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Circumambulating the Kaaba

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Circumambulating the Kaaba Drawing the Space of the Heart

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Abstract

In the Islamic world, the *Kaaba* (black cube) in Mecca is considered the heart and centre of the world. As a sacred edifice where the Hajj pilgrimage is performed, the *Kaaba* acts as a ritual attractor that connects the transcendental world of God and the corporeal world. The philosopher Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240) argued that our own heart is also a *Kaaba*. Considering this, I explore the performativity of *drawing-out* an Islamic ontology of space and time that reflects a *heart-space* relationship. Following Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphysics and a legacy of spatiotemporal drawing, wherein geometry, philosophy and architecture find common ground, I have discovered that the creative practice of drawing cosmograms is *tahqīq* (witnessing and attestation). Therefore, my drawings move beyond the limits of representation and perform as autoethnographic material that bears witness and attests to lived experiences. My drawings are made up of love and loss, presence and absence, and life and death that connect the past, present, and future. In this essay, I reveal that drawing serves to diagram language, culture, memory, and emotions and conclude that drawing has become a way to perform *tawaf* (circumambulate the heart) and create a *makān* (space of being) to be encountered.

Keywords: *Kaaba*, *makān*, heart, circumambulate, drawing, space, being, witnessing and attestation, encountering

Circumambulating the Kaaba

In this essay, I discuss the performativity of drawing and encountering, explored in my doctoral thesis *Kaaba: The Heart’s Centre - Kashf al-Makān/Unveiling Spaces of Being* (Patel, 2022). The research analysed the ontology of *wujūd* (being and existence) by Islamic philosopher Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240). Through a creative practice of spatiotemporal

drawing and an exhibition *Wujūd fi Ālam al-Mithāl (Being in a World of Images)*¹ (Figure 1), I created a cosmopoiesis that incorporated the corporeal and spiritual world. In response to the 2019 Mosque attacks in Ōtautahi Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand, the act of drawing cosmograms is a mode of performing *tawaf* – a methodology to circumambulate the heart or *Kaaba*, to unveil the *heart-space of my being*. Furthermore, I will discuss how my drawings and exhibition move beyond the limits of representation and operate as spatial expositions that create a *makān* (space of being) to dwell in.

Figure 1

Wujūd fi Ālam al-Mithāl. (Photograph by Samuel Hartnett, 2022. Reprinted with permission).



Kaaba

In the Islamic world, the *Kaaba* or black cube in Mecca is considered the heart and centre of the Earth. It is believed to be the primordial first house of worship, its form being a synthesis of cosmology and architecture (Akkach, 2012). Pilgrims circumambulate the *Kaaba* seven times during the Hajj pilgrimage and in any location in the world, prayers are

¹ *Wujūd fi Ālam al-Mithāl* was held from August 8 to August 13, 2022, ST Paul Street Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand.

orientated towards it. According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, our heart is also a *Kaaba* (Hirtenstein, 2010). Ibn al-‘Arabī, was born in Murcia, Spain and later settled in Damascus, Syria (1223), where he lived until his death (Corbin, 2014). In 1202 he travelled to Mecca to perform the Hajj pilgrimage in which he had a vision that would shape his philosophy (Ibn al-‘Arabī, 2019). Ibn al-‘Arabī testified that while performing the circumambulation around the *Kaaba*, an illuminated ‘being’ or ‘Youth’ appeared to him in the moonlight and revealed a sacred text that was etched on their body. This text led him to create his major work *Futūhāt al-Makkiyyah (The Meccan Revelations)* (Morris, 2004). Ibn al-‘Arabī’s position on the *Kaaba* is that it is the “heart of being … a [t]hrone belonging to the heart as a bounded body” (Ibn al-‘Arabī, 2019, p. 153). He suggests that if we move away from being ‘self-centred’ to ‘heart-centred,’ we are open to witnessing a space around us towards one of remembrance. In this way, the interior of every Muslim’s heart is considered a reflection of the edifice described as the *heart-Kaaba* relationship (Hirtenstein, 2010). Ibn al-‘Arabī identifies there are seven gifts for performing *tawaf* of the *Kaaba*. These are: living, seeing, knowing, hearing, speaking, desiring and powering (Ibn al-‘Arabī, 2019). I argue that if one circumambulates one’s heart while drawing, these gifts are also received. In regard to circumambulation, Ibn al-‘Arabī (2019) states:

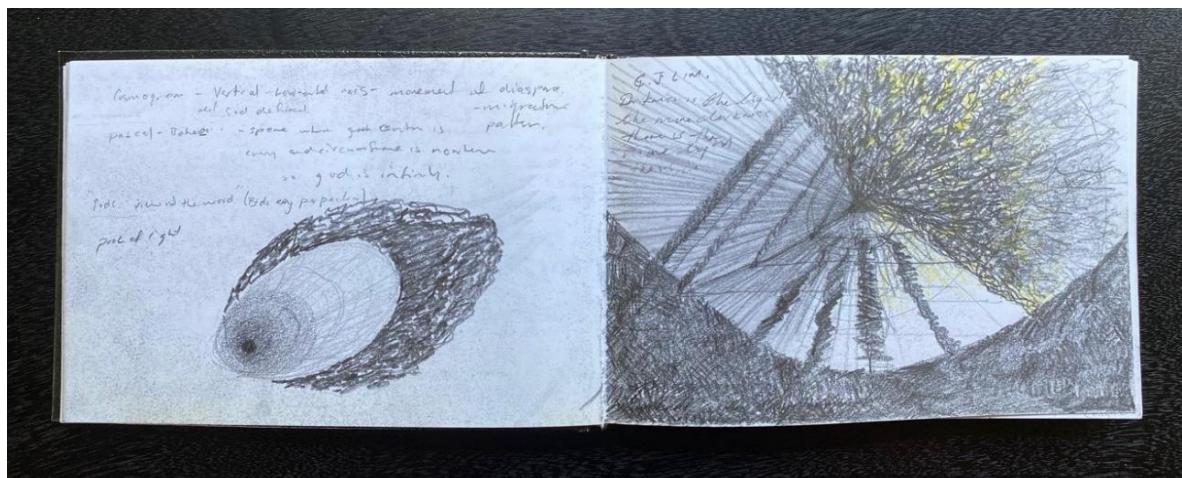
This returning is just as the arm of the draftsman’s compass returns, during the opening of the circle, after reaching the end of the circle’s being, to the beginning point. Thus the last matter is connected to the first, and its endlessness curves with kindness into its timelessness, and there is nothing but ‘*being*’ (p. 142).

Cosmograms

On March 15, 2019, the Al-Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch were the sites of the first terrorist attack on Muslim people in New Zealand, where fifty-one martyrs (*shuhada*) were killed, and forty people were wounded. The hearts and minds of New Zealanders quickly turned to Christchurch, which became the place of collective grieving – it became the centre for people to connect with Islam and its Muslim community in New Zealand. I made several visits to Christchurch, as a mourner and as an invited participant in the Royal Commission’s inquiry into the attack. With each trip, I had time to reflect, heal, deepen my experience, and ponder Ibn al-‘Arabī’s philosophy of ‘being.’ Compelled to confront the tragedy in Christchurch, and tapping into Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphysics, I used the practice of drawing as a methodology to *draw-out* an autoethnographic response as a form of *tahqīq* (witnessing and attestation) to face the image of trauma and mourning and create a spatial cosmopoiesis.

Sketching provided the basis for a beginning and a conviction to the project with no sign of an exit strategy. I consider the sketch to be a pivotal type of drawing because it quickly maps the “synthesis of theme and motif” (Purini, 2017, p. 63) of a project. The sketchbook (Figure 2) is my immediate field notebook that contains collections of spontaneous and unpredictable traces, and an archive that is a “magic encyclopaedia” (Taussig, 2011, p. 47). As a portable companion, it records fleeting marks, notes and raw feelings. Hence, *drawing-out* from one’s experience is not just seeing – it is a witnessing that Taussig (2011) states is “holy writ: mysterious, complicated, powerful and necessary” (p. xii). This suggests that drawing as a mode of witnessing goes beyond what we see on the surface to a deeper level of what we know and believe. In this way, drawing becomes an archival turning that renders ontological turns and is distinct from creating a passive archive. Opening it, flicking between its pages, I travel back and forward in time, exposing and concealing, returning to moments that chart my process to circumambulate my thoughts and understanding. Therefore, the drawing archive is always open to ongoing work, mourning and interpretation.

Figure 2
Sketch Book.



According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, the cosmos is made up of three modalities or “worlds of being” (Ibn al-‘Arabī, 1911, p. 198). He explains the first world is our corporeal *dunyā*, then when we die, we are transmuted into the intermediate world of the *barzakh*, and from there we are further transmuted into the afterworld of *akhira* (Chittick, 1997) (Figure 3). Spatially, traces of each world manifest within the next, whether spatially confined or unbounded, with all forms, spirits and bodies are in perpetual movement between the three realms.

Figure 3 (

Three Worlds of Being. (Photograph by Samuel Hartnett, 2022. Reprinted with permission).



Developed from the preparatory studies in sketching, a series of cosmogram drawings were then carefully redefined and became unbounded into more extensive drawings on permatrace drafting film, laser etching on acrylic sheets, screen printing and intaglio prints on handmade wasli paper. As I drew, a transmutation occurred, new thoughts, new forms and new spaces arose. There was no signification of intent, nothing fixed or finite, but there was a conviction to light and darkness, and a willingness to examine the *worlds of being*. If we consider French philosopher Henry Corbin's idea of *presence* as the locus of spatial orientation (Corbin, 1994, p. 1), then space and time are fundamentally manifested when significant events are encountered and witnessed. Therefore, the drawings are more than just art, they are a "tracing of metaphysics of presence" (Frascari, 2007, p. 6) essential to

the production of an architectural image of being and belonging. A drawing not only has value in its aesthetic attributes, but also through its ability in the disclosure of ethics, time and space, and event. In this sense, a drawing operates as a projection that ontologically "illuminates the space of culture, of our individual and collective existence" (Pérez-Gómez, 2007, p. 13). In these cosmogram drawings, the line is one of delineating form, and the effects of light and shadow through various methods of mark-making illuminate the surface, memory, and event, articulating a method of *spatial exposition*, that "exhibit[s] the contents of the concept of space" (Refiti, 2013, p. 28). As a *spatial exposition*, the drawings trace an outline of a new cosmological mapping of 'ālam al-mithāl (a world of images) that produces a *makān* calling for viewers not just to gaze at the image itself, but also to look beyond the surface – beyond the material to the immaterial.

Wujūd fi Ālam al-Mithāl

The exhibition, *Wujūd fi Ālam al-Mithāl* (*Being in a World of Images*), held at Auckland University of Technology's St Paul St Gallery, presented a series of cosmogram drawings/prints that were mounted on the walls of the gallery and installed in rotating devices titled *Re-turning Stations* (Figure 4). The space, a dark cosmos, conveys distance, and extension, voided by black walls at each end of the gallery. The prints, drawings and poems, were carefully lit and evenly spaced along the gallery's rectilinear periphery, emphasising dispersal, separation, and joining. This created an edge condition to traverse along and dwell between the work, signifying that each piece is a *makān* within a *makān*, spaces of being within a space of being. The promotion of a haptic interaction between the human body and the *Re-turning Stations* (rotating devices) set up an anthropological encounter. Personal reflections expressed in poems were also discretely engraved on each base of the *Re-turning Station* (Figure 5). They demonstrate how something may be unveiled or revealed for different visitors – if one sees them, then one is expected to bend down or kneel to read them. If they are not noticed or read, they still exist. The inscriptions also offer a tactile invitation to touch the words engraved on the bases, as though one is touching braille; although unreadable from a distance, tracing over with fingertips helps with the reading and translation of their meanings.

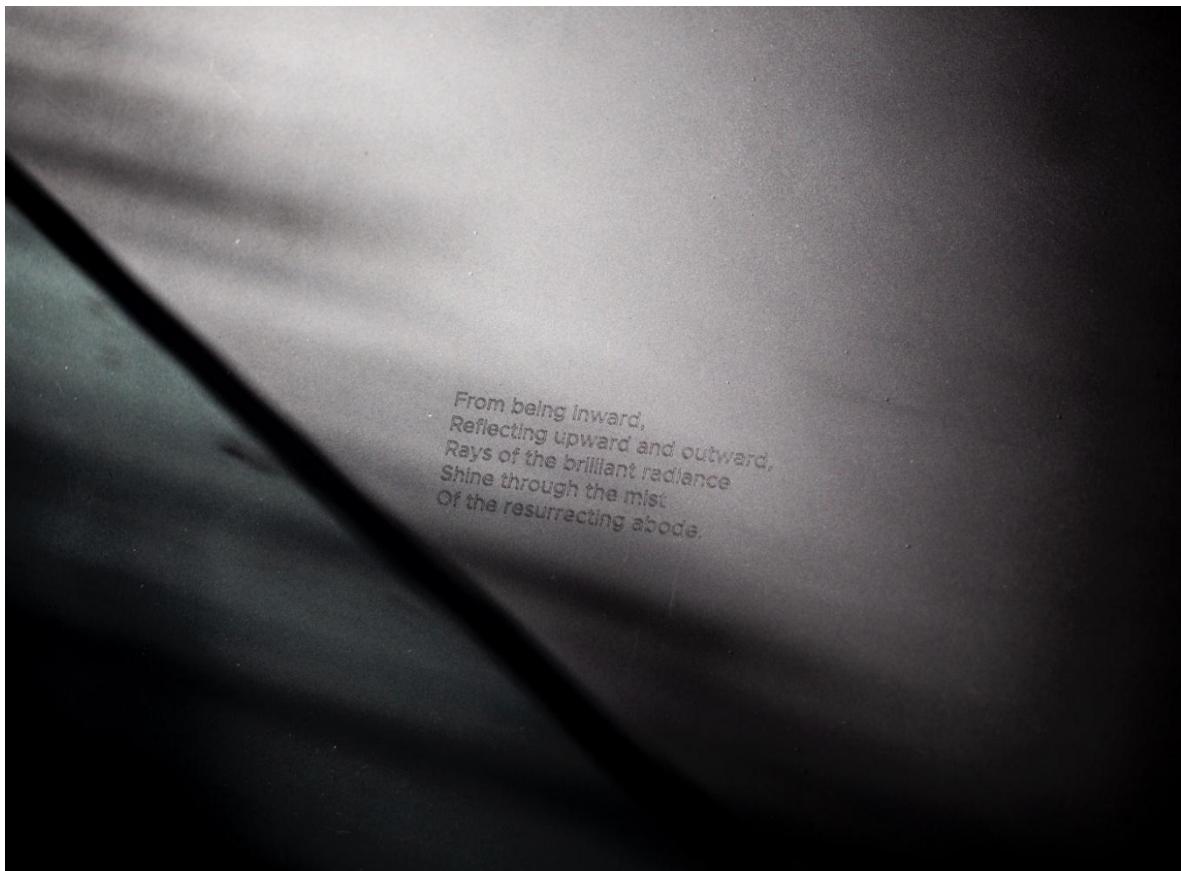
Figure 4

Re-turning Stations. (Photograph by Samuel Hartnett, 2022. Reprinted with permission).



Figure 5

Returning Station Poem. (Poem engraved on the base of a Re-turning Station).



Conclusion

At their core, I have discovered that my drawings are made up of love and loss, presence and absence, and life and death. Through a methodology of drawing as witnessing and attestation, my reality is grounded. My analysis has revealed that drawing serves to diagram language, culture, memory, and emotions and manifests a space that incorporates both the event and the divine. In conclusion, I have discovered that cosmogram drawings offer a way to analyse, depict and manifest a cosmopoiesis. Therefore, drawing has become a way to perform the ritual of circumambulating the heart to find my *authentic being* and my exhibition *Wujūd fi Ālam al-Mithāl* invited an audience to encounter a *space of being* (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Cosmopoiesis. (Photograph by Samuel Hartnett, 2022. Reprinted with permission).



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