

Creation and Mortality—The Eyes of Azrael

Alyssa Sakina Mumtaz

Remembering death—the one thing most of us desperately want to forget—is a pivotal spiritual practice in Muslim life. It has been so since the earliest days of Islam, following the Prophetic example and the Quran's abundant warnings about 'the fleeting life of this world.' If one is to objectively reckon with the purpose of life, death is always in the room. Engaging with this dichotomy has become a major feature of how I conceptualise my artistic practice.

As a contemporary artist and as an American-born Muslim who chose her path consciously, I am acutely aware of being stranded between epistemologies. The individualistic philosophy of the global contemporary art world (a modern colonialist construct) is abnormal when viewed from the theocentric perspective of Islamic thought and Muslim praxis. Bearing this in mind, a Muslim artist who is sincerely concerned with the expression of her own intellectual tradition must paddle hard against prevailing winds to unstrand her ways of thinking and working.

Following the birth of my children and the harrowing experiences of the pandemic, I started to think much more seriously about the fragility of the boundary between life and death. This awareness grows more and more visceral with time, especially within the unfolding of our global present, in which so many innocent lives are being ploughed under by racist imperialist governments and the endgame of global capitalism. Remembering death is now an urgent daily practice for me: in a world that is constantly rebelling against truth, it is a way of focusing on one absolute and incontrovertible reality.

Facing the imminence of death also raises speculative questions about the value of what will be left behind. From a spiritual perspective, the material archive of a life in art is a burdensome storehouse of attachments. When I think about my personal carbon footprint, the work I made before my religious conversion feels especially unwieldy. What will my children do with unmoored aesthetic objects that came into existence through a precarious cultural system that deserves interrogation? Will they be discerning enough to let go of the things that I could not let go of myself?

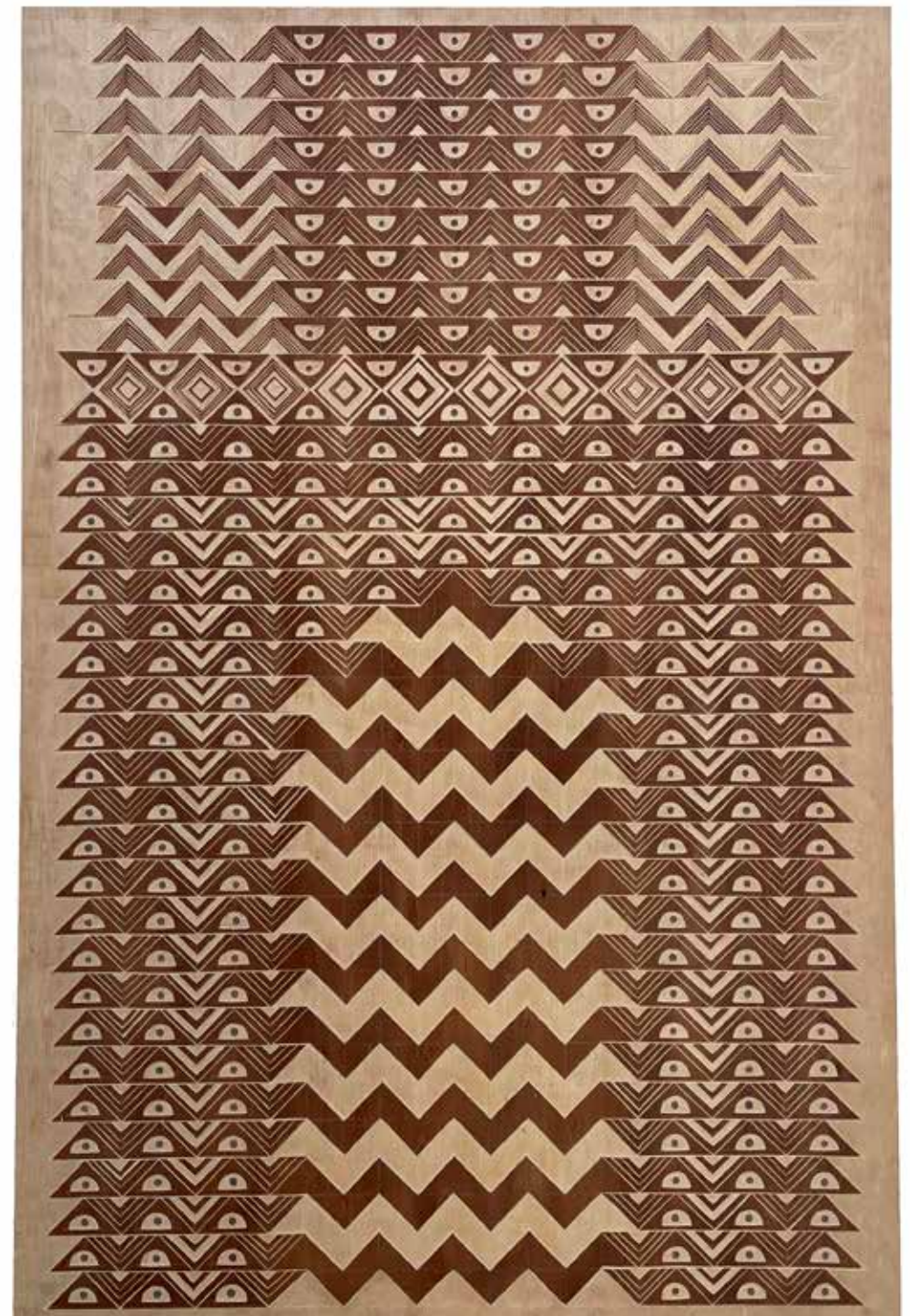
When my eldest, Hadi, was about six months old, I started hand-sewing a quilt for him—not a baby quilt, but a man-sized *razai* that I hope he will eventually use in daily life. There have been moments when making the *razai* has felt like an impossible task: to craft a fully functional textile that could reflect my son's layered heritage, I had to teach myself American and *desi*

quilt-making techniques simultaneously. The handwork that is holding the quilt together is improvised and eccentric, but it gives form to love. Taking this deep dive into the embodied reality of craft—forms of knowledge that are tactile, physical, structural, and functional, but also speculative, poetic, intuitive, and emotional—has helped me reimagine my creative vocation as a form of devotional practice.

The struggles and rewards of making the *razai* have also unlocked new ways for me to bear witness to religious experience. In 2022, I completed my first, hand-quilted *janamaz*, a textile prayer mat that is simultaneously a useful object, a conceptual artwork, and a family heirloom for the future. I think of this *janamaz* as a kind of manifesto for my practice and way of life as a maker: I am now trying to make things that jump over the perceived divide between so-called 'art' and 'craft'. In this spirit, I resist the outmoded yet persistently invasive idea that 'craft' is an unintelligent automatic process inferior to the intellectual space of 'art'. Knowledge and creativity are fully embodied and ensouled; in all forms of making, they are expressed physically while also being animated by intuitions, spiritual insights, and quasi-miraculous inspirations, to varying degrees.

In my creative practice I move fluidly amidst material inquiries that constellate many different forms of handwork in a search for larger narratives. I draw and paint using handmade papers and pigments; I weave with hand-spun woollen yarns and traditional wooden hand tools; I sew quilts completely by hand using woven and block-printed textiles; and print from my own hand-carved woodblocks. I owe a special debt to the generative out-of-control-ness of printmaking, in which every impression records a unique encounter and moment in time. There is a leap of faith that occurs in the germination stage of my print projects: as I set things in motion, I welcome the unseen Collaborator.

The Eyes of Azrael is one such project. Conceived and set in motion over a six-month period in 2023, it is a series of woodblock prints that meditates on the symbolic embodiment of *Malik-ul-Maut*, the Angel of Death. The concept of the Angel of Death in Islam is vast and multifaceted. While there is no mention of Azrael by name in the Quran or the Hadith, exegetists, philosophers, speculative metaphysicians, and theologians have expanded on his form and meaning through the centuries. Some have viewed Azrael as a cosmological symbol, while others have imagined and explained the reality of death through minutely described anthropomorphic imagery. For instance, according to one Islamic tradition, the Archangel chosen to be God's procurer of souls possesses a physical form that is beautiful or fearsome according to the soul of the person he visits.¹ In one of his most harrowing manifestations, he is covered in a multitude of eyes. Each eye represents the life of a created being and as creatures die, eyes close.² Another tradition holds that the Angel of Death visits each person multiple times a day.³ In this corner of the pious imagination, he is quite literally in the room, ever vigilant, watching us. He is hidden in plain view, inhabiting a liminal space between inner consciousness and outward life.



Work in progress view of the woodblock for *The Eyes of Azrael*, 2023. Woodcuts are a subset of the practice of relief printmaking, in which a block is carved or altered to create a low-relief surface that holds ink selectively. In this state, the block has been stained with walnut ink and carved in preparation for printing. The light-coloured marks in the image are places where material has been removed from the surface of the block through carving. Photo by author.

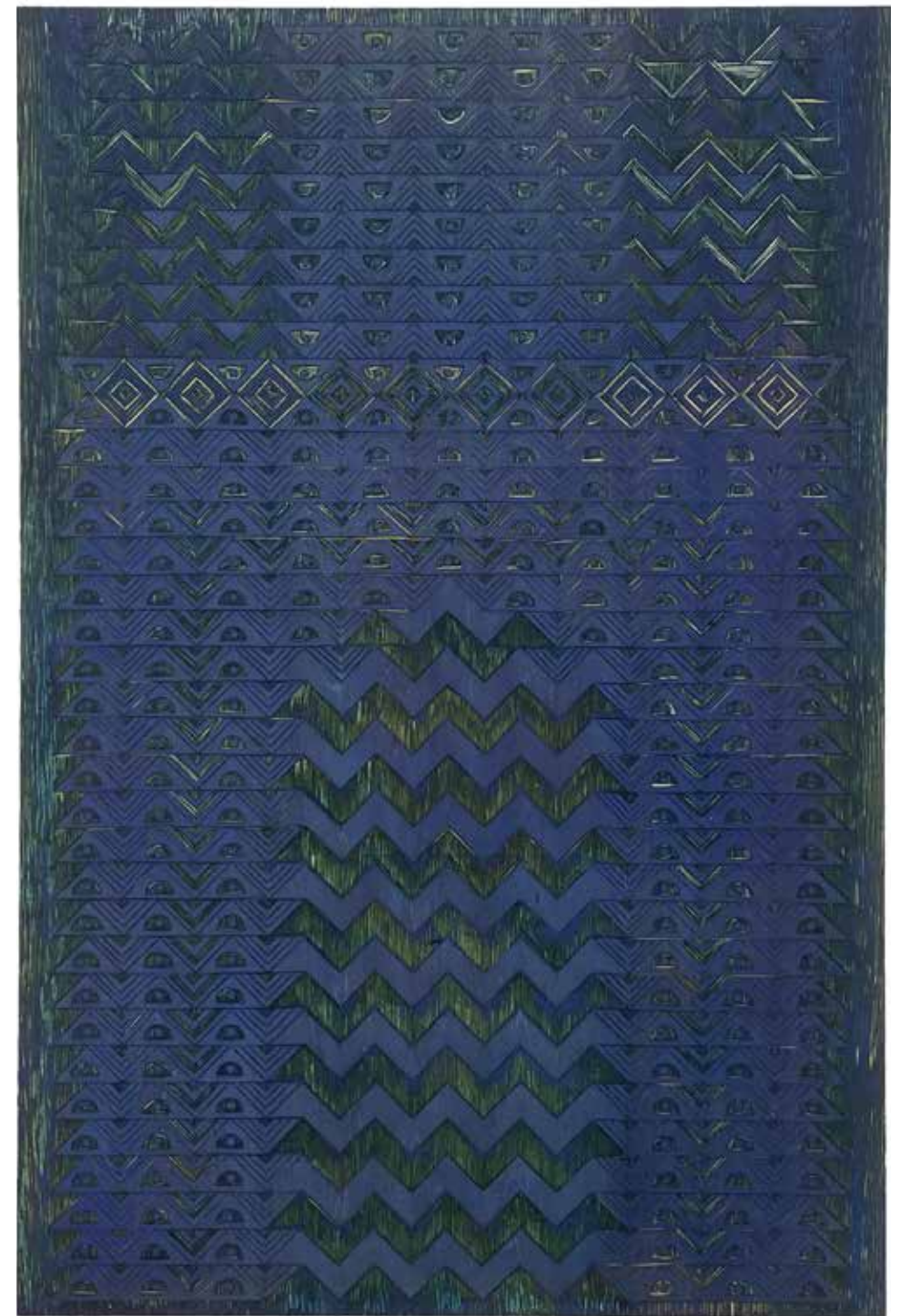
Derived from a single, hand-carved 24x36-inch *shina* woodblock, the images that comprise *The Eyes of Azrael* are printed in transparent Prussian blue ink on handmade *mitsumata* paper and hand-stencilled in gold.[¶] When presented as a complete group, the images visualise the gradual extinguishing of the many eyes. Reflecting light against a sombre blue ground, the gold irises that punctuate the eyes suggest flickering lights that will be snuffed out, one by one.

I imagine that the Angel of Death is in the room when I pray, and this body of images is a way of reckoning with that presence. I also remember him in interstitial moments that unfold outside of ritual life. Any act can be animated by a spiritual intention if we offer it to God sincerely. As an example of this kind of offering, the activity of making woodblock prints has become one of many contemplative exercises that I practise daily. *The Eyes of Azrael* was made using a simple craft methodology derived from the oldest form of printmaking known to history—printing an image by hand from a carved wooden block. The oldest surviving printing blocks were produced in China as early as 220 AD and were most likely carved for the purpose of printing textiles.⁴ From Asia to Europe and beyond, woodblock prints have been associated with sacred texts, arts of the book, and the preservation of knowledge. I embrace this history and the diversity of its forms but participate in it humbly, knowing that my engagement with it is, at best, a patchwork of experiments with occasional moments of insight.

During the process of making *The Eyes of Azrael*, I became aware of a hidden dialogue between creation and sacrifice. The woodblock on which the image was carved was once living matter harvested from Japanese linden trees. The *mitsumata* fibre and indigo pigment used to make the blue handmade paper on which the images are printed was harvested from other once-living plants. The home-brewed ink that I used to stain the block before carving it was distilled from desiccated black walnut shells that became ink instead of helping to fulfil the life cycle of the walnut tree.

The traditional Japanese tools that I used to carve the block are tiny gouges and knives sharp enough to draw blood. And yet, these carefully hand-forged blades are also fragile and changeable, requiring constant honing and care as they undergo their own process of erosion over time. The art of carving consists of many minutely controlled acts of violence that go both ways: the tools reduce the block irreversibly, and the block reduces the tools. There is no going back on either account—only subtraction and maintenance.

[¶] The woodblocks that I work with are made of *shina* plywood—a five-layer composite block made from *tilia japonica* trees that are grown sustainably in the colder regions of Japan. This wood is favoured for its fine, almost imperceptible grain pattern, and the quality of being structurally strong yet easy to carve. Also of Japanese origin, *mitsumata* paper is a fine-surfaced traditional paper made from the bark of the shrub *edgeworthia papyrifera*. I utilise Japanese tools and materials primarily because they are the most refined resources readily available to contemporary artisans.



Work in progress view of the woodblock for *The Eyes of Azrael*, 2023. This image shows the block's surface after it was inked by hand using a large roller. The areas of the block that appear strongly blue in colour are the uncarved portion of the image. Following this inking, the block was printed on an etching press using minimum pressure. Photo by author.

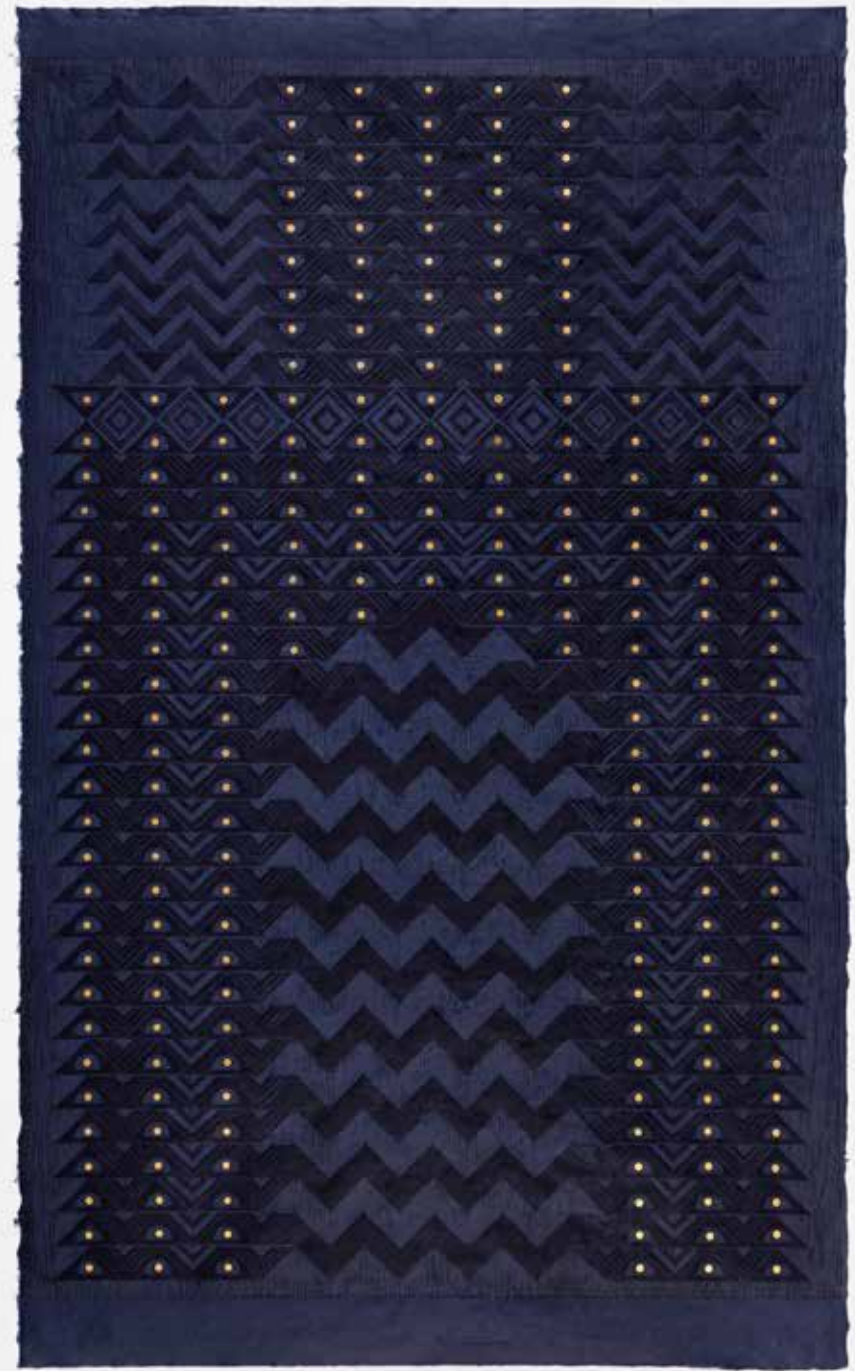
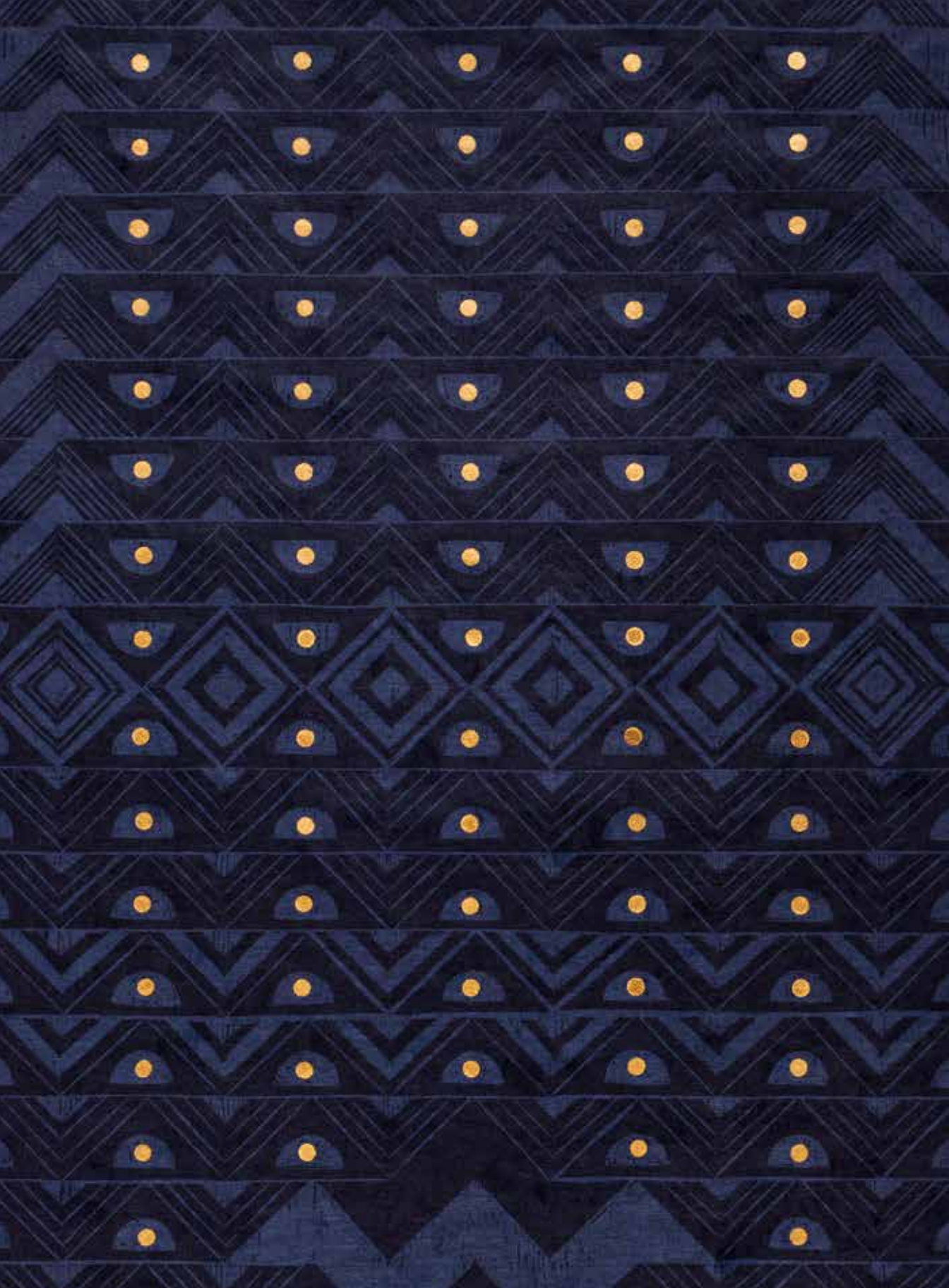
From a certain point of view, drawing is also a subtractive process. Whether one is carving directly and spontaneously into the wood's surface, or following a sketch that serves as a map, the act of drawing, be it emergent or choreographed, delimits the field of possibility mark by mark. As an image and the meanings that crystallise around it come into focus, other paths disappear, at least temporarily. In this sense, drawing can be a kind of winnowing process that separates the grain from the chaff, both visually and conceptually. Before I began carving the block for *The Eyes of Azrael*, I drafted its imagery onto the surface of the wood using a simple geometric framework with the grid as a compositional scaffolding. The revealed science of geometry, even in its most rudimentary forms, offers a window into the creative intelligence of God.⁵ Human beings are incapable of engaging with all of it all at once, and yet, mercifully, these limitations allow us to participate in our individual capacities.

The carving that eventually articulates the block is like a form of ritual scarification. After carving, it is tempting to allow the transformed block to remain as it is, un-inked and unprinted, with its blonde wounds on full display. However, to fulfil its purpose, the block must be inked beyond recognition, its contents obscured in the process. No amount of oil cleaning will fully remove the stain that is left behind in the wood grain. To make their impressions, most woodblocks will travel through a printing press or be rubbed vigorously by hand. The mechanics of transmission can erode a block, impression by impression, as can heavy hands and human error. But when the block prints, it becomes a mother—a new version of itself with offspring.

All of this takes tremendous physical exertion, concentration, and persistence. It is a hungry process that consumes matter, energy, and life. And for what? A delicate object, a tissue-thin membrane, bits of paper that will disappear in a gust of wind or dissolve in water.



Work in progress view of the woodblock for *The Eyes of Azrael*, 2023. After printing, the block was oil cleaned, leaving residual colour from the ink. In this final state, the block has been stained bluish green through the sequential processes of inking, printing, and cleaning. Photo by author.



Alyssa Sakina Mumtaz, 2023, *The Eyes of Azrael*, variable edition of 30 woodblock prints on handmade *mitsumata* paper, each 37 x 25 inches, published by the artist at Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA. Photo by Jon Verney.



Notes

1. Al Ghazali, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, 43-45.
2. Ibn Ahmad Qadi, *Islamic Book of the Dead*, 32. For a detailed study of the Angel of Death in Islamic tradition, see MacDonald, "The Angel of Death in Late Islamic Tradition."
3. Al Ghazali, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, 54. In some traditions, Azrael visits each house three times.
4. Weiji, *History of Textile Technology of Ancient China*, 323-26.
5. Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*, 11. For a detailed survey of *Ikhwan al-Safa's* understanding of geometry as a divinely revealed science, see El-Bizri, "Epistles of the Brethren of Purity."

Al Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife: Book 40 of the Revival of the Religious Sciences —Kitāb Dhikr Al-Mawt Wa-Mā Ba'dahu: Ihyā' 'ulūm Al-Dīn*. Translated by T.J. Winter. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1989.

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Netton, Ian Richard. *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān Al-Safā)*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991.

MacDonald, John. "The Angel of Death in Late Islamic Tradition," *Islamic Studies* 3, no. 4 (1964): 485-519.

Niazi, Kaveh. "Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On Arithmetic and Geometry. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 1 and 2." Review of *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On Arithmetic and Geometry. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 1 and 2*, edited and translated by Nader El-Bizri in *Aestimatia: Critical Reviews in the History of Science*, 12, 2018: 152-6.

Weiji, Cheng. *History of Textile Technology of Ancient China*. New York: Science Press New York, 1992.