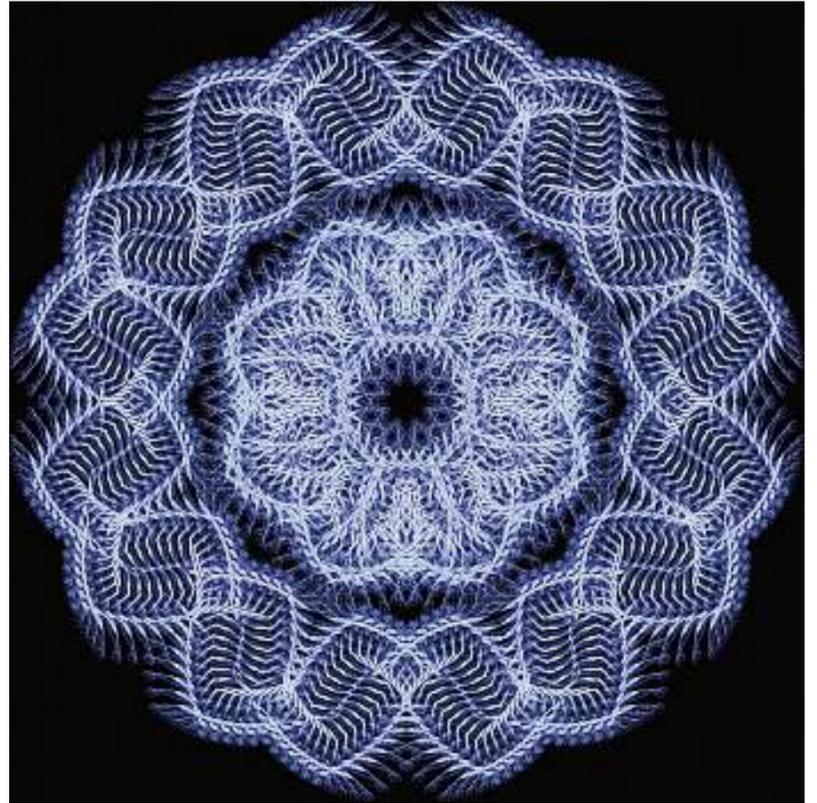
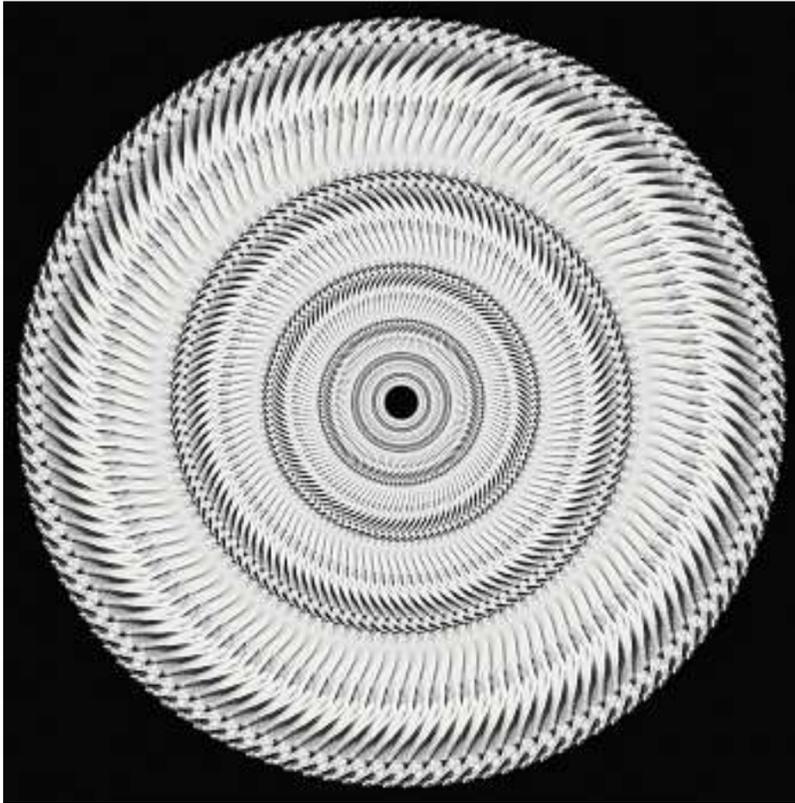
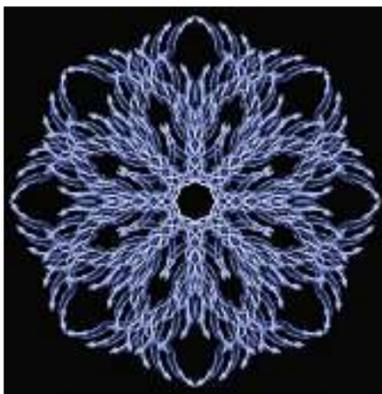
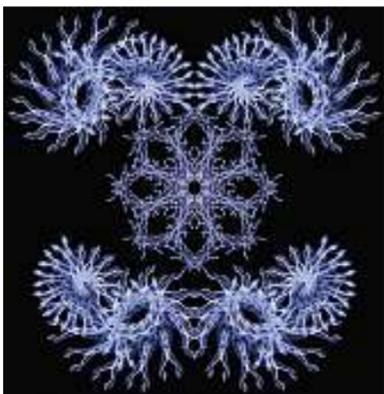


# Transient moments of pure self-expression

*Hazem Mahdy captures both the personal and the universal in his beautiful patterns that have an innate feeling of balance and tranquillity*



**Spontaneous symmetry** Hazem Mahdy's abstract photographic works resemble the geometric patterns seen in Islamic art or in fractal art



By **JYOTI KALSI**  
Special to Weekend Review

At first glance, UAE-based Egyptian artist Hazem Mahdy's abstract photographic works resemble the geometric patterns seen in Islamic art or in fractal art, which is inspired by the symmetry in nature. But a closer look reveals that these digitally created patterns are actually composed of repeated images of the artist's body. Mahdy's style was inspired by a vision he saw while meditating. The image that appeared in his mind was that of a tree with roots and branches made of human arms and hands holding on to each other to form a massive grid of interconnected hands. In his last show the artist tried to create visual interpretations of this mental image by using photographs of his own arms, hands and torso to create a series of interesting patterns.

In his latest show, *Atman*, Mahdy explores this concept and technique further. "I am a deeply spiritual person and am interested in learning about different philosophies. This work is inspired by my trips to India and Nepal, where I was introduced to the concepts of 'Atman' and 'mandalas'. Atman refers to the soul or essence of an individual that is eternal, unchanging and indistinguishable from the essence of the universe. And the mandalas are circular drawings used by Buddhist monks as tools for meditation. They are essentially metaphysical representations of the cosmos. For me the process of creating these artworks was similar to that of making a mandala and it helped me to discover and express my inner self," he says.

The artist has used images of his arms and hands in various "mudras" (meditative hand poses) to create beautiful patterns that have an innate feeling of balance and tranquillity, and a hypnotic quality that draws the viewer in towards the centre. "Because the mandalas looked interesting, I did a lot of research on how they are made and what the patterns mean. But initially when I tried to create those kind of patterns in my studio it did not work. I then realised that it is a subconscious process that will happen only if I let go. So I changed my approach. Before starting a piece I would meditate and listen to chants to put myself in a zone where my thoughts and feelings flowed out spontaneously. This entire series is a form of 'automatic art' with each piece capturing a transient moment of pure and honest self-expression. The blue I have used throughout this series is the colour of the 'throat chakra', which is the chakra of expression," Mahdy says.

At their core, the artworks are deeply personal and essentially self-portraits of the artist. But the hands within these organic patterns also represent all of humanity and the bond that exists between human beings and nature. "Ultimately my work is about unity. Like the hands in these patterns, the souls of all human beings are interconnected, regardless of the differences in our culture, religion or beliefs. The hands are a symbol for reaching out and supporting others and connecting with the universe," the artist says.

■ Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

■ *Atman* will run at Carbon 12 until June 10.

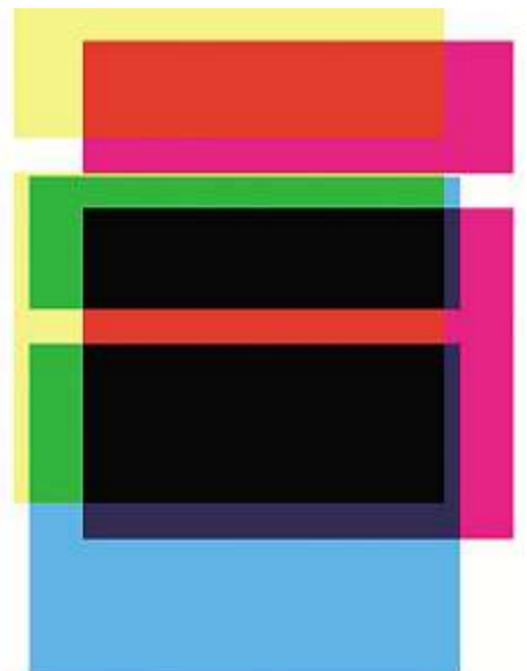
## Manifestations of truth

Hamra Abbas is interested in investigating notions of cultural history, violence, gender roles, ornamentation and faith by deconstructing how we see images that are part of collective memory. In her latest show, *Kaaba Picture as a Misprint*, the Pakistani artist, who won the Abraaj Capital Art Prize in 2011 and the Jury Prize at Sharjah Biennial 9, has explored the idea of devotion through the alteration of scale and medium of images associated with the Kaaba and haj. By using the visual language of religion and contemporary acts of devotion, the artist has addressed ideas of transformation, individual experience and the diversity of religious understanding and involvement.

The title of the show comes from a series of six photographs, where Abbas has reduced the cubic form of the Kaaba to its most simple geometric representation of two black rectangles. In a reference to printing technology, she has further broken down the black form into cyan, magenta and yellow versions of the shape. These three versions are then printed off-centre in the photographs. By showing that the image becomes black when the three colours are layered upon each other, and by calling her method a "misprint", the artist links the quest for truth through religious devotion to the plethora of ways in which that truth may be understood and experienced.

In a series of photographs, titled *Kaaba Pictures*, Abbas looks at souvenirs that people buy during the Haj to serve as a portable memory of the sacred ritual. The artist made paintings of some of these objects and then photographed them to create large-scale artworks. Similarly, in *Wall Hanging*, she has created a print of a painting of the silk- and gold-embroidered "kiswa" that covers the door of the Kaaba. Her original painting was based on a plaster-cast souvenir bought by her mother, and the translations from embroidery to plaster cast to painting to digital photography and reprint remove the final art object from its religious origin to explore multiple reinterpretations of the original. By highlighting the process of the production of these mass-produced images for public consumption, the artist invites us to contemplate our perception of spiritual icons and the symbolic and religious significance attached to them.

*Kaaba Picture as a Misprint* will run at Lawrie Shabibi until May 27.



*Kaaba Picture as a Misprint 5*, archival pigment print