The Invocation
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A DOCUMENTATION OF THE ONE PERSON EXHIBITION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF FINE ARTS

SCHOOL OF ART

BY

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DEKALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2019
CATALOG

One-Person Exhibition

BY

Zeinab Saab

The following work is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree at Northern Illinois University. The work was produced between January 2018 and March 2019. It was present in an exhibition from March 24, 2019 through March 29, 2019 in the Annette and Jerry Johns Gallery, Northern Illinois University- DeKalb, Illinois.
List of Work

1. Where Do I End? Where Do I Begin?, Ink and Beeswax on Paper, 16 ¼” x 30’, January, 2018

2. What Was Gained?, Ink and Beeswax on Paper, 16 ¼” x 30’, March, 2018

3. Hope You Make It, Ink and Beeswax on Paper, 16 ¼” x 30’, June, 2018

4. With Ease, Ink and Beeswax on Paper, 16 ¼” x 30’, September, 2018

5. Be, Handmade Paper, Wood, Terra Cotta, Thread, Gold Leaf, 5.5” x 9” x 65”, December 2018

6. Unclaimed Dua’as, Cast Paper, Prayer Rug, 30” x 44”, February 2019


8. Kitab Lam, Handmade Paper, Leather Laser-cutter, Prayer Rock, 6” x 9”, March 2019

The Invocation is a one-person exhibition of books, scrolls, and works on paper that are meant to behave as extensions of my body and thoughts pertaining to life, death, and the afterlife, and how those concepts are addressed through the lens Islam, as well as my personal relationship to ideology.

Each object is intended to express aspirations, doubt, concerns, and acceptance of a finite reality. The book is more than an object of thought. It carries a biological and spiritual entity, designated to protect objects that I have preserved over time—more specifically, objects that I did not find to be significant in the past but have been reclaimed with a new and personal meaning. From the prayer beads to the prayer rocks, each of these objects carries the story of conscious evolution, connection to home through objects, and redefining what is sacred based on personal attachment beyond just the object’s use throughout history.

The book and terminology within bookmaking are what launched this exhibition. Head, tail, spine, bone folder, etc., all terms within bookmaking that are intentionally meant to connect the self to book, outside of just using it as a means to carry memories, intimate thoughts, and new ideas, it also carries the DNA of whomever holds it, making it as though there is an extension of the self that is inherently a part of the book.

The Invocation is intended to redefine what a spiritual space can be, and its abilities to transform a secular space into a sacred one. This idea stems from the discomfort I have felt throughout the year attending religious spaces such as the mosque, and challenging who controls these spaces and who gives order to such spaces for those that attend. There is always a leader within these spaces, whether it be a priest, imam, or
rabbi, who has the responsibility of validating interpretation pertaining to sacred text.

With this exhibition I wanted to decentralize such powers, and give autonomy and permission to myself that my interpretations and ideas pertaining to sacred text are valid, with or without the confirmation of a religious authority, as well as validating the information I have accrued over the years regarding Islam, based on personal experience, oral history and narration, and academic research.

This challenges the issue of who has historically been given the privilege within these spaces to take on leadership roles; men. For me, as a woman, to not only produce this space and in the same breath state these individuals have no power or authority over this space, but is intended for the audience to interpret based on their own merit and personal experience is something close to my personal political and spiritual beliefs. We have no control of our environment, let alone the thoughts of those who surround us. The Arabic word I think of when discussing this is الحر (hur), or free will. The only thing we have governance over is ourselves, which provides us the free will to interpret and decipher on our own terms.

*The Invocation* is a form of veneration and supplication. As a child who was raised within Islam, it was my duty to perform prayer. Although my family attempted to teach my siblings the ritual of salat, it was placed heavier on me, and I assume this was based on my gender. But as I got older, I realized I wasn’t connecting to the traditional prayer. I think that is in part because of the pressure, which never allowed me to connect without compulsion. However, as I developed my skills as an artist, mostly through the medium of drawing, I recognized a spiritual connection early on and related it to the rituals I grew up with. This exhibition is meant to showcase how the practice of making
through the process of repetition is meant to be viewed as an alternative, yet valid, avenue of veneration and remembrance, which are the same outcomes that are expected within the traditional salat. I wanted to produce a practice that can also be recognized as a meaningful form of spiritual ritual without judgement from anyone above or below me, regardless of whether or not they practice the faith.

**Historical and Contemporary Influences**

The practice of bookmaking in general has been the process to best express my concepts because of its inherently intimate nature and connection to the body. We interact with books as if they are an extension of the self -- they carry our thoughts, our DNA, and even books written by other are still an extension of the self that are expressed in words we didn’t have the capability to express at the time. The terminology and structure within bookmaking became the driving force to marry the form to the concept, since so much of my work has talked about life’s beginning and end and challenging what we value in between.

An essay that heavily influenced this concept was Johanna Drucker’s *The Artist’s Book as a Rare and Auratic Object* from the book *The Century of Artist’s Books*. Her description of a book that carries an auratic energy, “Books which generate an aura about them generate a mystique, a sense of charged presence. They seem to bear meaning just in their being, their appearance and their form through their iconography and materials. It is as though they have been imbued with a power which animates them beyond their material limits generating a metaphysically charged atmosphere which surrounds the work.”¹ I wanted the reliquary books I produced to evoke a talismanic energy when
opened. The use of the Arabic letters as titles for the books, ﷺ، is a reference to the 29 of 114 chapters of Quran that begin with these cryptic letters in which no scholar has been able to decipher. One thing many scholars have concluded is that maybe this is something for humanity that is not meant to be deciphered, and that these letters were intended as a cryptic message between the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Allah (SWT). So for me, I used those as the titles for the books as a way so sending out my own cryptic message to a higher being.

One of my biggest contemporary influences has come from Marwa Helal, and a poem she wrote in her anthology of writings, Invasive Species², Poem to be Read from Right to Left:

language first my learned i
second
see see
for mistaken am i native
go i everywhere
moon and sun to
ل letter the like
lamb like sound
fox like think but
recurring this of me reminds
chased being dream
circle in a
duck duck like
goose
no were there but
children other
This poem sings to me in many ways, but most prominently because the structure of this poem can be viewed as a political statement, using the English language to flip it on its head by redefining what is the “right” way of reading, since Arabic is written from right to left. This influence can be seen in the Kitab series of leather-bound books, wherein the books open and turn from right to left, while at the same are written in the English language. One comment I would hear jokingly during the exhibition is “this isn’t the right way to open it”, which begs the question: what is the right way and who decided that for us?

Another thing that I love about this poem is the end of where she says, “I got tired of counting the number of english words it takes to capture in one another.” This section strikes a personal chord for me because language was inherently built to work against us, simply because there will never be the right words to truly encapsulate our thoughts, ideas, and emotions, this line works in both English and Arabic for me. With English, I have enough control of depth within my daily and academic vernacular to speak analytically, but never enough to speak emotionally, whereas with Arabic it is the reverse. They were both built to work against me, yet here I am, trying to hang on to one because the other dominated it. One more element that I need to point out is the fact that she does not capitalize any of the pronouns. Some might argue this may be an influence
of E.E. Cummings, but I think this has a direct influence from the Arabic language in which there are no capital letters that distinguish nouns from pronouns, which completely dismantles hierarchy through language alone. This idea for goes back to a concept of the exhibition, where no one has authority or hierarchy over the space, similarly how the Arabic language is utilized to dismantle a hierarchy with no incorporation of capitalization to inform a pronoun.

The work of Hadieh Shafie has played a significant role within my work over the last two years while working in the realm of book arts, as well as redefining what ritual can be through language. The playful nature of her books and how they behave as more sculptural, three dimensional pieces is something I would like to explore in the near future, but her obsessive drawings of the work “Ashg”³, or passion in Farsi, have played a large influence in the way in which single words can make a large spiritual impact on the self rather than a religious system. The way in which she has manipulated and transformed the word in a new piece displays a feeling of possession, wherein she is not only possessed by this, she also possesses it, as if no one else can use this word again as an artist who knows the language. I feel this way with my earlier works and the word “maalesh” which broken down is “ma aalayhi she” and translates to “not on her”. When used in colloquial speech, it is in reference to an event or situation to where we have reached our limit and conclude with “maalesh”, as in, it’s not on me anymore as to whether or not I have control over my surrounding, therefore I must succumb to the reality before me. I am letting go and leaving this to God to handle since I have used all the resources to resolve this situation. Shafie’s work reminds me of my possessive
relationship to this word and regardless of how much I want control over my life, there will always be a barrier to remind that such an endeavor is not always possible. Maalesh.

The decision for the overall feel and energy of my exhibition space was influenced by the Rothko Chapel, based out of Houston, Texas. Reverend Susan J. Barnes, one of the founders of the chapel states, “The Rothko Chapel…became the world’s first broadly ecumenical center, a holy place open to all religions and belonging to none. It became a center for international cultural, religious, and philosophical exchanges, for colloquia and performances. And it became a place of private prayer for individuals of all faiths”.⁴ I wanted to emulate a sense of drama, as if another energy that wasn’t visible yet still very present. Even though Rothko isn’t someone that has made an overt influence on my work, I am still inspired by the energy he is able to bring into a spaced that is defined by mark making and how light plays an important role in the specific body of work within the chapel.

**Philosophical and Aesthetic Concepts**

Repetition is rooted in safety and a feeling of stability. Growing up, eyes were always on me to perform as the “good Muslim”, or the ambassador for my family since I was the only girl out five brothers. I’ve always had a great deal of paranoia, anxiety, and obsessive compulsion due to this pressure, especially living in a town where everyone was basically related to one another and everyone was waiting for myself and other young girls in my town to transgress. It was on me to continue a tradition of religious rituals, regardless of whether or not I felt a connection to them, which at the time of my adolescence and most of my adulthood, I did not.
The obsessive compulsion came from a need for control over my life in a household that was constantly monitoring my every move. After leaving home for my undergraduate studies I continued to deal with the paranoia and anxiety, and it was through the process of drawing these repetitive marks and designs that I realized that I was replacing a ritual void of connection with something that had my voice. I lived alone for the first time which meant I had to adjust quickly to living a life I never thought I would ever be able to live in the first place. The repetition was and is still rooted in that obsessive compulsion, it gave me control not just over my life, but over the feeling of uncertainty in a new landscape.

I can’t help but think of Hala Alyan’s essay *Letter to My Husband*, where she states: “It helps that Arabic is a language that colloquializes theism. Mashā’Allah, inshā’Allah, subhān’Allah: it’s baked into the vernacular. Within a framework of displacement, faith becomes a constant. I never knew what to expect from a new city, but I always knew if I buried my head under a comforter and repeated my grandmother’s words, I would feel better. My trust in ritual became a common language.”

Repetition is also a reminder of a lineage both spiritual and cultural. It gives me an origin, regardless of whether or not I am using the traditional religious rituals within Islam. The secular rituals, like the practice of artmaking, are equally as sacred to me as any religious ritual. Islam is centered around repetition and the practice of Salat, or prayer, and is inherently a repetitive performance. Repetition, whether it’s the body or your tongue, you are repeating a behavior meant as a reminder. It is constantly repeated within the Qur’an that man is a forgetful being. We pray to remember. The term given for people in the Qur’an is *insan*, which is rooted in the word *insa*, meaning “to forget”. This
is a distinctive quality Islam reminds of— that we are a conscious being that easily forgets just as much as we remember, and this ability is one of the things that distinguishes us from animals and the neandrathals.

Again, going back to Alyan’s essay, she states: “I am a ritualistic person, I know. I love talismans, am superstitious about good news. I line up my blessings every morning. Displacement demands rituals—they replace roots. (They become them.) Every time I hang up my favorite Qur’anic scroll on a new mantel, I am reasserting my existence. Every time I read the al-Fāṭiḥa, I am being reminded of a lineage that was not erased in 1948 or 1967 or 2016.” Even though her perspective of one who has been displaced on more than one occasion, what she professes is one of the most honest statements of Muslim diaspora I have heard. Many Muslims that are first generation that I grew up around stick to the rituals, especially when they have to move away from family. They stick to them not necessarily for religious reasons, but because its comfort, it’s the sound of home. We play the Qur’an on our iPhones because it reminds us of our little community that we left, regardless of how we feel towards the faith. We want that connection because it is one of the few resources that connect us to an origin. This is especially true when we recognize that each country, let alone each region, within a country practices Islam differently, but how we practice it is very telling of where our roots belong.

Repetition is a reminder and an affirmation. I am living in an English dominated society and day by day feel as if I am losing the taste of my mother tongue. When it comes to works on paper scrolls, they behave as a means to practice my tongue, even if it is the same expression repeated over and over again. It’s a mantra that reminds me that
my native language is alive in diaspora, which is how it also behaves an affirmation. If my language is here, then so am I. If I repeat it enough then it must be true and that my ideas are in reality.

The book is truly a body of its own, both in the philosophical and physical sense. It is a vessel that carries my essence, from my hand caressing each page, let my DNA dance into the page, to my personal thoughts and worries being literally being illuminated as each letter casts a shadow on to the next page. The objects within each book isn’t just being nestled in between pages, it is also protected by my every word and cell of my being. This object that I am meant to protect is also protecting me.

Nothing to me is more grounded to the creation of life quite like making paper in a vat. The sound of water brushing up the sides of the vat as you carefully pull out a delicate sheet of paper and gently lay it on the pellon is like nothing I have ever experienced prior to. This form of thinking became clear to me when producing my final piece, *Be* (5), a book that was intentionally built to my height, connecting back to the concept of the book as body. The act of repeating this over and over again as I create a book to a specific dimension of my body, it’s as if life is being breathed into the object.

**Technique and Process**

When it comes to pattern ideation, I think about the expressions I am using and try to find a way to realize it in a similar fashion related to the pattern. When I started my first scroll that was not necessarily the case, but after completing it I knew the pattern could not be arbitrary and needed to be just as important as the words. For the piece, *I Hope You Make It* (3), in Arabic it reads *Inshallah Ta’oud bil Salam* which translates to
God willing I hope you return in peace. For this piece I was inspired by the pattern of a fence, in which as your eye goes further down the scroll the fence begins to break down. This piece is equal parts political as it is personal or spiritual and knowing the symbolic weight that fences carry in our current political climate. For the piece, With Ease (4), I extracted a verse from the Qur’an that says Fa In Ma’a Ilaa’sri Yusran which translates to with difficulty comes ease. The use of the snake like pattern was actually meant to symbolize blood flow and as the piece expands the flow becomes lighter, showing how as we get closer to the end or to our graves, living becomes easier once we know there is a way out of the struggles of life once and for all.

My process and form are mostly determined by the concept and history behind the material that can best support the concept. Also, in order to break out of the monotony, I like to experiment with materials that are new to me, and at times, if a mistake occurs, I try to work with it more than to hide it. As much as I am a stickler for craft, I need the spontaneous moments take over the work. A good example of this would be the scroll pieces I have been working on this past year. When I initially started them, I was not intending for them to be coated in beeswax at all. To be honest, the idea came to life when I was eating at my desk and when I was picking up an olive it slipped out of my hand and landed on my scroll. I was already a third of the way into the piece so there was no turning back. So instead of pitching the piece altogether, I paid attention to the reaction the olive oil had on the scroll and noticed the transparency that resulted, and I really loved how the light was able to come through the paper and give it an added element. It was reminiscent of skin and since the pieces had much to do with the body, I decided right then and there that I should coat them in a material to give a transparency
while remaining archival. Thanks to my mishaps and lack of consideration of my surroundings, it ended up being beneficial, elevating the effect of the pieces. The lesson that I learned from this an accident is it can be your friend more than it is your enemy, and that good art needs to highlight those moments of chance rather than hide it.

The theme of prayer and ritual continue with the formal tactics of implementing leather-bound books, for example, *Kitab Alif (7)*, carried the prayer beads as a tool to guide me in life. With the motif of the evil eye combined with the prayer beads, this artist book series continues to investigate the importance of prayer and artmaking. For centuries, the evil eye has been able to seep into almost every major religion on a global scale. I tend to be a very superstitious individual and always carry some form of charm or amulet that has an evil eye reference. The structure of this book is a traditional long stitch wrapped in leather. The book opens from right to left with a laser-cut personal prayer for guidance and protection. Nestled within the book is a set of prayer beads, which can be used for protection during my journey by using it as a means to count my dua’as as I walk to into the unknown. I decided to use this particular book because this book called upon protection for a new chapter I am about to embark on and, I felt it necessary to request spiritual and ancestral guidance along the way as well as making sure my dua’as, or prayers, make to it the next person or spirit safely. The amulet has always been in my life, whether it was my family’s home or a friend, to me it’s a symbol of comfort and someone is always looking after you.

The process of papermaking also continues to display itself in the *Kitab Series* (7,8,9), where each sheet of paper was produced by hand. After each sheet was finished, I used Rhino software and a laser-cutter to produce the words and forms on each page. The
idea of utilizing the laser cutter for those books in particular was to experiment with a different interpretation of the word “illuminated” in relation to books. We tend to reference the word back to the Illuminated Manuscripts within Christianity but rarely is the expression used within Islam. I have always enjoyed the shadow play that takes place with paper once its cut through, and I noticed that depending on the direction of where the light hits, the range of shadows that can arise from the page behind the words gave the page another level of depth that I think the books needed. The objects within each book- the prayer beads, the prayer rock, and the necklace- were meant to be “relics” that I had acquired as a child and one later on in life. I had them stowed away from quite some time and never really knew what to do with them, and when the opportunity presented itself that I could use my words enveloped within a book to protect them gave them a deeper, more personal meaning to me outside of them just being gifts from close friends and relatives.

Experimenting with digital technology such as Rhino and the laser-cutter allows room for problem solving when testing new materials and ideas. Using patterns and script within the software allowed me to play with a variety of tools that can alter the shape and design of the patterns and script. Laser-cutting onto paper opened up a new window as to how paper can behave in a more sculptural manner, by being more mindful as to how it can play in space when light is implemented. Being careful as to how the paper is handled and how it behaves as it turns with the addition of light gives room for paper to be more than just a flat surface.

For the piece, *Unclaimed Dua’as* (6) the process of creating each “prayer rock” was simple yet tasking. The prayer rock is usually found within the Shiite sect of Islam ⁶,
and the source of the clay to produce them is specific to the regions of Iraq and Iran, where many of the shrines of the Holy Imams can be found. The rocks are holy from a physical and spiritual sense. Not only does the clay used to create them come from holy land, but the symbolism in its use adds another level of meaning. During salat, the stone is placed at the top of the prayer mat, and when one bows to the ground, their head is intentionally meant to touch the stone, behaving as a reminder of not just an ancestral lineage for the Shiites, but as a reminder of your imminent return. This is a reminder during salat that you bow to the Earth created by God, and so you shall return to the Earth by God’s will. This concept was the driving force in making *Unclaimed Dua’as.*

Each paper stone I produced was from a cast of the original prayer stone, and layer by layer the form would develop into the final product. The labor in producing these stone by hand and with paper was tasking because of the fact that I could not control my environment, making it difficult to control the drying time for each piece. Some ended up shriveled and with little detail, but I kept them because there was something beautiful that the element of time gave that I could not replicate. Each stone symbolizes a *dua’a,* or prayer. I have not been committed to the traditional practice of prayer in quite some time, so for me, each stone symbolizes a prayer that went unclaimed. The use of white pulp with the wrinkled element signifies a more ghostly quality, showing how time has reminded me of what I have put on hold, and what I have not forgotten. They are a reminder that one day I will come back to this practice, just not right now. The past is behind and yet, in the same breath, the past is also present.

I need to acknowledge one more thing about this piece that struck a chord with me when developing it. As I was making each stone, adding a little layer of pulp at a
time, I couldn’t help but feel an ancestral connection. The act of making each stone reminded me of how my mother would make food dishes that were so tedious and needed special attention, and how her mother passed that down to her and so on and so forth, I could not deny the lineage of the hand and the delicate nature of making within my family’s history. Every time I entered the room to make the stones, I could genuinely feel a spiritual energy in the space as I pressed every ounce of pulp into the molds. The spirit of my grandmother, Zeinab, my namesake, was so strong in the room I would truly cry. To this day I can’t tell you why, but she was there. I just know it. Part of me thinks the strong, rapid emotions came from never knowing her personally, but rather from the stories I have heard of her. She was an incredible cook within her village. She would bake for her neighbors on a regular basis, and people would come to her home to feast and she would give without question. Part of me thinks the act of making with my hands is directly from her. I could feel her hands being ever so delicate with whatever she made. I could feel her sense of pride in each dish, and how much more pride would be added once she gave that dish away for others to enjoy. Although food and paper making are not the same, they do share a narrative of the delicate nature of making, of being gentle, and how every bit of you is truly an extension of the self. Although I never met her, my hands tell me all I need to know of her.

_The Invocation_ was a space where I could express my thoughts, feelings, and interpretation of Islamic ideology pertaining to life, death, and the afterlife, in one space through the practice of bookmaking, that encompasses all of my other passions of artmaking. Nothing seems more fitting than this medium when discussing these topics. After all, books are like bodies, they both have a beginning that develops into a climax,
and if we are lucky, the descension towards an end is slow, yet full of mystery and curiosity. My fears of an end, my questioning of my purpose in the present and future, and what is beyond existence have been on my mind for quite some time, and I have tackled an inch’s worth of that area of personal thinking.
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5. *Be*, Handmade Paper, Wood, Terra Cotta, Thread, Gold Leaf, 5.5” x 9” x 65”

December 2018
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