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# Compelling

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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 Crafts In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Furniture Design

# COMPELLING

By

Fatmah Bamashmous August 1, 2018 Thesis Title: Compelling

Thesis Author: Fatmah Bamashmous

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#### Abstract

As a woman from Saudi Arabia learning the craft of woodworking in America, I intend to embrace the opportunity to blend Arabic art and design with my knowledge of making furniture to create a body of work that is uniquely mine.

In my thesis, I created a body of work that helped me define my voice as an Arabic designer and maker. I have seen and researched Islamic art and graphic details such as Arabesque (عربسكي), which is an ornamental design consisting of intertwined flowing lines, and architectural details found in Mashrabiya (مشربية) arches, doors,..etc., and incorporated these aspects into my design language. The goal of each unique piece within this body of work is to address the design aspects above while allowing me to define my interpretation of the historical forms. Using the power of the line, incorporating contrast, rhythm, and repetition, and assigning traditional woodworking techniques in different ways, offer me an appropriate balance of aesthetics and function for each piece.

During my journey to become a furniture designer and maker, I have enjoyed each step of the process, from the development of my design, to learning woodworking techniques, to building each piece with a high level of craftsmanship. I faced a lot of challenges with each piece I designed; however, each piece in the body of work has taught me something. I found myself learning from my own mistakes which allowed me to overcome whatever came next. Each piece has its own beauty and its own attraction. Each piece pushed me forward to make larger, more complex, work with increased confidence. All of these pieces helped me not only to define my voice as a designer and maker, but also to decide what I want to be.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Creating artistic crafts and handmade objects is not a common profession in Saudi Arabia, making artistic woodworking and handmade furniture hard to find. Being a woman from Saudi Arabia and learning the craft of woodworking in America, I intend to embrace the opportunity to blend Arabic identity and my knowledge of making furniture to create a body of work that is uniquely mine. I seek to create functional artistic furniture that helps me define my voice as an Arabic designer, which is inspired by historical forms, powerful lines, and the use of contrast, rhythm, and repetition. Because of the lack of representation of hand crafted pieces in Saudi Arabia, I want to develop and define my voice as an Arabic designer. Having lived in the United States of America for a few years, I have a unique opportunity to express my identity as an Arab designer in a contemporary way.

In this study, I intend to research oriental ornaments that are aesthetic attributes or vernacular of Jeddah, a city in Saudi Arabia, which has a huge historical area called "Al-Balad." These artistic details in Arabic are represented in the wavy lines in calligraphy and naturally occurring geometric patterns. I asked myself, "What drew peoples' eyes to these shapes; what is unique about them? Do they have a meaning? What are their origins? Where do these unique shapes and lines come from? Why these specific shapes? Back before modern technology, how were these perfect patterns designed to last so long?"

I found these answers by reading about Islamic art and history. I was curious, specifically, about a detail that I saw in the area of "Al-Balad" at the Hijazi الحجاز regions in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, figure 1. It is a small area that has a historical building with ornamental details and significant environmental architectural solutions that still are functional to this day. The wood has been left natural and gives a pleasing appearance. Nevertheless, these architectural details provide an extraordinary view from the inside and the outside, as a way of being aesthetically functional. From the light and shade, to the combinations of wood, to the minimal use of furniture inside the space, it all combines to create an environment that can easily be lived in. It shows how these humble craftsmen, working with minimalistic tools and techniques, created shapes and spaces that continue to be admired today. For this reason, the aim of my research is to incorporate these Islamic

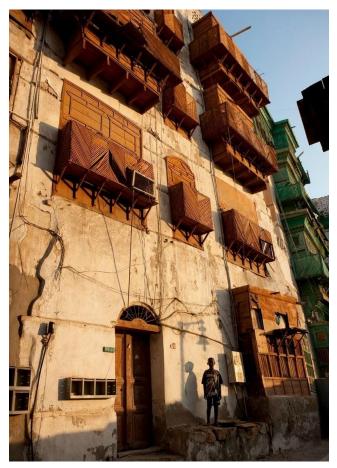


Figure 1 Jeddah city, Saudi Arabia

elements of art and design into my design language. The goal of each unique piece within the body of work is to interpret graphical Islamic forms, the power of the line, the use of contrast, rhythm, and repetition. Assigning traditional woodworking techniques in a way I feel appropriate based on my intended balance of aesthetics and function will further define my voice.

#### CONTEXT

During my furniture design and woodworking studies in the US, I saw how cultures vary, not only with language differences but also in regard to everyday activities. Living these experiences influenced my way of designing and thinking. For me, it is so interesting to see and experience how these cultural differences between the West and East effect the way people live. For example, in Saudi Arabia there exists a cultural difference involving how and where people sit. Thus, furniture made for these specific populations needs to accommodate these differences.

Handmade and crafted objects have existed for thousands of years, well before any machines were available. However, styles or movements that were established in any period have a direct impact on the shape of these objects and the material choices. Islamic art is one of those styles that has enormous scope and has developed under different circumstances while keeping its quality and unique identity.

Islamic art does not use figures as decoration. The non-figural types of decoration include calligraphy and geometric patterns are the basic components of Islamic art. Calligraphy is the fundamental element of Islamic art and is based on the Arabic script as its



Figure 2 Folio from the "Blue Qur'an",9th Century

fundamental form. The Arabic language is rooted in the Qur'an, the book of God, which is the source of the script and its evolution. One example is on Figure 2, an image of an old script of the blue Qur'an (9th c.) in which words were typed in a way that makes them look similar. However, after many years, these letters have changed and are distinguished by adding dots

above or below part of the letter. For example, the letters (b) and (c) (t) have the same basic shape, but (b) has one dot below and (t) has two dots above. Each historical period and geographical region has a variety of calligraphy in arts, design, paper work, architecture, and even in decorative elements on surfaces. What always catches my attention is the intersection that the calligraphers create by using their hand to write. These writing scripts started with simple forms and have evolved over time into more complex forms.

In addition to the art of calligraphy, geometric patterns are a dominant element in this form of art. Belief in Islam dictates that representations of human beings are prohibited in art and therefore artists substituted them with geometric patterns. This is in line with the monotheistic aspect of Islam. This type of art is found in mosques, and these patterns exist not to copy nature, but to reflect what nature represents. According to Loai M. Dabbour in *Geometric Proportions: The Underlying Structure of Design Process for Islamic Geometric Patterns*, geometry "represents an expression of the order of the universe as a visual representation of the truth" (2012). Geometric art has its own fundamental principles that are all underlying the order of nature. Two elements, the circle (representing "the sun") and the straight line (representing "the sky") are fundamental for the practices of geometric arts and crafts. Incorporating these two components repetitively has contributed to the complexity of these geometric shapes. My potential goal is to make use of these two elements as design details and find ways to connect them to create forms and shapes within the functionality of the pieces themselves.

The *Naqsh (نقشد)* design group inspires me a lot not only in my design process but also in their use of local geometric patterns. The name *Naqsh* represents one motif or pattern, and all their works are inspired by this "Naqsh". This group of three ladies from Jordan has worked on furniture making and art making for a long time. Each one has different artistic interests;

however, they design for the one common goal of self-expression. I admire their works and their ways of using these graphic motifs to create work that shows their regional identity. I am inspired by the mixing of media, the scaling of the art work, and the way they create functional and nonfunctional objects with different techniques like inlaying brass and marble.



Figure 3 Naqsh a wall piece

#### **EVOLUTION**

For the first piece designed, I started with simple forms and used simple joinery. I tried to understand the material (wood) as a natural species that leads to and informs its own process. With every day spent in the wood shop, my knowledge and understanding of this material was extended. Wood is naturally an unforgettable and unforgiving material. If you move forward, you cannot go backward, and you have to start over. Some minor mistakes can be corrected but could detract from the intended craftsmanship.

After learning and understanding the basic woodworking rules and understanding the nature of wood, I started designing my first table. For me as an interior designer, function was my first priority. However, during my journey as a craftsperson, I've developed a greater understanding of the role of beauty in the objects I designed.

For the reading table, I used two different wood species to show the contrast between leaner forms of the legs and organic shapes of the table top. The idea started by having Arabic letters in the pieces. I searched for a letter or a part of the Arabic alphabet that



Fatmah Bamashmous 1. Hand joinery table, Walnut, Cherry 2015, (24"x12"x12")

is simple and straight and related that to the function of the table. I found that the "Kufic" script, which is an Arabic writing style that has sharp edges with curves that are essentially from a

circle, suits my aesthetic decisions. These two design components create some dynamic linear rails that create the under structure which is four legs that cross with each other. The continuous lines going to the top create another function, the handle, which is used to hold a book and/or to help carry it. Smooth, linear rounded edges create a holistic perspective with the hollow detail on the top that connects the cross-sections of the legs with the top.

One day a woodworker told me that if you are 100% happy with the result of your pieces, you should quit being a woodworker; but if you have something you want to incorporate or if you wish you had done it in a different way, that means you are on the right track. Even though I'm happy with the combinations of the wood and the shape, I learned that the color of the wood will change with time. Cherry will darken, and Walnut will lighten. As a reaction to the first table, I designed another table "K'of-ish" that has the same idea but with a different use of wood species, Walnut is the dark wood, maple is the light one, and it is more abstract



Fatmah Bamashmous 2. K'of-ish table, Walnut, Maple, 2015 (32"x15"x15")

in the table top shape and the proportion of the piece. I also made the handle round to create more softness in relation to the top.

After making these two tables, the idea of making abstract objects changed my direction. To fulfill that, I was looking for direct or indirect connections between the function of the piece and the form. I found myself developing a way to translate the function to words, alphabets, or motifs that create the form of the object itself.



Fatmah Bamashmous 3. K'of-ish table, Walnut, Maple, 2015 (32"x15"x15")

#### THE BODY OF WORK

Calligraphy

#### And-Wow Bench

||Walnut, Cherry, Maple 2016. ||Diminutions 53"x17"x17"

Based on the lessons learned from reflecting on the first two pieces, I designed "And-Wow Bench" which is seating for two. The shape of the seat is inspired by its form and function. The form of the piece is inspired by the alphabet "<code>¿</code>" "Wow" which means "and" in English. I transferred the line of "<code>¿</code>" "Wow" and created a functional surface which is the seat for two. The orientation of the alphabet is different than is normally seen as an Arabic reader, but it mimics the shape of the alphabet. I chose the "Kufic" style that I described before as my basic design language, dynamic lines, circle, rhythm, and repetition.



Fatmah Bamashmous 4. And-Wow Bench, Walnut, Cherry, Maple 2016 (53"x17"x17")

I found it more interesting to use different wood species. Walnut, cherry, and maple emphasize the idea of having non-repetitive rhythm, create visual movement for the seating surface, and establish a dynamic repetition of the light and shade. The hollow part of the bench which is the front of the alphabet "*y*" is a functional part which could be for storage.

When I finished this piece, I was satisfied not only with the result, but also the amount of knowledge that I gained within the process of creating. In this piece, I learned a new technique, bend lamination, which is the process of bending the wood and creating carved shapes and forms. At this point of my learning journey, I feel that I can accomplish every shape that I want with this technique. Learning this technique at the end of my first year has given me confidence to push forward to learn and make more.



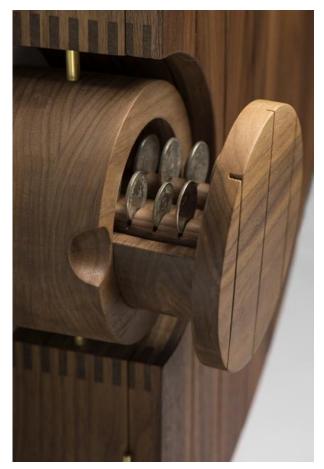
Fatmah Bamashmous 5. And-Wow Bench, Walnut, Cherry, Maple 2016. (53"x17"x17")

### Halala Relic

||Walnut, Brass 2016 ||Diminutions 24"x 12"x 5"

The "ملك" Halala Relic is a decorative wall piece that is meant to hold and display my childhood collections of coins which have meaning to me. The form is inspired by the contents and the curvature of Arabic calligraphy, primarily the Arabic word "Halala" which means "Coin". "Halala" in Arabic starts with the letter "o". The half circle presents the "o" when the cabinet is closed; when the door is open it shows a full circle that represents the coin itself. Placing finger joints on the side of the carcass was an aesthetic decision to

emphasize the linear components with the circle in front. The circle at the middle part of



Fatmah Bamashmous 6. Halala Relic, Walnut, 2016 (24"x 12"x 5 ")

the piece is a secret drawer that mimics the round part of the letter "."

The process of making this piece made me think about the notion of sensation. It made me think more about the object that I am designing in depth. As a result of that, I designed this piece of furniture to have soul. This is a piece of furniture that has a special meaning for me and is a compelling wall piece for others. This is the result that I am going for.





Fatmah Bamashmous 7. Halala Relic, Walnut, 2016 (24"x 12"x 5 ")

Fatmah Bamashmous 8. Halala Relic, Walnut, 2016 (24"x 12"x 5 ")

#### A-Chair

||Walnut, upholstered with Blue cowhide 2017 ||Diminutions 24"x24"x36"

After making the And-wow bench and the Halala Relic, I found myself focusing on where my connections are, the "joints." One day one of my professors, Adam Rogers, told me "this is the opportunity; this is the moment for a nice detail". I found myself focusing more on that connection and how I can make this connection aesthetically pleasing within the function. The form of this piece, as I mentioned earlier, reflects the way of writing with Arabic script. It is different from the more common way of writing; it starts from right to lift instead of from left to write.



Fatmah Bamashmous 9. A-Chair, Walnut, upholstered with Blue cowhide 2017. (24"x 24"x 36")

People who speak different languages see Arabic letters as "a drawing not a script". From that idea I wanted to design a chair that contains the flow in lines that I see in Arabic writing. The A-Chair is a light desk chair designed for easy transportation. It is user-friendly in that one can pull the chair from the back by using the back handle. One can also pull it by using the two side handles. The Arabic script inspired the shape of the two side handles and the back handle in that the side handles curve to mimic the shape of the circle while the back-handle mimics the horizontal line. The finger joints establish the connection between the curved handles and the horizontal handles. In fact, I use finger joints every time I connect a curved shape with a horizontal shape. I felt that this is the moment where people are going to be attracted to this piece.



A-Chair, Walnut, upholstered



Fatmah Bamashmous 11. A-Chair, Walnut, upholstered with Blue cowhide 2017. (24"x 24"x 36")

#### THE BODY OF WORK

Geometric Patterns

#### Twin Table

||Walnut, Maple, 2017 ||Diminutions 24"x24"x11"

The Islamic star always fascinated me as a small pattern that exists in my hometown. This star is made up of many different angles and the geometric shapes that result vary. Pentagonal, hexagonal, or square are all shapes often employed to make the star pattern. As a first thought, I transferred these stars to a three-dimensional piece of furniture that has a function. I wanted to make the pattern the main focus of the piece. With simple, linear, thin members, light is my goal.



Fatmah Bamashmous 12. Twin Table, Walnut, Maple 2017. (24"x 24"x 11")

The twin table is made of seven individual frames that are combined to create one form. The frames that are made of the dark walnut present the shape of the star, while the light wood which is maple is the two frames that create the functional surfaces. The rhythm that was created by changing the location of the dark wood made the feeling of movement on the piece. To keep the frame consistent and the flow of lines without any end grain distraction, I chose the miterjoints with mortise and tenon for more strength as my design decisions for this piece.

When I decided to make these two pieces, I was trying to explore a way to translate the graphic-details to three dimensional objects with functions. Even though there are two tables, and

typically the top part is the functional part, the users can still enjoy the side view of the table which is the most important to me. However, the result was still flat to me, and that made me wonder if this is what I wanted to do and keep designing. Did I want to keep these motifs flat, and what should I do? So, I started looking into how these motifs began; what is the significance behind them; how can I create some connections with the pieces, and how do I feel about them in relationship to my design aesthetic decisions.



Fatmah Bamashmous 13. Twin Table, Walnut, Maple 2017. (24"x 24"x 11")

## *C-low poufs*

||Walnut, Upholstered Milk Color Fabric, Brass, 2017 ||Diminutions 70"x70"x4"

It is an Arabic tradition that family and friends gather inside the home each week. There are different rooms for different celebrations and different genders; however, the living room is the room where family and friends gather. Usually, everyone is the same gender if they are friends. As furniture to be used inside the living room, there are sofas;

however, in the Arabic traditional way of seating, sitting on the floor is preferable to sofas.



Fatmah Bamashmous 14. C-low Poufs, Walnut, Upholstered Milk Color Fabric, Brass, 2017 (70"x 70"x 4")

C-low poufs are six low seats with wooden frames. These frames are constructed with miter-joints with simple laser engraving on the sides of the frame to create visual continuous lines, and these lines create hollow parts which also serve as handles to carry the pieces when they are stacked. These seats are designed to be stacked when not used, and they are suitable for small spaces. Simple, cozy, and easy to move, were my goals.

When I was in the design stage of this piece, I wanted to transfer the graphic elements from the walls, which is where they're originally seen, to become a three-dimensional object that functions in a space. Consequently, I started thinking differently. I decided to think about the shape (in this case, a star pattern) and how I could make a functional object from that shape. Normally the star has a center, and when I looked at it from the top view, as a flat pattern, it reminded me of the word "gathering". For me, gathering means sitting together. I decided to design a piece that presents the idea of gathering, with the function of seating. Because of the repetitive shapes in the star itself, the idea of stacking them when they are not being used is given.

After making this piece, I realized that the thickness of the upholstery will not only add more comfort to the piece but will also add another way to keep the pieces stacked in the right position without having orientation points. It also gave me a clear idea for the next piece; I wanted to design something fast and small. This piece took more time than I expected, but the results are pleasing.



#### Oudh the Incense burner

||Walnut, Brass, 2017 ||Diminutions 5"x5"x3"

Nothing revives the past as completely as a smell. Oudh is an incense burner that I designed as a reaction to the nostalgia that I felt for the smell of my home. It is a tradition in Arabic households to ignite embers and use oudh, a small piece of wood that reacts and produces scented resin, for a good smell in the house. Oudh has a distinctive aroma that recalls the memories I have from when I was a child. It reminds me of when my family gathered and of times of celebration such as Eid Al-Feter, Eid Al-Adha, weddings, or on a Friday afternoon. This smell evokes moments of happiness, family, and memories

I was inspired by the shape of the Oudh itself. It is a non-symmetrical shape with a carved texture on the top. I used a dark wood, walnut, as a material choice. For the construction, I used coopering techniques and hand-shaped the curves for the appearance of flow and smooth edges. In the front and back, I used hand tools, gauges, to create the texture and the feeling of the rough texture that the Oudh has.



Fatmah Bamashmous 16. Oudh the Incense burner, Walnut, Brass, 2017 (5"x 5"x 3")



Fatmah Bamashmous 17. Oudh the Incense burner, Walnut, Brass, 2017 (5"x 5"x 3")

#### Midst Table

#### ||Walnut, Maple, 2018 ||Diminutions 10"x24"x40"

The Midst table is a tall table with a wide table top. I used the coopering techniques with a coved line from the top to the bottom at the connection between the two parts of each leg. The legs of this table are tapered and tilted towards inside in the top which direct the eye to something special on the top, and the legs are connected with walnut dovetails joints going crosses. The top is flat and thin in the middle and wider towards both ends. This table designed to complement the object that is placed on the top.

Making decisions was a dilemma for me with this piece. I found it very hard to design a



Fatmah Bamashmous 18. Midst Table, Maple, Walnut, 2018. (10"x 24"x 40")

piece that is supposed to work with a specific object that has its own beauty. When I decided to make this tall table, it was meant to be a pedestal for "Oudh the incense burner". However, the purpose changed during the process of making it which I found to be the hardest decision, and also, I changed my design process. I normally start making something with a whole vision of what that piece is going to be and how it will look. With this table, I started without having the full vision of the whole design. It was difficult to make decisions during the process of making the piece. I learned that changing during the process reduces the quality of the final result, in my opinion. All the design decisions were made according to what might work, yet now in this

stage, it is not what I want it to look like. I did not find myself making decisions that satisfied my intended design aesthetic.



Fatmah Bamashmous 19. Midst Table, Maple, Walnut, 2018. (10"x 24"x 40")

#### Mashra Room Divider

#### ||Walnut, Cherry, Maple 2018 ||Diminutions 70"x70"x2"

For hundreds of years, Mashrabiya (مشربیه) Figure 4 has offered an effective protection against sunlight. Mashrabiya is a window that has an oriental ornament that characterized the local identity and sunshading device for cooling the cover of the building. I'm strongly influenced not only by the technical aspects of the window, which allows the cool air to pass through to the inside of the building, but I am also fascinated by the light and shade that can be created by this window. This simple technique changes the environment of the space. It promotes a nice constant flow of air and shade during the day time. I wanted to transfer this feeling to a piece of furniture.

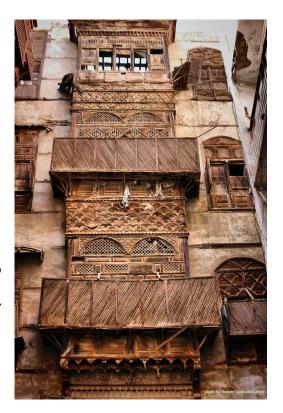


Figure 4 Mahrabiya, Old Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Mashr is a room divider that I designed with the feeling of the Mashrabiya. The design decisions of this piece were much clearer for me after making the previous pieces. This piece was my last piece after a long exploration with woodworking and wood. I found it much easier, in the design aesthetics aspect, to design this piece which was based on all my earlier pieces. Even though woodworking takes a long time, I found myself making and designing this piece in five weeks. Normally the design part takes a long time for me because I want to make everything at once. In this stage, my design decisions were based on a clear vision of what I wanted to accomplish and what defines me as a designer and a maker.



Fatmah Bamashmous 20. Mashra Room Divider, Walnut, Cherry, Maple, 2018. (70"x 70"x 2")



Fatmah Bamashmous 21. Mashra Room Divider, Walnut, Cherry, Maple, 2018. (70"x 70"x 2")

#### CONCLUSION

After finishing this body of work and being ready for my thesis show, I wanted to show these pieces to the world and learn other people's opinions. I wanted to show how hard and fun the process is, but how the result will make you happier. I enjoyed listening to other people's reactions during my show "Compelling" at Bevier Gallery at Rochester Institute of Technology on May 27, 2018, and how the show fascinated them not only because I am a woman, but also a craftswoman from Saudi Arabia.

During my journey to be a craftswoman, I enjoyed the process of making furniture starting from designing to the final result. I faced a lot of challenges on each piece I designed; however, each piece of the body of work taught me something. I found myself learning from my own mistakes which allowed me to overcome whatever was next. Each piece has its own beauty and its own attraction. Each piece pushed me forward to make bigger pieces with increased confidence. All of these pieces allowed me not only to define my voice as a designer and maker, but also made me decide what I want to be.

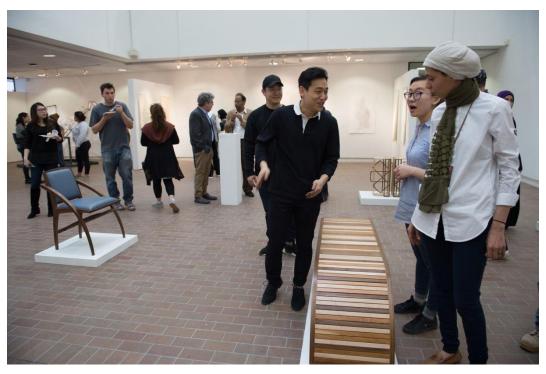
Every piece of the body of work has a deep connection with me as a maker. Each piece represents something about Islamic/Arabic identity in general and present my way of defining this uniqueness. This makes me appreciate the small details of my hometown, Jeddah, and my job as a designer is to revive these forgotten details. Working with wood in general as a material has made me appreciate the nature of it and how to preserve it. I came to the United States of America for the purpose of learning how to make furniture, and I reached that goal as a beginner. As a designer, my design decisions have changed because I now know how to build my own designs. I can now design pieces with the full knowledge of the logical way of making it right. With full confidence, I go back home with a huge amount of information on woodworking and

making furniture and I can teach people the right ways of making furniture in the American traditional way of woodworking. Now, I can consider myself an interior and furniture maker with a humble knowledge of woodworking yet desperate to know more and work more with wood for a better living environment.

# INSTALLATION IMAGES



1 Pictures of the thesis show April 27, 2018 take by Elizabeth Lamark



2 Pictures of the thesis show April 27, 2018 take by Elizabeth Lamark



3 Pictures of the thesis show April 27, 2018 take by Elizabeth Lamark



4 Pictures of the thesis show April 27, 2018 take by Elizabeth Lamark



5 Pictures of the thesis show April 27, 2018 take by Elizabeth Lamark

### Illustrations

Figure 1 Jeddah city, Saudi Arabia Figure 2 Folio from the "Blue Qur'an",9th Century Figure 3 Naqsh a wall piece Figure 4 Mahrabiya, Old Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

### Personal Images

Fatmah Bamashmous 1. Hand joinery table, Walnut, Cherry 2015, (24"x12"x12")

Fatmah Bamashmous 2. K'of-ish table, Walnut, Maple, 2015. (32"x15"x15")

Fatmah Bamashmous 3. K'of-ish table, Walnut, Maple, 2015. (32"x15"x15")

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### Thesis Show Pictures

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3 Pictures of the thesis show April 27, 2018 take by Elizabeth Lamark

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