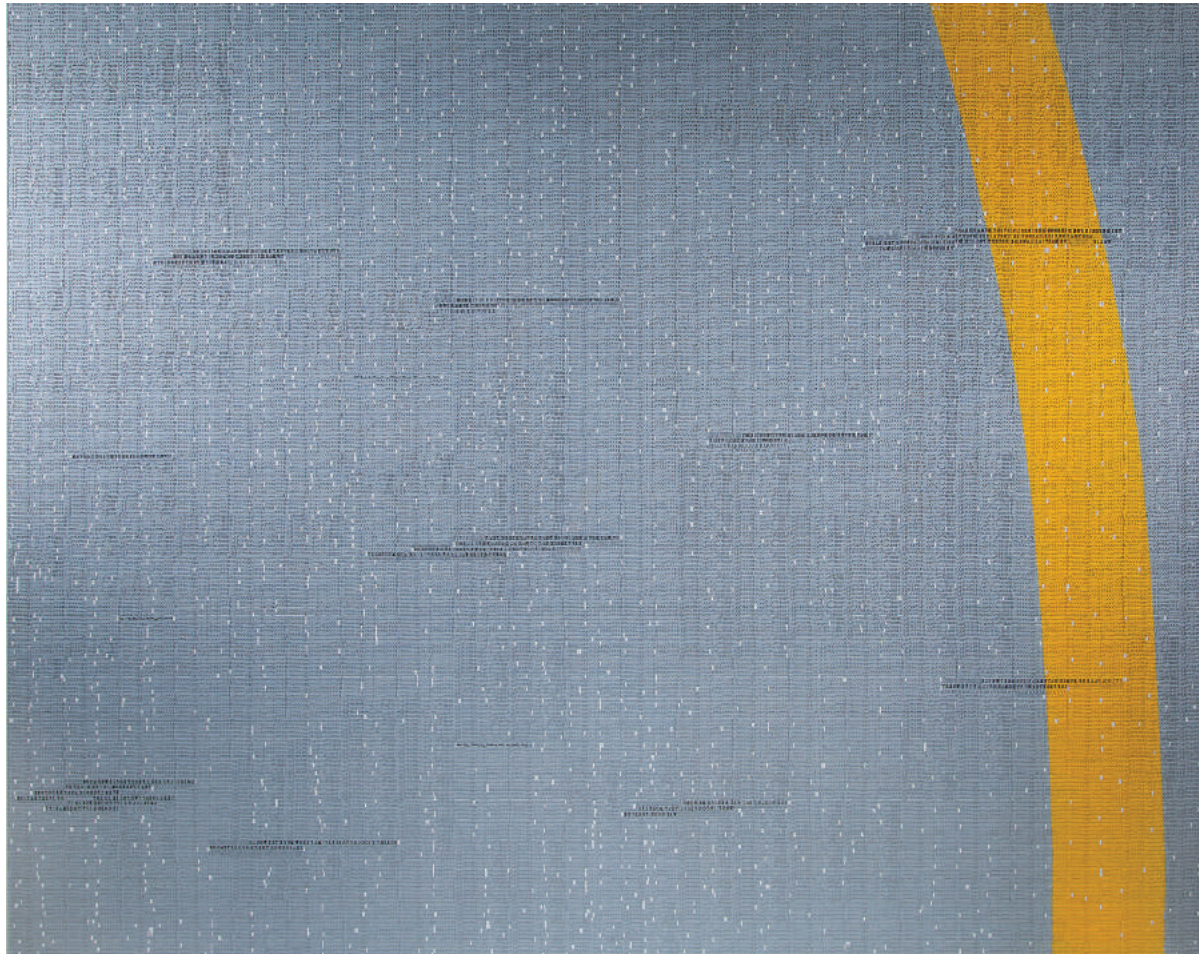




Linda Komaroff with Sandra Williams || Los Angeles County Museum of Art







ABDULNASSER GHAREM || PAUSE

Artists often play the role of a social conscience by visualizing episodes of violence and upheaval, helping us to frame and appreciate our own reactions. Picasso's painting *Guernica*, for example, is a masterful response to the aerial bombing of the Basque town in 1937, while the lesser-known but equally powerful work by London-based Iraqi artist Dia Azzawi *Massacre at Sabra and Shatila* depicts the slaughter of Palestinian refugees in southern Beirut in 1982. Both use abstraction to represent horrifically gruesome events and each, through the distance of time and space, has become as much an artistic icon as a portrayal of a human tragedy.

It is perhaps too soon to gauge how or which works of art may one day embody the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001, but already there is one potent visionary, Abdalnasser Ghareem, who has created a remarkable body of work born in the aftermath of this infamous date. That he is a Muslim, an Arab, and a lieutenant colonel in the Saudi Arabian army will likely provide added resonance for an American audience, while serving to remind us that terrorism is experienced worldwide. For Ghareem, like most of us, seeing the World Trade Center destroyed on television was one of those terrible moments that seems to make the earth stand still or pause; he learned soon after that two of the hijackers were former classmates.

Ghareem has deeply absorbed this notion of pause into his work as an occasion to examine certain universal dichotomies that can lead us to choose our own life's path. More literally, he has used the digital symbol for pause—a pair of solid rectangles—as a visual metaphor for the Twin Towers. In his monumental and eponymous work *Pause*, two silvery rectangles seem like ghostly after-images as we pause to blink our eyes in disbelief. On a related



theme and scale, he uses the image of a jetliner, viewed head-on as if about to take off or land, and embeds it within typical Islamic architectural decoration, including an inscription of the Muslim profession of faith, which surrounds and covers the plane's gleaming fuselage. These are powerful and provocative works that only gradually reveal their possible meanings.

Ghareem's vocational path embraces the polarities of artist and soldier; however, his enrollment in the national military academy had more to do with opportunity than inclination. Although Ghareem has had no formal art training, as a commissioned officer he found time to study on his own—learning about twentieth-century art through the internet—and to form a cooperative venture with other artists. In 2003, the project became the art collective Edge of Arabia. Cofounded by Ghareem, the organization was intended to help support contemporary Saudi artists reach an international audience. It succeeded beyond its founders' expectations, launching the careers of a pioneer generation that has introduced a local arts community to the global discourse. Ghareem is at the forefront of this movement, creating art in a range of mediums and techniques largely outside the traditions of painting, drawing, photography, and sculpture.

Part of Ghareem's appeal has to do with his idiosyncratic and imaginative combination of materials, which builds upon twentieth-century masters such as Robert Rauschenberg. Like Rauschenberg, he integrates the printed word into his art, but by using the print mechanism itself in the form of tiny rubber stamps of Arabic and English letters. These rubber letters function like a canvas or paper ground, onto which he prints digitally manipulated images, or with the addition of color they become the painted surface; he calls



these “stamp paintings.” Most of the stamp letters are randomly placed; however, some spell out phrases, in reverse writing, almost like coded messages that lend further insight into the artwork within which they are fixed. The stamp appears elsewhere in his work in the form of a supersized rubber stamp with a carved wood handle, comparable in scale and spirit to Claes Oldenburg’s sculptures of everyday items. Gharem’s stamp has the word *moujaz* (“permitted”) in the center surrounded by the phrase “In accordance with sharia law” in English and Arabic, referencing the religious restrictions placed on Saudi banks, which must align with the principles of Islamic law and may not pay or receive interest. The giant stamp seems here, in a hyperbolic manner, to certify adherence to this rule.

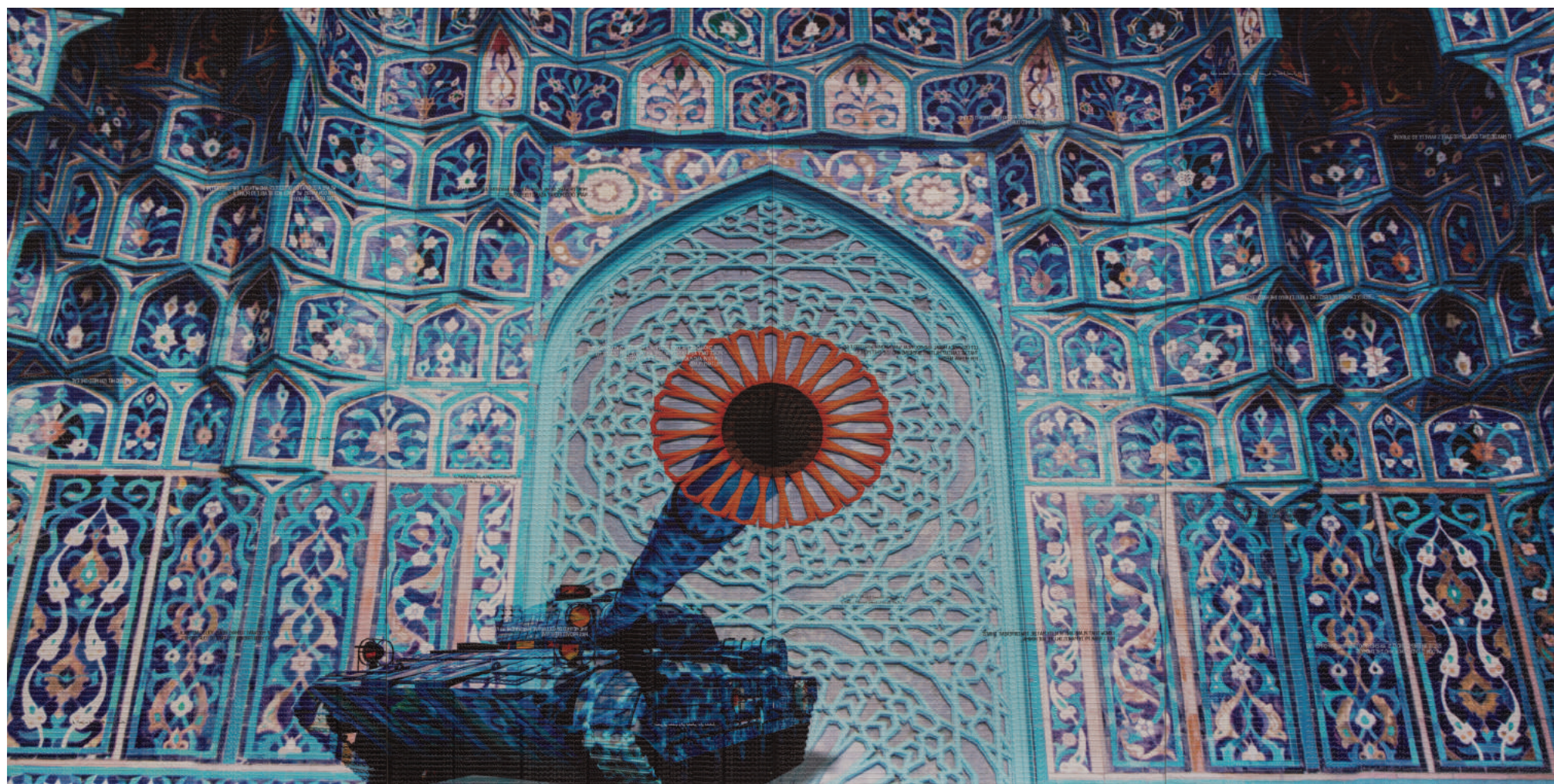
The media and platforms for Gharem’s art clearly borrow from the mainstreams of modern art, but the narratives and images are drawn from his everyday world, while many of his motifs—including geometric designs and floral arabesques—belong to the canon of Islamic art. This mixing of artistic traditions and visual metaphors is especially obvious in his most recent work, the sculpture *Hemisphere*. Here, Gharem merges a mosque dome and a warrior’s helmet into a single sculptural form, meant to allude to the dualism inherent in most faiths—a message of peace as opposed to the types of sectarian concerns that sometimes lead to violence. His art also includes performance-based elements, captured in photographs and video. For example, his piece *Siraat* or *The Path* is an evocative remembrance of a group of villagers who perished in a flood and a reminder of how we each choose our own path. In the video version, the word *siraat*, which means both a literal path and a spiritual one, is spray-painted over and over again on a now-deserted road leading to the collapsed bridge where the flood victims, having chosen the apparent safety of higher ground, lost their lives.



Ghareem's path as an artist, and subsequent international recognition, might have been otherwise, despite his obvious talent, without the kind of intellectual openness, artistic freedom, and transcultural receptivity that have increasingly defined a global society. Writing from the vantage point of early 2017, it is hard to predict the future of this type of globalism, here used to describe a world closely linked through vast intercontinental networks both electronic and human. Issues of globalism, as reflected in visual culture, have already begun to engage those with an interest in contemporary art, forcing them to look beyond the West to a greater world in which connectivity is measured not in gigabytes but by creative endeavor. Abdunasser Ghareem and the younger generation of Saudi artists he is helping to train at Ghareem Studio in Riyadh will hopefully continue to redirect and expand that gaze.

Linda Komaroff, curator and department head, Art of the Middle East





## Camouflage

2017

Digital print and lacquer paint on rubber  
stamps on aluminum

94.5 x 189 in. (240 x 480 cm), in four parts

Courtesy of the artist

Ghareem frequently uses Islamic architectural settings in his work. Here he employs an Iranian mosque as the backdrop for this monumental “stamp painting,” which depicts an army tank (a common sight for Ghareem, a lieutenant colonel in the Saudi Arabian army) with a giant orange daisy protruding from its cannon. The flower and the colorful tile decoration of the mosque façade belie and even disguise the deadly nature of the armored vehicle. For the artist, this form of camouflage represents his own critique of theocracies that prey on sincere religious beliefs by promoting a message of intolerance toward adherents of other faiths. For LACMA’s audience, the combination of weapon and flower may be reminiscent of some of the antiwar imagery from the Vietnam War era; this powerful work perhaps takes on a new meaning once transplanted to American soil.

[LK]



المهمات  
الرسمية فقط



للمسلمين فقط  
Muslims Only



مكة المكرمة  
Makkah



غير المسلمين  
FOR NON MUSLIMS



EXIT ONLY



خروج فقط

## Road to Makkah

2014

Digital print and lacquer paint on rubber  
stamps on aluminum

40.6 x 120 in. (103 x 305 cm)

Private collection, Switzerland

Like many contemporary artists, Ghareem often uses mundane elements of life to form penetrating appraisals of modern society. Here he transforms a standard sign found on the road to Mecca into one of his iconic “stamp paintings,” the surface of which is composed of small stamps. As the birthplace of the Prophet Mohammad, the site of the Kaaba (the directional locus of Muslim prayer), and the endpoint of *hajj*, the annual Muslim pilgrimage, the city of Mecca is considered a holy space and is therefore off-limits to non-Muslims. This sign directs Muslims straight ahead into the city, while non-Muslims are sent to the right and those involved in official business are sent to the left. Embedded within the larger text of the sign are smaller quotes made from the stamps and therefore seen in reverse. The quotes refer to the unity, peacefulness, and sanctity of the city, perhaps included by Ghareem as a subtle critique of the practice of exclusivity. For an American audience, the sign is a shocking reminder of our own recent history and the signage that once separated people based on the color of their skin.

[SW]





## The Path (Siraat)

2012

Silkscreen on paper

51 x 70.9 in. (129.6 x 180 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Edge of Arabia

## The Path (Siraat)

2007

Single channel video, 3 minutes

Los Angeles County Museum of Art,

Purchased with funds provided by

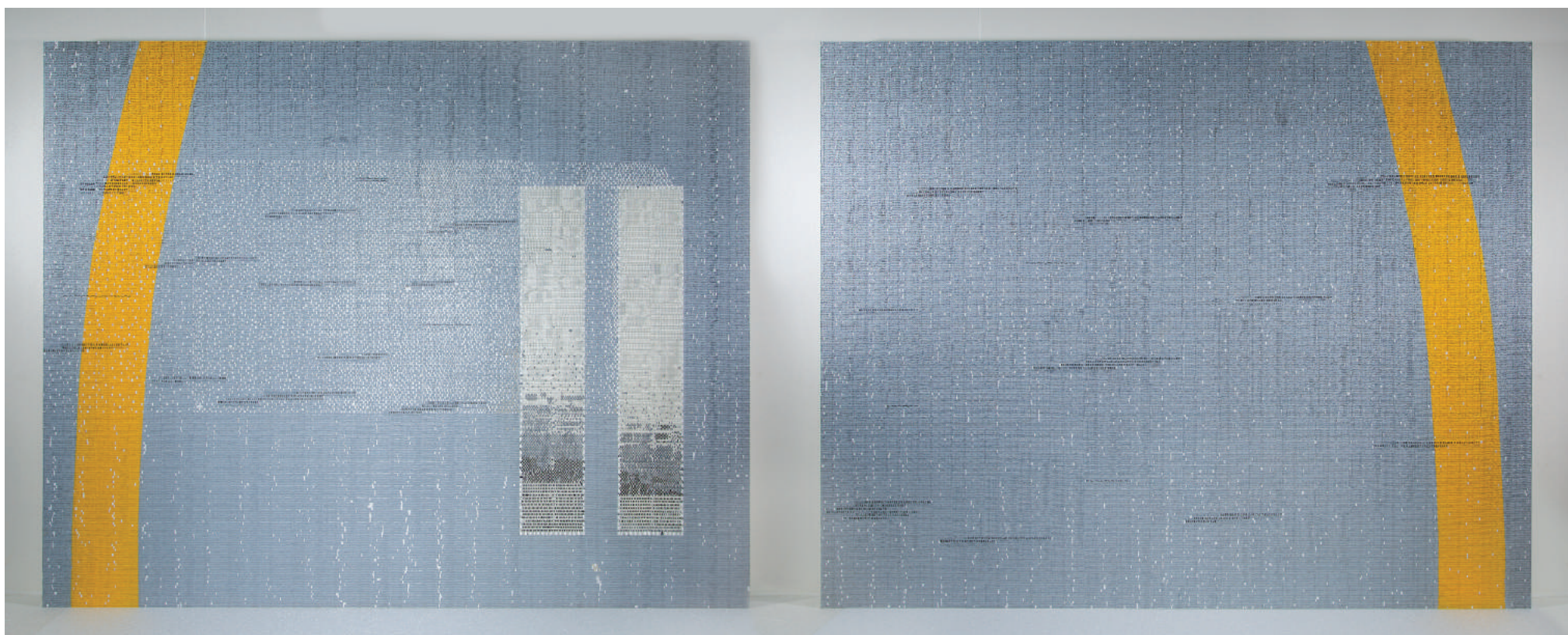
Art of the Middle East: CONTEMPORARY

M.2011.4.1

Much of Gharem's art is performance based, captured in photographs and video, and focuses on our relationship to and trust in physical structures and the natural environment. *The Path*, or *Siraat*, commemorates a tragic event that occurred in 1982, when a group of villagers took shelter from an approaching flood on a concrete bridge spanning a river in southwest Saudi Arabia, where heavy rains are often commonplace. Everyone was swept away and most were killed by the deluge. A new road was built nearby but the old one on either side of the washed away bridge remained. On the section of road leading up to the bridge, Gharem and a crew of assistants spray-painted over and over again the word *siraat*, which means both a literal path and also a spiritual one (e.g., the straight path that leads to paradise). The repetition of this single word on the roadway becomes a visual chant—a reminder of how we choose our own paths, and a remembrance of the flood victims, who, having chosen the apparent safety of higher ground, lost their lives. This notion of individual choice when it comes to life's pathways is endemic in Gharem's work.

[LK]





## Pause

2016

Lacquer paint on rubber stamps on  
aluminum

63.2 x 159.8 in. (160.5 x 401 cm)

Courtesy of the artist

Ghareem's personal reaction to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have laid the foundation for much of his artistic output; however, *Pause* is the work most closely concerned with the destruction of the World Trade Center. For Ghareem, like most of us, witnessing the collapse of the Twin Towers on television was one of those shocking moments that seems to make the earth stand still or pause. When he later found out that two of the hijackers were classmates he wondered why they had chosen that horrific path while he, who had been given the same education, elected another. This expressive "stamp painting" is Ghareem's response.

On the left panel of the diptych are two solid rectangles seemingly rendered in shades of gray; upon closer inspection it is apparent they are formed of tiny rubber letter stamps in Arabic and English and painted in black and white. The pair of rectangles signifies the digital symbol for "pause" as well as the Twin Towers, which look like ghostly after-images. An incomplete yellow arch—resembling a golden rainbow—straddles the diptych and draws our eyes back to the center. To underscore the visual connection with 9/11, Ghareem has embedded within the composition twenty-seven short quotations formed of stamps painted black and written in reverse. On the far left, just to the right of the golden arch, he offers these words from Sandy Dahl, wife of Flight 93 pilot Jason Dahl, "If we learn nothing else from this tragedy, we learn that life is short and there is no time for hate."

[LK]





## In Transit

2013

Silkscreen on paper

53.9 x 71.5 in. (137 x 181.7 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Edge of Arabia

Ghareem frequently uses elements of Islamic art and architecture in his work.

In this print, he overlays a simple image of an airplane and runway with a geometric pattern borrowed from mosaic tilework, which includes the Muslim profession of faith. Similar to his iconic “stamp paintings” but rendered as a print, a second mosaic-like layer is formed by numerous small letters, some of which form fragmented quotes, shown in reverse and in English and Arabic. The quotes are drawn from former President George W. Bush’s “War on Terror” speech, tying the enigmatic image to contemporary politics. As with many of his works, the immediacy of this artwork conceals its multiple layers of meaning.

[SW]





## The Stamp (Moujaz)

2013

Wood with embossed rubber face  
37.4 x 37.4 x 63 in. (95 x 95 x 160 cm)  
LACMA, gift of private collection,  
Switzerland  
M.2017.16a–b

## The Stamp (Moujaz)

2012–13

Silkscreen on paper  
59 x 42.7 in. (150 x 120 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist and Edge of Arabia

The stamp appears frequently in Ghareem's work, for instance the tiny rubber letters that form the ground or surface of his "stamp paintings," such as those included in this exhibition. It is rendered in other media and formats as well; here are two examples. In one, Ghareem has created a supersized rubber stamp with a carved wood handle, comparable in scale and spirit to Claes Oldenburg's sculptures of everyday items (see his *Typewriter Eraser* on lacma.org). In the other, he depicts in a silkscreen print the colorful impression of such a giant stamp.

Ghareem's stamp features the word *moujaz* ("permitted") in the center surrounded by the phrase "In accordance with sharia law" in English and Arabic and repeated in the print. *Moujaz* references the religious restrictions placed on Saudi banks, which must align with the principles of Islamic law and may not pay or receive interest. The stamp and related print seem here, hyperbolically, to certify adherence to this rule.

Ghareem conceived of the giant stamp and related impressions for his first group exhibition in London in 2008, in which his work *Siraat* (also shown here) was to appear but had to be withdrawn due to a misinterpretation of its meaning (it was initially erroneously believed to disparage Quranic text). Ghareem had two weeks to come up with a replacement. His family's furniture factory provided the craftsmanship for the wood support for the stamp, initially less ornate than this later version. Together, the stamp and related prints comment on the mechanisms of bureaucracy endemic in daily life in Saudi Arabia, but their messages, especially in the context of their first exhibition, perhaps pertain to freedom of expression.

[LK]





## Ricochet

2015

Digital print and lacquer paint on rubber stamps on aluminum

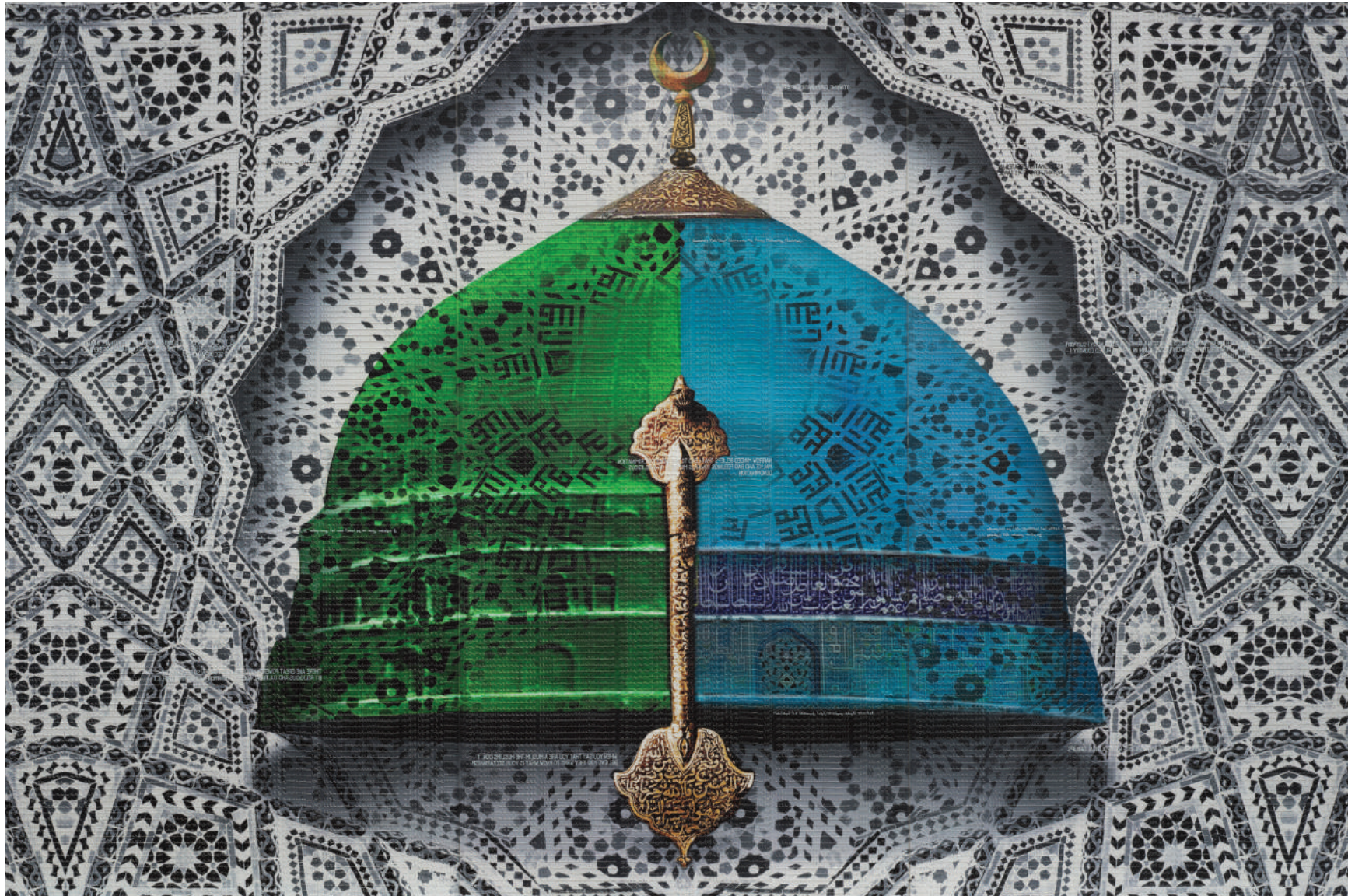
94 .9 x 142 .5 in. (241 x 362 cm), in three parts

Private collection, Switzerland

One of Gharem's "stamp paintings," in which the substrate is constructed of small letter stamps, *Ricochet* is a reflection on the ongoing war in Iraq and its consequences for the region. Describing the impetus for the work in a 2015 interview, Gharem stated, "Usually people look to the sky for inspiration but now they look up and see a bomber coming towards them." He captures this sentiment by transforming a vault covered with muqarnas, a stalactite-like decoration typical of Islamic architecture, into a fighter plane laden with missiles that descends towards the viewer. Concealed among the stamps that make up the surface of the work are several quotes taken from a magazine article about the war, all of which are fragmentary and as open-ended as the future of the region.

[SW]





## Hemisphere

2017

Digital print and lacquer paint on rubber  
stamps on aluminum

94 .9 x 142 .5 in. (241 x 362 cm), in three  
parts

Courtesy of the artist

This monumental “stamp painting” is related but not identical to the sculptural dome that shares the same name. In this instance, the two halves forming the cupola are based on architectural elements that embody the two main sects of Islam: Sunni and Shia. The left half, symbolizing Sunni Islam, is, as in the sculpture, modeled on the green dome of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, Saudi Arabia; the right side, representing Shia Islam, depicts an Iranian dome, fashioned after the seventeenth-century Shah Mosque in Isfahan. Though rendered in different colors, the two halves are united by the same geometricized design that includes a repetitive inscription of the Muslim profession of faith, while the conjoined dome is framed by the sort of pattern distinctive to Islamic architectural decoration.

[LK]





## Hemisphere

2017

Polyurethane with sand-cast bronze  
and aluminum inlay

70.5 x 118.1 in. (179 x 300 cm)

Courtesy of the artist

Ghareem has produced other dome sculptures, but this work, his most recent version, presents an amalgam of two distinct forms to create the cupola: a mosque dome and a late Islamic-style warrior's helmet. The title of the work is intended to suggest two halves that form a whole, as in the human brain with its left and right hemispheres, the former governing logic and the latter creativity. In the sculpture, the right half is based on the distinctive green dome of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, Saudi Arabia, which is the second holiest site in Islam, after the Kaaba in Mecca. Expanded many times over, the mosque's dome was constructed in the early nineteenth century. The left side of the sculpture is patterned on an Iranian helmet inscribed with verses from the Qur'an, dating to the eighteenth or nineteenth century, and probably intended for ceremonial and parade wear rather than for actual battle. The two halves of the dome are separated by an appropriately enlarged and inscribed nasal piece—the projecting bar on a helmet covering the nose and protecting the center of the face. The comingling of the dome and the helmet in a single sculpture is meant to allude to the dichotomy inherent in most faiths—a message of peace and supplication versus the types of political and sectarian concerns that sometimes lead to violence.

[LK]



This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture. The organizers are grateful for the special collaboration of Gharem Studio.

All exhibitions at LACMA are underwritten by the LACMA Exhibition Fund. Major annual support is provided by Kitzia and Richard Goodman, with generous annual funding from the Judy and Bernard Briskin Family Foundation, Louise and Brad Edgerton, Edgerton Foundation, Emily and Teddy Greenspan, Jenna and Jason Grosfeld, The Jerry and Kathleen Grundhofer Foundation, Taslimi Foundation, and Lenore and Richard Wayne.

Cover: *Camouflage*, 2017  
First spread: *Pause*, 2016

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