure 4.11 (Riyami, M, August 2012). Initial Screen-printing process.

Screen-printing is one of the early methods of printing. It involves the passing of ink or any other printing medium through a mesh or screen that has been stretched on a frame and to which a stencil has been applied. The stencil openings determine the image that will be imprinted (Figure 4.12).

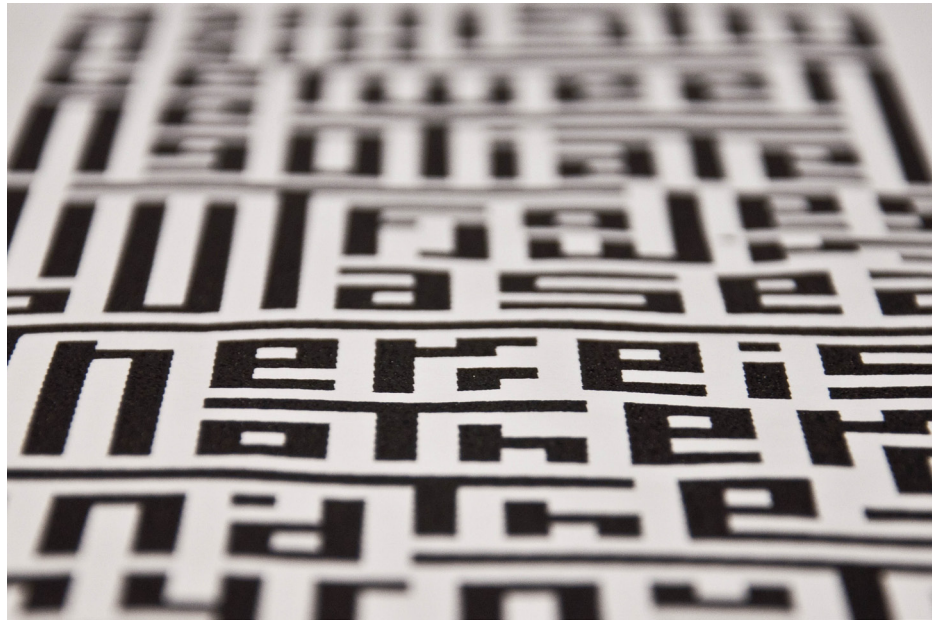


Figure 4.12 (Riyami,M, August 2012). Close-up picture shows the texture result of the Screen-printing.

When I initially applied screen-printing to my experiments, the aesthetic outcome contained linear and plain geometric forms. The artefacts did not function in addressing the disorientation or confusion within the cultural continuum and the transitioning of identity. Therefore, I began to play with mixing screen-printing with other techniques to explore a different aesthetic result, which I discuss in the paragraphs that follow.

In my recent work, I took an interest in what Homi Bhabha (1994) describes as the “moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures” (p. 2). I attempted to visually represent the complexity of a hybrid identity, and my negotiation in the cultural continuum between my home and New Zealand (Figure 4.13).



Figure 4.13 (Riyami, M, Aug 2012). Printmaking with water applied as a way of addressing my own space.

The sea that is between the original and the other culture in Dickinson's poem is the place where the negotiation between my original culture and the new one takes place. According to Rutherford (1990), this is what Bhabha (1990) calls the "third space" which is a result of the negotiation that takes place. Therefore, I used water as the third element that negotiates between the ink and the paper. Water is the visual vehicle of my own space.

My studio practice is formatted as an artefact that explains my own experience of what it is to be in between cultures. Using this experience of negotiation with the new culture, I positioned myself as the "sea" (or the water). My identity has become dynamic and multifaceted (Lustig & Koester, 1999). It is in continuous change; it is not static. Water represents my identity in the space in between where it is always changeable. Thus, identity and water are fluid and open to change. Looking back at Dickinson's poem, paper can be considered as the representation of the new culture and the ink is my original culture. The interaction between the three elements – paper, water and ink – may broadly be described as a metaphor of my transitional and adaptive experience where I am attempting to understand how I am behaving in the space in between. This interaction between the water, ink and paper reflects the idea of cultural negotiation and changing identity as the liquid element offers unusual and diverse outcomes with ambiguous qualities.

One of the most important considerations in my screen-printing process is the choice of paper. Saff & Sacilotto (1978) explain that the paper can influence not only the manner in which work is printed, but also the effectiveness and the aesthetic of the finished work itself (p.249). The point of testing different kinds of paper is to find an appropriate and comfortable place for the water – me – to interact with the other element, ink. I have experimented with a range of paper stock of different absorption and textural qualities in different sizes (Figure 4.14). To represent the complexity of a transitional space (my own space), I came to a realisation that the paper must be capable of absorbing several layers of ink and water, and should have good dimensional stability that does not stretch when water is applied. Textured paper also provides a stronger



sense of life to the artefact and gives more options for me, and the viewer, to connect with and experience the artefact and my own space at a more embodied level. Furthermore, I tested different sizes of paper and decided to work on a very large scale so that the artefact, as a whole, could hold a stronger and more active presence within its environment, similar to the Kufi patterns that are embedded within the ceilings and walls of mosques.



Figure 4.14 (Riyami, M, August 2012). Testing different paper stock & sizes.

After a long period of experimentation I decided to use watercolour paper because:

- 1- It produces significantly more variant tonal ink qualities, with fresh and crisp effects.
- 2- It allows more time for the water to interact with the ink and paper, as it does not dry too quickly, and it therefore picks up more textural detail.
- 3- The paper does not deform too much when water is applied.

I continued my studio experiments and aimed to construct a new sign of identity that represents my space – a paradoxical ‘un-home’ space. This new sign resulted from the negotiation between paper, water and ink.

During the visual manifestation process, I focused on cultural negotiation and changing identity in the in-between space. This was done by spraying water on the ink of the already screen-printed paper. Water reacted with the printed ink and paper tissue. In time, they together transformed each other, resulting in changes in tonal intensity and intricacy of texture to attain a negotiated visual representation of a new identity (Figure 4.15). Thus, the reading flow of the written poem became distorted, encouraging viewers to participate in making perceptual judgments.



Figure 4.15 (Riyami,M, August 2012). Close-up picture shows the final result of the screen-pinting.

In summary, my creative process originates in personal experience of the space in-between and its development may be understood as a form of self-exploration. My studio practice involved three phases starting from the selection of a poem and the Arabic calligraphy, Kufi, as the content. This was followed by experimentation through computer-composed artefacts, and led towards the application of the printmaking medium (Figure 4.15). Schön (1983) explains this process as where “we sometimes do things in order to see what happens: we take action in order to produce an intended change” (p. 146). After I had been through these three phases, I found that the degree of control in creating the artwork decreased. This was clear when I compared the artefact I created through using the computer and the one that I created through using printmaking. This has an interesting correlation with the notion that it is necessary to change, and as I began to let go of control, my work developed to reflect my acceptance of the differences between my own culture and the new one.



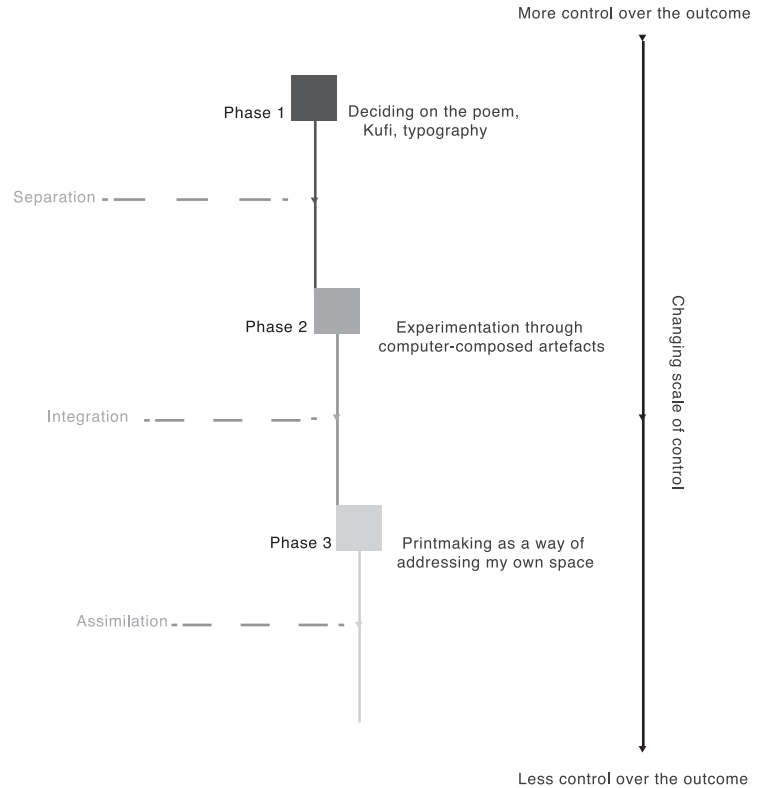


Figure 4.16 (Riyami, M, Aug 2012). Mapping of the development of my studio practice process.

C O N C L U S I O N





CONCLUSION

The overarching concept of liminality which underpins the final body of work indicates the position I have arrived at in my investigations. The central concern of my research project is exploring myself in the space between cultures. The artefacts engage with concepts such as hybridity, acculturation, cultural differences, cultural negotiation and changing identity. Liminality is a threshold place, where I am negotiating and moving whilst being in the surrounding environment.

This research project was approached through a grounded methodology. This kind of methodology involves different stages, starting from collecting data, analysing and developing ideas and finally reflecting on my studio practice. This approach allowed me to visually record my self-experience of cultural negotiation between my own culture and the New Zealand culture. It has allowed me to be a part of my research in categorizing the data and analyzing it and it visually records my response to the surrounding environment.

I have applied the Arabic calligraphy, Kufi, to an English poem to visually explore the sense of liminality through my practical work. Photos, poetry, calligraphic artefacts and typefaces were all tools in my visual methodology of collecting data. However, applying the Kufi aesthetic to the English written poem was the main method of my practical work that enabled me to explore my own space. It was important to allow the work to develop in a way that could open up opportunities for the viewers to bring their own sensitivities to interpreting the work.

Through my studio practice, starting from using the computer to compose designs to the printmaking process to address my space, I realised that each one of these processes has a different context of negotiation and at different levels. This corresponds to my progression from an initial position where I felt separated from the new culture, to the position where I feel comfortable living in the current environment. In addition, my practice transited from the more controlled process of computer composing to the less controlled printmaking process; thus my negotiation becomes more visible within the artefacts. It corresponds with the transiting journey of my own space that reflects the self-expression and self-presentation of my views and identity of the culture that I currently live in. These are expressed through the exhibition a representation of *My Own Space*.

My Own Space was a passionate thesis. It has been more than just a design project. It was a journey of self-exploration that involved the examination of duality, negotiation of boundaries and questions of difference between my own original culture and the New Zealand culture.





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