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# Moataz Nasr's search for sincerity in political art

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## Moataz Nasr (/author/moataz-nasr-), Mary von Aue (/author/mary-von-aue)

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There's a map of the Middle East that hangs in the Leila Heller Gallery today, and upon entering the room, it's hard to avoid its sparkle. From a distance it looks like an assembling of satellites, twinkling some utopic message to fellow points on the grid. Yet the sheer, crystalline slabs of topography have an unusual texture, and require a closer view. It was a jolting moment when I realized that I was not appraising diamonds on a map, but staring at a region layered with shattered glass.

Moataz Nasr's latest exhibit "Broken Patterns" is a testimony to the layers of disruption he has witnessed in his lifetime. In his New York City debut, the Egyptian artist's latest exhibit covers a clash of interests, politics, and cultural and historical moments, densely packed into Leila Heller's Chelsea location. Much like the aforementioned *Shattered Glass*, each piece reminds the viewer to take a closer look: events deemed political still retain the spiritual; intimate moments may yet encompass a larger community's experiences.

Alternative to *Shattered Glass*, a mosaic hanging on a separate wall is difficult to view from a distance. Its matte colors are subdued and hazy, strikingly different from its twinkling glass counterpart. *Arabesque I (Lost Heritage)* presents a three dimensional image that looks distorted in the light, using blurred lines to create a dizzying effect. Nasr has recreated a classical Islamic geometric pattern, but to understand his intricate system of matchsticks, it doesn't suffice to observe from afar.



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### Saudi-led Coalition Launches Huge Airstrikes on Yemen's



*The Shattered Glass (courtesy Leila Heller Gallery)*

*Arabesque II: Lost Heritage at the Leila Heller Gallery in New York.*

"To see it, you have to stand very close to one piece of it." Nasr explained the inspiration behind this installment, "you cannot understand it from far away. And to me, this is how I felt about Islam at the time I was creating it. From far away, people see things out of focus." His other matchstick mosaics, such as *Khayameya* and *Arabesque II (Lost Heritage)* are equally multifaceted. Not only do their geometric patterns remind the viewer of the limits of a geographically distant perspective, but they also showcase the intricate complexity of heritage. Each matchstick, which stands defiantly upright from the plexiglas canvas, is "theoretically very weak," he explains, "but each one can create its own fire. And together they become very powerful."

There's an inherent resistance to dualism throughout the exhibit, where Nasr uses disjointing experiences to create a sense of wholeness. This technique commonly appeared in Sufi literature, especially between the 9th and 14th centuries, to highlight the complexity of what is not initially seen. Nasr applies it with somewhat similar intentions, prompting the viewer to question what they think they know. His interest in Sufism began with his early admiration of Ibn al Farid, the 14th century Egyptian poet most commonly known for *The Wine Ode* and *The Sufi Way*, epic poems that explore divine knowledge through metaphor and ecstatic imagery. It was al Farid's work that led Nasr to explore other Sufi writers and scholars, most notably Ibn Arabi, whose texts are often referenced in his previous work.

The spiritual aspect of Nasr's art is by no means hidden, but is too often ignored. When he was 16 years old, Nasr was shot and arrested during the Egyptian bread riots of 1977. It was a traumatizing experience for a teenager, but it hasn't discouraged him from creating activist art and combating censorship in the decades since. It's not a misnomer to call him a political artist, but it's still a limitation. The tragedies he has experienced have, in many ways, eclipsed part of his message, reducing his work to a singular response to those events.

"Broken Patterns" rattles that narrative, displaying the wholeness of Nasr's perspective. In it, he reveals both his spirituality and an earnest criticism of religion. He displays intimate conversations with his father to convey both his frustrations and his ultimate acceptance, and he chronicles Tahrir Square with twin senses of hope and futility.

A famous poem by the 8th century Sufi poet Rabia al Adawiyya says:

*I carry a torch in one hand  
And a bucket of water in the other:  
With these things I am going to set fire to Heaven  
And put out the flames of Hell,  
So that voyagers to God can rip the veils  
And see the real goal.*

This preoccupation with the concept of *ikhlas*, or sincerity, is pervasive throughout the Sufi canon, from its early ascetic period (which brought us Rabia) through the later, more famously mystical periods. In theory, special interests in Heaven's rewards or fear of Hell's punishment blinded believers from seeing a complete picture. There is a similarity in Nasr's own quest for sincerity, though not necessarily in the context of the divine. His conflicting images are intended to dismantle many of the preconceived notions and ulterior motives of his viewers. Stripping those limitations, he conveys an image in its wholeness, embracing good and bad, old and new. By refusing to answer to the singular, reductive questions hurled at Islam or the Middle East, his exhibit in New York City offers a more sincere, and whole, picture.

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The "Broken Patterns" for which the exhibit is named can be understood not only as the destroyed patterns of heritage, but also as the pattern of disruption by new forces and intrusions. The pattern of philosophical ideals having to answer to political realities. Nasr manages to harness decades of frustration and creative flourishing, and reflect them onto centuries of Egyptian history. As a collection, "Broken Patterns" seeks to fill in the gaps of a limited and broken view of Middle East, conveying pieces of its heritage and its disruptors in multitudes.

Deepali Srivastava

**Mary von Aue:** In "Broken Patterns," you explore themes of heritage by recreating classical Islamic geometric patterns. What was the original inspiration behind building these structures with matchsticks?

**Moataz Nasr:** The matches have seen many stages. The first time I used them in my art, I recreated the map of the Iraq after the invasion, and then set it on fire. Coming from the concept that each match is so fragile, you can break it simply, but meanwhile it's holding the power of fire. And if there are more together, they become stronger. The idea kept developing. After that I started doing Islamic patterns, which can be very dizzying to look at with the different matches and colors, it's hard to focus on it. To see it, you have to stand very close at one piece of it. You cannot understand it from far away. And to me, this is how I felt about Islam at the time I was creating it. From far away, people see things out of focus, they see it as unclear.

The two pieces here I call the *Lost Heritage*. I'm a huge fan of monuments and history, and in Egypt there were many monuments I would go and visit and take pictures. After the revolution, there was this attack on these monuments, and now most of them have disappeared, whether destroyed or removed. We lost a lot of things. It's a lost heritage I wanted to remember these since they're gone now. So one of them is a number - and the other is from a door, from an old beautiful school in Egypt.

The Islamic geometric patterns are incredibly meditative for people to gaze upon. And working on this was meditative for me too. Can you imagine sticking 32,000 matches to a canvas? It takes a long time but it makes you quiet and relaxed. You might lose your fingers but it was worth it.

**MA:** Your references to spiritual heritage in your work remind me of our conversation once about Ibn al Farid and your love for his poetry. Is Sufi literature a major influence in your work as well?

**MN:** Definitely. Ibn al Farid was one of the first that I was introduced to, and then I was drawn to Ibn Arabi, and all these amazing writers. I was fascinated with how evolved and developed they were. I remember reading their work and couldn't believe it was written over centuries ago. We need them here today. If they were here today, the world would have changed a lot. This affected me as a human. This was the spiritual part of me which appears in my work often, in language or in styles, such as the use of repetition, mantras, even octagons.

Octagons, or the number 8, has meant a lot of in Islamic architecture, and its origins are Sufic.

I've spent a lot of time with this aspect of arch. In a certain period from 12-13th century, most of the arches in Egypt, Syria, and Turkey were influenced by this Sufi architect. The base of the building has a square, but the top of the building is perfect dome: which has no edges, no beginnings, no end, a symbol of the divine. The square is just a body, for the base to get to the form of a dome, it must pass through an octagon. The octagon was a geometric shape that connected the base to the dome, a symbol for connecting the body to the infinity. That's why most of public water sources and public hammams are found in octagon shapes. So all these little secrets of the Sufis are still around us in public buildings and structures and we take it for granted, we don't remember it. But it takes a lot of my attention, and I try to look at it and understand it, and bring it out in my artwork.

**MA:** You've also taken major religious symbols and anchored them to more political realities. Can you tell me about the inspiration behind *Petro Beats*, your prayer beads made from petrol canisters?

**MN:** Each piece contains different lines of my life: there is a political line, a social line, the spiritual one, and sometimes they go parallel and sometimes they intersect. But these lines exist in everything I've done, though I never know which line will become the most explicit until after I've finished and I look back.

Prayer beads are used by many different religious people, from Sufis to even Buddhists. For Muslims, there is a particular number of beads: 33, 66, or 99, for the sacred names. So I chose the small one, but I replaced the beads with gasoline canisters, just to say in simple words that gasoline money and petrol money have been involved in religion for a long time, and it has made it very dangerous. I chose the color orange because it used to be a color I would associate with joy, brightness, or even the traditional garments worn by Buddhist monks. But lately, this color has reminded me of the color worn by those executed by ISIS. It's amazing, this color used to convey joy. ISIS has managed to turn this color into one that represents death.

Someone told me I was insulting religion, and I said well, if you can't see that the money in the oil industry is destroying your religion, if you can't see that, if you can't deal with it, there's a problem.

**MA:** You've been in politics all your life. Looking at what happened during the bread riots in 1977 and at Tahrir Square in 2011, how has the dialogue changed between the government and the art world in Egypt?

**MN:** This is a hard question, but a good one, I might need time to answer it.

**MA:** Sure. Let's start with when you were 16. After leaving jail, were you reluctant to begin protesting again?

**MN:** After I was shot, I spent some time in jail for a while, but no, it didn't stop me. It made me want to create a space for artists to talk about these things. That's why I created Darb 1718 (<http://www.darb1718.com/>), to get the art movement louder in Egypt.

In early 1977, Anwar Sadat was at a high point in his life. He had come out of war, he made peace with Israel, he was the man of the hour, being celebrated internationally. Seeing that he had this power, he imposed things on the Egyptian people that we didn't want. He thought he could do whatever he wanted because of his international celebrity and influence, but the Egyptian people would not accept that. And we let him know. He nearly tripled the price of bread in one day. People went crazy, this was our food! We went out into the streets. He was forced to change this immediately and take back his position, and that's when I saw for the first time that people had the power. Even then, I wanted to start Darb 1718, because I had seen the power of self-expression. I needed a space where I could continue to do that.



*Oxymoron at the Leila Heller Gallery in New York.*

So back to your question! January 25th, 2011 awakened the creativity in people in ways I had never seen before. I don't know how else to say it but January 25th opened the creative chakras in the people of Egypt, because all of a sudden, everyone was expressing themselves artistically. There were poets in Tahrir Square, people were reciting literature, performing music. I was amazed by the Square. For 18 days I stayed there and every person I met was an amazing person. Everyone found a way to articulate their feelings, and these articulations ranged from writing to singing to chanting. We came there for political reasons, but the creative, spiritual, emotional sides came alive. People were awakened and finally expressing themselves in full.

I have to say that this uprising, revolution, whatever you want to label it, was bringing so many dormant ideas to the fore. The most beautiful thing about it was that for the first time in my life, I saw the Egyptian people feel like they could say whatever they wanted, and feel like they could not be censored. And everyone in the Square took that moment to say what they wanted, in some of the most magnificent ways. Maybe now we are tired from what has happened since, but we know now that we won't be silenced.

**MA:** You've come into problems with censorship in the past, in unlikely places. Were you surprised when London banned your work from Hanover Square?

**MN:** It was very strange and surprising, to be honest. I didn't realize that government had an influence on decisions within the art community. I was shocked by the involvement of politics in art. When politicians want to block artistic criticism in London, I learned that they could. The politicians have the ability to do that, and it's not a fair fight. For me, I see this and I think how weak are they? They're afraid of an art piece that I would put in a garden because it could criticize them? Don't they believe in their own system? I've come into problems with censorship, but this may have been the most baffling example. Censorship reveals a lot about a government and how they see their own system.

**MA:** They're afraid to have that conversation. But dialogue has also played a large role in this exhibit, especially with the recorded meeting you have with your father. When "Broken Patterns" premiered, I noticed a visible change in people after viewing your film *Father and Son*. But was this installation somewhat unplanned?

**MN:** Yes, originally I wanted to record a conversation between my father and myself just for my children. And also because I wanted to release the anger inside me that I had held towards him. When he agreed to let me record it, my brother decided to help me tape the meeting. It was a spur of the moment personal project. But my father and I talked things out for over 3 hours, and the conversation changed everything.

**MA:** It catalyzed immediate introspection in the audience as well, to the point where I had conversations with complete strangers afterwards, where they told me about their own relationships with their fathers. What I loved about it was that it was not an argument, there was no shaming, it was an earnest conversation.

**MN:** It helped me accept a few things, and it helped me to finally forgive him. I did a small fourteen-minute video for the longer conversation and showed it at the library in Alexandria. I was amazed by the reaction, and everywhere I show it I'm met with the same reaction. People tell me "thank you, now I need to go talk to my father, I want to have the same conversation with him." And it's amazing how this reaction has been the same everywhere. Other pieces are met with different reactions depending on the person, the region, the perspective, but this created the same impulse in everyone. It's incredible how our relationships with father figures shape our personality, our relationships. I showed it to a friend of mine who is a psychologist, and he told me that this is what we're supposed to do to heal ourselves: talk directly, say all of it, and reflect on all aspects of the conversation until you can fully accept it.

**MA:** That seemed to be your technique throughout "Broken Patterns," where you reflect on so many aspects within a single piece.

**MN:** I don't have any fear about talking about my spirituality alongside politics to give a fuller picture, but the personal side was new for me. But I had to do this, because if I limited the work to one aspect, one part that people want to see, I wouldn't be sharing the entire idea. Parts would be missing. It would not have been a full glimpse at the heritage we talked about. I needed to show all sides of this heritage without fear. The artist belongs to everyone, so I needed to share it with everyone as sincerely as I could.

All images courtesy Mary von Aue.

**Mary von Aue** is Associate Editor for Warscapes. She is a freelance writer based in New York. She holds an MA from Columbia University, where she studied classical Islamic literature and the effects of the water crisis in Palestine, a topic she investigated while working in Deheishe Refugee Camp. Mary has lived in 6 countries and writes about history, policy, and culture. Twitter @von\_owie ([https://twitter.com/von\\_owie](https://twitter.com/von_owie))

**Moataz Nasr** is a painter, sculptor, multimedia artist, and activist from Alexandria, Egypt, and the founder of Darb 1718, a non-profit contemporary art and culture center in Cairo. He has exhibited in biennials in Thessaloniki, Lubumbashi, Sharjah, Busan, São Paulo, and Venice. His New York City debut, "Broken Patterns," is on display at Leila Heller Gallery's Chelsea location in New York through December 23.

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