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Words Dream of Being Flowers, Birds Dream of Language

The Becoming-World of Decorative Arabic

In February 2006 a miraculous albino Oscar fish showed up in a pet shop in Lancashire, England. Its scales spelled the Arabic words “Allah” on one side of its body, and “Muhammad” on the other. Named Salam, the fish became famous to devout Muslims, and its website received outpourings of praise for the mysterious workings of God who makes his revelation known in all things. In fact, the word “Allah” often appears in the loopy stripes of various kinds of fish,¹ the insides of eggplants, and sometimes in the wrinkly ears of newborns, to a reception mingling joy and scepticism. What is remarkable is that while Christians marvel at the appearance of pictures—the face of Christ in a plate of pasta, the Virgin in the whorls of a tree stump—in the Muslim world, it is the holy word that appeals to the eyes of pious Muslims.

The word, which in Islam has utter precedence over image, is fundamental to the visual system of Islamic art. Yet throughout its history, from Konya to Khartoum, Granada to Samarkand, Islamic art is rife with text trying to become figure, and image that reverts to its basis in text—as the albino Oscar fish became host to the name of God. As though the text could not be contained by its own bounds, or as though the image was latent in the text. In both cases—and this is what makes these art forms different from many others—the text precedes the image. The image would not exist without the text; it unfolds from the text.

This essay visits some of the Islamic artworks from various periods and places that seem to play with the sacred foundation of the religion, namely the word, by transforming it into figurative images—and letting it slip back again. As the great historian of Islamic art Richard Ettinghausen observes, “In view of the anti-iconic attitude of Islam, nothing would have seemed more unlikely than to

¹ Sophia Al-Maria, Signs of Allah. *Bidoun* 14 (Spring – Summer 2008): 74–75. Salam’s website is www.fishfromallah.com.