



**Saint Xavier University**  
Department of Art & Design:

Honors Project:  
**#muslimban: Silkscreens of Protest**

by  
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Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen are primarily Muslim nations in the Middle East and Africa. Since 2017, the United States government under the Trump administration, has detained hundreds of visitors from those countries and revoked visas in the tens of thousands. This action has not just interrupted the lives of countless Americans, many Americans see it as confirmation that people from the Middle East are not to be trusted. The travel ban, or "Muslim ban" directly targets individuals because of their country of origin, and more directly, their religion, claiming that they are potentially dangerous. It is my opinion that this viewpoint is deeply harmful, creating a rift between Muslim/Middle Eastern Americans and Americans who are wary of Muslims or people of Middle Eastern descent. It is my desire to communicate, through the medium of silkscreen poster, the validity of the Muslim American experience, and a message of Muslim or Middle Eastern inclusion in American society. By utilizing key "patriotic" phrases and images in my works, I am suggesting the application of patriotic norms be applied to these people in the same way a white, Christian person claims those same identifiers. The Statue of Liberty, a symbol of patriotism, is also a symbol of welcome as well as open immigration policies. I have utilized the potency of that symbol to address Islamophobia, and discrimination against these people because of their country of origin. I also utilize the powerful images of family and youth to draw parallels to the American Dream in several of my other posters and prints. If a person who mistrusts Muslim or Middle Eastern Americans can relate to these ideas, can they perhaps find a way to address their issues of mistrust and embrace these neighbors as friends as well? While the countries listed in the Muslim ban have not originated any terrorists since 9/11, I believe this policy to be without merit, and harmful to the American tapestry. As a artist who draws upon my conscience for guidance, I have worked to address this injustice by creating visual works with input and feedback from the Muslim community in my area, seeking to create the most powerful and appropriate pieces possible. It is my desire that hearts and minds will be changed when observing my works, and if not then perhaps in the conversations that follow.

"But with or without God, I think it is a sin to kill.

To take the life of another is to me very grave.

I will do it when necessary but I am not of the race of Pablo."

- Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

In Ernest Hemingway's classic, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the character Anselmo has always appealed to me. Knowledgeable, wise, and talented, he guides Robert Jordan through the mountains of Spain, simultaneously navigating the rocky terrain and the rocky personalities of the guerrilla fighters with whom they are stationed. My artwork, like Anselmo, treads the line between unity and conflict, war and peace, and through my work I engage my audience in ways that challenge their existing views while encouraging dialogue with those who are different from them. In Hemingway's story, Anselmo is clearly cast against the character of Pablo, a fellow warrior in the troop who has passed his prime and is now a drunk, conniving coward. Pablo's one remaining talent is his ability to kill. For this, the guerrillas keep Pablo around but his motives are far from ethical, and in many ways he exists only to wreak havoc. As an "X-ennial," (someone born from 1976-1983, between the Generation-X and Millennial demographics) I have had a front row seat to observe the emergence of online trolls. These "Pablos" hide in cave-like dwellings, spitting vitriol from dark rooms with dark motives. This is evident in designs like the vicious conservative cartoons portraying the Prophet Mohammed that prompt bombings from fundamentalist sects, and racist and homophobic illustrations circulated at white supremacist rallies and through 4Chan. Artists on the political left are often just as cruel, creating monstrous images of President Trump, like the sculptures flash-installed in cities around the country by artist collective Indecision in 2016, depicting the President naked with tiny genitalia. These attacks through art, while often effective in rallying partisans, rarely serve to bring opposing sides together. Trolling uses politics to sow messages of division and hate, something I strive to combat in my work.

The name I use as an artist is "The Race of Pablo," taken from the quote above where Anselmo reveals his aversion to killing others, even in war. Death, he explains, is a natural part of war and is often necessary, but to him it is never a good thing. "To take the life of another is to me very grave," Anselmo states. "I will do it when necessary, but I am not of the race of Pablo." My art is often political in nature and contains controversial themes, but it does not come from an intention to harm or divide. I desire to create works that enrich and inform, educate and positively impact my audience. While my works can sometimes be upsetting or difficult to view, I am using those elements in order to bring about change. I, like Anselmo, am not of the race of Pablo.

Cathie Ruggie-Saunders, a professor at Saint Xavier University, taught me how to print using silkscreen. She demonstrated to my class the simple act of drawing ink through a fine screen onto

paper while blocking (or stenciling) part of that area with another substance like torn paper, dried fluid or emulsion fluid. Professor Ruggie-Saunders took us deep into the historic context of the medium, and how it transformed in the mid twentieth century, from something strictly commercial to a widely accepted fine art form. I remember thinking at that time that I too would like to make that transition. Having worked in graphic design for close to twenty years, I have sought out an education that will give me the skills, connections and understanding needed to make a similar leap; from making client-driven, commercial works to personal expressions of my artistic vision.

Over the last ten years or so, I have also struggled with another form of expression. Namely, what it means to create works of conscience as an ally of underrepresented or oppressed members of American society. There is a strange tendency in people who recognize the privileges they benefit from to remain silent and complacent about issues that negatively affect minority groups, rather than speak out. I have come, through several excellent classes on race and gender, to understand these feelings to be rooted in institutional white supremacy, feelings of inadequacy, and shame. Rather than give in to those feelings and let them prevent me from creating artworks that apply to the struggles of others, I am now working to change these oppressive systems by incorporating community feedback and deep, lasting relationships with underrepresented groups into my work. It is my intention to demonstrate to those who are like me, and those who are not, that these groups matter, and that their needs and struggles are legitimate issues that must be addressed.

The title of my Senior Project for the Saint Xavier University Department of Art and Design, and subsequently, my Honors Seminar Project is **#muslimban: Silkscreens of Protest**. My project consists of six 18"x24" red, white and blue silkscreen prints, protesting the 2017 travel ban put in place by the Trump administration, supported by a 2018 Supreme Court ruling. The six pieces are split into two triptychs, entitled **Life, Liberty**, and **The Pursuit of Happiness**. The first triptych consists of graphic posters (whose titles are prefaced by the hashtag #muslimban) that communicate my message of Muslim-American inclusion through a combined use of imagery and type, specifically the phrases "Repeal #muslimban" and "United We Stand", while the second triptych consists of "fine-art prints" that express their intent without text, utilizing imagery and gesture alone, with a focus on artistry. The poster series is certainly more recognizable as "protest" art, while the fine-art prints communicate a message of inclusion and joy without specifically voicing the issue that precipitated their creation. One set seems destined for public consumption, the other for private enjoyment.

Soon after candidate Trump announced what came to be called the “Muslim Ban”, I began working on an early version of the poster that would become the poster **#muslimban Liberty**. Rudimentary, crude and hand cut, my first study was a two-color poster depicting the Statue of Liberty in teal with torch raised, standing alongside the hashtag “#muslimban” in large white letters resting on a field of red. I hung a dozen posters up around my neighborhood, and showed the rest to friends, but they did not seem to make much of an impact. Months later, I remembered an article I had read the year before in the Daily Beast, describing how the “Statue of Liberty was originally conceived as a Muslim peasant woman.” According to the article, the statue’s designer, Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, originally intended the statue to commemorate the completion of the Suez Canal and intended to build in Cairo. When it became clear that Egypt did not have the funds available, the statue was revised for an American audience, her headscarf and flowers removed, and given as a gift to the American people.

I researched, drew a few rough sketches, and then returned to my studio. I cut a second set of stencils, and carefully worked them into the design so that it blended well with the statue below it. In my research, I had encountered only two instances of the Statue of Liberty wearing a headscarf, one featured on the far-right website InfoWars, and the other on 4Chan. In these poorly photoshopped memes, Lady Liberty was nearly invisible, draped under a full body “Niqāb” like those used in Saudi-Wahhabi culture, her body was hidden and only the eyes were visible through a narrow slit. The memes were obvious in their wordless intention and their message was clear: if America fails to stem the tide of invading Muslim culture, this is what its future will look like. I wanted to make



clear in my work that the Statue of Liberty's headscarf was not a symbol of oppression draped to hide her, but conversely, a revelation of her true nature. After all, before the French government removed her headscarf and flowers, replacing them with a crown of light and placing her in New York harbor, she was a Muslim.

My earliest prints were screenprinted using hand-cut stencils using canary tracing paper. These were not photo realistic like my later work, and have a very stylized appearance. I used a vibrant red field, with the Statue of Liberty in teal and finally the headscarf and sidebar in a darker teal that was almost forest green. Regarding text, the hashtag “#muslimban” (in nearly 200 pt. type) took up a large portion of the upper section and I printed the words “United We Stand” up the side of the poster to clarify my stance and eliminate any idea that I somehow supported the travel ban. Early on, I did not want to use red, white and blue as a color scheme because it seemed too obvious. I used patriotic imagery in order to draw people in who view themselves as patriotic, but felt that using the United States' colors was over the top. In later designs I converted to a very dark blue, and a fire-orange red, dancing closer to the U.S.' traditional colors. I did so to concrete my message of American inclusion.



It was at this point that I reached out to the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at Saint Xavier University where I study Art & Design, asking to present the first and second versions of **#muslimban Liberty**. I was concerned that my work might be viewed as exploitive, problematic or inappropriate, and the nature of a white man making art about Muslim Americans seemed all of those things if I did not seek out the opinions of Muslim Americans before making the work public. Diana Katab, the President of the MSA at the time, and three of her officers met with me for over an hour. During that time, I shared my ideas, asked questions, listened to feedback and opened the design up to criticism, stating

that I did not want to speak for a group of people without their input and cooperation. I explained that as a non-Muslim, I did not see it as my place to speak for Muslims, but that my conscience demanded that I say something to those who might assume by my silence, agreement. The group was excited, vibrant and gracious, and invited me to present my posters at a dinner the following week.

The Muslim community in the Chicago area is a vibrant and resilient one, and I have been the beneficiary of their kindness, patience, and acceptance as I've walked this journey of discovery. To show my artwork without acknowledging the profound impact their feedback and support has had on it would be a great injustice. I was not willing to make these pieces without the overwhelming support of the people to whom my work strives to bring attention. On a few occasions I've considered stepping back from the work, only to find the will to persevere in the voices of those who support what I am trying to accomplish. When encouraging other white artists who seek to make socially conscious artwork, I often say "be a soapbox, not on a soapbox" meaning "be" a platform that others can project from. Use privilege to quiet the loudest voices in a room and insist that they listen to the those who are being ignored. I stand by my work, proud of what I have accomplished, but humble in the knowledge that these are not my stories, and this is not my pain.

The feedback sessions with the MSA were incredibly productive, and I learned a lot. I began by speaking briefly about the work I had done so far, and then handed the microphone to audience members and asked for their thoughts. For the next forty-five minutes, I fielded questions, explained my decisions, and discussed ways to make the piece better. It was surprising to me then, but I have seen it in every venue since, that almost all Muslim viewers interpreted the color choices of red, green and teal as a nod to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and the U.S. government's often one-sided behavior favoring Israel. In this poster, they read an America that supported Palestine; the America they wish for. Even more importantly, the vast majority of people I showed the early versions of **#muslimban Liberty** did not see a "headscarf" until it was pointed out. Even Muslim women who were themselves wearing a scarf did not see it right away. My subtlety had backfired. Several folks suggested a much darker ink for the scarf, but I resisted, feeling that it might serve to reinforce negative stereotypes and seem threatening. I promised to look into ways to make the headscarf more dynamic, and at the time accepted the Palestinian interpretation as a positive side-car to my message, rather than a distraction.

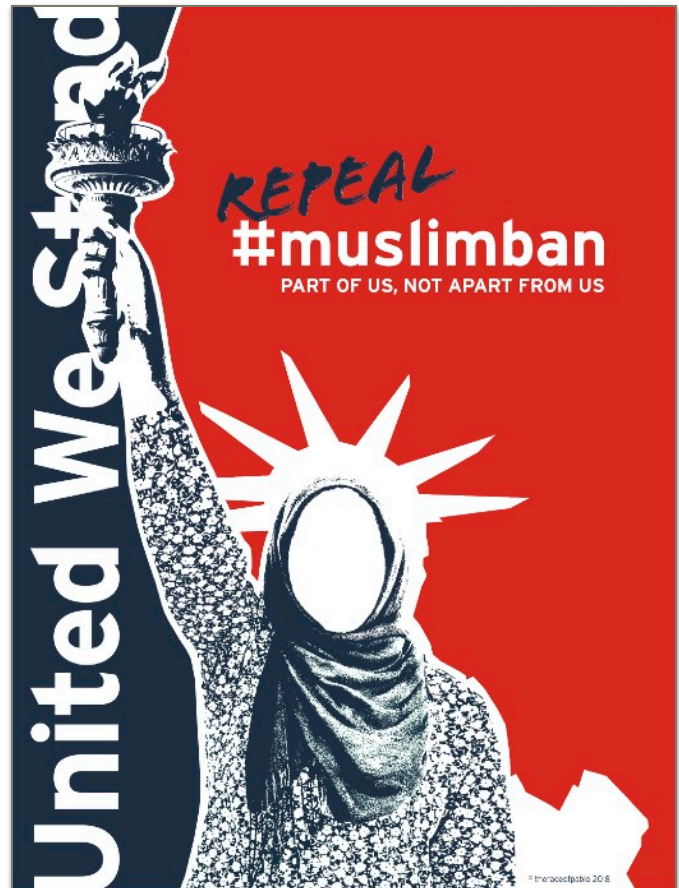


The most dramatic change to the poster took place when I learned to utilize photo emulsion techniques to incorporate photographs into the screens, which produced a much more realistic look than my hand cut stencils had produced. I reached out again to the MSA, this time asking for female models who would be interested in posing for the poster. Several volunteered, but none fit the part so well as 20 year old, half-French, half-Moroccan, Hiba Alwatik. I held a transparency of the statue's design in front of the camera, directing Hiba to hold her hand higher, or lower, or over just a bit. It was amazing to me how well this direction worked, and with less than 20 shots, we got the image I wanted. I was able to edit the image in Photoshop, capturing the flowers in her dress and tassels on her scarf. I bought a large pack of 140 lb. Sweet Tooth Pop-Tone paper from French Paper Company, and printed an edition of 40.

Over the summer of 2018, Professor Nathan Peck, the chair of SXU's Art & Design department, founded the art gallery "UpFall" in Chicago's Beverly neighborhood. Together we curated six art shows in three months. Our third show featured a progression of the **#muslimban Liberty** series, from my earliest design to its third (current at the time) iteration. Entitled **The Process of Change** the progression demonstrated the flow of my creative process, and I received feedback from visitors to the gallery. Members of SXU's MSA came to the show, and it was encouraging to share my progress with them. Viewers were still struggling to make out the hijab until I pointed it out, and again, not everyone was sure that I was speaking out against the ban. The design still had clarity issues, and it was not accomplishing my



goals. Following the show, I developed several alterations in photoshop and crowd sourced these alternate versions on social media. For the first time I changed the dark green color to a navy blue, and in some designs eliminated the teal Statue of Liberty that had been printed underneath Hiba's layer. Since the Supreme Court had upheld the travel ban, I felt that the focus needed to be more "in the moment" than historical, and by removing the statue's face and leaving an empty hole in the hijab, I forced the viewer to confront the empty space, asking the audience to be honest with themselves about the face they imagined. Was it friendly or adversarial? Feedback regarding that decision was positive but viewers thought that poster felt much more aggressive and confrontational. I agreed, but argued that it could also be seen by Muslim girls as an inspirational element. Each headscarf-wearing girl that viewed the poster could imagine their own face in that space, imagining themselves an integral part of the American social fabric. Finally, I added the word "Repeal", solidifying my position and calling for action. The responses to my informal survey were evenly split. I evaluated the comments against the designs, and created the fourth version of **#muslimban Liberty**.



On September 27, 2018, at the invitation of Principal Tammie Ismail, I spoke at the AQSA School in Bridgeview, the only all- girls Muslim High School in the United States. She specifically invited me to speak to a classroom of Advanced Placement English Language Acquisition students taught by my friend Stacey Hartin who had told Tammie about my work. I was initially scheduled to speak for 30 minutes, but the school rearranged the girls' day so that I could have two complete periods to spend with the students, discussing my **#muslimban** posters and *The Littlest Refugee* (a silkscreen print of the three year old Syrian refugee Aylan Kurdi, who drowned with his family fleeing to Turkey.), as well as my approach to art. Mrs. Hartin asked me to speak freely, and only suggested that I work "career" into the discussion somehow. When planning my visit, Stacey and I discussed

intersectional feminism, white supremacy and institutionalized racial bias. She informed me that the class had been doing extensive reading on the subject of race, and were currently working on “rage against racism” projects. She said that most of the girls were working around the theme of Islamophobia and she would like them to branch out more if possible. Principal Ismail was vaguely familiar with my work, and told me later that she assumed my value as a speaker would be as an example of a career in art and design. She had suggested as well that I begin my discussion with the girls by asking how many were interested in pursuing careers in art and design, and while several were, our discussion had much more to do with activism, persistence, and community than it did my choice of career or personal success. I introduced my work in the same, process-driven approach that I have used in most of my presentations and discussed how my work began as a passionate but rudimentary design and how it developed into the poster they were looking at. The students had an excellent reaction to the “missing” face, and we discussed how interesting it would be to paint the design on a wall, projecting the faces of AQSA students into the space where a face would be. Principal Ismail stayed, in spite of her busy schedule, for over an hour, and was on several occasions brought to tears by the artwork, or the comments of her students. It was very moving, and had a deep impact on my understanding of the power that artworks of inclusion can have on a marginalized group of people. Some of the girls mentioned feeling “seen” and “important” because of the poster, and when I left, I gave the school a copy to hang in the foyer at their request.



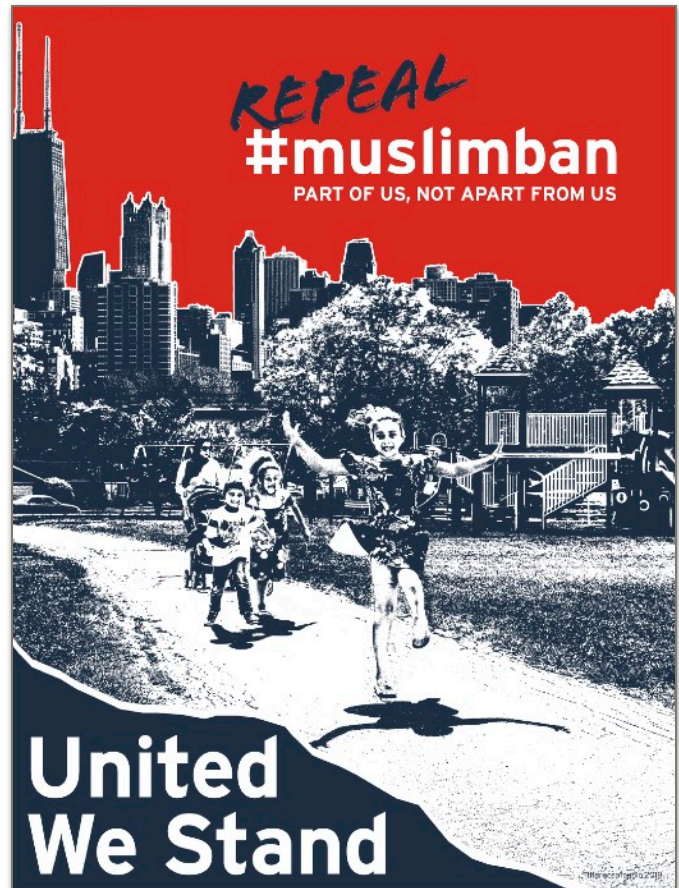
After the class was excused, Principal Ismail and Mrs. Hartin invited me to join them for lunch, where we were met by Assistant Principal Eve Mersch, STEM Director Dr. Janelle Scharon, and Art teacher Alana Marcelle. Our conversation was focused on the students' in-class comment cards, and the subject of utilizing feedback in creative and constructive ways. We discussed my idea for projecting faces into the headscarf on an enlarged version of **#muslimban Liberty**, and the possibility of doing it as a permanent mural at the school. About two weeks after my visit, I received two dozen handwritten thank you cards from the girls in the class with drawings, personal notes, and statements of support and thanks. In several notes, it was clear that this was the first time that many of them had

felt championed by a person who was not Muslim, and that the work I was doing meant a great deal to them. Other notes addressed specific design challenges and the girls' reactions to my choices. For example, I was nervous that Muslims would react negatively to my change in color scheme (from red, white and green, to red, white and blue) because of the positive associations with Palestinian rights, but quite the opposite occurred. One of the students stayed after class to speak to me and said she felt that seeing a headscarf integrated into a symbol of American freedom was the most patriotic moment of her life. The conversion to traditional American colors in order to create a feeling of inclusion was clearly successful. Returning to Saint Xavier, I showed the new print to my Art & Design Senior Seminar classmates and received their feedback. While many liked the "missing" face, a few expressed concern that it might look antagonistic, a concern that would come up later in critiques. I dismissed it at the time because I had received such positive reactions from the students at AQSA, but later revisited this decision. I took the comments from my peers, the enthusiastic reactions of the AQSA girls, and the overwhelmingly supportive feedback on social media as permission to move on and design the second poster in the series, ***#muslimban Life***.

My eight year old son attends elementary school with a girl named Sadeen. Her mother Miriam Jaber and I have become good friends since they moved to Oak Lawn from Brooklyn, NY several years ago. I shared with Miriam what I was doing, and asked if she and her family would be interested in modeling for a poster showing everyday normality and happiness associated with their lives here in Chicago. I wanted a joyful picture to offset the political nature of the first poster, which while life-affirming, is potentially "heavy" due to the subjects of religious freedom and American symbolism. We scheduled a photo shoot in a local park, and I began with Miriam and her kids strolling toward the camera. I asked Sadeen to run toward the camera and jump. I wanted a happy pose that caught the emotion and spirit of play. It only took six photos to reach this goal. Sadeen is leaping into the air, her hair and dress whipped up in the breeze, her arms aloft like wings, and her shadow in the noonday sun projected below her. In the background, her brother and sister have begun to chase her as their mother looks on, pushing a stroller. I took the photo back to the lab, and worked on fitting it into the general scheme of the first poster, using the colors and general effect to deliver similar results. I photoshopped the Chicago skyline into the background in a nod to our great city, and presented the finished image to my peers in class the following Wednesday.



I was not prepared for the negative response. "Too busy. Way too busy." No one could see the family in the sea of information in the design. All of the simplicity and impact of the first poster was gone, and the blanket of "flatness" brought on by too much detail hid all the subjects of the poster from view. "There's no whimsy", Dr. Ruggie-Saunders stated. The hand cut white lines of the Liberty poster, she asserted, were a huge part of its success. This was just a black and white photograph with high contrast, switched to blue and slapped in front of a red field. The best parts of the design, Sadeen's shadow, her arms raised, were completely hidden.



I did not have a rebuttal for their points, as I had not imagined the poster looking any other way. I went back to the drawing board, cutting it apart in photoshop and rearranging the pieces. I removed the city of Chicago and replaced it with a stylized, hand-cut silhouette in white that mirrored the gestural shape that surrounded the Statue of Liberty in my first poster. I reversed the ground to highlight Sadeen's shadow, and cut out the background entirely. The result was a substantially redesigned poster, which addressed many of the concerns of my group. In the interest of time, I skipped peer feedback and silkscreened a "finished" design for review in the Art & Design department's first full-faculty critique the following week.

At the full-faculty critique I displayed the first and second poster designs, alongside a rudimentary mockup of what I believed **#muslimban, The Pursuit of Happiness** would look like. I presented my work and the most recent designs, and awaited feedback. Professors Nathan Peck, Jayne Hileman, Cathie Ruggie-Saunders, Stephen Fleimister and Chris Matusek reviewed my work and that of my classmates for several hours, offering input and advice. Overall, I received good marks for the work completed, and most of the criticism landed on the newly revised and printed

**#muslimban, Life.** Professors Hileman and Matusek felt that the poster was too reliant on text, and that it felt cramped, and Professor Fleimister expressed a desire to see a more freehanded approach to the statue of liberty cutout behind Hiba's picture. Profesor Peck liked the simple, joyful exuberance of Sadeen and her family, but was disturbed by the fact that Sadeen's shadow was white on a blue field. Shadows are not white, he argued, and it made him think of grizzly crime scenes or Vietnam-era, apocalyptic explosions. Professor Hileman doesn't like the color red used liberally and Professor Matusek thought Miriam looked unfriendly. At the time, I did not understand exactly what was being pointed out, and some of it seemed "nit- picky." Afterward, I watched the recording of the critique and wrote down everyone's comments word for word so I could read it several times over the next few weeks for better understanding.



Critique, and feedback in general, is a snapshot of something someone sees in a moment. That feedback is based on the person's interpretation of what they saw, and their reaction to it. In the case of the Art & Design full-faculty critiques, feedback takes on a unique dynamic since there is an expectation that the professors will voice feedback in a way that will guide students toward positive results. It is never meant to tear someone down, as can be the case in the world of art criticism. Some of the professors were very familiar with our works before the critique took place, and others were seeing pieces for the first time. Professor Ruggie Saunders, who teaches the Art & Design Senior Semester class would offer feedback, but her comments come from a deep knowledge of the students' decisions leading up to the displayed work. Professor Fleimister tends to encourage strengths while tweaking things that might make a design better. Professor Peck tosses ideas around, offering counter-advice to that given by other professors on a regular basis, to provide students with a sense that the decisions they make are still their own. Professor Hileman sets things on fire,

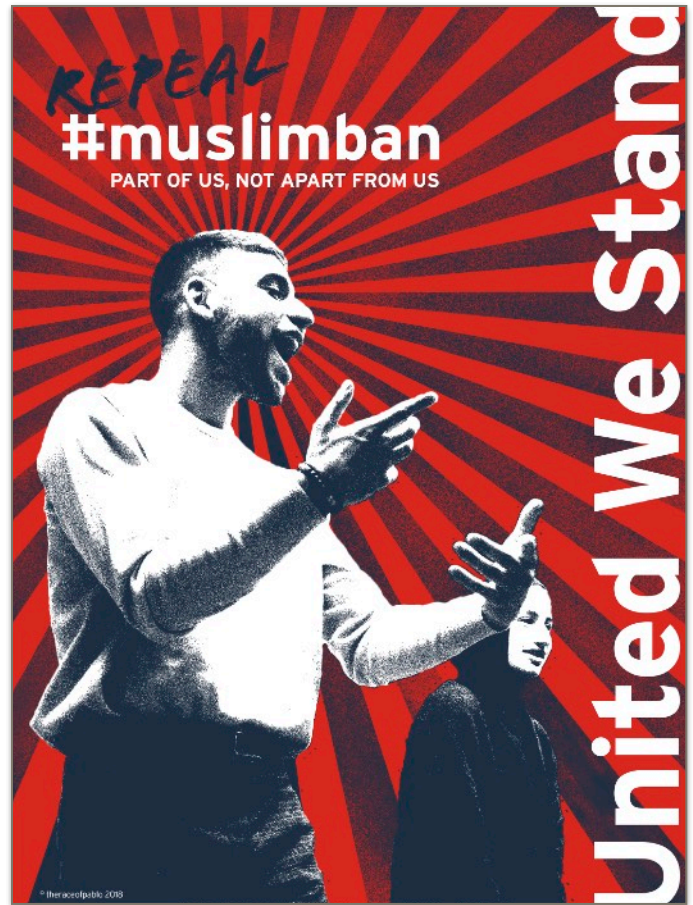
challenging the intentions of the artist and their decision making process. Her feedback is regularly met with defensiveness and frustration, but more often than not uncovers gaps in thinking that should be addressed before displaying work publicly. Professor Matusek dissects design, challenging individual choices, questioning the overall effectiveness of the student's design. She believes that the harshest critics are the most effective, and usually sees herself in that role. After listening to the critiques through several times, I made the decision to stand by my design of **#muslimban Life**, leaving it unchanged.

Two weeks later, I set up my next photo shoot with Hasan and Sara Hussein, a brother and sister performance duo, who perform hip hop and spoken word. Sara and I had met at an MSA event the year before and we formed a friendship. She invited me to speak about my posters at a Mosaics event arranged by Moraine Valley Community College. We spoke at length and made the decision to collaborate sometime soon. I determined that I wanted **#muslimban The Pursuit of Happiness** to represent youth, energy and forward social movement, so I decided to capture an image of Sara and Hasan performing. During their scheduled performance at the University of Illinois – Chicago's Intersectionality Night "open mic", I took multiple photos of Hasan and Sara. I was able to get live shots of the duo performing as well as some staged shots. I went back to my studio, edited the photos and selected three that I felt were contenders for the next poster design. As I edited the pictures, I kept looking for the elements and "feel" that made the first two posters successful. I on the idea that a hand cut starburst from behind the two performers would bring the air of whimsy to the piece that the shape of the statue and city had done in the earlier works, while conveying that the Hussein siblings were full of energy and bursting with life. I completed several versions of the image I liked the best, applied the standard #muslimban and "united we stand" treatments, and included these images in my Honors Seminar Mid-Year Presentation.

On November 20th, 2018 I presented my progress on the **#muslimban** series as well as **Invisible Women** (an installation on intersectionality I created during the fall semester) to the Honors Seminar class. I built a keynote presentation that included photos and videos of my progress, as well as a series of slides that introduced the seminar class to artists like Shepard Fairey, Yoshitaka Amano and Titus Kaphar who have shaped me most. I detailed my creative process, along with my reasons for creating protest work, discussing the challenges I have faced and the solutions I made along the way.

In addition, I invited Dr. Ruggie-Saunders, as my Honors Project Mentor, to visit the class to observe and offer commentary.

During the presentation, I showed the most recent addition to **#muslimban**, "*The Pursuit of Happiness*". The class murmured their approval, and I shared that my primary concern with the design was the minimization of the female performer. I felt like she was taking a back seat to the more dramatic, larger, male. Some people agreed, saying that perhaps a different photo might be better, or that I should reshoot with the female in the foreground, or even that I should remove her and make the photo only about the boy. I thanked the group for their "in the moment" feedback and opened to a Q&A session.



During the discussion, class members asked a few questions about screen printing and the **#muslimban** series, and offered one or two generally positive comments about my collected works. After a few of these types of comments, Professor Ruggie-Saunders chimed in. She focused her feedback on the *Pursuit of Happiness* piece, which she had not seen before. After opening with some positive commentary on the subjects of the poster and the photo itself, Professor Ruggie-Saunders also gave me critical feedback on several of the elements of the design. I tried my best to track along with her comments, but in the moment, the main words that stuck out were "1960's", "graphic design application", "cheap" and "cop-out."

It is never particularly easy to process negative or even constructive feedback in public, but in the moment I answered that perhaps my repeated trips to 1960's era print shows and some of my research had overly influenced my work. In reality, I was doing my best to offer a decent response and get off stage so I could process what she meant. I sat down with Professor Ruggie-Saunders while the



next student prepared their presentation. Professor Ruggie-Saunders leaned over and said “I hope this wasn’t the wrong place for those comments, but I don’t want all these science majors thinking that art is just a bowl of cherries.” I realized then that she had used the opportunity to make an impression not just on me, but also on the other students in the room, who while wrapped up in their own exhaustive labors might not realize the hundreds of hours that have gone into my creative work. Professor Ruggie-Saunders had honored me and the creative discipline by feeling comfortable criticizing my work in public, knowing that I would offer some semblance of a response.

After several days of repeating her critique in my head, I was able to piece together her actual (not just perceived) comments, and soon after, her intent. The gist of her critique was that while my layout was dynamic and eye catching, the starburst lines emanating from behind Hasan’s head were “stealing the show”. My photographs, Professor Ruggie-Saunders argued, were strong enough to stand on their own, but I doubted them by putting 1960’s design applications like a starburst behind them to draw extra attention to the design. Upon re-evaluating her commentary, I saw clearly what she meant by saying they looked “cheap” or like “a cop-out”. Her observations were astute, accurate and incredibly helpful. She challenged the lack of faith I had shown in my work, by choosing to rely on low-hanging solutions to make the biggest impact while expending the smallest amount of mental investment. Most graphic designers are given very little time to come up with the most impacting solution possible, and I had slipped into that common practice of commercial graphic design behavior when approaching the poster, rather than focusing on artistic integrity.

Ironically, from a commercial design perspective, **#muslimban, The Pursuit of Happiness** was a success. The brother and sister featured loved the solution, my family loved the solution... as did everyone I had shown so far. It was only Professor Ruggie-Saunders who had challenged the choice, pointing out that it could (and should) have been done more elegantly, more thoughtfully, and better. As I grow in confidence, both in my work and in myself, I am sure that I will look back at this interaction as a turning point. The next week, I struggled with addressing Professor Ruggie-Saunders’ concerns as I continued to re-work the design. I began to understand why I did not need the starburst, but was unable to determine what to do next. Professor Flemeister spent some time with me, looking at the my design files. He played around with layers, object placement and spacing while discussing the methods I used in creating my designs. “You’re so proud of your photographs,” he said, “and that it’s getting in the way of your design.” Professor Flemeister went on to stress that while he really appreciated the shots I took, and that I should be thrilled with them, the “photographer” in my head wasn’t allowing

anyone else to make decisions. In any designer's mind, he argued, the artist, designer, creative director, art director and all the other creative "voices" interacting in my mind weren't able to experiment freely because I was forcing myself to remain true to my intent as a photographer.

Sara Hussein, the sister featured in *#muslimban, The Pursuit of Happiness*, has a huge personality. Her voice rings loud and clear above a crowd. Her laugh bursts in bright staccatos that cut through conversation. She is big in every way but stature, and that really concerned me. In many ways, my posters had been shaping up to be images of powerful women, and the last thing I wanted was for someone like Sara to play a diminutive role in the poster intended to feature her. Professor Flemeister's input showed me that the domination I was giving the photographer in my head and my adherence to the original photo would always keep Sara physically smaller than Hasan. Professor Flemeister could see I wasn't happy with the fact Sara was minimized, and pointed out that if I were to find a solution, I needed to "thank" the photographer in my head for his work, and ask him to leave. With the need to remain true to the photo gone, we began playing with different layouts and backgrounds. I eliminated the white border around the image and enlarged Sara's picture to over four times its original size, so that it now filled the background, knocking her image out to white.

Professor Flemeister also challenged me to reconsider the need for text and used the work of Hank Willis Thomas, called "Unbranded", as an example. Professor Flemeister didn't know it, but I had just visited that same show several weeks before at Northwestern University's Block Museum, so his comments definitely triggered a response in me. In "Unbranded," Thomas challenges our perception of commercial photography's disposable worth by digitally eliminating the text from advertisements. Most of the ads are from the 1970's and feature photography that stands on its own



as independent artworks once the logos and tag-lines are removed. I took the same initiative, and removed all of the text from my poster, and suddenly it took on an entirely different life. Hasan's face is so full of passion, and Sara looks strong and confident. Neither is playing second fiddle to a line of text, and the message of energetic youth plays out just as strongly. At the second Art & Design full-faculty critique I presented the idea of my alternate "fine art prints" to accompany the first three posters. The most important feedback that came out of that critique was the recommendation to reshoot Hiba's face and introduce it into **#muslimban, Liberty**, as the empty space was still receiving heavy criticism. I didn't feel that it needed to be added, but after shooting a new picture of Hiba's face and incorporating it into the print, it works.

Shortly after the second Art & Design full-faculty critique, I participated in an art show called "Fen" ("art" in arabic) hosted by the local clothing brand, Middle Eastern Pulse. I was invited to participate in early November, and the event planning and promoting was a group effort by the artists and performers participating in the event. When we met to plan the show, I volunteered to create the marketing materials, including a master poster, as well as individual promotional posters of each performer that could be used to promote via social media and print. I was discovered by ME Pulse on Instagram, and that was where we promoted the event primarily. At the event I displayed the

**#muslimban** silkscreen prints, as well as my installation **Invisible Women** (for the first time publicly.)

Tickets were \$20 each and included a shirt and food at the event. On Saturday, December 18, 2018 at a storefront in Orland Park, IL fifteen performers, artists and filmmakers opened the doors to a large crowd of attendees. The event's poster design borrowed the image of Hasan that I used in my poster series, promoting in one stroke Hasan's performance and my posters. The venue exceeded capacity, and additional tickets were sold at the door. I was the first artist to speak following the MC's opening act, and introduced my prints and installation to an enthusiastic crowd. I shared the nature of my work,



the purpose behind my approach to art and the need for conversation and understanding in our polarized society. The rest of the night was spent enjoying the other acts and conversing with attendees as they visited my installation. I engaged in valuable conversations, and received both positive and negative feedback. On two occasions, I was questioned about the appropriateness of a white, non-Muslim male to making artwork about the plight of Middle Eastern women, inquiring as to my rationale. I used it as an opportunity to share my experiences, motivations and approach with both individuals, who were satisfied to the degree that they followed me on social media following our conversation. The unique nature of what I'm doing tends to produce either instant support or antagonism, because in many ways this is the first time most of my viewers have encountered a non-Muslim person at their events, let alone someone creating artwork that purportedly speaks to issues that affect them directly. Throughout the evening, the overwhelming majority of feedback was positive, and I was struck again by the inclusive and accepting environment I have encountered at these events. I have made new friends, seen some amazingly talented performers, and at every show I attend, learned a great deal.

Encouraged by my breakthrough with ***The Pursuit of Happiness***, I revisited ***Life***, this time with the same intention of eliminating the text and asking my photographer self to "leave the room." I wanted to create an image similar to the one of Hasan and Sara that featured Sadeen, taken at an angle with the same sense of movement and joy. The original photo shoot for ***Life*** had been shot in August, and I wasn't sure how I could reshoot in December, but a warm patch of weather mid-month was a stroke of luck. Miriam had Sadeen wear the same dress from the first photo shoot, and we headed to the park for an alternate take. Sadeen was really excited and accommodating, and ran past me, jumping at marks I made on the ground until we got the picture I'd been waiting for. During the editing process, I looked for a background image that would echo the power





and intrigue I had achieved with Sara's image and I decided to use a floral pattern. I located a Middle Eastern paisley pattern and extracted elements for a wisp-like treatment surrounding Sadeen as she leapt into the air.

When it came to creating a fine art print version of **Liberty**, I arranged a new photo shoot with Hiba, who in her senior year was now the President of the MSA. I also asked a new friend, Reem Alshoweat, to pose for the fine-art print of **Liberty** with Hiba. They came to the Visual Arts Center where we took several different poses, and during that time I asked them to clasp hands, holding them over their head in a sign of solidarity. In the image I selected for the print, Reem's youthful exuberance is almost palpable, which paired with her delicate features and the clear frames on her glasses creates an expression that communicates innocence and hope. Hiba's piercing eyes and dark framed glasses give her an air of power and purpose. When I first revealed the design, both women replied with the same statement; "we look so powerful!" It was everything I wanted Liberty to be. At the Art & Design department's final full- faculty critique before the 2019 Senior Thesis Art Exhibition, I revealed the design to the faculty to mixed reviews. The photo itself was widely praised, but everyone agreed that on its own, the picture of Hiba and Reem didn't seem as balanced as the other two fine-art prints. It was recommended that I re-introduce the Statue of Liberty in some way. After the critique I added an oversize torch in blue to the background of the image, overprinting the red background. The feedback was immediate and positive, my final design was now complete and ready for print.



When it came time to produce the prints, I worked with Professor Ruggie-Saunders to identify the highest grade paper I could afford, and pre-mix my inks in large amounts so that I would have uniformity of color across the length of the print run. Saint Xavier's Honors Program provides a \$500

Development Grant toward supplies used for a senior project, so I utilized those funds to purchase 147, 26"x40" sheets of Mohawk Ultrawhite Superfine 130 lb. double cover stock from Lewis Paper in Chicago (at 40% off its market cost), providing me with almost 300 sheets for printing. I used the remainder of my Development Grant on Speedball ink. I then began my normal process of printing posters, which is when things began to go wrong.

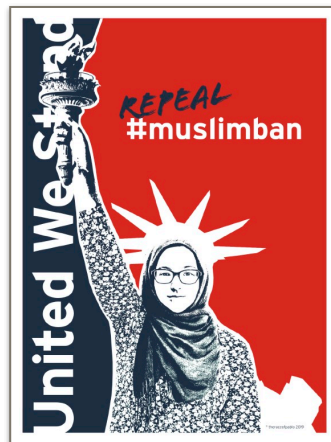
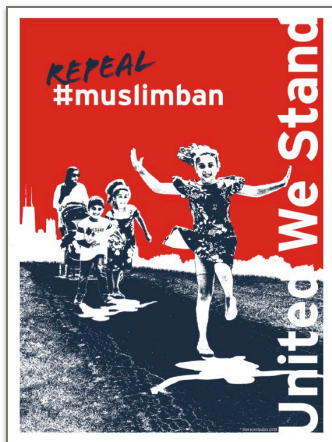
Up until this point, I had hoped to be working with the traditional large 18x24" size for my posters, usually ending up with something just a little bit smaller, as my silkscreen frames were 20x26" and it is very hard to produce a good result close to the edge of the screen printing frame. Because the tension near the edge is higher and the paper does not receive the same amount of contact, it is very difficult to press hard enough to get ink all the way to the edge. The largest squeegee I had access to was less than 18" and could not pull across the entire design at once leaving a 3-4 inch space that needed to be pulled in a second pass, often creating a slight overlap of ink. This produced an unwanted and very noticeable line down the design. Finally, my process for producing the stencils necessary for printing was very time consuming and presented its own challenges. To "bake" a photographic stencil into a screen, it is necessary to use a copier to print your design on a transparent sheet and expose both the screen and transparency to a concentrated dose of light for several minutes. My primary challenge was that the available copiers at SXU can only produce 8.5 x 11 transparencies. That means printing partial designs and "stitching" them together with tape, aligning them perfectly so no lines show where the prints meet. This process can take up to an hour or more. If done incorrectly, it can take hours to fix. I began work on the fine art print ***The Pursuit of Happiness***, but it was quickly evident that the results were going to be awful. In order to reach the edges of the design, I was having to apply much more ink than is normally necessary. Aside from being wasteful, the layers of ink pooled on the paper creating what are called "kiss marks" where instead of a field of color, visible pools of darker ink remain when the design dries. The posters I produced in this run were unusable. I was faced with two obvious choices, reduce the size of my prints to a manageable size, print new transparencies, stitch them together and begin again, or change my entire process by potentially bringing in outside help. I was not willing to compromise my vision when it came to the size of the finished posters, so I chose the latter.

Two years ago, Professor Ruggie-Saunders invited Chicago-based silkscreen poster artist Kyle Baker to visit the school and present his work in the Saint Xavier University Gallery. I was deeply

impressed by his level of skill and artistry, and was able to establish a correspondence following his visit. I followed up with him a few times after his visit, expressing a desire to someday visit his studio and he extended an open invitation. As I reviewed my options with this round of posters, I decided to reach out to Kyle in hopes that he could take a look at my process and provide insight that could help me execute my vision. He responded quickly and invited me to his studio, asking me to send my files ahead of my visit so he could review them. When I arrived at his studio near Chicago's Lincoln Square neighborhood, I was shocked to find that he had already created screens for my first two posters on 36 x 36" frames. He used a large roll printer to create transparencies that not only exceeded the quality I was able to produce, but were perfectly to scale and contained "registration marks" that dramatically aid lining up the different layers of a print. He showed me around the studio, and offered advice about how to print my designs with the best results. He loaned me a 30" squeegee, allowing me to pull ink across the design in landscape mode which reduced the length of each pull and gave me a better transfer of ink across the design. He did all of this without charging me, and sent me on my way with 4 screens, ready to print. Over the next two months, I returned a half dozen times to Kyle's studio to "reclaim" (clean) the screens, print transparencies and bake new screens before returning to Saint Xavier's Visual Arts Center each time to print. With each return visit Kyle trained me on a new part of the process, allowing me to become self-sufficient in his studio, not requiring oversight or assistance from him or his staff. I cannot overstate his impact on my project.

I printed editions of 15-75 of the six designs, with quantities based on success of the printing process, perceived demand and desire. In March 2019 I was invited to present my posters at the AQSA School's Annual Fundraising Dinner, and for the first time presented to community and religious leaders in the South Chicago Muslim Community. I donated several posters to the silent auction and spoke for ten minutes about my vision and my project to date. As I closed, in a moment of over-active humility I said "If this isn't something you all support, and you want me to stop, I'll stop." In response, several community leaders called encouragements from their tables, telling me to "keep going". On April 27, 2019, the six prints were exhibited publicly as a set for the first time at the Saint Xavier University 2019 Senior Thesis Art Exhibition alongside the work of five other graduating seniors. On Wednesday, April 24th, 2019 I was also honored with the award for Outstanding Art & Design Student at the College of Arts and Sciences Academic Awards Ceremony & Reception for my work on the **#muslimban** series.

My intentions going in to this project were to positively impact the lives of others, helping others understand the needs of Muslim Americans. But in the end, I have discovered that it is me that has been impacted through the friendships and partnerships made possible through this project. The discussions I've had with high schoolers, religious leaders, teachers, college students, and political leaders from a Muslim background have deepened my understanding of the Muslim American experience, and their comments and worldview have impacted my work in many ways. I have learned a great deal about my artistic voice, how to engage my audience, how to process feedback, incorporating the ideas of my audience and my peers, and most importantly how to be a good ally. Engaging the American Muslim community while simultaneously developing my creative voice has been one of the greatest outcomes of my time spent at Saint Xavier University. As I have begun to share my designs in online forums and art exhibits, I am expecting to encounter opposition to my viewpoints and artistic choices, and that's ok. This is about changing hearts and minds, and as polarized as our country is, we need more open discussions that expose close-minded people to other types of Americans. Deeper understanding of each other, I feel, better equips us in the forming of a more perfect union for future generations of Americans. It is my hope that the #muslimban series contributes to that deeper understanding, and that viewers will leave my shows changed for the better.



***#muslimban Poster Series***



***#muslimban Fine Art Print Series***