

An Interview with Nadia Janjua
of Muslim Women in the Arts (MWIA)

MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE ARTS (MWIA)

by **Valerie Behiery**, Islamic Art historian, Ph.D.

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The best terms to describe Nadia Janjua are dynamic and community-oriented. The underlying intention of all her work, whether as an artist, architect, or community organizer, is to build and consolidate a sense of community, amongst Muslims but also across ethnic, cultural and religious boundaries. It is this same spirit that animates, for example, her trip to Pakistan to help flood affected communities design and build adobe homes, her simple architectural design for an Islamic school, or still yet a painting such as 'Of the Earth', a water-colour testimony of her spiritual journey to Mecca to make hajj.



www.njartitecture.com



Hello (wa assalamu alaikum) Nadia. You are now coordinator of Muslim Women in the Arts (MWIA) but you are also a practicing Muslim-American architect and artist. Could you say a few words about your own practice before we discuss MWIA specifically?

Wa alaikum salaam Valerie! I work under the business name "NJARTitecture," which encompasses my commissioned work in the fields of both art and architecture. I have been painting for fifteen years, have had numerous works commissioned by private clients and art collectors, and I contribute annually to charitable events, usually fundraising for the rebuilding of communities destroyed by natural or man-made disasters. This is also my broad focus with architecture – disaster relief architecture, but in the United States I am an independent subcontractor working with Design-build firms. In this type of work, I'm a part of every step of the process; as I often describe it to people – my hands are in the dirt, all the way up to meeting with clients and helping them find their design vision.

When was MWIA founded and by whom? What motivated your predecessor to establish an organization that would bring Muslim women artists together?

MWIA was founded in September 1999. Unfortunately, I don't know who the original founder was, but I know that for at least the past 10 years the group has been under the direction of Siham Eldadah, who is referred to as the founder by older members of MWIA. From what I understand, a core group of older Muslim women artists from all walks of life in the Montgomery County area of Maryland got together and recognized that each one had so much creative talent, but no outlet to share or express it. Siham worked very hard over the years to build a strong relationship with Montgomery County ("MoCo"). This county also happens to be the most active in the arts and very supportive of both diversity and women. This relationship has allowed MWIA to exhibit at the MoCo Executive Office



'Apertures', Oil, 14 in. 40 in., 2005. © Nadia Janjua

Building for the past 11 years.

How would you define the purpose, aim and long term goals of MWIA?

The mission of MWIA from 1999 up until today has been to empower and encourage Muslim women artists to exhibit their art and to share their skills, as well as to highlight the continued relevance of the Islamic arts. It is also to educate the public about Islam through the beauty and depth of the artistic ability of Muslim women.

What would you like to bring to MWIA? Where do you hope to bring it under your leadership?

To really fulfill all aspects of the original MWIA mandate. Over the years the association has really only focused on producing an annual exhibit. From what older members have told me, presence at meetings was dwindling; there was a lack of commitment in this group run by volunteers, disorganization, haphazard submission and presentation of art work, and not much space for members to contribute and share ideas.

In four months, I have managed to transform MWIA by gaining a wider presence on the world wide web. I created a website, a Facebook fan page, a Google Calendar, and a Twitter account, and within days we had over 300 fans. Emails

poured in daily from women and men all around the world in support of this group. As an effort to get artists and youth, in particular, from all over the world involved, I introduced design competitions, which also served as a means for fundraising. Our logo design, for example, is a combination of work of Lubna Shaikh, a painter in California, and Sarah Diab, a Graphic Designer in Bahrain. I set up a "Global Artists Database" on our website, and featured an artist and their work every other day or so. Meanwhile, at our home base in the Washington, D.C. area, I recruited approximately 20 artists to be a part of our themed exhibit that took place last April 2011, which

had the theme of violence against women. We had several meetings in advance to organize the show, discuss the theme, as well as our work.

To answer your question more directly now, what I have wanted to do is to enable a path for women to find or amplify their voice. It was important to me that while I led meetings and the overall functioning of all things related to MWIA, every member had a voice that was heard and respected for what it was. As a self-taught artist and entrepreneur of fifteen years, I really wanted to impart the reality that if you set your mind to something, you can absolutely achieve it.

Is membership open to all women who self-identify as Muslim women artists? What is the process to become a member and do you have any specific selection criteria or restrictions? And finally is there an annual fee?

Yes exactly, to be a member of our Global Database you must be a Muslim woman who identifies herself as an artist – amateur, emerging, or professional. The process to become a member is simple with no restrictions.



You just submit a short biographical statement, a link to your website, and a profile picture. There is no fee, though members participating in the art exhibit were asked to donate a minimum of ten dollars to cover costs.

You are open to all art forms from scriptwriting to jewellery making, and from poetry to painting although the focus appears to be on the visual arts. What is the rationale behind such an inclusive approach?

Having an inclusive approach is so integral to who I am individually, and the collective work I do. I believe to attempt to explain our identities as Muslims living in the West, we must be inclusive.

First of all, contrary to what many may think, there is no shortage of Muslim artists, and I think it's so important to exhibit how contemporary Muslim artists are redefining what "Islamic Art" is, even if it just to say that it is ever-changing and responding to its

context. In terms of art, in particular, Islamic traditions of poetry and storytelling are being revived and expressed through hip-hop today. Calligraphy has become "calligraffiti," typography, or variants of traditional styles. Islamic dress has become a fusion of respective local trends, still aiming to emphasize modesty, while nonetheless being unique and stylish. Patterns of town and community planning still exist, but the form is different; our spiritual centers may not be mosques in the traditional sense, but could be a space in the basement of a church, or a rented apartment. The essence of Arabic calligraphy and geometric surface patterns are now found on paintings or other forms of two-dimensional visual art which serve to evoke the remembrance of Allah and reflect the beauty of creation.

This is actually a really exciting time for Muslim artists because we constitute the creative body of pioneers who are shaping contemporary Muslim artistic identity,

both in the West and the East. Our cultures, attitudes, approaches, and spirituality are influencing our identities, collectively and individually; we're evolving, and our revived presence is gradually being recognized on a larger scale.

And why do you think that no musicians and singers have become members of MWIA? I have been told that it is equally difficult for Muslim women to make inroads into the music industry, which has led to the emergence of two European associations, Sisterhood and Ulfah Arts, which have been set up precisely to help Muslim women record their work and organize concerts and tours.

They have, actually. I've been to past MWIA events where women have sung after the keynote speech. For this exhibit we had a short window of time for our event, and didn't have the set up to encourage a musician to perform. One of our members is a

Radio Show Host in Virginia. She runs a show called Global Rickshaw Radio where she interviews musicians from all over the Muslim World. She made a 2.5 hour fusion/mix CD that we played at the exhibit's opening. It's an incredible mix – you can listen to it online actually! <http://i.mixcloud.com/CVf15>

Islam is obviously an important aspect of your organization. How spirituality and religion are defined and practiced is left up to the individual members, but such a focus does seem to reflect in some of the work, for example in the prevalence of calligraphy. However, MWIA's spotlight on Islam seems to move beyond the art as one of your goals is to lessen the mistrust towards Islam in western societies and to engage in inter-faith dialogue. How central is this to your organization's mandate? Art makes is a great ambassador; has it, in your experience, helped heal post 9-11 wounds and if so, can you give concrete examples?

I think I'd like to look past the specificity of "9-11 wounds," and say that generally speaking, part of my work with MWIA is to highlight that the issues we express through our art are global issues. With the theme of violence and abuse against women, there are definitely stereotypes that the non-Muslim or even Muslim viewer will have to dispel. For example, child brides are not only a Muslim phenomenon, nor for that matter are acid attacks against women; the inequality of women is not necessarily best personified by a woman in a burqa, but it could be equally exemplified by the fact that in the United States women earn only about seventy cents for every dollar that men make. My point is the goal of our art is to dig deeper: "We may look different, but we have exactly the same issues as you do. Recognize it, and let's talk about how we're going to solve things creatively."



Al Fatih Academy; Herndon, Virginia. Private Islamic school, preK-8th grade. Schematic Design by N. Janjua & C. Frazier

How many members does MWIA have in all?

About 40 members in the DC area, and just under 800 global fans!

That's incredible! Most of your members are, like you, based in the U.S.A. But you also have some

who live and work in Canada and Britain which only underscores the need for organizations like MWIA? Do you do outreach to Europe and/or the Muslim world? And if so, do you plan to expand by, for example, organizing exhibits outside of the U.S., by having the site translated into Arabic,

Italian or Malay, or other such 'globalizing' initiatives?

I haven't thought about translation but would absolutely be open to it! We have members from all over the world actually. My challenge now is to find funding so that international artists can be paid to have their work shipped to be a part of our art exhibits. There has already been much interest in opening up a chapter in Florida, Georgia, New York, New Jersey, California, and Illinois. We're open to it, I just need a team and a bit more funding to help make this happen.

An online platform provides visibility to the artists. It connects women who share the same interest or passion but who are often separated by great distances. How do you believe members are empowered by their affiliation to MWIA?

Artists have come up to me and told me that they've never felt like they were a true part of an artistic community before, and there is now definitely a general consensus of feeling very proud to be a part of MWIA, mashaAllah. And I'm so thankful that I was able to do a few things right with this association to create such an ambience and feeling for the artists. And to quote directly from a survey that I took from the general MWIA Fan base, here are what member artists are saying about the organization:

"A group for Muslim women artists helps to give more exposure to our sisters."

"This is such a great opportunity to allow Muslim women to show their talent as well as meet other artists."

"It is a great way to network with like-minded women with an interest in art."

"It allows us to gain inspiration and motivation from one another, and allows us to share our work and

receive feedback from other Muslim women artists who share the same passion."

"I think a support groups have benefits. Often times the voices of Muslim women go unheard. Art is a means of expression; a 'group' will only nurture this."

Do you know of instances where online presence, and therefore specifically the MWIA website, has lead to press, exhibits, or sales for the members?

Oh yes! Every time we've had an event at least one artist has sold work. Since our 4/22 event we've been offered to bring our exhibit to four other places. A few artists have been featured on some relevant blogs as part of MWIA.

MWIA hopes to help women artists professionally. Have you developed specific events or programs –apart from the annual exhibit– that offer advice on say web design, the art market, grantwrit-

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ing, educational programs, etc., to help your members with their artistic careers?

Everything you mentioned in the latter part of your question is definitely in the works. I have plans to have two themed exhibits, three workshops, and one training program per year. Most of this has come out of the direct need and questions I get from artists so we are definitely working on providing more opportunities for artists to learn and raise the standard of their work.

Is your hope to develop an alternative contemporary Muslim art world –and we do indeed see

many exhibits and festivals heading in this direction– or to encourage Muslim women artists to exhibit in more mainstream art venues? Or both?

Both. The difficulty with the notion of a contemporary Muslim art world is that there is still a large gap between doing something to highlight art amongst Muslims, and doing it with a high standard of quality and professionalism. While I am thoroughly grateful for the much-needed exposure of Muslim-produced art to the Muslim public and the raising of awareness about art in the Muslim community, I am hoping to make the exhibits and other events much more professional.

Part of my work with MWIA is to help educate other artists and really push them to consider their work, approach, and presentation in a more professional way. Perhaps MWIA will be the first, or one of the first associations to catalyze the contemporary Muslim community to provide proper resources, finances, and presentation formats for their artists.

I definitely want MWIA artists to exhibit in mainstream art venues as well. Alhamdulillah, two of the opportunities we've received have been from two prestigious galleries who felt it was important to highlight the work of Muslim women artists: the Saville Gallery and the VisArts Center, both in the state of Maryland.

I thank you so much Nadia for accepting this interview and I wish you every success at the helm of MWIA as well as with your own practice. Jazakhallah alkhairan.

Barakallah Fikh! Thank you so kindly for the interview. I would just conclude by saying that there is a lot of support from all sorts of different groups and individuals for Muslim women artists to be the leaders of our communities, and I hope through MWIA and similar groups we encourage ourselves and each other to rise to this position, inshaAllah.

