

Art in America

Baseera Khan

NEW YORK,
at Participant Inc.

by Jane Ursula Harris

Baseera Khan's first solo exhibition in New York, "iamuslima," was titled after a term, "Muslima," that she had Nike stitch on a pair of sneakers to protest the company's refusal to allow the word "Islam" or "Muslim" on its customizable sneaker models. While Nike recently removed those words from its banned list of "content construed to incite violence," the New York-based artist's positioning of the sneakers at the exhibition's entrance suggested their ongoing critical relevance—particularly in the wake of Trump's travel ban targeting Muslim-majority countries. Invoking as well Khan's self-identification as a "queer femme Muslim," the shoes were a perfect introduction to the intersectional and autobiographical themes explored throughout the show.

The sneakers, placed on clear acrylic shelving, were adjacent to three "Psychedelic Prayer Rugs" (all works 2017). Made in collaboration with Kashmiri artisans, the rugs have brightly colored designs combining personal symbols and markings meaningful to the artist—a pink triangle, an excerpt from an Arabic poem, the Purple Heart medal—with those traditional to Islam, such as the lunar calendar and the star and crescent. Viewers were encouraged to take their shoes off and interact with the rugs, meditating on their political and poetic allusions or performing the traditional salat, the daily prayers that constitute one of the five pillars of Islam, the others being faith, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca.



Baseera Khan:
Oneness (believe in monotheism), 2017,
screen print, 59 by
50 inches; at
Participant Inc.

Khan reenacted the five pillars in a series of large-scale monotone screen prints. Based on photo-collages, the prints adapt and personalize the pillars' foundational principles through performative self-portraits. In *Oneness (belief in monotheism)*, for example, which corresponds to faith, Khan layers photos of herself in profile such that she appears as a goddesslike figure with multiple legs and faces. The image suggests a multitude of identities coalesced into one—a vision of oneness that is feminized and collective.

In four of the five prints, Khan wears one of her “Acoustic Sound Blankets,” a group of black textile sculptures that were also on view. They consist of sound-dampening material cut with head-size holes. The margins of the holes are embroidered with elaborate gold patterns passed down through generations of women in the Khan family. In the prints, the blankets abstract and obscure her body, their ghostly forms recalling, alternately, hijabs, body bags, robes, and moving blankets. As sculptures, they exert a physical presence that is weighty and funereal. Huddled together against a wall, they seem to protect secrets carried within. In the past, the artist has employed them for intimate discussions (often sexual), inviting people to join her inside one of the muffling cloaks.

Khan's performances are not always private or hidden. In a public performance on opening night, she activated the exhibition's dominant installation, *Braidrage*, a rock-climbing wall made from bits of cast body parts. Swinging from a giant black braid suspended from the ceiling, she climbed on the resin body fragments, most of which were filled with hair and gold chains and tinted in shades of brown or black to conjure a vast spectrum of skin tones. The symbolism of hair and gold reflects her Indian heritage, and in the context of the performance referred to the struggle and ascent of her immigrant family members who came to the States before she was born.

Khan's interpretive explorations of Muslim identity are complex, offering a recuperative, adaptive model at odds with the reductive stereotypes Islamophobia breeds. At a time when many—feminists and liberals alike—still question whether Muslim women can be empowered by their faith and culture, the works in “iamuslima” were testament that they can.

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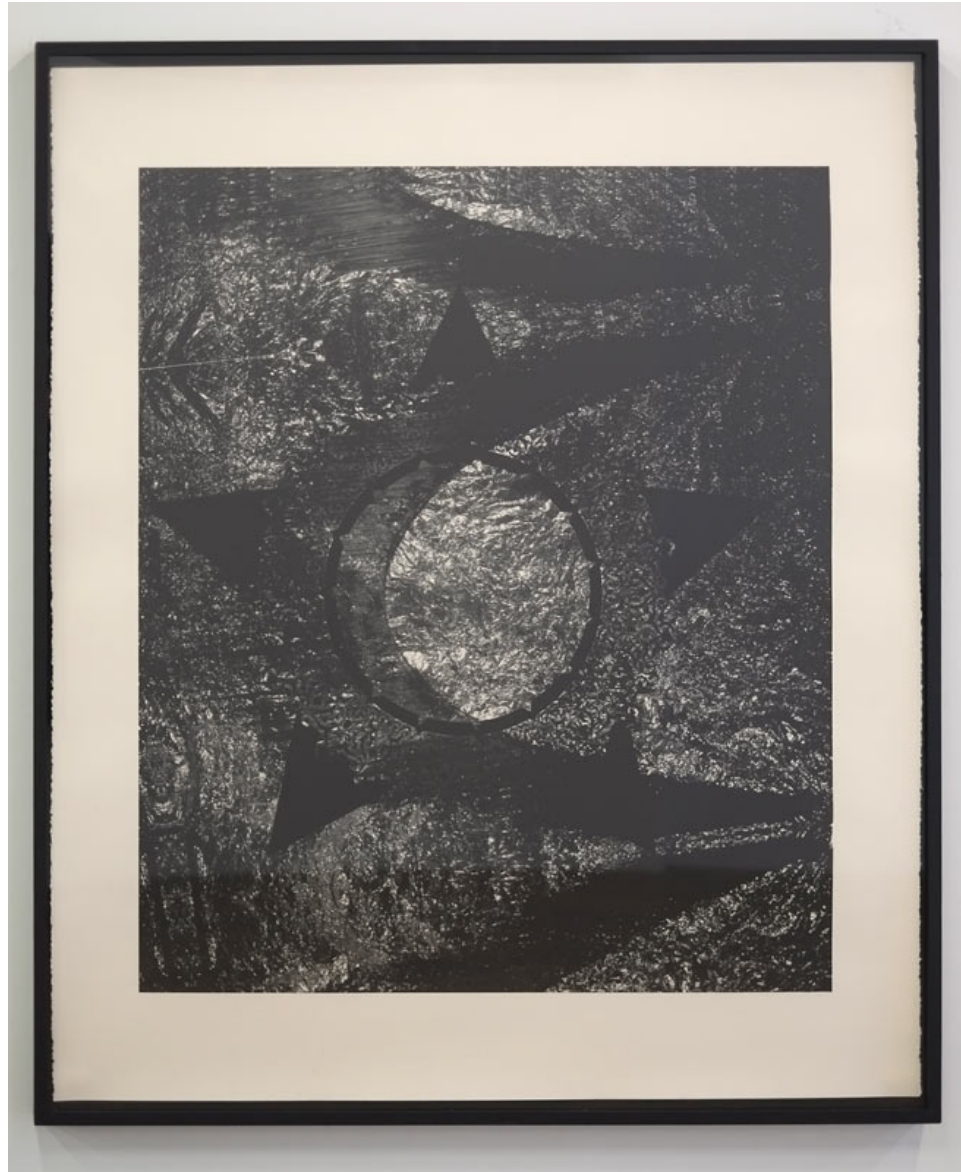
Baseera Khan's *iamuslima* by Terence Trouillot

Exploring Muslim femininity through the politics of love



Baseera Khan. *iamuslima*, 2017, NikeiD-customized Air Force One mid-top shoes.
All images courtesy of Participant, Inc, New York. Photo by Andrew Bourne.

At a time when draconian measures are being implemented to deny Muslims entrance into the US and white mansplaining increasingly has the audacity to criticize and define the cultural identity of Muslim women (e.g., Bill Maher, who on his HBO show *Real Time*, supported the meme “A woman should be... whatever the fuck she wants,” then lambasted those who dress in burqas), it’s no wonder that Muslimas feel unfairly portrayed and scrutinized by conservatives and liberals alike. As author and activist Samila Ali solemnly points out, “the only women it seems permissible to judge and even ridicule today are Muslim women.”



Fasting (a 30-day fast by the lunar calendar), 2017, monotone screen-print on paper.
Photo by Andrew Bourne.

Baseera Khan's *iamuslima* at Participant Inc., her first solo exhibition in New York City, presents work that, at least in part, challenges such sardonic views in an effort to excite, complicate, and open dialogue about Muslim femininity and by extension Islam. The show features five large screen prints, each representing the artist's interpretation of the Pillars of Islam; silk prayer rugs designed by the artist and handcrafted in Kashmir, India; a fifteen-foot-long braid of hair suspended from the ceiling; a climbing wall; embroidered sound-dampening blankets; and a display case of family photographs, letters, jewelry, and other archival materials.

At the entrance of the gallery sit stacks of Plexiglas boxes, each with a pointed arch-shaped opening at either side, and together serving as bookshelf and shoe rack. On display is a modest selection of books, most notably two copies of Jean Genet's *Prisoner of Love*—one old and filled the artist's marginalia, the other brand new. This book, a memoir of Genet's experience living in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan in the 1970s, sets the stage for Khan's own observations on love. She grapples with desire, compassion, obsession, and admiration. A piece that might encapsulate this idea of a multivalent love is *Acoustic Sound Blankets* (2017), a collection of large, black shrouds reminiscent of the burqa but here ostensibly used to protect one from stun grenades at violent protests, or alternately just big enough to invite multiple people to stay warm or safe in the company of others.



Acoustic Sound Blankets, 2017, silk, felt, industrial sound insulation, and embroidery.
Photo by Maxim Ryazansky.

The exhibition's title comes from *iamuslima* (2017), an edition of customized Nike Air Force One sneakers designed by the artist. The words "Muslim" or "Muslima" were not allowed to be stitched on the sneaker as they did not fit the guidelines of NikeiD customization features. While the misspelling of "iamuslima" was permissible—a loophole the artist came across—the discriminatory practices of Nike connote a certain Islamophobia suffused through Western capitalism. NikeiD has since lifted its own ban and "Muslima" is now allowed, but what's

most telling about this anecdote is how the artist relates to object fetishism, fashion, and popular culture—that is, with a love for the superficial that then becomes subject matter to investigate notions of identity as a Muslim Indian American woman.



Lunar Countdown, 2017, silk rug designed by the artist and handcrafted in Kashmir, India.
Photo by Peter Kaspar.

At the opening, the artist, dressed in all black, kneels on the floor methodically rubbing her feet, hands, face, long braided hair, and body with dusty black chalk. Surrounded by a swarm of viewers, she performs her ritual ablution or *wuḍū'*, the ceremonial act in Islam of washing different parts of the body before prayer. This purifying gesture, here, almost irreverently—or with tongue in cheek—suggests the artist is paradoxically sullyng herself, an antithetical if not heretical move. However, she dutifully preserves the sanctimony of her action (at least theoretically), knowing all too well that, in the absence of water, ablution can be performed with either sand or dust.

Notwithstanding the wry sensibility her inaugural performance proposes, the seriousness of the deed is all the more palpable given the artist's slow and meticulous motions. Following her ablution, she moves through the crowd of onlookers, leaving a trail of black footprints behind her, to reach a fifteen-foot climbing wall at the back of the room. There she climbs the

partition with the help of ropes that dangle from the ceiling. As she attempts to scale this massive object titled *Braidrage* (2017), finding her footing or gripping onto several translucent resin holds that are cast from different parts of her body—each filled with a combination of hair, gold chains, and gold thermal blankets—the artist swings precariously back and forth, marking the white wall with black soot.

Using secular and religious motifs, Khan incorporates her body in ways that are both playful and introspective. What looks like an attempt to bridge her Muslim heritage and a Western conception/obsession with fitness and the body, she effaces what the world seems to perceive as irreconcilable dichotomies: sexuality and piety, secularism and religion, materialism and altruism. Moreover, Khan’s work seems to both embrace and criticize these polarities.



99 Holds (detail), 2017, one of ninety-nine unique resin cast body parts embedded with chains, hair, and hypothermia blankets. Photo by Andrew Bourne.

While Khan’s approach to love—that of the body, of tradition, of family—may verge on solipsism, I can’t fault it as means for self-exploration—an attempt to keep the complexities of her own identity from being flattened while celebrating opposing signifiers of her selfhood. In Michael Hardt’s essay “Procedures of Love,” part of *DOCUMENTA* (13) Notebook

Series *100 Thoughts/ 100 Notes* (2012), he explicates how love “can be the central, constitutive mode and motor of politics.” Warning that this love is not based on “the process of unification in which differences are erased,” but rather—in referring to works by Spinoza, Deleuze, Proust, and Genet—love’s aim is to investigate multiplicities, both in harmony and in conflict, among all of us. It’s not without deference that Khan welcomes love in this way—positively embracing difference and conflict. And as sappy as it may sound, as a form of agonism, her practice seems noteworthy.

Baseera Khan’s [iamuslima](#) is on view at Participant Inc., New York, until April 9, 2017.

Terence Trouillot is an art writer, editor, and BOMB’s Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Oral Histories.

ARTFCITY

Climbing Generations Of Trauma And Muslim Heritage: Baseera Khan's "iamuslima" at Participant Inc.

by Emily Colucci on March 28, 2017



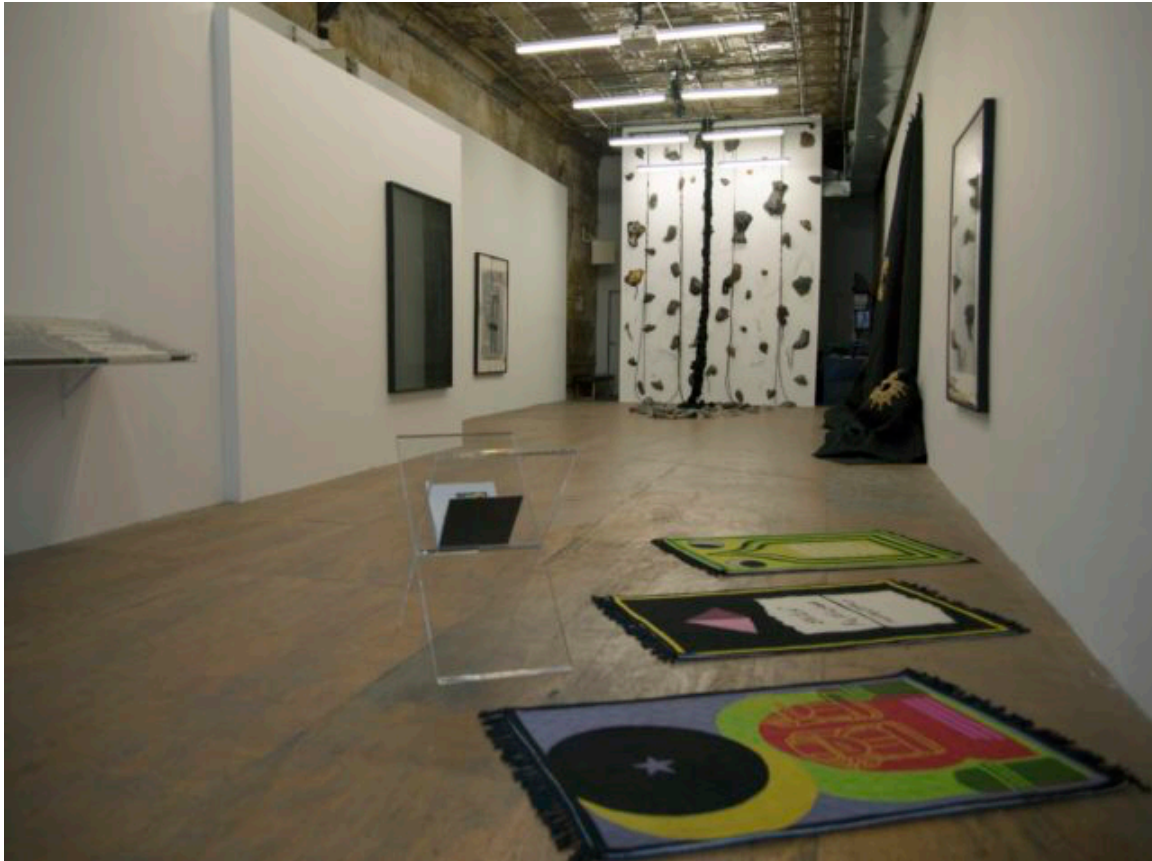
Baseera Khan, *iamuslima*, Nike ID Tag customized Nike Air Force One Mid-top shoes (Courtesy the artist)

Baseera Khan: *iamuslima*
Participant Inc.
253 East Houston Street, New York, NY
On view until April 2, 2017

The personal is political is one of the longest enduring cliché's in contemporary art. But, sometimes, an artist can dust off this tiresome trope to more effectively shed light on a critical issue with their own life and cultural heritage than with cold, hard facts.

The latest of these exhibitions is Baseera Khan's *iamuslima* at Participant Inc. The show does more than just counter our current environment of Muslim bans and government-sanctioned discrimination. Instead, the artist takes aim at its historical legacy by referencing her and her family's experiences.

And this could explain why the show felt much more successful than others launched in response to Trump's Executive Orders. Unlike MoMA's fifth floor rehanging, it doesn't just drag out disparate paintings by Muslim artists—inadvertently raising questions about why they were in storage for decades. Here, Khan presents a visceral, personal depiction of the tenuous place of Muslim women in Western culture.



Installation view of Baseera Khan's "iamuslima" at Participant Inc. (Courtesy the artist)

Overall, Khan's white-walled exhibition is sparsely hung, with works scattered around the space. With its central climbing wall and bookshelf of suggested reading material, it looks like a playground for art-goers. However, what the show lacks in organizational density, it makes up for in layers of Islamic symbolism. This includes a series of colorful prayer rugs facing northeast and five large-scale black-and-white prints based on Khan's interpretation of the Five Pillars of Islam (here: prayer, pilgrimage, oneness, zakat (charity) and fasting).

This gallery-wide immersion into Islamic visual culture immediately confronts viewers with Muslims' fragile position in Western society. The first thing viewers see, after walking through the doors, is a pair of black Nike Air Force One sneakers, placed on a set of shelves containing books by Frantz Fanon, Jean Genet and others on post-colonialism, race and migration. The shoes are emblazoned with the word "Muslima" in gold. This misspelling isn't a mistake. Instead, it's a forced rearrangement of the word Muslim in order to be approved by Nike's customizing NikeiD program (unsurprisingly, other religious terms were allowed). Khan wasn't the only person to discover this—Nike was sued (and lost) over their rejection of "Muslim."

While the shoes present an eye roll-inducing example of the pervasive fear of Islam, Khan's critique comes into focus when she engages with the generations of Muslim bodies that came before her. This can be seen in the monumental installation *Braidrage*. Khan transforms the central wall in the gallery into a climbing wall, but instead of the rock-like steps in a gym, she fashioned steps from fractured cast resin body parts. Torsos, feet, ankles, elbows and knees, in different shades of brown are arranged from the floor up, hanging at various levels on the wall. The installation resembles a wave of dismembered or blown-up bodies. Gold chains weave through the limbs like veins and shiny metallic warming blankets add a glittering glow. It's hard not to look at the installation without thinking of drone strikes or terrorist attacks.

But beyond the potential violence, understanding *Braidrage* as an active climbing wall deepens her statement. An enormous braid hangs in the middle of the installation with smaller braids and gold chains closer to the wall, acting as a harness for climbing (Khan, in an opening performance, scaled the wall in her Nike sneakers). Rather than just a fractured body, modeled after the artist's own, the installation represents the bodies and histories of other Muslim women that Khan stands on today. It seems to indicate the trauma she, and others, must negotiate and climb.

More than just anonymous body parts, other works use imagery directly descendent from her own family to point to the ways Muslims have historically had to code language and symbols in order to shield themselves from violence. Take, for example, her collection of *Acoustic Sound Blankets*. These heavy black blankets feature a single hole embroidered with an elaborate gold pattern, which derives from imagery passed down through generations of women in Khan's family. Five blankets are draped on the walls, while six sit propped on the floor, eerily reminiscent of sitting or kneeling bodies. Resembling both a protective covering, as well as a burka, the blankets seem to reflect how practices of safety, like aesthetics, connect generations.



Baseera Khan's *Oneness and Zakat*, monotone screen-prints on Stonehenge paper (Courtesy the artist)

Granted, like her *Acoustic Sound Blankets*, some of Khan's work requires close reading of the press release for context, especially for viewers with passing knowledge of Islamic or South Asian symbolism. This is why the inclusions that are, perhaps, more obvious come across as more impactful. A good example of this is Khan's black-and-white print *Zakat*. In this work, Khan appropriates the notorious 1985 *National Geographic* cover with Steven Curry's photograph of an Afghani girl. With her piercing gaze, this photograph will be recognizable to many viewers since it still stands as the typical clichéd depiction of refugees. Khan also keeps the photograph's subtitle, which reads, "haunted eyes tell of an Afghan refugee's fears." Rather than just letting that cringe-worthy sappiness stand, Khan adds the phrase "words of whiteness," emphasizing the white gaze of the photographer (and possibly, the viewer) that perceives this Afghani girl as a traumatized victim. In the same print, Khan superimposes an image of herself in profile over the cover, combining her experience as a Muslim woman in America with the Afghani girl's.

Even more chilling than the continued objectification of Muslim women, however, are the magazine's headlines. This includes "U.S. Mexican Border: Life on the Line" and "Afghanistan's War Torn Frontier." Both are issues that still resonate today. While we sometimes like to think with the Muslim ban that we live in unique times, essentially, Khan points out, both in the print and *iamuslima* as a whole, little has changed in international politics, the perception of refugees and the experiences of Muslim women.

ARTE FUSE

Baseera Khan's *iamuslima* on view at Participant Inc.: Interview with the Artist

04/03/2017 by KATE MENARD



Installation view of *iamuslima* by Baseera Khan at Participant Inc.

In 1985, when she was very young, growing up in Denton, Texas, Baseera Khan saw a photograph of a young girl on the cover of National Geographic magazine. The girl was Sharbat Gula, a refugee fleeing war in Afghanistan who became widely known as “the Afghan girl.” Her image was captured by American photojournalist Steve McCurry at a Pakistani refugee camp, her identity unknown to him.

Baseera saw herself in this girl visually, and although both her father and mother immigrated to the United States from India, Baseera’s paternal grandfather was from Afghanistan, giving her an ethnic connection to the girl in the photograph as well.

The National Geographic cover serves as the inspiration for Khan’s screen-print entitled *Zakat* (or donation). The piece features several vertical rectangles, skewed left and right in layers, in various shades of black, white, gray, and beige. At the center is the smallest rectangle, a thin, crisp white frame that mimics National Geographic’s iconic yellow border and contains white lettering that makes up the cover’s original text. In *Zakat*, it is only these reprinted words that are clearly visible and neatly contained. Khan’s face in profile lies within the central rectangle, while her embroidery covered shoulder area spills into other frames. Enlarged photographs of family jewelry, including her father’s wedding ring, positioned on top of Khan’s head—almost like an elaborate hat or crown—lie within and beyond the central frame as well. And only very faintly can be seen a portion of the cover’s original subject, Gula’s left eye, positioned directly left of Khan’s right. The right eyes of each woman share the same point, at the direct center of the piece.

Khan's connection to "the Afghan girl" and her reworking of the National Geographic cover are integral strings in the web of family history, geopolitical commentary, and inner and outer journeys that make up Khan's first solo exhibition *iamuslima*, currently on view at Participant, Inc through April 9th.

iamuslima is a multimedia show that is structured around five 50 x 59 inch monotone screen-prints on Stonehenge paper and in identical black frames. Each print is an interpretation of one of the five pillars of Islam and titled accordingly: Zakat, Fasting, Prayer, Pilgrimage, and Oneness. With Zakat, Khan seems to indicate that she both sees and recognizes the suffering of others as she journeys with it herself.



Installation view of *iamuslima* by Baseera Khan at Participant Inc.

Across from Zakat, along the opposite wall, is a sculptural piece entitled Acoustic Sound Blankets, made up of several acoustic blankets both pinned to the wall and structured into various humanoid shapes on the ground. Khan uses these acoustic sound blankets for performance pieces, and they are featured in four of the five screenprints. Khan spoke about the significance of the blankets:

These blankets came into my life because I feel like I've always been vocally on exhibition in my family. . . . When you finish the book, the holy book, you have to recite several things in front of people and you have to have a really beautiful voice, and parents are really into that. . . . It's like a

pageantry. And so I've always had to perform and record. . . . Later on in my life, I got really interested in underground music, and that was really the only way I could kind of think through who I needed to be for myself, and it was a very private thing. I worked at Rubber Gloves Rehearsal Studios, a music venue that's still in Denton, Texas. . . . Music is a way I incorporate a lot of interests. I think through music as a language because I do feel like words fall short.



Artist Baseera Khan at Participant Inc.

Cut into each acoustic blanket is a hole that Khan refers to as the neck hole, meant to resemble the circular patterns that can be seen on the holy book. These holes are rimmed with golden embroidery based on patterns that have been passed down for generations through her mother's family to mark special occasions such as births, marriage, and death. The holes in these blankets also resemble the sound holes of acoustic guitars rimmed by intricate rosettes. That acoustic blankets are often also used when moving possessions feeds into the mobility Khan gives the blankets, including their use as protest march gear. The black blankets bring to mind a variety of

divergent and interconnected concepts, from womb-like safety to self-discovery to body veils to, on the darker end of the spectrum, Khan says that they can even be seen as body Bags.

Lying between Zakat and Acoustic Sound Blankets, by the back wall of the gallery's main space, is an installation piece entitled Braidage. The piece consists of a large braid that is 15 feet and 6 inches in length, made of synthetic and real hair, which, as Khan points out, is usually sourced from South Asia. The braid hangs from a hole in the ceiling. The end tip forms a small pile of hair on the floor below. Strewn on the floor surrounding the braid, are unique poured dyed resin body parts embedded with additional hair, Cuban chains (in gold and silver), and gold leaf made of hypothermia blankets. Khan has also attached these body parts to the back wall of the gallery, turning it into a 12 x 15 foot rock climbing wall where the Cuban chains included in the piece double as harnesses.



Installation view of *iamuslima* by Baseera Khan at Participant Inc.

On opening night, Khan included the climbing wall in a performance piece, as well as a pair of customized mid-top Nike sneakers bearing the word “MUSLIMA” on the back and “IAMUSLIMA” on the velcro strap across the front. These sneakers were so named, in part, due

to Nike’s prohibition of the use of the word “Muslim” on its products (a ban now lifted). Opening night, before climbing the wall, Khan removed the sneakers from her feet and placed them in a compartment of clear acrylic shelving that can be seen by the gallery entrance, also containing ablution items and sociological textbooks. There she rubbed black chalk on her body like performing ablution, then, barefoot, walked over to the wall and started to climb. After the climb, she returned to the shelving to put the sneakers back on her feet.

Viewed in its totality, the installation resembles both a battlefield or sea of sunken bodies and the type of obstacle course used in military training. The silver and gold colored Cuban chain link—a type of chain link often used in Men’s Jewelry and “bling” jewelry—when observed with the black and brown body parts on the floor, bring to mind concepts of bondage and exploitation, while viewed on the wall, hanging as harnesses, they appear to be re-appropriated as symbols of strength, means over a hurdle. The metallic chains may also be seen to work in tandem with the golden embroidery patterns passed down through Khan’s mother’s family, looped in with the bonds and strength of lineage. The gold colored hypothermia blankets, most often seen worn by refugees or athletes, bring to mind devastation, displacement, and greed, as well as safety and perseverance.



Installation view of *iamuslima* by Baseera Khan at Participant Inc.

Speaking about the significance of the materials used in *Braidrage*, Khan said that they:

Do relate to a system of colonization that clearly still exists all over the world and has created so much confusion and institutional racism in America. . . . We see how labor is a way around abusive relationships with regards to exploiting one’s work and resources for little or no pay to a large entity that has a vast amount of monetary return. And . . . to add, a woman—because ultimately I am a woman, but I call myself femme—a femme person is picked apart and sold in many ways in every society, gold is traded, your hair defines you, and you are without agency, like a refugee wearing a hypothermia blanket at the edges of a new life if you do not behave as that status quo, or behave in patriarchal ways.

Braidrage, along with Zakat, directly ties in with Khan's screen-print entitled Prayer, which can be seen by the gallery entrance across from the acrylic shelving. In Prayer, various bodies wearing and surrounded by Khan's acoustic sound blankets, including one body that can be clearly identified as Khan's, appear to have been cut out of a polaroid picture. Layered on top of the images in black lettering, the text of the print reads:

Some families
stack the dollar bills.
My family stacks the trauma.
Now I'm trying
to makes some money
off understanding my mama's drama
You feel me?
Ameen Summa Ameen
-Baseera Khan

Khan clarified that her name is not meant to be read as a sign of authorship, but rather the traditional signing off of a prayer. Like Braidrage, Prayer also brings to light the ways in which personal and public, familial and geopolitical narratives can overlap and intertwine, can be stories of exploitation or triumph. The lyrics in Prayer will also be featured on an upcoming album Khan will be putting out as well.



Installation view of *iamuslima* by Baseera Khan at Participant Inc.

On a more colorful plane, a bit further into the gallery beyond Prayer and the shelving, lie Khan's Psychedelic Prayer Rugs, three small rugs laid out next to each other on a diagonal. Lunar Count Down, woven in Islam's symbolic colors of green and white with a large amount of yellow is related to the lunar calendar and the counting down of days (concepts also touched upon in

Fasting). Act Up features a two-shaded pink pyramid and a poem in Urdu passed down to her from her mother, which pays tribute to the iconic poster the organization put out featuring the gay pride pink triangle and the words “SILENCE=DEATH.” Purple Heart is rooted in the relationship between religion, war, and global trans communication.



Installation view of *iamuslima* by Baseera Khan at Participant Inc.

Khan invites viewers to use the rugs for their own meditation. And *iamuslima* as a whole can be viewed as Khan inviting viewers into her life perspective while beckoning viewers to see themselves in it. Speaking about Pilgrimage, a very dark screenprint where only a faint pair of hands wrapped round braided chains poking through an embroidered hole of one of the acoustic sound blankets can be made out, Khan stated:

Pilgrimage is this place where it promotes you to only think about yourself, and it absorbs you. And this idea of absorption and darkness is a really beautiful thing. And I think it’s interesting how in cultures darkness, especially in America, darkness is a scary thing. And black is usually used for mourning. It’s usually used for showing that something is scary, so I wanted to problematize that and just have a conversation if anything about that.

Khan both challenges and welcomes her audience to gaze at themselves as they make meaning out of what it is to be femme, Muslim, and American.

Baseera Khan: *iamuslima* at Participant Inc.

Feb 26 – April 2 (extended to April 9th)

PARTICIPANT INC is located at:
253 East Houston Street, ground floor
between Norfolk and Suffolk Streets on the Lower East Side

All photos for this article by Peter Kaspar



Installation view of *iamuslima* by Baseera Khan at Participant Inc.



Installation view of *iamuslima* by Baseera Khan at Participant Inc.