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Contemporary Arabic Calligraphy and Poetry as Geometry of True Morality

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School of American Craft

In Candidacy for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Metals and Jewelry Design.

Title: Contemporary Arabic Calligraphy and Poetry as Geometry of True

Morality

By

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MAY 9, 2018

Committee Approvals

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Date:

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Abstract:

All human languages are tightly interwoven with the history and culture of the nations and people who speak them. There is an inherent beauty to the lines of each sign, balance, and proportion of the symbols in Arabic calligraphy that are amazingly beautiful. In Arabic writing, one can feel musical rhythm to the words- there is a feeling as if one can hear the music or poetry. Arabic calligraphy is an art that contains the Arabic alphabet or Arabic script and has significant value because it includes a message which is meaningful to the artist. I think Arabic calligraphy is my way to express the pure beauty that is full moral integrity, value and ethics.

My subject matter's inspiration comes from a stereotypical piece of advice; "Don't judge a book by its cover." As cliché as that sounds, it's a simple piece of advice that many people choose to forget. A person's appearance might project perfection, but once you dig a little deeper, you might find an empty shell that represents nothing. I am interested in this topic as a reflective analysis. Every day I encounter people that have one dimensional priorities, whether it be appearance, the color of someone's skin, or the educational degree they carry. They choose to judge a character based on these things before assessing the essence of their personality. Through my work of multimedia sculptures and jewelry, I

explore these ideas through many materials such as, resin, aluminum, steel, and wood.

Context:

Nowadays, society trends cause the development of external appearance because people choose to judge based on beauty and vanity, before assessing the core of the essence of the self. This implies that appearance might project perfection, but penetrating deeper inside; there might be a core that lacks values, manners, personality, and ethics. Societal appearance associated with wealth and power are the reason why some individuals strive for it. Arabic calligraphy involves the beauty and true morality connected with historical and religious literature. People, who have no connections with the Arabic culture, may only enjoy the beauty of Arabic calligraphy. Looking from the inside, there is a compelling spiritual and aesthetic tradition comprehension of the Arabic calligraphy in the world of Islam. The contemplation of the calligraphy art should convey some sensory information to a person of another culture but, most likely, only superficial.

Each letter of the Arabic alphabet has an in-depth symbolic script. These correspond to certain colors, shapes, planet, zodiac sign, digit, and

therefore any word or phrase has its numerical, astral, color codes (Elmansy, 2014). Moreover, the form of the letter itself is sacred. Inspired by this thought, a group of Muslims also created the Mystical Movement, which proclaimed the letters, and their numerical meanings as the starting points to the foundation of the world. (Sood & Fitzgerald, 2012), These texts are not ordinary, but specific words, sanctified, along with their image and tradition. The art of calligraphy has long served the Muslim world for the regulation of mental activity. For people brought up in Muslim cultural traditions, Arabic script, drawn on a piece of paper, and the words themselves, possess magical significance. They are often considered as protection from evil forces and diseases. In the minds of some contemporary Muslims, the connection of the word and its meaning is so strong that they may read the script from the Quran over water and give this drink to a patient, believing in the healing properties of this mixture (Ekhtiar & Moore, 2012). The Word and its graphic design dominates the Arabic culture. It is a must-have attribute for all kinds of arts and crafts; shaping the thinking of Muslims which stimulates their creativity.

Brief History of Arabic calligraphy:

History and Culture are involved to all human languages of the world. The Arabic language, belonging to the Southern-Central Semitic group, is associated, first, with the Quran and Islam, and, secondly, with the rich and multidimensional arts. The history of the Arabic language is deeply connected with the art of calligraphy as it pushed the written word to the higher levels of embellishment and elegance.

The history of the Arabic language can be roughly subdivided into three main stages that have a distinct set of features and peculiarities – Old Arabic, Old Hijazi, Classical Arabic, and Neo-Arabic (Bishop, n.d.). It is believed that the first instances of the use of Arabic could be dated as far back as the ninth century BC, but the real development of the language began in about the second century BC. In the late sixth century AD, the tribes managed to form a relatively uninformed language code that was used in the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa (Owens, 2009). A large variety of scholarly and poetic texts of this period made a significant contribution to the standardization of the language that was completed at the end of the eighth century. Nowadays, the Arabic language is one of the most important languages in the world and functions on two

basic levels – the Modern Standard Arabic (used in writing, high register speech, etc.) and colloquial Arabic (used as a spoken language of everyday life). The Modern Standard Arabic is also used as one of the official languages of the United Nations.

The Arabic language has always existed in close contact with other languages of the Semitic group, like, for example, Hebrew, Syriac, and others. Due to the significant territorial expansion of the Islamic states, the Arabic language has also had many contacts with the languages of the conquered territories, like Spanish, Portuguese, Bulgarian, etc. (Bishop, n.d.). These and other European languages borrowed a variety of Arabic words that mostly denotes the concepts related to culture and science as the Arabic states were responsible for the transition of these ideas into medieval Europe (Owens, 2009).

The history of Arabic calligraphy is not identical with the history of the language as for a long time Arabic did not have the fixed written form. During the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime very, few people could read and write, so calligraphy was a prerogative of the professional scribes. The name of the classical calligraphers began to appear since the tenth century AD – Ibn Muqla, Ibn al-Bawwab, and others (Blair & Bloom, 2017). The

Baghdad calligraphy of the tenth century laid the foundation for all scripts and traditional materials used for this art. Since about the twelfth-century, regional variants of calligraphy began to emerge with the most prominent being North African and Andalusian styles (Zakariya, n.d.). The nineteenth-century Ottoman calligraphy brought plenty of innovations to this sphere and paved the way for contemporary calligraphy (Blair & Bloom, 2017). Currently, calligraphy is still used for traditional purposes, like the decoration of mosques or religious texts, but it has also become a powerful visual art that is appreciated all over the world. The Arabic language plays a crucial role in the culture of the Islamic world. It also frequently contacted with other languages of the Semitic group and influenced many European languages during the periods of extensive territorial conquest. In addition, the art of calligraphy facilitated the development of the language and led to the formation of the unique Islamic art that is still a part of the Muslim culture.

Personal background:

There are many things that influence how I create art, including my past experiences, childhood, parents, culture, and literature. This plays a significant role in the consolidation of my art. My memories of my childhood

impacted how I grew up in a large traditional family in the house that includes all family members from grandparents to grandchildren. My grandmother was a colloquia Kuwaiti Arabic poet, and she uses her poetry in daily life conversation. Furthermore, she was greatly affected by her father who was working as a performer on a sailing ship (before oil was discovered in Kuwait in 1936). Moreover, my family, Almuqhawi, was interested in reading books and Arabic literature because they established a printing house in 1947. Also, they got all of their printing equipment from Basra, Iraq. At that time the Almuqhawi printing house was considered the second print press in Kuwait after the failure of first government print press in 1946. My family history shaped my interest in Arabic calligraphy.

Also, I learned many things from my mother as; she nourished the mind and spirit. She taught us about honesty, compassion, and graciousness. The core lesson she always preached was, “those who win over the most hearts would ultimately gain something more precious than treasure.” She taught me that external beauty is transient and money comes and goes, but morality and integrity are priceless. Because of this, I learned to interact with people based on my values and morals regardless of whether that is reciprocated or not. These aspects impact my life and help me to find my way in my art.

Furthermore, my drawing is inspired by the artist Leonard Urso. He is Italian artist, his work reflects human activity and personal stories that shape our lives, using large sculpture, and painting ethics. Urso uses language in most of his painting to express his beliefs in what he states is “*The Truth.*” Also, he uses color, shapes, scale, and pattern as symbols in his work.



Also, the Arabic artist and calligrapher Mohsen Ghareeb influences my art. Ghareeb is abstract painter and fabricator; moreover, he used language as a tool to translates the present vicissitude to images, graphics, and sculptures. His work is associated with people understanding of the art, and he believed that there is nothing in this world “absolute truth.”



Evolution:

From the beginning of my metal work at RIT, I believe that I had an excellent artistic vision, but only had basic skills because I grew up in a cultural environment that protects woman from any risk. Men and women who are trained for the same artistic program are separated in terms of the work they learn. Men learn to weld, solder, and machine metal while woman are only allowed to cut and glue fabrics. Overcoming this cultural environment has been a motivating factor for continuing to evolve my work. I always say that I can evolve myself by practicing and learning from failure to succeed. When I started conceptualizing work, I began exploring Arabic calligraphy, and kept asking myself why I chose Arabic calligraphy for my sculptures, and not another language? I think this an outstanding quality that reflects my history and culture and emphasizes my soul.

In the RIT Metal and Jewelry Program, my first piece was titled, “The Life Ring,” which I completed after I had my first child. I felt like I was in a different world and state of mind. This is a functional piece that contains random letters from the Arabic alphabet. These letters form a lampshade that symbolizes my emotions, thoughts and memories. With each additional letter, the shape of the lampshade gets more complicated, like my life.

When I was younger, life was simple, but as I got older, it became more complicated, and with that came more responsibility. Furthermore, this change has surrounded me everywhere, in school, in my family, and in society. It has impacted my life and led me to accept new aspects of my life, which helps me to progress as an Arabic woman.



"The life ring" glass, LED light, copper patina.
Size:9 x9 inch.

Over time, I continued to explore more about Arabic calligraphy and different materials.

I created this next work of art because I was directly influenced by the beauty of Arabic Calligraphy and nature. This piece, titled *Spring of Essence*, illustrates the essence of purity. Because of this, I chose to use this shade of blue. The blue color resembles a water spring, and it's associated with human intelligence, truth, faith, trust, wisdom, and purity. The bottom part of this table was inspired by Diamond; using hexagonal angles.



"Spring of Essence" steel, aluminum mesh, resin, and acrylic medium.
Size: 25 x 25 x 12 Inch.

Then the royal blue parts from “Spring of Essence” influenced me to create this sculptural piece titled “The Essence”, it presents my culture through Arabic calligraphy and it is focused on the value of the pure inner beauty that we observe in ethics and morality. Arabic Calligraphy is symbolic of fairness. Also, there is a steady rhythm between elements that shows the harmony. Furthermore, I repeat the word "essence" in the element to strengthen its meaning and certainty, and to convey the message of the importance of the pure essence for the human being. I chose this shade of blue because it associates with human purity and ethics.



“The Essence” aluminum 14-gauge ,and acrylic medium

Next, I created this sculptural necklace

titled “The Life Puzzles”. I tried to use a different material than metal that I have never used before which was foam.

I found that foam is a soft, fun, playful, and colorful material that is easily shaped and formed with different sizes and shapes. Also, I decided not to paint it because I didn’t want to lose the value of the playful and fun colors



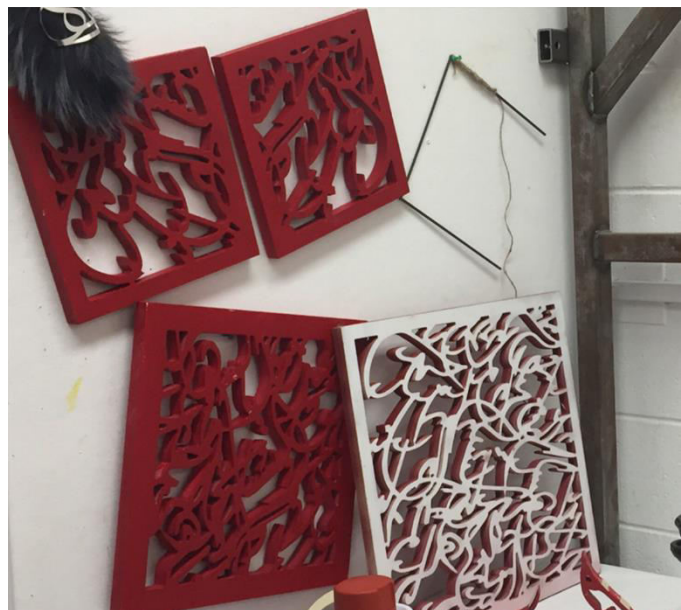
“The life puzzles” foam

This piece resembles life as a puzzle that needs to be solved because in our experience sometimes we have problems, mysteries, and difficulties that need to be addressed, to be overcome. This provided me with an idea of creating a sculpture with similar structure and movement.

As the semester went on, I felt the need to go significantly further and create relief sculpture that has a large scale and has contemporary forms.

The idea of this sculpture, titled "Mirror- Never Lies", occurred from "The Life Puzzle" piece. In the

beginning, I converted handwritten calligraphy into a CAD software program. Next, I laser cut the pieces and chose (MDF) wood for the calligraphy and painted it with acrylic medium and added



texture with a brush. As a result, I was not satisfied with the work "A1" because I found that the wood

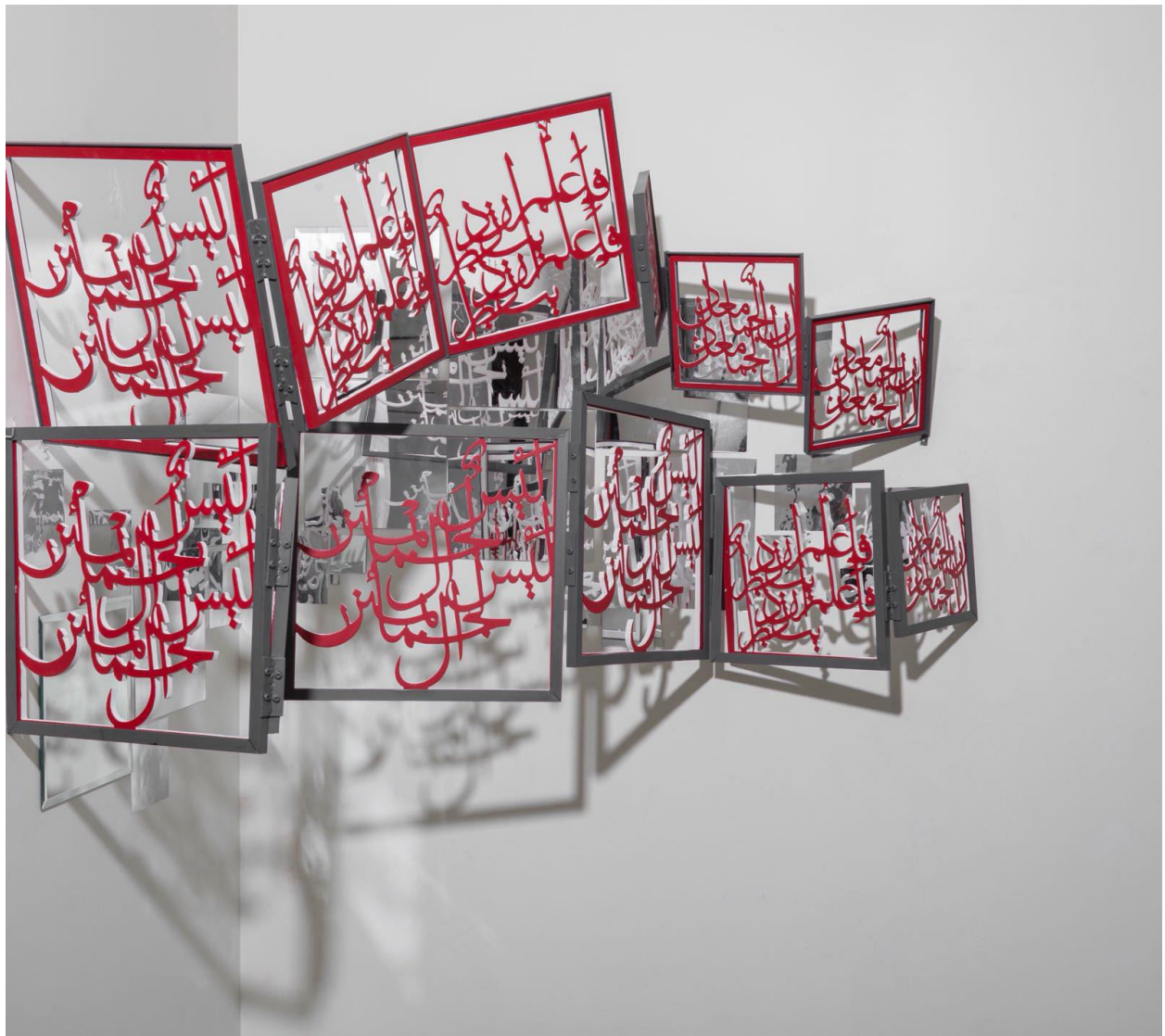
calligraphy looked rough and contracted. Thus, the calligraphy lost its

inherent beauty and rhythm. Then I decided that I would create the

calligraphy by computer software program. I found this program called Calli

pro that can create professional Arabic calligraphy, and designed the calligraphy in it, while considering the essential elements of design such as, lines, space, color, and harmony. After that, I laser cut the calligraphy that I designed. Next, I made a steel frame for these calligraphy wood blocks and painted it red and white with the hand brush. I think handwork enhances imagination and creativity and helps to achieve the ultimate expression. Although I can create the sculpture structure without steel frames, I found that this gives the work significant value because it provides aesthetic vision and strength. For the connections, I made hinges because it helps me to change the sculpture to allow it to fit various galleries of different size. This also allows me to have a new structure every time I install it in the galleries. Furthermore, it will be easy to me to ship it from place to place. When I created this hinge, I encountered a technical issue related to the connection due to welding two pieces of metal together. As a result, I found that the hinge was not finished accurately because it was not cleaned, and the angle was misaligned with the bend. Next, I decided to replace all the hinges and made fold hinges with 90 degrees and 45 degrees. After installation on the wall "A2", I found the scale was not big enough to attract the attention I desired. I decided to increase the scale of the sculpture, and I made more frames with different sizes to make the

sculpture more significant, but I know that my sculpture was too massive to be hang on the wall and, it would be risky. Then I changed the structure of my piece to extend it to the floor, so that all the weight of the steel frame is supported by the ground.



“A2” Mirror- Never lies” steel, wood, acrylic medium.

The Body of Work:

Figure1, 2

The essence of my work is from the ancient Arabian Peninsula, Calligraphy, and Literature. This piece was inspired by the pottery of *“Amr ibn Ma’adi bin Yakrib al-Zubaidi.”* The poem describes beauty and fairness; Bin Yathrib describes beauty, not as an apron that we can wear, but rather in your good deeds, which will be inherited from generation to generation.

The first piece is called “Mirror- Never Lies” and is a sculpture that represents our lives. Also, it symbolizes life as a book because each day is different and there are many actions, which change every single day like the pages of a book. Besides that, it is reflecting your emotions such as sadness, joy, and danger. However, this makes many people judge other people because of their actions, not based on their manner and equality.

This gets me thinking about creating this sculpture to call it your Mirror.

Because I think nobody knows the truth as we see ourselves like a mirror and it reflects ourselves on to this sculpture. I will invite the audience to walk under or through the sculpture to make them see it from a different angle, which also helps them to see the reflection of the calligraphy. I

created this sculpture from the mirror, steel, aluminum, and wood, which I painted rose red.

The second piece, called “The Musical of Poetry”. My desire for this sculpture was for audience to feel the harmony and the rhythm of the poetry that almost matched the music quality. The material I used is silver wall stickers and panels that I painted a ruby red color because it is a color that is associated with emotion.

figure,3,4,5,6,7:

Through my research, I discovered how to modify and simplify the letters of Arabic calligraphy after fragmenting them into geometric elements. As a result, there is a connection between the letters which have a recliner and curvilinear motion. That led me to design this necklace with square recliner motion and the Arabic calligraphy inside it which has a curvilinear motion. Furthermore, I conveyed a message through the necklace. Moral, manners, and ethics are critical keys to life. I used materials for these necklaces are stain steel wire, aluminum 14-gauge, brass tubing, fur, acrylic and clips. When we look at these geometric lines and calligraphy, we observe that the form relates to each other. This idea depends on the beauty that we find on

the element and form. This aspect has a strong harmony, which unifies this artwork and helps to create a high contrast between the components.

Figure 8” *Don’t Judge People From Its Cover ... Most of Their Books Are Still Being Written”*

The strength in the rhythm of the Arabic Calligraphy is the way that I express my truth faith and my soul. The wealthiest people are those who are rich in their spirit with love, kindness, and purity. Their valued currency is how much positive impact they leave upon the world. Most people in society judge others from their first impression, but over time, people discover a different person from what we thought. This piece illustrates the reflection of shadow on the face and body. Furthermore, the concept of the shadow is the internal human reality that is full of our stories and thoughts. I photographed the piece being worn by people of a variety different races. Even though the people wearing the piece are of different races, skin colors and faiths, they all have good value, manner, and ethics.

Conclusion

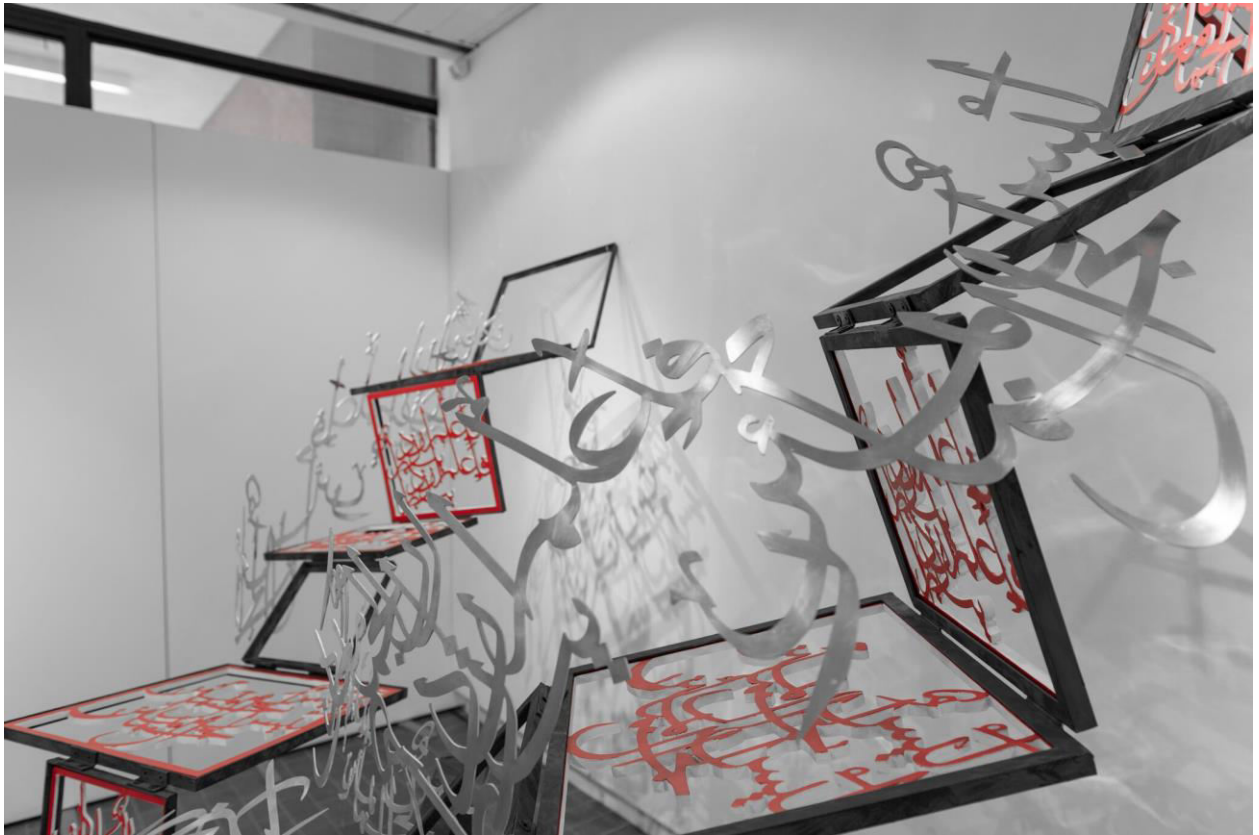
Following the insulation of my work in the Beaver Gallery. I made few changes in my sculpture "Mirror-Never Lies." Initially when I drew the sketch, I planned to place random mirrors of different sizes in the walls and floors to reflect our- selves and sculptures. After discussion with my committee, I moved all of the mirrors into the large frame at the floor. We found that if the mirrors are not straightly attached, they seem indefinite, and distracted. Furthermore, I could not recognize the movement of the calligraphy.

During the show, I put a sign "remove your shoes" to encourage people to walk through both sculptures and make people enjoy seeing different angles of the sculptures, but I found that very few people walk through.

Next time, although the audience enjoyed the Arabic calligraphy without knowing the meaning, I will provide some translations of the poetry, because I found that most of the audiences prefer to hear my explanation of the poem in the different culture. Also, I learned many new experiences that affect me as Arabian woman and artist.

At the end of my graduate, I discovered that I need to continue my studies and research about visual art, sculpture, text, literature, poetry, and

installation. Besides, I also wish to have a higher degree which is a doctoral program in fine art. This will help me improve my skills, strength and collect new data. I also need to move abroad to different country or city to help me to explore different cultures, environments, and learn new experiences.



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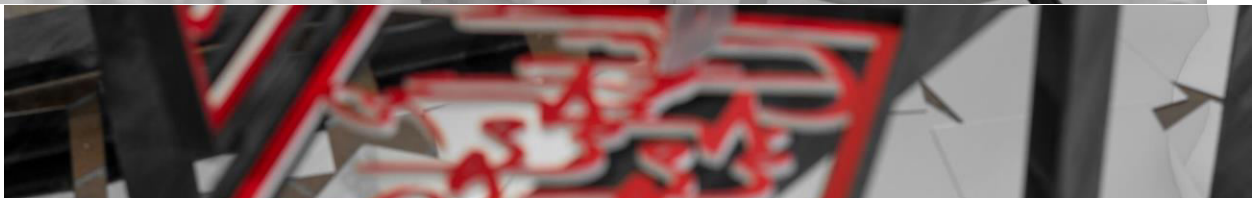








Figure 3“integrity”
aluminum 14-gauge Size: 9 x 9 Inch



Figure 5“the beauty of the soul”

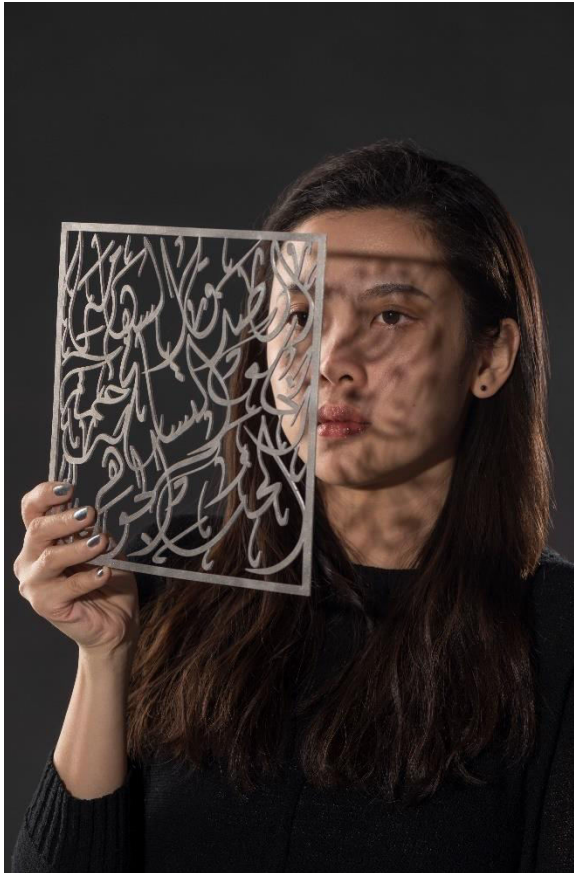
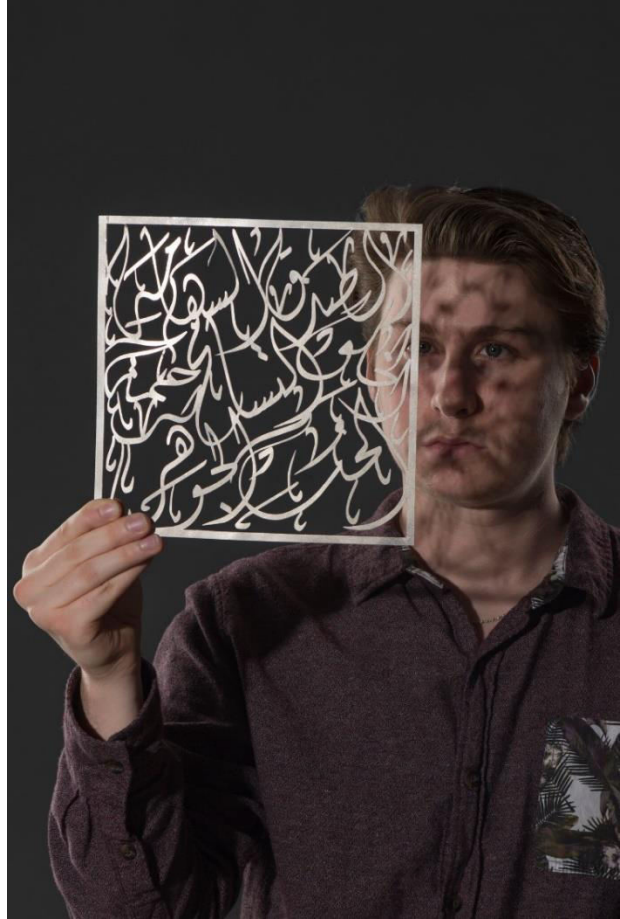
aluminum 14-gauge Size: 9 x 9 Inch,
red acrylic, stain steel wire, clip and
brass tubing





Figure 5 “Ethics”

aluminum 14-gauge Size: 9 x 12 Inch, clips, stain steel wire and brass tubing





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