



Image courtesy of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery



# Beauty in complexity

Islamic artist, Walthamstow resident, and maths geek Zarah Hussain welcomed Finnola D'Albert into her home-cum-studio. It became clear that Zarah's work is a reflection of her self - elements grow and branch-off a central philosophy, contributing to a final design.

In her parents' house Zarah had an attic room, which was the coldest, but had the best light, and she was always painting. After finishing her (non-arts) degree at Manchester University she applied for a course called Visual Islamic and Traditional Arts at the Prince of Wales School. Without an art degree she had no expectation of actually getting in, but her portfolio of work and the fact that they were looking for potential got her a full scholarship.

It was hard work. Reading a cocktail of Plato and mathematics, while learning to draw complex geometry with a ruler and a straight-edge was rigorous. It was also very traditional, so while it taught her how to make her own paints, canvases and grind her own pigments, she would hide her laptop under her desk-space. But while there was very little room for innovation, you need to know the rules to be able to break them.

The first time she used digital processes to create her work was in 2005, working with a Walthamstow local. "I thought 'Wow, there's a really cool art community here', and it coincided with me moving here."

Jump forward eleven years to her current exhibition at The Barbican, Numina, one which wouldn't be possible without computer programmes. The biggest thing she's ever done, the sculpture uses projection mapping to create a beautiful, and seemingly infinite, animation. It's effected by shadows, the time of day that you visit (Zarah thinks it looks best at night), and where you stand in the room.

"The Barbican have given a Pakistani woman without gallery representation or an agent a huge space and said, 'Here it is, do what you want. But make it big.' They took a risk, and I'm immensely grateful for that."

The work has received a lot of comments along the lines of, "I don't understand contemporary art, but I like this." Which lead us to discuss whether or not art 'needs' to be beautiful.

Zarah believes that some art feels the need to be unpopular, difficult to understand or weird to have critical acclaim. This kind of deliberately ugly work goes against the peace, tranquility and geometry found in traditional Iranian art, Zarah's clearest influence. "For me, art is

meant to be beautiful. I think some art is deliberately impenetrable to the ordinary person. There's a lot of bullsh\*t."

The orderly geometric shapes of Islamic art lend themselves to computer programmes, laser-cutters and precision. I asked about the difference between creating something drawn or painted, and something computer generated.

"It's much more satisfying to paint for me, but the animation Numina cycles through all of the RGB spectrum, which is 127million colours. By hand you could never do that. They're different tools."

She explained that the reoccurring geometric patterns in Islamic art are intended to highlight the naturally occurring beauty in nature and that this maths is innate within humans.

"I was taught to look at plants and trees and see the geometry and the order and balance to the universe. And this isn't just Islamic, all traditional cultures have understood these principals of symmetry and order. Of unity."

In Islamic tradition, there isn't superficial beauty. The concept is more than just a visual one - beauty encompasses your character and is in everything you experience. In traditional Islamic art, there's no such thing as art for art's sake. In a mosque every surface is decorated - the floors, walls, cups, clothes.

"Art and life are one and together, they're seamless. In a mosque the idea is that you're surrounded by peace, serenity, and that brings out the unity and compassion in you. It's a visual meditation."

This 'art in everything and art for everyone' philosophy, coupled with the use of patterns naturally leads to comparisons between Zarah's work and that of William Morris. Her piece Magic Carpet was even projected onto the side of the William Morris Gallery for the Walthamstow Garden Party and to mark Eid-al-Fitr in July 2014.

"I agree with William Morris' philosophy of art and life and there being some kind of psychological purpose in making something. He was influenced by Islamic artists and if you look at some of his carpet

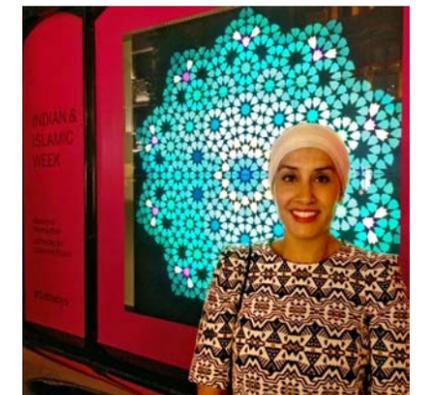
designs you can see the symmetry and the floral repetition. It's not like he's copying, but you can see the influence there."

As of December, a few pieces from a series of sculptures previously exhibited in Birmingham will be showing in the Walthamstow Window Gallery.

"These represent the idea that from one source, from unity, there are infinite possibilities - the idea of our DNA being almost identical, but still producing infinite differences. As an artist you have to experiment, challenge and do new things. I do like optical tricks and illusions. There's a relaxation to be had with these infinitely repeating images. And it's nice to be asked to do these things locally. I think it's a really nice space."

The majority of Zarah's work has the feeling that it could be infinite, and could be repeated, making the pieces themselves feel like a snapshot of something much larger. I left her house, my head swimming, finding geometric shapes in the pavement and the leaves on the ground.

[instagram.com/zarahkhussain](https://www.instagram.com/zarahkhussain)



Zarah Hussain  
The Walthamstow Village Window X December until X January 2017

Numina  
The Barbican Foyer until 25th January 2017

Top left: Zarah's Magic Carpet was projected onto the William Morris Gallery as part of the 2014 Walthamstow Garden Party. Top right: Numina currently in the Barbican Foyer.

Images courtesy of the Barbican. Photo of Magic Carpet © Gar Powell-Evans. Photo of Numina © Max Coulson

Top left: Zarah Hussain's 2015 exhibition Symmetry in Sculpture at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Top right: Desert Night Sky Middle left: Blue hexagon tile design. Bottom right: Zarah Hussain.