

IMAGES AND THE IMAGINAL

Ta'wil in Art Practices of Light

Narjis Mirza

Auckland University of Technology

School of Art and Design

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Abstract

This practice-oriented research aims to provoke an imaginative understanding beyond representational knowledge of things using *ta'wil*, a method of esoteric interpretation in Islamic thought that performs in the metaphysical realm.

Ta'wil unfolds in my light and sound installations as a process and an event with a continuous and perpetual esoteric dimension beyond physical matter, form and visibility. In installation art practices I explore light (together with animation, projection, voice, and textiles) as a medium with a poetic, philosophical and metaphysical resonance. In our daily life, the images we see are an effect of light, while light itself remains invisible and unseen. *Ta'wil* influences my observations, making, and recordings of light, and brings about a transcendental moment through my artistic practice, according to one's potential to be affected. I work with Arabic *huroof*, letters and the mysterious *farwatih* of the Quran, that appear as bodies of light projected onto delicate fabric with fragrance and light-bearing qualities. A sonic space is marked through these letters' voicing, and when the seer enters the installation, their body is inscribed with light. I consider how lustre and luminosity arouse *ajab*, a desired state of wonder in early Islamic visual culture, to open the seer's potential to contemplative perception.

The philosophical paradigm of my art practice considers Islam's triadic ontology of the Sensible, Imaginal, and Intelligible realms, each more real than the preceding realm. Each domain has its corresponding mode of perception, of which imagination is the isthmus that connects the purely sensory faculties of the body with incorporeal modes of intellect, *al-Aql*.

Persian Muslim philosopher Shihab ud Deen Suhrawardi [1154-1191] describes the Imaginal as an extension of images of this world without any materiality, opening out to the world of the imagination and the suprasensory. Suhrawardi's Imaginal develops in the subsequent process ontology of Mulla Sadra Shirazi [1571-1640]; he describes *tashkik ul Wajud*, intensification in existence, as a continuous and perpetual flow of a singular Being in all realms, which is *Noor e Ilahy*, the divine light of Being. Each particle of existence—material or immaterial, image or Imaginal—may be found in the cascading intensity of *noor*, light. I explore these potentials in my major body of work *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light (2020-2021)*. The sensorial connection of the creative image to the Imaginal is informed by contemporary theorists including Laura Marks, Rosalind E. Krauss, Sayyed Hossien Nasr and Matthew Saba.

These artworks probe into emergent modes of perception and interpretation of Islamic images, letters, and sounds. This research suggests that by interweaving philosophical dialogue with participatory experiences, we can create installation-art spaces of cultural inclusion that can expand our means of learning, articulating, and sharing knowledge, for the artist and the seer. My aspiration for this thesis is to increase inter-cultural efforts of understanding and respect for different modes of being, through public participation in my light installations.

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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 (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Date: 3 June, 2021

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Introduction

Over the past nine years, my art practice has evolved from painting to moving images, animation, typography, and projections in an installation setting. This means that I design the space and duration in which my work is viewed in order to engage the seer's entire body in the act of seeing. This doctoral thesis, led by an installation-based art practice, aims to engender an art experience which encourages the seer to consider the unseen over the visible, and the imaginative over the physical. *Ta'wil*, meaning “to cause to return”, is generally considered a hermeneutic discussion for the esoteric exegesis of the Quran (Moezzi and Jambet 2018, 78)¹. In Shi'ism it is a developed methodology; a symbolic exegesis for all existence.² I propose that *ta'wil* can function as an artistic activity that enables the imagination to consider the spiritual paradigm beyond the physical. Aniconism, a quality in many Islamic artforms, indicates how images and art experiences contribute to imaginative perception, as understood in Islamic thought.

Aniconism and Ta'wil

I begin this exegesis with an aniconic worldview. An-ionic implies something is “symbolic or suggestive of” and is not the actual real itself, as in the case of the mirrors hosting the candles' image.³ Aniconism indicates that the *zahir*, the apparent, is less significant than that which is in the *batin*, the hidden.⁴ Traditionally, images free from figural representation are described as being aniconic. Hence, Islamic art, which is predominantly associated with calligraphy, patterns, and geometry is described as aniconic; or free from figurative art.⁵

¹ By Ta'wil I reference to the Arabic word *تاويل*

² There are two major school of thought in Islam, Sunni, and Shi'i, of which the Shi'i school advanced the concept of *ta'wil*. The Islamic philosophers considered in this research are also of Shi'i background, hence it was important to consider the Shi'i perspective of *ta'wil*.

³ Merriam-Webster (n.d.). Aniconic. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved January 28, 2021, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aniconic/>

⁴ Throughout this exegesis, Arabic words are written in italics, followed by a comma and their meaning in context to the discussion. Please also refer to the glossary for additional meanings.

⁵ At the same time, it must be noted that not all artworks created in the Islamic world are aniconic. Figural representations were part of miniature paintings of Ottoman, Persian, and Indian Mughal art. The Islamic view is also not necessarily against figurative forms, it has avoided and on occasions prohibited figuration because it did not serve a purpose in a religion that has no image of God. There are many articles that argue the case of aniconism in Islamic art. (See Kaminski 2020; Grabar 2003; Al-Alwani, 2000).

More broadly, aniconism reflects Islam's vision of this world (Grabar 2003, 46); a concept that favours the esoteric over the exoteric, the unseen over the seen and implies a *ta'wil*: return of the *zahir*, apparent image to its origin. When I propose an aniconic perspective for my art practice, I expand primarily on media theorist Laura U. Marks' definition of aniconism. She summarizes aniconism as; "when the image shows us that what we do not see is more significant than what we do" (2010, 5). This situates the sensible world as being less significant in comparison to the metaphysical, and stimulates one's ability to be contemplative, not to be fixated on the literal but to think outside one's physical being (Kaminski 2020, 135).⁶

Philosophically, aniconism for Islamic art is in view of Islam's ontological framework, which considers an ontology of three realms: the Sensible, the Intermediary, also known as the Imaginal or the *Aalam al Mithal* in Arabic, and the Intelligible realm. The concept of existence is on a systematic ascension in these three realms; all material things are at the lowest level in terms of being real. The corporeal world is considered less significant and temporary in comparison to the metaphysical realms—Imaginal and Intelligible—which are more real and more permanent.⁷ I acknowledge it is a challenge to present the unseen Imaginal as more real than the physical reality of the world we live in. However, to believe in the unseen is a central concept in the Islamic faith, given that *Allah* is an invisible God, *al Haqq*, The Real, that gives everything its *haqiqah*, reality. The *wajib ul Wajud*, the necessary Being, not bound by time or space, no mind can grasp its truth; it is unnameable in essence, described only through its attributes and beautiful names. There is no image or representation for God, and it can only be experienced through its manifestation.

I will use the words Divine, *al Haqq*, the Real, and Being throughout this exegesis in varying contexts—these are attributes associated only to God. Andalusian Sufi Sage Ibn Arabi [1165-1240] uses the mirror analogy to describe how God might be experienced; "God is your mirror, through which you see yourself, you are his mirror through which he sees His names and determinations" (2015, 30). A mutual relation is formed in this manifestation; each mirror—as in existence—hosts God's image. Hence, a person's reality/being is not measured according to their materiality and visibility but in relation to the unseen God (Emadi 2014, 26). This initiates a transcendental perspective about how we exist in this world as images and creations of God.

⁶ Here the metaphysical is in contrast to the physical understanding of the world, it is a branch of philosophy that deals with abstract concepts like being, existence, and God etc. I consider Henry Corbin's interpretation of metaphysics as being concerned with the *Ilahiyat*, the divinalia (Corbin 1962, xiv).

⁷ I often explain this by simplifying that if there was a "Real-o-meter" that could measure reality, it would place this world—all visible to us—at the lowest level compared to the unseen Imaginal and Intellectual worlds. On this real-o-meter, the unseen metaphysical worlds are more intense and real in their reality in contrast to the sensory materiality of this world.

To summarize, aniconism in art preserves God's sovereignty and saves a person's relationship with the Divine by avoiding any representation; it is one of the virtues of Islamic art (Kaminski 2020, 133). With this premise, all the *zahir*, as in the apparent world, is a mirror hosting an image of the Divine, and we participate in this manifestation. Art, architecture, poetry with an Islamic intention attempts to index the metaphysical, and light plays a fundamental role in this expression.



Image 1 Narjis Mirza, *Koukabun Durri, the Shining Star* (2020).

Koukabun Durri and my Art Practice

Koukabun Durri is an interactive installation created towards the end of my research with an Arabic title—which means the Shining Star. The title references the well-known Light Verse of the Quran (Q24:35). In this allegory, a lamp in a glass niche burning the oils of an olive tree, is as bright as a shining star and can be seen from the West and the East. The light from this lamp embraces our entire existence, the heavens and the earth, illuminating every corner of the cosmos; it is light upon light. The Light Verse is one of the most sublime descriptions of Divine luminance, existence, and its varying degrees of intensity (Lari 2006). There are many hidden meanings and symbols encrypted in this verse which is why—over the centuries—it still provokes the creative intelligence of writers, mystics, artists, and philosophers.

I consider the Light Verse aniconic; in other words, what we understand from its literal words is significantly less than what is intended in its *batin*, as in hidden meaning. This is why Quranic *ta'wil*, or esoteric interpretation is essential; it is in some ways an archaeological exploration that sifts through the successive layers of the soil of revelation, returning to the divine light, which is hidden and primal (Moezzi and Jambet 2018, 76). My installation art practice explores a reverberation of this mysterious and all-encompassing phenomenon of light: invisible, infinite, omnipresent, and makes an image appear to sight.

The light installation *Koukabun Durri* has a circular composition; at the centre is a laser-cut, black acrylic ring with the Light Verse in Arabic in stylised Kufic font. It hangs free in the centre of the room, surrounded by an atmosphere of haze and darkness (see Image 1). Seeing is a consequence of our interaction with light, which is why I invite the seer to see, using the torch of their cell phone. This readily accessible light stencils the calligraphy, thus exposing the latent image of this installation. As soon as the torch turns on, beams of light discover the calligraphy. A small amount of haze is also released at short intervals from a nearby fog machine, intensifying the seer's atmosphere. The calligraphy performs, as light brings out its tendency to morph and transform through shadows (Marks 2011, 308). Through light the seer can cast the calligraphy anywhere onto surrounding surfaces; it is no longer confined inside a 2-dimensional material of the acrylic ring.

Here, the seer's encounter is important; the unsteady movement of the handheld light produces a quasi-animation and the solid beams of light created through haze—perceptible by touch—shifts the locus of calligraphy from the literal inscription (*zahir*), evoking a mystical encounter. When attempting to grasp the visible strokes of light, and failing, the seer is challenged by the notion of materiality through light and the immateriality of light (Bal 2013, 54). For me, it is a reminder that Quranic word has its origin not in the literal book but in

the sublime sonoral speech of God, which is an exalted spiritual light form. To cast visible light on the Light Verse is my attempt at *ta'wil*, returning for the seer its fluid light-form outside the physical. In doing so, the installation's intention is realised, the apparent calligraphy becomes invisible and a deeper implicit meaning is elucidated.⁸

Ta'wil for Artistic Research

In this thesis, I suggest that there is potential in creative artworks such as *Koukabun Durri* to provoke—however briefly—an imaginative understanding beyond the visibly apparent, using *ta'wil*. With this purpose, I use light as a research tool with a metaphysical potential, Word as the substance and medium that carries the image of light in my animations; and voice, an immaterial wave-form, like light that cannot be seen and is useful in provoking a connection with the suprasensory.

Ta'wil is a methodological approach presented in the Quran. To understand *ta'wil*, and how I use it for my visual art practice, it is important to first grasp the meaning of *zahir* and *batin*; because *ta'wil* is a journey from the *zahir* to the *batin*. I understand *zahir* and *batin* as two ends of a continuity. *Batin* is from the etymological root word *ba-ta-na*, which means the inside of the stomach or womb. An Eastern woman might say, “I am carrying a baby in my *batn*,” meaning in my womb. Opposite to *batin* is *zahir* related to *zubr*, the back (Marks 2010, 15). Every existent has a *zahir* and a *batin* of a certain intensity. Marks beautifully describes the embodied meaning of *zahir* and *batin* in this way:

Think of how a fetus develops with its back, the spine curved, protecting the soft interior organs. These organs gradually mature, and the body unfolds, as the fetus develops. Indeed, when we sleep in the fetal position, or in dangerous situations curl our bodies to protect our organs from blows, we are embodying the meanings of *zahir* and *batin*: we make manifest the hardened part of our bodies in order to hide the vulnerable parts (2010, 15).

In the Islamic philosophical paradigm, all appearance, every exoteric is considered in relation to an esoteric inside. Hence all existence is seen from this dual perspective of *zahir* and *batin*. The corporeal body is the *zahir* and the mental, spiritual and suprasensory is the *batin*, hidden aspect of a person. In this research I consider—light, animation, projection, voice, and the haptic visual experience of the seer, to be the *zahir* of my practice. Embedded in its *batin*, inside is an imaginative and spiritual understanding beyond the visible (Corbin 1969, 28).

⁸ Video of this work can be seen here <https://phdartresearch.wordpress.com/2020/06/01/fog-and-light/>

With this general understanding of *zahir* and *batin*, I would like to open a discussion on *ta'wil*, and how *ta'wil* can be rendered into a visual and creative discourse of my art-practice (Mirza 2019, 565). The term *ta'wil* is used in the Quran on various occasions; first *ta'wil* is esoteric knowledge with Allah, and those who receive divine wisdom and are firm in knowledge. This kind of *ta'wil* is in relation to the Quran. It is exclusive to certain persons because they can decipher through divine knowledge esoteric interpretations of the *mutashabihat*, the ambiguous and difficult to decipher Quranic verses.⁹

Second, *ta'wil* is the materialization of a vision or a dream, the Quran describes this meaning of *ta'wil* from prophet Joseph's story (Q 12:100). A renowned exegete of the Quran, Muhammad Hussain Tabatabai, in the discussion of Joseph's story defines *ta'wil* as not just an esoteric exegesis (a literal interpretation like *tafsir*) but also an event that opens to further interpretations. Tabatabai explains: "When we say that this verse has a *ta'wil*, we mean that the verse describes a real fact (past or future) or a real happening, which in its turn points to another reality—and that is its *ta'wil*" (1976, 7:39). Hence there is a continuity of deciphering and creativity in *ta'wil*.

Put another way, *ta'wil* can be an experience, an event, or a set of relations to an image or an object that can lead to further meanings. From Prophet Joseph's story, I infer *ta'wil* as not only a literal interpretation but also the transformation or material manifestation of a vision into a reality.¹⁰ I understand the basis of my artistic activity to function as a *ta'wil*. While I acknowledge the traditional association of *ta'wil* with the Quran, I suggest that *ta'wil*, as an approach to interpretation, can continue in contemporary art practices

⁹ The solitary Arabic letters at the opening of many chapters of the Quran are an example of *mutashabihat*, ambiguous verses, which apparently have no meaning. They are known as the *Fawatih*, opening letter-symbols. Verses like these require a hermeneutic interpretation and their *ta'wil* is exclusive to Allah and a few knowledgeable persons. Further discussion of the mysterious *fawatih*, letter-symbols of the Quran, is in chapter three. I use these letters in my art practice as they are a unique case for *ta'wil*. The abstract, aniconic ambiguity of the *fawatih* tempted me to explore them in animation and projection.

¹⁰ In Islamic history Prophet Joseph is known for his knowledge of *ta'wil*, specifically for the interpretation of dreams. There is an elaborate discussion from Islamic history on this topic, which is beyond the scope of my research, here I share only a brief outline. The Quran states that Joseph was taught the science of *ta'wil* by his Lord, as a favour bestowed on the house of Jacob. The most famous story of Joseph's *ta'wil*, begins at a young age when he dreams that eleven stars, the sun, and the moon are prostrating to him. He shares the dream image with his father who asks him to keep this news a secret from his jealous brothers. Years pass by and after many adventures and struggles Joseph becomes the beloved prince of Egypt. One day, during a time of drought and distress, he is visited by his brothers and parents, they prostrated themselves to him in respect and awe of what he had achieved, and this is when Joseph exclaims; "O my father, this is the *ta'wil* of my vision of long before. My Lord has made it reality" (Q 12:100). In this story *ta'wil* is presented as a physical happening, as the images of the eleven stars, the sun and the moon, *ta'wil* (as in manifest) as his father and brothers. For Joseph, *ta'wil* is the reality of the vision he had as a child. *Ta'wil* is the return (as in happening) of an image to its actuality, the transformation of a vision into an actual physical event. Ibn Arabi speaks at length about this story and says, "God made it manifest to the senses, after it had been in imaginative form" (2015, 69).

The word *ta'wil* in Arabic syntax is a *masdar*, which means it is an abstract idea of an action, and the action encoded in *ta'wil* is to return. The root word from which *ta'wil* is constructed is *aa-wa-la*, meaning “to cause to return” or “lead back to the original” (Moezzi and Jambet 2018, 78). An important derivation from *aa-wa-la* is *al Awwal*, an attribute of God meaning the First One. Furthermore, *ta'wil* is a verbal-noun derived from the second set of verb patterns in Arabic language, which implies a number of additional meanings on the action of return in *ta'wil*: 1) it is a happening, as in *returning*; 2) it draws out or creates something when it returns, as in an event; 3) it is a causative verb that changes the state of something when it returns.¹¹ To summarize, we can establish from the lexicology of this word, that the most basic principle of *ta'wil* is to return to the origin. As this exegesis progresses, I share how my interpretation of *ta'wil* operates in my art practice.¹²

Research Questions

If the key feature of studio-based enquiry is to produce knowledge “with the action of making art,” as Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt propose (2010, 7), *ta'wil* is an invitation to reach beyond the concrete form of an artwork towards layered philosophical interpretations; the journey from the seen to the unseen, and vice versa. The determining factor and objective is to reach the *batin*—interior reality. This creative and hermeneutic approach of travelling from *zahir* towards *batin* tilts my artistic practice toward a concern with the spectrum of realities we engage with, in our everyday lives. As such, my guiding research questions for this practice-orientated research are as follows:

How does *ta'wil*, a traditional method of interpretation in Quranic hermeneutics, perform in a creative arts practice?

How can a visual arts installation practice assist in provoking an imaginative understanding beyond the visibly apparent, thus exploring *ta'wil* as a creative potential in Islamic thought?

¹¹ In Arabic grammar each verb pattern holds numerous meanings. For instance, the second verb pattern of Arabic grammar to which *ta'wil* belongs, has more than thirty meanings but for *ta'wil* I consider the three meanings stated.

¹² How *ta'wil* operates in areas of research and art practice outside the Islamic paradigm is a matter of further exploration. In Chapter One, section 1.1, I discuss instances in recent research where *ta'wil* is applied to media visual studies. I refer to Vahid V Motalgh's methodological approach of *ta'wil* for strategic insight into the future, and Azadeh Emadi's application of *ta'wil* to media and visual studies. See pages 27-28.

How can light, animation, projection, voice, and materials stimulate the seer's imagination in connection to the suprasensory and the spiritual?

Philosophical Framework with Medieval Muslim Philosophers

In order to answer these questions, the philosophical framework that inspires me in my art practice and initiates an aniconic perspective of the world for me, lies in the work of medieval Muslim philosophers.¹³ In this section I briefly introduce their work and how they guide me in seeing beyond the apparent reality of the world.

First, Shihab-ud-Deen al-Suhrawardi [1154-1191] founder of *Hikmet al Isbraq*, wisdom of Illumination, placed the symbolism of light at the heart of his entire ontology.¹⁴ Among Muslim philosophers Suhrawardi is recognised as the first to formally discuss the *Aalam al Mithal*, which literally means a world of similitudes or representations; translated as the Imaginal by Henry Corbin (Ziai 1996, 441; Rahman 1964, 169). Suhrawardi describes the *Aalam al Mithal*, a world of pure spiritual lights and *mothol mo'allaqa*, images in suspense, referring to the Imaginal as an extension of images of this world, but without any material substance (Corbin 1972, 6). The Imaginal would then have a corporality and spatiality of its own, which Corbin describes as the “immaterial materiality” (Corbin 1969, 21), a perfect example of which is found in dreams. Dreams allow a person to experience images, places, and events that are immaterial, and we recall them as vague audio-visual memories. In Islamic philosophy, dreams are deemed spontaneous flowering of symbols and real transitions into the unseen Imaginal. Certain dreams are considered meaningful; they hold a *ta'wil*, an interpretation for everyday life. Thus, for the

¹³ In the early stages of this research I closely examined Western phenomenology, in particular Henri Bergson's concept of intuition parallel to the discussion of *ta'wil* and Martin Heidegger's discussion in *Being and Time*. Henry Corbin was first to note traces of *ta'wil* in Heidegger's work, for more see discussion on page 53. For my article considering *ta'wil* alongside Bergson's intuition see: Narjis. 2019. “*Ta'wil*: in Practices of Light”. *Performance Philosophy*, 4(2), 564–575. <https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2019.42242>.

¹⁴ Suhrawardi described his work as *Hikmet* which translates as wisdom. Both Mulla Sadra and Suhrawardi's work is understood in Arabic as *Hikmet*, wisdom. The Arabic term *falsafa* is closer to the meaning of philosophy. There is an extensive discussion on what constitutes Islamic philosophy, wisdom, philosophy, theosophy, culture and more. For further discussion: Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 2006. *Islamic philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

ordinary person—through dreams—it is possible to experience this other world which is not perceivable through our physical senses but has its own organ of perception within us.¹⁵

I consider the concept of the Imaginal useful for my installation art practice, attempting to provoke the seer's imagination beyond the *zahir*, apparent. In this art research, *ta'wil* is useful in initiating a return to our spiritual beginnings. Suhrawardi's book *Hayakal al Noor*, translated as *The Shape of Light*, describes hierarchical manifestations of light and its effect on our visual and Imaginal perception. I use the title *Hayakal al Noor* for my major body of work and translate it as the *Bodies of Light*. Most of what is known of Suhrawardi's thought in the English and French languages is through the eminent French scholar Henry Corbin (1903-1978), a valuable reference throughout this research.

Second, the writings of Sadr-ud-Deen Muhammad Shirazi [1571-1640], better known as Mulla Sadra, an Islamic philosopher who came four hundred years after Suhrawardi, informs this thesis. Sadra's transcendental philosophy marks the opening of a new chapter in the development of Islamic philosophy. With his distinctive method of synthesis of past knowledge, Sadra was bestowed the title of *Mujaddid al-falsafa al-Islamiyya*, Reviver of Islamic philosophy (Nasr 2006, 79). He raised the principle of *asalatul Wajud*, the primacy of existence, in his metaphysics that brought with it a revolution in Islamic thought.¹⁶ He developed his ontology by building on the legacy of prominent Islamic philosophers such as Abu Ali Ibn Sina (980-1037), known as Avicenna in the West, as well as Andalusian Sage Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), and Suhrawardi, introduced above.

Sadra presents the concept of existence as the act of Being (i.e., God), and not just as an abstraction or the cause of a substance, but as that which gives substance—material or immaterial—a constant reality. One major critique that Sadra had of Ibn Sina's concept of existence, is that it lacked fluidity. Ibn Sina is said to have been influenced by Aristotle's theory of substance. In the substance theory, substances like the individual man and the individual horse are considered basic entities of being. Sadra kept Ibn Sina's concept of God as the *wajib ul*

¹⁵ The discussion on dreams is complex and must not be generalized with every dream. Islamic philosophers clarify that not every dream is a case of awakening into the Imaginal. Very often the physical activities of the body intervene and hinder the potential of the Imagination to roam. However, the key concept is that dreams allow the human imagination to interact with immaterial realities. I expand on this in chapter four of this exegesis.

¹⁶ Sadra was born during the Safavid period in Iran when the Islamic sciences and philosophy were flourishing. It was a period of vast intellectual synthesis as the state religion of Persia became Shi'ism. Safavid kings would give refuge to scholars and scientists who were threatened under the rule of the Ottomans in Syria. When Sadra travelled to Isfahan he became the student of philosophers of eminence, like Shaykh Baha al-Din Ameli, a refugee from Syria, and Mir Damad a scholar in acquaintance with the Safavid king. Sadra absorbed the vast knowledge of nine centuries of intellectual elaboration, and his work is seen as a synthesis that opened a new intellectual dimension.

Wajud, the necessary Being—on which all other beings are contingent—but redefined it as *sarayan al-Wujud*, the flow of Being. This concept is useful in understanding that there is a flow of correspondence between images, imagination, and the Imaginal. For this flow of Being, Sadra presents a process philosophy in which existence has primacy over substance. This is one of the major contributions of Sadrian philosophy.

For Sadra, existence is not static but on a *tashkik ul Wajud*, modulation/intensification of a single necessary Being; God from which everything emanates (Nasr 2006, 88; Rizvi 2009, 38). Sadra in his exegesis of the Light Verse, positions light, *basit*, as simple, self-manifesting and in varying degrees of intensity, in view of *tashkik ul Wajud*, or the systematic intensification of Being. The sensible light is perhaps the most familiar manifestation of luminance, it makes objects appear to sight, but interestingly in Sadra's universe, even my physical body and other simple objects, are all varying degrees of light. Sadra writes:

In truth, the reality of light and existence (*wajud*) is the same thing. The existence of everything is its manifestation; accordingly, the existence of corporeal bodies (*al ajsaam*) would also be a degree of Light. (Sadra 1600/2004, 43)

This perspective triggers metaphysical speculation on appearances, light, and the images we see. In addition, the Andalusian Sage, Master of *ta'wil*, Muhammad bin Ali Ibn Arabi [1165-1240], is a guiding figure in the philosophical framework of this thesis (Corbin 1969, 29). Ibn Arabi's influence on Sadra and Suhrawardi's philosophy is undeniable. For Ibn Arabi, *ta'wil* is an esoteric and spiritual connection with the Imaginal realm. Therefore, following Ibn Arabi, *ta'wil*, light, imagination, and the Imaginal are concepts that I will expand on throughout this exegesis.

Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light and the Seer

Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light, is the central body of artwork produced for this thesis. The first version of this installation was exhibited for the public at the North Art Gallery in Auckland on the 15th March 2020. This day marked the anniversary of the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shootings. The tragic events of this day and the remarkable strength and solidarity among Aotearoa New Zealand people bring to mind a beautiful verse from the Quran. In a chapter called the *al Saf*, The Ranks, it says, there are a few who want to extinguish the light of God by blowing it out (like blowing out a candle), but God will perfect its light, although those who do not believe detest this (Q 61:8). The taking of lives at al Noor Mosque (which literally means the Light mosque) can be considered a *ta'wil* (an event manifestation) of this

Quranic statement. A few wanted to extinguish the light of being, the light of faith, the light of freedom, but in the brave resistance of those who passed on and those who live among us—Muslim or not—is the resonance of a perfecting light.

Unexpectedly, the opening event of the first version of the *Hayakal al Noor* (2020) exhibition at North Art Gallery was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This was a turning point for my art practice as I experienced withdrawal from the seer, or audience. I apprehend this new way of being—due to the pandemic—as *khalvat*. *Khalvat* is philosophically considered a spiritual exercise, it is about disconnecting from the world so that one can journey inward. For me, this inward practice was in close proximity to *ta'wil*, because of its inward direction and destination. *Khalvat* is in contrast to *jalvat*, which is about being out in the open, *zahir* and outward. My isolation in 2020 was from the seer and any public exhibition of work. Throughout this exegesis, I refer to the person participating in my installations, the seer. The seer, is a person who has the potential to be affected, inspired, and provoked. Ibn Arabi uses the word seer in his book *Fusus ul Hikam*, *Bezels of Wisdom* (Arabi 1200/2015, 16). I describe the seer as the person who actively participates in my artwork. Merriam Webster describes the seer as “1. one that sees 2a. one that predicts events or developments. 2b. a person credited with extraordinary moral and spiritual insight.”¹⁷ All of these meanings relate with how I develop the term seer in this thesis. The concept of the seer develops throughout the exegesis, as a person or body of light, a person of *basirah* (inner vision), engaged in performative participation and subjected to *takarrud al nafs* (meaning capable of shedding the robe of materiality). The significance of using the word seer for my audience, is to establish a regard for the depth of human imagination, perception and the potential of seeing beyond the surface of things.

Fluid Translations, Voice and Sound

Language in words, letters, and voice is a significant part of this research, in the artworks and for this written exegesis. For example, in the *Hayakal al Noor* series introduced above, I use *huroof*, Arabic letters, and an Arabic voice. These are perhaps the *zahir*, the apparent use of language in my work. Embedded in this exegesis are many Arabic and Persian terms and concepts. Some of these terms like *huroof*, *fiwatih* appear occasionally, and for them, I use a word-for-word translation. Other terms like: *zahir*, *batin*, *ta'wil*, *ajab* reflect the worldview of this research. For them, I suggest fluid translations throughout this exegesis, in relation to the context of the discussion.¹⁸

¹⁷ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “seer,” accessed October 19, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/seer>.

¹⁸ Please refer to the glossary for word for word translations of Arabic terms used in this exegesis.

I have two reasons for this: first, the meaning of these Arabic terms cannot be encapsulated in a single English word. Second, they are not just words that hold a single definition, they are broad concepts, where each term has its own nuance and translates differently depending on the context. Therefore, I will introduce them with their intrinsic core meaning or lexicology—usually a two or three letter combination—and use these in the context of my research. The intrinsic core meaning is important to know, as it will remain a constant while the context of the discussion may change the use of the term. A creative way to explain this is that words are always travelling, moving in different geographies and times, they begin their journey when they are in a very simple state. As they advance, they take on meaning and structures on top of their initial state.

Sound, in the form of a voice, is also an important feature in my light installations. For *Hayakal al Noor* (2020) at North Art Gallery I collaborated with LA-based vocalist and composer Jessika Kenney. I met Jessika through Substantial Motion Research Network (SMRN).¹⁹ Jessika is an American woman who has a deep understanding of Islamic traditions and over fifteen years of experience, singing classical Persian poetry. She has a soulful voice and one of her songs *Pamor* became part of the *Hayakal al Noor* (2020) Auckland exhibition. In search of a wonderful voice, I also collaborate with my sister who is trained in Arabic *qir'at*, the recitation of Quran and Persian language. Together we produced a supplication of Arabic *huroof*, letters that became part of the latest iteration of *Hayakal al Noor* (2021) exhibited in Sydney.

Practicing as a Muslim Woman Artist

In this exegesis I have intentionally avoided framing the practice-outcomes from an exclusively feminist perspective. My reasons for this are: firstly, to keep the emphasis on the discussion of images, imagination, and *ta'wil*; I consider them gender-neutral subjects. To adopt a feminist methodology would add an additional layer of meaning over an existing philosophical paradigm. Secondly, my identity as a woman artist is implicit and present in my work; there are many forms of female presence that an attentive seer will detect. For instance, I project onto delicate chiffon-silk fabric—a material I wear and a textile that was sent to me by my mother. I work with my own body and other female bodies for projection mapping. I use fragrances and a woman's voice for sound. In this way rather than an explicitly feminist position, I create my images and installations with subtle undertones and perspectives that stimulate or provoke an experience. Lastly, I do

¹⁹ I am a member of this network and it has a strong cohort of artists, media theorists, scholars and creative practitioners from across the globe. Azadeh Emadi and Laura U. Marks founded this network, and it is, in a sense a reverberation (a continuing effect) of Sadra's theory of Substantial Motion (*Harkat-e-Jouwhariyya*). Members meet each month—online—to share new work, ideas and understand different perspectives. My research has benefited from this diverse, knowledge-based network.

not underestimate the need for more women artists and writers with Muslim and Middle Eastern backgrounds to share their creative perspective and concerns for the world. After I started living in Aotearoa New Zealand, I realised the gap in information and understanding between different perspectives. The Christchurch Mosque shootings in 2019 amplified the need for more conversations and spaces for dialogue. In this exegesis, I will share the significance of my position as a Muslim woman artist on occasions, but exploring the notion of a collective *ta'wil* in art practice is central to my work.

Overview of Chapters

This exegesis is structured by keeping an approach to *ta'wil* at the forefront. The concepts discussed in the introduction—aniconism, a triadic ontology of reality to be measured in connection to the Divine Light, intensification of the Being, and the significance of provoking an imaginative perception beyond the *zahir*—influence my art practice and approach to image-making. I practice *ta'wil* by gradually intensifying my understanding of the *zahir*, experimenting with the visible/invisible potential of light and provoking a transcendental moment in installation art practice. I position my installations as mirrors of, or perhaps small insertions in, the grand scheme of spiritual and material things.

My first chapter introduces *ta'wil* in broad terms as a way of seeing in a world of images. This perspective positions the reality of the world in a state of symbolising and returning to its origin in the spiritual worlds (Corbin 1969, 12). This means I see images as aniconic, suggestive of another reality, and mobilised by our capacity to imagine. Henry Corbin's vision of *ta'wil*, alongside contemporary scholarship, positions the significant task of *ta'wil* for this image-making art research. In the studio, I begin by observing how light stimulates sight and is a source of illumination. With a projection mapping technique I contour objects and architectural corners of my room, with extended shutter speed, I record myself and the movement of light in still photographs. From my observations, I arrive at the *zahir*'s phantasm, the visible effect of an invisible radiation (light) and the potential of a *ta'wil*-like methodology. With *Asfar* (2018) my first public exhibition for this research I explore how light mediates our understanding of the visible and the unknown.

In chapter two, I explore how *ta'wil* performs in the case of Islamic art works. I begin by defining the term Islamic art and the aniconic quality of the Word in Islamic arts. Sayyed Hossien Nasr, in particular, has a deeply spiritual perspective that resonates with my approach to *ta'wil* as the creative and spiritual function of my art practice. I draw from my own bodily and spiritual participation in sacred Islamic sites, including my experience of visiting a mirror palace in Lahore and the philosophical wisdom art is able to generate for the seer. My research is informed by concepts of implied and existential phenomenology in the scholarship of Valerie Gonzalez and Marks. I consider

artworks from contemporary artists with a Middle Eastern background: Monir Fatmi, Refik Anadol, and Azadeh Emadi—that enflame a philosophical question in their image. I relate *ta'wil* to Rosalind Kraus's theory of passage, a journey between the visible and the unknown. Upon close reading of various installation artworks, including British artist Anthony McCall's concept of Solid Light (1973), I ask; how performative art encounters generate dialogue, sensation, and the potential for *ta'wil* beyond the visibly apparent?

Chapter three is titled Encountering *Ajab*, in the *Ta'wil* of *Huroof*, Letter Symbols. In the studio, my light-projections transform into animated *huroof*, Arabic letters; and in the *ta'wil* of letters, particularly the *farwatih* which are the opening letters of the Quran, I stumbled upon *ajab*, wonder. Matthew Saba argues that *ajab* is a state of bewilderment that comes onto a person due to their incapability of knowing the cause of something (Saba 2012, 198). Saba asserts that the aesthetics of *ajab* were strategically intended and marked the success of early Islamic arts. I consider *ajab* a prelude to *ta'wil*, as a related concept to *ta'wil* that initiates a contemplative perception and engages the seer's imagination. This chapter discusses how I develop different components of my major installation work, *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light* (2019-2021). With multi-directional projections, I experiment with inscribing the body with projections and illuminating the seer's body. I speculate on the mystical traditions and wisdom these letters can impart on those who see, touch, and hear them. Through delicate chiffon silk fabric, fog, fragrance, and sound, I engender a haptic, olfactory, auditory, as well as a visual sensibility in my installations.

The last chapter prior to the conclusion of this thesis is about the seer's participation in the public exhibition of *Hayakal al Noor*—how the artwork contributes to imaginative perception as understood in Islamic thought. First, I return to the Imaginal as the isthmus between this world and the hereafter, formally introduced by Suhrawardi, and advanced in the process ontology of Sadra. Second, I return to one of my initial questions; how does *ta'wil* perform beyond a literal method of interpretation. I consider Marks' approach to the Imaginal in relation to film studies as a model for socio-political change. A model that brings about a non-discursive and effective change in the collective imagination of people. In response to my research questions, I explore various ways that a visual art practice can create an imaginative understanding of social and spiritual inspiration. A *ta'wil*, as interpretation, intensification, and return for my work in relation to the Christchurch Mosque shootings is also discussed. I see my light animations and the seer's performative participation as unfading animate bodies of light; *Hayakal al Noor* resonates with the broad discussion of inclusion and us-ness, and contributes to the contemporary art scene of Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia.

To Return and Embark

For me, this PhD research is a return to some of the concepts and art practices I started my academic journey with. I write in English, think in Urdu (my native language), and speak of Persian and Arabic ideas. All these languages—spoken and written—have been part of my academic journey and come together in this research. The philosophical underpinnings of this research owes to the time I spent at an all-girls madrassa (seminary) in Pakistan, at the age of fifteen; I entered in 2003, when religious fundamentalism and terrorism were becoming synonymous. With no regard for stereotypical assumptions about the austerity of Islamic madrassas, my father advised me to explore for myself. I hesitantly enrolled in a four-year program and acquired the rudimentary knowledge of Islam and developed *zouq*, a taste for Islamic philosophy, logic, and history.²⁰ The influence was substantial and later in the libraries of the world (Ankara, Istanbul, Sydney, and Auckland) I found myself in the section on Islamic philosophy. My artistic skills, as well as my enduring faith, were fostered in this madrassa, making it a place where I could learn and express myself. I now recall my time at the madrassa as a golden period of my life. However, the limited exposure to people, places, and experiences persuaded me—at that time—to move away from a career in Islamic studies.

There is a particular work from my art practice prior to this research that helps to situate the artworks in the exegesis to follow. *The Line Films* was a walk-through installation made for my undergraduate degree in 2012 comprised of four video projections on canvases suspended in air, inside a large theatre space, enclosed from all sides with long black curtains. When a person entered the hall, they would see the first frame and then walk towards the next frame, and then the next, making a horizontal journey, until the last large screen that had an elevator video making a vertical journey. In such an installation setting, the encounter is not of an outsider but an insider, you do not just see the moving images, you also blend in with the moving image of the installation (see Image 2). Pakistani curator Asim Akhtar described my work at the time: “Mirza stages moments released from the continuum of time, interstices, and transitional spaces thereby revealing a concentrated though nevertheless laconic image of the mental and social present” (2012, 40). I now recall this project as my first attempt at staging a correspondence between the *zahir*, what we see in the visible and manifest outside, and the *batin*, what could be seen and is in the dimension of possibilities on the inside.

²⁰ What I mean to say here, is that I developed a *zouq* which means a deeply intuitive understanding and tasting of something after the initial knowledge-based learning. The concept of *zouq* is related to Islamic mysticism, and gnostic creativity (Rizvi 2009, 91).

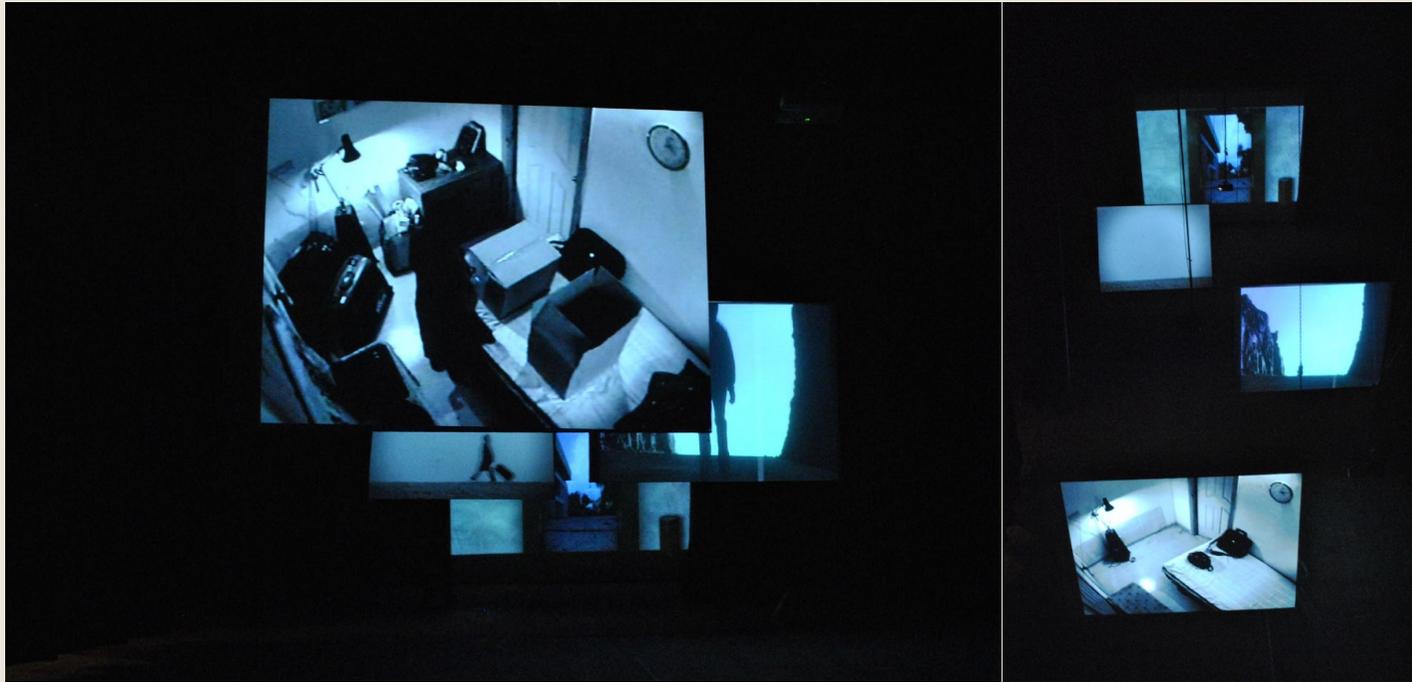


Image 2 Narjis Mirza, *The Line Films* (2012) front and ariel view photograph.

The wider context of my art practice in Aotearoa New Zealand—a country far from my home in Pakistan—is to elucidate the potential of that perfecting light in our being. And this potential is a shared reality in our existence, that in Sadra’s words is “our luminosity which determines our ipseity” (Sadra 1600/2004, 35)—meaning our selfhood. The purpose of my art practice is to return to that perfecting light through light, making my way through the various intensities of visible light, word, voice, and materials.

As a bridge to the next stages of this exegesis, I offer a *munajaat*, a supplication, written by Ibn Arabi, that inspires the conceptual arguments around *ta’wil* of the *zahir* and the *batin*. Condensed in a few lines, Ibn Arabi gives voice to the invisible, affirming the importance of art, poetry, and moving images in matters of perception.

اسمع يا حبيبي!	Listen, O dearly beloved!
انا العين المقصودة في الكون	I am the reality of the world, the centre of the circumference,
انا نقطة الدائرة ومحيطها	I am the parts and the whole.
انا مركبها وبسيطها	I am the will established between Heaven and Earth,
انا الامر المنزل بين السماء والارض	I have created perception in you only in order to be the object
ما خلفت لك الادراكات الا لتدركني بها	of my perception.
فاذا أدركتني أدركت نفسك	If then you perceive me, you perceive yourself.
لا تطمع ان تدركني بادراكك نفسك	But you cannot perceive me through yourself.
بعيني تراني ونفسك	It is through my eyes that you see me and see yourself,
لابعين نفسك تراني	Through your eyes you cannot see me.
(كتاب التجليات الإلهية من 81 الشيخ الأكبر محيي الدين ابن العربي)	(Corbin 1969, 174-175)

1 In a World of Images Ta'wil is a Way of Seeing

Ta'wil is a central principle of my work and in this chapter I consider the esoteric, political, and spiritual dimensions of *ta'wil*, alongside the conceptual framework that the physical world is neither fixed nor opaque. Within the realm of image-making, I identify artists as persons with the potential to *ta'wil*: to provoke the imagination beyond the immediate *zahir*, apparent. *Ta'wil* as a methodology for practice-oriented research may be characterized as emergent methodology in artmaking. Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barret's notion of "materializing practices" implies that practice-oriented research is emergent, reflexive and "subject to repeated adjustment" (Barrett and Bolt 2010, 7). This thesis unfolds one iteration of *ta'wil*, for creative arts research, which acknowledging that *ta'wil* is a well-known method of interpretation in the Muslim world.

This unfolding of *ta'wil* involves informed deliberation around Islamic principles and iterative creative practice, which is further enhanced by participatory and spatial light and sound installations. Hence *ta'wil* as both concept and action is applied as a performative methodology that makes a significant contribution to discourse around creative practice as research. This performative and participatory approach opens a range of meanings, experiences and esoteric potentials.

This chapter begins with how *ta'wil* is considered a method of observing events in the recent scholarship of Vahid H Motalagh, Ali Amir Moezzi, and Azadeh Emadi in visual media studies. I explore the spiritual and creative dimension of *ta'wil* through my art practice with light, word, and voicing: a sacred tradition in Islamic art cultures. I understand *ta'wil* as a way of seeing that transforms images—everything visible—into symbols. *Ta'wil* according to Corbin, is a state of symbolising and returning to the initial conditions (Corbin 1969, 12). Philosophically, *ta'wil* initiates a transcendental perspective on our being, seeing, speaking, and even listening. This means that the apparent is aniconic, it is suggestive of the other, and the images we see and create freely transcend their physical and apparent margins.

In my observations of light and its visible effect on perception, I draw a connection to my medium's ephemeral and transcendental potential. I refer to important writings of Suhrawardi [1154-1191] and the meaning of *ta'wil* for the Sufi Sage Ibn Arabi [1165-1240]. Inspired by Mulla Sadra's [1571-1640] concept of intellectual journeys around the Real, I present the art experience of my first installation *Asfar* (2018).

1.1 Unravelling the Image

“*Beta*, my child, don’t stomp your feet on the ground” my mother would say. “The earth will complain about you if you treat it badly”.

This is a perspective initiated by *ta’wil* that has its foundations in Islamic traditions. The earth is a physical place in this physical world of being, and when it returns to its spiritual state in the intermediary universe of metaphysical representations, the Imaginal, it will become a spiritual being. Today, when our understanding of world ecology has amplified, it is worthwhile to understand the earth from the perspective of *ta’wil*. *Ta’wil* implies a ‘state of being’ for all objects and creatures. This state of being is in a state of return, hence according to the Quran the world is ‘folding up’.²¹ In this event of folding up, mute objects like the earth will have a voice in the hereafter and testify to our actions. I believe that the concept of *ta’wil*, as an artist and image-maker, can change our attitude and our relationship with the world and its images.

Ta’wil is not widely understood as a method for creative art practices. However, during the course of this research I have encountered several scholars and artists who have directly or indirectly nourished the theory of *ta’wil*, in their writings and art practices. First, Iranian futurist scholar, Vahid V Motlagh presents *ta’wil* as a fusion of methods that aims to provide a strategic intelligence on the future (Motlagh 2012, 102–9). Based on an interpretation of the story of Joseph, he theorizes that in the modern world ‘data scientists’ *ta’wil* for us events, images, text, and data. They are people who scan the horizon, the environment, the economy to provide a reliable insight into the future. They forecast from present circumstances, predictions that are unknown, unseen and hidden from ordinary people. I also referenced the story of Joseph in the introduction of this exegesis, as the interpreter of dreams/visions that manifest as events, objects, and experiences outside the world of dreams and imagination. From this story I set the basis of my art practice, to function as a *ta’wil*; as in exteriorizing light in the *zahir*, in installation art and then returning to the imaginative and transcendental (Mirza 2019, 566).

Artist and media studies scholars Azadeh Emadi and Khairiah A. Rahman apply the theory of *ta’wil* to the study of media-visuals as a method “to go beyond the immediate message of the image” (Rahman and Emadi 2018, 175). In an article on the study of the visual representation of Muslims in Aotearoa New Zealand media, Emadi and Rahman identify how *ta’wil* is a process of interpreting an image

²¹ Here, the reference is to chapter 81 of the Quran called *At Takwir*, The Folding Up. It draws attention to the final events of this world, events that will begin with the folding up of the sun, the falling of stars, and the movement of mountains, implying a return of everything to its primal, non-corporeal form.

in relation to its underlying events. In this context, *ta'wil* is a continuous process of questioning, doubting, and unpacking the *zahir* of an image in relation to socio-political factors. Emadi also references the theory of *ta'wil* in her practice-led PhD thesis as an approach for finding the inner meaning of things (2014, 51). These are some of the contemporary approaches to *ta'wil* that inform my art practice and the images I create.²²

In deep spiritual and philosophical traditions *ta'wil* demonstrates an esoteric dimension of knowledge that enables a person to have theophanic experiences with the unseen Imaginal. To elaborate on this, Henry Corbin narrates a story from the early life of the great Sufi sage Ibn Arabi, when he fell very ill. Those who sat around him thought his soul had departed his body. Little did they know that a universe of esoteric realities had opened for him and he was “besieged by a troop of menacing, diabolical figures” and in an instance a glorious being, exhaling sweet perfume emerged before him and repelled the demons with an unseen force. In that moment Ibn Arabi asks, “who are you?” and the figure replies:

“I am the *Sura Yaseen*” (Corbin 1969, 39).

The grieving father of Ibn Arabi was reciting and voicing *Sura Yaseen* (a chapter from the Quran)—as a prayer—so that his dying child would recover from his illness. This is a common practice in Islamic households: to recite the Quran for your troubles to go away, to assist a dying person in their last moments, or to send a recitation as a spiritual gift to a departed soul.²³ In the case of Ibn Arabi the theophany of the *Sura* manifested as a person before him and rescued him from the dark energy that was troubling him and causing a fever in his corporeal body. Corbin writes about the valency of the Word; “such was the energy released by the spoken Word that the person corresponding to it took form in the subtle intermediate world—a phenomenon not at all rare in religious experience”(1969, 29). What I find most remarkable in this story is Ibn Arabi’s conversation with the Imaginal being of the *Sura*. It relates to my mother’s spiritual

²² In relation to my own and other contemporary uses of *ta'wil*, it is important to note that historically, *ta'wil* is a debated and heated subject in the Muslim world. There are questions around who can *ta'wil* religious text and what are the political consequences? *Ta'wil* is considered in Islamic traditions as the task of the real successor of the prophetic mission, since the function of *tanzil*, revelation, was completed by the Prophet of Islam, as the seal of prophethood. Prophet Muhammad [70-632 AD] has a well-known saying that ‘I will fight for *tanzil*, revelation of Divine Word and after me there will be fights for *ta'wil*, esoteric interpretations.’ Just as this prophecy argues, the authority and authenticity of the person of *ta'wil* in Islam is contested to this day—with questions around who the successor of prophetic knowledge is—in the major schools of Islam. See more in Ismaili Gnosis (2015). In the Ismailia School, their living Prince is a person who *ta'wil* and in the Shi'i School the last Imam from the progeny of the prophet currently in great occultation is the person of *ta'wil*.

²³ The word Quran means To Read or The Reciting, like *ta'wil* Quran is a verbal noun, meaning a noun generated from a verb. It is an active word. I explain this further in the chapter 3, The Wonderful Voice of the Fawatih.

understanding, that the Earth will have a personhood or voice in the hereafter. There are many narrations like this, from the life of Ibn Arabi, where he penetrates—with ease—into the unseen Imaginal realm in his lifetime.²⁴ To summarize, this story from Ibn Arabi's life inspires me in my art practice, to draw a *ta'wil* out of the *zahir*, apparent, and the Word through artistic practices. In Corbin's words, this narrative; “demonstrates the extraordinary role of the Image in the spirituality of Ibn Arabi” (Corbin 1969, 233). Particularly, voicing and reciting is a devotional art form in traditional Islamic cultures, for instance: the daily *azan*, call to prayer, *qir'at*, melodious recitation of the Quran. Like light, sound is an immaterial and invisible medium to our sensory perception. It has a deep connection to *wahi*, sonoral revelation—the primary form of communication between the invisible and the physical realms. Hence besides light, voice is also an important medium for making a connection with the unseen Imaginal. In chapter three, I explore this connection in detail, specifically in relation to Arabic *huroof*, letters and the mysterious *fatwaih*, letter-symbols of the Quran that invite the condition of *ajab*, a state of wonder.

In this thesis, I consider *ta'wil* a noun, as in image, event, or object, and also a process. *Ta'wil* is an event in the case of Joseph's dream and Ibn Arabi's flight into the Imaginal, as well as a process of interpreting, intensifying, and returning to inner meanings. Scholars of *ta'wil* describe it as not an intellectual exercise but a spiritual one (Cheetham 2012, 95). It is a creative activity, mobilised by our capacity to imagine, that shifts the apparent solid-state of beings to their inner fluid meanings.²⁵ There is a *ta'wil*—as in return—for all beings, every image of colour, shape, and texture is a symbolic object, and every act is a symbolic event. A musical score is never performed once and for all, it needs to be performed over and over again, and so just like that, an image is never explained entirely, it needs to be disentangled and deciphered endlessly (Corbin 1969, 14). In a similar manner *ta'wil* suggests we see an image in a perpetual state of unravelling.

²⁴ In Islamic traditions access to this Imaginal realm is possible in three situations; after death, in dreams, and in waking with true imagination, however the last scenario is not for ordinary people (Corbin 1960, 74). In general, anyone who claims to have access to the Imaginal hereafter is seen with scepticism. Most Gnostics never reveal information about their mystical flights to the general public in their lifetime. In present day Iran a figure famously known for his asceticism, spirituality, and Gnosticism is Ayatullah Taghi Behjet, a spiritual and humble personality whom I also visited on my first visit to Iran. When he walked to the local mosque to lead the prayers, people gathered in the streets to catch a glimpse of him. He had his head down and seemed shy of the crowds. The gnostic passed away in the year 2009.

²⁵ This is a discussion on how *ta'wil* sees religion from an open perspective. It makes religion more fluid and open for interpretation. In *ta'wil* there is no one right path, it is a continuous process.

1.2 The Significant Task of Ta'wil

Mulla Sadra has a poem titled *The Warrior of Ta'wil* in honour of the first Imam in Shi'ism, son in law to the prophet and a person of *ta'wil*, Ali ibn Ali Talib [599-661 AD]. This poem has attracted little scholarly attraction and Ali Amir Moezzi to my knowledge presents its first English translation. The poem alludes to the many spiritual stations and political merits of Ali as the beholder of Divine knowledge. Here, *ta'wil* is understood as the struggle for the very spirit of the Quran, more broadly God's message. I share only two verses that allude to the necessary task of *ta'wil*.

Harb bar ta'wil karde Murtaza / hamcho bar tanzil Sadr e anbiya

Murtaza (Ali) fought for the *ta'wil* (esoteric exegesis of the God's message) / Just as the Master of Prophets (Muhammad) fought for the *tanzil* (revelation of the God's message).²⁶

Har yeki zishan-e-nateqi / rah-e-haqq ra nur-e-eshan sa'eqi

Each of them (i.e., the imams) an eloquent word / Their light is a guide upon the path of the Real
(Amir-Moezzi 2020, 328)

In the European literature of the 1960s, Henry Corbin [1903-1978] is a prominent name for the revival of *ta'wil* from medieval Muslim philosophy, in its full depth and with all its complexities. Tom Cheetham, who authored four books on Corbin's work, describes *ta'wil* as the most important concept in Corbin's entire oeuvre (2012, 56). Corbin explains how *ta'wil* takes its full form and meaning in Shi'ite theosophy, under the guidance of the Imam, whom the Quran acknowledges as those "firm in knowledge" (Q3:6) in the matters of *ta'wil*. In a few lines below, Corbin describes the broad vision of *ta'wil*, its necessity, purpose, and authority.

This precisely is the Shi'ite idea of the *ta'wil*, the esoteric spiritual exegesis which apprehends all material data, things, and facts as symbols, transmutes them, and "carries them back" to symbolized Persons. All appearance, every exoteric meaning (*zahir*) has an esoteric meaning (*batin*); the book "descended from Heaven," the Koran, limited to the apparent letter, perishes in the opacity and servitude of legalist religion. It

²⁶ The above translation is my own. The author's is: "Murtaza (Ali) fought for the spirit (of the Quran) / Just as the leaders of the prophets (Muhammad) fought for its letter."

is necessary to bring out the transparency of its depths, the esoteric meaning. And that is the mission of the Imam, the “spiritual Guide,” even if as in the present period of the world he is in “great Occultation”—or rather, this meaning is himself, not to be sure his empirical individuality, but his theophanic Person. His “magistry” is an initiatory “magistry”; the initiation to the *ta’wil* is a spiritual birth (*wiladat ruhaniya*) (Corbin 1969, 28).

When Corbin introduces *ta’wil* as a purely Shi’i vision, it is because prophethood is resumed in Shi’ism in the figure of Holy Imams as spiritual guides—people of *ta’wil*.²⁷ It is believed that there has been no period of time when the world was void of a person of *ta’wil*, as in Imam.²⁸ The Ismaili and Twelver Shi’i in particular identify *ta’wil* as more than a hermeneutic task of literal exegesis, “the real aim of *ta’wil* was not to elucidate a source, but to spiritually transform its audience” (Hollenberg 2016, 39).

Corbin’s explanation of *ta’wil* as; “the esoteric spiritual exegesis which apprehends all material data, things and facts as symbols, transmutes them, and carries them back [...],” helps situate the significance of *ta’wil* in an image-making practice. I see *ta’wil* as a process of returning light through animation, projection, text, and voice to metaphysical beginnings. When I examine the visible effect of light, in a moving image with text or in a projection of light, I discover the depth of my medium. In my thesis I refer to *ta’wil* in the broader context of transformative installation art encounter, which may be of a spiritual kind, according to the receptivity of the participant.

An artistic enquiry in my view is based on providing an art experience that apprehends understanding of the known world. Stephen Scrivener writes extensively about how art research contributes to knowledge and raises the significance of apprehensions for new ways of seeing and experiencing the world. He writes; “art is one of those modes of experiencing that, rather than providing givens for dealing with situations, offers apprehensions that provide potential ways of seeing situations” (Scrivener 2002, 12). Hence in this research, *ta’wil* raises

²⁷ In the larger Sunni school of Islam, *ta’wil* is the task of God. Any person who claims to *ta’wil* the word of God beyond surface meaning is trespassing and claiming knowledge of the unknown. However, *ta’wil* is in the foundations of Ismaili and Twelver Shi’i school of thought. For a detailed analysis on *ta’wil* and its historical political scope in the Muslim world see <https://ismailignosis.com/2015/12/28/esoteric-interpretations-of-the-quran-the-foundations-of-shi-i-ismaili-tawil/>, accessed May 20, 2021.

²⁸ In the Ismail Shi’i, their living Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni Aga Khan IV is considered a person of *ta’wil* authority, a provider of esoteric interpretations of the Quran. In the Twelver Shi’i School, the last Imam named Muhammad Mahdi, from the progeny of the last prophet and currently in great occultation—hidden from an announced life—is the person of *ta’wil*. A discussion on the spiritual and political facets of *ta’wil* and the ministerial position of the Imam is beyond the scope of this exegesis; however, it is important to identify the significance of the task of *ta’wil*. The historical and political discussion on *ta’wil* is an interesting topic with little exploration in recent times. I wish to expand on this topic in future studies after my PhD.

apprehensions about material/visible image. In the realm of image-making, I consider the artist and the seer who participates in the art experience, as people with the potential to be affected by my *ta'wil* of light; they are not distracted by the apparent and seek to apprehend the inner significance of images.

1.3 Light Observations

In the sections that follow I shift towards my art practice in studio. I share my observations of visible light, its effect on perception, and how my art practice is driven by the visible for the provocation of the invisible. In this process I am guided by Suhrawardi and Sadra's exegesis on visible light as a weak manifestation of Divine luminance that illuminates the world for our sensory perception. I share *Asfar*, a light installation and my first public exhibition in Aotearoa New Zealand, that allowed other agents to *ta'wil*, interpret and experience through the phenomena of light and shadows.

My first direct encounter with Suhrawardi's work was in May 2018 when I read his book *Hayakal al Noor* (1100/1998) translated as *The Shape of Light*.²⁹ At this stage in my studio, I was mapping simple strokes of light on various architectural corners of my house and tracing the architect's cut. In complete darkness, light would draw a space and mark its corners (see Image 3). I observed that projected light has an effect in changing and manipulating an already defined space; this was something I intended for my light installations. I mapped projected light onto the structural lines of objects, for instance, a physical chair and then added a wiggle effect. When I turned off the lights in the room, the chair seemed to be moving. The constantly moving light created an illusion of movement in the chair. This is because light creates *ilm us suri*, a representational or image-based knowledge of things. In Suhrawardi's *Hayakal al Noor*, there are discussions on the many shapes, forms, appearances, and edifices of light, of which the first pertains to sense perception (1100/1998, 45).

From observations, I realised that we are surrounded by a reality represented by light. The leaves of a tree are green because of the sun light's effect, and in the absence of all visible light, the leaves have no visible colour. The green colour in leaves is caused by a chemical process that absorbs some of the wavelengths of light and reflects others. A leaf absorbs the red and blue wavelengths from the ultra-violet

²⁹ *Hayakal al Noor* is translated as 'The Shape of Light' by Sheikh Tosun Bayrak. I disagree with this translation because *Hayakal* is plural. Firstly, if it is translated with the word 'shape', *Hayakal al Noor* would be Shapes of Light. I chose to translate *Hayakal al Noor* as Bodies of Light. The dictionary translation of *hayakal* is structures, or skeleton. For more see <https://www.almaany.com/en/dict/ar-en/%D9%87%D8%A6%D9%83%D9%84/>, accessed May 20, 2021.

sun rays and projects a colour, which 'appears' green to our eyes. This process applies to all objects. Seeing is a consequence of the effect that light has on things. When visible light collides with a surface, it is partially absorbed, partially reflected. The reflected chromatic light enters our eyes, the cones on our retina process this light, which creates an image in our mind. This image not only has colour shape and texture; it also occupies space and time. As a result, through light we determine distance, space, perspective, and time.

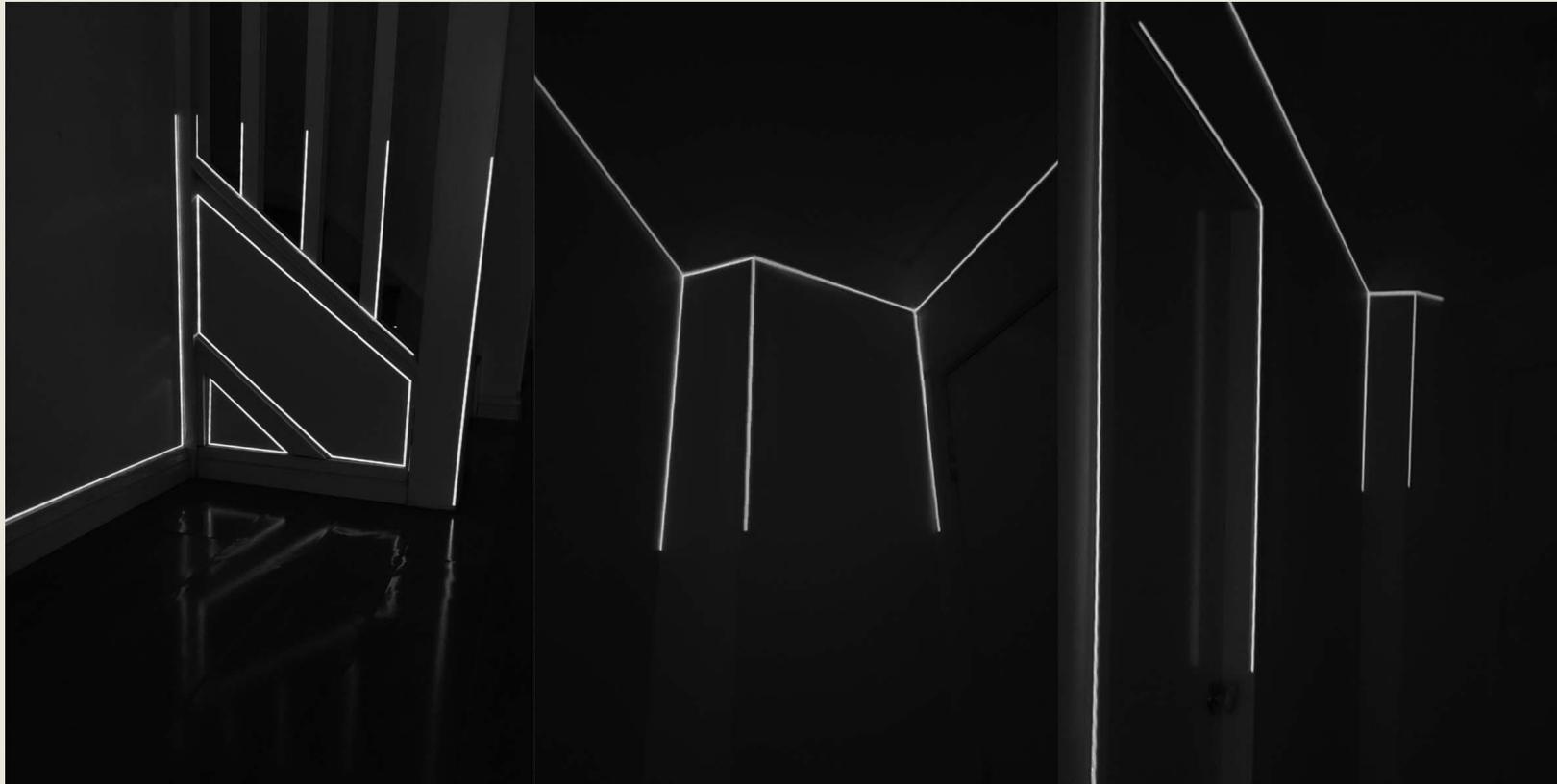


Image 3 Narjis Mirza, mapping architectural corners with projection mapping, (2018).

Light is described by physicists as a packet of energy called a photon that is both particle and wave-like.³⁰ This photon travels on an electric and magnetic field that is tied together and is continuously moving, called the electromagnetic spectrum. All electromagnetic radiation is light and only a certain wavelength, a fraction from this spectrum is detectable by human eyes and considered visible. The continuous movement of electromagnetic radiation is everywhere, in the form of visible yellow light from the sun, invisible ultraviolet and infrared waves of the sun, waves from x-rays, microwaves, gamma waves and radio waves. What we do not see of the electromagnetic spectrum, is a limitation of our biological perception.³¹ Even what we call visible light, is essentially invisible to our eyes. From this discussion I draw an association between apparent vision as the *zahir*, and the hidden aspects of reality as the *batin*.

Painters, sculptors, and image-makers are often keen observers of light. In my first art class, I was taught to closely observe light and how it creates shadows and highlights. A photographer uses a camera to capture light. And what we see in a photograph, in essence, is a record of light. Similarly, the images we see in this world are a continuous recording of the *effect of light*. If objects do not absorb or reflect light they cannot be visually seen. Vanta black, the blackest black, absorbs 99.9% of visible light and cannot be seen. When we see Vanta black, we see it in contrast to the effect of light around Vanta black, similar to black holes in space that absorb all of light with intense gravitational pull, creating no image of the hole itself.

The earth's sky is blue because of its atmosphere that scatters the light of the sun on the horizon. In contrast, the Moon's sky has no colour, it is darkness because it has no atmosphere that can hold or reflect light. In my installation *Koukabun Durri* (2020), artificial haze augments the atmosphere for light. When a person enters the room and turns on the torch light, the path of light is visible through haze. This arouses a haptic response to light, inviting the seer to touch. Contemporary light artists Anthony McCall and Ann Veronica Jenssen's work is recognised for this kind of visceral sensibility with light. I will elaborate on haptic visuality in relation to their work and my installation practice in the following chapter. To summarise the above discussion, the study of visual arts frequently begins with observations of light, because light contours an image. I find that light intensifies in moving images and immersive light installations to become an embodied experience.

³⁰ This particle and wave duality is perhaps a general definition of light, in deeper mathematical analysis and observations it is not entirely correct. Hence there is a sense of mystery around what is light? See <https://www.space.com/wave-or-particle-ask-a-spaceman.html>, accessed May 20, 2021.

³¹ For example, see https://science.nasa.gov/ems/09_visiblelight, accessed May 20, 2021.

From the perspective of *ta'wil*, I see my image-based reality as a consequence of light. I apprehend that *zahir* is a perceived idea of the mind which might not correspond to the actual exterior reality. When a person describes seeing something, “it is a verbal attempt to describe that nonverbal experience inside one’s mind but the words are not always accurate, saying is not seeing” (Zakia and Suler 2017, 62). Therefore, there is a discrepancy between our concept of the world—that we put together based on limited information—and that which is actually present in the physical/exterior world (Cornsweet 2017, 3). This is to say that an artist, or indeed any person involved in drawing, creates a representation of their imagination within the limits of their own sense of colour, shape, form, and texture. We have no way of accurately knowing the realness of a person’s perception.

1.3.1 Light Drawings

With this awareness about light and its effect on perception, I use the conceptual framework of *ta'wil*—a process of returning, intensifying, and symbolizing—for seeing and making my image with light. *Light Drawings* (2018) artworks are part of a series of experimental recordings of light. In my hand is a small torch light, and with a 15 to 45 second camera shutter closing duration I draw in complete darkness with light at home and in a park. The DSLR camera is able to record the event over the set shutter speed. The movement of my hands is minimal and free flowing. Image 4 is a photograph from my home, the complete stillness of this image is concealing the motion behind this scene. There is a stark contrast in the underlying performance that occurred in the darkness and the still image that records this event. The uncanny and blurry presence of myself contributes to the obscurity of the image, as a signifier of a hidden aspect. I participate in intellectual sympathy with the light, where the presence of my body is held within the image, at the centre of the experience.

Embedded in these photographs was a duration of 25 seconds, the movement of my own body, the abundance of darkness, a handheld torch, and the quality of my camera to capture light. It is only when we return—*ta'wil*—the image to its actual/real event that we can fully understand the photograph. This aspect of *ta'wil* is exploring/seeing the photograph in relation to the latent event that has led to making of such an image and its related meanings (Emadi 2014, 51). For some of the seers these light drawings show the artist in performance in the domestic space of a home. This is part of the many related meanings these photographs exhibit for different seers. Hence with this image I instigate questions about appearances and their inner dimension.



Image 4 Narjis Mirza (2018) DSLR camera and extended shutter speed.

1.3.2 Asfar in Public Exhibitions

Asfar, meaning journeys, was my first public exhibition in Aotearoa New Zealand. I exhibited *Asfar* at Corban Estates Arts Centre (CEAC) and Papakura Art Gallery (PAG) in February–March 2018. The installation had a laser cut cube at the centre of the room, on which the four journeys of *al Haqq*, The Real—from Sadra’s magnum opus *al-Hikma al-Muta’liyya fil Asfar il Arbaa*, translated as *The Sublime Wisdom in the Four Intellectual Journeys*, by Carl W Ernst 1999—were laser cut in Kufic style font.³² In brief, these four journeys are: *from* the Real, *towards* the Real, *with* the Real and *in* the Real. Sadra says he has structured these journeys in correspondence to the movement of Saints and Sufis, hoping to illustrate a continuous movement *around* the Real through these four passages (Rizvi 2009, 30).

My installation, *Asfar* creatively considers Sadra’s sequence of journeys around *al Haqq*, the Real. Experimenting with various styles of Arabic calligraphy in studio, quickly led me to Kufic calligraphy, a writing style that takes its name from Kufa, a city in Iraq. Kufic is the first canonized form of writing, primarily performed as a sacred act of copying the Quran to bring God’s speech into the phenomenal world, into a body without flesh and blood (González 2015).

There are many variations in Kufic writing, and I chose to write in *Kufi murabba’* square Kufic, which is also known as *banna’i*, a masonry script (Medlej 2015). This Kufic font has been used in many aniconic art forms: on the exterior of buildings, interiors, coins, and decorative objects. Square Kufic style does not demand legibility to admire its beauty and purity of form. Although Kufic aesthetics are austere, they offer endless possibilities for creative exploration of geometric relationships. I expand on the ambiguous design of Kufic font in the discussion on Word in the next chapter. For the *Asfar* light installation, a single halogen bulb lights the cube; the appearance is like a lamp that projects shades of light and shadows all around.³³ Anyone in the path of the light is enveloped in the journey of light and the word *al Haqq* (see Image 5).

³² This is a book of several volumes, the poetic phrasing of these journeys, *Minal haqqe ilal Khalq* and so on, were used for this installation.. For Sadra, these four journeys are structured in correspondence to the mystical movement of Saints and Sufis, to illustrate a continuous movement around the Real. Sadra’s headline for the four journeys is poetic and multidimensional, in brief, they are journeys from the Real, towards the Real, with the Real and in the Real. The concept of encircling The Real inspired this installation project titled *Al Asfar*, Journey. With one halogen bulb at the centre, I explore light, shadows, lines, and movement.

³³ Sourcing a bulb that would cast sharp shadows was a difficult task. After several trips to many light shops in Auckland, discussions with light experts, and many experiments, I was able to find that a 12V halogen bulb, connected to a transformer, could cast sharp and clear shadows.



Image 5 Narjis Mirza, *Asfar, Journeys* (2018), inside the Barrel Store at Corban Estates Arts Centre Henderson, West Auckland.

At Corban Estates Art Centre, I installed *Asfar* in an experimental space, known as the Barrel Store, a dark tunnel-like room that has concrete brick walls and a high ceiling with old beams of wood. The rain also leaks in, and small creatures have made their home—wherever possible—in the vault’s corners and cavities. The dark organic structure of the vault tempted me to light my lamp here. The continuous spill of light through the laser cut, presented the notion of one and many with the word *al Haqq*. I translated *al Haqq* as the Real at the heart of this installation. I hosted a three-day event at CEAC and invited friends and the Muslim community in particular to experience the light of *Asfar*. I received an encouraging response from my community. For many, this installation was a place to connect with each other and reminisce about their cultural and spiritual heritage. I met Dr Ali Zaidi, an Iraqi doctor from Kufa. He took his time to read the description of work I had provided and then said, “*al Haqq*, is one of the names of Allah, I don’t know if I should take my shoes off?” I had thought about this aspect, and I was aware that for a Muslim, it is problematic to step on the name of God.³⁴

“It is light,” I said, “and I don’t think you can step over it.” We smiled at the end of this conversation, but he had reservations and suggested we ask an Islamic scholar for clarification. We had an enlightening discussion on the history of Kufic calligraphy, philosophical interpretations of Wajud, Being, his own art practice in Kufa at the time of Saddam Hussain, and how important it is for Muslims to work in the arts field. I invited him to my next exhibition next month at Papakura Art Gallery and thanked him for his time. A few days later he sent me an email saying:

“*BismilAllah al Rehman al Raheem*. You might remember that I was about to take my shoes off on entering your exhibition once I saw the reflection of *من الخلق الى الحق* on the floor last Thursday. I promised you that I will ask a scholar in this regard. I’ve asked Shaikh Hussain Al-Harbi following his lecture at Al-Mustafa Centre, New Lynn yesterday evening. He reassured me that there is no harm if any part of human body steps on light reflection of a name of *Allah Ta’ala* since eventually, that light reflection will become on top of our body. He said that only if the word *الحق* was physically written on the floor, I should have to take my shoes off...He is impressed by what he saw in the photos of your work on my phone. He is keen to attend your exhibition at Papakura Art Gallery... Wassalam.”³⁵

³⁴ See documentation of the process work in studio, and for the *Asfar* light installation at <https://phdartresearch.wordpress.com/2017/09/21/kufic/>

³⁵ Personal email conversation with Dr. Zaidi on 17th February 2018. Reproduced with permission.



Image 6 Narjis Mirza, *Asfar Journeys*, (2018), inside the Barrel Store at Corban Estates Arts Centre Henderson, West Auckland.

This was a thought-provoking moment for both Dr Zaidi and me. A valuable *ta'wil* interpretation for how I position visible light and its metaphysical potential. The hall at CEAC had natural light seep inside and as the day set into darkness the contrast of light and dark intensified for *Asfar* creating a heightened sense of mysticism and sacredness. I received many interesting conversations from this project that contributed to my understanding of light and sensorial experiences.³⁶

A month later, a more formal opening of the light installation took place at Papakura Art Gallery. I invited Syed Taghi Derhamy, an elder within the local Muslim community who leads the Friday prayers, to say a few opening words of blessing for my work.³⁷ When he entered

³⁶ See full photograph and video documentation at <https://phdartresearch.wordpress.com/public-exhibitions/ceac/>

³⁷ The leader of Friday prayers is an important position in Islam, given to someone whose honesty and generosity is attested in the public eye.

the gallery, I went up to him to talk about my work. He politely asked me to let the work speak and sat down quietly to gaze at the installation. In his opening speech for the show, Syed Derhamy shared his wise ponderings with the audience:

You cannot possibly disrespect this art, the light comes on your shoe, not underneath your shoe, the light comes on top of your body, not underneath your body, the light is in front of you not behind you. The closer to the light you are, the sharper images are. The further away from the light you are, it becomes [a] blur. It becomes grey...³⁸

This interpretation shares an affinity with Sadra's theory of the Divine light of intensity and gradation. Light as the source of illumination, visibility, and ascension—a mediator between the *zahir*, apparent, visible and the *batin*, hidden, invisible. Syed's speech gave the audience a perspective, a new light on my work, which led to a series of questions. I cherish a responsive and inquisitive audience. I find it essential to have a 'safe space' around my work to invite questions, conversations, and dialogue. I was asked many questions that night. Why is figurative art prohibited in Islam? Is it your choice to do a hijab? How can ISIS do what they are doing and call themselves Muslims? Are they in the grey area? And so on. For me, these questions are not new but very important.

That night I saw the light in its physical form, touching anyone in its path, and in a metaphysical form, encouraging dialogue and contemplative perception. As a practising Muslim artist, I realise the social and political value that my work can have in Aotearoa, at a time when there are many misconstructions about Muslims that can be addressed only through open dialogue. With *Asfar*, I attempted to create a platform for 'collective *ta'wil*', acknowledging that everyone has the agency to *ta'wil*.³⁹

³⁸ This was in response to the CEAC show where Dr Zaidi raised the issue of disrespect to the calligraphy as it was casting on the floor. I consider Syed Derhamy's interpretation a *ta'wil* because it has an aspect of returning the visible light to its primal metaphysical state, as in Divine Light.

³⁹ Full documentation of the *Asfar* Light installation at Papakura Art Gallery can be seen at <https://phdartresearch.wordpress.com/public-exhibitions/asfar-at-papakura-art-gallery/>



Image 7 Syed Taghi Derhamy, opening words for *Asfar Journeys*, (2018), at Papakura Art Gallery.

At Papakura Art Gallery I hosted two workshops. First with local students from the predominantly Pasifika school, Te Aoatea college. The workshops titled *Light Reflections* started with a conversation around my artwork. While I spoke about the work, the teenage students interacted with the light box with flashlights from their phones. In the second half of the workshop, they wrote their names in square Kufic Arabic. These students were quickly able to learn the Kufic style lettering from a table of Arabic letters and their corresponding letters in English that I had provided. Following the geometric style in Square Kufic, they wrote their names and cut them into stencils. Next with the flashlight from their phones they cast their names onto a wall with light. In this exercise the mobile light redistributed the agency from

the singular light bulb in *Asfar* to each student (see Image 10) . This kind of participatory interaction with torch light was later designed for *Koukabun Durri* in April 2020, but due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions there was limited opportunity to further this approach through public interaction.

My second workshop was with Papakura Blind support group: a local blind and limited-sight elderly community.⁴⁰ The participants interacted with the work through touch, replicating their sensory contact with clay. In this way objects (like clay) were responding to objects (the laser cut box) and generating a form of material *ta'wil* that was surprisingly enlightening. Some people pressed their hand over the light box, some inscribed the Arabic word *al Haqq* in clay, and others wrote the word *al Haqq* in brail with clay. From observing some of the clay works I realised eyesight is not essential for *basirah*, inner vision, which can sometimes grasp more information. In the section that follows I argue that sometimes ocular perception can obscure the perception of deeper invisible meanings (see Image 9).



Image 8 Papakura Blind support group see the work through touch, (2018), photograph courtesy of Papakura Art Gallery, reproduced with permission.

⁴⁰ These workshops were initiated by Papakura Art Gallery with local groups. It was not necessary for me to obtain ethics approval as the gallery hosted and facilitated these events. The creative encounters were planned collaboratively with the gallery curator Leilani Kake and myself. Images are used by permission of Papakura Art Gallery.



Image 9 Papakura Blind support group workshop with clay in response to the work (2018), photograph courtesy of Papakura Art Gallery, reproduced with permission.



Image 10 Students from Te Aoatea working on their Arabic names (2018), photograph courtesy of Papakura Art Gallery, reproduced with permission.



Image 11 Gallery curator Leilani Kake speaking to children about *Asfar, Journey* (2018), photograph courtesy of Papakura Art Gallery, reproduced with permission.



Image 12 Narjis Mirza, *Asfar Journey* (2018), at Papakura Art Gallery photograph by Sam Hartnett, reproduced with permission.



Image 13 Narjis Mirza, *Asfar, Journey* (2018), at Papakura Art Gallery
photograph by Sam Hartnett, reproduced with permission.

1.3.3 Veiling, Unveiling of Light

It is the Light of all lights, visible to Itself, by Itself, free of all dependence and relation to matter and the visible. It becomes invisible to us and is veiled by the overwhelming power of Its intensity. (Suhrawardi 1100/1998, 69)

Suhrawardi presents the phenomenon of light being a veil over itself, because of its intensity in the Divine Light. When I was working on the visual aspects of performance, photographs, and installations, I realised my way of seeing needed further openings to imaginative perception, the kind Suhrawardi possessed and expressed in his book *Hayakal al Noor*. This book is interpreted in English by Sheikh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti, a leader of the Sufi Jerrahi order. In the interpreter's preface is an insightful introduction to Suhrawardi's vision of light.⁴¹ Light has different forms, of which the sensory makes an image manifest to sight, yet upon observing the finer reality of events, their cause and essence, one can observe invisible forces that affect our sense of perception. Suhrawardi gives an example that explains how conjecture can take over the mind. If left alone with a corpse at night, our mind battles with the illusion of fear. Like this, many times one's sensory perception is affected by other elements, like conjecture, memory and prior knowledge, while visual perception is only of the surface of things (Suhrawardi 1100/1998, 57).

This notion reminded me of my blemished approach in my observations of visible light. I was engaged with the visible and sensible aspect of light, the coarse representational knowledge of images. What if this sensory light, a source for continuous negotiation with our surroundings is actually a veil of appearance over the inner perception of images (Ventling 2017, 19)? What if this visible light, while it is illuminating the physical *zahir*, is also a distraction from the metaphysical *batin*? In our visual sensory perception, the physical is tangible and seems real, yet we know—paraphrasing the words of the Sheikh—that there are invisible realities out there and the most observed invisible reality is light itself.

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, *ta'wil*, as an approach, describes all light, a gradation of intensities, descending from the *Noor e ilahy*, the Divine Luminance (God) to the physical spectacle of ambient light (Sadra 1600/2004, 35). Existence is an epiphany or

⁴¹ Shiekh Tosun Bayrak [1926-2018] was an author, a Sufi, and a leader. His Jerrahi style of *zikir*, prayer, inspired my audio voicing of the Arabic *huroof*. I believe it is out of immense humility that Sheikh Bayrak presents himself as an interpreter of Suhrawardi's work and does not claim to translate the Sheikh Al Ishraq, Master of Illumination, Suhrawardi.

manifestation of *Noor e Ilahy*: comparably visible images are a manifestation of an invisible light energy. Given that images are indebted to an invisible flow of energy, rarely do we source the unseen. Evidently, there is a long history for the use of light to present God's presence towards creation. Media theorist Sean Cubitt tracks a genealogy of such a light in early artworks dating as far back as the 1400s. He writes, "light was a perfect symbol of God illuminating everything yet itself invisible" (Cubitt 2014, 46). Cubitt ruminates on the performance of light and the "potential that lies curled up inside." Light begins in the invisible black and performs as a mediation between the known and unknown world (Cubitt 2014, 10). It is among the mysteries of this world, in a state of loading, continuously flowing, animate and passing between the visible and the unknown worlds.

For this kind of interpretation of light—that returns the seer to the transcendental—Islamic philosophers emphasize an imaginative mode of perception that corresponds to the Imaginal reality of beings. In the next section I expand on an Islamic understanding of imagination and then continue in the next chapter to discuss how visible light creates a passage between the image and the Imaginal worlds, specifically in Islamic art practices.

1.4 Imagination Ignites Ta'wil

The light of this bright wisdom spreads over the presence of Imagination, which is the first principle of Divine Revelation among the people under God's Providence (Arabi 1200/2015, 68).

The Islamic idea of imagination is related to the *Aalam al mithal*, the Imaginal, and must not be confused with the kind of imagination we know as fantasy. Imagination plays a fundamental role in Islamic philosophy, it is based on *kashf*, intuition and inner revelation supported by a demonstration of knowledge (Rizvi 2009, 4). It has its own noetic function and corresponds to an ontological reality of its own—the Imaginal (Corbin 1971, 39).

Ibn Arabi considered Imaginal perception "at equal footing with rational understanding," he describes it as the "first principle" for the acquisition of divine knowledge (Arabi 1200/2015, 10).⁴² Hence, revelation and communication with God in Islam is an imaginative

⁴² Here I chose the words of William Chittick which are cautious, he speaks of Ibn Arabi and says that he positions imagination at equal footing with rational reasoning. Later, while reading *Fusus Al Hikam* by Ibn Arabi, I read that "Imagination as a faculty of the soul is sometimes stronger than the intellect" (Arabi, 2015, p. 10). In the same way, Corbin considers spiritual theosophy to be on a higher plane (Corbin, 1969, p. 20).

experience. The Arabic term for prophetic revelation is *wahi* which is exclusively a prophetic experience, but on a lesser stage is *ilham*, which is similar to intuition; *ilham* is a variant of imaginative experience that enables poets and artists to be creative. Hence creative inspiration is a mild form of *wahi*, divine revelation. This is one reason why artistic practice in Islam is a spiritual task.

The mystical wanderings of Ibn Arabi and Suhrawardi are stories of other realms, they *ta'wil* for their reader using creative paths of poetry and philosophy. Their theosophy is on a more transcendental, creative, and intuitive plane than strictly rationally acquired knowledge. These qualities draw these two sages closer to creative minds, and to my art practice in particular.⁴³

1.4.1 The Imaginal in Suhrawardi and Corbin

In this section I return in more detail to Suhrawardi and Corbin's contribution to my understanding of the Imaginal. Suhrawardi's work draws attention to the metaphysical necessity of the Imaginal which, in modern thought, is described in great detail in the works of Corbin. As I mentioned in the Introduction, in the English and French languages most of what is known about Suhrawardi is through Corbin. I have referred to his translation of *Aalam al Mithal* as 'the Imaginal' throughout this research. Corbin recalls his encounter with Suhrawardi as his spiritual destiny and a calling that changed his life. I feel it is important to tell this story because the way Corbin describes this encounter, he does not consider it a coincidence, rather it was an inspiration from the heavens that led him to his calling.⁴⁴ Following heavenly inspiration is valuable in Islamic thought, and essential in my artistic practice, as stated earlier on the significance of imagination.

In 1929, 26-year-old Henry Corbin was working at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Sorbonne and one October day he visited Loius Massigion—then Director of Islamic studies—and spoke to him about his enthusiasm for Arabic language and philosophy. Massigion had just returned from Iran and had brought with him a lithographed edition of Suhrawardi's major works. What happened next Corbin

⁴³ It is important to note that when I speak of Imaginal experience for my art practice, I am significantly simplifying concepts for the purpose of this research. Accessing the Imaginal realm in Gnosticism involves sacrifices, asceticism, and demanding practices not agreeable to ordinary people. As I have suggested in the introductory chapter, dreams prove that the realm of the Imaginal exists and can be accessed by everyone. In this manner, my art practice aims to activate my audience's imaginative potential.

⁴⁴ In Islamic philosophical thought there is no such thing as coincidence or chance, since everything is in the knowledge of God, it is pre-determined and predestined. At the same time there is a margin for free-will, hence making a person accountable for their actions. This is an extensive discussion on determinism and free will, for more see Leghaei, Shaykh Mansour. *Ultimate Questions in Philosophy of Religion*. N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.

describes as an *inspiration from heaven*. Massigion gave him the lithograph and said, “take it, I think there is in this book something for you.” (Cheetham 2012, 12). This *something* became the project of Corbin’s life; he became a close companion of the young Shaykh from Suhraward who lived 37 short years before his execution in 12th century Aleppo.⁴⁵ Corbin became a disciple of Suhrawardi’s ideas and was able to postulate a radically poetic method in his writings, dismissing the strict rational discourse in Western traditions (Cheetham 2012, 12). Because of this he came under severe criticism for being too mystical and overemphasizing a spiritual Shi’i perspective on Islamic philosophy.

Cheetham’s description of Corbin is appropriate for my reading of his work; that while Corbin did not convert to Islam and was not a Jew or a Christian, “he was something very ancient and radically new” (Cheetham 2012, 29). Corbin was also very fond of German mysticism; he was the first French translator of the German scholar Martin Heidegger [1889–1976] who returned hermeneutics as the central task of philosophy. In Corbin’s view, *Being and Time* (1927) “is a moment in a cross-cultural conversation that includes the central concept of Shi’i hermeneutics, *ta’wil*” (Cheetham 2012, 28). This statement demonstrates the probable connections between continental philosophy and Islamic hermeneutics.⁴⁶

In the 1960s Corbin urged for the revival of imagination, he believed it was left with poets and artists, and the lack of imagination in philosophy was a void that limited our understanding of the world. Imagination is at the centre of our reality. Therefore, in his writings Corbin was eager to introduce Suhrawardi’s mysticism.

The effects of Suhrawardi’s theosophy of Light have been felt in Iran down to our own time. One of its essential features is that it makes philosophy and mystical experience inseparable: a philosophy that does not culminate in a metaphysic of ecstasy is vain speculation; a mystical experience that is not grounded on a sound philosophical education is in danger of degenerating and going astray .(Corbin 1969, 20)

Corbin describes to his reader the significance of sound philosophical knowledge alongside mystical flights of the imagination. I personally—as a woman and an artist—value imagination (and the transcendental, creative, intuitive, and infinite journey of the heart)

⁴⁵ Suhrawardi is called Suhrawardi because he belongs to a village called Suhraward. In most Middle Eastern regions, people are associated with their names to their regions.

⁴⁶ This is intriguing but would be an expansive discussion that I feel is beyond the scope of this exegesis, focusing as it does on Islamic philosophy.

alongside (and sometimes before) a finite and dimensionally restricted rational understanding of the world. Albert Einstein in one of his interviews makes this statement: “Imagination is more important than knowledge, for knowledge is limited, whereas imagination encircles the world” (Stroud, 1994,1). For me, when rational thinking and logic reaches its end point; imagination ignited by *ta’wil*, a spiritual exegesis, opens a new world of images. For instance, reading literal interpretations of the Light Verse (Q24:35) is one approach, creating an immersive art space with the Light Verse, through haze, light, calligraphy; and interacting with an artwork is another possibility for expression of this verse. For the installation *Koukabun Durri* described in the Introduction, I bought a fog machine because I wanted to interact with the atmosphere, and provoke a haptic experience for the seer to engage with the visible–invisible, material–immaterial mystery of light that the Light Verse alludes to. In such experiments, I appreciate the significance of an artwork alongside a philosophical exploration, and a means to *ta’wil*, interpret, through a creative activity.

1.4.2 Unfolding, Flowering and Ta’wil; as a Methodology for Artistic Research

I understand art and image making as a fluid process of the imagination rather than frozen.⁴⁷ And perhaps the most striking advantage of *ta’wil* in art making is that it has an unfolding. *Ta’wil* ignited through imagination enables a person to enter a new world, to surrender to a higher plane of being (Corbin 1969, 28). When Pavel Florensky [1882-1937] describes the creative path of the artist, he aligned it to the Imaginal. He describes a “boundary” between the two worlds—earth and heaven—which in Arabic is called a *barzakb*; a Quranic term for the *Aalam al Mithal*, Imaginal. Florensky describes the potential of artistic imagination to elevate to this realm of higher realm of meanings, he writes:

In creating a work of art, the psyche or soul of the artist ascends from the earthly realm into the heavenly; there, free of all images, the soul is fed in contemplation by the essences of the highest realm, knowing the permanent noumena of things; then, satiated with this knowing, it descends again to the earthly realm. And precisely at the boundary between the two worlds, the soul’s spiritual knowledge assumes the shapes of symbolic imagery: and it is these images that make permanent the work of art. Art is thus materialized dream, separated from the ordinary consciousness of waking life. (Florensky 2000, 45)

⁴⁷ Taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s quote: “The quality of Imagination is to be fluid and not freeze” (Emerson, 1946, 170)

Similarly, *ta'wil* is a creative process that reveals itself to the creative mind and hence is appropriate for artistic inquisition. Suhrawardi and Sadra remind us again and again that symbolic imagery flowers in the soul spontaneously to announce something that cannot be expressed otherwise (Corbin 1969, 20). I expand on this aspect of *ta'wil* in relation to *himmā*, a creative energy of the imagination in the following chapters. Given the above, the potential to imagine beyond the *zahir* is in all of us, and we are constantly doing it; in our dreams and in our minds. It is just that artists give this image a public life (Cheetham 2012, 36). Imagination is a never-ending exercise, it is as infinite as the universe, which is expanding, no, accelerating! In Islamic cultures, dreams are important, they carry signs and spontaneous symbolic imagery. I consider the intuitive experience in my art practice that allows a meaning to reveal onto the mind/heart of an artist or a poet. I believe an art practice can weave a web of relations, carries them back and forth between the actual object and its metaphorical meanings. This approach to *ta'wil* is in liaison (as in a close working relationship) with the creative wonderings of Islamic philosophers.⁴⁸

In my installation art practice I use light, animation, projection, voice, textile, space and fragrance as techniques or methods for my *ta'wil* of the image. *Ta'wil* manifests as an action of returning the apparent image to its inner significance and as an event through installation art. The manifestation of this event is most prominent in my iterations of *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light* from 2020–2021 in Auckland and Sydney. The work can be apprehended in multiple ways and from a range of perspectives. The participatory and performative features of *Hayakal al Noor* mobilizes the seer to co-create and co-author the art work. The notion of the seer establishes a way of regarding and designing for ‘participants’ with the capacity to be affected, inspired, and provoked. *Ta'wil* drives my installation art practice to engage with more than the representation of form, it takes a central place as a rich method with a range of apparent and hidden connotations that might not be fully graspable.

Thus far, it is established that *ta'wil* is a performative methodology can be extended to event manifestation for artistic research. It initiates a process of unveiling the immediate, *zahir*. The term *ta'wil*, will be used interchangeably throughout this exegesis, both as a noun—as in a creative outcome—and as a method of activating the imagination through practice-orientated research. The Islamic understanding of imagination is different from its general context of making up a thought; imagination corresponds to a metaphysical realm of the Imaginal.

⁴⁸ In the introduction to Fāṣus al-Hakīm's *Bezels of Wisdom* (original date of publication unknown), the translator Binyamin Abrahamov presents a quote by William Chittick who is a notable scholar of Ibn Arabī's work; he says that Ibn Arabī's writings are like spontaneous inspirations, flowering from his pen: “with such force and velocity that they destroy horizontal and logical continuity” (Arabi 1200/2015, 3). This sentence makes me smile. No wonder it was a struggle for Corbin and those like him, to introduce these sages to a philosophical world with purely rational discourse. Although my acquaintance with Ibn Arabī and Suhrawardi has only been for a few years, I see them as artists and their writing as strokes of their brushes. The palette of their imagination is vast, and it has many colours; of which logic and wisdom from the Divine is something which makes their universe infinite and open. I started my career as a painter, and I am aware of spontaneous strokes which are more intuitive than rational. Especially the last few finishing strokes, when pure white colour—an impression for light—is used to lift the image off the canvas.

Intuitive knowledge or the spontaneous flowering of a symbol is not disregarded in our philosophical traditions, hence affirming the significance of creative art practices. What we see of light are the images created and represented through light.⁴⁹ Sadra states this fact, “there is no demonstration for light rather it is the demonstration for everything” (Sadra 1600/2004, 36). This is the point of departure for *ta’wil* and my installation art practice with light.

⁴⁹ A light designer Joanne Entwistle, Don Slater describes it as “relational material” this is because the material effects of light are relative to other objects.
<http://journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk/browse/issue-09/light-as-material/>.

2 Ta'wil and Sensorial Experiences with Light, Word, and the Sacred in Contemporary and Historical Islamic Art and Architecture



Image 14 Facade of the *Sheesh Mahal*, *Lahore Fort* (2012) photograph by Ahmar Nadeem.

My installation-based art practice bears a resemblance to the sensorial experience of Islamic art and architecture. In this chapter I suggest a multi-sensory encounter is valuable in provoking the imagination beyond the *zahir*, apparent, and in heightening one's engagement with an artwork in space. My connection with Islamic art is primarily through the time I spent in the Grand mosques of Mecca, Medina, Qom, Mashhad, Tehran, Karbala, Najaf, Samarra, Baghdad, Istanbul, Ankara, Abu Dhabi, and Lahore. When I stand inside a mosque, listen to the *azaan*, a call to pray, gather in a *jamm'at*, a congregational prayer, absorb the energy of the space, and speak to the people; I appreciate

the potential in the design of these spaces to facilitate a connection with the metaphysical unseen.⁵⁰ My sensorial experience includes a performative participation that is bodily and more, for instance a *tawaf*, circling the *Ka'aba*. For me, people, light, colours, calligraphy, geometry, prayer, fragrance, voice and its rhythm together are reminders of the sacred, and the unknown. There is great emphasis on visiting a mosque in Islamic culture. This is because the collective energy of the living and non-living (for instance calligraphy, geometry, architecture) aids one's spiritual progress. My light installations attract this collective sensibility, participation, and imagination of diverse communities, when situated in an art gallery, rather than within religious architecture.

In this chapter, I first explain how I consider the term Islamic art for this thesis in the scholarship of Oleg Grabar, Avinoam Shalem, and Sayyed Hossein Nasr. I position this research and the approach of *ta'wil* in my art practice as contributing to the philosophical paradigm of Islamic arts. Second, I draw from my personal experience of visiting a mirror palace in Lahore, the effect of light and the philosophical wisdom of geometric mirror mosaics. I draw attention to the significance of the sacred and the Word in Islamic arts beyond legibility; the highly stylized calligraphy and the finesse in mathematical geometry alludes to the prestige of the aniconism in art practices. I discuss contemporary works by Mounir Fatmi, Refik Anadol and Azadeh Emadi that expand on the *zahir* of the image.

Finally, I discuss Rosalind Krauss's theory of 'passage' and its application to artwork including Bruce Nauman, Janet Cardiff, George Bures Miller, Anthony McCall, and Anne Veronica Janssen. Upon examining examples of installation-based artworks, I consider the concept of 'passage', a performative participation that resonates—in some respects—with *ta'wil* as a journey between the visible and the unknown.

2.1 Situating Islamic Art

When we look at the complex, rich, and diverse artistic creations of the Islamic world, it becomes apparent that there is “no single voice or explanation” that satisfies to explain a myriad of art forms (Grabar 1983, 12). There are multiple perspectives and critical opinions on defining the aesthetics of Islamic art. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis I choose to focus on abstraction and aniconism as significant features of Islamic artistic practices. These features resonate with my work, and with the act of *ta'wil*, as I shall explain in the sections that follow.

⁵⁰ Here the metaphysical is in contrast to a physical understanding of the world, it is a branch of philosophy that deals with abstract concepts like being, knowing, time and so on. As Corbin explains, “metaphysics is generally defined as being concerned with the *ilahiyat*, the Divinalia” (Corbin 1962, xiv).

When I use the term Islamic in relation to art, I refer to various art-forms that have been developed by artists and artisans over a vast cultural, geographical, and historical period, the majority of whom share a common source in the work of medieval Islamic philosophies and the Quran. My art practice with light, Arabic text and voice, inherits characteristics from this aniconic paradigm of Islamic art. Of the many definitions of Islamic art, some favour a geographical disposition. For instance, Oleg Grabar, a leading figure in the field of Islamic art and architecture, finds the term ‘Islamic’ for art problematic, because it stems from a Euro-American perspective of looking at the artwork of Muslims, while the Muslims themselves distinguished their artwork based on a certain style within a national or regional context, for instance Persian art or Mughal art (Grabar 1975, 247).⁵¹ At the same time, Grabar is wary of ‘parochialism’ in the study of arts that reduces the diversity and complexity to local ethnic and cultural procurement. His article titled “What should one know about Islamic Art?” points out that, while the widespread knowledge about Islamic artistic creations is lacking, what is known in Western scholarship has been through critical and historical discussions (Grabar 2003, 5). In my opinion, Grabar raises these sweeping questions to encourage a deeper sense of awareness by identifying a gap in studies by contemporary Muslim scholars that examine the social, political, regional, and philosophical idiosyncrasies of an artform that spread over a period of thirteen centuries.

Continuing on, Professor of History of Art in Islam Avinoam Shalem (2012)—makes a plea to entirely rewrite the narrative of Islamic art that was forged in context by Euro-American art historians largely in the nineteenth century. The Euro-American historical canon holds Islamic abstract forms to be backward for lack of figuration, yet simultaneously modern, because of the conceptual basis and aniconic forms. Shalem questions how abstraction is considered as a penultimate form of ‘Western’ artistic expression when there is a long history of abstraction in the ‘East’ (Shalem 2012, 18). Sayyed Hossien Nasr, recognised as an Islamic philosopher, in current times tends to focus on the spiritual aspects of Islamic arts. Nasr makes a useful distinction between the classical and sacred Islamic arts, the former relates to the traditional arts: carpet weaving, miniature paintings etc., and the latter relates to the Quran and religious text as its inspirational source (Nasr 2010, 110). It is worth noting that the philosophical premise that the phenomenal world is not divorced from the noumenal world, “but as signs of God, the *vestigial Dei*” operated in many of the Islamic art forms (Nasr 1987, 41).

For the purposes of my moving image project, I will refer frequently to Laura U. Marks’ tracing of the genealogy of modern media art in the historical and phenomenological encounter with Islamic art. I view abstraction, ambiguity, and aniconism in my light, animations, and

⁵¹ At my first art school in Pakistan—the National College of Arts, Lahore—I took a class of miniature art, a distinct style of painting that was developed in the Mughal, Persian, and Ottoman periods and is now taught and studied in traditional art schools. It does come under the umbrella of classical Islamic arts, but the regional peculiarity is significant.

text as an experiential, processual encounter—following Marks—that is informed and inherited by both the sacred and classical traditions of Islamic art. When Marks argues for a strong affinity and continuity between Islamic art and new media art, it is because of the ability to enfold the imperceptible in a perceptible image (2006, 42). In the case of new media images, they resemble the case of aniconic Islamic arts, says Marks, where: “the most important activity takes place at a level prior to the perceptible image. The image that we perceive refers to its underlying cause—in ornament, geometry, pattern, text, and code-generated images” (Marks 2010, 5). I inherit the cultural and sacred traditions of Islamic arts, the images I create in my installations refer to the latent image (extended in the Imaginal), or that which is not apparent.

In addition, I see in this encounter with the aniconism of Islamic arts an invitation to *ta’wil*, to contemplate and question so as to return to the *batin*, hidden origins. *Ta’wil* has the distinction of being a continuous process of unveiling that goes beyond an embodied approach. I allude to this continuity in *ta’wil* from my own encounters in the section that follows, where I recognize a shift from a bodily participation in Islamic spaces to a spiritual presence.

2.1.1 Bodily and Spiritual Presence

In addition to Marks, the work of authors Valérie Gonzalez and Seyyed Hossien Nasr have been helpful in contextualizing my own practice in the larger scheme of Islamic artistic practices. For instance, Gonzalez is an advocate of implied aesthetics, which focuses on the “essence of the being of the object as it appears to the sight” (2001, 3). This kind of aesthetic inquiry has a chain of signifying elements, in the contingent world that connects a person to the absolute Being. For example, the written word or the monogram ‘Allah’ is visible to our eyes, this is in the first sphere of contact which has embodied or visualized the ineffable Divine in language. The second sphere is composed of “perceptual signs” which have representational extensions, for example Allah in stylized calligraphy has an iconic representation and is not as clear as plain writing (2005, 21). For Gonzalez the first sphere (the literal word) and its succeeding points of contact are a significant source for the essential truth. She writes:

Between the depiction of a mosque and the name of God and, beyond that, the ungraspable idea of the Divine Truth there takes place a chain of interconnected significances that rely on the various ontological grounds the word explores through its multiple forms, thanks to its combined signifying, graphic, and iconic properties. (2005, 22)

Gonzalez identifies a significant contrast in the outward reality (*zahir*) of a word or an image and the inward reality (*batin*); which is timeless, formless, and abstract. I also consider this aspect in my practice when I use materials, animation, and projections as *zahir* elements, the first sphere of contact, while referring to the immaterial and formless Imaginal, the second sphere of contact. In the sensory encounter with light and atmosphere in *Koukabun Durri*, or chiffon silk in *Hayakal al Noor*, I envisage a sensorial experience that has the potential to arouse a suprasensory realization. The chiffon material has a personal narrative for me, it was sent to me by my mother and kept me in material exchange with my homeland. In the chapter that follows I shall expand on this aspect further. Evidently, the phenomenological aspect of Islamic arts is important, “so while the writing refers to the timeless and immaterial Divine Being, the absolute ideality, the depiction of a mosque refers in contrast to the factual and material reality of human existence, namely what we could call in phenomenological terms the absolute reality” (Gonzalez 2005, 22).⁵²

To return to Marks’ argument for an embodied experience with Islamic art, she suggests that for her historical studies the encounter with an image is sensory, as in bodily. This is derived from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the sensate body in human experiences (Marks 2010, 30).⁵³ Marks suggests using an embodied experience as a measure—by visiting the mosques yourself—and allowing this to be the basis of your approach. Reflection occurs on the historical and cultural perspective of the people who were here before you. And being in the same space as them is perhaps the closest you can get to your subject (as in a mosque or any other site of exploration). Marks calls her sensory and mental analysis: existential phenomenology. This bodily/sensory approach is part of my installation experience when I invite the seer to interact, be, and immerse themselves in the light, animation, projection, text, and voice. My decision to create immersive, spatial installations is also perhaps from my own experience of encountering Islamic art as a complete space, as in entering the mosque. A significant outcome of this approach is that the experience cannot be generalized, it is specific to the individual. Upon entering the mosque, Marks says “all I can do is gaze upon them ... try to let their logical depth indicate to me what experiences they gave to the people—faithful, fascinated, sleepy, distracted—who lived with them in their early days” (2010, 31).

On a personal level, going to the mosque has been part of my everyday life. As a young child I visited Masjid al Nabawi, the Prophet’s Mosque many times in Medina. My mother would tirelessly pray for long hours, her devotion would resonate with the deep reverberations

⁵² Gonzalez refers to this world as absolute reality, only in phenomenological terms. Otherwise in Islam the material reality of the world, that we are in right now, is the mildest form of reality based on the discussion of reality and its intensities, mentioned in the introduction to Sadra’s work, see page 18.

⁵³ For Merleau-Ponty, the experience of the body came first in the experience of the world. He writes: “our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive; it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 235).

of prayer and movement of people in the mosque. There is a unique atmosphere of energy (or vibrations) in Grand Mosques, like the buzzing of bees. I saw this energy amplify in the grand Mosque of Mecca, in the *tawaf*, circumambulation of the *Ka'aba*, which is a unique bodily experience where hundreds of people become one unit, one body. People enter and exit the *tawaf*, but the *tawaf* continues. The *tawaf* is perhaps one of the most immersive bodily experiences inside a mosque for me where, “each person becomes a point in the circumference of the circle whose centre is *Bayt Allah*, the house of God” (Faisal and Nasr 2009, 3). As a Muslim when I enter a mosque it is to pray, even when I visit a mosque as a tourist—as I did when I visited Istanbul—the etiquettes of visiting a new mosque for me meant that I honour this mosque with prayer (remembrance of Allah).⁵⁴ Which is also a bodily engagement with the space and architecture of the building, it is standing, kneeling, sitting, and prostrating. Hence, when I consider “existential phenomenology”, with Marks, my attempt begins not only through my secular or bodily existence but also my spiritual being.

2.1.2 The Invisible and the Unseen in Mughal Architecture

Let us now look at how light generates an interpretation beyond the *zahir*, exterior. In 2008, I completed my first year of studies at the National College of Arts and went on a field trip to Lahore; a city of gardens, palaces, mosques, and a mighty red brick fort.⁵⁵ Historically, Lahore was a walled city with twelve gates, and in the 1600s it became the capital of the Mughal Empire. Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal emperor, had a passion for art and architecture and commissioned some of the most magnificent architectural monuments of the sub-continent, most famous of them is the Taj Mahal in Agra. In Lahore, Shah Jahan advanced sections of the Lahore Fort and commissioned a *Sheesh Mahal*, Crystal Palace, or the Mirrors Hall. When I entered this section of the mighty red fort, I suddenly encountered the palace's delicate and distinctive features. Ornamented with pieta-dura and a geometry of mirrors; *Sheesh Mahal* is a complicated mosaic of mirror and glass, “coloured and plain, convex and flat” so as to reflect light in multiple directions (Thapar, Manto, and Bhalla 2012, 96).⁵⁶ At night a single candle can illuminate the palace hall, resembling the sparkle and shimmer of the infinite night sky. In this pavilion of mirrors the play of light and geometry initiates a symbolic significance of the image.

⁵⁴ A mosque in Arabic is *masjid*, which literally means the place of *sujud*, prostration. Hence, encoded in the word *masjid* is a movement of the body.

⁵⁵ National College of Arts (NCA) used to be The Mayo School of Industrial Arts created in 1875 by the British Crown in India. The art, crafts, and artisans of India were brought together under one roof to preserve and sustain India's indigenous craft. The department of Miniature Art of NCA became a school with a legacy that until today has Masters to whom Miniature art has been passed on by their ancestors; who can be traced back to the artisans of the Mughal courtyards of the 1800s.

⁵⁶ Pieta dura is a technique that uses highly polished stones to create images and is common in Mughal and Persian Architecture.



Image 15 *Sheesh Mahal, Lahore Fort* (2011) photograph by Siraj ul Hassan.

Traditionally, mirror-art is considered to be part of wider Islamic–Iranian architecture, in which the candle–mirror analogy signals deeper philosophical interpretations.⁵⁷ When the candle’s light reflects off multiple surfaces, each mirror hosts an image of this light according to its surface potential but “the fact is, that the image in the mirror is not the very candle in reality” (Ghehi 2012, 7). In this sense, Islamic art and architecture enacts *ta’wil*, or interprets in art a sublime image of the invisible and unseen Being. Islamic art steers clear of any definite image of the Being. More broadly what we see in the wonder-inducing Islamic creations are symbolic and suggestive of the other, which is far more significant than what appears to sight.

2.1.3 Significance of the Word and Ayaat, Signs

I would now like to turn to the function of the sacred and the word in Islamic arts in order to trace the lineage in my art practice that uses Quranic phrases and the sacred *huroof*, letter–symbols. Jeff Durham argues how sacred art is a portal from the sensory or manifest world to a place of hidden potentials, he calls sacred art ‘effective art’ that can be powerful and problematic (2011). Problematic in the sense that the sacred can gain more power over the rational and this has been the cause for ambivalence towards the sacred.⁵⁸ However, he goes on to suggest that there seems to be a solution to this matter, in the concept of the intermediary world of the Imaginal presented by Corbin (2011). The Imaginal is a realm of potentials and provides a ladder for symbols, icons and words to be in a state of symbolizing. Hence, there is no more gaining power over the rational, rather there is an opening of the imagination to a world of metaphysical potentials. I see *ta’wil* functioning on a similar principle of opening/unveiling the imaginative perception, and art as a vehicle for this process.

Sayyed Nasr claims that inspiration for the sacred in Islam descends from a higher plane, which is how it is able to return or connect the viewer to higher realities (1987, 109). More precisely the immaterial ‘formless’ voice in revelations materializes on a horizontal plane in the complexities of calligraphy and other visual art forms, with a purpose to return the seer to the *ghayb*, the unseen. The significance of

⁵⁷ In traditional Islamic literature the candle–mirror analogy postulates the concept of *tawhid*, the esoteric monotheism in Islam, as in a unity in the multiplicity of images, and multiplicity in the unity of a single Being. Sayyid Baha al-Din Haydar Amoli [1319-1385] uses the candle–mirror analogy in his diagrammatic art to establish a relation between the image and infinite abstraction of the metaphysics. I discovered the circular drawings of Amoli towards the end of my research, and this is a subject I would like to explore further in future research.

⁵⁸ Durham refers to strong sentiments of ambivalence towards sacred arts as a result of the assumption that this art form is independent of human rationality. So much so that some scholars consider art with religious symbolism not art but religion. This is a complex discussion with various aspects, for more please refer to Durham 2011.

aniconism and symbolic lettering in Islamic art is that it attempts to *ta'wil*, as in return the seer to the *ghayb*, the unseen from the *shahadat*, the present world. The *ghayb* is used here as a general term for all that is hidden from sensory perception.

Another meaning of *Shahadat* is 'to witness' and *shahid* is a 'witness'. Testament in the oneness of God in Islam is also called a *shahadah*, a witnessing. I see the repetitive blue tiles of Iranian mosque architecture, with its geometric and floral mosaics and complex calligraphy, as a visual *shahadah*, a silent witnessing, activating *ta'wil* in chorus with a *zikr*, remembrance of the Divine. Hence not only worshippers, but objects, art, and architecture can also perform *zikr* which is an important means of communicating with the unseen. These concepts and my experience with the sacred, influence me in my approach to art-making. There is a mystical sensibility with how I use light in my installations, and in the materials I select. In the next chapter with my studio experiments I will discuss how I use wonder-inducing materials in my attempt at initiating *ta'wil* through various trials with the word.

In my art practice I continue on the traditions of Islamic art with text. Word has importance, it is the chosen medium of communication by God and frames the unrepresentable (Karalis 2014, 28). I use the term Word in contrast to figurative images; Word includes sacred scripture in general with words, letters, and sentences that can appear as symbols, patterns, images, geometry, and sound.⁵⁹ A stylized calligraphy of scripture or a melodious recitation of the Quran, both are an example of Word-art. Oludamini Ogunnaike and Sayyed Nasr both consider the Quran as the highest form of art in Islam (2017; 2010). The verses of the Quran are called *ayaat*, meaning signs, hence they have a symbolic status on top of a literary meaning. Revelation, in its original oral form as speech, was exclusive for the Prophet, word—written and oral, see-able and sayable, legible and illegible—was given to everyone else. The universe is replete with signs for wondering minds according to the Quran (Nasr 1987, 41). Muslim artisans over the years worked on advancing the scriptures with beautiful calligraphies that unfold as *ajajib*, wonder-inducing images coalescing with geometry and countless patterns.

Quranic calligraphy is often stylized to the limits beyond readability. Hence, those who wish to 'read', for them the cosmic order of the world is stretched beyond verbal expression—"seeing has to come first. Seeing before reading requires a deceleration that is enabled through Islamic calligraphy's hindered read-ability" (Kokoschka 2019, 262). The *batin*, the womb of the word, treasures signs for infinite contemplation that encourages the imagination to drift away in an ocean of possibilities. In their discussion of Islamic calligraphy, calligraphers Abdelkebir Khatibi and Mohammed Sijelmassi find that "the written word inscribes the estranged ephemeral symbolism of the separated being whose double nature Arabic calligraphy expresses" (2001, 89).

⁵⁹ The Kufic style font is based on geometric calculations.

This thesis evades any rivalry between word and the image in terms of one having prestige over the other. This distinction is part of the basic human experience, we see and perceive words and images and sometimes both image and word interconnected (Alù and Borghesi 2012, 6). As demonstrated with the text in the installation *Asfar*, the hindered readability of stylized calligraphy was to enable a see-ability before any literal interpretation. In Islamic cultures, when we write the word Allah on a piece of paper it is as sacred as an image of God and is not thrown away or disrespected in any way. When Islam shifted the cultural prestige to symbols, icons, geometry, and text there was an intellectual premise for the revelation of the word and the toppling of ‘idols’: one of earliest historical events in Mecca with the advent of Islam in Arabia (Karalis 2014, 15). The abstraction of words came to hold precedence in Islam over figurative images (Salmeron 2014). My practice continues to turn to aniconism: appropriate to my concerns around the correspondence between the *zahir* and *batin*, image and Imaginal.

In search for the imaginative beyond the *zahir*, I have realised that the concept of the Word has a generative capacity. Alieda Assmann maintains that one can stimulate transcendental imagination through the arbitrariness of the written word that calls for further explorations. By arbitrariness, Assmann means that the word does not have to be legible as a word only. We see this in Islamic calligraphy where the words disappear in the process of seeing (2012, 243). I can personally relate to this since many of the stylized calligraphies of mosques and Islamic artworks are not legible for me—a person who can read Arabic easily. There is a ‘calculated delay’ in reading and then understanding the *zahir* of many Islamic calligraphies (Kokoschka 2019, 262).

My light installations also use Arabic words and letters, and display a level of calculated delay in legibility. The Kufic word-image in *Asfar*, the streaks of light with haze in *Koukabun durri*, and the *huroof*, letter-symbols in *Hayakal al Noor* are not after ‘readability’. The literal word or letter disappears in the calligraphy, animation, or projection of light. The luminance of the light and animation of word is acknowledged by Arabic and non-Arabic seers alike. All of my installations have words/letters, but they basically appear as symbols, images, or patterns and upon close inspection one can attempt to read. Hence, *ta’wil* shifts us from the traditions of literal interpretation to a way of seeing and experiencing. A discussion on the Word continues in the following chapter, in relation to the *Hayakal al Noor* installation.

2.2 Contemporary Artists Expanding on the Zahir, Apparent Image

If we now turn to contemporary artworks we find that the subjective function of the Word is strikingly bright in the work of Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi. His 2012 installation, titled *In the Absence of Evidence to the Contrary*, has a blinding effect on eyes that attempt to read the Quran, written in Arabic and English on fluorescent tubes of white light. Structurally, the installation has dozens of fluorescent tubes that form a radiating vertical trunk reaching the ceiling (see Image 16). The verses are from chapter twenty four of the Quran called *al Noor*, The Light. Fatmi's studio describes this intense dazzling environment as a 'visual chaos'.



Image 16 Mounir Fatmi, *In The Absence of Evidence to The Contrary*, (2012), fluorescent tubes, Courtesy Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris, photograph by Rebecca Fanuel.

The eye of the spectator moves from one language to the other without being able to define the words. He or she is thus required to approach the light in order to read the text on the luminescent tubes. In this hypnotic epiphany, the visible text tests our retinal tenacity. Visual chaos is provoked, luminous spots remain imprinted, and a kinetic effect closes the eyes. Our eyes retain the memory of the text, and we project this text onto everything that we see (Fatmi 2012).

Such an experience recalls the event on Mount Sinai, in the story of Prophet *Musa*, Moses. The Prophet requests a visual experience of God. After much insistence and many reservations from God's side knowing the inability of the physical eye—a beam of light strikes on Mount Sinai and turns the mountain into ashes. Parisian Art Critic François Salmeron also sees this apparition in the glaring light of Fatmi's work. He writes: "We enter in the light, like a converted heart illuminated by divine revelation. Unless this bright light ends up blinding us and turning us into fanatics" (Salmeron, 2014). Fatmi's work is relevant to this thesis because it is provocative, sceptical of the literal, aniconic and yearning for that which is beyond the apparent *zahir*. In one of his interviews, he describes words as feeble, limited in a language coming from a limited body, "but we must go beyond language". Accordingly, his use of Quranic verses is far from-decorative



Image 17 Me, standing inside, Refik Anadol, *Infinity Room* (2015), immersive environment, Zorlu Center Istanbul Turkey.

calligraphy, instead there is a feeling of reluctance in accepting things as they are. Encrypted with symbols that have historic, political, and religious references, this is the kind of art practice that privileges the unseen over the seen, the invisible over the visible.

Another significant artist who mediates a connection with the latency of an image is Turkish media Artist Refik Anadol. In 2015, at the Zorlu Performing Arts Centre in Istanbul, I entered the *Infinity Room*. In this artwork, Anadol delivers an immersive experience into another world; I have a faint memory of drowning as the lines moved in, which made me sit down. And as the lines moved out, it felt like the room was expanding (see Image 17). Inside a four meter square room, Anadol is able to play with perception, and transform our encounter with physical space, testing; “the threshold between the simulacrum space created by the projection.” (Anadol, 2015).⁶⁰ Anadol’s practice has advanced through the use of artificial intelligence over recent years. He now works with data as a substance on a massive scale, using AI technology, algorithms, and huge projection-scapes. Anadol’s work is fluid, immersive and on a grand scale. “Parametric data sculpture approach” is how he

defines his current art practice, which is about using the invisible data, which is in abundance as raw material, and giving it a visible life (Anadol, 2015). His work reminds me of Motlagh’s theory of data scientists as persons of *ta’wil*—discussed in the previous chapter. *Machine Hallucinations* (2020), *Black Sea* 2019, and *Bosphorus* (2018) are all mesmerising installations, and I see them as intermediaries that oscillate between what we see, and what we do not see (as in data). Anadol refers to the return-effect in his *Infinity Room* installation, which connects to how I understand *ta’wil*; my method of returning in this practice-oriented research. Anadol writes:

Rather than approaching the medium as a means of escape into some disembodied techno-utopian fantasy, this project sees itself as a means of return, i.e., facilitating a temporary release from our habitual perceptions and culturally biased assumptions about being in the world, to enable us, however momentarily, to perceive ourselves and the world around us freshly. (2015)

⁶⁰ Refik Anadol’s *Infinity Room* can be seen here: <http://refikanadol.com/works/infinity-room/>, accessed May 12, 2021.



Image 18 Azadeh Emadi, *Motion within Motion* (2014), digital video projections, screenshot from <https://vimeo.com/101236299> accessed May 12, 2021.

This fresh interpretation of the world and its *zahir* is what Azadeh Emadi seeks in her investigation on the pixel. Emadi arrives at the pixel by questioning the *zahir* of an image, she sees the pixel as the “minimal part” in relation to time and motion in the frame as a whole (2020, 77). Emadi argues that the concept of the minimal part and its relationship to the whole (as in the universe) can reveal the many hidden aspects of our perception. Her pioneering work on “the point of view of the pixel” and “becoming pixel”; in her PhD thesis *Motion Within Motion* (2014), considers the pixel a living entity that has its own being, it is only rigid in the human perception. Emadi invites us to consider for a moment that we think of the pixel, asking, “then how does the universe appear from a pixel’s point-of-view?” (2013). This is a unique perspective that can expand our perception and experiences of the universe.

Emadi’s artwork *Motion within Motion* (2014) has a large projection that shows the inside of the Friday Mosque of Yazd, which has its own historical significance. The projection is accompanied with a smaller screen that has single blocks of colour shimmering, appearing and then disappearing; this is that minimal part of the whole. The echoes from the mosque, the call for prayers, and the movement have an intensifying effect on the viewer, which takes them inside the mosque. My encounter with this installation is through its documentation on Vimeo, and it is interesting to see how the camera is positioned. This is because the projection seems to be on the ground level, and there is a scene where you see people walking inside the mosque and then there are those (the viewers) who pass by in front of the projection. The notion of motion within motion becomes apparent (see Image 18). The following passage is a beautiful analogy by Marks for Emadi’s pixel:

To Emadi, the pixel is like a whirling dervish, becoming more deeply connected to the world as it spins. In a way, her works invite human visitors to cultivate this pixel dervish within ourselves. (2018)

Like Anadol and Fatmi, Emadi’s work liberates our view of the world and traces the resonance of the unseen, in the visible image. My art practice with light has a similar theme of tracing the unknown unfamiliar *batin*, enfolded in the apparent light, word, and experience.

My selection of artists in this thesis is not based on their gender, rather, for me, the conceptual concerns of the artwork takes priority. Two internationally acclaimed women artists of Middle Eastern descent, Shirin Neshat and Mona Hatoum, based in the United States and United Kingdom respectively, also create multi-media light and sound installations. However, I have focused on other artists in this chapter because, while Neshat and Hatoum use certain Islamic aesthetics like Arabic text, calligraphy and human body as I do, my mode of expressing Islamic philosophy through art is closer to the work of Mounir Fatmi, Refik Anadol and Azadeh Emadi. Neshat and Hatoum's artworks are often interpreted as a critique of Islamic gender politics, and their rendering of Islamic gender codes may be argued to serve Eurocentric and neo-liberal arts agendas with preconceived notions about the situation of Islamic women. My view on Neshat and Hatoum resonates with art historian Jessica Winegar's article entitled, "The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror." The article talks about the Western obsession with Muslim women artists work. Winegar writes; "the obsession over women artists supposedly critiquing Islam may at some level rationalize U.S. intervention, or at the very least prevent substantive criticism of it...Does the insistence on seeing rai musicians or Muslim women artists as critiquing Islam really advance Americans' understanding of the Middle East, or does it merely confirm what they think they already know?" (Winegar 2008,668).

2.2.1 Illumination and Metaphysics in Light Art

I position my artwork among the works of artists from Middle Eastern and South Asian backgrounds for the most part. In addition, I also look at luminaries of the Euro-American art world who have light as the main protagonist of their practice. To name a few: Anne Veronica Janssen, Laddie John Dill, James Turrel, Bill Viola, William Kentridge, Chris Fraser, and Anthony McCall, all have explored the phenomenon of illumination in their life's work. I discuss some of these artists in the remainder of this chapter, alongside my experiments with light in studio. I also consider, the technically advanced group of European media artists called AntiVj: including Yannick Jacquet, Joanie Lemerrier, Romain Tardy, Olivier Ratsi, and Simon Geilfus. They work primarily with projections and create large scale interactive



Image 19 Joanie Lemerrier, *Constellations* (2018), projections, screenshot from <https://vimeo.com/324872156> accessed May 12, 2021.

installations to explore light and perceptions of reality, time, and space. Among them, I have been following Lemerriers' work for many years. He started his career as a visual jockey, sampling videos at festivals and soon discovered how projecting images or light onto surfaces can enhance or even change their reality. Specifically, projection mapping is a technique that transforms the visual state of a surface; it challenges the conventions of four-cornered video and presents it in coordination with the mapped surface. I first used this technique in my Master's program in Ankara.

Lemerrier uses geometric designs and minimalist abstract forms in an installation setting to expand on the perception of the visible. For instance, his recent installation titled *Constellations* (2018) is a projection of abstract geometry on invisible ripples of water, which creates stunning holograms (or no-lographics)⁶¹ in the air; we see a ring of light morphing into patterns of geometry and stars; as if this is a portal to another universe (see Image 19). Zach Andrews from Design Boom describes the impact of such a projection as:

a complex 3D homage to the cosmos. dazzling, frightening, and hopeful are some of the emotions one may remember as blinding cascades of sacred geometries slide your still body forward at lightspeed through a black hole, only to stop abruptly to gaze at temporary silence, or flaring red supernovas. (2019)

This kind of work has a transformative effect on the perception of space, time, and movement. In addition, I am aware that there are limited new-media and installation-based work from artists with a Muslim background, which makes me realise the importance of creating experience-based installations that can bridge this gap. Hence, besides Fatmi, Anadol, and Emadi, I now turn to artworks that situate a performative participation of the seer. This kind of work responds to Rosalind Krauss's theory of passage, a concept that has some parallel to my understanding of *ta'wil*.



Image 20 Bruce Nauman
Corridors (1975), videotape,
Courtesy of Solomon R.
Guggenheim Museum, © (2018)
Bruce Nauman/Artists Rights
Society (ARS), New York.

⁶¹ Lemerrier calls this phenomenon of illumination through light, no-logram, see more at <https://joanielemercier.com/no-logram/>, accessed May 20, 2021.



Image 21 Narjis Mirza, *Asfar, Journeys*, (2018), inside the Barrel Store space of Corban Estates Arts Centre.

2.3 Passages Between the Visible and the Unknown

In her book *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977), Krauss discusses many modern sculptures and installations and how they create a passage for the active viewer. In this section I discuss Krauss's notion of 'passage': a performative participation in relation to my installations and the works of selected Western artists. I examine how their artworks assist my understanding of installation art and the experience for the seer. Passage is not simply moving or passing through an enclosed space, it is more about the performative/bodily participation of the viewer (Petersen 2015, 28); a participation that places both the audience and the artist before the work and the world, in an attitude of primary humility (Krauss 1981, 283). I believe this sense of humility rises from discovering a higher meaning in simple objects, events, and encounters. For me, passage and my approach to *ta'wil* for installation art practice are two concepts that meet each other in the discussion of performative installations that create passages between the apparent and the unknown.

When I examine Bruce Nauman's *Performance Corridor* series from 1969-1989, the viewer is the 'moving centre' of the experiment, where participation is a 'moment-to-moment passage through space and time' (Krauss 1981, 282). My fascination with this work is with the architectural use of space; the disappearing of the body when walking inside the corridor—in some cases 50 feet long corridors—testing the physical limits, followed by the unsettling perception of place (see Image 20). My installations share a similar ambition: *Asfar*, *Koukabun Durri* and *Hayakal al Noor* series are—for the seer—passages of light and dark. In these works, the seer's body also disappears in the light, haze, shadows, and veils. However, I intend the disappearing to be followed by the opening of the imagination in connection to the suprasensory. My installation practice proceeds with some similarities to passage-like artwork and some added modifications, as I shall explain.

The barrel store space, introduced in the previous chapter, in Corban Estates Art Centre in particular has a long tunnel-like passage (see Image 21). I installed my light cube in this space for three days in the winter. As it grew dark outside, the contrast of light and dark magnified inside the barrel store. Image 6 shows how the participating seer's body disappears in the austere *Kufic* lines and the text from Sadra's transcendental journeys relays a direction for the imagination to return to the philosophy of being. The movement of a seer is designed by the light and shadows and can trigger a circular *tarwaf*-like experience.

However, Nauman's corridor started with the artist's self-exploration in studio; banging his body against the walls of his studio, walking on perimeter lines of a square and developing a relationship with the camera. Nauman would record his studio experiments, and the first instance has him walking into a twenty-inch-wide corridor, with exaggerated hip movement as if imitating a sculptural figure. The concept of passage is amplified in *Corridor* (1970) which features two monitors at the end of the corridor, one tracking the movement of the walker through live capturing video; this camera is placed at the entrance of the corridor.⁶² Hence, when walking down the corridor one sees oneself from behind and the second monitor has a pre-recorded empty corridor video from the same angle. The uncanny absence of the walker from one monitor, and the live footage of the self from the unfamiliar back side of the body, makes this an "unsettling self-conscious experience of doubling and displacement" (Mann 2018). As a result, every time the viewer turns around to notice the camera, they lose the ability to see themselves in the monitor and there is "splitting of subjectivity" (Burgon 2016). It encapsulates the constant circular motion of the self, attempting to see, followed by their inability to see, and this resembles the circular motion found in the continual process of *ta'wil*.



Image 22 Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *Night Walk for Edinburgh*, (2019), video, image screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hnwStv7cWo> accessed May 12, 2021.

Krauss goes on to discuss the potential of an art space in transforming an ordinary object or event into something extraordinary. When an artist takes an ordinary object and displays it inside a gallery the object is transformed. The act of inversion is severe, because the object is so ordinary that the physical and formal aspects are no longer important, so the object becomes a symbol with a metaphorical opening. Krauss's concept of the symbolic significance of an image, or an object inside an art space, resonates with my understanding of *ta'wil*—where an art space becomes an appropriate place for interpretations (as in *ta'wil*) beyond the apparent:

It is a recognition that is triggered by the object but is somehow not about the object. And, as a moment, it does not concern the time in which the object itself exists or in which the viewer experiences or understands it. That is,

⁶² Bruce Nauman's Performance Corridors invite the viewer to be active and engage with the installation as a walker or a participant. Hence, I use the term walker or participant for installation-based work.

the moment does not resemble the linear passage of time from the seeing of the object to the cognition of its meaning. Instead of that kind of arc, the shape of this moment has much more the character of a circle—the cyclical form of a quandary. (1981, 77–78)

The shape of this moment is similar to the shape of *ta'wil*, which is a cyclical form of returning the viewer again and again to the beginning as does Nauman in his *Performance Corridors*. However, 'the beginning' in a *ta'wil* approach is a different place. It is a place of hidden mysteries—where the image is initiated, and the soul of the artist is fed with symbolic imagery— to recall Florensky and Corbin in the previous chapter. *Aalam Al Mithal* or the Imaginal is also a passage between the sensible world and the highest realms of *al-Aql*, intellect.

Another conceptual approach to 'passage' is in Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's video walks; they also create an unsettling experience—between the apparent and the unseen—for the participant. In these walks, for example the *Night Walk of Edinburgh* 2019, the important activity takes place prior to the actual walk. The viewer is given an iPod and headphones, with a pre-recorded video footage of the area where the walk will take place. An uncanny voice guides the participant on a set path, which sounds like it will be a normal audio guide but it is dramatically different and experimental. There is also a layer of background sound in the iPod audio, which overlaps the noise actually occurring in the outside world of the participant. The mixing of the visuals—the one on the iPod against what the participant sees in their present time—places the imagination against the physical surroundings. The outside sound layered with the audio in the headphones positions the listener in-between the real and the virtual, the immediate and the distant, which is an ambiguous place to be. I find Cardiff and Miller's walks a powerful experiment that rattles the concept of reality for the participant. There is an aporetic temporality in these walks, it is a kind of passage where "temporalities are mixed rather than juxtaposed" (Capdevila 2015, 12).

Finally, I would like to discuss Anthony McCall and Ann Veronica Janssen's light works, which are less unsettling experiences than the *Night Walk of Edinburgh* 2019, and have affinities with my own practice in mixing light and darkness. Their work brings the formless, immaterial phenomena of light close to material sensibility. Hence, the concept of passage manifests with the participant at the centre of the experience; in awe of the enchanting light. McCall uses sharp linear beams of projected light, in an atmosphere of haze, which gives an appearance to light. McCall's light installations developed from a series of film projections that began in 1973. His early projections were in old warehouses, McCall talks about how the dust particles and natural smoke gave his light substance, drama, and visibility. The projections also have a strong 3D sculptural quality, inviting the viewer to touch, feel, and sense the immaterial passage of light (Iles 2001). Mieke Bal sees the appeal of touching light as the defining characteristic of both McCall and Janssen's work. The participant is invited to explore, touch, walk into the installation and present their body to the light to interact and cast shadows (see Image 23). The formless light

fuses with the atmosphere to take form. Like Janssen and McCall, I am also inviting the haptic–touch sensibility in my installations; in *Koukabun Durri* this is possible through haze, and in *Hayakal al Noor* I capture the flow of light with translucent chiffon silk and the body of the seer. I consider the seer's participation valuable in installation art intended to be passages between the visible and the unknown.



Image 23 Anthony McCall. Line Describing a Cone, 1973. Installation view at the Whitney Museum in 2001 during the exhibition "The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977"

Unlike the theory of passage, *ta'wil* operates with the world view that considers the sensory perception of things as the mildest form of reality. As discussed, Sadra situates reality on a gradation of intensities, where the sensory world is less real than the Imaginal realm, which is not the case for Krauss's theory of passage. Passage operates by considering the theatrical elements of sculpture and its effect on the art experience, which do not necessarily imply a suprasensory encounter. This situates the theory of passage more towards a secular undertaking, while *ta'wil* is more about what is behind the *zahir* and seeks the mystical. I consider my light installations to be within the domain of Islamic arts, that begin with the bodily presence and continue in the imaginative spirituality of the seer. This imaginative spirituality is a shared experience that can occur in the secular context of art galleries.

To summarize the discussion in this chapter, I have found that contemporary installation art practices question the *zahir*, apparent image, and generate performative participation that augments my understanding of the seer's relationship to an image. The Word has both literal and sacred significance that extends to the realm of symbols, in a state of symbolizing when encountered from the perspective of *ta'wil*. I see *zikr* and *tarwaf* as activating agents of *ta'wil* in Islamic practices. In the chapter that follows, I explore the wonder-inducing *huroof*, letter-symbols and present them as bodies of light: symbolizing the sensorial and voicing a *ta'wil* to return and reflect on our spiritual beginnings. Through the process of making in studio, I next expand on how the aesthetics of *ajab*, wonder, in Islamic arts, can form a basis for *ta'wil* in my art practice.

3 Encountering Ajab in the Ta'wil of Huroof

This chapter explains the aniconic qualities of Arabic *huroof*, letters, and the mysterious *fwatih*, fourteen opening letter–symbols of the Quran. Through projections in an installation setting, I further my understanding of how letters, words, and symbols evoke an imaginative spirituality and open a passage for the unknown. In my attempt to *ta'wil*, I found the *fwatih* exemplify *ajab*, wonder, in Islamic traditions. The Arabic term *ajab* is an unanticipated state of wonder and has a significance in early Islamic art practices. For my installation practice I consider the experience of *ajab*, a prelude to *ta'wil*, in provoking an imaginative understanding beyond the *zahir*. I begin this chapter with Matthew Saba's pioneering work on the 'Aesthetics of *Ajab*'. Saba argues that *ajab*, wonder, was strategically intended for the Islamic arts and marked the success of many Islamic crafts (Saba 2012, 203). The purpose of presenting the concept of *ajab* is to consider the effect it can have on the seer and how wonder mediates contemplative perception. This is an aesthetic experience that can potentially go beyond the sensory and yet keep you dazzled by the *zahir*. After the discussion on *ajab*, wonder, I go through the various trials in studio and how I developed the animation, projection, materials, voice, design of space, and participation in my installation series *Hayakal al Noor*. Originally developed for the Black box space at AUT, it was later exhibited in public galleries: North Art Gallery Auckland in March 2020 and at Leo Kelly Blacktown Arts Sydney, April 2021.

3.1 Ajab, a Prelude to Ta'wil

Ajab, then, is a desirable feeling that stems from one's own inability to fully comprehend an event, object, or phenomenon because it is perceived as too strange, too great, or too complicated. (Saba 2012, 198)

Ajab is a commonly used word in languages including Urdu, Persian, and Arabic. It is from the root word *a-j-b*, and we derive many more words from *ajab*, like *ajib* meaning mystery and strangeness; and *ta'ajjub*, astonishment. Ibn Manzur in *Lisan ul Arab* begins describing *ajab* as refusal and denial of something because it is out of the ordinary, and then adds, "to experience *ajab* is to be delighted and confused at the same time".⁶³ This is because the impression of the unexpected event, moment, or object is so great, while the cause is not known to the seer; and this stimulates a contemplative perception.

⁶³ Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, A very old Arabic dictionary, dated 1290CE 1:580–82. For more see Matthew Saba "Abbasid Lusterware and the Aesthetics of *ajab*" 2012.

Ajab, wonder, is one of the aesthetic experiences I provide the conditions for in my installations, particularly *Hayakal al Noor*. I consider *ajab* an emotional response that influences the experience of the seer and initiates the contemplative process of *ta'wil*: to go on a journey of unveiling and discovery. I briefly discuss some of the techniques used to arouse *ajab*, wonder in art for instance: mirror work, light and light bearing materials, and advanced geometrical designs. In my studio practice I consider light, animation, Arabic letter–symbols in particular the *farwatih*, projection, translucent materials, and the multisensory encounter with the space, are all effective for generating *ajab*, wonder, for the seer.

The close association between *ajab* and contemplative perception through *ta'wil* is purposeful in Islamic art cultures. It was and *is* a strategic effort of Islamic artisans to induce wonder in the beholder through art (Saba 2012, 192). Why? Because wonder-inducing art is a befitting approach for provoking a connection with the unseen worlds. Scholars like Saba, Gurlu Necipoglu, and Idreis Travethan see *ajab* as the first step towards a fuller understanding of Islamic metaphysics and wisdom (Necipoglu 1995, 195; Saba 2012, 203; Trevathan 2020, 110).⁶⁴ The Quran refers to many events as cases of *ajab*, followed by an invitation to critical thinking. I consider the concepts discussed so far in this exegesis: intensification of Being, the unseen Imaginal, luminance as existence, *ta'wil* and the act returning to spiritual beginnings; concepts full of *ajab*, that arouse critical and creative thinking. Hence, creating the aesthetic experience of *ajab* is valuable in Islamic arts as it leads to a realisation beyond the materiality of the *zahir*.

3.1.1 Ajab in Islamic Art

It is important to briefly situate how *ajab* was created in artworks, before moving onto my studio experiments. Earlier in this exegesis the intricate mirror work of the *Sheesh Mahal* was identified as aniconic Islamic art; ‘symbolic and suggestive of the other, which is far more significant than what appears to sight’. Here, I would like to revisit this example from the perspective of *ajab*.

In these mirror palaces from the Mughal era, a few candles glisten the arches and walls to signal deep philosophical interpretations. The complex mosaic can be considered a *zahir*, an outward manifestation of a subtle and inward commentary of Islamic ideas. The immediate reaction of a person entering these mirrored palaces is awe and wonder, for the craft, the skill, and the monumental scale of the work. The custodians of the palace are aware of the *ajab* inducing mosaic and the spectacle of light, which is why they usher the visitors inside the

⁶⁴ It should be noted that the discussion on *ajab*, contemplative perception, and wisdom can be traced back to philosophers like Ibn Sina and Al Farabi who reference the Quran for their synthesis of knowledge. Hence the discussion in contemporary studies of Islamic arts is rooted in ancient Islamic philosophy and the Quran.

Sheesh Mahal in complete darkness. When the visitors enter, the custodians first wait a few moments to let the visitors assimilate to the darkness, then a few candles are lit and suddenly, the walls scintillate a brilliant show of light. There are gasps of awe and wonder for the vivid animation of light that elucidates an invisible world in the darkness of the night (see Image 24).

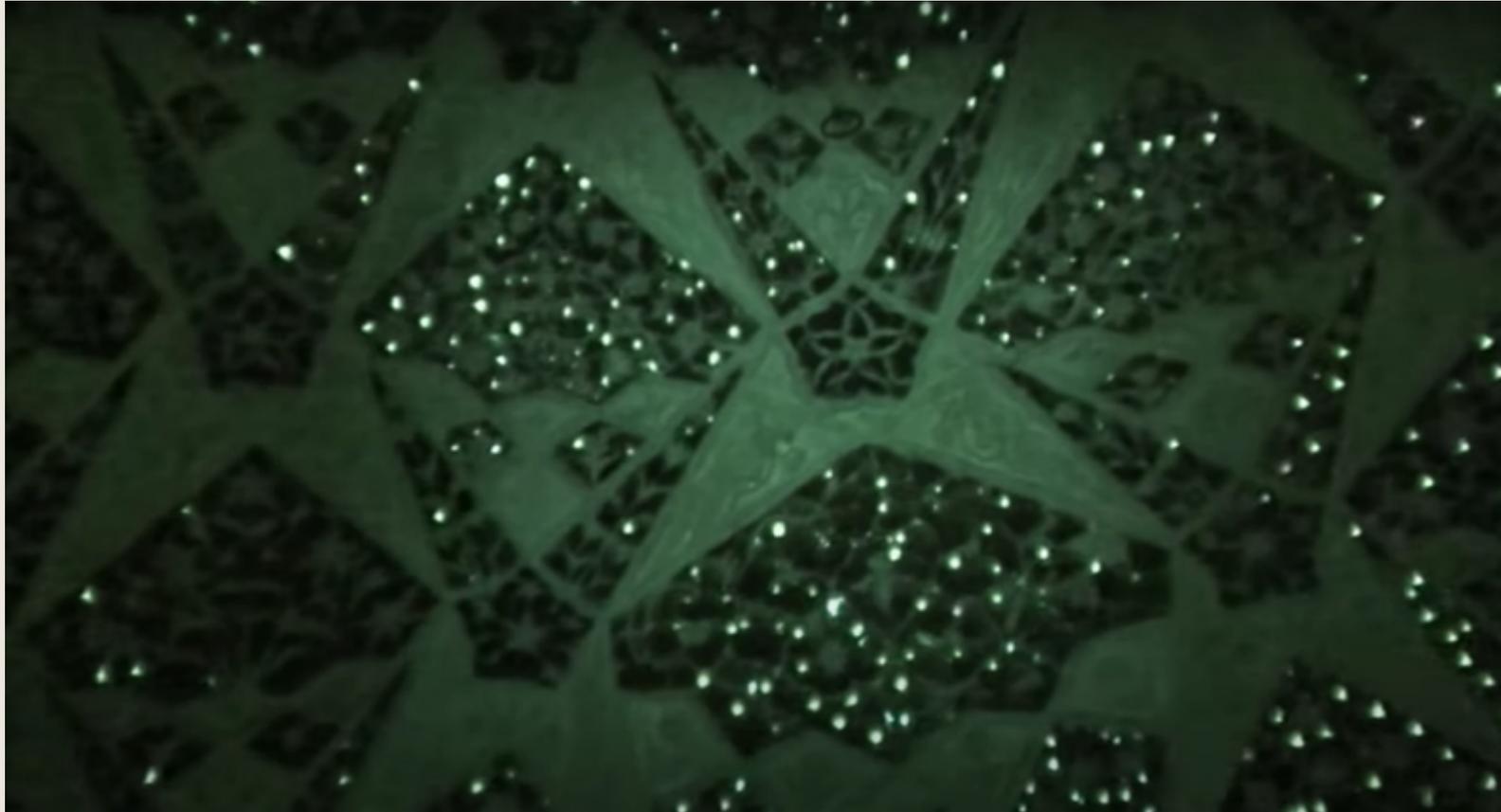


Image 24 *Sheesh Mahal* Agra Fort (2017) video by Matthew Heines, screenshot from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PU_41Fz4_Rg accessed May 12, 2021.

Sheesh Mahal, in my view, represents one of the many *ajajib*, wondrous creations from early Islamic art and architecture that generate an aesthetic encounter of *ajab*. Saba, based on his survey of Abbasid lusterware, presents a theory called the ‘Aesthetics of *Ajab*’ (2012, 203). Saba argues that *ajaba*, to be wonder-struck, was an expected and desirable reaction and marked the success of an artwork; early Islamic

crafts people's motivations were to generate wonder for the viewer. The micro detail of the complex Islamic patterns, elaborate geometry, the perpetual play of difficult to decipher motifs, stylized calligraphy, use of light-bearing textures, mosaic of mirrors that create a sense of motion, and monumental scale of the work that suggests the infinite—all are in the framework of *ajaba*, wonder-inducing (Saba 2012, 189). These are subjects of adornment and wonder-inducing methods. Saba's analysis is based on various historical texts and objects from Iraq. He writes:

It emerged that in early Islamic Iraq works of craft were expected to be able to elicit significant reactions of *ajab* in viewers, and that objects and monuments were often judged according to this criterion. Some of the qualities consistently described as *ajib* included surface effects like reflection or iridescence, a sense of movement, and the unexpected fusion of forms or images. (Saba 2012, 203)

I referenced in chapter two, Motlagh's synthesis on *ta'wil* in the modern world that positions the artist's strategic intelligence, in proximity to *ta'wil*. An approach in which the artist is intelligently able to take the viewer to where they are intending. From Saba's argument above I wonder if the artists who crafted the elicit reaction of wonder through their work, were practicing *ta'wil*? Were the architects of the *Sheesh Mahal* of Lahore intending to stimulate contemplative perception? When the artist brings forth the emotional response of wonder it places the viewer in humility before the wonderful creation. Krauss has also indicated that this attitude of primary humility before the work, generates a deep reciprocity between the viewer and the artwork (Krauss 1981, 283).

Gurlu Necipoglu, a Turkish expert on Islamic art and architecture, also identifies this aesthetic aspiration. She describes how extended contemplation of the complexities of Islamic art can induce not just wonder but 'pleasurable wonder' in the viewer (Necipoglu 1995, 213). This has an intimate association to imagination, creativity, and *ta'wil*, hence wonder is the first step. There is on the other hand, sparse literary material on the technical methods used for creating '*ajab* inducing-works'. For instance: there is a dearth of information to explain how the complex geometry in Islamic art was developed. Hence, when in 1995 Necipoglu gave a public life to the Topkapi Scroll—discovered in 1986—it was a significant moment in modern art history.⁶⁵ The scroll was presumably prepared in the late 15th century Iran. It provides some technical information on how the complex geometric designs developed all over the Muslim world. The scroll has 114 geometric 'method drawings', some of them are three-dimensional patterns that interlock stars and polygons to construct complex patterns known as *girih* in Persian, meaning knots (Necipoglu 1995, 4). The geometric sophistication of these *girih*s are informed by mathematical

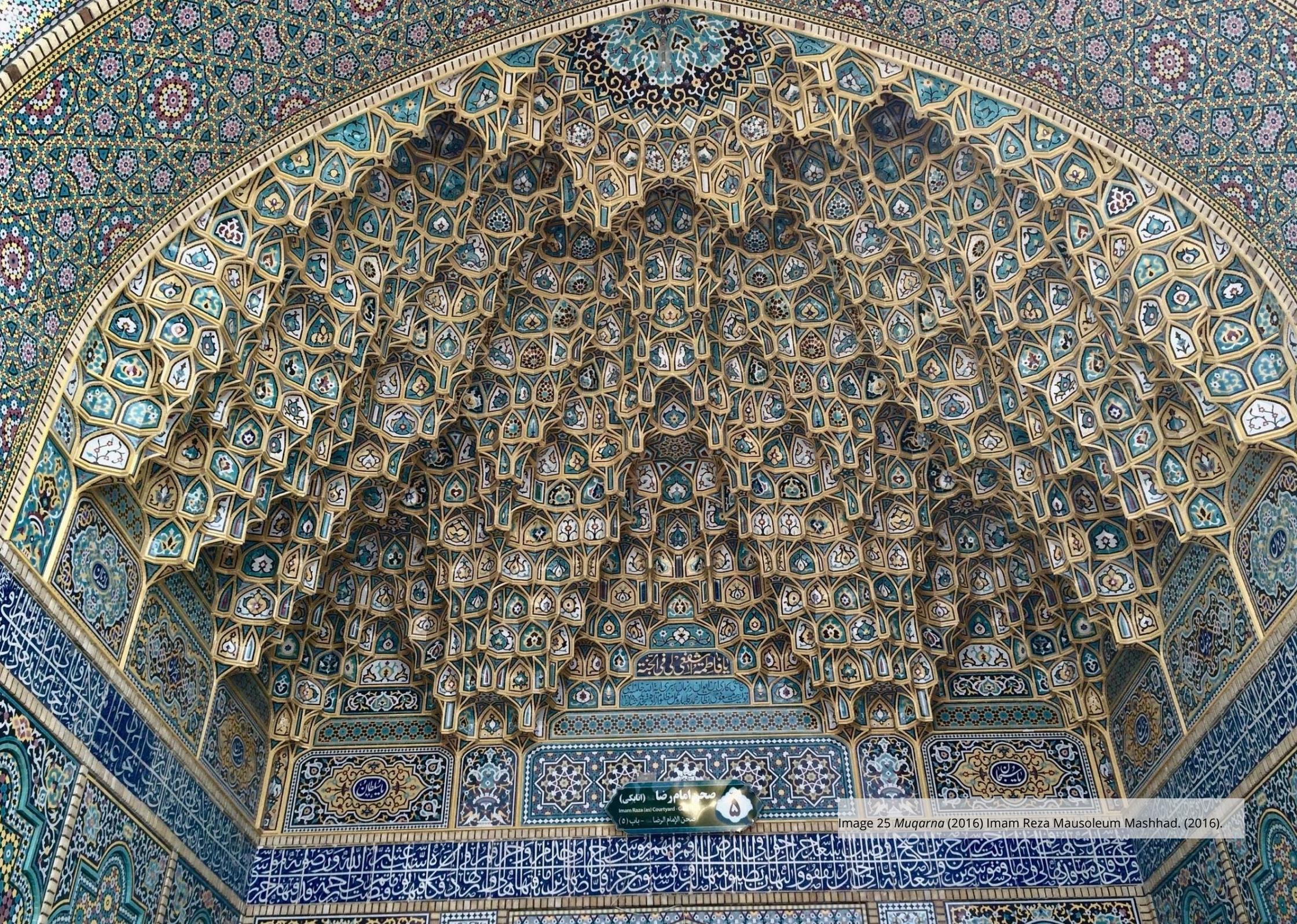
⁶⁵ Before Gurlu Necipoglu these scrolls were not seen by the world. In 1986, Topkapi Palace Museum Library showed them to Gurlu and she decided to publish these rare artefacts from Islamic art history.

calculations and aesthetics of discipline, in a compositional unity, intended to dazzle the mind and blind the eye (Necipoglu 1995, 175). Necipoglu has deep understanding of these works and writes eloquently on the magnetism of *girih*s against the natural representations of the world:

The absence of a fixed viewpoint in the abstract geometric matrices of *girih*s yielded an infinite isotropic space that amounted to a denial of the naturalistic representation of the visible world. *Girih* patterns filtered the visual data offered by the natural world into mental abstractions. No wonder, then, that these inward-looking abstract images were unconcerned with the spatial coordination of sight and representation through the use of vanishing point perspective. The draftsmen who designed them remained bound to a conception of the picture plane as a window to infinity, filled with symmetrically repeated geometric shapes exhibiting *unendliche Rapport*.⁶⁶ (Necipoglu 1995, 166)

Such arithmetic geometry develops complex wall panels, domes, and vault projections, of which a unique subcategory of *girih* is three dimensional *muqarnas*. *Muqarnas* are another case of *ajab*, they are an unexpected configuration of forms and images. These are an archetypal feature of Islamic architecture that make complex volumetric vaults with sophisticated mathematical calculations that feature in arches and domes. Necipoglu describes *muqarnas* as the work of ‘wonder-making architects’ (Necipoglu 1995, 6) for whom in the perfect lines of geometry are the echo (*ta’wil*) of the wonderful infinite. *Muqarnas* are most common in Iranian architecture. Image 24 shows one of the *muqarnas* of Iran, photographed on my visit to the city of Mashhad at the mausoleum of Imam Reza, who is the eighth Imam in Shi’i Islam. This mausoleum attracts approximately 30 million local and foreign visitors each year and *muqarnas* like this, welcome the visitors inside the sacred shrine. Indeed, these *muqarnas* have a magnetic bodily and transcendental effect on those who witness them. They place the viewer in utter humility upon encountering the perfection of this opening to infinity and contemplative perception (see Image 25). More broadly, *muqarnas* are reminders of the strategic intelligence and mathematical sensibility of artists—which Motlagh refers to as a *ta’wil* like approach (Motlagh 2012, 109). I am inspired by these intelligent artworks and processes for the aesthetics of *ajab* and use them as background research for my installation art practice.

⁶⁶ *Unendliche Rapport* can be translated as infinite connection.



سجده امام رضا (علیه السلام)
Imam Reza (a.s) Courtyard - 5
سجده الإمام الرضا - باب 5

Image 25 Muqarna (2016) Imam Reza Mausoleum Mashhad. (2016).

3.1.2 Ajab in the Sermon of Imam Ali

On the subject of wonder, there is a sermon titled the *Peacock*, delivered by Ali Ibn Abi Talib [599–661] the son-in-law of the Prophet of Islam. The purpose of briefly sharing this sermon of Imam Ali is to explore what features in the natural world generate *ajab* for the beholder; and how I can create the aesthetic response of *ajab* in my installations. In the discussion of *ajab*, both Saba and Idries Travethan—a renowned curator of Islamic art collections in the Middle East—refer to this sermon documented in the book *Nahj ul Balagha, Peak of Eloquence* by Al-Sharif Al-Radi [970–1016]. This sermon is considered an important historic document that inspires the aesthetics of wonder in the minds of early Muslim artisans (Saba 2012, 203; Trevathan 2020, 189).

The sermon begins by establishing how all of creation is full of wonder (*al-ajab*) and this is clear proof for attentive minds to acknowledge and submit before the divine Being. There is divine craftsmanship (*san'a*), in the wondrous creation of birds, and most distinguished among them is the peacock, that testifies to God's Marvel (*lutf*) and Might (*qudrat*). The profile of the peacock is expressed as a visible testament to fine creativity. Imam Ali adorns the luminosity, brightness, iridescence, and many light bearing qualities of the peacock, all of which induce wonder in the seer (Trevathan 2020, 199). Here, I share a short excerpt from the sermon that describes the many luminescent features of the Peacock:

Its brightness (*bayaḍ*) glistens through the darkness around it. How few colours are there that it did not take in portion and improve in terms of the amount of its polish (*siqal*) and luster (*barīq*), and glitter (*baṣīṣ*) and brilliance (*raḥnaq*)? Like scattered blossoms that neither the rain of spring nor sun of summer has weathered.... If you studied one of the hairs from its feathers closely, it would show you the red of a rose and then the green of an emerald and then again, the yellow of refined gold. (trans. Radi 1989)

The various adjectives used in this sermon, *bayad*, brightness, *siqal* polish, *barīq* lustre, *baṣīṣ* glitter, and *raḥnaq* brilliance; all are bearers of light. Hence, the fascination for bright colours and luminance in early Islamic ceramics, tiles, and lusterware had their inspiration in the natural world. Travethan and Saba give an account of many precious objects, lustreware, and tiles all of which reflect brilliant colour, radiance, and luminance; these qualities made these objects *Abu kalamun*. *Abu kalamun* is a very old term used to describe objects and materials that have almost magical light bearing qualities; that have brilliance of colour, iridescence, and remarkable luminance. The description of *Abu kalamun* inspires my selection of materials that bear and emit the light of the projection. In the section on testing

materials, I expand on this aspect further. Travethan quotes an account by 11th Century, poet Nasir e Khusraw [1004–1088] who describes unique fabric in the bazaars of Old Cairo, as *bukalamun* (a derivation of *Abu kalamun*):

It is a colourful cloth that appears to be a different colour at every time of day. It is exported to the East and West from Tinnis alone. The ruler of Byzantium, they say, sent a message to offer the Sultan of Egypt a hundred towns for Tinnis. The sultan refused, knowing he wished to procure *qasab* (a type of fine linen) and *buqalamun* from it. (Travethan 2020, 90)

This is one example of the many wonderful and precious creations that were made over the vast history of Islamic art. In the next section, following this understanding of *ajab*, wonder, and its effect in generating a contemplative perception in mind, I would like to open a discussion on my studio work with luminance and *huroof*, letters.

3.2 My Installation Art Practice from the Perspective of Ajab

My installation series titled *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light*, as a case of *ajab*, wonder-inducing work, developed upon my approach to *ta'wil*, provokes the seer beyond the apparent. In the sections that follow I explain the various stages of making in studio. *Hayakal al Noor* includes several studio tests and three exhibitions. First in the Black Box space at AUT, second in a group exhibition in Auckland and third in a solo exhibition of work in Sydney. I discuss the experience of the exhibition for myself and the seer in the next chapter. Here I discuss the processes in studio.

My studio tests are of two categories: projection on materials and objects, and projection on bodies, which I call 'Inscribing the Body with Light'. The animation used in the projections was also developed from several sketches, with Arabic *huroof* letters and the mysterious *farwatih* letter–symbols—that build differently in each digital animation. Before I delve into the process of making, first, I share how Arabic letters and the *farwatih*, letter–symbols are considered in scripture and everyday Islamic traditions. I follow this with an explanation of why I chose to use letters as 'bodies of light' in my research on provoking the seer's imagination.

3.2.1 The Arabic Script and the Fawatih in Everyday Islamic Traditions

First it is important to know some details about the Arabic script in order to understand how I composed the letters in my animations. In Arabic writing, the shape of each letter changes with its position inside a word; it can be in the initial position, the middle, or at the end of a word. In this way a single letter has three different shapes depending on its position in a word. However, when a letter stands alone, it is a *muqata'a* which literally means disjointed, as are the *fawatih*. For instance, the letter ب (Ba) is disjointed and has a complete identity on its own. This same Ba has to be broken in half to be able to join another letter and has a fractured identity, this small Ba has to join another letter to make a word (see Image 26).

For example, when ب (Ba) joins ي (Ya) and ت (Ta), it makes the word بيت (bait) which means house, and when Ba Ya, and Ta is disjointed, it looks like this ت ي ب and does not make a word. The letters I use in my animations appear disjointed, hence they cannot be read as a word. Of the 28 letters in Arabic language, only 14 letters appear in their disjointed form in the Quran and are called the *fawatih* meaning the Openers or the Keys. They appear repeatedly, and open twenty-nine chapters of the Quran. These are also called *Huroofe Muqata'at*, meaning the isolated or disjointed letters of the Quran. They have no literal meaning. Even when they are recited, each letter is enunciated separately, as you will hear in the audio composition of these letters.



Image 26 On the left is whole disjointed Ba and on the right is broken Ba.

There is very limited information on what these letters literally mean, and there is even condemnation for anyone who claims to know the reality of the enigmatic *fawatih*.⁶⁷ What is known of these letters is from Quranic exegesis of the chapters these letters open. For example, *Alif Laam Meem*, these three letters open the second *Sura* of the Quran and in the famous Tafsir al Tabari it is mentioned “the letter *alif* represents *ala' allah* (God's favors), the letter *lam* represents *lutf* (divine kindness) and the letter *meem* represents *majd* (divine glory)” (Ebstein and Sviri 2011, 230). This is one example of the many theories around these letters.

⁶⁷ The discussion on what the *fawatih* mean is an expanded discussion with each scholar presenting a theory. But it is a general consensus in the Muslim cultures based on Prophetic guidance, that the *fawatih* are mysterious, secretive and no one knows their meaning. There are few scholarly works to explain what these letters mean and why they appear as opening letters. A Prominent Iranian scholar and contemporary philosopher, Syed Jawadi Amuli, discusses the ambiguity of these letters and also presents 20 common views on the interpretation of the fawatih, critically analysing each view. For more see <https://en.shafaqna.com/47861/ayatullah-jawadi-on-the-disjointed-letters-huruf-al-muqattat/> Accessed: 2021-05-30.

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Image 27 Loh e Qurani, this everyday household poster has the fourteen fawatih. On the image in the footnote it says, whoever looks at this all their problems will disappear and they will be blessed with divine sustenance. Image from <http://islamicmuslimwallpapers.blogspot.com/2012/11/lohe-qurani-wallpaper.html> accessed May 13, 2021.

This research is limited to the cultural and spiritual significance of the *fawatih* for Muslims in their everyday life. These selected letters are highly revered in most Islamic households. Simple practices, like pasting an image of the *fawatih* on one of the walls of your house, or wearing an amulet (a locket) with an image of the *fawatih*, is believed to ward off evil and troubles. An image with all the letters written in a sequence is called *Loh e Qurani*, Tablet of the Quran, and this title *Loh*, meaning tablet corresponds to the Quranic term, *Loh e Mahfooz* (Q 85:22) a Guarded tablet, that is believed to hold the divine decree (*kismet*) of all creations. In this sense the *fawatih* are believed to be symbolic codes for the entire Quran, sacred in general, and meaningful for those who can decipher (see Image 27).

Another important aspect of the *fawatih* is their aural recitation. On the basis of *ilm ul tajweed*, the science of Quranic elocution—the *fawatih* are recited in a specific style, this is a bodily exercise where each letter is exhaled from a specific part of the mouth. These letters are traditionally recited adhering to the customary standards of recitation of the Quran. In my work, on the basis of *ta'wil* (as a creative potential), I explore the oral potential of *fawatih*, through experimental compositions that are like supplications calling on the divine blessings of the *fawatih*. I expand on the connection of voice and sonoral revelation, as the primary form of communication with the divine, in the section on discovering a wonderful voice for *Hayakal al Noor*.

Lastly, the sacred *fawatih* also have a special ocular significance. There are cultural traditions that suggest that by just looking at these letters, one can experience their blessings. Visually seeing is a large part of my practice, and, as I've already mentioned, I refer to a person entering the installation as a seer. This is a person who primarily sees but then, also has the potential to be affected, hence, *seeing* takes place visually followed by other visceral encounters. With this understanding in mind, I would now like to open a discussion on animation and digital projections of the *fawatih* in studio.

3.2.2 Animation Sketches of Hayakal al Noor Series

When I began creating animated compositions with the Arabic letters, I wanted to explore the mystical and cultural traditions that suggest these letters can impart an effect on those who see, touch, and hear them. In the *Hayakal al Noor* installation the encounter for the seer with the projected and animated *huroof* letters operates on various levels; it is sensory, as in seeing, touching, hearing; followed by a spiritual resonance of *ajab*, wonder. In an installation setting with multiple projections, there are moments to ruminate on the significance of these symbolic and ambiguous bodies of light as they fall on you, before you, and behind you. In the section that follows, I discuss the animation sketches, testing of materials, and design of space, that eventually came together to create an experience of *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light*.⁶⁸



Image 28 Narjis Mirza, animation I falling *huroof*, letters, (2019).

with duration, size, and physics of the letters—all of which went through a testing phase: I would project the animation on different materials, fabrics, objects, and live models—and get feedback. With live models I would map the animation on their body, as shown in Image 35 on page 93. In this way the corporeal body would disappear behind the light of the animated letter–symbols.

I developed several animations in Adobe After Effects with the Arabic letters and the *fawatih*. I used the disjointed form of writing the letters, which means that unlike English script, these letters do not read as words in any way—even when sitting together. One of the reasons to use letters in this way was to have that ‘calculated delay’ in legibility I discussed in the last chapter and explore the letters’ symbolic significance.

The first composition has a simple arrangement of all 28 Arabic letters falling. Single letters gradually pile on top of each other (see Image 28). When the letters fall there is a faint bounce with each letter, as it rests onto the projected surface. This composition developed several iterations

⁶⁸ A detailed overview of my animation practice please see my drawings, animation and projection test on my blog page <https://phdartresearch.wordpress.com/2019/02/01/animations/>

In later animation trials I also used the image of a person prostrating and kneeling in prayer, and applied ‘alpha matte invert effect’ which inserts the figural image inside a letter (see Image 29). Now, as the letters piled up in the animation, they would build the image of a person praying.⁶⁹ The presence of the body has been a significant part of my studio experiments, for instance, projecting onto a live model, using a figure in the animation or inviting a person to interact with the animated *huroof* projection. This was perhaps from my understanding of the corporeal body as not separate from an Imaginal experience. I understand the Imaginal world as an extension of this world and not separate. From Sadra’s perspective reality comes *sarayan al Wajud*, the flow of a singular Being, from the sensory visible world intensifying in the unseen Imaginal and Intelligible realms. Hence Corbin was able to suggest an interconnected fusion of the matter with immateriality for the Imaginal. In my work the bodily encounter is present, it is the basis for a *ta’wil*, which is to journey from the sensory *zahir* to the hidden *batin*.



Image 29 Narjis Mirza, animation II praying person embedded inside letters, (2019).

In later animations, the fourteen letters of the *fawatih* came into my animations. Some appear as single letters and others are joined in their groups of two, three, four, and five letters. With the *fawatih* I experimented with different fonts and styles of writing in Adobe Illustrator and discovered a digital version of *Khat e Mo’alla* called HSN Golden font.⁷⁰ I use this font because it creates sharp strokes of light, less austere than Kufic font and more flowing. In the section that follows on inscribing the body with *huroof*, I explain why the strokes of a *Khat e Mo’alla* generated a more provoking animation.

In Adobe After Effects, I also tested the ‘particle world effect’, which can transform text into particles and disperse it in the frame. I then played with the size, position, scale, and physics of each letter. In the final render, although each letter is the same size, it appears on

⁶⁹ Inspiration for adding a figure in my work came from the events of the Christchurch shooting. In the chapter that follows I share in detail my exhibition at North Art Gallery, on the anniversary of the Noor Mosque Shootings and the work I installed.

⁷⁰ *Mo’alla* means the Exalted, and this style of calligraphy was first created in 1995 by Iranian calligrapher Hamid Ajami. It is most recognized by the calligraphy of the word Ali.

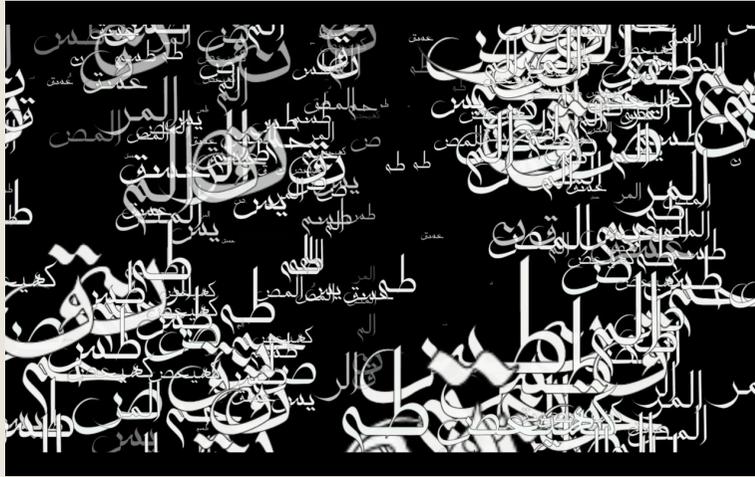


Image 30 Narjis Mirza, animation III *fawatih* with particle world effect (2020).

various points of depth on the Z axis. Some letters overlap and gather in a vibrant cluster of light. In a test installation, when I projected the animation onto translucent chiffon fabric and interacted with the light projection, I immediately saw how the letter animation was inscribing my body. In complete darkness, vivid strokes of light would stylize parts of my body. Unknowingly, I was blending with the light and discovering a new image with every changing frame (see Image 30).

In further compositions with the *fawatih* I experimented with special effects like Trapcode Suite and FreqReact. Trapcode Suite has a plugin for After Effects called Particular that can create fractal and abstract effects for an image or text. Freq React is a plugin that bakes the data from a sound piece and transforms it into an effect. This effect can then be played into the animation, as a reaction to a sound (see Image 29). In

such a way, when the sound plays there is a reaction of your choice on the text, for instance the data of the sound can affect the size, position, or physics of the image or text layer. In general, in my animations, I keep the compositional design simple and clean. All of my animations have an aniconic quality, of being more symbolic and less literal. The font used in these animations is mostly stylized Kufic, which as suggested in chapter two, has a calculated geometric composition.⁷¹

After making a composition in After Effects, my next step is usually to project the animation. In this way, I explore the performative quality of the Arabic *huroof* in an open space, outside the computer screen. I mostly projected on free-flowing and translucent chiffon fabrics, this creates subtle fluid encounters with these letters and the light they carry. I consider animation and projection a useful medium for bringing out the *ajab*, wonder, in these *huroof* and provoke the seer's imagination. Marks considers the potential of animation in contemporary art practices for amplifying the experience with the written word. With regards to how animated calligraphy generates a transformative quality, in relation to Mounir Fatmi's animated calligraphy work, Marks writes:

⁷¹ See other animation iterations on by blog <https://phdartresearch.wordpress.com/2019/02/01/2019-drawings-animation-projections/>

Animation is an ideal playing field for the transformative and performative qualities of writing that Arabic writing has explored in dazzling variety for centuries. These works also perform as documents when we see them in the light of Islamic traditions, in which writing, and the word can be thought of as a document or manifestation of the invisible. (2011, 303)⁷²

I consider abstract style animation with Arabic letters and projection in an installation setting to be effective in apprehending a sense of *ajab*, wonder, for the seer. Projection on materials also opens a contemplative dimension that generates a *ta'wil*, an interpretation that occurs continuously with the unfolding of the moving image. I would now like to move towards the different materials and surfaces I tested for the projection of these animated letter-bodies of light.

3.2.3 Testing of Materials

The studio images below show some experimental projections on different objects and materials. I found some of these materials and objects too opaque, as they did not allow light to go beyond the surface area, as is the case of an umbrella or a coat. I saw this as a problem, since I was after *ajab*, and for this I needed wonder-inducing materials. In my trials I tested projections on transparent plastic sheets of various thickness, which created random refractions of light but the synthetic and commercial polymer did not suit the aesthetics I was after. Therefore, I quickly moved away from solid and synthetic surfaces and discovered chiffon fabric; a translucent material closer to the aesthetic experience I was after.

Chiffon has a unique response to the projection of light, as discussed in chapter one, and light requires a surface for visibility (see Image 31). Chiffon has a light bearing and emitting quality that can create a sense of wonder for the seer. As was discussed with *Abu kalamun* in chapter three, there is a connection between the experience of wonder and the capacity of a material to bear light, so I chose to use chiffon fabric in the final versions of my installations. Chiffon holds a sharp image of the projection and at the same time diffuses a softer image, as some of the light seeps through. For me, the fabric became a vessel that illuminated the path of the light. I am personally familiar with the many varieties of chiffon weaves. Culturally in Pakistan it is worn on special occasions and is readily available in different dyes and colours. After testing limited samples of chiffon available in shops in Auckland, I decided to import a fine quality chiffon fabric from Islamabad, which is delicate to the touch and translucent for my projections. I was guided by my mother in the process of material selection.

⁷² The reference here is to Fatmi's animation work on 99 Names of Allah titled *L'Alphabet rouge* (1994).

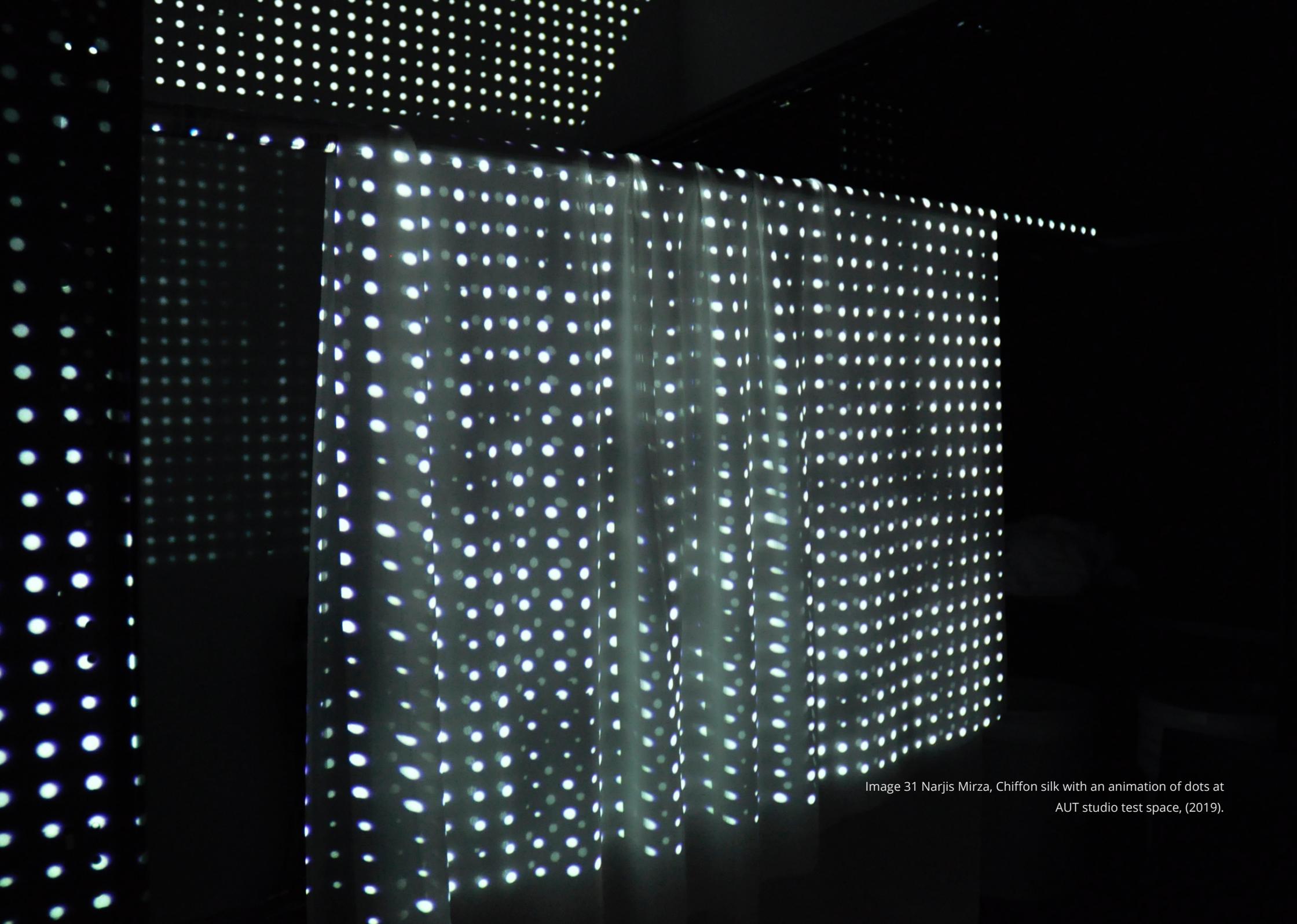


Image 31 Narjis Mirza, Chiffon silk with an animation of dots at
AUT studio test space, (2019).

For *Hayakal al Noor* at Black Box AUT and North Art Gallery, I used 60 meters of fabric that hangs from the ceiling; each drop is 4 meters long. I installed the fabric in a manner that it creates a passage that invites the seer inside the installation. The exhibition space in Sydney was a large performance hall and I used 98 meters of fabric.

The long curtains of chiffon in each iteration of *Hayakal al Noor* in Auckland (2020) and Sydney (2021), hangs free as veils and when the seer enters the installation space—between each drop of chiffon silk—the body embraces the invisible path of the projected light. A passage is created between each layer of chiffon and different intensities of light. Touch is encouraged; hence a person can literally perform an unveiling gesture (as we know in *ta'wil*) with the freely flowing fabric. This is a performative participation by the seer. Shamina Lone in her review in Art New Zealand of my exhibition at North Art Gallery describes the *Hayakal al Noor* as an “interactive performance piece: people walk through it, touch it and become part of it” (2021). As discussed earlier in the discussion on Passage Between the Visible and the Unknown, it is essentially “moment-to-moment experience in space and time” (Krauss 1981, 282) that positions me as the artist, and the seers, as *hayakal* bodies that encounter the luminance of light.

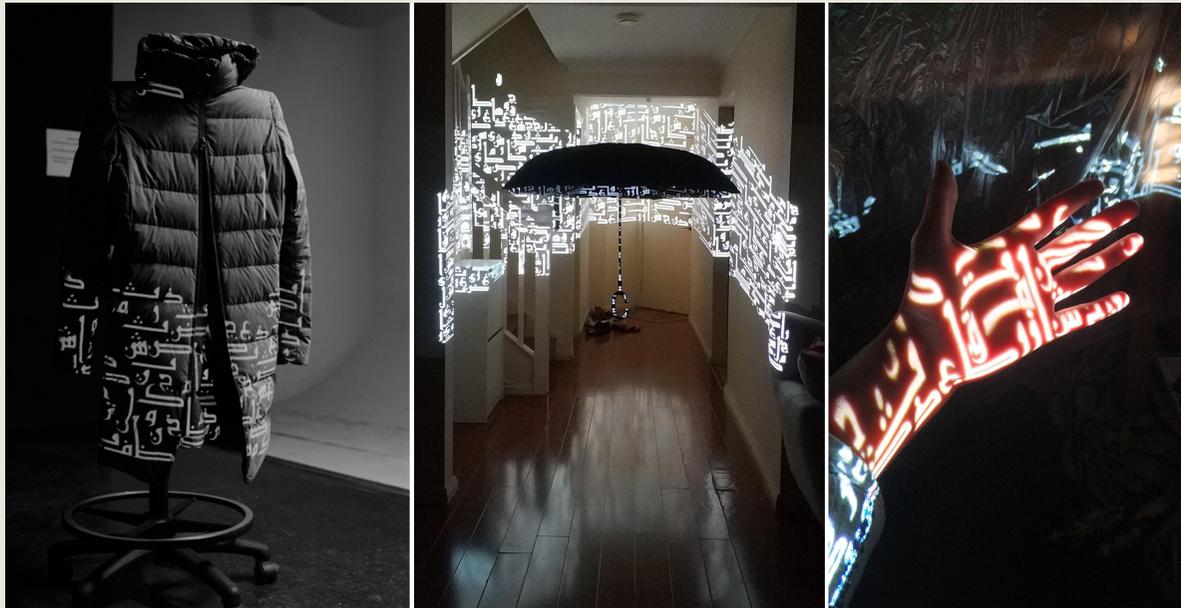


Image 32 Narjis Mirza, testing of materials left to right, coat, umbrella, and my hand, (2019).

3.2.4 Designing the Installation Space

The setting of the space for all of my studio practice for this research is complete darkness, illuminated by vivid projections. For *Hayakal al Noor* the design of space considers the visual, haptic, audible, and olfactory experience of the seer. Each edition of *Hayakal al Noor*, at the Black Box space AUT, North Art Gallery, and Leo Kelly Arts Sydney, has been in relation to the space; balancing the used and empty space. First, the chiffon veils are hung in adjacent parallel lines. In most cases, I maintain a distance of 1.5 meters in between each veil for the seer to enter with ease. Corridor-like passages are created, with the intensity of the projection gradually diffusing between each veil. The corridors invite the seer to engage in a performative participation with the installation space, light, and veils.

Second, is the ‘voice of the *farwatih*’ that marks a sonic space for the installation. This voice accompanies the seer in the extrasensory encounter with light between the veils and outside. *Hayakal al Noor* at North Art Gallery had the voice of Jessika Kenney and the latest iteration of *Hayakal al Noor* in Sydney has the voice of my sister reciting the *farwatih*. In the section that follows I discuss the process of composing and producing the voice of the *farwatih* and its contribution to *ta’wil* and *ajab*.

Another aspect that occupies the space and the encounter of the seer, is a subtle fragrance of rose *attar* oil, rubbed onto the translucent chiffon. My own experiment with fragrance developed in *khalvat*, seclusion, during Covid-19 lockdowns. I turned to rose oil in my installations because for me the rose fragrance enhances the experience on a further sensory level and reminds me of the spiritual and the sacred. It is an everyday item in Muslim households, especially in South Asian cultures. My mother always kept some rose water in her fridge, and rose oil on her *musalah*, prayer mat. In April 2021, after the easing of restrictions in Sydney, I installed *Hayakal al Noor* with rose oil rubbed on the chiffon veils, for public viewing at the Leo Kelly Blacktown Arts Centre Sydney. The minimal olfactory encounter has an impact on the experience, together with light, animation, calligraphy, projection, and space.

Aotearoa New Zealand artist Raewyn Turner in her art blog writes about smell as one of the “unchartered territories of sense perception,” and how among the senses, smell can amplify our perception of the world (Turner, 2020). Australian artist David Haines in his collaboration with Joyce Hinterding also considers aroma compositions an “underutilized medium” in contemporary art practices (Haines & Hinterding, 2013). In Sydney, I visited an exhibition opening of Australian Aboriginal art and was welcomed with the aromatic incense of Eucalyptus leaves burning. A person was walking about with the leaves and people with a gesture of their hands gathered the fragrance over their body. Incense is also part of the ancient cultures of South Asia and the Middle East. My mother regularly burns *hermal* (some

traditional spices) in her home, for sanitization and warding off spiritual evils. Hence, I see a connection between the sensory experience of fragrance and its suprasensory effect.

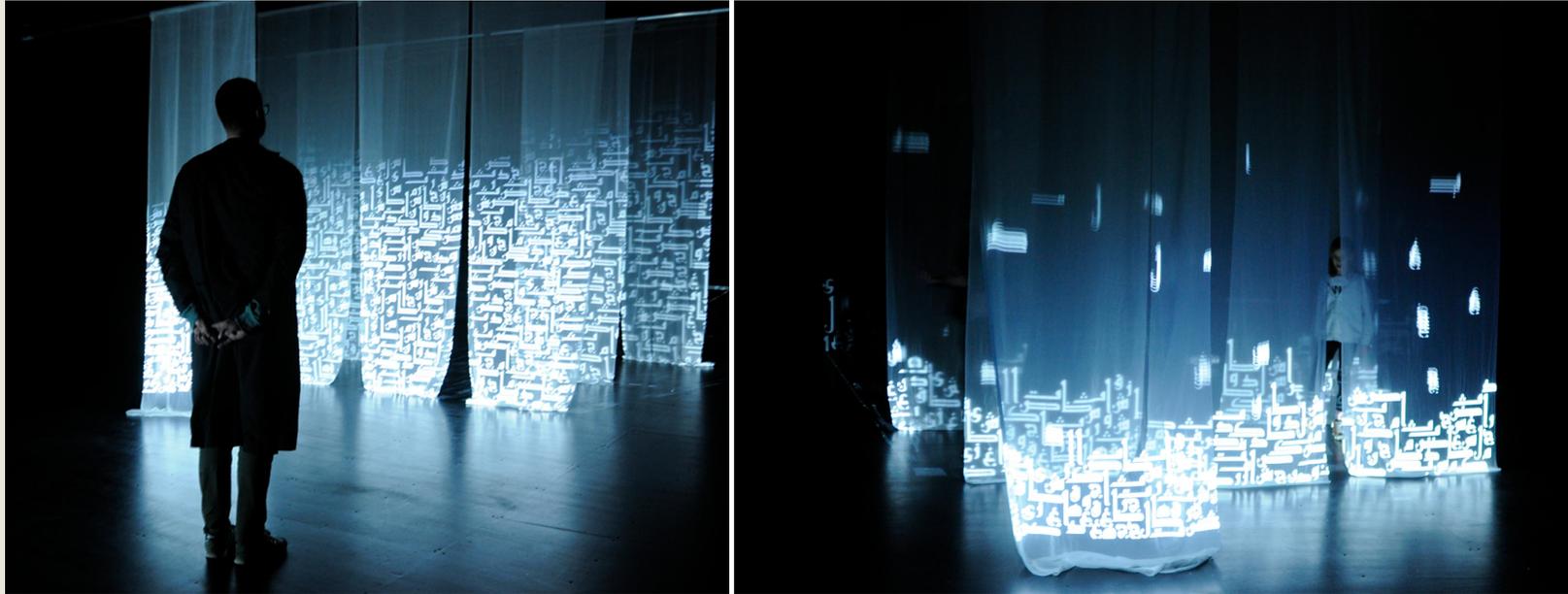
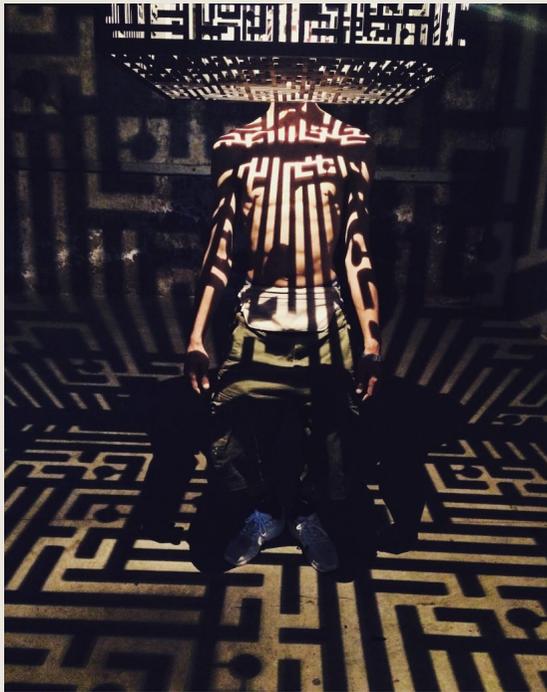


Image 33 Narjis Mirza *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light*, (2019), Black Box test space, AUT.

Aotearoa New Zealand artist Tiffany Singh in her recent installation *Indra's Bow* (2018) brings everyday items like herbs and spices to the gallery space; a refreshing reminder of the flavours and colours that contribute to our everyday world. These herbs and spices come with their specific scent. As a person from South Asia, these herbs and spices unfurl memories of home and belonging. Many of the Muslim seers of *Hayakal al Noor* in Sydney, after some time realized there was a fragrance in the air. I intentionally designed this delay, to engender *ajab*, wonder about the fragrance, after traversing through the passages. Some said, rose oil reminded them of their loved ones who had passed away. One person said rose oil for them is a reminder of death, but in a pleasant way. These are *ta'wil*, interpretations that the fragrance evokes for the seer based on their personal connection.

For me, installation art taps into many territories: it is time-based, space-based, *bodily*-based, and through harnessing multiple senses has the potential for creating an experience, a *ta'wil*, an interpretation that can be outside the body. My understanding of time, space, body, and outside the body, is from my experience of visiting a mosque or structures associated to Islamic architecture (like the Lahore Fort and the *Sheesh Mahal*). I have discussed my experience of these spaces in detail in chapter two. Here, in photographs (see Image 33), I share the experience and design of space for *Hayakal al Noor* at Blackbox space AUT in June 2019.⁷³

3.2.5 Ajab, In Inscribing the Body with Huroof



When I was developing animation in studio, I also experimented with mapping projections directly onto the body. The idea of mapping animated *huroof* directly onto a body emerged from my first exhibition at Corban Estates art Centre 2018. A local Māori boy walked into the installation space with his bare chest and stood close to the cube. The light from the cube tattooed his body, with a strong contrast of light and shadow. This led to a discussion among the observers of the installation about how light can change and contour different surfaces, objects, and bodies. I then started thinking about ‘inscribing the body with light’. A mixing of the materiality with the immaterial light. In studio I would hire a volunteer to model in a stationary position and map the projection of *huroof* on their bodies and faces. However, these were directional projections that required a specific viewpoint to be seen as intended, unlike the projection on chiffon silk, which creates a three-dimensional passage for the seer. Hence, *Inscribing the Body* is a group of works generated from my studio experiments, and best documented in photographs.⁷⁴

Image 34 A tamaiti tāne explores *Asfar Journeys*, (2018) at Corban Estates Arts Centre, Henderson, West Auckland.

⁷³ More images and video documentation can be seen at <https://phdartresearch.wordpress.com/2019/06/21/projection/>

⁷⁴ Please note that some of these studio tests developed during the Covid-19 pandemic after March 2020. Limited by the restrictions on social interaction, my husband and I were the only two people available for the testing of the *fawatih* projections on our body. See documentation in photographs at <https://phdartresearch.wordpress.com/2019/10/21/body-projections/>



Image 35 Narjis Mirza, various experiments with inscribing the body with projections of *huroof*, letters (2019-2020).

3.3 The Wonderful Voice of the Fawatih

While *Hayakal al Noor* is a letter-based installation, with letters as symbols and carriers of visible light in projections, this artwork also features voice. I composed two iterations on the voicing of the *fawatih* with my sister. Both were produced during the Covid period which I describe as a period of *khalvat* meaning isolation. Regardless, I was able to connect with my sister and work on voicing the *huroof*. In April 2021 in a public exhibition in Sydney, I presented the sound of the *fawatih* with the *Hayakal al Noor* installation. Before opening a discussion on the making process, I would like to highlight the significance of sound/voice in Islamic traditions and how this inspired my audio compositions with the *fawatih*.

The Quran from which the *fawatih* are derived literally means that which is recited and is a product of sonoral revelations. The letters and words were primarily introduced orally and only later took form and shape in writing. Sound as voice has precedence in Islamic traditions and its own creative potential. This is perhaps because “the sonoral refuses to become imprisoned in any earthly vessel” (Nasr 2010, 110).

Sayed Nasr situates sonoral revelation as a mediator of the unseen—immaterial and formless to our natural senses. Hence, voice was given form by necessity upon its revelation into this world. He explains:

Before the revelation became visible in the form of calligraphy, it was an invisible sonoral revelation. In entering this earthly abode, the Quranic revelation followed the metaphysically necessary trajectory from the Invisible (or absent) World (*Aalam al-ghayb*) to the Visible World (*Aalam al-shahadah*). (Nasr 2010, 110)

The first revelation of the Prophet was also about making speech. The first Divine command was “*Iqra!* Read (out loud), in the name of the Lord of Creations” (Q 96:1). This sonoral dimension of the Quran is often forgotten, as we consider calligraphy to be the primary example of Islamic art, whereas the Quran was first preserved in its oral dimension—sealed in the hearts of believers through the act of *hifz*, memorizing. The Prophet’s principal method of delivering God’s message was reciting the Quran, it was at a later stage of history that the Quran was written and adorned in the art of writing and calligraphy.

There is a vast field of knowledge in Islam on the science of recitation, *tajweed*, and enunciation, *makharij*. Oludamini Ogunnaike in his article the “Silent Theology of Islamic Art”, suggests that the best introduction to Islam is an untranslated recitation of the Quran in its *maqam*, melodic mode. This is because the most sublime exhibition of Islamic theology, philosophy, and way of life is in the direct encounter with *Kalam ul Allah*, Word of God. I agree with Ogunnaike that Islamic art engenders a powerful experience that communicates profoundly and clearly. I believe in the silent theology of Islamic art because “its beauty can be more evident and persuasive than the strongest argument” (2017). Ogunnaike suggests that we show then tell, and I would add that we create more art and art experiences that develop intercultural connections. For me public exhibitions are such platforms for dialogue through image and experience.

In the Islamic world, there is a unique method of recitation of the Quran that is not applied to other Arabic text. Similar to how stylized calligraphy exalts the Word of God over all other Arabic words, *Qira’at*: which is lexical, phonetic, morphological and syntactical recitation of the Quran—exalts the voice of God’s Word over all other speeches in Arabic (Leaman 2006, 233). In studio, when I started exploring the recitation of the *fiwatih*, I looked at the various styles of *zikr*; which is a devotional practice of remembering the Divine generally through recitation of a prayer. This is different from *Qira’at* which is a specific style for the Quran. An everyday ritual of *zikr* in Islamic cultures is reciting on the beads of a *tasbeih*, which is used as a counter for a specific *zikr*. In the case of *fiwatih* I looked at Sufi traditions of *zikr*. In particular the Jerrahi order of Sufism, where *zikr* is performed in a ceremony of people. Their practice of *zikr* is a beautiful supplication of prayer that begins in a sitting position, with low tones and develops a climax with standing. I came across the Jerrahi

tradition through the translator of Suhrawardi's book *Hayakal al Noor*. I discovered the translator has a prominent position in the Jerrahi order through the titles in his name, Sheikh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti.

Inspired by the Jerrahi style I started with a small ceremony in my house, where I gathered five women to recite the letters with me. I recorded different iterations of their voices in chorus reciting the *fawatih*.⁷⁵ However, I was unable to achieve a recording that could attune the audible voice with the inaudible voice of the *fawatih* successfully. Hence, I reached out to my sister in Islamabad who is trained in Arabic language and *Qira'at* of the Quran. Her voice is attuned to the subtlety of the divine revelation, thus after a few attempts I could hear in her voice, the voice of the wonderful *fawatih*. In such a way, voice can mediate a *ta'wil*, a return to the inner realities of the unknown *fawatih*. The exhaling of the *huroof* from your body and the formation of breath into a voice is a bodily performance.

Once the audio was recorded in the mixing phase in Adobe Audition I wanted to balance the voice with silence. This reciprocates with how I balance the design of space in *Hayakal al Noor* with my material, as described earlier in the design of space. Hence, after every few letters there is a pause of silence, assimilating with the void of space. Also, I use minimal studio effects on the recorded audio. I intentionally kept the sound of breath, which is minimal in the final mix.⁷⁶

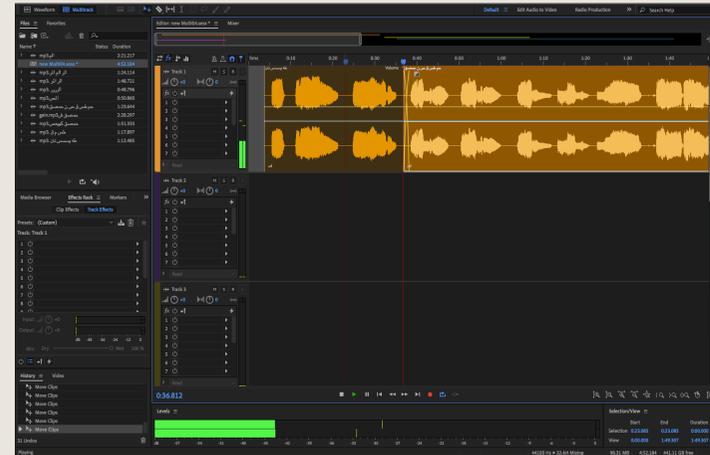


Image 36 Narjis Mirza, working in Adobe Audition for the voice of the *fawatih* (2020).

⁷⁵ Listen at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1j948AbyNXb9t2wjJfGHI0oLxaH3AUisZ/view?usp=sharing>.

⁷⁶ The Voice of the *fawatih* first edition is available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/11n3SKULk37HfZQm1LiyikJmJ7AGhq1Ji/view?usp=sharing> Followed by a second more developed edition that was played at the latest exhibition of *Hayakal al Noor* (2021) in Sydney.

3.3.1 Reflections on the Mystical Voice

Christopher Vitale expands the discussion on the potential of recitation and its performative nature. He positions the Word with an analogy of digital coding, as the Master Code for actualization of the universe. His description reflects a contemporary version of Ibn Arabi's concept of Cosmic creation through the utterance of Divine Word. First, here is how Vitale sees the potential of recitation:

In this sense, the text can be seen as both information and interface, an enfolding of the virtual potentials which are emanations of God's eternal creative power. The Quran (literally, 'The Reciting'), as God's active word, literally then functions as an algorithm, a code that makes things happen, for it is not merely a writing, but a doing. And for a human to recite the Quran is then to participate in him and his work, to sync with it, in a sense, even if the agency for it and yourself all comes from God in the first place. The Quran is a [sic] therefore a sort of master code for actualizing in the world. (2011)

The concept of "a master code that makes things happen", to follow Vitale, has a deep genealogy in the work of Ibn Arabi. Ibn Arabi in his Meccan Revelations, has spoken extensively on the Divine Names of God and how creation is a direct manifestation of God's divine attributes.⁷⁷ The cosmic creation encircles the Divine names of Allah as the "locus of their manifestation" (Ebstein 2014, 109). Ibn Arabi elaborates on this through the famous verse of the Quran; *Kun fayakun*, be and it is! (Q2:117). The divine utterance of *kunfayakun*, is for Ibn Arabi the "central element that sets the unceasing creative process in motion" (Ebstein 2014, 69). He calls this "*nafas ar Rahman*, the breath of the all-Merciful that manifests all existence in the creative fiat of *Kun* meaning be" (Ebstein 2014, 70). Corbin translates *nafas ar Rahman* as "sigh of Compassion". He speaks of the sadness within the Being for remaining concealed (not known). This is in reference to a famous narration from God himself, "I was a Hidden Treasure, I yearned to be known, so I created creation" (Corbin 1969, 108). I discovered a wonderful voice for the *farwah* in my sister's voice and used it to attune both myself and the seer to the sonoral aspect of the *farwah*. Each letter is uttered separately and relates to the initial Divine utterance of *Kun!* Be, a voice-like command that set the course of existence into motion. Corbin explains the relationship between breath and existence:

⁷⁷ See chapter 558: Divine Names, "*The Meccan revelations*" Ibn al-Arabi, Michel Chodkiewicz, William C. Chittick, James Winston Morris, Cyrille Chodkiewicz, and Denis Gril. 2002. New York: Pir Press.

This *Sigh* marks the release of the divine sadness *sympathizing* with the anguish and sadness of His divine names that have remained unknown, and in this very act of release the Breath exhales, arouses to active being, the multitude of concrete individual existences by which and for which these divine names are at last actively manifested. Thus, in its hidden being every existent is a Breath of the existentiating divine Compassion. (Corbin 1969, 115)

This alludes to the notion that the cosmos comes into being through the spoken Word and is also identified with it. To quote Vitale again, the recitation of the Word then allows an individual to participate in the creative process of existence (2011). It is important to note that for God, the utterance of *Kun*, Be!, is not in the literal sense, since God is not a person or a being of any genus that breathes: “*Kun* is thus linked to the divine will (*irāda*) or to God’s decree” (Ebstein 2014, 50), as is evident from various Quranic verses (40:68, 16:400). If we further dissect *Kun*, it is a two letter word, with ك (kaf) and ن (nun) and these are the two chosen letters at the initiation of the event of existence. They are two of the 14 *fawatih* of the Quran. The other 12 are ; alif , laam, meem, ra, ya, seen, saad, qaf, ha, tua, hha, ain.

To summarize, these fourteen letters, or *fawatih*—which appear in several tests in the *Hayakal al Noor* series including the *Inscribing the Body* projections—are enigmatic symbols; they are the keepers of divine secrets and, in their initial sonoral enunciation, are the genesis of all creation. In the Islamic traditions they hold a mystical and sacred position and very little is known about their meaning. The general consensus among scholars is that these *fawatih* are one of the many *ajab*, wonders of the Quran. As mentioned in the section on testing materials, I came to use translucent chiffon for animation projection. In my work these letters take on a performative transformation as bodies of light that generate *ajab*, wonder and contemplative perception for the seer. The installation-based setting facilitates and provokes through the sensorial experience of animation, projection, fragrance, and voice, the potential to arrive at an imaginative perception. In the next chapter I present *Hayakal al Noor* from inside the gallery space and how the performative participation of the seer contributes to the creative process of *ta’wil* as more than a literary exegesis.

4 Ta'wil Portal to Other Worlds

In this chapter, I discuss the art experience of *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light*, situating my work with the encounter for the seer. First, I recap the Imaginal which is also known as the *barzakb*—an immaterial extension of this world, before the intelligible realm—that is closest to the divine. Second, I propose we consider the spiritual exercise of *himm* for art practice, which is about the creative concentration of the heart that can affect others and, in my art practice, affect the seer. Third, I explore the connection that sensory images can engender in relation to the Imaginal. In my discussions I examine Laura Marks' approach to the Imaginal in her article 'Real Images Flow' (2016). I also return to one of my initial questions in order to reflect on how a non-traditional, non-discursive approach to *ta'wil*, can have a more profound effect than a linear discussion of concepts. I examine how *ta'wil* can enrich the experience of the seer individually and as a collective in installation artworks. Finally, I present the art experience of *Hayakal al Noor* at public exhibitions in Auckland (2019) and Sydney (2021).

4.1 An Extension of this World

In this research, the Imaginal in Suhrawardi's definition raises the significance of the image and the imagination (Corbin 1971, 39). I believe excavating the Imaginal can enrich the art experience of my work, particularly *Hayakal al Noor*. In the introduction of this exegesis, I presented the concept of the Imaginal as a world of representations, suspended images, and pure spiritual lights. With no physical materiality the most practical encounter of the Imaginal is considered possible in dreams. Ibn Arabi describes dreams as portals to unseen worlds, a place where all people can bear witness that there exists another world which is not perceivable through our physical senses but has its own organ of perception within us (2015, 55).⁷⁸ Hence dreams arrive on the plane of imagination. In everyday Islamic culture dreams are considered symbolic and meaningful. Based on Suhrawardi and Sadra's philosophical writings, Marks describes the Imaginal as an actively pro-image world that explains how suprasensory images manifest in imaginative perception (2016, 25).

In his book *Divine Manifestations* (1600/2010), Sadra has an elaborate discussion on dreams and people who have the potential to see the unseen in their sleep and wakefulness. Sadra explains how in the sleep mode, a person's physical senses decline and imagination activates

⁷⁸ The discussion on dreams is complex and must not be generalized with every dream we have. Sadra clarifies that not every dream is a case of awakening into the Imaginal. Very often the physical activities of the body intervene and hinder the potential of the Imagination to wander off. For more see *Divine Manifestations* by Sadra (2010, 150-159).

the soul's connection to the suprasensory. However, not every person has a strong imagination to encounter the unseen in dreams. There are very few souls who manage to accomplish a transition into another world. Concerning these people Sadra writes: "such souls have the power to control both sides, and may ignore for a while the senses and look into the world of the unseen and secrets are revealed to them like a flash of lightning and this is a kind of prophethood" (Sadra 1600/2010, 159).

There are numerous narrations of Islamic mystics, poets and philosophers who can transition into these other worlds Sadra describes, as we saw in chapter one with the imaginative encounter of Ibn Arabi with the *Sura Yaseen* in the chapter of the Quran. In addition, Suhrawardi's book *Hayakal al Noor* has an epilogue about one such journey. Suhrawardi describes his experience as being dream-like, between a state of sleep and wakefulness. This world that Suhrawardi enters has architectural details, like streets, houses, roads, and a city centre. The narration is many pages long and I share here only a small excerpt, to demonstrate how elaborately Suhrawardi presents this Imaginal world:

I reached a city which was enveloped in darkness. It was so vast, I could neither see nor conceive of its limits. This city contained everything which was created. There were people from all nations and races. So crowded were the streets that one could hardly walk, so noisy was it that one could hardly hear oneself or others. All the ugly actions of all the creatures, all the sins known and unknown to me, surrounded me. In awe and amazement I watched this strange scene. (Suhrawardi 1100/1998, 108)

In the Introduction to this exegesis, I discussed Suhrawardi as the first Muslim philosopher who brought forward the concept of *Aalam Al Mithal* (Ziai 1996, 441; Rahman 1964, 169) which literally translates as a world of similitudes; interpreted as the Imaginal in Henry Corbin's work, an intermediary place and a passage between the world of matter and the world of pure Intellect. In the Quran this world is described as a *barzakh* meaning a border, an isthmus, "something that separates two other things while never going to one side" for example, the barrier that separates two seas of different densities, or the line that separates the shadow from sunlight (Arabi 1200/2015, 170). From an eschatological perspective, *barzakh* is the first station of residence for the returning souls after death.⁷⁹ The description of *barzakh*, like Suhrawardi's epilogue, is elaborate. For instance, in oral and cultural traditions, it is believed that *barzakh* offers a similar

⁷⁹ In my Islamic cultural knowledge sleep is considered a small-scale death, in the sense that the soul in a sleep state is able to release itself from the corporeal body and wander away and reach the Imaginal based on the strength of one's imagination. The difference between death and sleep is that in death the soul is unable to return to the body. Islamic literature in general indicates a link between death and sleep, particularly in relation to the Quranic discussion on sleep see verses 39:42.

lifestyle to this world. For example, people as souls, can live in cities and neighbourhoods where the only difference is that they have no physical substance.

After Suhrawardi, when Sadra advanced the concept of the Imaginal, he argued that it is in constant flow based on his theory of intensification. It is not a place that can be referred to as here or there, it is a realm of potentiality within the soul. As discussed earlier there is an ontology of three realms of which the Imaginal is the intermediary between the Sensible and the Intelligible; it has characteristics of both worlds. For instance, it has an image, but this image is not material or tangible. Hence, anyone who wishes to access the Imaginal must subject themselves to *tajarrud al nafs*, shedding the robe of materiality, to bring about a closeness to *al Haqq*, the Real. When a person is completely immersed—on the basis of sense perception—in their material and corporeal reality it is the minimal stage of being, since materiality is the farthest from the Divine Being. However, when a person *sheds the robe of materiality*, this facilitates access to the Imaginal world. Ibrahim Kalin describes this as partially disembodiment from matter in Sadra’s work on the imagination (Kalin 2011, 107).

I return now to the origins of this exegesis in my research question: how can an installation art practice provoke the imagination beyond the visibly apparent? In response, I decided to use the non-discursive approach of *ta’wil*, to encourage the seer’s imagination to return from the *zahir*, apparent, to the *batin*, the hidden. I explored light, together with animation, projection, calligraphy, voice, textiles, and fragrance, to encourage the seer in *Hayakal al Noor* to momentarily open to experiences beyond the sensorial. In my art practice I saw the effect of *ta’wil* in encouraging an otherworldly art experience. I am aware that although an art experience is different from a dream, or immaterial state of *barzakh*, the art conditions created in *Hayakal al Noor* can elevate the imagination to a realm beyond physical reality. Paradoxically, the material, sensorial encounter within the installation itself facilitates this bridge to the Imaginal, where for some ‘seers’ the material environment is shed or left behind for a moment. Yet, *ta’wil* helps to challenge the bodily senses, aiming to create a glimpse of the Imaginal. In this way, images and sensory experience are not completely disconnected from an Imaginal encounter and an immersive installation space can act as a portal to other worlds. Throughout this chapter, and in the conclusion that follows, I analyse the extent to which *Hayakal al Noor* might provoke the imagination of the seer, and how *ta’wil* contributes to this experience.

4.2 Pouring Himma into my Art Practice

In Islamic spirituality *himma* refers to the creative energy, resolve, and concentration of the heart (Corbin 1969, 40). Corbin in the discussion on imagination extracts the term *himma* from Ibn Arabi’s work and applies it to the artistic activity of an artist. Ibn Arabi says, *himma* is “a hidden potency which is the cause of all movement and all change in the world” (Corbin 1969, 228). When a gnostic employs

their imaginative faculty it generates a concentration of the heart that allows them to experience theophanic realities, as in perceive the invisible realm of the Imaginal (Halligan 2014; Corbin 1969). It is narrated that Ibn Arabi had the *himma*, creative energy, to see and communicate with the spirit of Prophets and other souls who have departed this world; either by making them descend to this earthly realm or by asking them to appear in his dreams, or by unbinding himself from his material body to rise to a spiritual meeting (Corbin 1969, 224). Corbin argues that the creative intentions an artist puts into a work is beheld by those who see their work. Corbin explains how *himma* can be considered for material artefacts:

We can easily conceive of an application of this idea to material iconography, to the images created by art. When in contemplating an image, an icon, others recognize and perceive as a divine image the vision beheld by the artist who created the image, it is because of the spiritual creativity, the *himma*, which the artist put into his work. Here we have a compelling term of comparison, by which to measure the decadence of our dreams and of our arts. (Corbin 1969, 198)

Himma is indeed a compelling concept for my art practice, and I saw its effect in the final iterations of *Hayakal al Noor* (2021) in Sydney. The spiritual activity I intended for this installation, through *ajab* and *ta'wil*, was felt by those who participated in the installation—based on the conversations and feedback. For me personally, a pronounced application of *himma* is in sound; I believe different voices project different energies. I discussed in the previous chapter the wonderful voice of the *farwahib* and how I wanted to find a voice that could attune to the audible letters with the inaudible voice of the *farwahib*. I wanted to find a voice that could *ta'wil*, as in return the letters to their less literal sonic state. I conceived in my sister's voice a deep spiritual understanding of the Quran, and a *himma*, creative concentration of the heart acquired through years of practice and studying different styles of *Qirat*, Quranic recitation. I understand *himma* as a creative activity of the Imagination, that aligns with *ta'wil* and bridges the *zahir* with the *batin*, the apparent with the hidden, and the sensory with the Imaginal. In the section that follows I share the experience of *Hayakal al Noor* in relation to the Imaginal.

4.3 From Images to the Imaginal

Every once in a while the soul finds its way toward the sacred realm, learning that which it knew not, from its Holy Sustainer to which it belongs. The soul also reaches the souls of the celestial spheres which are aware of their own movements and the causes necessitating their movements. Like a mirror that is decorated by the image placed in front of it, the soul begins to understand a number of secrets, both in a waking and a sleeping state. Sometimes it almost sees strange images from its destined portion of the mysteries of the

spiritual realm which are reflected upon its powers of imagination. These same images which pass through one's mind may also appear in the world of the senses. Words once spoken are heard, or invisible, and unknown things become visible, sometimes clear, sometimes obscure according to one's connection and the intensity of one's wish. (Suhrawardi 1100/1998, 97)

Suhrawardi presents the sacred realm of the Imaginal, a celestial sphere without any materiality. Exposure of this Imaginal in philosophical and religious text—primarily relies on one's connection to the divine, purity of the soul, imagination, and desire to be affected. Earlier in chapter two on the imaginative understanding, I gave the example of divine revelation in the hearts of Prophets as a case of this Imaginative experience, which on a lesser scale is intuition and creative inspiration for artists and poets. We know the concept of true Imagination in Islamic thought is far from fantasy and is based on a spiritual potency of the soul to go beyond the sensory abilities of the body. Imagination, in this sense, is an organ of knowledge that is in addition to sensory perception and opens to experiences unseen.

The less one is distracted by the *zahir* of things, the more potential there is in the Imagination to receive the heavenly realities of the Unseen. For this purpose, I used the aniconic letters, the mysterious *farwatih* in my animated calligraphy projections for the final iterations of *Hayakal al Noor* (2021) in Sydney. Many visitors asked what this text means and what is the voice saying? I explained they are letters found in the opening of various chapters of the Quran. No one knows the meaning of these letters and the voice is their sound calling on their mystical status. It was interesting to observe that visitors who had an Islamic background were trying to explain what these letters mean to their friends who were not familiar (meaning not of Islamic heritage). The letters are not envisioned to express any literal meaning. Thus conversations occurred on the mysterious nature of the *farwatih*. I overheard some of the seers saying “They don't have an interpretation, but they must have some meaning?”

In this way there was no literal narrative in the text or the voice of *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light*, facilitating an imaginative perspective beyond the apparent. In an article titled ‘Real Images Flow’, Marks presents the concept of the Imaginal as a “model” for the study of images in a film (2016, 44). This article portrays a contemporary adaptation of the Sadra's continuously intensifying Imaginal for media studies. We know, says Marks, images in a film are often considered unreal and there is “suspicion of images as false, misleading, or ideological” (2016, 25). Nonetheless, the argument is about the concentrated flow of images in cinema, and how this can stimulate the imagination on a collective level. Marks detects a relation between cinema and Sadra's theory of intensification for the Imaginal. Marks uses the concept of Sadra's continual realm of the Imaginal as a base to suggest that cinema is a “medium that makes the imperceptible perceptible and reveals the world as a process of becoming” (2016, 36). Hence in a large cinema setting, the concept of the Imaginal (as a

continual process of Being) intensifies in Marks' view, when communities come together to perceive a dream, and act upon it in real life. She gives the example of a documentary film called *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012); a film that provokes the imagination of its people with a dream from their past. For me, the most interesting aspect of this argument is how the transcendental capacity of the Imaginal is made immanent and given a perceptible form. The theosophical position of Sadra's Imaginal is referred to as a kind of energy that can have a physical impact in this world. On the Imaginal realm, and drawing on Sadra, Marks suggests:

To do something similar with Sadra, we would have to qualify the Neoplatonist and Sufi element of love that is so central to his philosophy: the longing for the Beloved draws all things toward God, intensifies them, and makes them more real. An immanent approach would replace that teleological motion with a more aleatory movement of energy that, perhaps, we could still call love. The changing contents of the Imaginal realm can be considered a model for political change, in that it reflects collective wishes that are as yet nondiscursive, but real. Cinema not only suggests but actually produces Imaginal images that capture the collective imagination. Using its powers of poetry, rather than argument, the cinema stimulates the imagination to bring the unthought into being. (2016, 44)

In reference to Marks' argument, my approach to immersive art installations is similar in the sense that through the performative participation and the collective *ta'wil*, interpretations of the seer, I also seek to capture the collective imagination of my audience for a personal and inter-cultural transformation. I bring inside the secular space of a gallery an experience that facilitates a return to our spiritual beginnings. I remind the seer about the ephemeral force of light that defines our perception. I draw on the lineage of Islamic arts and mysticism to rekindle a sense of wonder in the seer. However, for my art practice, I do not suggest we completely immanentize the Imaginal nor must we replace the transcendental Real with a real in this world. My approach through *ta'wil* (interpretation, intensification, and return) is to create for the seer a sensory encounter that provokes the imagination to consider a reality beyond the *zahir*, visible world.

In the *Hayakal al Noor* installation series I use particular strategies that might shift the seer from a discursive or literal understanding towards a flow of images in the process of becoming. Among these strategies is the layering of image on translucent chiffon, that depicts varying degrees of the same light. The seers of *Hayakal al Noor* in Sydney discovered different viewpoints of the installation, as they could walk through or around the work. One particular viewpoint was from the rear wall of the room looking towards the projectors. Those who discovered this perspective would ask their friends to come and look from there. From this other side, I saw a forest of illuminated letters, gradation of intensities, a three-dimensional letter-scape, and silhouettes of moving bodies. From this perspective I recall the metaphysical

potential of light and I was reminded of a phrase by Blumenberg; “light remains what it is while letting the infinite participate in it” (1993, 31).

On one occasion a group of children (mostly young girls) entered the performance hall of *Hayakal al Noor*. They did not hesitate and quickly wandered in and out of the artwork. It was fascinating to see these children use both hands to set the fabric aside, as if swimming through the passages of invisible light, only to return back inside. Some of the children were curious about how can light pass through the curtains, all the way to the end of the hall. I was observing their swift movement from one corner to the other, and quickly recorded a small video of this moment. The scene was reminiscent of this otherworldly realm of wandering souls. A mother close by, also noticed how remarkable the scene was and exclaimed, “oh wow!”.

At this moment of *ajab* I realised, moments, feelings, and imagination are indescribable which is why we often shy away from expressing them, and words ossify the meaning we hold within ourselves. This is also perhaps why it is difficult to describe images from a dream, “it takes a very long time because there are no words for the slippery and unusual images of the dream-like events” (Marks 2016, 39). It is difficult for me to describe what this scene was like and this artistic research is about creating artwork that generates such moments and experiences. The footage I share in the footnote below is a spontaneous recording and only a few seconds long.⁸⁰ I intentionally did not record or video my visitors too much, as I did not want to distract them from the experience. As soon as I did take out the camera, some of the children stood still and posed.

Reflecting on this moment, I look back at Sadra’s equation of existence as light; which includes sensible light and material bodies as the cascading intensities of Divine Light (See page 19) This theory opened for me a metaphysical speculation on visible light and its varying intensities in the images we see. When we examine Sadra’s ontology of Being, we understand existence as a continuous process, and for this process “concepts are too static to capture it: images are more truthful” (Marks 2016, 38). These truthful images have an impact and can

⁸⁰ See the following link to video documentation of the exhibition of *Hayakal al Noor* 2021 Sydney with the clip of the wandering children inside the installation <https://vimeo.com/558291322>



Image 37 Narjis Mirza, *Hayakal al Noor Bodies of Light* (2021) children wandering through the installation.

the model of a cinema-like space, there is no constructed design of space for the person who enters my installations, they have the freedom to explore and participate in the flow of images. This leads to a collective bodily participation that can be at the cusp of disembodiment or letting go of the material self, allowing the imperceptible to become perceptible.

Looking back, the first time I tested my animation of falling Arabic letters onto chiffon silk was at home in Auckland in May 2019. This was for my landlady and her daughter; both of them quietly witnessed Arabic calligraphy of letters as small bodies of light settling onto several layers of chiffon silk. In this instance the animation was quiet, and there was not enough material to create an immersive space, and

evoke a heightened sense of imagination. I position my installation practice as a non-discursive *ta'wil* of being, light and the gradation of intensities through images and the Imaginal, that opens a world of invisible potential. Alongside these moving bodies of children was a forest of symbolic letters, encoded with wonder and the divine secrets of creation. The style in which these *huroof* were voiced in the installation engendered a spiritual inspiration in the seer.

As an artist and image maker, I rely on the *himma*, creative energy of my work, to make the imperceptible perceptible and present the world in a process of becoming. I work with moving images, projections, voice, fragrance, and a public space to create a moving and becoming moment for the seer. Unlike

yet neither of the women asked me for an explanation on what this work was about. Instead, they shared with me the subtle impression that light and its animation had on them. They connected the work with Islamic calligraphy and were amazed by how light could travel through several layers of chiffon and onto their bodies.

I shared with them my vision for this installation, how the calligraphy animation uses letters that, unlike English letters, cannot be read as words when they come together. I expressed how I wanted to provoke the seer by exposing the invisible path of projected light through layers of translucent textile. I asked myself if chiffon silk in an installation setting would attract the seer to touch, feel, and engage with this wonderful material. Among the layers of fabric, I asked if the seer would also become an apparition of a luminous body of light? Together, as we explored the projection of light onto transparent chiffon and against our opaque bodies, there was an instant feeling of *ajab*, wonder for the translucent material. In chapter three, I shared Idries Trevathan and Matthew Saba's discussion on the connection between *ajab* and light bearing materials (See page 80). In the segment that follows I return to Fatimi's perceptual approach in installation art and continue to describe the response to my public exhibitions in Auckland and Sydney.

4.3.1 How Artworks Facilitate the Imperceptible to Become Perceptible

We know that the images of the Imaginal world are not *zahir*, visual, and cannot be seen by the faculty of sight, and the most perceptible experience of the Imaginal given by philosophers is dreams (Rustom 2007, 11), where we have a visceral encounter with images and see with our eyes closed. In a similar manner, I argue that certain artworks welcome the intuitive mind to see images that are beyond our ordinary ways of perceiving. These artworks aspire for a transforming experience that is beyond what is apparent to the senses. Some examples were discussed earlier in this exegesis (section 2.2). I discussed Fatmi's light installation *In the Absence of Evidence to the Contrary* (2012). The title of this installation is also suggestive of the challenges in visual perception, and Fatmi intelligently plays with our vision. He uses fluorescent tubes of light and has Quranic verses imprinted on them in Arabic and English. When the seer attempts to read the text it causes excessive light to enter their eyes, hence blinding their vision momentarily. Luminous spots are imprinted on the seer's vision and the memory of the text creates an after image that is projected wherever they look. For me, this play of light tones down one's concept of reality associated only with the visible and the manifest. Fatmi describes this as "visual chaos", and asks the seer to wonder about this visual experience or, rather, visual illusion. Fatmi's Studio describes the event of seeing like this:

The eye of the spectator moves from one language to the other, without being able to define the words. He or she is thus required to approach the light in order to read the text on the luminescent tubes. In this

hypnotic epiphany, the visible text tests our retinal tenacity. Visual chaos is provoked, luminous spots remain imprinted, and a kinetic effect closes the eyes. Our eyes retain the memory of the text and we project this text onto everything that we see. Light can only be a visual experience, or rather a visual illusion. Is it divine revelation? Does this bright light not become blinding? We may then wonder if we really must believe everything we see ... until we have evidence to the contrary. (Fatmi, 2012)

I ask a similar question in this exegesis and through my light installations—in the absence of evidence that contradicts the unseen—should we associate real-ness only with the apparent and the literal? Artists can encourage the spontaneous flowering of the imaginative faculty outside the physical knowledge of things. To understand how the realness of the Imaginal might be offered without a perceptible form, I return to Sadra’s flow of being that unites every existence on a gradation of intensities (*taskik ul wujud*). A gradation that intensifies every existence and its reality, subject to its closeness to the Divine Light of God. In Sadra’s world, imaginative perception exceeds sensory perception since it corresponds to a higher Being (Kalin 2011, 36) and at the same time has certain characteristics of sense perception.

Sadra gives the example of heat. For our sensory perception the sensation of heat is completely dependent on an object or a thing that emits heat to our body. Once we have had the initial sensation of heat, the imaginative faculty can store this sensation and continue to perceive heat without any hot object. Hence imagination in this sense is independent and acts as an isthmus or an intermediary; Imagination is: “an ontological state connecting the two spheres of existence” (Kalin 2011, 137), the sensory and the suprasensory. Similarly, in my installations I provide the materials, the light, the voice, and the sensation for an Imaginal experience that can be transformative and more than sensory. It is the receptivity of a person and desire of each seer to be affected that opens a unique imaginative, spiritual, and mystical experience.

4.4 Unfading Animate Bodies of Light

An important *ta’wil* (as in interpretation, intensification) of my work occurred after the Christchurch Mosque shootings on March 15th, 2019. This tragic event in Aotearoa New Zealand attempted to extinguish the light of Being, and fifty-one people died and many were injured. On the occasion of its anniversary, it was important for me to reclaim this day with unfading animate bodies of light. When curators Sonja van Kerkhoff and Salama McNamara gave a call for a show at North Art Gallery, under the theme of Ko rātou, ko tatou,

On Otherness and Us-ness, I immediately wanted to be a part.⁸¹ I felt my work with light and the concept of *Hayakal al Noor* as bodies of light, resonated with the broad discussion on inclusion and us-ness. It also signifies the spiritual dimension of the martyrs of Al Noor Mosque who—according to Islamic traditions—are now bodies of light in the Imaginal isthmus, between this world and the hereafter.⁸²

My first thought for this exhibition was to work on the bodily performance of Friday prayers, an act which became an excuse for the massacre of so many of my people. I began collecting photographs of people offering the daily Muslim prayer. I recorded a video of my husband praying and camouflaged it with my animation of Arabic letters. Arabic was the language in which they were praying and associated with for their names. In the national memorial service for the victims, there was a segment, when the names of the victims were read out loud. Each name was enunciated, in their native accent, mostly Arabic style, as most Muslim names originate from Arabic language. This was a foreign sound to the English-speaking New Zealanders and for me, this was an iconic moment of this ceremony; a community of people were recognized with the dignity of who they are. For those who died in this attack their names became their identity, since the bodies were too distressed to be unidentifiable.



Image 38 Narjis Mirza, adobe illustrator files, a figure of man praying with letters overlaid, (2019).

⁸¹ Another reason for my motivation to be part of this show was because I was not in New Zealand when this tragic incident happened. A few days before, I received news of my father's sudden passing and travelled to Pakistan. After a few months when I returned, like me, New Zealand was coming out of its mourning. There was no event where I could participate, share, and be part of my community. Therefore, on the occasion of the anniversary of the Mosque shootings, I wanted to create a safe, unifying space.

⁸² In Islamic traditions the soul of a person who dies, stays in a *barzakh*, the isthmus between this world and the hereafter. Until all the world will come to an end, the souls of those who die reside in this *barzakh*, isthmus.

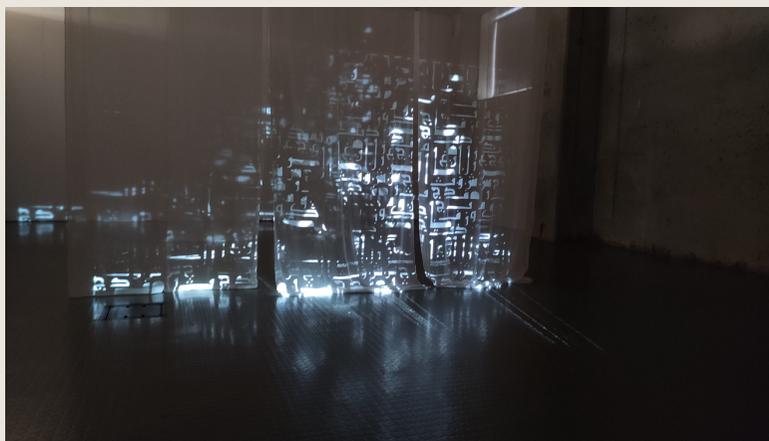


Image 39 Narjis Mirza, studio projection experiments, (2019), Test space, AUT.

In my animation trials I produced a faint image of a person praying using a track Alpha key in Adobe After Effects, which causes an image to hide inside a text layer. After multiple trials in studio, I extracted the image of a person praying as I wanted to keep the abstract aniconism in my image. I then experimented with the Quranic phrase, *inna lil Allah wa inna ilahy rajeeoon*, meaning we are from Allah and we return to Him. These are the words of condolence expressed on the passing of an individual, reminding everyone about the ultimate return. For this animation I used a video of a red *musala* (carpet used for prayer) found in most mosques, and inserted it in the animation (see Image 36).

has over 15 years of experience singing Classical Persian poetry. After several conversations, she shared her song *Pamour* with me that voiced syllables from a Javanese prayer song, from Central Java, Indonesia. The song has durational melodic voicing of letters that blended with the gradually falling letters in my projected animation. This prayer is attributed to Sunan Kalijaga, “one of the nine Sufis who peacefully brought Islam to Java over five centuries ago. The prayer includes men and women Prophets’ names, virtues, and associated body parts” (Kenney, n.d.). Prayer, peace, migration, language, identity, light, the Divine, and the body, all of these aspects came together for me in this installation, and alongside my moving image, *Pamour* augmented the experience of the seer.⁸³

In search of sound for the installation I spoke with Jessika Kenny in Los Angeles, who has a deep understanding of Islamic traditions and

Unfortunately, the show did not see an opening night, and in the weeks that followed there were many restrictions in Auckland on gatherings and interaction among people in a closed space. Covid-19 was now a pandemic that had made its way into Aotearoa New Zealand. The limited possibility of seeing the show and lack of collective participation of the public took its toll on my research. The curator of the show, Sonja van Kerkhoff documented this exhibition online.⁸⁴ She takes the reader inside the installation, between the diaphanous columns of light and observes the collective participation of the seer as the body-self and others on whom the illuminated

⁸³ Pamor song can be listened here <https://jessikakenney.bandcamp.com/track/pamor>, accessed 20 May 2021.

⁸⁴ The exhibition blog is here: <https://sonjavank.wordpress.com/2020/06/08/including-islam/>, accessed 20 May 2021.

letters fall. In this way the reference to *'hayakal'*, bodies, is both Arabic letters and the presence of the seer (Kerkhoff, 2020). Shamima Lone, a contributor to the Art New Zealand magazine also managed to visit the gallery once it opened to public, and in her review identified problems in other areas of the exhibition. First I share her experience of *Hayakal al Noor*, Lone writes:

Narjis Mirza's *Hayakal al Noor (Luminous bodies)* was a beautiful installation ... The artwork set the appropriate mood for a memorial—serene, mystical, spiritual, contemplative. Flowing white silk chiffon hung from the ceiling in a darkened room, with falling light projections ... It was an interactive performance piece: people walk through it, touch it, become part of it. Light is Mirza's reaction to the Christchurch shootings... I found safety and solace in the authentic, delicate complexity of this work. (2020)

For me, Lone's experience reveals how light in *Hayakal al Noor* carries creative energy to the seer, and that is then received by those who have the potential to be affected and see. In regards to how the show was curated, Lone observes how the overwhelming 'white' perspective compromises the Islamic diversity and 'others' the Muslim community. Lone's review draws my attention to the absence of Muslim artists, curators and gallery managers from the Aotearoa New Zealand aesthetic landscape. I personally had many challenges installing my work at North Art Gallery. I felt othered by the gallery managers and the exhibition opening was cancelled on the Mosque shootings memorial day without providing an alternative for the participating artists to express their loss and hurt over the attacks. This being said I saw good work in the show, by people of good intentions. At the same time, the areas of cultural appropriation, lack of consideration for Islamic diversity and nuance that Lone identifies—was not unfounded.

4.5 Hayakal al Noor and the Participation of the Seer

After an unsettling and inward-facing (2020) year with the Covid-19 pandemic and travel restrictions, I was fortunate enough to come out of *khalvat*, working in isolation, and share my work with an audience in April 2021; in the performance hall of the Leo Kelly Blacktown Arts Centre in Sydney. I presented the experience of *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light*, that had developed over several iterations as discussed in chapter three. In the final rendition the installation had the animation of the *fawatih* in *Khat e Mo'alla*, overlapping and dispersed as particles that created a 3D perspective. The animation was projected through two projectors placed side by side. The translucent chiffon was hung in four adjacent parallel lanes, creating a passage and an intermediary space for the seer. Rose oil was rubbed on the fabric. This was the first time the voice of the *fawatih*, sung by my sister, accompanied the installation and matched the duration of the projected animation. After bringing all these elements together on 24th April 2021, during the month of Ramadhan, *Hayakal al Noor* had an opening

event and invited the seers to participate.⁸⁵ On the same day I also engaged in an artist talk with the gallery coordinator Susan Doel.⁸⁶ The highlight of the opening event for me was during the artist talk when Susan shared some of the feedback she had received for *Hayakal al Noor*, followed by her first question. She asked:

People have had such a strong and personal experience of your work *Hayakal al Noor*. Comments have included: being brought to near tears, wonder—what is the text? What are the words in the music? Calm serene, having an extended sense of time, wanting to stay longer in the space and more. What is your response to people’s responses of *Hayakal al Noor* at Blacktown Arts? Is this what you expected?⁸⁷

This question immediately took me back again to my research question. How can an installation art practice assist in provoking an imaginative understanding beyond the visibly apparent? How can the seer’s performative participation evoke the transcendental and the unseen within us? The response I received after my artist talk—collectively and in personal conversations—was also overwhelming. For many the encounter was ineffable, just as light and voice in *Hayakal al Noor* is ineffable—it is an experience to have. Another important discussion that took off from the artist talk was about the seer. One of the audience members asked about the concept of the ‘Seer’, who is this very special person, the mystic. “How can we be seers too?” she asked, continuing to answer herself, yes we do see and experience but to give this special status to us as the audience is so special? I apprehended her question was in relation to the Sufi mystics, who are special people and deep seers of the Imaginal.

Indeed the seer is a special person and I have referenced in the introduction of this exegesis that I derive the term ‘seer’ from Ibn Arabi’s work (2015). Ibn Arabi himself had that high concentration of the heart and active imagination to *ta’wil*, see things that are hidden from other people’s perception. Like Ibn Arabi, Suhrawardi also is among the seers of the Imaginal and beyond. Sadra and Suhrawardi use the term seeker in their work, this is a person striving for philosophical and spiritual wisdom, which I consider in close relation to the seer (Suhrawardi 1100/1998; Sadra 2010).

The methodological concept of *ta’wil* is deeply rooted in Islamic philosophy and for any art practitioner who wishes to apply *ta’wil* to their creative journey a prerequisite understanding of the Islamic framework is crucial. A persons’ potential to *ta’wil* in my installation art,

⁸⁵ The documentation of *Hayakal al Noor* (2021) Sydney can be viewed on this link <https://phdartresearch.wordpress.com/public-exhibitions/hayakal-al-noor-sydney/>

⁸⁶ The artist talk was live screened on Blacktown Arts Facebook page and can be seen here: <https://ne-np.facebook.com/BlacktownArts/videos/hayakal-al-noor-bodies-of-light-artist-talk-with-narjis-mirza/202951131637879/>

⁸⁷ This is Susan Doel’s personal comments, which she asked during the artist talk and later shared with me in print. Reproduced with permission.

understood as to return, to see and feel a connection that transcends the apparent image is varied by their personal experiences and understanding of metaphysical concepts. A person of Islamic faith would *ta'wil* differently, depending on their own understanding of the significance of the *huroof* and their sense of *Hayakal al Noor (2021)*, as mediating an encounter with the divine. However, I observed many non-Arab and non-Muslim visitors overwhelmed. Several seers spoke of their awareness of the metaphysical significance of light, sound and its effect on the body. While on the other hand some Muslim participants were troubled by their attempts to decipher the literal meaning in a faith-based interpretation. For me, as the artist, the installation stems from my Islamic faith, but ultimately, I aspire for meanings that are ineffable and shared experiences for people from all cultural and religious backgrounds.

In the final iteration of *Hayakal al Noor (2021)*, at Black Box Theatre WG210 (see Appendices), I received a diverse range of visitors from both Muslim communities based in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, and those of other backgrounds who were drawn to light and participatory effect of the work. My finding was that a persons' emotional and/or spiritual connection to the installation, evoked through light, voice and free flowing textiles oriented their potential of seeing and becoming a seer. I suggest that a seer, whether a practicing Muslim, or of another faith or no faith, can experience a form of *ta'wil*, as described in this thesis, through the conditions created in my installations. I decided to use the word seer, so as to position the person wandering through my work in the lineage of special people, who see beyond the *zahir*. One of the motivations of this artistic research is to make these distinct people (Sadra, Suhrawardi, and Ibn Arabi) and their extraordinary contributions accessible to ordinary people.

For me the experience of *Hayakal al Noor* in Sydney was more than a bodily encounter. The intensity of light on the first layer of chiffon gradually faded in the last few layers. In this way the image from the other end of the hall, farthest from the projector was significantly altered and layered. Upon close inspection the Arabic letters with their 3D positioning resembled an infinite forest of light. The space between each veil created a passage and an isthmus to pause between different intensities of light. I noticed that many of the seers disappeared in between the veils. In chapter two on the discussion of the word, I described how abstraction and aniconism of calligraphy made the words disappear from the realm of legibility. Here the seer's body disappears between the various intensities of light, voice, and veils. Most participants explored touch and the gesture of moving the curtains aside to make way. Some visitors were keen on recording the installation before experiencing it, these seers were distracted by their cell phones. There were some seers who stayed in the installation space longer than others, or they sat down in the corners of the hall.

One of these visitors asked me about the voice in the installation. I informed them about the mysterious *fawatih*, and the symbolic significance of these letters and then said, she is voicing Arabic letters. The visitor was quite shocked and said I cannot imagine the English

alphabet would impart the kind of effect that this voice and these letters confer. So many of the visitors were mesmerized by the voice of the *fawatih*. Many would stand in the corner to just listen and seemed less attracted to the light and fabric. When I shared the concept of *himmah* with this visitor she seemed to understand what was happening. I personally was unaware of how effective voice could be in evoking the seer and intensifying the experience of *Hayakal al Noor*. At this moment I realized that my artistic research began with speculation on light, yet this other waveform—sound—has just as much potential to provoke the unseen. More than the artefact it is the creative concentration of the heart that can impart an effect on others. Together with voice and fragrance I see potential in images and art experiences to contribute to an imaginative understanding. On the experiential, Stephen Scrivener writes: “the creative production, as an object of experience, is more important than any knowledge embodied in it” (2000, 7).

The artist talk at Blacktown Arts raised a further important question about how I approach religious concepts in a ‘secular’ context such as this public art gallery in Australia. I answered this by suggesting that art and religion have never been entirely separate from each other in historical and contemporary arts. What differentiates my work is that not many contemporary Islamic/religious artworks like mine, have occupied the modern gallery space, particularly, in my case where dialogue and interaction with seers (bringing in community aspects) are central to the exhibition and transforming the space. Conversely, I think art galleries can also be understood as operating beyond a purely secular context. The art centre in Sydney where I was exhibiting *Hayakal al Noor*, had the architecture of a church. Upon inquiry I was informed that indeed it used to be a church. It is the shared experience of art that makes art powerful and effective for inclusive, open, and imaginative understanding. Hence, I tend to avoid arbitrary separations of art from religion that position a gallery as a purely secular place. The Islamic philosophical paradigm from which my art practice springs, urges the artist and seer to imagine a world beyond the *zahir*. The seer brings about their own spirituality and culture, contributing to the *himmah*, creative energy of the artwork. I close this chapter with a unique *ta’wil* from a seer, Sarah Malik who is a journalist and a writer based in Sydney. I understand her *ta’wil*, as an interpretation that reflects on the continuing effects of spiritual imagination and the significance of an Islamic presence in art galleries. Malik writes on her Instagram social media feed:

Moving Arabic and Quranic calligraphy set on gossamer curtain in white, to a powerful female recitation of letters. It’s incredible to see art that reflects your seasons and rhythms and the community in which it lives. This mystical exhibition really reflects the spirituality and lyricism of a tradition that is about the oral form. The room is fragrant with incense and oud and it’s like a set of a movie where the scene feels ethereal—like I’m in medieval Jerusalem not Sydney, in a stained-glass mosque, sitting in deep meditation.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ https://www.instagram.com/sarah_b_malik, date accessed: 27-05-2021

The commentary I have recorded in this chapter about *Hayakal al Noor* sustains my understanding that the seer is imperative to this research to enable it to exist. My work is about generating an art experience, a *himma*, provoking the imagination to *ta'wil*, returning to our spiritual beginnings and inducing *ajab*, wonder—all this would not be possible without the seer.



Image 40 Narjis Mirza, *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light* (2021), Leo Kelly Blacktown Arts Sydney .



Image 41 Narjis Mirza, *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light* (2021), Leo Kelly Blacktown Arts Sydney, photograph by Zahid Ahmed.



Image 42 Narjis Mirza Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light (2021), at Leo Kelly Blacktown Arts Sydney.

Towards a Conclusion

This exegesis opened with an aniconic world view in which the *zahir*, the ostensibly visible world is symbolic and suggestive of the unseen and the metaphysical. Hence, the plethora of images we encounter was considered to host an image of the divine. In my art practice I saw potential in light and installation art experiences to provoke the imagination of the seer beyond the apparent. My enquiry drew upon Islam's ontological framework of the sensory world interconnected with the Imaginal and the intelligible realms. I differentiated a Euro-American understanding of imagination from an Islamic perspective that extends to the spiritual realm. In Islamic thought the physical senses respond to the *zahir*, and the imagination is an organ of perception that responds to the invisible, the unseen, and the Imaginal. I evoked imaginative understanding within the milieu of divine revelation, intuition, and creative inspiration.

In the Introduction of this exegesis, I suggested that Suhrawardi's theory of the Imaginal is an augmented reality that is an extension of this world but without any material form. Suhrawardi describes the Imaginal as a realm of spiritual lights and suspended images. Sadra developed this idea further on the basis of continual intensification of Being, presenting the Imaginal, a plane of infinite potential within the soul, that I believe can be explored through artistic research. My art practice considered light a—visible invisible, material immaterial—medium that is a cascading intensity of the unseen Divine Light, referencing the Light Verse of the Quran. I used text as an expression for the image of light and voice to reflect on Islamic spirituality that has its beginnings in oral traditions. Through chapters three and four I explored how animation, calligraphy, projection, textiles, design of space, fragrance, and sound, together in an installation space can produce an art experience, a spiritual context to encourage the seer to dwell on the unseen.

In this thesis (writing and art practice), I framed the participant as the seer, acknowledging a person's potentiality to be affected and spiritually aroused. I observed that each seer sees and responds to my work according to their own reception and personal connection. The seer is in the lineage of people who strive to go beyond the *zahir*, the visible and material dimension of being. The response to my work, particularly the latest exhibition of *Hayakal al Noor* in Sydney demonstrates that there is transformative potential in an interactive and immersive light and sound experience generated from *ta'wil* as an approach.

Throughout the thesis I have suggested that *ta'wil*, is to apprehend the *zahir* and to inspire a connection with the Imaginal. I acknowledge it was a challenge in the beginning to openly demonstrate how *ta'wil* applies to my studio art practice. *Ta'wil* is traditionally associated with literal interpretation founded in the Quran, though it has a creative, political, esoteric, and spiritual dimension that I have alluded to

in chapter one—in Sadra’s poem on *ta’wil* and Joseph’s story of interpretations. Gradually, my understanding of *ta’wil* for artistic research developed through artmaking, reflecting, and sharing my work with an audience. *Ta’wil* became a way of seeing that affected the creative decisions I made for my art practice. For example, in chapter three I introduced my decision to work with the *farwatih*, opening letters of the Quran because they have aniconic qualities, they are symbolic, mysterious, and mystical. These letters are ambiguous in their meaning, they require a *ta’wil*, as in interpretation. In text-based animations I apprehended that I could amplify their mystical status, by attending to how they would appear and the effect they could generate. I worked on their style of calligraphy, type of animation, duration, and physical movements. These were intuitive decisions taken when I was working inside Adobe After Effects. I recounted my iterative testing of my animations as projections on various materials. The resulting artefact together with sound, textiles, and fragrance produced the immersive experience of the major body of work discussed in chapter four, *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light*.

Through my art practice I found there is a creative potential in the Islamic concept of *ta’wil*, as an effective methodology for artistic research concerned with the inner significance of images. This inner significance is provoked sometimes by visual chaos in Monir Fatmi’s work, simulacrum spaces in Refik Anadol’s data sculptures, and by becoming a pixel in Azadeh Emadi’s moving image. In chapter two I consider these contemporary art practices together with aniconic motivations of early Islamic art practices. I found that *ta’wil* can operate on a practical level and provoke an other-worldly connection through sensorial encounters of art for both myself, the artist, and the seer. The basic principle of *ta’wil* for artistic research remains the same as is for Quranic *ta’wil*—to return to the inner significance of images. In 2019, I published a paper titled *Ta’wil in Practices of Light* for the online peer-reviewed journal Performance Philosophy (Mirza, 2019). I discussed how this traditional method used in hermeneutic discussions can be practised outside the domain of literal interpretation. It is an emergent method that draws a connection between physical and metaphysical worlds. *Ta’wil* is both a noun, as an object or happening in the physical world, and a process of carrying a perceptible image towards higher and deeper understandings. Inquiry into how *ta’wil* applies to art practices that do not have an Islamic paradigm, is a matter of further research. I maintain that *ta’wil* as a methodology requires a deep understanding of the Islamic philosophical framework. The principal concern in *ta’wil* is to return to the *batin*, the unseen, the ineffable and the metaphysical. In the next few passages, I look back at how my art practice developed into experience-based research, on the basis of *ta’wil*.

Artistic Practice, a Journey Inward

Asfar, meaning journeys was the first project I developed in studio, inspired by Sadra’s classification of four spiritual journeys that connect people with *al Haqq*, the Real (also translated as God or the truth). As introduced in chapter one, I wanted to create an immersive

experience around what it means to journey spiritually, and so I produced a laser-cut light box with a phrase about each journey written in Kufic style calligraphy. I presented *Asfar* at Corban Estates Art Centre in February 2018, this was the first occasion I introduced myself and my Islamic heritage to an audience in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Asfar* (2018) produced an immersive space and explored what it means to be fully submerged in light, patterns, calligraphy, geometry, and repetition. The travel of light from its strongest point towards a lighter shade, performed a visual gradation of clarity for those nearby and blurriness for those farthest away. The light box created what seemed to be an infinite display of light, in a finite room, enveloping every moving and stationary surface. My approach of *ta'wil* in this project examined the gradation of visible intensities of light, the significance of Sadra's words beyond literal comprehension, inviting the seer to experience and then observe their performative participation. I gathered people around light, touching them with light, offering them a journey spiritually through an art experience and the agency to *ta'wil*. For me the candle-mirror analogy that I described in chapter two is performed in *Asfar* (2018), where multiple seers host light through their bodily presence and in their heart (as in imaginative perception). The Muslim community in particular found a connection to their heritage and spiritual beliefs, and at this beginning stage of my PhD I realized the significance of my work in Aotearoa New Zealand, where works of Islamic art are relatively scarce.

The second public exhibition of *Asfar* was in March 2018 at Papakura Art Gallery. This exhibition had a more formal opening event which attracted a larger participation from the Muslim community. In chapter one I discussed some of the conversations my own presence as a Muslim woman artist, new to Aotearoa New Zealand, triggered for the audience. There was a sense of curiosity among the visitors about who I am, where I have come from, and what is it that I am doing? I was welcomed and I noticed that "who I am" affects how people see my work. However, as stated in the introduction of this exegesis, my own personal position, as a Muslim woman is implicitly present for this research. I value more the collective *ta'wil*: the conversation with and participation of my audience. More specifically, I found my work has an impact on people: the workshops with the high school students and the elderly community of Papakura, Auckland, created a more inclusive environment where I could share and exchange conversations about culture and spirituality through the process of making art. The Muslim immigrants of Aotearoa New Zealand who visited *Asfar* saw an image that is familiar to them, which offered them a sense of belonging. I learned how light and text together can inscribe and imprint on the body of the seer.

Later in 2018, I advanced my practice with more experiments around light, as outlined in chapters one and three. First through photographs with extended shutter speed camera, I recorded myself with handheld light. Next by mapping strokes of light on architectural corners of my house and other objects, but soon I moved away from these experiments because they did not include the seer. Also, I wanted to create an experience with images that did reflect my philosophical position on light. I returned to Arabic language and gradually developed an interest for Arabic letters and the mysterious *farwatih*, because of their ambiguous status. I worked on the idea of inscribing

the body with animations of *huroof* and experimented with different surfaces for projections. I produced a series of body projections but later sought materials that are wonder-inducing. My own experience of Islamic art inspired me to include the aesthetic experience of *ajab*, wonder, in my work. *Ajab* positions my art practice in the lineage of Islamic artisans who strategically intended wonder and contemplative perception in their artwork. After several tests I realized translucent chiffon is effective for the kind of art experience I seek to engender in *Hayakal al Noor*.

I continued to work in studio and developed works around light and its effects on our sense of perception. In June 2019 I harnessed the Blackbox space at AUT for a large-scale installation test and invited colleagues to participate and experience. This was my first iteration of *Hayakal al Noor*. Silent and disjointed Arabic letters in an animation sequence gathered on layers of chiffon, hung in adjacent parallel lines. I collected feedback from my audience about this walk-through installation. Many of them comfortably interacted with the textile and design of space. Some asked if there was sound that could accompany the work. Others suggested more chiffon material to enfold the body of the seer. Seeing my work with the audience and collecting their experience was important for developing my work. The subtle spiritual effect of the Arabic *huroof* animations and chiffon material was evident. At this stage *Hayakal al Noor* was just sprouting and I was exploring Suhrawardi and Sadra's philosophy of imagination.

In March 2020, at North Art Gallery I installed *Hayakal al Noor* together with Jessika Kenney's letter song *Pamour*. Although the exhibition opening event was cancelled for the artists, some people did engage with the work and I received useful feedback through reviews. This was a direct impact of the looming pandemic. Given the uncertainty of the situation there was limited opportunity to interact with the audience. When Aotearoa New Zealand announced border closure I decided to move to Sydney and be close to my family where I observed a 14-day home quarantine. This was an experience of *khalvat*, isolation from the world that affected my art practice for the remainder of the year.

For one whole year my practice resumed in *khalvat*, in isolation from the seer. In an online interview with Papakura Art Gallery June 2020, I shared how the pandemic had impacted my work.⁸⁹ The presence of the seer is an active part of my art practice that I lost due to restrictions and lockdowns. From March 2020 till March 2021, I (alone) was the seer of my work. During this time I presented my work online at the 12th International Image conference 2020 in Sydney. At the monthly meeting of Substantial Motion Research Network—

⁸⁹ Online interview with Papakura Art Gallery <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=256529752440586>

with fellow artists, I shared the idea of *khalvat* in relation to my own experience of quarantine living and its effect on my art practice.⁹⁰ I was asking the seer to have a haptic and olfactory experience in my work when the situation with the pandemic required social distancing and mask wearing.

One important component of the final project that I developed during the *khalvat* period of my art practice was the voice of the *farwatih*. I connected with my sister and in three stages we developed the final version of the voice. The first phase was field recordings where I gathered a few women in my house in Sydney and recorded their voice reciting the *farwatih* in chorus. In the second stage it was only my sister's voice and we developed the first composition; this iteration was developed further into a more refined version which was played in *Hayakal al Noor* in Sydney. When I was mixing the final version I realized the impact of voice, specifically my sister's voice in intensifying the experience of the seer. I had kept sound in the background of my art practice, and focused more on the projection of animations. However, when I shared the voice-like sound for the first time in a public exhibition I came to know the potential of sound for provoking a suprasensory experience.

While confined in my domestic space I also made tests with light and fog. I developed the art experience of *Koukabun Durri The Shining Star* in June 2020 that was viewed only by my immediate family. The Light Verse of the Quran was laser cut in stylized Kufic on a circular panel. I hung this panel in my garage and released fog into the space. Then with the torch of my phone I explored the calligraphy of words and observed how light reacts to the atmosphere. However, this project was publicly documented through video and shared with an audience on Papakura Art Gallery's Facebook page.⁹¹ In this work, I observed the contribution of atmosphere in creating an ocular experience' and the performative tendency of light and calligraphy.⁹²

During this time I was constantly seeking opportunities to install at large scale and share my work with an audience, since I position this artistic research explicitly for the seer. It was important to test the various elements I was developing for *Hayakal al Noor* in a public space with the communities I was living among. In May 2020, in response to a call from my local arts centre in Sydney, I was selected as a resident artist to work in Blacktown Arts studios, however, with continuing restrictions from ongoing lockdowns, I was unable to work in the public studios or interact with an audience. Finally, in April 2021 after an ease in restrictions, I was offered to exhibit my work at the

⁹⁰ *Khalvat* at SMRN <https://substantialmotion.org/news/item/inspiring-smrn-meeting-of-april-2020>

⁹¹ Papakura Art Gallery's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/papakuraartgallery/videos/256529752440586/>

⁹² It is a challenge to work with fog in public spaces because in some buildings it can set off the fire alarm. Therefore, my experiments with fog were only at home.

performance hall of Blacktown Arts. This exhibition advanced my research and demonstrated how well my work generates a *ta'wil*, which is about provoking the seer to consider the inner spiritual significance of images.

Drawing on this exhibition experience, I have established from my own and the seers' performative participation that moving image, sound, and light installations can enhance our understanding of philosophical concepts and make them more accessible. Marks speaks extensively on the potential of a moving image, where "concepts are too static to capture it: images are more truthful" (2016, 38). I also discussed the relationship between images and the imagination throughout this exegesis. In the framework of the PhD program I learned how to articulate, question, and relate to my own cultural background. It is a challenge for me to conclude this research that has only just come into being as interactive installation art and exegetic writing. In the sections that follow I expand on how my art practice and the art experience of *Hayakal al Noor* have contributed to knowledge and the significance of art experiences in general.

Contribution to Knowledge and Art Experiences

So, whoever wants to wade into the ocean of divine disciplines and find depth of heavenly truths must observe practical and theoretical training and acquire eternal fortunes until divine light dawns upon him and get into the habit of extricating himself from his body. (Sadra 1600/2010, 8)

Through this artistic research, I have found that art practice can also contribute to the practical aspect of seeking knowledge. Sadra's instructions for philosophical knowledge require a serious training, which includes a detachment from the materiality of the world, and the development of spirituality, self-discipline, prayer, and mysticism. Only then do the fortunes of divine wisdom dawn upon a person. I propose that this practical exercise of seeking knowledge can be extended to artistic research and art experiences. Scrivener distinguishes between general artwork and 'knowledge artefacts' or art produced as research; the former (meaning general artworks) provide material for seeing, and the latter (knowledge artefacts) provide materials for knowing; the former attends to this world and the latter provokes an unknown and unfamiliar world of knowledge (2002, 12). I consider the process of making knowledge artefacts, exploring and reflecting through a written exegesis as a practical step for offering new knowledge (Candy and Edmonds 2018, 66).

The overwhelming response from the audience to *Hayakal al Noor* in Sydney in 2021, as discussed in chapter four, elucidates the spiritual effect of the work. For many it was difficult to describe in words the mesmerizing spell of the various mediums. One person said to me, they: "felt disconnected from the outside world and absorbed inside this other world of light, undulating Arabic calligraphy, sound, and

passages with rose perfume” (name unknown, 2021). If I dissect this comment from a technical perspective, the disconnection was partially due to the design of the space, which is a dark performance hall, enclosed with long black curtains that immediately changed the atmosphere for the seer, entering from a well-lit corridor outside. The design of space facilitated the seer to participate, by walking between the translucent chiffon, touching the fabric, and disappearing between the layers of light and shadows. This participation became a performance for others and myself as the observing artist. I realised that the seer *is* the *haykal al noor*, the *body of light*.

Other elements that provoked this other-worldly experience included the animation of *fawatih* in *Khat e mulla*, which literally means an elevated style of calligraphy. The duration, physics, and style of animation, synchronized with a soulful voice that enunciated the *fawatih* with a deep *himmah*, a concentration of the heart and a creative energy of the maker (as discussed in chapter four). These elements made up the *zahir*, apparent features that I can describe. Contributing to this is the creative potential of *ta'wil*, that I as the artist engendered in my work, followed by the potential and desire in the seer to be affected. Together the artwork produced a personal and ineffable connection for the seer. Scrivener notes that the practical value of an artistic research is offering: “insights as possibilities rather than conclusions” (2002, 11). *Ta'wil* for me, develops a novel way of seeing and experiencing. The performative art experience is important for seeking that knowledge, enfolded in the art work. *Himmah* when received by others facilitates exchange of knowledge and learning.

I apprehend that the Imaginal other worldly experience I am after is unfamiliar territory for most of my seers in Australasia. Even for a Muslim, the Imaginal is considered distant and inaccessible. However, the comments about the other-worldly effect of *Hayakal al Noor* are close to what I understand as the Imaginal. The Imaginal as an extension of this world, is not entirely inaccessible, as suggested in the discussion on dreams. Therefore, if artistic research is about opening insights into possibilities, I intend to open the possibility of the Imaginal for the seer in *Hayakal al Noor*.

Future Directions

The next phase of this study will be a social art practice (or field research): going into public spaces, galleries, and art festivals, where I can develop a close relationship with the seer and create experiences that can enrich our experience of this world. The past ten years of my life have been inside an art school and opportunities to have conversations with those outside have been limited. I now feel ready to share my cultural, social, political, and spiritual understanding of the world with a wider audience. In view of the global pandemic, there are limited opportunities to exhibit internationally or take my work back to my home country Pakistan. Meanwhile it is a crucial time to make connections between our nations through participation and dialogue around creativity and awareness, especially when there is often

misinformation about Islam through mainstream media in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. The Islamic philosophical paradigm from which my art practice springs urges the artist and seer to open to a world of imagination. Therefore, my immediate plan is to create installation-based art works for audiences in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. There are two particular concepts that branch from this study that I plan to explore in my future art practice.

First, through moving images and installation-based art practice, I want to explore how *ta'wil* generates a link between the ecology and eschatology of the world. Paolo Bocci coins the term 'eco-theology', arguing how in religious eschatology, with 'the end of the world' there can be an alternate form of environmentalism (Bocci 2019, 2). In chapter one, I shared my mother's spiritual understanding of the earth, a being that is witness to our actions and will have a voice in the hereafter. I presented how *ta'wil* is a way of seeing that aligns with the Quran's statement about the folding up of the world. In this discussion, I indicated that the concept of the voice of the earth can influence our attitude and relationship with the natural world. With the heightened realization of world climate change, the discussion of eschatology can be valuable and it has an imaginative valency that is rarely explored. Further conceptual research with interactive installation art can provoke a sense of responsibility and understanding for our planet and its living environment.

Second, I plan to steer the transformative and spiritual aspect of my installation art practice towards the spiritual health and well-being of the seer. I consider spiritual and mental well-being closely related concepts. I was inspired on this aspect when one of the seers of *Hayakal al Noor* in Sydney shared her experience of the installation with me: how animated strokes of calligraphy, voice, and the passage between the veils affected her spiritually and mentally. It allowed her to be in the space and at the same time not be there, as she wandered away in the passages. I also enjoyed the passages between the veils and the ability to disappear and appear as I wish. She shared her struggles and the need for more empathy-based efforts for understanding the complexity of human behaviour. The serene and calm effect of *Hayakal al Noor* was also noted by Shamima Lone (2020) in her article for my exhibition in Auckland. New Zealand based artist Tiffany Singh positions her art practice in the realm of "creative well-being", an area of art practise concerned with achieving health and well-being goals.⁹³ Singh draws inspiration from her Indian culture and philosophy to create sensory spaces of inclusion and cohesive living. I would like to consider spirituality and well-being in Islamic traditions and engender in my future installation based art practice.

In the next few years, I also plan to disseminate this research, particularly the political, creative, and ecological dimensions of *ta'wil*, by writing articles for peer-reviewed journals and presenting my work at conferences. I believe there is a need for more studies that establish

⁹³ See Tiffany Singh's homepage, <https://tiffanysingh.com/> Accessed, May 14, 2021.

how *ta'wil* generates new forms of knowledge in practice-oriented research. For this purpose, I plan to present my work at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ) this year. The AAANZ conference 2021 will be held in Sydney on the theme of “Impact” in relation to art, design, film, culture and politics⁹⁴. I want to share how my art practice corresponded to the impacts of the emerging global pandemic in the year 2020-2021 and how *ta'wil* performs in *khalvat*, a state of isolation from the outside world. I will also produce an article on the metaphysical dimension of *ajab*, wonder, in artistic practices for the Journal of Art and Society. In addition, I would like to share segments from this research in the online and peer reviewed Journal of Artistic Research and introduce the potential of *ta'wil* in creative art practices.

Afterword

One of the reasons for pursuing a research program was to bridge Islamic philosophical thought with contemporary art practice. My academic training in the art schools of Pakistan and Turkey had courses on art history, media theory, and research methodologies from the standpoint of mostly Western scholarship. Regional and historic art forms like Persian and Mughal miniature art were in the margins of a pedagogical system that had a lot to inherit from its vast history of art making. The lack of contemporary scholarship for these ancient cultural art forms of South Asia led me to consider a research program.

In 2016, while I was completing a Master of Fine Arts in Media and Design at Bilkent University Turkey, I submitted a research proposal for a PhD project to AUT. I wanted to embark on an independent research project in a University that supported creative practice-oriented research, to see if I could bring Islamic philosophical thought to contemporary and new media discussions. I had previously enrolled in a PhD course in Turkey on the politics of the self, which had weekly discussions on the work of scholars such as St. Augustine, Rene Descartes, John Locke, Michel Foucault and only one week dedicated to a scholar from the Ottoman period. In Pakistan my art history class taught me all the art movements from Renaissance to ‘Western’ Conceptual art but little about the art and architecture of the region I was living in. The lack of contemporary scholarship on these ancient cultural art forms, as well as the rich philosophical tradition of South Asia motivated this research. It was exciting to discover the work of Azadeh Emadi in Aotearoa New Zealand (now in Glasgow) and Laura Marks in Canada who were contributing to a field of research I wanted to be a part of; creating bridges with Mulla Sadra and other Islamic *Hikmet*.

⁹⁴ AAANZ conference 2021: <http://aaanz.info/aaanz-home/conferences/2021-conference-impact/>

My art practice identifies the significance of reframing concepts from Medieval Islamic philosophy in contemporary art scholarship, rather than relying on Euro-American philosophy. My approach to *ta'wil* through installation art methods contributes to a nascent area of research, which Scrivener describes as “culturally novel” (Scrivener 2002, 11). In my Artist Talk in Blacktown, Sydney, I articulated how important it is to speak about the philosophical contributions of Mulla Sadra, Suhrawardi, and Ibn Arabi, and their impact on Islamic cultures and beyond. I believe it is important to share the philosophical contributions of Islam in contemporary art spaces that have a voice in shaping and influencing people’s perceptions. I have found that practice-based research into Islamic images, letters, and sounds can expand our means of learning, articulating, and sharing knowledge. Artistic research probes into new modes of perception and fresh interpretations while continuing the trajectory of Islamic arts, for the artist and the seer. Hence, I consider conversations, dialogue, scholarly writing, collective *ta'wil*, and public exhibitions an important way forward for my art practice. On the next and final page of this exegesis, I conclude with the remainder of Ibn Arabi’s supplication that was shared in the introduction. This is a conversation with the Divine and the self, calling on all senses of human experience: ocular, haptic, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile to reach out for the unseen, destroy all forms of separation, and unite with the ineffable.

حبيبي..
كم أناديك فلا تسمع
كم أترأى لك فلا تبصر
كم أندرج لك في الروائح فلا تشم؟
وفي الطعوم فلا تطعم لي ذوقاً
مالك لا تلمسني في الملموسات
مالك لا تدركني في المشمومات؟!
مالك لا تبصرني. مالك لا تسمعني.
مالك، مالك، مالك
أنا ألد لك من كل ملذوذ
أنا أشهى لك من كل مشتهى.
أنا أحسن لك من كل حسن
أنا الجميل، أنا المليح
حبيبي. حبيبي لا تحب غيري.
اعشقني. هم فيّ. لا تهم في سواي. ضمنني قبلني.
ما تجد وصولاً مثلي.
كلّ يريدك له. وأنا أريدك لك.
وأنت تفر مني

حبيبي.
الوصال، الوصال
لو وجدنا إلى الفراق سبيلاً
لأذقنا الفراق طعم الفراق!
حبيبي! تعال، يدي ويدك،
ندخل على الحق يحكم بيننا
حكم الأبد

Dearly beloved!
I have called you so often and you have not heard Me.
I have shown Myself to you so often and you have not seen Me.
I have made Myself fragrance so often, and you have not smelled Me,
Savourous food, and you have not tasted Me.
Why can you not reach Me through the object you touch
Or breathe Me through sweet perfumes?
Why do you not see Me?
Why do you not hear Me?
Why? Why? Why?
For you My delights surpass all other delights,
And the pleasure I procure you surpasses all other pleasures.
For you I am preferable to all other good things,
I am Beauty, I am Grace.
Love Me, love Me alone.
Love yourself in Me, in Me alone.
Attach yourself to Me,
No one is more inward than I.
Others love you for their own sakes,
I love you for yourself.
And you, you flee from Me.

Dearly beloved!
Let us go toward Union.
And if we find the road that leads to separation,
We will destroy separation.
Let us go hand in hand.
Let us enter the presence of Truth.
Let It be our judge
And imprint Its seal upon our union.
For ever.

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Glossary

aalam al ghayb

world of the unseen and absent from sensory perception

aalam al mithal

Imaginal

aalam al shahadat

world of the seen and available to perception
ajab wonder

al aql

Intellect

al haqq

the Real, also translates as the Truth

asalatul wujud

the primacy of existence

barzakh

a border or barrier

batin

hidden, invisible, esoteric

hikmet

wisdom

himma

concentration of the heart, creative resolve

huroof

letters

jalvat

in the open

khalvat

solitude, in isolation

makharij

points in the mouth, used for Arabic enunciation

mothol mo'allaqa

images in suspense

noor

light

qira'at

a unique style of recitation of the Quran

sarayan al-wujud

the flow of Being

ta'wil

primarily an esoteric mode of interpretation found in the Quran

tajweed

a set of principles used to improve recitation of the Quran

tashkik ul Wajud

modulation/intensification of a single necessary Being

thesis

the overall project is referred to as the thesis, the thesis incorporates the art practises, artworks and the written exegesis document.

zahir

apparent, visible, exoteric

List of Exhibitions | Publication

- 2018** *Asfar*, Journeys at the Barrel Store at Corban Estates Art Centre, Auckland.
Asfar, Journey at Papakura Art Gallery Auckland.
 Workshop I Light observations with Te Aoatea college at Papakura Art Gallery Auckland.
 Workshop II Light Observations with Papakura Blind support group at Papakura Art Gallery Auckland.
- 2019** Mirza, N. (2019). *Ta'wil*: in Practices of Light. *Performance Philosophy*, 4(2), 564–575.
<https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2019.42242>
- 2020** *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light* at North Art Gallery Auckland.
Koukabun Durri, the Shining Star, sharing my work online with Papakura Art Gallery
<https://www.facebook.com/papakuraartgallery/videos/256529752440586/>
 Pop up virtual exhibition in the Eleventh International Conference on The Image
 link: <https://ontheimage.com/about/history/2020-conference>
- 2021** *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light* at the performance hall of Blacktown Arts Centre, Sydney
<https://blacktownarts.com.au/whats-on/exhibitions/hayakal-al-noor-bodies-of-light/>
 Final exam exhibition of *Hayakal al Noor* at the Blackbox theatre space AUT

Appendix

The following pages feature photographic and video stills of documentation of my Ph.D. exhibition *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light* held from the 1st July until the 8th July 2021 at WG210, Blackbox theatre, AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand. Further details of this work and others can be found at www.narjismirza.com. My studio art practice for this thesis was also documented on a blog over the past four years (2017-2021). Website links from this blog are inserted in various sections of this thesis. The following website link opens to the main page of the blog and shows documentation of the public exhibitions and studio practice www.phdartresearch.wordpress.com.

Seven passages were created in the Blackbox space at AUT, using over hundred and twenty meters of chiffon, cut into four meters each and stitched onto bars, raised at a height of approximately 4 meters. Two projectors were installed at one end of the room, projecting an animated sequence of the Arabic calligraphy of *huroof* onto layers of free-flowing chiffon. Each passage between the layers of textile was an isthmus to pause between the intensities of light. The wonderful voice of the *fawatih* is my sister, singing the fourteen mysterious Arabic letters. The sound was distributed over four speakers, one in each of the corners of the room and the voice was mixed in such a way that it would overlap as it played over the four speakers. Sound, light, image, textile and rose oil rubbed on chiffon, were spatially woven into this installation, to create an experience that is unique to the seers' interaction (images on next page).

Video documentation of the this project can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/630656480>

My website: www.narjismirza.com



Image 43 *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light 2021*, Final PhD exhibition at the Blackbox theatre, AUT, Auckland. Photo by Narjis Mirza



Image 44 *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light 2021*, Final PhD exhibition at the Blackbox theatre, AUT, Auckland. Photo by Rumen Rachev.

The spontaneous performative participation of a group of seers. The seers explore and wonder how light from the projectors and the animated Arabic calligraphy imprints on their bodies and takes various forms and shapes. The texture and color of the seers' apparel also adds color to this monochromatic forest of light, voice, and animation.

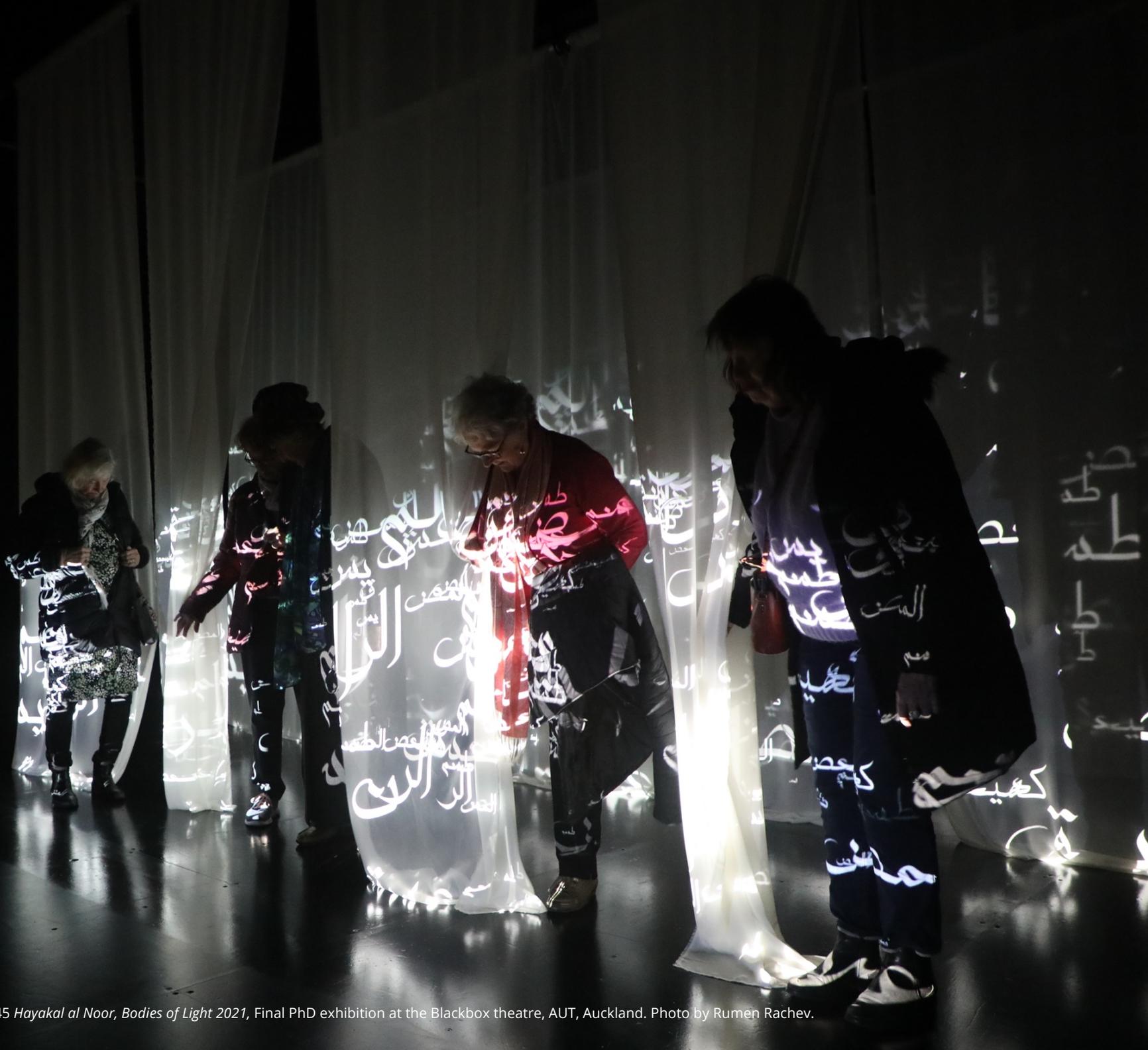


Image 45 *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light 2021*, Final PhD exhibition at the Blackbox theatre, AUT, Auckland. Photo by Rumén Rachev.



Image 46 *Hayakal al Noor*, *Bodies of Light* 2021, Final PhD exhibition at the Blackbox theatre, AUT, Auckland. Photo by Rumen Rachev.



A Persian rug was also rolled out in the installation space. A friend brought it upon my request and the moment of laying down the Persian rug became an event where all the seers participated. Then Sayed Derhamy said, "shall I show you how the Iranian sit?" We all nodded and followed him by taking off our shoes and sitting together in a *halqa*, group, this scene reminded me of sitting in a mosque.

The spatial hospitality of the installation manifested in discussions, interpretations and *ta'wil* for which the body, the soul, materials, and architecture of the space were witnesses. For many of the seers, the tradition of sitting on the ground rendered a more inclusive space of us-ness, and sense of humility before the light and its gradations.



Image 48 *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light 2021*, Final PhD exhibition at the Blackbox theatre, AUT, Auckland. Photo by Rumen Rachev.



Image 49 *Hayakal al Noor*, *Bodies of Light 2021*, Final PhD exhibition at the Blackbox theatre, AUT, Auckland. Photo by Rumen Rachev.



Image 50 *Hayakal al Noor*, *Bodies of Light 2021*, Final PhD exhibition at the Blackbox theatre, AUT, Auckland. Photo by Stephan Marks



Image 51 *Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light 2021*, Final PhD exhibition at the Blackbox theatre, AUT, Auckland. Photo by Stephan.

<https://vimeo.com/630656480>



Image 52 Hayakal al Noor, Bodies of Light 2021, Final PhD exhibition at the Blackbox theatre, AUT, Auckland. Photo by Zohreh Shirazi



Image 53 *Hayakal al Noor*, Bodies of Light 2021, Final PhD exhibition at the Blackbox theatre, AUT, Auckland. Photo by Zohreh Shirazi