

To Recognize Infinity in Patterns

Seamless Loop, Sheikha Wafa Bint Hasher Al Maktoum
Meem Gallery, Dubai

Dubai has grown in audacious bursts and daily life surges ahead at a breakneck pace, nearly as quickly as new skyscrapers dot the dusty horizon. With *Seamless Loop*, Sheikha Wafa Bint Hasher Al Maktoum isolates eight iconic images from the Emirate in distinct screen prints and textile-based embroidery works, presenting staid symbols in highly conceptual form, all circumscribed within the traditional mandala structure.

With origins in Buddhist and Hindu spiritual practices, the mandala is a tool for mindfulness meditation, defined as a circular diagram containing symbols that represent the cosmos. In the early 20th century, Swiss psychotherapist Carl Gustav Jung¹ brought an awareness of the form to a European audience by asking his patients to sketch their own versions. He interpreted the drawings as maps of the subconscious mind to be used for discerning the self's individual place in the greater universe.

By opting to contain these symbols within the mandala context, Maktoum compels viewers to pause and recognize the extraordinary in the everyday of the city, as if turning a well-worn garment inside out for the first time and appreciating the construction of fragile, individual threads and the thick seams binding them together.

Danna Lorch in conversation with Sheikha Wafa Hasher Al Maktoum

This exhibition is daring. The symbols you engage with are also common Orientalist² stereotypes of life in the Gulf. They have been repeatedly misappropriated in art, on company logos, and on tourist merchandise. It is nearly impossible to say something new, and yet you have managed to innovate.

I often return to a quote by the poet Charles Bukowski: "An intellectual says a simple thing in a hard way. An artist says a hard thing in a simple way." I look at my surroundings, take complex elements and simplify them through art. That being said, I wanted to stay away from the overdone desert dune with the camel and the palm tree.

And yet, those tropes appear here, but in a fresh way. For example, in your *Fish Mandala*, the *gargoor* fishing traps, hand knotted nets, and gleaming fish scales, are reimagined through abstract patterns constructed from fabrics and haberdashery sourced in local souks.

Comment [Office1]: Is this still the correct title for this piece? Or are they now associated with numbers as well? At the moment keep this, can change if needs be.

Comment [Office2]: I'm not entirely happy with this word. What do you think? I think it works.

¹ See Jung, Carl Gustav, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (Vintage, 1989)

² For a full discussion of the loaded term see Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, (1978 Pantheon Books).

Are these pieces, which point to the complexity of the national narrative, a rebuttal to those who claim the UAE is void of homegrown culture?

A long time ago, when the British were here, the officers' wives had these little watercolor sets and they set up easels and started painting. All they did was paint camels and sand dunes. I didn't want to be another *Jumeirah Jane*³ painting sand dunes onto postcards. I don't want people to think this is what Emirati art is about.

Did you have to leave Dubai to gain enough perspective to notice that these common icons could transform from themes in your sketchpad to an ongoing series of work in two mediums?

I haven't left Dubai this summer. I don't need to get on a plane to get inspired. I am inspired by my own country. There is so much going on. You just have to look in the right places. For example, the falcon is everywhere—on our currency, on our passports, on the Emirates Petroleum logo at the station where we fill our cars' gas tanks. To me, it symbolizes vision, but the signs are easy to miss.

It's easy to rush through life without stopping to reflect on that meaning. That is the point of a mandala, right?

Yes, to recognize infinity in the patterns. Over and over again. To begin with I drew each symbol on graph paper. Then I played around with duplicating them using tracing paper. Next I scanned them onto my computer and copied and pasted repeatedly, overlapping with different colors until suddenly something interesting popped out and surprised me. I silkscreened them onto thick cotton. I kept the screen prints simple with just three colors, but the textiles are more complex.

The starting symbols aren't easily identifiable in the final pieces. Does that matter?

No, not at all. Once they leave the studio it is up to the viewer to study the works and perceive a unique meaning.

You chose to produce your mandalas in Al Satwa⁴, an industrious, scrappy neighborhood made up of alleyways dotted with hundreds of South Asian tailor shops.

The fabrics, paints, and other materials used for the pieces were sourced in shops, boutiques, or *souks* in the area, and that is where all the production has taken place.

³ Dubai-specific derogatory term used to describe expatriate ladies of leisure who "lunch" in the upscale beachside neighbourhood of Jumeirah

⁴ See Abuthina, Jalal, *Memories of Satwa*, (Reframe Photography Services, 2015)

Just like the watercolors you described earlier, embroidery is traditionally regarded as a pastime to keep women “busy” while they wait for their husbands to finish more important business outside the home.⁵ Interestingly, the tailor you teamed up with to produce these pieces is a man. How do you work together?

We sit on the ground. Indian music plays quietly in the corner. The embroidery bed is in front of us and seven hours a day I am holding the fabric down for his needle, directing him where to stitch. He doesn't speak English or Arabic and I don't speak his language, so we communicate through pointing. He stitches so quickly you can hardly see his needle. My stitches are much slower. I did some embroidery work in university and also in my last solo show, and can do cross-stitch and other simple stitching by hand.

In this case, you are taking things even one step further by instructing a man on how to produce these pieces by hand using techniques that were once considered strictly “women’s work.”

This is a diverse world we live in. Textile work is just like cooking. In the past, cooking was always linked to women, but now we see so many successful male chefs. The same goes for fashion and design. Who says this is a man's job or a woman's job?

-Danna Lorch

⁵ However, in recent years, artists like Ghada Amer, Tracy Emin, and Greyson Perry (who self-identifies as “Claire”), have brought embroidery work into gallery, auction, and museum spaces, proving that the medium has substance and can hold its own.