HEYDAR ALIYEV FOUNDATION

MINISTRY OF CULTURE OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

La Biennale di Venezia

61. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte

Partecipazioni Nazionali

THE ATTENTION

FAIG AHMED

AZERBAIJAN PAVILION

61ST INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION

LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

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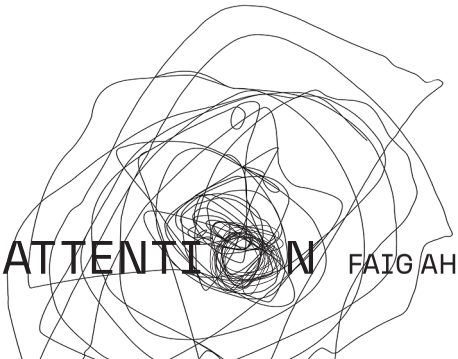
THE ATTENTION

FAIG AHMED



HEYDAR ALIYEV
FOUNDATION

For centuries, culture and art have served as universal languages of dialogue between peoples. They transcend borders, connect traditions, and create spaces for mutual understanding. In this context, international cultural initiatives play a vital role in bringing together diverse ideas, artistic practices, and worldviews.

Among such initiatives, La Biennale di Venezia stands as one of the oldest and most prestigious platforms for contemporary art. For more than 120 years, it has reflected the spirit of its time, acting as a global mirror of the evolving paradigms of human experience. The Biennale provides a unique space where artistic expression engages with the social, cultural, and intellectual realities of our era.

Situated at the crossroads of civilizations, Azerbaijan has historically been a meeting place of cultures, religions, and traditions. This diversity has shaped the country's rich cultural heritage and fostered a long-standing openness to dialogue and cultural exchange. Since 2007, Azerbaijan has been a regular participant in the Biennale, presenting the dynamic identity of its contemporary creative scene to an international audience.

At the 61st International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, Azerbaijan is represented by the artist Faig Ahmed, whose work is internationally recognized for its innovative reinterpretation of traditional carpet weaving. By merging ancient ornamental systems with contemporary artistic language, Ahmed creates works that challenge the boundaries between tradition and contemporary artistic practice.

His project resonates deeply with the Biennale's overarching theme. Through the deconstruction and reimagining of familiar visual forms, Ahmed's art reflects a broader global dialogue—one that seeks to bridge historical identity and the fluid and interconnected realities of the present day.

The project is curated by Dr. Gwendolyn Collaço, whose vision highlights the dialogue between cultural memory, art history, and contemporary expression. Within this framework, art becomes not only a creative practice but also a powerful means of fostering understanding, trust, and cooperation among cultures.

This initiative is realized under the auspices of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, which has organized Azerbaijan's national pavilions at the Biennale since 2013. Guided by its cultural mission to promote Azerbaijan's rich heritage, preserve national values, and build bridges of dialogue between civilizations, the Foundation actively supports a wide range of international initiatives, both artistic and educational.

These efforts include the restoration of historic monuments both in Azerbaijan and abroad, the establishment of cultural and educational centres in different countries, and the organization of major international events dedicated to intercultural exchange. Through strategic partnerships with leading global institutions, the Foundation also implements programs in the arts and education that ensure the transmission of Azerbaijan's traditions to new generations while encouraging creative innovation.

The Foundation's multifaceted work alings naturally with the spirit of the Biennale, reinforcing Azerbaijan's contribution to contemporary artistic discourse while honoring its profound historical traditions and fostering mutual understanding among nations.

It is hoped that this presentation will inspire new reflections and open new paths of friendship through the universal language of art.

FAIG AHMED
Artist

For thousands of years, human ancestors healed their communities through different practices. In much the same way, contemporary society continues to explore forms of inner healing. Art has inherited this ancient capacity and holds the potential to communicate with individuals as a distinct, singular consciousness rather than as an anonymous collective.

I have always been drawn to exploring consciousness for as far back as I can remember. This search has guided my attention in two directions: on one hand, toward science—biology, physics, and mathematics—and on the other, toward spirituality, art, poetry, and creative expression. At first glance, these fields appear opposite, even contradictory.

One form of knowledge is directed outward, toward what can be measured, calculated, observed, and verified. The other turns inward, toward the subjective, the unprovable, and the inexpressible. It is an experience that cannot be confirmed or fully shared with another, just as it is impossible to truly know what it feels like to be someone else.

Yet it is precisely within this inner world that creation takes place, where calculations occur, and where logical structures are formed and analyzed. We are living in a historical moment when these two domains have developed into vast systems with their own institutions, structures, and centers of knowledge. In this growth, they have come remarkably close to one another. Science and art meet at their boundaries, and in many cases, they have already begun to cross them.

In studying the medieval Azerbaijani poetry of the mystic Nasimi (d. c. 1418/19), alongside other Sufi poets, philosophers, and practitioners, I began to notice parallels between a deep understanding of inner experience and the discoveries of modern science, particularly in quantum physics. The latter reveals phenomena that are not immediately apparent and often contradict intuitive logic, as physicists themselves acknowledge. The inner world and the creative process function in a similar way—through uncertainty, through open questions, through states that are not fixed until the moment they manifest. It resembles a probabilistic wave of the unconscious, collapsing into conscious ideas, images, and meanings, sometimes as poetry, sometimes as experience, sometimes as pain.

The project unfolds as a journey guided by a carpet. As one moves through these spaces, the carpet beneath one's feet transforms into a dark wave suspended above the viewer. The same carpet, in another space, becomes a knot, a particle, a concentration of knowledge, memory, thought, and identity. It is a work that accompanies the viewer throughout their path from more familiar textile structures to the collective poetic threads generated by a Quantum Random Number Generator (QRNG) in the pavilion's final space.

GWENDOLYN COLLAÇO, PhD
Anne S. K. Brown Curator for Military
and Society, Brown University

TIED THREADS OF POETRY, SCIENCE, AND CARPET CRAFT:

Mapping the Coded Universe in Faig Ahmed's The Attention

The encircling ocean is in ferment.
Being and space are in uproar.
The eternal mystery has become manifest.
Why should the gnostic dissemble?[1]

These verses open the collected poems of the medieval mystic Nasimi (d. c. 1418/19), who is widely regarded in Azerbaijan as a national poet.[2] Originally written during a time torn by conflict, instability, and political upheaval across the Near East and Central Asia, these lines invite the question: how do individuals find meaning, if not refuge, amid the overwhelming chaos of global information overload?[3] Facing resonant issues today, *The Attention* by Faig Ahmed boldly emerges to declare the quiet solution of internal contemplation as a salve to society's turbulence, hidden in the coded microcosm, or "minor keys" of human perception.[4] Through successive installations that transition from material form to quantum process, Ahmed weaves poetry, science, and perception into a unified experiential fabric.

This vision for the Azerbaijan Pavilion at the 61st International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia opens with Ahmed's surrealist take on the country's most celebrated art form of the carpet, while reinterpreting its structure as an encoded paradigm to unlocking a cosmology spanning physics and the Islamic genealogies of new media art. At its core, the shared concept powerfully recalibrates viewer notions of artistic perception. In this regard, philosopher Laura Marks observes, "[T]he most important activity takes place at a level prior to the perceptible image . . . the image that we perceive refers to its underlying cause—in ornament, geometry, pattern, text, and code-generated images."[5] *The Attention* renders that realization in a magnified dynamic via a scientific dialogue with historical carpet arts to bring the intersection of materiality and lettered systems to the forefront of perception.

Guided by a transforming carpet path, Ahmed cultivates a multisensory landscape that compels viewers to look beyond patterns captured on carpet surfaces to experience the weight of textured pile at its core, before excavating the textile paradigms reflected in the physics of nature and the universe. Visitors journey inward to the soundscapes of the mind's garden, which lead the way to visualizing the brain's perceptions of art through lines and threads. Through this process, Ahmed launches his viewers into the alphanumeric realm of quantum expression, where science and art converge to convey the cyphers fueling creation at the cosmic level.

THE CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND TO A SHARED PARADIGM

Faig Ahmed frames this journey through Nasimi's verses, which reflect the tenets of Hurufism ("Lettrism" from the Arabic *ḥurūfiyyah*), a mystical movement that interprets letters from the Perso-Arabic alphabet in a numerological system, correlating them with the human form as a manifestation of the divine.[6] Letters and numbers thus serve as both a compendium of the cosmos and the individual building blocks for conveying its knowledge.[7] Much like the algebraic expression of a physics equation, this metalanguage allows all existing entities to relate to one another on the most fundamental level of creation. Together, this matrix of signs points to a greater reality beyond the material world that draws humanity and the universe together.[8]

Yet what if materiality can aid in visualizing, or even participating in that metalanguage in tangible ways? Faig Ahmed refashions the metaphysical underpinnings of Hurufism and applies them to the coded constructions of carpets and contemporary science to understand how our inner microcosms reflect the macrocosm of our universe. As this catalogue's essays address from several angles, *The Attention* offers a haptic journey to realizing a cosmic system that not only collapses the larger divisions between art and science but also transgresses time and space. In doing so, the project brings a new materiality to the notion of "deep time" that encourages keen physical involvement from the viewer to enact histories of medium-body connections that the concept explores across time.[9] Materiality takes on a corporeal, if not humanistic nature, defined by its engagement with the perceivable senses, which can be translated into the anatomized data of this cosmic paradigm.

Only in the past year has a major exhibition delved into cosmology as an encyclopedic framework to explore the histories of Islamic art, science, and culture. That ambitious project, *Wonders of Creation* curated by Ladan Akbarnia at the San Diego Museum of Art, notably featured Faig Ahmed's work.[10] Here, however, the series of installations that Ahmed has crafted in this solo venture fearlessly captures how the power of analogy and its subversion can illuminate the shared cosmology of contemporary art and the practice of science today. This forward-facing approach strategically destabilizes historical structures of art to forge a dynamic suspension of elements in a state of entropy, which Başak Şenova elegantly discusses in her essay. The project reverses the metaphorical mirror by wielding scientific tools from neuroscience,

Face It, sketch
Part of I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One (2026)
Room 2

biology, and quantum physics in an artistic endeavor to unveil the potential of dedicated consciousness in a world vying for ever precious attention. In Ahmed's installations, science crucially actualizes the deepest levels of spiritual meditation found at the edge of chaos, which annihilates the ego to fulfill the highest aims of a mystic journey.

By wielding his iconic carpet sculptures as the shared framework and physical path for that cosmic journey, Faig Ahmed distills his works down to color, texture, line, and sound. His installations do not merely invoke traditional textile forms, but reveal the poetry in motion behind them, which can in turn dissolve into individual letters and numbers that scaffold the most fundamental codes of artistic creation. Following the teachings of Nasimi, who was informed by his mentor Fazlallah Naimi Astarabadi (d. 1394) and his study of earlier mystics, Ahmed's works take viewers past the false dichotomies of order (science) and chaos (poetry), to realize how these elements must work in tandem to fashion the highest forms of human awareness.[11]

Ahmed's approach re-envisions the methods of medieval Hurufi mystics, like Nasimi, who used letter forms and diagrams to forge a type of spiritual graphicacy, "a specific intellectual skill" for "understanding and deciphering" spiritual concepts in graphic media such as charts, graphs, and maps.[12] Studies on visualizations of knowledge as meditative devices have already gained momentum in medieval Islamic art and its western counterparts.[13] Yet Ahmed's practice lends a fresh graphicacy to textiles, underscoring how they can exist as more than objects, but also as diagrammatic representations of a greater cosmological system that transcends the limits of physicality and materiality. This pavilion celebrates the intelligence behind carpet construction, while magnifying its ability to function as a universal paradigm for internal contemplation.

Ahmed's transformation of mystical graphicacy through contemporary textile arts holds new significance for audiences today. It offers a vivid reinterpretation of regional spiritual practices that shaped Azerbaijan's history, without diluting its conceptual integrity, while making it accessible to the world via the experience of the pavilion. Ahmed reclaims historical texts of the region and Azerbaijani carpet craft to reimagine

1 Kathleen R. F. Burrill, The Quatrains of Nesimi, Fourteenth-Century Turkic Hurufi (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), 26. For further editions of Nasimi's work, see Cahangir Qährämanov, İmadəddin Nəsimi əsərləri, 3 vols. (Baku: Elm Näšrijjaty, 1973). For more on the medieval poet, see Michael Reinhard Hess, Die Sprache des Menschengottes: Untersuchungen zu `Imad äd-Din Näsimis (fl. ca. 1400) türkischem Divan (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2009); idem, "Two Worlds Can Fit into Me, I Can Not Fit into This World" Azerbaijan's Immortal Poet İmadəddin Nəsimi (Berlin: Gulandot, 2019).

2 Ferenc Csirkés, "Messianic Oeuvres in Interaction: Misattributed Poems by Shah Esmā'il and Nesimi," Journal of Persianate Studies 8, no. 2 (2015): 155–94; Shahzad Bashir, "Deciphering the Cosmos: The Ḥurufiya Movement and Medieval Islamic Esotericism," in Imagining the End: Millennial Faith from Ancient Middle East to Contemporary America, ed. Abbas Amanat and Magnus Bernhardsson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002) 168–84; For more on Nasimi's writings and his mentor Fazlallah Astarabadi, see Istaván Vásáry, "The Beginnings of Western Turkic Literacy in Anatolia and Iran," in Irano-Turkic Cultural Contacts in the 11th–17th Centuries, ed. É. M. Jeremiás (Piliscsaba: Avicenna Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, 2003), 245–53.

3 Hess, Two Worlds Can Fit into Me, 27–100.

them for a new generation of viewers across the globe through the international language of science. Alongside Hurufi thought, Ahmed builds upon historically documented uses of the carpet in the practice of prayer and meditation throughout the Islamic world, discussed in the catalogue essay by Elizabeth Dospěl Williams.

Though at first unexpected, the intersection of carpets, Islamic mysticism (Sufism), and quantum physics offers a synergetic fusion that underscores the structural languages underpinning these fields. After all, quantum physics frequently adapts imagery from textile arts to visualize cosmological theories with familiar terms, such as "string theory," "entanglement," and "space-time fabric" that have entered our popular discourse. While I shall leave the intricacies of quantum mechanics and its history to the catalogue essay by theoretical physicist Stephon Alexander, here I shall instead focus on the importance of highlighting this connection with Ahmed's artistic intervention.

Faig Ahmed's intellectual and scientific approach to mysticism in contemporary art questions how popular global lenses have often viewed Sufism as a detached phenomenon, an individual quest separate from the entire fabric of society. However, the cultural receptions of these traditions range from before Nasimi's time and place to our own.[14] Ahmed's works likewise manage to emphasize a connected continuum between individuals of disparate fields and origins. By combining science, poetry, and mystic philosophy, the pavilion recognizes the universal objective that the masters of each domain strive to unveil through resonant languages of code across time. In fact, Ahmed concludes the pavilion by visually acknowledging that shared aim through hand-drawn equations and verses coexisting on the final wall. Yet this union does not sacrifice important overtures throughout the pavilion to Azerbaijan's socio-cultural history through artisanal craft, textual heritage, and philosophies that have shaped this country's many identities. Thus, as Ahmed's works forge a reflective window into the inner self, they also remind us of a larger sense of belonging to a shared universe. Fittingly, the pavilion emphasizes how we must first inwardly awaken to unlock the underlying codes that compose perception, origin, and identity, before attempting to reconnect with the world, if not each other.

4 Koyo Kouoh, "Curatorial Text: 'In Minor Keys,'" La Biennale di Venezia 61st International Art Exhibition, accessed January 7, 2026, https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2026/curatorial-text-koyo-kouoh.

5 Laura U. Marks, Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 5.

6 Hamid Algar, "Horufism," Encyclopaedia Iranica XII, fasc. 5 (2004): 483–90.

7 On the medieval history of Hurufism, see Shahzad Bashir, "Enshrining Divinity: The Death and Memorialization of Faẓlallāh Astarābādi in Ḥurufi Thought," The Muslim World 90 (2000): 289–308; idem, "Deciphering the Cosmos: The Ḥurufiya Movement and Medieval Islamic Esotericism," in Imagining the End, 168–84; idem, Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Elias John Wilkinson Gibb, A History of Ottoman Poetry, vol. 1 (London: Luzac, 1900–19), 343–68.

8 Bashir, "Deciphering the Cosmos," 177.

9 For more on the notion of 'deep time,' see Siegfried Zielinski, Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

10 Ladan Akbarnia, ed., Wonders of Creation: Art, Science, and Innovation in the Islamic World (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2025).

WHAT IS A CARPET, BUT A CODED STRUCTURE?

A systematic understanding of carpet structure closely resonates with Nasimi's poetry and his interpretation of Hurufism as a construction of numbers, lines, and letters. While a textile itself might be the bearer of specific messages through its imagery, the threads of yarn behind its form offer key insight into the programmed codes of its creation. Textile specialists have constructed their own alphanumeric language to deconstruct the weaver's creative process.[15] Oftentimes art historical analyses of carpets include these codes that break down a rug's production in terms of thread type, ply count, and density in knot counts per inch or decimeter. For example, "Wool Z2S, 8–9 threads per inch (32–26 per dm)" describes the structure of an Azerbaijani *Dragon* rug, roughly dated to the eighteenth century at the Victoria & Albert Museum (fig. 1). Though at first seemingly ciphered, the code "Wool Z2S" refers to a specific, common method of preparing yarn for rug construction from this region, where two individual strands of wool, each spun in a Z-directional twist, are plied together with an opposing S-twist to create counter tension. With these fundamental codes of production, the seemingly opaque microcosm found in a carpet transforms into digestible units intelligible to an artisan or a scholar.

This internal logic of a textile's microcosm has aided in studying carpets from the Islamic world. When paired with historical and stylistic analyses, such coded details can illuminate the macrocosm of global connections that defined carpet production from the fifteenth century onward through trade and diverse artistic repercussions, for which Williams provides a nuanced overview in her catalogue essay.[16] The resulting forms of these textile constructions further resonate with designs across media to architectural ornament and book illumination, among larger contexts like garden landscapes. Therefore, understanding the construction of a single rug can act as a gateway to comprehending more of the material universe it inhabits. Ahmed treats that textile logic as the forgotten sibling to the algebraic equations of physics. The matrix of carpet structures can likewise assist in understanding algorithmic new media, like the installations below, which act as a force of individuation preserving the decision-making, reflections, and

11 For example, al-Ghazali (d. 1111) explores false dichotomies almost three centuries earlier. Abu Hamid ibn Muhammad Ghazali, Mishkat al-Anwar, ed. Abu'l-Ala 'Afifi (Cairo: al-Dar al-Qawmiyya li'l-Tiba'a wa'l-Nashr, 1964), 65–66. See also the translation: Abu Hamid Ghazali, The Niche of Lights: A Parallel English-Arabic Text, ed. and trans. David Buchman (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1998).

12 Ildar Garipzanov, "The Rise of Graphicacy in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages," Viator 46 (2015): 1–22; Ahmet Karamustafa, "Cosmographical Diagrams," in Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies, 2 vols., ed. James B. Harley and David Woodward (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1:71–89; Noah Gardiner, "Diagrams and Visionary Experience in al-Būnī's (d. 622/1225) Laṭā'if al-ishārāt fī al-ḥurūf al-'ulwiyyāt," in Visualizing Sufism: Studies on Graphic Representations in Sufi Literature (13th to 16th Century), ed. Giovanni Maria Martini (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 16–50.

13 For a major work on medieval diagrams, see Jeffrey F. Hamburger et al., eds. The Diagram as Paradigm: Cross-Cultural Approaches (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2022).

14 Jamal J. Elias, "Sufi Saints and Shrines in Muslim Society: Introduction," The Muslim World 90 (Fall 2000): 253–58.

Figure 1: Dragon Carpet, 18th century, Garabagh (Azerbaijan). Woolen pile on woolen warp and weft, 184 × 212 cm. London, Victoria & Albert Museum, T.84-1909. Image © Victoria and Albert Museum.

even emotions of their creator.[17] Ahmed's works fulfill that potential without abandoning the innate materiality and cultural heritage that sparked this pavilion's journey.

Yet this connection across disciplines also has enjoyed an overlooked history that this pavilion reignites for the Biennale. Since the 1980s, textile historians and those of architectural ornament have unpacked carpet patterns and surface design by applying plane symmetry that incorporated principles of two-dimensional crystallographic analysis from physics.[18] In the early stages of this research, physicists of the Soviet Union met with textile specialists at the 2nd International Symposium on the Art of Oriental Carpets devoted to the Azerbaijani Carpet in 1988, cementing the modern linkage between the fields explored in Ahmed's works.[19]

Looking further back in history, this collaboration fits seamlessly into medieval paradigms of the Islamic world where all fields of expertise in crafts and sciences were generally subsumed under the shared umbrella of terms such as *fann* (art) and *san'at* (craft).[20] For example, in a tenth-century treatise on the science of music, the philosopher al-Farabi (c. 950) would describe musical modes via analogies to warps and wefts in a textile loom, or bricks and plaster in architecture, further illustrating this shared conceptualization of knowledge.[21] In that vein, this pavilion rejects the false dichotomy that western modernity has imposed on these fields to build upon the reality of their connection. Across the pavilion's rooms, discussed below, computerization and quantum technologies push the discussion beyond analogy to transform Ahmed's artworks, reaching new levels of complexity and dimensionality that further undermine modern understandings of this textile craft.

More than a mere metaphor, a carpet's construction acts as an intermediary to a level of perception beyond the material world it defines. In many ways, the carpet makes a naturally apt vehicle for comprehending the cosmos, given how it already occupies a key role in shaping the relational web of society in Islamic history, particularly in the region where Azerbaijan sits today. In "The Draped Universe of Islam," art historian Lisa Golombek paints a picture of "a world submerged in textiles, where textiles played a role in every facet of life, for everyone, rich or poor. They served far more than a purely functional role

15 Walter B. Denny, How to Read Islamic Carpets (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014), esp. 35.

16 Walter B. Denny, "Beyond the Carpet Design Revolution: Perspectives in 15th Century Carpet History," Oriental Carpet & Textile Studies 7 (2011): 19–32.

17 Laura U. Marks, "Thinking Like a Carpet: Embodied Perception and Individuation in Algorithmic Media," Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies 7 (2013): 7–20.

18 Carol Bier, "Elements of Plane Symmetry in Oriental Carpets," The Textile Museum Journal 31 (1992): 53–70; For applications in architectural ornament, see Gülru Necipoğlu, The Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture: Topkapı Palace Museum Library MS H. 1956 (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995); Peter J. Lu and Paul J. Steinhardt, "Decagonal and Quasi-Crystalline Tilings in Medieval Islamic Architecture," Science 315 (2007): 1106–10.

19 Bier, "Elements of Plane Symmetry," 56. See also Kh. S. Mamedov, "Crystallographic Patterns," Computers & Mathematics with Applications 128, nos. 3 and 4 (1986): 511–29.

20 Necipoğlu, Topkapı Scroll, 185.

21 Necipoğlu, Topkapı Scroll, 208.

22 Lisa Golombek, "The Draped Universe of Islam," in Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World, ed. Eva R. Hoffman (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 97–114, 33.

23 Golombek, "Draped Universe,"32.

24 "Artist in Conversation with Nina Levent, PhD," in Faig Ahmed, by Emma Saperstein et al., (Berlin: Kerber Verlag, 2025), 7–8.

and were incorporated into codes of social and religious behavior at every level of society and in every phase of human existence."[22] The collective power of textile displays could emerge in selections of draperies and floor coverings, as well as cushioned seating arrangements for guests, all reflecting a host's assessment of visitors.[23] Moreover, in the pre-modern Caucasus, where the most sought-after Azerbaijani carpets were produced, textiles often defined the transitory spaces between the inner and outer world of a Turkic nomadic home, such as the door hangings between the warmth of the hearth and chilly winds outside, to the carpets that separated the household from the dirt ground below. Here, Ahmed plays upon those liminal functions of textile arts to prompt the transition from an outer material world to the inner realms of the mind, nature, and cosmos.

THE NARRATIVE OF THE JOURNEY INWARD

A liquified carpet draws viewers into the pavilion, hinting at how the rational rules of the outside world will dissolve in this space. Named after Nasimi's famed poem *I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One* (2026), the molten textile path introduces viewers to the artist's most iconic visual signature and acts as the guide that weaves together the threads of the larger pavilion narrative across its seven rooms. Through it, viewers experience multisensory stations that mirror a mystic journey in a cosmological framework. The expansive carpet narrates time, movement, and transformation in its composition, which shifts from structured patterns to liquified paths, and dark matter across the pavilion.

The liquid carpet of the threshold at first solidifies into floral and geometric patterns, renowned idioms of historic carpet design in the region of modern-day Azerbaijan. As the viewer moves away from the natural light of the entrance, the room quickly dims the carpet's rich ornamental palette to shadows, then applies a blacklight to signal a transition from visible order to the invisible world of the mind. The effect redirects the viewer's focus onto the wall before them featuring the otherworldly fluorescent shades of *Ancestors* (2026). In this work, the familiar forms of Azerbaijani carpets begin to dissolve into viscous formations of color. At the outer portions of the work, traditional garden imagery appears distinct as a stylized pattern. Yet as the gaze moves inward to the center, once-defined patterns melt into a shape akin to a human face formed by streams of color. The transformation of this synthetic rug reveals a reminder of the earlier individuals who produced and used such textiles, always silently present behind surviving historical patterns.

This work offers the ideal gateway into the best-known features of Faig Ahmed's oeuvre, which creates a vivid, if not revolutionary, dialogue between traditional carpet craftsmanship and modern-day image production techniques. In his creative process, Ahmed first digitally sketches the cartoon, or underlying design of the carpet, before collaborating with women weavers from Azerbaijani villages to produce the final work.[24] This vacillation between technological rebellion and reverence of craft tradition has become the hallmark of

Figure 2: Garden Carpet (with detail of fish in pattern), second half of the 18th century. Woolen pile symmetrically knotted on cotton warp and weft, 309.9 × 241.9 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1922, 22.100.128. Image Public Domain.

Ahmed's celebrated artistic practice. The result reflects a continuum of design practices as much as the extended histories of production his works evoke.

However, Ahmed does not rely on his reputation in this pavilion, but rather pushes notions of what a carpet can become and express. In the next room, distinct colors and rigid historical patterns fade to shadows as the ground carpet extends upwards to encompass an entire wall. Commandeering the architectural space, this wall of dark fabric grows into a sculptural mass known as *Face It,* part of *I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One* (2026). Here, the viewer encounters a stoppage in their path that must be confronted. The monumentality of the eclipsing carpet becomes overwhelming as the textile buckles and folds in areas under its own weight. The work deftly activates two definitions of the word "pile" in its profuse physicality and in the surface materiality of carpets formed by knotted threads that provide density and volume in looped or cut varieties. A mirrored wall across from this work doubles the effect to create an elephantine enclosure of crushing shade encircling the viewer, as oppressive and insurmountable as the deepest grief. The blocked passage compels viewers to turn around and find an alternative form of artistic expression elsewhere in the pavilion.

The darkened carpet path eventually leads viewers into the following room where color streams reemerge. There, Ahmed introduces the verses of Nasimi in the *Garden of Awakening* (2026), recited as multi-directional chants throughout the courtyard. As viewers move through the space, they are immersed in a cultivated soundscape featuring Nasimi's poetry recited in numerous languages, which makes the materiality of language audibly palpable. Such a medley of languages befits this pavilion given Azerbaijan's diverse linguistic heritage, which has traversed Arabo-Persian, Cyrillic, and Latin forms in major script changes enacted over the course of the twentieth century. Each linguistic transformation has reflected one of the multiple identities and forces that have shaped the region.[25] Scripts, however, cannot blend into one another, but rather remain distinct even when expressing the same language. Scripts, too, can seem flat, much like carpets that many casual users may consider to be two-dimensional objects. Yet

25 Lynley Hatcher, "Script Change in Azerbaijan: Acts of Identity," International Journal of the Sociology of Language 2008, no. 192 (2008): 105–16; Ayça Ergun, "Politics of Romanisation in Azerbaijan (1921–1992)," Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 20, no. 1 (2010): 33–48; Sara Amir, "Between the Lines: Azerbaijan's Alphabet Reforms Trace a Century of Cultural Detachment and Return," Brown Political Review, June 2, 2025

26 Tristan Weddigen, Unfolding Textile Spaces: Antiquity/Modern Period, Art & Textiles: Fabric as Material and Concept in Modern Art from Klimt to the Present, eds. Tristan Weddigen and Markus Bruderlein (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013), 88–95; see also Blessing, "Draping, Wrapping, Hanging," 14.

27 Laura Marks, "Infinity and Accident: Strategies of Enfoldment in Islamic Art and Computer Art," Leonardo 39, no. 1 (2006): 36–42, 38.

28 Carl Ernst, The Shambhala Guide to Sufism (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 16.

29 Marks, "Infinity and Accident," 39.

30 Ibn al-Haytham, The Optics of Ibn al-Haytham: Books I–III, On Direct Vision, trans. Abdelhamid I. Sabra, 2 vols. (London: Warburg Institute, 1989); discussed in Necipoğlu, Topkapı Scroll, 203.

31 Wolfgang Klimesch, "An Algorithm for the EEG Frequency Architecture of Consciousness and Brain Body Coupling," Frontiers in Human Neuroscience 7 (2013): 766; Harald Weiss and Volkmar Weiss, "The Golden Mean as Clock Cycle of Brain Waves," Chaos, Solitons & Fractals 18, no. 4 (Nov. 2003): 643–52.

sound and human engagement can activate a text and its carpet counterparts in dynamic ways that expose the multidimensional possibilities of both.

By instead realizing linguistic diversity through the sonic experience of translation rather than a visual medium, Ahmed accomplishes what script alone cannot. The room allows numerous translations of poetic verse to inhabit the space simultaneously, at once referencing the historical aural reception of Nasimi's text and the permanence of the verses' meanings behind it. Audible heartbeats act as the syncopation to verses interweaving to become a sonic fabric draped over this space, thus subsuming the role of many-colored threads in a textile. Together, the lines of recited verse form a unified web of expression. Only when seated at the center of the courtyard can the viewer at last hear one language that makes the cacophony intelligible.

That seated moment of meditation reveals a hidden artwork to the attentive viewer, only visible from this vantage point: brilliant sunlight reflects downwards from mirrored circles suspended from the windows above selectively enhancing the illumination of the courtyard. Here, the experience of awakening elides with that of elucidation to the covert reality of the lighting in this garden microcosm. The installation introduces science through restrained manipulations of light and refraction. Such experiences continue to compound in complexity through the subsequent half of the pavilion as the viewer journeys inward to more theoretical understandings of science and artistic creation.

In the following room, *The Knot* (2026) captures the liminal role of the textile through a massive, entwined carpet that invites touch just as much as it draws the viewer into the depths of its interlaced folds. This dynamic epitomizes the "textile spatiality" of art historian Tristan Weddigen, which stresses the essential value of understanding textiles both *in* space and *as* space.[26] Additionally, the interlocking layers of *The Knot* seemingly echo the earliest historical uses of such carpet motifs for talismanic protection, discussed in Williams' catalogue essay. Here, the knot indeed acts as a safe, internalized space, akin to a seed planted by the *Garden of Awakening*, from which new understandings of the self and universe can grow.

The concept of interlocking layers further epitomizes Laura Marks' notion of enfoldment and unfoldment, where "the relation between two elements, such as soul and matter, particle and wave, image and information, or information and experience, is one not of dichotomy but of implicit relation."[27] Though already apparent through the complex layering of *The Knot*, the notion also prefaces the mixed lines of algebra and poetry that cover the main wall of pavilion's final room, discussed below. These two installations explore the generative potential of entanglement through seemingly contrasting media, which function across two and three dimensions. Both bring their imagery back to elemental features of design through the interactive manipulation found in intertwined lengths of textile and in intersecting lines of ink, respectively. The relational dynamic behind these two, at first disparate, rooms make an ideal steppingstone into an encoded world where Ahmed renders information

Figure 3: Bishndas and Nanha, "Babur supervising the laying out of the Garden of Fidelity," illustrated folio from the Baburnama, c. 1590, Mughal India. Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper, 26.6 x 15.4 cm. London, Victoria & Albert Museum, IM.276A–1913.
Image © Victoria and Albert Museum.

and artistic perception into jointly-created scientific data. From this point onwards, historical referents are perceived across senses but not directly visualized as before. Science thus becomes the intermediary for exposing historical concepts behind artistic production and its connections to Hurufi cosmology.

Ahmed enters this plane of thought in the following work *Chahar Bagh* (2026), where threads and membranes of the earth form nourishing channels of data between nature and the human brain. A mirrored cube of soil anchors the room, bringing the overlooked materiality of nature to the fore. The work's form loosely draws upon early modern Islamic gardens often depicted on the microcosm of a carpet, which adapts a bird's eye view of the classic four-part garden (*chahār bāgh*) (fig. 2). Ahmed has transformed this concept into an abstracted three-dimensional sculpture to express the brain's perception of the fabric of nature. However, in Ahmed's version, knotted threads of wool do not create the pile of this carpet, but topsoil itself, blanketing the earth below it teeming with invisible life forms akin to the creatures subtly incorporated into the imagery of historical garden carpets.

Above this cube, silvery wires shimmer under the light, referencing the stylized rivulets or canals that often divided these garden landscapes while watering them. At the same time, the choice recalls the silver paint that often represented such canals in early modern illustrations of gardens (fig. 3). However, instead of flowing from a font of water, these silver threads originate from the technological hub housed in a platform suspended above the sculpture and attach directly onto the soil below. Though akin to silver rivulets, they do not channel water, but data. Much like the Neoplatonic theory of emanation adopted by Sufi thinkers, this thread of connection emphasizes the source and current of creative energy unifying the most elemental features of the earth to the highest forms of abstracted knowledge.[28]

Human presence activates this element of the installation to visualize contemplation as an iterative process of active observation. When a visitor enters the space of this minimalist garden, the installation begins to respond, translating human presence into shifting abstract forms relayed on the screen of the opposite wall. The extended act of beholding is therefore tied to a heightened awareness of the living earth. The static electricity of life itself flows from its material context to the informational plane of atomized data before taking on a new guise behind amorphous forms accompanied by equally transformative sounds. The graphical interface confronts viewers with ultra-minimal data abstractions, which visualize the infinitely extensive plane of digital memory and its endless transmutations emanating across media.[29]

The experience captures key elements of the medieval optical treatise by Ibn al-Haytham (completed c. 1011–21), wherein visually complex forms require the concentrated contemplation of the gaze, as opposed to a fleeting glance. Regarding "minute designs, letters of a script … and the difference between closely similar colors," he states that "[F]ine features appear only after they have been scrutinized

and contemplated."[30] Here, the results of such a scrutinizing gaze, coordinated between body and eye, can be computationally manipulated. The data transforms with each slight change in the angle of contemplation enacted by a variable human presence on tiny particles of earth. Much like a carpet, soil at first seems like a uniform pile, but digital magnification reveals the encoded complexity of life at one's fingertips. The installation relies on an atomist universe of alphanumeric code translating the intricacies of the relationship between the mind, heavens, and matter.

The following work of *The Golden Limit* (2026) builds upon this analytical vision of information as a data landscape. The human mind becomes the garden of the universe in a monumental drawing of linework, which from afar appears to reference black threads of embroidery on a gridded cotton surface. At first, the lines suggest the chevron patterns of cloth accessories like a *keffiyyah/kuffiyah* worn by numerous communities in the Middle East today. Yet upon closer examination, the work depicts varied frequencies drawn from neuroscience in a highly individualized experience of creativity.

The Golden Limit cleverly incorporates real-time data from electroencephalogram (EEG) readings of the artist's brain activity during a meditative state. The title references the "golden limit," or Golden Mean in neurological studies, which represents the optimal balance for the brain to function "with complexity on the edge of chaos."[31] When cognitive processes, like memory span and neural wave patterns, resonate at this ratio, the brain reaches peak efficiency of neural coding and maximizes its adaptive capabilities. This artwork honors that namesake in its adaptive power.

At the proportion of a full wall drawing, these EEG lines allow the viewer to behold the ink behind each ligature and rescale our understanding of recorded data as many intrinsic modifications of ink.[32] Seen at this microlevel, the differences between these drawn linear charts and the construction of a textile become less overt. Each manipulates and activates its languorous medium to convey forms and designs, which an individual line of ink or thread cannot achieve on its own.

Fittingly, in the verses of Nasimi, silk threads become the metaphor that captures how love for the divine can make unifying truths discernible in every aspect of life, writing, "Mosque and tavern become one to us . . . Grief became joy, a thorn silken thread to us."[33] In the conclusion of this verse, experiences of the human mind transgress distinctions between textile and nature, making viewers rethink their own divisions between socially constructed notions of space, media, and knowledge.

Regarding space, this EEG chart takes on a new connotation through a simple, but powerful, detail: a perfect circle formed from gold-leaf. Not only does this circular augmentation identify the "golden mean" of brain frequency, the illumination of gold leaf on paper transforms the rest of the chart's two-dimensional lines into the peaks and valleys found in a mountainous landscape against a bright, glowing sun. The reflection of its burnished yet textured light onto the ground below recasts the

space beyond the drawing to act as a shimmering lake at the foot of a sunlit valley, lending an unexpected third dimension to the installation.

Once steeped in these elemental forms, Ahmed's final work transposes the mystic science of Hurufism onto contemporary quantum physics and its understandings of human perception. This pavilion's series of individualized encounters culminates in *Entropy Altar* (2026), which incorporates a quantum random number generator (QUANTIS-PCIe-40M) to produce numbers and words from natural sources of entropy—like the randomized visitors to the pavilion. In the broadest strokes, these generator chips exploit the intrinsic randomness of natural quantum phenomena.[34] They provide important practical applications, such as detecting and measuring natural sources of entropy, like radioactive decay.[35] Or more familiar to popular audiences, such chips most commonly power cryptographic systems with their randomized sequences.[36] Yet as specialists note, "[T]here remains doubt whether the backing physical process is truly random or . . .as it happens in a chaotic system, we simply have a poor model and a better one could destroy the illusion of randomness."[37] That concept closely echoes a medieval tension from ninth-century Basra between Neoplatonic Sufi theologians, who stressed a structured system where matter emanates from God, and atomist philosophers of the same era, who emphasized the complexity and ultimate unknowability of the relationship between God and matter.[38]

Ahmed's work raises similar questions regarding the blurred line between the unknowability of chaos and logic at the cosmic level. *Entropy Altar* generates clusters of words seemingly woven from the chaos of an alphaneumeric field in response to the shared presence of self-selecting participants. The resulting words craft a jointly created form of poetry composed from the entanglement of individual informational codes. Yet the very genesis of poetic strands suggests that meaning, if not structure, can be gleaned from entropy. The viewers' attention collectively shapes the numbers and letters produced in the installation, which positions consciousness as the cosmological loom to this social fabric.

Entropy Altar further honors its deep-time materiality by exposing its inner workings through a glass viewing window onto

32 Toshihiko Izutsu, "The Basic Structure of Metaphysical Thinking in Islam," in Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism, ed. Mehdi Mohaghegh and Hermann Landolt (Tehran: Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Tehran Branch, 1971), 66; Annemarie Schimmel, Mystic Dimensions of Islam (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, repr. 2011), 411–17.

33 Burrill, Quatrains of Nesimi, 223–24.

34 Megha Shrivastava, et al., "Randomness in Quantum Random Number Generator from Vacuum Fluctuations with Source-Device-Independence," Applied Physics B 131, no. 111 (2025)

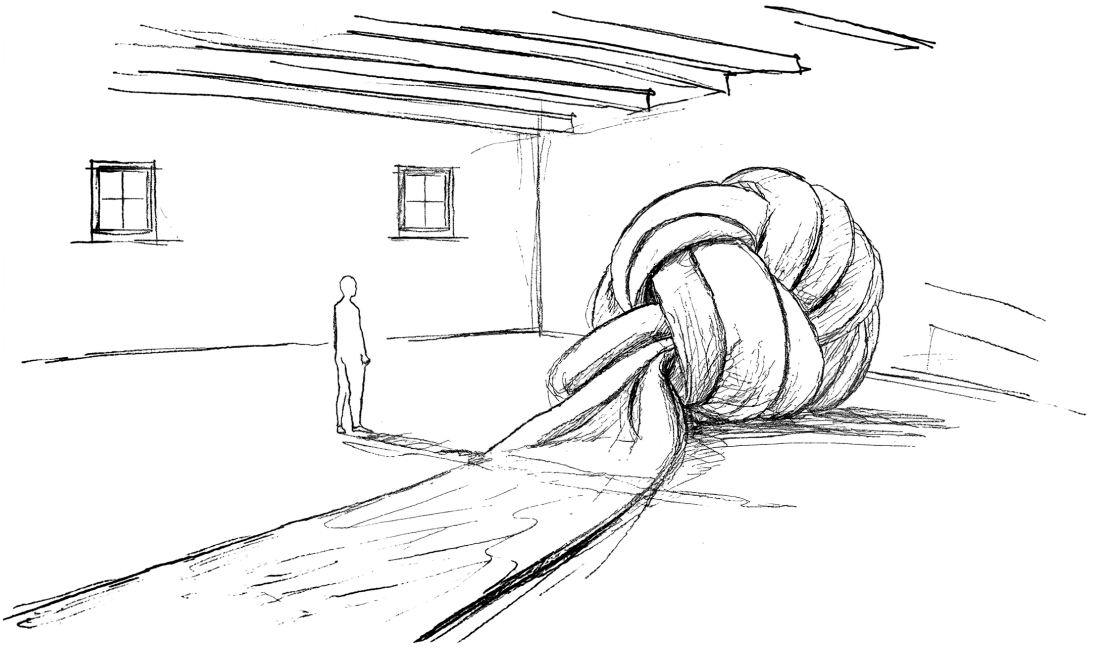
35 Miguel Herrero-Collantes, and Juan Carlos Garcia-Escartin, "Quantum Random Number Generators," Reviews of Modern Physics 89, no. 1 (2017)

36 L.E.Bassham et al., "A Statistical Test Suite for Random and Pseudorandom Number Generators for Cryptographic Applications," National Institute of Standards and Technology, special issue 800–22, Revision 1a (September 2010)

37 Herrero-Collantes and Garcia-Escartin, "Quantum Random Number Generators," 4.

38 Marks, "Infinity and Accident," 40. The author refers to the Mu'tazili anatomist movement in Abbasid Basra during the ninth century. For more in this movement, see: Alnoor Dhanani, The Physical Theory of Kalām: Atoms, Space, and Void in Basrian Mu'tazilī Cosmology (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

39 Aysel Morin, Crafting Turkish National Identity, 1919–1927: A Rhetorical Approach (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).



The Knot, sketch
Part of I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One (2026)
Room 4

the core of its processor and silica quantum chip. Silica represents an abundant mineral in the earth's crust, which enjoyed extended use in the history of human expression long before quantum chips. Likewise, stone more generally holds great significance to the crafting of national identity in numerous Turkic nations, including Azerbaijan.[39] The cutting-edge words produced by this silica chip allude to the stone inscriptions that preserve the oldest form of Turkic languages. Carved onto stone steles in the early eighth century, these texts known as the Orkhan inscriptions bear messages of unity in a time of chaos and conflict.[40] Silica quartz further enjoys a rich history of transformative use in glass and ceramic glazes that proliferate across Islamic production.[41] As such, the historic genealogy of these mineral arts directly informs contemporary notions of transmutation in Ahmed's art production, which emerges from a state of turmoil or instability, and transitions into one of crafted permanence at its completion.

Here, words generated by entropy and beheld by viewers act as the shared ciphers that contribute to the (re-)construction of their own presence in a universal paradigm. This acknowledgement of the microunits behind and part of the cosmic whole captures the mystic concept of *tawḥīd* (Arabic "unification" and "oneness"), a central goal among Sufis who seek the annihilation (*fanā'*) of the self, separating existence from the divine. The space allows viewers to become part of an intertwined dialogue between consciousness and the informational universe. In facing that dissolution of the self, new meanings can emerge on the reflective surface of the altar. Viewer presence is thus translated into the cosmic coded reality, leaving them to ponder whether the words generated are purely random, or part of a greater order of the universe.

In that reflective culmination, the pavilion draws evocative parallels to another foundational Sufi poem in Persian: *The Conference of the Birds* (completed c. 1177) by Farid al-Din ʿAttar (d. c. 1221). In the frame tale, the hoopoe, as leader of the birds, narrates parables to convince his flock to undertake an arduous journey to meet their king, the Simorgh, the mythical phoenix-like creature and symbol for God. The creatures venture through seven perilous valleys, which can be interpreted as mystical stages on a Sufi's inward path. As their numbers dwindle, only thirty birds endure to the end, where they realize that they are the Simurgh (Persian for "thirty birds"), beholding a mirror image of themselves as a unified whole.

Much like *The Conference of the Birds*, this pavilion offers a multisensory embodiment of mystical discourse and the healing capabilities of an inward journey. ʿAttar's historic poem also represented a new form of Sufi practice wherein manifold audiences could partake in the generative opportunity to experience the spiritual health offered by intentional contemplation, transforming and elevating them to higher levels of awareness within and beyond themselves. The concept of poetry and art as a spiritual medicine to repair the heart builds upon the rich history of this metaphor in Persianate verse and Arabic rhetoric.[43] Faig Ahmed's pavilion cogently refashions those lessons to embody the most intricate forms of science today at the intersection of neuroscience and quantum physics,

where humanity processes art and poetry in new inventive ways. In doing so, his works capture how the science of transmedial alchemy can result in the greatest form of spiritual healing: returning to oneself. That culmination brings the pavilion full circle to its opening promise of delivering a salve to the information overload of the world. Instead of wholly rejecting the world's complexities, the journey unveils the poetry of the intricate data behind it, offering overlooked tools to decipher the fray. In completing that contemplative path, connecting with oneself becomes the means to discovering a wider unity with the interwoven fabric of art, nature, and the universe. The convergence of meanings behind the interpretation of these forms marks the awakening of a healed and renewed soul facing the world.

CODA: THREADS OF LOCAL HERITAGE TO GLOBAL AUDIENCES

Upon reentering the world, viewers can grasp a more nuanced understanding of the artist's guide of choice for the Azerbaijan Pavilion: the carpet. Today, as a national expression of contemporary art in the global venue of the Venice Biennale, the pavilion allows carpet craft to redefine itself for a new era of transcultural engagement. Faig Ahmed stunningly translates this medium into the international languages of digital production and the science of perception, allowing this living artisanal craft to don new visual idioms and articulate cosmologies of belonging through the interwoven threads of a carpet paradigm.

40 Kemal, Sılay, ed. An Anthology of Turkish Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1996) 2–5.

41 Marcus Milwright, Islamic Arts and Crafts: An Anthology (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 65, 233.

42 Austin O'Malley, The Poetics of Spiritual Instruction: Farid Al-Din ʿAttar and Persian Sufi Didacticism (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 7–9, 213–14.

43 O'Malley, Poetics of Spiritual Instruction, 90–125. See also Alan Williams, "Open Heart Surgery: The Operation of Love in Rūmī's Mathnawī," in The Philosophy of Ecstasy: Rumi and the Sufi Tradition, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2014); Tahera Qutbuddin, "Healing the Soul: Perspectives of Medieval Muslim Writers," Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review 2 (1995): 62–87; Anna Livia Beelaert, A Cure for the Grieving: Studies on the Poetry of the 12th-Century Persian Court Poet Khāqānī Širwānī (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut Voor Het Nabije Oosten, 2000), 87–93.

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THE THREADS THAT BIND:
A Short History of Carpets in Islamic Lands

If historic carpets might at first glance be thought of primarily as functional objects, they should also be considered works of art rich in poetic and metaphorical potential.[1]

With patterns and practices of making that often transcend time and place, carpets are also deeply rooted in the individuals and communities that fabricate and use them. For all these reasons, the time-traveling possibilities of this most quintessential form of Islamic art offer unique opportunities for drawing parallels between historic objects and contemporary artistic practice. Considering the structural features, visual qualities, and cross-cultural trajectories of historic carpets further nuances the transhistorical resonances of Faig Ahmed's *The Attention*, his larger body of work, and considerations of space and time evoked in the natural sciences and beyond.

Though today associated with widespread production across North Africa and Central, South, and West Asia, the early history of Islamic carpets remains shrouded in some mystery. A fifth-century carpet, preserved in Egypt's dry sands and now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is one of the earliest surviving examples from the region, a point of departure just before the birth of the Prophet (c. 570 CE) in what remains a highly fragmentary history of carpets (Fig. 1). On the one hand, the carpet demonstrates all the features typical of carpets for generations to come, and in this way seems like a proverbial ancestor of the medium: wool wefts tied in symmetric knots and cut into tufts create a dense, cushioned surface, in a manner directly connecting it to the structural features of Faig Ahmed's works *Ancestors* (2026) and *Face It*, in room 2, part of *I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One* (2026) at the opening of the pavilion. The visual elements of the Met's carpet, too, connect to a whole history of carpet making, demonstrating a deep logic of mirrored symmetry in geometric patterns done with careful attention to visual effect. The viewer's eyes are drawn to passages of swirling color and pattern, resting only on a four-sided knot and a swirling star-like pattern that bear ancient associations

Figure 1: Carpet Fragment with Mosaic Floor Pattern, 4th–5th century. Wool (warp, weft and pile) and symmetrically knotted pile, 102×117 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund 1931, 31.2.1.

Next page, figure 2: Carpet with Triple-Arch Design, c. 1575–90, attributed to Turkey, probably Istanbul. Silk (warp and weft), wool (pile), cotton (pile), and asymmetrically knotted pile, 172.7×127 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 22.100.51.

Ancestors, 2026
handmade woolen carpet,
170×385 cm
Image courtesy of the artist
Room 1 of the Pavilion

with protection (a concept sculpturally evoked in the pavilion via *The Knot* in room 4, part of *I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One*). This carpet fragment is all that remains to tell a long, now-lost history of weaving extending both forward and backward in time.[2]

When we turn to the medieval and early modern periods, we are on firmer ground, thanks to more surviving examples and a rich treasury of religious, literary, and documentary written records that offer insight into past appreciation for carpets.[3] From these texts and artifacts, we learn about the conditions of carpets' production and use, the identities of their weavers, and the spiritual, poetic, and metaphorical resonances carpets conveyed. The sheer range of historic carpets—their regional varieties, their chronological development over time—defy a single definition or any straightforward narrative, and in this way showcase the artistic vision of so many production practices across time. Humble or grand, made of cotton, wool, silk, and precious-metal threads, some carpets reflect the work of specialized centers in elite courts while others appear to be the products of skilled weavers in distant villages. In these examples we can see how carpets transcended all classes of society and connected individuals and cultures across geography and time. Indeed, we encounter similar conceptual resonances in Faig Ahmed's practice today, emerging in his sensitive reimaginings of historical carpets and in his collaborations with women weavers in Azerbaijani villages.

The variety of Arabic words for carpets speaks precisely to the medium's foundational place in Islamic culture, with conceptual resonances that connect across centuries to Faig Ahmed's own poetic understandings of the medium.[4] The Qur'an refers to *bisāṭ*, a term connoting the idea of extension and the entirety of the Earth's surface, a conceptualization that situates carpets as connecting the cosmic and the mundane through metaphors of weaving, covering, and protecting. In other contexts, the term *sajjāda* came to connote a prayer carpet specifically, serving as a kind of portal to the sacred, a concept evoked in Faig Ahmed's earlier work *The Wave* (2015). Such carpets served both to cushion the body during *salat* (ritual prayer) and to focus devout minds in meditative practice, both in the context of private devotion and in the communal spaces of mosques. It is perhaps not surprising, then, to encounter carpets across time and geography that feature architectural elements in varying degrees of abstraction that recall a *mihrāb* (the prayer niche in a mosque) while at the same time serving as visualizations of a metaphorical portal to the divine.

The weavers of a magnificent sixteenth-century Ottoman carpet, for example, depict three arches set on paired columns with a hanging lamp at the center (fig. 2). The carpet's features recall the Light Verse in the Qur'an (24:35), where Allah is described as a light burning like a glowing lamp in a niche. The Light Verse's poetic visuals made it a popular choice for adorning *mihrābs* across the Islamic world, drawing further connections between the personal experience of prayer, the elements of sacred architecture, and the visual features of carpets as these. In their functions for prayer and through their visual references to divine light, such historic carpets were viewed as membranes at the thresholds of human

Figure 3. Left: Garden Carpet, 18th century, Iran. Cotton warp, wool weft and pile, 685.8×243.8 cm. Cambridge, Harvard Art Museums, Gift of Joseph V. McMullan, 1957, 1957.13.

Next page: Faig Ahmed, Secret Garden, 2017. Handmade wool carpet, 180×230 cm. Collection of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art. Image courtesy of the artist

experience and spiritual meanings, much in the way Faig Ahmed's *Golden Limit* (2026) suggests connections between human cognition and transcendent illumination.

Such poetic associations between carpet and cosmos pervade historic carpets, pointing to enduring conceptual linkages between these ideals across time and culture. Consider, for example, the predominance of floral motifs in carpet patterns, visual references that connect the woven surface of the carpet to the flourishing of earth itself. These aspects are perhaps most evocatively drawn together in a genre known as "garden carpets," whose popularity flourished particularly in Safavid State. An eighteenth-century example, now at the Harvard Art Museums, represents a spectacular example of the type (fig. 3). Its long, narrow, rectangular form points to its use in a monumental setting, and its high-quality weaving indicates it must have been fabricated in a workshop of some importance. Its central field is dominated by abstracted floral, animal, and water motifs arranged in a grid, replicating the same formal qualities of

gardens popular in Central and South Asia, known as *chahār bāgh* (four gardens). The forms of such gardens evoked ancient conceptual associations of gardens as metaphors for an idealized paradise, a microcosm of the natural world brought under human control, also found in Ahmed's *Chahar Bagh* (2026). In this way, floral imagery on these carpets might be understood not only to capture the visual and spatial effects of historic Islamic gardens, but also as expressing deeply rooted connotations of human beings' relationship to the environment and to the divine.

Beyond such metaphorical possibilities, however, historic carpets also record the real-world conditions of mobility in their production and consumption, standing as testimonies to the global networks of the medieval and early modern worlds. In this way, historic carpets offer fascinating opportunities to deepen our appreciation of the movements of objects, people, and ideas in our world, demonstrating recurring themes of economic exchange, intercultural mobility, and human resilience that continue even in Faig Ahmed's practice today. Not only did the raw materials of fibers and dyestuffs

Figure 4: Small-pattern Holbein carpet, 15th century, Spain (Mudejar), probably Alcaraz. Wool warp, wool weft, wool knotted pile, and Spanish knot, 458.5 × 212.1 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Elizabeth H. Flint Fund, in memory of Sarah Gore Flint Townsend, 39.614

used to fabricate historic carpets travel great distances, so too did the finished weavings themselves circulate as trade goods, as did the craftspeople. On the consumption side, medieval and Renaissance European paintings, especially among the works of Venetian artists like Lorenzo Lotto and Giovanni Bellini, are filled with depictions of Islamic carpets adorning the fashionable, luxurious interior décor of churches and domestic settings alike.[5] Carpets in European paintings are at times so precisely portrayed that it becomes possible to identify visual representations of surviving carpet fragments. A magnificent carpet now at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, for example, closely resembles a carpet type depicted in Hans Holbein's paintings (fig. 4). The MFA carpet's motifs and vibrant color scheme, uncannily similar to those pervading the pavilion in *I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One* (2026), point to this carpet's intercultural mobilities. On the one hand, the MFA carpet shows many similarities to carpets produced in western Anatolia in the early fifteenth century, with distinctive features including calligraphic designs in knotted Kufic Arabic at its borders and a mirrored pattern of spinning medallion designs, known as *gul*, in the central field. Yet the carpet's structure comprises asymmetrical single-warp knots, a technical feature typical of carpets made in Spain. This discrepancy raises questions about the identities of the carpet makers and its site of production: could the carpet have been made in Spain in emulation of western Anatolian carpets? Or was it produced by Muslim craftspeople exiled from Spain and working alongside Anatolian weavers in the mid-fifteenth century, perhaps following the violence of the Reconquista? The carpet is all that remains to tell its own story.

In all these historic examples we see the potential of carpets to speak to us across the gulf of time, connecting geographies and periods through visual splendor and technical mastery. Historic carpets stand as witnesses to a shared past, with each surviving example revealing the intentions of its makers and the object's capacity to bring the lived experiences of past people close to us today through the realm of art. From historic examples to Faig Ahmed's installations in *The Attention* today, carpets across time and space reveal the threads that bind us, where past, present, and future coalesce through the conceptual and technical associations of a medium unbounded by time.

1 Walter B. Denny, How to Read Islamic Carpets (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014), 9–10.

2 On early Islamic carpets specifically, see Friedrich Spuhler, Pre-Islamic Carpets and Textiles from Eastern Lands (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014).

3 For a history of medieval and early modern carpets, see Anna Beselin, Knots: Art & History: The Berlin Carpet Collection (Milan: Skira Editore; Berlin: Museum für Islamische Kunst, 2018); and Friedrich Spuhler, Carpets from Islamic Lands (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012).

4 Friedrich Spuhler et al., "Bisāṭ," in Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, ed. P. J. Bearman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1394.

5 A classic text on carpets in Italian paintings is Rosamund E. Mack, Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Islamic Art, 1300–1600 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); see also Donald King and David Sylvester, eds., The Eastern Carpet in the Western World: From the 15th to the 17th Century (London: Hayward Gallery, 1983).

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SUSPENSION IN FLOW:
Reading Faig Ahmed by Tracing Nasimi's Path across the Pavilion

As one of the most structured visual languages in the world's cultural histories, the traditional Azerbaijani carpet is formed through symmetry, repetition, geometry, and inherited patterns. Faig Ahmed's work begins with the carpet, yet his path unfolds beyond it. This path is grounded in a broader intellectual and poetic lineage that informs Ahmed's line of thinking. Nasimi, a fourteenth- to fifteenth-century Azerbaijani Sufi poet, describes existence as exceeding form and location, a theme that echoes throughout Ahmed's practice.

> Məndə sığar iki cahan, mən bu cahanə sığmazam,
> Gövhəri-ləmәkan mənəm, kövnü məkanə sığmazam.
>
> Two worlds can be contained within me,
> yet I cannot be contained within this world.
> I am the jewel of the placeless realm;
> I cannot be contained in existence and place.[1]

Ahmed does not reject this structure; he enters it from within. In this vein, his practice does not abandon tradition but destabilizes it. He stretches geometry until it liquefies. He fractures symmetry without destroying it. Motifs cascade, dissolve, pixelate, elongate, and even melt into abstraction. The carpet appears to lose its structural certainty, yet the core remains embedded within the weave. The distortion is not rupture but revelation. The carpet holds two worlds: heritage and contemporaneity, ornament and algorithm, surface and depth. Yet in Ahmed's hands, the carpet refuses containment—it refuses to remain obedient to its own borders, exceeding its own frame.

Ahmed's carpets render placelessness, seeming to slip beyond their own structural coordinates. The grid that once secured them loosens into movement. The border that once contained the field bends, ruptures, or spills outward. The object no longer holds ground, dissolving into movement. This gesture is ontological; Ahmed unsettles the idea that tradition holds

steady and that identity is grounded in repetition. Instead, he reveals structure as movement, pattern as tension, and symmetry as already tending toward its own undoing. This condition is materially anchored in his monumental carpet *I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One* (2026), which spans the entire floor of the seven-room pavilion and takes its title directly from Nasimi's verse, positioning the exhibition itself within this logic of non-containment.

From this perspective, the interconnected design of the Azerbaijan Pavilion, which aims to form a single, breathing body, resonates with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concepts of striated and smooth space.[2] In a manner similar to the woven carpet, which traditionally creates a striated space through its grid, measured repetitions, and encoded motifs, the pavilion stages

1 Imadəddin Nəsimi, "Sığmazam," in Seçilmiş əsərləri (Divan), ed. Həmid Araslı (Bakı: Elm Nəşriyyatı, 1973). Translation by Başak Şenova, adapted from the Azerbaijani original.

2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 474.

3 Nəsimi, "Sığmazam."

4 Farida Azizova, Imadeddin Nasimi in Medieval Sources and Literary Criticism (Baku: TEAS Press, 2019).

5 Nəsimi, "Sığmazam."

Detail of Gautama, 2017,
handmade woolen carpet,
285×380 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

a transition from striated to smooth space both spatially and conceptually. The striation of the carpets and the venue is pushed toward smoothness, as forms stretch, melt, and dissolve into continuous variation. The work emerges precisely within this oscillation, where neither condition is resolved but each is held in dynamic suspension. The visitor is carried along a path that is at once structured and unbound, guided yet open. The rooms give way to fields of unpredictability and openness, culminating in works that engage randomness and information. Space becomes less a system of organization than a field of entropy.

Kimsə gümanü-zənn ilə
olmadı həqq ilə biliş,
Həqqi bilən bilir ki mən,
zənnü gümanə sığmazam.
Surətə baxu mə'nini
surət içində tanı kim,
Cism ilə can mənəm,
vəli cism ilə canə sığmazam.
Həm sədəfəm, həm inciyəm,
həşru sirat əsinciyəm,
Bunca qumaşu rəxt ilə
mən bu dükanə sığmazam.

No one came to know the Truth
through doubt and conjecture,
The knower of Truth knows this:
I do not fit within doubt
or supposition.
Look at the appearance and recognise
the meaning within it,
I am the body, and I am the soul,
yet I cannot be contained in them,
I am the shell, and I am the pearl,
I am at the threshold of resurrection
and the bridge over Hell,
With all these goods and garments,
I cannot be contained in this shop.[3]

Ahmed's work resists recognition through certainty and cannot be approached by assumption or resolved through interpretation alone, since, as Nasimi suggests, truth does not arise from conjecture. In these carpets, what is seen cannot be fully grasped by expectation, as the image undermines its own clarity, and the pattern seems familiar yet refuses to settle into known structures. What is encountered exceeds the frameworks through which the carpet is interpreted, such that the work does not confirm perception but continually unsettles it, drawing the viewer into a state where seeing and knowing no longer coincide, a condition that resonates with Nasimi's poetic articulation of truth as irreducible to assumption and beyond containment.[4]

To look at these carpets is to navigate between appearance and meaning without settling their relationship, as form persists even when no longer anchored to the message it bears. Motifs stretch, dissolve, or fracture without disappearing, and in doing so reveal that meaning is not located beyond the surface but resides within its internal tension. This condition becomes particularly comprehensible in *Ancestors* (2026), where the image sustains its structure while continuously exceeding it. The work simultaneously inhabits both—body and image, material and perception—while remaining reducible to neither, holding these states together yet surpassing them through a persistent refusal to settle into a singular form. This simultaneity creates a threshold condition in which the carpet exists between structure and dissolution, continuity and rupture, and containment and excess, operating at once as both an enclosure and a release. Like the shell and the pearl, it encases and reveals in the same gesture, holding and

slipping at once, so that what is woven never stabilizes into a fixed form but remains in flux, suspended between what is made and what cannot be held.

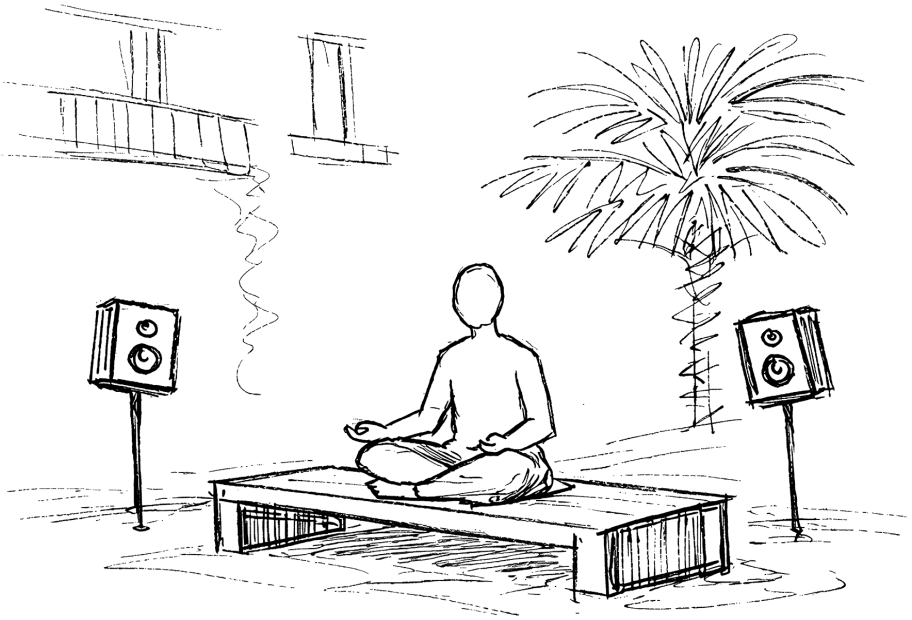
Within this condition, accumulation no longer guarantees coherence, and the density of pattern, the precision of technique, and the weight of tradition do not secure the work within a stable frame but instead intensify its instability. The carpet exceeds its own limits, refusing to remain within its function, its category, or its place. What remains is no longer an object but a field of unfolding in which perception is continuously drawn beyond what it can hold, extending toward a space where recognition gives way to awareness.

Can ilə həm cahan mənəm,
dəhrilə həm zaman mənəm,
Gör bu lətifeyi ki,
mən dəhrü zamanə sığmazam.
Əncüm ilə fələk mənəm,
vahy ilə həm mələk mənəm,
Çək dilini və əbsəm ol,
mən bu lisanə sığmazam.

I am soul, and I am the world,
I am both the age and the time,
See this subtle truth that I cannot be
contained within time or age.
I am the stars and I am the heavens,
I am both the revelation
and the angel,
Withdraw your tongue and be silent,
I cannot be contained within
this language.[5]

Nasimi's proposition finds its spatial articulation in the pavilion's refusal of containment at the levels of form, perception, and experience. What unfolds beyond this point is not an expansion of form but an expansion of conditions through which form is encountered. The pavilion extends Ahmed's inquiry from the surface of the carpet into an environment where perception itself becomes material. The work no longer resides in discrete objects but disperses across spatial, sonic, and visual registers, each destabilizing the other while remaining structurally entangled. The carpet, having already exceeded its role as ground, continues to function as a connective force, yet it no longer bears the full weight of meaning. It is accompanied, interrupted, and rearticulated by other media that do not illustrate it but expose parallel instabilities. On the walls of the last room, lines unfold in restless accumulation, looping, crossing, and thickening into dense fields that resist compositional closure in the form of poetic and mathematical expressions. These hand-drawn words do not represent gesture; they sustain it. They occupy a space between inscription and erasure, where mark-making approaches the threshold of illegibility without dissolving into it. The wall ceases to be a neutral support and becomes a surface of continuous negotiation, where form appears only to be exceeded by its own repetition.

Sound manifests not as atmosphere but as structure. It does not frame the works but traverses them, binding distant points while dissolving proximity. At times it contracts into a near-private field, drawing the listener inward and detaching perception from the visible, as in the *Garden of Awakening* (2026). Other times, it disperses, extending beyond the immediate, unsettling orientation and scale throughout several rooms. Sound does not stabilize meaning; it dislocates it. It introduces a temporal dimension



Garden of Awakening (2026), sketch
Room 3

in which perception cannot settle, where attention moves forward without resolution. Listening becomes a form of spatial navigation. Installation, in turn, intensifies the material aspect of this condition.

Textile thickens into mass, folds into itself, and accumulates weight, as in *Face It* in room 2, part of *I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One* (2026). What was once surface becomes volume, resisting the optical with the physical. These forms neither fully detach from the carpet nor remain within it. They occupy an in-between state, where structure is both preserved and displaced. Whereas in *Entropy Altar*, *Chahar Bagh*, and *Golden Limit* (2026), systems emerge that generate sequences beyond the artist's control—where language, image, or data unfold through processes that cannot be entirely anticipated—here, the logic of pattern persists, though its outcome remains unpredictable. Structure becomes generative rather than declarative. Across these elements, a distributed field takes shape. No single medium holds dominance; each acts as a variation within a larger network of relations. In Ahmed's work, the carpet flows into drawing, drawing dissolves into sound, sound extends into installation, and installation loops back to the logic of pattern. The viewing experience unfolds as duration rather than sequence, where past and present coexist within the same perceptual field. What surfaces is not synthesis but circulation. The work moves through itself.

The pavilion does not illustrate the condition of non-containment; it performs it. Boundaries remain visible, yet they no longer function as limits. Each element holds its form, yet exceeds it through relation. The carpet does not cease to be a carpet, the sound does not detach from its source. Instead, each extends beyond itself, entering a continuous process of transformation. What remains is not an object, nor even a set of objects, but a field of unfolding in which presence and disappearance remain inseparable. Ahmed's work does not resolve this tension; it simply sustains it.

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THE ALGEBRA OF THE UNSEEN: On Faig Ahmed, Hurufism, and the Unfinished Language of Physics

"The total number of minds in the universe is one."
—Erwin Schrödinger

The modern enterprise of physics owes its deepest advances to a willingness to transcend the way we directly perceive the world. From Newton's calculus to Einstein's curved spacetime, from Heisenberg's uncertainty to the vibrating strings of energy in contemporary theory, the physicist's task has always been to forge new symbolic languages—mathematical, visual, conceptual—capable of encoding realities that the senses alone cannot reach. We build equations the way poets build metaphors: not to decorate what we already know, but to illuminate what we cannot yet see. It is from this vantage point that I first encountered Faig Ahmed's practice—his sculptural carpets, his investigations into Hurufism, and the conceptual architecture of *The Attention*, his immersive environment for the Azerbaijan Pavilion at the 61st Venice Biennale. The work left me unsettled, in the best possible way. It does not merely illustrate scientific ideas through art. It performs something rarer: it generates a mode of perception that physicists, particularly those of us—myself included—working at the frontier of uniting quantum mechanics with Einstein's general theory of relativity, desperately need but have not yet been able to produce on our own.

AL-JABR AND THE MOTHER TONGUE OF PHYSICS

Consider the word "algebra." It enters the European lexicon from the Arabic *al-jabr*, meaning "restoration" or "completion," the title concept of al-Khwarizmi's ninth-century treatise that founded the discipline.[1]

Al-Khwarizmi's revolution was not simply the invention of new techniques. It was the creation of an abstract symbolic language—one in which unknowns could be named, manipulated, and solved through universal rules. That language became the mother tongue of all modern physics. Every equation of quantum mechanics, every operator in quantum field theory, every symmetry group in the Standard Model of particle physics speaks in the grammar that *al-jabr* made possible. When Paul Dirac (d. 1984) wrote his equation for the electron, when Werner Heisenberg (d. 1976) formalized the uncertainty principle, and when Richard Feynman (d. 1988) devised his diagrams to visualize quantum interactions—each was performing an act of algebraic imagination whose lineage traces back to ninth-century Baghdad.

This genealogy matters for understanding Ahmed's artwork because it reveals an intellectual kinship that runs far deeper than analogy. Ahmed works within the tradition of Hurufism, the medieval mystical movement founded by Fazlallah Astarabadi in the fourteenth century and carried forward by the great Azerbaijani poet Nasimi, which held that the letters and numbers of the Perso-Arabic alphabet constitute the fundamental building blocks of the cosmos (for a fuller account of Hurufism's intellectual and artistic legacy, see Gwendolyn Collaço's introductory essay in this catalogue).[2]

In Hurufism, letters are not mere vehicles for conveying meaning—they are the structural atoms of reality itself, a meta-language through which all existing entities relate to one another at the most fundamental level of creation. This is not a distant cousin of the algebraic impulse; it is its mystical twin, born in the same cultural soil. Both traditions insist that an abstract symbolic code underlies visible reality, and that mastering this code is the path to genuine knowledge. Algebra seeks to restore hidden quantities to the light; Hurufism seeks to restore the hidden divine architecture encoded in every letter. Physics and mysticism here share a common root: *al-jabr*—the noun meaning restoration and completion—which unveils what was always there.

CARPET DIAGRAMS AND THE VISUAL GRAMMAR OF THE INVISIBLE

One of the most consequential inventions in twentieth-century physics was Richard Feynman's diagrammatic method for calculating quantum interactions. His diagrams—deceptively simple pictures of lines, vertices, and loops—provided a visual grammar that made the invisible choreography of subatomic particles computable. They are not illustrations of physics; they are physics, each line and loop corresponding precisely to a mathematical term in the perturbative expansion of quantum field theory.

Ahmed's textile practice performs a strikingly analogous operation. His carpets encode cosmological and mystical content not as decoration but as diagram. The traditional Azerbaijani carpet, with its layered geometric motifs and numeric symmetries, already functions as what scholars have termed a form of "spiritual graphicacy"—a system for diagramming realities that transcend the material.[3]

When Ahmed liquefies a carpet—melting its rigid pattern into a flowing, molten form—he is not simply distorting a decorative object. He is visualizing a phase transition in the code itself, the moment when ordered structure surrenders to a more fundamental, fluid state. For a physicist, this image is electrifying, because it is precisely the kind of visual thinking we need as we confront the deepest unsolved problem in fundamental physics: the nature of the quantum vacuum.

THE LIQUEFIED CARPET AND THE QUANTUM VACUUM

Roughly seventy percent of the energy content of the universe consists of a substance we call dark energy—a pervasive, invisible force driving the accelerating expansion of spacetime. Despite decades of effort, we do not know what dark energy is. Our best candidate is the quantum vacuum itself: the seething, probabilistic ground state of quantum fields, which theory predicts should carry an enormous energy density. Yet when we attempt to calculate that density, our equations produce a number that is catastrophically wrong—roughly 120 orders of magnitude larger than what we observe.[4]

This crisis tells us something profound: we do not yet understand how quantum mechanics merges with the fabric of spacetime. The vacuum—the supposedly "empty" ground beneath all phenomena—remains uncharted territory. My own research, together with collaborators, has explored the possibility that dark matter itself behaves as a quantum fluid, a superfluid condensate whose collective behavior shapes the gravitational scaffolding of galaxies.[5]

Ahmed's liquefied carpets conjure exactly this vision. Consider, for instance, *I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One* (2026), a single continuous carpet that shifts from liquid colors to a traditional Azerbaijani floral pattern and fades to a fully black surface—an arc that mirrors the journey from dark energy's invisible pervasiveness to the enigma of dark matter. When a rigid, rule-governed textile dissolves into a flowing substance, we witness an analogue of the quantum vacuum's hidden nature: a state that is anything but empty, teeming with latent structure, yet refusing to be captured by

1 Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, al-Kitāb al-Mukhtaṣar fī Ḥisāb al-Jabr wal-Muqābala (c. 820 CE). The word "algorithm" likewise derives from the Latinization of al-Khwarizmi's name.

2 Hamid Algar, "Horufism," Encyclopaedia Iranica XII, Fasc. 5 (2004): 483–490; Shahzad Bashir, Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

3 On graphicacy in medieval Islamic visual culture, see Ildar Garipzanov, "The Rise of Graphicacy in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages," Viator 46 (2015): 1–22; Noah Gardiner, "Diagrams and Visionary Experience in al-Būnī's Laṭā'if al-ishārāt," in Visualizing Sufism, ed. Giovanni Maria Martini (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 16–50.

4 The cosmological constant problem remains one of the great unsolved puzzles in theoretical physics. See Steven Weinberg, "The Cosmological Constant Problem," Reviews of Modern Physics 61, no. 1 (1989): 1–23.

5 See, e.g., Stephon Alexander, Fear of a Black Universe: An Outsider's Guide to the Future of Physics (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2021).

our existing symbolic grids. His melted patterns are a visual metaphor for what physicists experience mathematically every day—the dissolution of our ordered frameworks at the boundary where quantum mechanics meets gravity. The *Entropy* Altar (2026) takes this further still. By deploying a quantum chip to generate genuinely random numbers from natural sources of entropy, Ahmed constructs an artwork whose output is shaped by the very indeterminacy that our theories cannot yet tame. It is an experiment—in the deepest sense—probing the same uncharted frontier that keeps physicists awake at night.

THE OBSERVER AND THE INCOMPLETENESS OF QUANTUM MECHANICS

The problem of the observer is perhaps the most philosophically charged question in all of quantum physics. In the standard formalism, the act of measurement—of paying attention—appears to play a constitutive role in determining physical reality. Before observation, a quantum system exists in a superposition of possible states; the act of attention collapses it into a definite outcome. The founders of quantum mechanics recognized this concept as a profound difficulty from the very beginning. Eugene Wigner (d. 1995) sharpened the paradox with his celebrated thought experiment, "Wigner's Friend," in which two observers assign contradictory quantum states to the same system, forcing the question of whether consciousness itself plays a constitutive role in physics.[6]

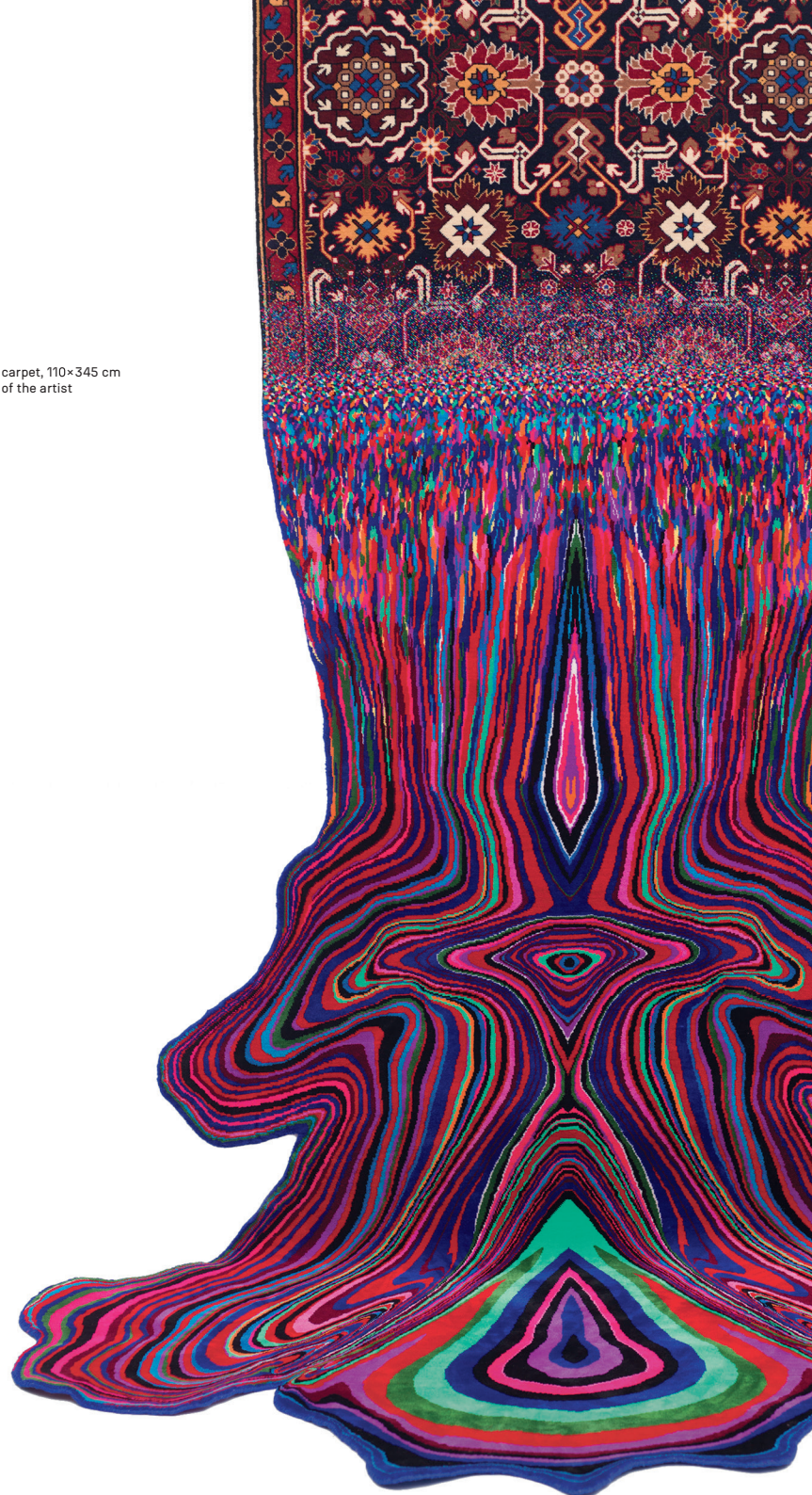
Wigner was not alone. Roger Penrose (b. 1931) has argued, through decades of sustained work, that quantum mechanics is fundamentally incomplete without an account of consciousness—that gravitational effects at the Planck scale, the inconceivably small threshold (roughly 10^{-35} meters) where quantum mechanics and gravity become inseparable, trigger an objective reduction of the wave function in which mind and matter are inextricably linked.[7]

As we push toward a theory of quantum gravity—a framework that unifies quantum mechanics with general relativity—the status of the observer becomes even more acute. If spacetime

6 Eugene Wigner, "Remarks on the Mind-Body Question," in The Scientist Speculates, ed. I. J. Good (London: Heinemann, 1961), 284–302.

7 Roger Penrose, The Emperor's New Mind (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); idem, Shadows of the Mind (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). See also Stuart Hameroff and Roger Penrose, "Consciousness in the Universe: A Review of the 'Orch OR' Theory," Physics of Life Reviews 11, no. 1 (2014): 39–78.

8 On Schrödinger and Vedanta, see Walter Moore, Schrödinger: Life and Thought (Cambridge University Press, 1989). On Bohr and Eastern philosophy, see Abraham Pais, Niels Bohr's Times (Oxford University Press, 1991). See also Stephon Alexander, Fear of a Black Universe (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2021).



Catalysis, 2021
Handmade wool carpet, 110×345 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

itself is a quantum entity, then who or what stands outside it to observe? Azerbaijan pavilion, entitled *The Attention*, addresses this problem with remarkable directness. The title itself is a thesis: attention is not passive reception but active participation in the constitution of reality. Ahmed's *Entropy Altar* envisions a quantum chip generating random numbers that transform into streams of language—an artwork whose form is irreducibly shaped by the interplay between quantum indeterminacy and the observer's engagement. This is not metaphor dressed as science. It is an authentic experimental intuition.

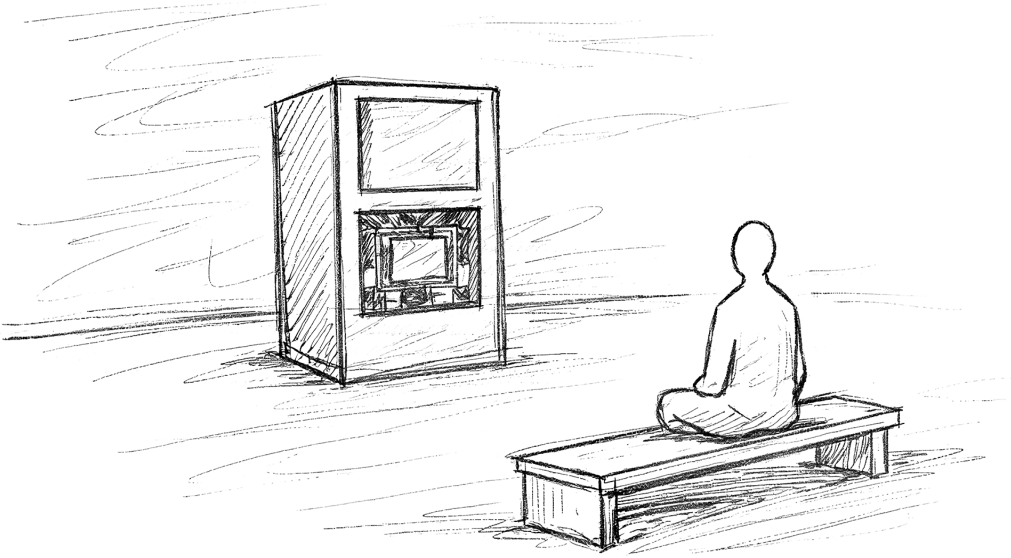
The Hurufi mystics understood something similar centuries ago. For Nasimi and his predecessors, the cosmos was not a dead mechanism awaiting external inspection; it was a living text that revealed itself through the quality of attention brought to it. Letters were simultaneously the medium and the message, the observer and the observed, the code and the reality it encoded. This is startlingly close to the position that Wigner, Penrose, and a growing number of physicists now suspect we must adopt: that consciousness and spacetime are not separate domains, but aspects of a single, deeper structure whose full algebra we have not yet discovered.

A SHARED MOTHER TONGUE

Some of the most consequential physicists of the twentieth century found their deepest intuitions not in the laboratory but in the contemplative traditions of the East. Erwin Schrödinger's immersion in Vedic philosophy shaped his conviction that consciousness could not be plural—an insight that quietly undergirds the unity of the wave function itself. Niels Bohr, whose complementarity principle owes a profound debt to his study of Daoism and Buddhism, placed the yin-yang symbol at the center of his coat of arms. My own mentor, the great mathematical physicist Chris Isham (b. 1944), studied Christian mysticism with equal seriousness, training himself to carry long calculations into a dream state—dissolving the boundary between rational formalism and contemplative vision in his own practice. Ahmed's *Golden Limit* (2026) enacts precisely this dissolution: based on the golden ratio, it uses lines drawn from the artist's own EEG readings during a meditative state to form the outlines of a landscape against an illuminated gold-leaf sun, making visible the threshold where scientific pattern and contemplative experience become one. These were not eccentricities. They were methodological commitments: each of these physicists understood that the symbolic structures capable of describing reality at its most fundamental level might be found in traditions that the modern scientific establishment had learned to ignore.[8]

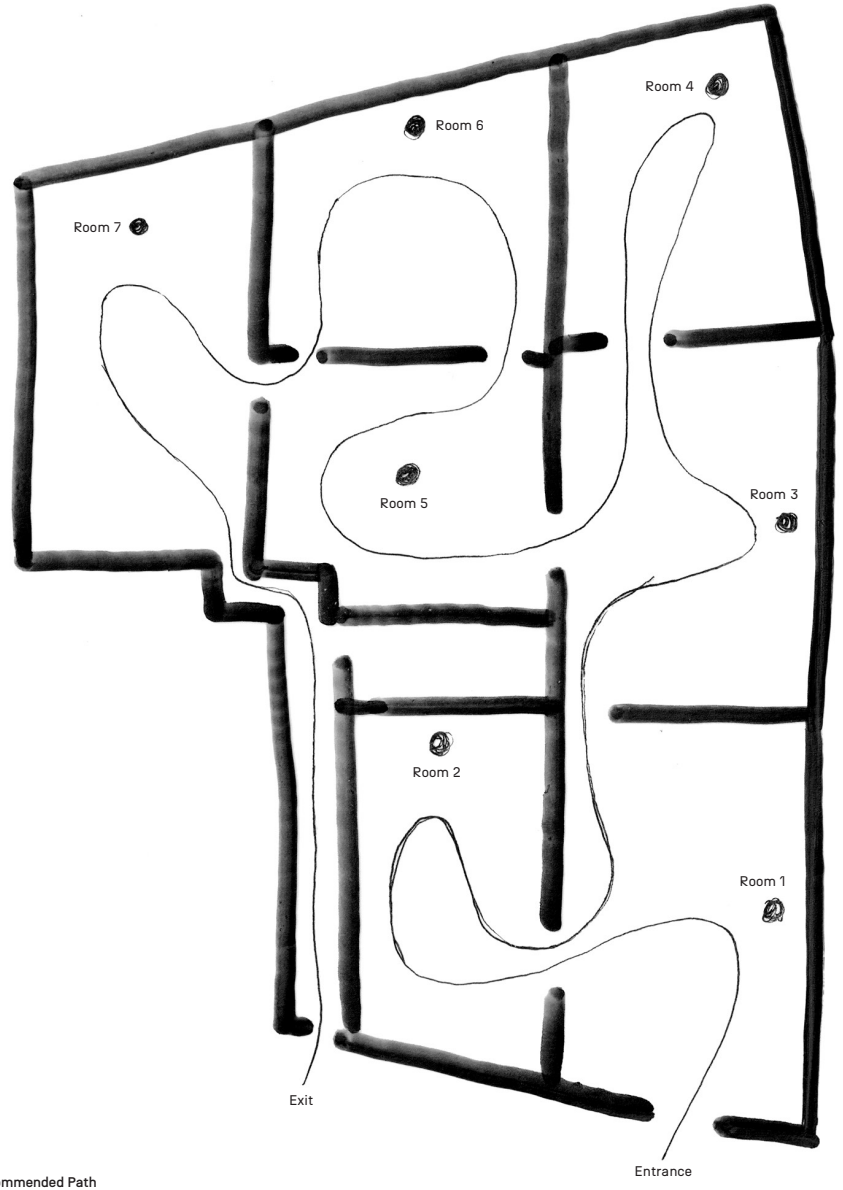
Yet the potential of Islamic mysticism—and Hurufism in particular—has not received comparable attention from the physics community. This strikes me as a remarkable missed connection. The tradition that gave physics its foundational language—algebra—also produced, in Hurufism, a sophisticated cosmological framework in which abstract symbols are the constitutive elements of reality. That framework is not merely a historical curiosity. It is a living intellectual resource, and Ahmed's work makes it vividly accessible to a global audience. For physicists

Entropy Altar (2026), sketch
Room 7



trained in the Western canon, this pavilion is an invitation to engage with a tradition that speaks our own mother tongue—but has been speaking it, in some ways, longer and more daringly than we have.

As a physicist who has spent a career searching for hidden connections—between jazz improvisation and quantum gravity, between sound waves in the early universe and the large-scale structures of galaxies—I recognize in Ahmed's work a fellow traveler. His practice does not merely accompany the scientific enterprise from the outside. It extends it. The liquefied carpet is not an illustration of the quantum vacuum; it is a way of seeing the vacuum that my equations have not yet achieved. The *Entropy Altar* is not a popularization of the measurement problem; it is a genuine probe of a frontier that remains uncharted by physics alone. Art, at its most powerful, does not decorate knowledge—it generates it. In the tradition of Nasimi, in the algebra of al-Khwarizmi, in the woven diagrams of Azerbaijan's carpet masters, there exists a mode of symbolic reasoning about the cosmos that physics has only begun to rediscover. The Azerbaijan Pavilion is where that rediscovery begins in earnest. And for this physicist, standing before a carpet that has learned how to dissolve, the feeling is not one of appreciation alone. It is the thrill of recognition: the sense that the answers we seek may already be woven into a language we have not yet learned to read.



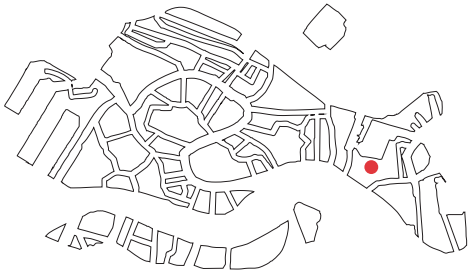
Recommended Path

Entire Pavilion: I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One, 2026
Room 1: Ancestors, 2026
Room 2: Face It, part of I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One, 2026
Room 3: Garden of Awakening, 2026
Room 4: The Knot, part of I Can Contain Both Worlds But I Do Not Fit Into This One, 2026
Room 5: Golden Limit, 2026
Room 6: Chahar Bagh, 2026
Room 7: Entropy Altar, 2026

THE ATTENTION by Faig Ahmed

AZERBAIJAN PAVILION
61st International Art Exhibition
La Biennale di Venezia

Campo della Tana,
Castello 2124/A-2125



9 MAY – 22 NOVEMBER 2026
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OPENING HOURS
9 May to 27 September, 11 AM – 7 PM
29 September to 22 November, 10 AM – 6 PM

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