

A RUG OF CONTRADICTIONS

Samia Nassar-Melki discusses *Concrete Carpet* – an amalgamation of Japanese aesthetics and Arab culture by Lebanese furniture designer, Nada Debs.

The mere fact that they called it *Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art* was telling; it had that whiff of political incorrectness about it or rather the intonation of wording from another era. However, once one sees 'Munich, 1910' tagged to this now famous exhibition, it all falls into place: 1910 was the date, Munich was the location, and the West's largest exhibition of Islamic art was the event. In commemoration of the 100-year anniversary of the *Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art* exhibition, Munich's Haus der Kunst Museum launched a new show in September 2010 titled *The Future of Tradition – The Tradition of Future* (Canvas 6.5).

It was for this new exhibition that Lebanese furniture designer Nada Debs (Canvas 1.2) was invited by the Khatt Foundation, an organisation dedicated to the art of typography and whose founding director, Huda Smithshuijzen AbiFares, challenged Debs to design an Islamic object incorporating calligraphy. "Something traditional made with modern material came to mind; ultimately I visualised a concrete carpet adorned with calligraphy," says Debs.

Having forged a name for herself in her native Lebanon, Debs's work celebrates Eastern craftsmanship fused with contemporary forms of design. A childhood spent in Japan developed in Debs an appreciation for the purity and simplicity of the Far East. She successfully balances the calm Zen-inspired aesthetic of Japan with the loud ornate style of Arab culture, bringing serenity to where there was once a cacophony of sounds.

Measuring an impressive 9 x 3.5 metres, Debs's *Concrete Carpet* is subdivided into 28 modular panels like Japanese Tatami mats, each panel featuring a letter of the Arabic alphabet. The typography is Debs's corporate font, which mixes the calligraphic tradition of Japanese *Kanji* and Arabic calligraphy. These panels exude a certain monastic austerity, which is only alleviated by the glint of mother-of-pearl, inlaid by hand in this sea of poured concrete to highlight each panel's chosen letter once. The carpet is then finished off by threads of stainless steel beads to faithfully interpret the aesthetic of a hand-woven Persian rug.

Concrete Carpet is, by all means, a study in

contradictions. By juxtaposing the industrial (concrete) to the artisan (mother-of-pearl inlay), Debs highlights the contradiction of what Islamic carpets mean to our collective imaginations: the lightness of 'flight' of the magic carpet as opposed to the static heaviness of the concrete. In a way, it sadly denotes the difference between the Arab world's aspirations and its realities. Debs also addresses our perception of 'cosiness' – that is what a carpet does to a space, it renders it warm and intimate. But a concrete carpet perfectly denotes the loss of such cosiness in the modern world, in the name of efficiency and order.

As the words are aligned in sequence, reminiscent of the naming of the dead in modern war memorials, Debs lays out at our feet the cost of science, industrialisation and machinery to society. What stands out is the speck of light stemming from the hand-laid mother-of-pearl, like a promise of hope that can be only be offered by the human touch. Through handcraft, Debs reiterates man's necessity in this world of mass production. 

