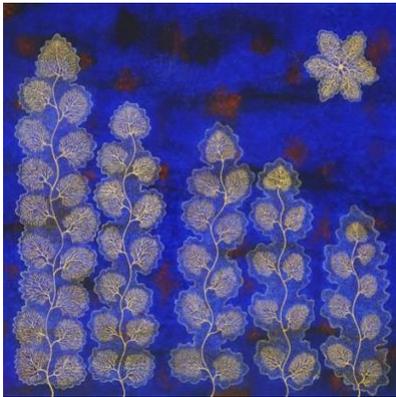


Looking within: Art is an ultimate means of expression¹
By Charleen Leo

As one peers into the gallery space, we are instantly drawn to a large, striking painting reminiscent of underwater corals, depicted through a labyrinth of metallic gold and silver lines and dots. Seemingly in motion, these corals shimmer on the square canvas covered in an intense shade of royal blue, interspersed with dapples of red paint. This work, *Let there be spaces in your togetherness*, is one of the highlights at *Tranquil Essence*, the fourth solo show of Singapore-based artist Jaleela Niaz.

The exhibition also features 39 other works that echo the same artistic style and approach as *Let there be spaces in your togetherness*. As a self-taught artist, Jaleela's distinctive style is largely influenced by subjects such as nature and Arabic calligraphy. The presented works are categorised into three themes: Coral, Bamboo and Calligraphy, each offering a unique visual exploration of the artist's aesthetic narrative through bold colours and the incorporation of intricate patterns using metallic hues.



Let there be spaces in your togetherness

Mixed media on canvas

180 x 180 cm

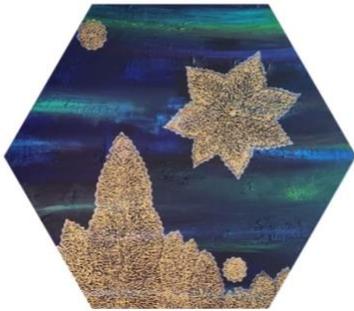
2019

At first glance, Jaleela's rendering of corals and bamboos seems to be a faithful representation, suggest a degree of realism. However, closer inspection reveals that, for example, the 'corals' are conceived through elaborate motifs and they adopt a myriad of shapes and sizes distinctly different from their natural, lifelike counterparts. Aligning with her belief that "art is an ultimate means of expression,"² her works are not recreations of real images or the subjects but are

¹ In the submitted artist profile, Jaleela wrote: "For her art is an ultimate means of expression".

² See footnote above.

instead, reflections of her memories and emotional interpretations.³ In this sense, the shape of the canvas, the colour choices, each stroke and line, and the composition of each painting embody and convey her feelings and experiences at the time of creation.



Deep Sea Dreams 2

Mixed media on canvas

70 x 80cm

2023



Coral Kaleidoscope 3

Mixed media on canvas

40 cm (circle)

2023

The *Coral* series emanates from Jaleela's fascination with the underwater ecosystems, particularly the movement of corals. Each piece in the series begins with Jaleela covering the canvas in one or two primary colours (red, green or blue), setting the background for the work. After the acrylic-paint background dries, Jaleela uses unconventional materials – first the gold glass paint in tubes to draw the bold yet delicate lines, next she employs the silver acrylic marker filling in the dots to form the 'corals'. The different techniques, combined with

³ From our conversation, Jaleela revealed that, for example, the 'corals' are painted from her memories and how she feels they (should) look.

contrasting metallic hues against the primary colours, create a sense of depth, energy and fluidity within the artwork and thus rendering the 'corals' with the illusion of being three-dimensional and in perpetual motion.



Deep Within

Mixed media on canvas

180 x 180 cm

2019

The same methodology and process employed are mirrored in the creation of the *Bamboo* series, albeit simplified. The backgrounds are bathed in the vivid intensities of red or blue, juxtaposed with the bold, golden strokes depicting bamboo. This contrast—between the vibrancy of gold and the saturated tones of red and blue—enables the 'bamboo' to assert its presence, projecting a three-dimensional effect and conveying intrinsic dynamism.



Lucky Bamboos (Blessing)

Mixed media on canvas

90 x 120 cm

2019



Lucky Bamboos 3

Mixed media on canvas

61 x 20 cm

2023

Similarly, the same method and process underscores the works in the *Calligraphy* series. Upon the singular colour background, recognisable Arabic terms and phrases like *Allah*, *Subhanallah*, and *Allahu Akbar* are meticulously inscribed. Using acrylic markers, these expressions are rendered loosely following the Naskh style, enveloped by intricate motifs and recurrent patterns.⁴ In Islamic art, calligraphy is considered to be the “most highly regarded and most fundamental element” primarily to transmit a text.⁵ Reading Jaleela’s *Calligraphy* series through the lens of calligraphic abstraction – while her paintings serving their purposes to share text – they do not “conform to the established conventions, rules and functions that have developed for centuries across the Islamic world.”⁶ The resultant artworks, articulated through her own artistic language, encapsulate her desire to not only illustrate religious verse in a contemplative manner but also to employ the script as a source of knowledge, transcending the religious realm, in novel ways. In her own words: “to offer viewers a fresh and engaging perspective”.⁷

⁴ There are 6 styles of Islamic calligraphy - Thuluth, Naskh, Mubaqqaq, Rayh&n, TawqV and Riqaa\ Abul. For a more comprehensive understanding of the different styles and its beginning, please see, Ali, A. K. M. Yaqub. “MUSLIM CALLIGRAPHY: ITS BEGINNING AND MAJOR STYLES.” *Islamic Studies* 23, no. 4 (1984): 373–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20847281>.

⁵ Department of Islamic Art. “Calligraphy in Islamic Art.” In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cali/hd_cali.htm (October 2001)

⁶ The definition of calligraphic abstraction presented here is based on what Ahmad Sadali and A.D. Pirous have offered. Please see, Anissa Rahadiningtyas, *The Neglected Dimension* (National Gallery Singapore, 2023).

⁷ Whatsapp conversation with the artist.



Allah

Mixed media on canvas

90 x 90 cm

2023



Subhanallah, Alhamdulillah, Allahu Akbar

(Set of 3 paintings)

Mixed media on canvas

40 cm oval

2023

Revisiting *Let there be spaces in your togetherness*, this piece draws inspiration from the words of the prolific Lebanese–American writer, Khalil Gibran, in his poem *On Marriage*:

“But let there be spaces in your togetherness,
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.

Love one another, but make not a bond of love:
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.”⁸

This artwork, produced in 2019, is a timely reflection of the current society, particularly in bustling metropolises like Singapore. Here, the lack of physical space in this little red dot is a pressing issue. Beyond mere physicality, the frenetic pace of urban life also eclipses spaces of pause, reflection, and respite. This artwork eloquently encapsulates this essence – the profound

⁸ Poetry Foundation, “On Marriage by Khalil Gibran | Poetry Foundation,” n.d., <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/148576/on-marriage-5bff1692a81b0>.

need for space – using negative space to convey notions of harmony, beauty and grace. Indeed, acknowledging the need for space, whether physical, spiritual or relational, is important; it is this recognition that enhances our understanding and facilitates growth. Extending the spirit of this work, the deliberate arrangement of the artworks on the walls, leaving an open space in the centre, carves out both physical and personal space for each viewer. This empty space serves not just as a visual pause but also as a metaphorical breath, inviting reflection on the multifaceted dimensions of ‘space’.



Let there be spaces in your togetherness 2

Mixed media on canvas

60 x 40 cm

2020

Tranquil Essence, in its simplest form, is an invitation to ‘look within’ Jaleela’s inner world and her unique artistic expression. It reflects her journey as she navigates the tension between the concrete and abstract, and the tangible and intangible. Each painting demands a closer look to fully appreciate its multi-layered expression, prompting intimate reflection and contemplation. Through this gesture, Jaleela invites the viewers to ‘look within’ themselves, offering a space to explore their emotions and formulate new perspectives.

Charleen Leo (b.1990) is currently an independent curator from Singapore. She was Curator, Exhibitions and Production at ArtScience Museum, Singapore and has curated several exhibitions including *Future World: Where Art Meets Science* (2016 -2022), *Wind Walkers: Theo Jansen's Strandbeests* (2018) and most recently, *Sensory Odyssey: Into the Heart of Our Living World* (2023) and *MENTAL: Colours of Wellbeing* (2022 – 2023).

TRANQUIL ESSENCE

A Solo Exhibition by Jaleela Niaz

October 14 – 28, 2023



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