DESIGNING BY HERITAGE: VISUAL NARRATIVES FROM EMIRATI DESIGN STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT:

In the past 20 years, the United Arab Emirates, and Dubai in particular has transformed itself from an oil-based economy into a global financial and commercial hub. More than ever, the effort to preserve local heritage has become an important task for the Emirati society and their government. This is mirrored in the curricula of several institutions in the country, including the College of Arts and Creative Enterprises at Zayed University, where, as part of the Design classes, students explore their heritage in the form of a visual narrative. This paper will present this point of view from the Graphic Design 1 course perspective, which is included Graphic Design, Visual Arts and Multimedia programs, and will analyze it while cataloging the patterns found.

It will explore the students' use of multiple design elements to build stories and complete a visual narrative of their family legacy. These narratives have been classified in four groups. The first one named *Wedding Mementos* use elements that are treasured and mark the shift into a new family life. *Extended Family*, the second group, are narratives dedicated to family members other than parents or siblings including friends and neighbors. The third group gathered projects that told the story of parents that were part of the Army, Navy or Police and is name as *Service to the Country*. The last group, *Emirati Traditions* explore how certain elements unique to the Middle East and especially the society and culture of the United Arab Emirates is embedded as an important element in their narrative.

Keywords: Heritage, Design Principles, Visual Narrative, Emirati Culture

1. BACKGROUND

Graphic Design 1 (ART351) is part of the junior classes in the curriculum of the Graphic Design, Visual Arts and Multimedia programs offered at Zayed University. It is the first approach for the students to apply basic design skills into a full-scale design project. This class is divided into four main projects; the first two explore the visual narrative by merging imagery produced or compiled during their initial research, along with typography and calligraphy exploration. The idea for the project, which is recollecting memories from the nineteen eighties, is inspired by the Archive80 creative project from Emirati artist Alia AlShamsi in 2011, and the I Repeat follow-up project by Aminah Yousuf. The idea was adapted and rewritten by Assistant Professor Tina Sleiman in 2012, in the form of the methodology employed to collect data and the design criteria and specifications that went

into the making of the student projects (Sleiman, 2012). The outcome of the first part of the project was set to be an elongated poster and a set of three snapshots or postcards. The second part is an eight-page booklet. Among the learning outcomes of this project is the ability to transmit someone's story into a visual sequence by creating a graphic system that consists of a photomontage of images. Each project had duration of 4 weeks, dedicating the first weeks to research and exploration and the last 2 into producing sketches and mockups.

1. 1 VISUAL NARRATIVE AND HERITAGE

Narrative could be defined as a story that told is and the way of telling it. In certain ways it is a more inclusive term that also implies certain knowledge that was assimilated by living an experience (Potteiger and Purinton, 1998). The ability to narrate something is developed during the early childhood process, and it simplifies the learning process because it explores specific connections in the story. For a designer, narrative is one of the many tools of communication available. Design is a sequence of elements that are connected together to generate the narration of a particular meaning that is being represented. The connection between narrative and heritage relies on the act of sharing stories via oral traditions, texts, images and photos, objects and other media (Potteiger and Purinton, 1998). In the particular case of this paper, this act relies on their "visuals" and its materiality and aesthetics. Wartson and Waterton use the definition of heritage given by Laurajane Smith as the *cultural processes that supports social structures and identities –national or otherwise- and which act to establish and sustain discourses that make sense of the past* (Watson, 2010). The means in which the narrative relies on, in certain ways depends on the visuals of it, and as mentioned also by Watson, gives empirical sense to what is signifies.

The cases presented in this paper were created in base of that empirical sense that came from the research gathered by the students: pictures found in family albums, objects that were treasured, or simple oral stories told by their close relatives. Students made their own interpretation of what their heritage was by using specific aesthetics that came from that materiality found in research and embodied into designed artifacts.

1. 2. ARCHIVE80: EMIRATI VISUAL NARRATIVE

Figure 1. "My Aunt Gmashah".
Kuwaiti TV show. Khawla Marri, 2011.
Image from @Archive80 - Twitpic

Archive80 was created to be a collection of artworks that reflected the life in the UAE during the 1980s. It focused mostly on the transformation of a local society into a global community where big brands were entering into the market; TV, advertisement and foreign pop stars were starting to become common in the daily life. Photographer, photojournalist and poet Alia AlShamsi served as curator of the project and counted with the collaboration in 2011 of renowned local artists including Hind Mezaina, Leila AlMarashi, Maitha Darwish, and Khawla Marri (Figure1). Both versions of Archive30 were presented as a public

exhibition at Dar Ibn Haytham Visual Arts Gallery in Al Bastakiyah, one of the oldest and most traditional neighborhoods of Dubai.

2. METHODOLOGY: ASK, RECORD AND COLLECT

The initial process started by interviewing, recording and collecting stories from family members or close relatives that lived in the UAE during the decade of 1980. The intention of this was for the students to explore their heritage and their roots in a society that quickly developed and matured after the UAE's independence in 1971. It also allowed them to compare their experiences in a complex society to a simpler life style from 3 decades back.

Students had the primary task of building a questionnaire or using a suggested interview guide to interview their family member (or client, as defined in the project brief) and gather elements such as photos, objects, publications like newspapers, books and magazines as well as other personal items. Once the students had completed their initial research, they started building their narrative based on a selection of stories gathered. They moved into sketching different ways of telling a story; this not only allowed them to organize their ideas, but to ideate and share possible options with their classmates in multiple group and individual critiques and collaborations. The students developed their own creative criteria and started having a sense natural selection in their projects by evaluating their own options and alternatives.

Both projects were the initial gateway to explore the combination of typography and Arabic calligraphy as well as English and Arabic in a single layout, though it was not required to the student to use both languages in the same piece.

2.1. ASSESMENT

The evaluation was divided in two parts: student self-evaluations and attending faculty evaluation, both with the same weight in the final grade. In the self-evaluation, students were asked to evaluate their process, craftsmanship and the individual presented pieces. It was a way for them to reflect on their progress, the way their project evolved from an initial idea to a final piece as well as the gathering and research of stories and related elements.

For the craftsmanship criteria, the quality of their work in terms of no pixelation, cutting and gluing and general attention to detail was evaluated. This also included their digital process and the proper use of the software tools available. For the self-evaluation, students needed to consider how their imagery and type worked together both visually, and conceptually, as well as the proper use of space and their creativity at when interpreting their stories.

3. PATTERNS IN THE NARRATIVES

3. 1. WEDDING MEMENTOS

Figure 3. Henna Decoration. Image of Public Domain.

Weddings in the UAE and the Middle East are deeply influenced by the culture and traditions of each family and at the same time differing from each Emirate. Following the tradition, weddings are separated between male and female celebrations, being the female one more expressive and visually interesting than the male. The conventional black *abayas* (the traditional black over-garment that covers the female body) is replaced by dresses and elaborate hairstyles. In these weddings, food is abundant and usually has a wide variety of dishes including olives, *hummous*, *tabbouleh* and sweets as well as tea, coffee and other drinks. The traditional *Laylat al Henna* or Henna Party is the prelude of the wedding celebrations and takes place one day or two before the actual ceremony at the bride's parent's house (Hamid, 2002). Henna is a natural dye that comes from dried Mignonette Tree leaves mixed with boiling water. This dye is used to create temporary body art in India, North Africa and the Middle East (Figure 3).

(1)   **(2)**   **(3)**

Figure 2. (1) *Afrah*, Booklet, 2015 - *Maryam Maktoum Mohamad Hasher Al Maktoum*, (2) Meeting of the Desert and the Sea, Postcard, 2014 - *Sana Hasher Hamad Juma Almaktoum*. (3) Red Dress, Poster and Postcard, 2015 – *Alia Hamad Ibrahim Khalfan Ali*.

As part of their narrative, students used their mother's wedding dresses as an important memento of the ceremony, and they transform it and appropriate it to generate in most cases geometric patters. In Figure 2.1, parts of the decoration of wedding dress were modulated in a radial arrangement along with pieces of the jewelry worn by the bride. This new geometric element is laid out in the top and bottom parts of the composition and later framed in the center by Arabic calligraphy reading *Afrah* or celebration, extracted from the original wedding invitation. This word is usually used to describe the celebration of a wedding. Something similar happens in *The Meeting of The Desert and the Sea (Figure 2.2).*

This booklet covers uses portions of an embroidered flower decoration from her mother's wedding dress and modulated in a radial manner creating a new flower. This modulation is repeated throughout the pieces to represent the female character of the story juxtaposed to the falcon, which represents the male side of it.

Figure 4. Traditional Emirati Thawb. Image courtesy of Marie-Claire Bakker, Zayed University.

In the *Red Dress* poster, the student created a parallel comparison between the western white wedding dress and a traditional Emirati dress (Figure 2.3). The system is completed with 3 postcards that make use of the same radial interlaced designs. These designs are constructed from parts of the dress and the golden embroidered details found in the sleeves and the lower portion of it. The Emirati *Thawb*, is usually decorated with golden threads, prints with geometric patterns and bright colors such as red, orange, yellow and intense shades of blue and green (Figure 4). This garment has been deeply affected by regional and external influences including the new socio-economic context of the country especially during the current post-oil era. These influences are reflected in the high quality of its tailoring, fabrics, and remarkably elaborated embroidered applications. Embroidery is a craft specially regarded in the Arab world, seen as creative outlet that allowed women to express themselves (Ṭariq M., 2011, Stone 2007).

3. 2. EXTENDED FAMILY

Family ties in Middle Eastern society have evolved into a standardized nuclear family, due to easy access to education, the arrival of expatriates, foreign companies and fast urbanization (Barakat, 1993). However, the extended family its still part of a complex and interlocked network of close relationships; they live in the same or in close neighbors, there are marriages between close relatives and in general there are big expectations between one another. According to Barakat, *the extended character of the Arab family is interrelated with its other characteristic features, and particularly with its functioning as a socioeconomic unit. This arrangement renders family members symbiotically interdependent* (Barakat, 1993). This family network is also at the core of the Arab society, where values such as pride, generosity, hospitality, and dignity are highly regarded, respected and expected to be complied (Joseph, 1994).

In Arab families, persons outside the bloodline, but close to the family core are also recognized and accepted as extended family. For example, a brother's friend could also be seen and called brother or even do things a brother could do. (Joseph, 1994). This is an idiomatic kinship that is important in familiar situations but also in political and economical standings. This can be seen for example in *The Smiley Man,* as the student related several

stories of her father and his close friends during their childhood and teenage years (Figure 5.1). Similar to other cases, radial patterns are found in her piece which is found in the calligraphic interlacing of the word *Abdullatif* (her father's name) that defines the distribution of the different situations depicted along the pattern.

| **(1)** | **(2)** | **(3)** |

Figure 5. (1) The Smiley Man, Poster, 2015 - *Dalal Abdullatif Mohamed Ahmed Mohamed,* (2) Behind the Garden Walls, Poster, 2015 - *Khulood Mehayer Ali Rashed Suwailam*, (3) A Throwback to the Eighties, Booklet, 2015 - *Sarah Omar Saeed Obaid Almatrooshi.*

Behind the Garden Walls, explores the link between cousins and neighborhood friends by telling the story of 4 children that used to play at *Safa Park*, one of Dubai´s biggest and oldest park. One important element in this composition is the use of a blurring filter to disguise the identities of the other three female children in the photo. This is not only to make the main character in the story the focal point, but also to conceal their identity in some sort of cultural shyness to avoid personal clashes. (Figure 5.2).
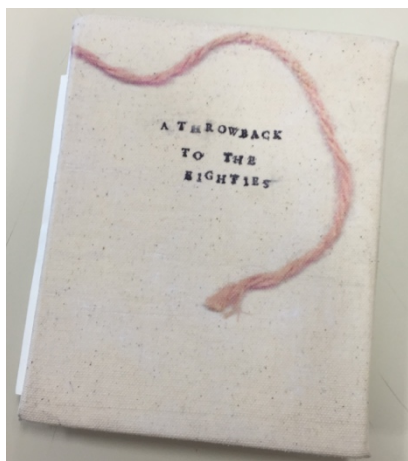

Figure 6. A Throwback to the Eighties - *Sarah Omar Saeed Obaid Almatrooshi*.

In *A Throwback to the Eighties*, the student makes a tribute to her uncle, defined by her in the booklet as a role model as her father. (Figure 5.3). In this booklet, the narration is done from a first person perspective as if her uncle was telling the story from his first memories to the times he used to play with his friends and became an adult. An interesting element in this piece is the use of yellow tracing paper in some of the pages that, when turned, unveil a new memory. The typographic elements are clean and simple and make an interesting mix of Arabic and English through out the entire piece using in both cases handwritten script. To back the concept of memory, the uses of elements from scrapbooking are often used: from wrinkled or ripped paper to strips of adhesive tape. The student paid special attention to the cover by using photo-transfer over canvas (Figure 6).

3. 3. SERVICE TO THE COUNTRY

In this category students made use of medals, insignias and other images related to the UAE Union Defense Force. The UAE Army, the UAE Air Force and Defense Force and the UAE Navy along with different Federal Police Forces compose the armed forces. In *My Seashore*, the student tells the story of how her parents met, got married and moved to Abu Dhabi (the capital of the Country), so her father could to attend Navy training as an officer (Figure 7.1). What is even more interesting is the metaphor of the anchor along with a Navy hat to represent her mother as the anchor that keeps the family stable and together and the hat representing her father's career in the institution.

(1)   **(2)**   **(3)**

Figure 7. (1) My Seashore, Booklet, 2015 – Amani Salem Yousef Busannad Alshamsi, (2) Oh Flying Birds, Poster and Postcard, 2015 - Fatima Yahya Maayouf Saeed Humaid Al Helei, (3) 1986, Postcard - Maryam Ahmed Thani Obaid Thani Al Muhairi.

Oh Flying Birds, is a set of three pieces each one describing the experience of a young combatant (the student's father) as part of the armed forces of the country. It opens the poster with the lyrics of the song *Ya Teour Ettayrah (Oh Flying Birds)* written by *Iraqi poet Zuhier A'dujieli* and song by renowned the Iraqi singer Sadoun Jaber. The song claims for the safe return of the *bird* (in this case a metaphor the young soldier) from the country. It also uses images of old envelopes with the "Air Mail" caption along several seals from the UAE to show the continuous communication efforts between the family and the main character of the story. Arabic Calligraphy is integrated as part of the images as an element that dynamically moves around the pieces with interesting change in size and proportion to enhance certain parts of the song lyrics (Figure 7.2).

The use of emblems, seals, tags and other objects related to the service to the armed forces or the police is a common element in some of the pieces. Either used as part of the general composition like in Figure 7.2 or as the focal point in the pieces as its show in Figure 7.3 where the emblem of the Dubai police or the cadet sword uses most of the visual space along with the date of 1986 in Arabic.

3. 4. EMIRATI TRADITIONS

| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |

Figure 8. (1) Carrom and Canada Dry, Postcards, 2014 - *Hind Omar Thani Rashed Al Matrooshi,* (2) Memories of my Mother, Poster and Postcard Set, 2015 - *Fatma Hassan Abdulla Mohd Taher*, (3) Emirati Burqa, Poster, 2015- *Jawaher Jamal Khamis Almutawa Alsuwaidi*, (4) Meeting of the Desert and the Sea, Booklet, 2014 - *Sana Hasher Hamad Juma Almaktoum.*

Figure 9. Carrom board and pieces. Image under Creative Commons License.

Carrom or *Karrom*, it's a board game originally from the Indian subcontinent that later was brought to the Middle East. It consists in a wooden game board with four corner pocked that is played by using a "stricker" that is flicked to hit black and white round pieces (Figure 9). Several students used Carrom pieces to build their narrative, with Figure 4, 1 being one particular interesting case. In this project, the student used a sequence of old Canada Dry cans arranged in a 5x3 grid with one piece breaking the rhythm of the cans and making it the focal point of the composition (Figure 8.1).
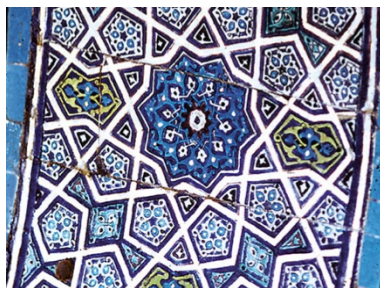

Figure 9. Decorated arch at the Green Mosque in Bursa, Turkey. Image under Creative Commons License.

Similar thing happens in the second artwork from this student as she made a geometric interlace with a Carrom piece in the middle and radial distribution of Canada Dry cans, additional pieces and Sandwiches and a Carrom board as background. In certain way, this geometric interlace is similar to the traditional *Girih* patterns from Islamic decorative arts found in book covers, tapestry and architecture. According to the student, the reason to include cans and sandwiches responds to the story told by her mother as she used to sit and play Carrom with her family while enjoying them.

Another Emirati tradition present in this narrative exercise is the Gulf Burqa, which, opposite to the

Afghani Burqa which fully covers the woman's body including face, is a piece of decoration that only covers the woman's forehead and upper lip imitating the features of a falcon, a symbol of pride in the region (Figure 10) (Nuriyah, 2013). Each country in the gulf has its own type of Burqa. The Emirati one has a narrow top and broader curved bottom. Gulf Burqas are made from blue or purple fabric with a metallic finish imported mostly from India. Even when this accessory is not commonly used anymore by younger woman, its regarded as a piece that belongs to older generations and represents experience and respect (Al Hameli 2014, Al Khan 2007, Kanafani 1979).

Figure 10. Emirati Burqa. Ahmed Alromaithi. Image under Creative Commons License

In this category, students have transformed the Emirati Burqa into a fashionable and generationally acceptable accessory that blends itself with flowers, falcons and henna decorations along with *Memories of my Mother* written in Arabic calligraphy along with elements representative of the Middle Eastern culture (Figure 8.2). Even by juxtaposing it to the western white wedding dress, the Burqa becomes the center of attention that challenges the duality of these pieces creating an extemporal story (Figure 8.3).

Falconry is one of the most important and unique traditions in the UAE as it is an integral part of the life in the desert (Hamid, 2002). The Bedouin diet, encompassed mostly by bread and dates, lamb, mutton, goat and milk, along with rice and wild berries was complemented by hares or houbaras (large bustard bird) hunted with falcons. Falcons were also used to survey large deserted territories as part of hunting expeditions that lasted several days long. In the project *Desert and the Sea,* the student makes use of the falconry concept to make a parallel between the life in the desert and the life in the sea. With the skillful use of scientific-like illustrations, the student dissects the falcon and seashells while combining them with Arabic calligraphy. It is a metaphor between the life of her mother in the sea and the life of her father in the deep Emirati desert (Figure 8.4).

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper presented a series of academic exercises executed by first year Emirati design students. The visual narratives presented here explore multiple representations of what the students consider their heritage. These representations were catalogued into several groups that describe some ideas regarding the current state of the Emirati culture and its society. The categories explored were weddings, the preexisting relationships between the extended family and the value given to it, the service to the country in the shape of military or police service and some of its most representative cultural traditions. Exploring these visual narratives enabled the student to think and conceptualize their ideas by creating a sequence of designed pieces that not only displayed abstract and cultural concepts but were also translated into non-verbal narratives that were visually easy to understand (Baskinger and

Nam, 2006). Building a graphic system allowed the student to explore several aspects of storytelling while keeping a sequence that structured the main idea, in the case of the exercises presented here, someone's story. In Baskingers and Nam paper, philosopher Alan R. White is cited in relation to imagination and perception and the way both are connected as part of the visualization process (Baskinger and Nam, 2006). Compiling a story, interviewing someone or interpreting the information gathered, depends on the interpretation given by the student of it; the use of the imagination allowed them to visualize potential ideas in the narrative they were building. The narratives found in this paper, according to the categories defined by Pimenta and Poovaiah are Static Visual Narratives. Yet, even when they are static in the sense of being fixed to a medium and offer no interaction, they unfold in the imagination of the viewer that in certain way its mobile on the interpretation given (Pimenta, 2010).

Exploring one's heritage using visual means, demands the creation of a set of categories and structures that define what will be non-verbally communicated; either presenting a wedding dress to tell the story of a new life to making an homage to soldiers to even enhancing the storyteller's roots. Watson and Waterton argue that heritage, and especially those objects that represent it, have a life outside their materiality and beyond what makes them relevant (Watson, 2010). This exercise sought to look beyond that materiality by creating new meaning in a new visual narrative but also by understanding its original meaning in the context of a story.

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