In memory of my parents
“Art attracts us only by what it reveals of our most secret self.”
Jean-Luc Godard

About Shahida

Shahida Ahmed was born in Pendle, Lancashire, in the North West of England. Today, she divides her time between the UK and the Middle East.

She has a double master’s in Community Leadership from the University of Central Lancashire (2012) and Visual Arts from Leeds University, UK (2011). Earlier, she studied under the renowned American ceramist Jim Robison and art historian David Hill at Bretton Hall, which forms part of Leeds University, UK, gaining a BA (Hons) in Visual Arts (1991).

In 1996, she won a scholarship to study Traditional Islamic Arts with the Prince of Wales School of Architecture at the Royal College Arts in London, UK. She was also awarded a licentiateship by the Society of Designer Craftsmen, London, UK (2013).

Aside from her art, Shahida has contributed to the arts through radio, television, teaching and community-based art projects, many of which had a multi-cultural theme to them. Other milestones include recognition as the first UK-born female Muslim ceramic artist and becoming Pendle’s first female Muslim councillor.

Today, Shahida retains a studio in the picturesque village of Barrowford, where she is partly based.

“When people from different communities come together in art projects, they soon realise they experience the same things and have the same issues and problems,” she says. “The arts are a powerful and safe tool to bring communities and people together. It’s the safest form of dialogue.”

Group exhibitions include a show at the Royal Opera Arcade Gallery, London, UK (2015), a joint exhibition at the Commune Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan (2011), a show with selected artists at the Global Peace Unity event (2010), in which she presented her works to the pop artist Jermaine Jackson and a joint exhibition with renowned calligrapher Sabah Arbilli at BBC Blackburn, UK (2009).

Other achievements include presenting then British Prime Minister David Cameron with a piece of her artwork at Downing Street, London, UK (2012), and an international residency in Karachi, Pakistan, with the late Ismail Gulgee, the award-winning Pakistani artist.

Shahida was nominated European Muslim Woman of the Year by the UK-based organisation Connecting European Dynamic Achievers and Role Models (Cedar) (2010) and selected from ten candidates to feature in its leadership advert in the same year. She also won the Woman of the Year Fusion Awards (2009) and Muslim Role Model of the Year award, EESHA Magazine (2008). She was also runner-up for the Alhambra arts award (2010). She was given an award for her contribution to the arts by the Mayor of Pendle in 2009.

Her work has been featured in several publications, including Ahlan Magazine, Qatar (2014), Sharjah Arts magazine (cover page, 2014) and Islamic Art International online magazine (2011-2014).
Shahida is known for her unconventional use of clay as a means of exploring her ideas and both sharing and expressing the profundities of human existence. “Each clay has its own characteristics, just like humanity,” she says.

In 2011, while completing her MA studies, Shahida created a collection of ceramic hijabs for her ‘Beyond Stereotypes’ exhibition which achieved a two-fold aim of highlighting the medium used, while making a political statement. The hijabs, captured in the smooth, but strangely static flow of clay are left in natural pale, unglazed bisque tones. Faceless, hollow and without heads, they are powerfully haunting and discomforting.

“The hijab inspired me, not just as an item worn by women, but the role it plays in the process of life,” she says. “For instance, in death, some bodies are wrapped in a simple shroud. Through this I wanted to convey an understanding of the form, the hijab, as an object of judgement and not seeing the person.”

The transcendent and mystical qualities of her art are evident in the novel use of techniques, form and ornamentation as well the themes. Arguably for Shahida, art is her faith as she explores, shares and expresses in clay the profundities of human existence. ‘My culture, faith and growing up in the West made me question a lot of things.’ explains Shahida and the layers of meaning within her work open a Pandora’s box of timeless observation and transpersonal searching.

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Geometry plays a key part in much of Shahida’s work and reaffirms the influence of Islamic art and architecture in her art. Her Geometry Series consists of a collection of remarkable paintings in which she uses pattern, colour, space and voids to relay the effect of restrictions on space caused by society and decision-makers in particular. The ideas in her paintings are portrayed through floor markings and journeys.

Unequal Void
Oil on canvas
1m x 1m
Shahida Ahmed 2015

“There is geometry in the humming of the strings, there is music in the spacing of the spheres.”
Pythagoras
Coloured Spectrum
Oil on canvas
1m x 1m
Shahida Ahmed (2015)

Compact Kufic and geometry
Oil on canvas
0.75m x 1m
Shahida Ahmed (2015)
Oneness

At a key point in her career when she was exploring how to represent traditional arts in a modern manner and on a more universal platform, Shahida created a set of 99, different-sized clay cubes in black and white. Made from slipcasting and iron oxide, for a 2010 show titled ‘Oneness’, the installation piece was later exhibited at Katara, Doha, Qatar (2013), Sharjah Museum, Sharjah, UAE (2014) and the Islamic Museum of Australia, Victoria (2015-2016).

Each cube features one of the 99 names of God in Arabic calligraphy, specifically, abstract, geometric-styled ‘kufic’ script. Heavy in form and with a monochrome glaze, this huge installation combines an avant-garde style with an ancient and eternal effect.

The cubes are arranged in layers to make seven concentric circles, echoing the seven doors of heaven. The ‘kufic’ script is reminiscent of bar codes, making it difficult to differentiate between the meanings on each cube. This, Shahida says, highlights the importance of not rushing to make judgments.

“I wanted to work with a genre of Islamic art to show religion as a façade, relaying the message that the focus should be on what is in your heart,” she explains. “On the outside of the cube was a traditional style represented in Arabic script, but no one can ever see beneath that, at what is inside the cube.”

"Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes."
Carl Jung
While Shahida is known for exploring Islam through art, her multifaceted and inventive work takes us on a far greater spiritual journey, silently drawing the viewer into deep contemplation.

In her thrown pottery collection, Shahida looks at interfaith dialogue and art “as a universal language”. The pieces were heavily influenced by the studies she was undertaking at the time in Cordoba and the Alhambra, Granada in Spain, where she was working towards her MA in Community Leadership, one of the first masters of its kind to be offered in the UK.

Her creative starting point was the Convivencia period, during which the three Abrahamic faiths lived in harmony, and its legacy today. The resulting collection features charming clay vessels in a traditional colour of pale blue/grey, which are adorned with elongated Arabic scripts. The vernacular use of the pieces is clearly portrayed, but they are also elevated to the level of platforms for expressions of faith. More broadly, the pieces relay a message of how faith is to be lived as an everyday experience, in common activities.

Shahida presented the collection to then British Prime Minister David Cameron in 2012.

“My thoughts are whirled like a potter's wheel.”
William Shakespeare, Henry VI
Thrown Ceramic
Shahida Ahmed (2011)

Pilgrim Flask
Hand-thrown stoneware
Raku-fired
Shahida Ahmed (1991)
Shahida’s paintings include a mesmerising Dervish series of abstract Sufi figures, some in bold colours, followed by later works in simple black and white, but all with a focus on movement.

Juxtaposing colour with white and energy with stillness, the paintings relay myriad contrasting themes and paradoxes. They also exemplify the transcendent and mystical qualities of her art, highlighting her novel use of techniques, form and ornamentation.

In the paintings, which mark her first time using figures, Shahida explores the concept of spinning and the part it can play in the purifying process. Whirling in stark white robes against a stylised, decorated orange and earth-toned background, their arms outstretched and heads back, the figures in the first series draw the eye upward through the painting towards heaven.

"To create one's world in any of the arts takes courage."
Geogia O Keefe

Dervish Series

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Journey through Zikar
Triptich section
Oil on canvas
0.75m x 1m
Shahida Ahmed (2016)
Seeker
Oil on canvas
45cm x 1.45cm
Shahida Ahmed (2016)

The thinkers
Oil on canvas, with gold foil
1mx1m
Shahida Ahmed (2016)
“When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace.”
Anon

Journey through Zikar

Amongst her achievements, Shahida was awarded funding by the British Arts Council to travel to Pakistan to explore the country’s art and work with artists there at what proved to be a critical and dangerous time. Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto had been assassinated, as had one of the artists that Shahida had hoped to meet.

It soon became apparent that Shahida’s work was akin to that of pioneers such as the late Indian cubist painter Maqbool Fida (MF) Husain and the late Ismail Gulgee, with whom she did a residency. Influential artists, including Naheed Raza, Jamal Hussain and Iqbal Hussain have all exhibited with Shahida.

The climate she encountered had a profound influence on both Shahida’s artistry and her medium, prompting her to choose to work in paint. The resulting collection was titled ‘Journey Through Zikar’ (2008), exhibited at the V.M Gallery in Karachi, her first exhibition in Pakistan, relaying the message that zikr is a meditative process, offering a route to inner peace; a powerful and inspiring statement arising from a milieu of violent division.

Oil on canvas with latex
1m x 1.5m
Shahida Ahmed (2008)
Noor installations

Shahida’s latest works signal a subtle shift away from tradition towards a more modern and universal platform, which sees light in all its forms and shade put to great use alongside her signature treatment of geometry, movement and shape.

Light’s ambivalent role in life is explored in the two installations featured in the Noor exhibition, ‘Illuminated Door’ and ‘The 99 Illumining’. The pieces are characterised by myriad contrasts, which range from colour and treatment of the subject, as ‘noor’ is visualised and its place in Islamic heritage explored.

With movement to the fore, the colours change with the reflection, leaving viewers free to make their own interpretation.
Illuminated door, various changes in colour with audience movement
Sharjah Museum
Wooden triangles and LED lights
Shahida Ahmed (2015)
Illuminated door consisting of 609 individual triangles and LED lights

Shahida stated, "I was invited by His Royal Highness Sultan Qassemi, to exhibit at the Museum in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.

The theme for the exhibition was Light-Noor. I designed two installations. One was based on a door, the idea generated on how we enclose ourselves as individuals just like a door or shutter. Illuminated door, reflect's on the how there is always light; a ray of hope, light can filter through and penetrate. When a door is closed there seems to be no hope. The Led lights drilled in the piece are all rays of hope."

The piece explores how an object can manipulate the change in light.

How movement and the way we look at something enables instant change.

The change affects the way we see things. Although the piece was one installation, the images capture how each movement around the piece changes the tone, colour and shade.
“True equality means holding everyone accountable in the same way, regardless of race, gender, faith, ethnicity - or political ideology.”
Monica Crowley

Shahida recently decided to change the signature on her art to the simple and anonymous pronoun ‘She’, to denote, she says, “a woman, no faith, colour or culture”, whose art was there to be freely interpreted by all.
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