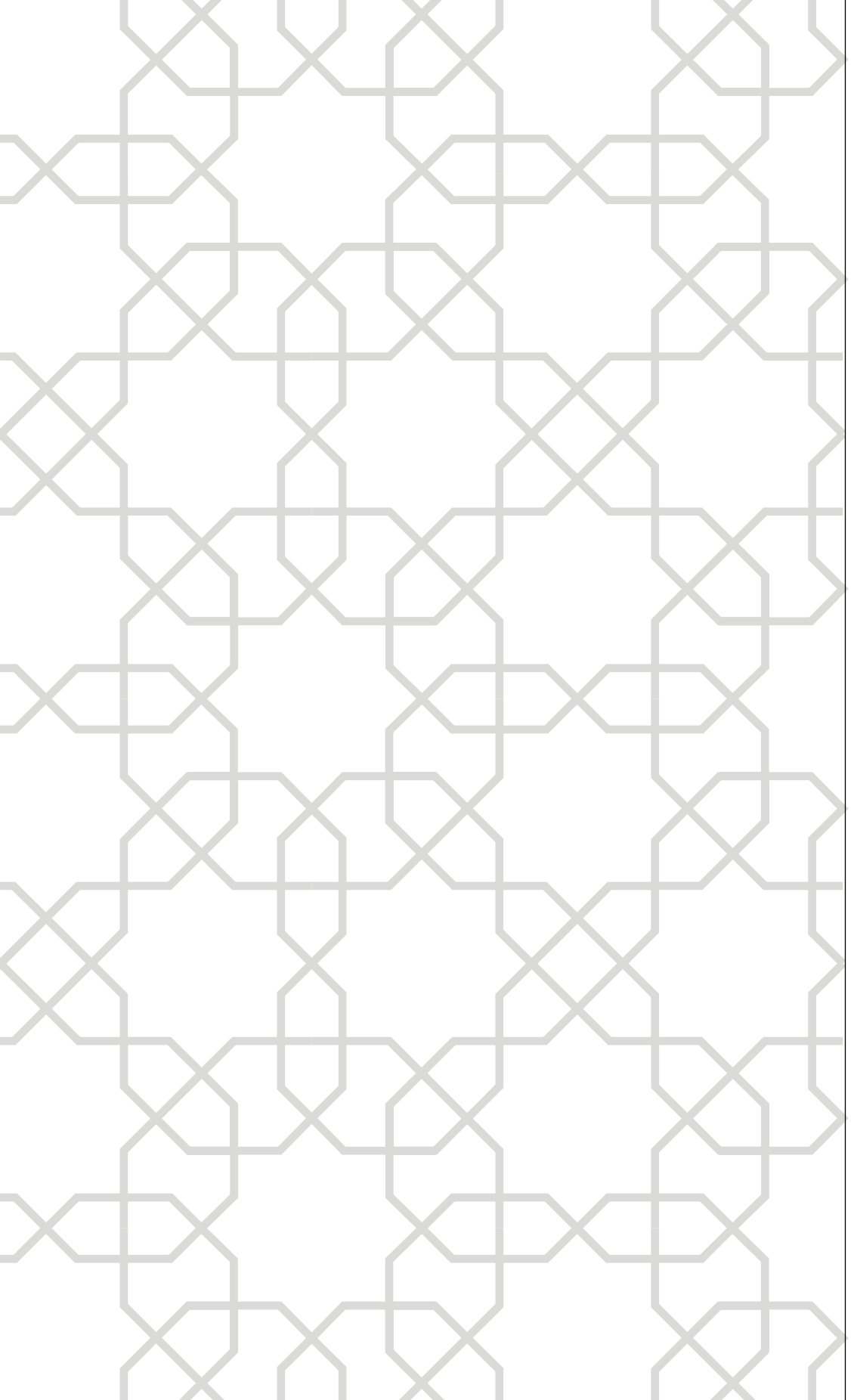




ROXANA MANOUCHEHRI

E N I G M A



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ELECTIVE AFFINITIES

Leonardo da Vinci occupies a unique position in European culture and, consequently, in world history. A leading light in a golden age, he was the original Renaissance man. Yet his restless brilliance, seemingly unbounded by period or place, has also allowed him to become the personification of timeless genius, to Occidental eyes at least. By way of contrast, his closest rival in this regard, Albert Einstein, seems likely to be forever linked to the calamitous century from which we have just emerged. Einstein was a specialist in an arcane field whose history is commonly perceived to be entwined with Western modernity's narrative of relentless technological progress, followed by a spectacular fall from grace. Leonardo, on the other hand, was a prolific polymath whose enduring contributions to contemporary mass culture, half a millennium after his own demise, include the most famous portrait ever painted, the *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503–05, as well as the most widely reproduced religious picture of all time, *The Last Supper*, 1495–98. A third iconic image, his drawing of *Vitruvian Man*, c. 1490, aspired to transcend the limitations of historical or geographical specificity entirely, disregarding ethnic difference and other divisive factors, most notably gender, in pursuit of a universally valid depiction of ideal human proportions.

All of which makes Leonardo da Vinci a singularly appropriate recruit to Roxana Manouchehri's latest investigation into the myriad ways in which aspects of identity, as well as vectors of identification, may be coded into contemporary art. Born and raised in Iran, Manouchehri has led a peripatetic life since graduating from the Art University of Tehran. More specifically, she spent a significant period of time working and exhibiting in South Korea, before moving to Ireland some years ago. An early admiration for Leonardo, the byproduct of a cosmopolitan upbringing, informs this new suite of paintings, which she describes disarmingly as 'my own detailed, monochromatic versions of ten Da Vinci portraits'. Her selection of 'portraits', all women, includes the *Mona Lisa* alongside lesser known drawings, paintings and details from larger works, providing a delicate balance of familiarity and mystery, as well as a blending of precise detail with nebulous *sfumato*. The paradox inherent to the figure of Leonardo in the popular imagination, the contrast between the inexorable logic of the pioneering scientist and the enigma of the archetypal artist, is astutely reflected in the combination of up-to-date digital manipulation and old-school painterly execution by which Manouchehri has generated these ghostly shades of Da Vinci's five hundred year-old originals. Her appropriations range from a small ink drawing of an anonymous woman's head, dated 1473, to a detail from the version of *The Virgin of the Rocks* in the National Gallery, London, which was painted some time before 1508.

Manouchehri's treatment of her purloined pictures deliberately enhances their more shadowy features in a manner that suggests a profusion of Old Masterly *pentimenti* compounded by the misregistrations of the technologically reproduced image. The meticulous anachronism of these mildly disconcerting hybrids is itself, however, only half the story. For each of these ten paintings is in turn encased in a thin box-frame, which protrudes twelve centimetres from the wall. The side panels of each frame are mirrored, while the glass pane through which we view the painted image is adorned with one of a number of infinitely expandable geometric patterns. Each one of these designs derives from a specific precedent in the rich history of Islamic decorative art and architecture, ranging from an eleventh-century tomb in Agra, India, to a fifteenth-century school in the Khorasan province of Iran. What we are being presented with here, however, is no simple binary opposition between East and West. For, as Manouchehri points out, 'while geometric ornamentation may have reached a pinnacle in the Islamic world, the sources for both the shapes and the intricate patterns already existed in late antiquity among the Greeks, Romans and Sasanids in Iran.' For many people in the Islamic world, moreover, these repeat patterns 'concretely symbolize the infinite, and therefore centralized, nature of the creation of the one God (Allah) and convey a spirituality without the figurative iconography of the art of other regions.' While irony has played little part in Manouchehri's work to date, there is an ironic aspect to her smuggling these ghosts of Italian Renaissance figuration into a set of hybrid painting-objects inflected in equal measure by the abstract art of her Persian heritage. From a Western perspective one might have expected the Da Vinci borrowings to prove overpowering; yet this is by no means the case. Far from usurping their Near Eastern settings these spectral revenants from the canon of European art history, trapped within their bespoke gilded cages, appear to shimmer and shrink from view behind the lattice of shadows cast across their painted surfaces. The reflection of the viewer's own image in the mirrored surfaces of the picture's inner frame merely exacerbates this sense of compromised access to the image of an Other. That the flowering of geometric abstraction in Islamic visual culture was related of its virulent aniconism is of relevance here, as is the fact that the patterned pane through which we view each of these pictures recalls the grille of a Catholic confessional.

It is no accident that, in the case of those of Manouchehri's borrowed images that are details from larger paintings, they have been relieved of those elements in their original setting that embed them in a culturally specific (i.e. Biblical) narrative. She refers

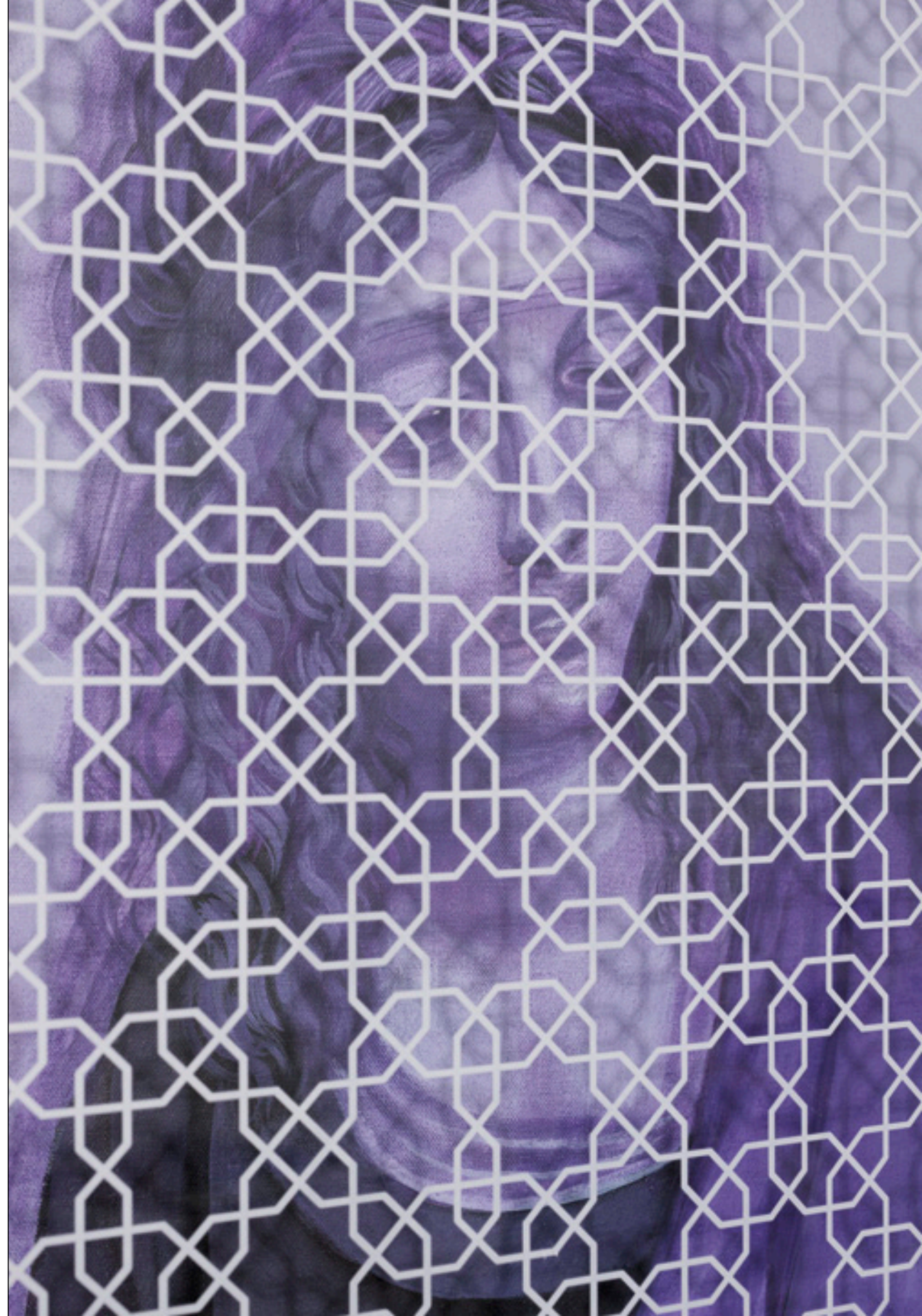
consistently to these images as 'portraits', which confirms that her interest, at least for the purpose of this suite of works, is in faces rather than heads. This distinction is not trivial. Gilles Deleuze famously argued that Francis Bacon, in contrast, painted heads rather than faces. Clearly, Manouchehri and Bacon have little in common. From a purely Irish perspective, however, Manouchehri's 'boxed portraits', which seem simultaneously to emerge and recede from their hazy monochromatic grounds, do have something in common with the work of an artist intermittently associated with Bacon, the late Louis le Brocquy. Any affinities Manouchehri might have with le Brocquy are no doubt fortuitous. That said, her fascination with just such fortuitous similarities between art works emanating from radically disparate cultural milieux is clear. In light of this fact it is at least worth noting that le Brocquy tended to stress the culturally specific resonances of his most popular body of work, the sequence of 'heads' he began painting in the early 1960s. While acknowledging that this series was originally inspired by his discovery of the Polynesian decorated skulls in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, he insisted equally on associations closer to home: 'Like the Celts I tend to regard the head as this magic box containing the spirit. Enter that box, enter behind the billowing curtain of the face, and you have the whole landscape of the spirit.'

Previous bodies of work by Manouchehri, including an engagement with early Irish illuminated manuscripts, amply attest to the centrality to her vision of the play of similarity and difference between cultures – especially, but not exclusively, visual cultures – which are usually assumed to have little in common. Such a fascination is, of course, perfectly understandable in an age of accelerating globalization. It may even be inevitable in her case, given her nomadic personal history. There is, however, surely more to it than that. To end on a personal note, I remember being entranced as a teenager by the *Dánta Grá*, those early modern Gaelic poems of courtly love, some of which, as it happens, were composed during the lifetime of Leonardo da Vinci. I also recall that, in the relatively isolated, monocultural Ireland of the time, their allure was notably amplified by the improbable revelation that they formed part of a European tradition initiated in eleventh-century Provence and Aquitaine under the powerful influence, relayed through Moorish Al-Andalus, of the sophisticated philosophies of Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd). That seemed like something to conjure with.

CAOIMHÍN MAC GIOLLA LÉITH

DECEMBER 2013

Enigma 1 (detail), 2013
Acrylic on canvas,
laser cut acrylic perspex,
mirror film
61 × 51 × 12 cm





Enigma 2, 2013
Acrylic on canvas,
laser cut acrylic perspex,
mirror film
61 × 51 × 12 cm

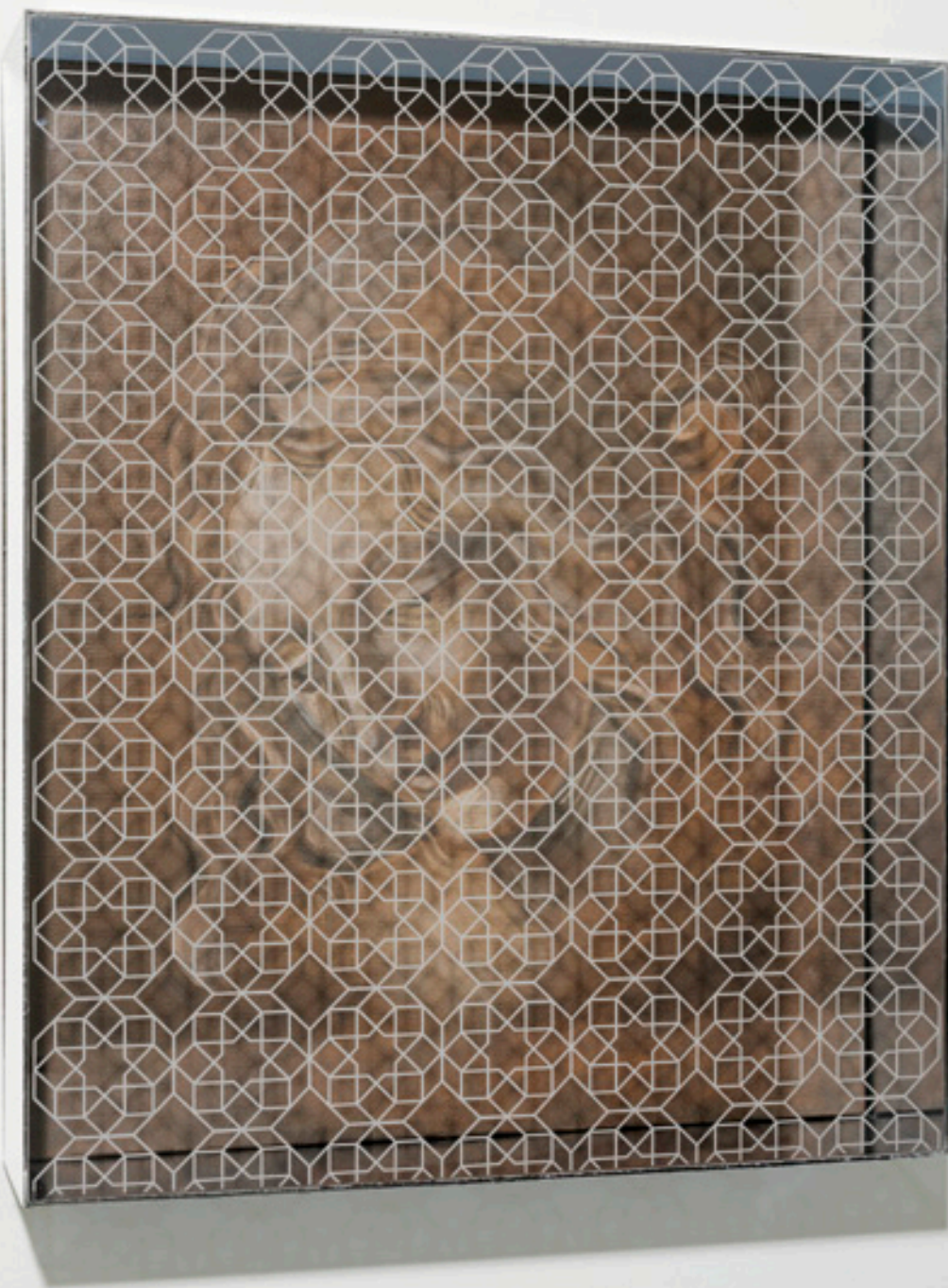




Enigma 3, 2013
Acrylic on canvas,
laser cut acrylic perspex,
mirror film
61 × 51 × 12 cm

Enigma 4 (detail), 2013
Acrylic on canvas,
laser cut acrylic perspex,
mirror film
61 × 51 × 12 cm

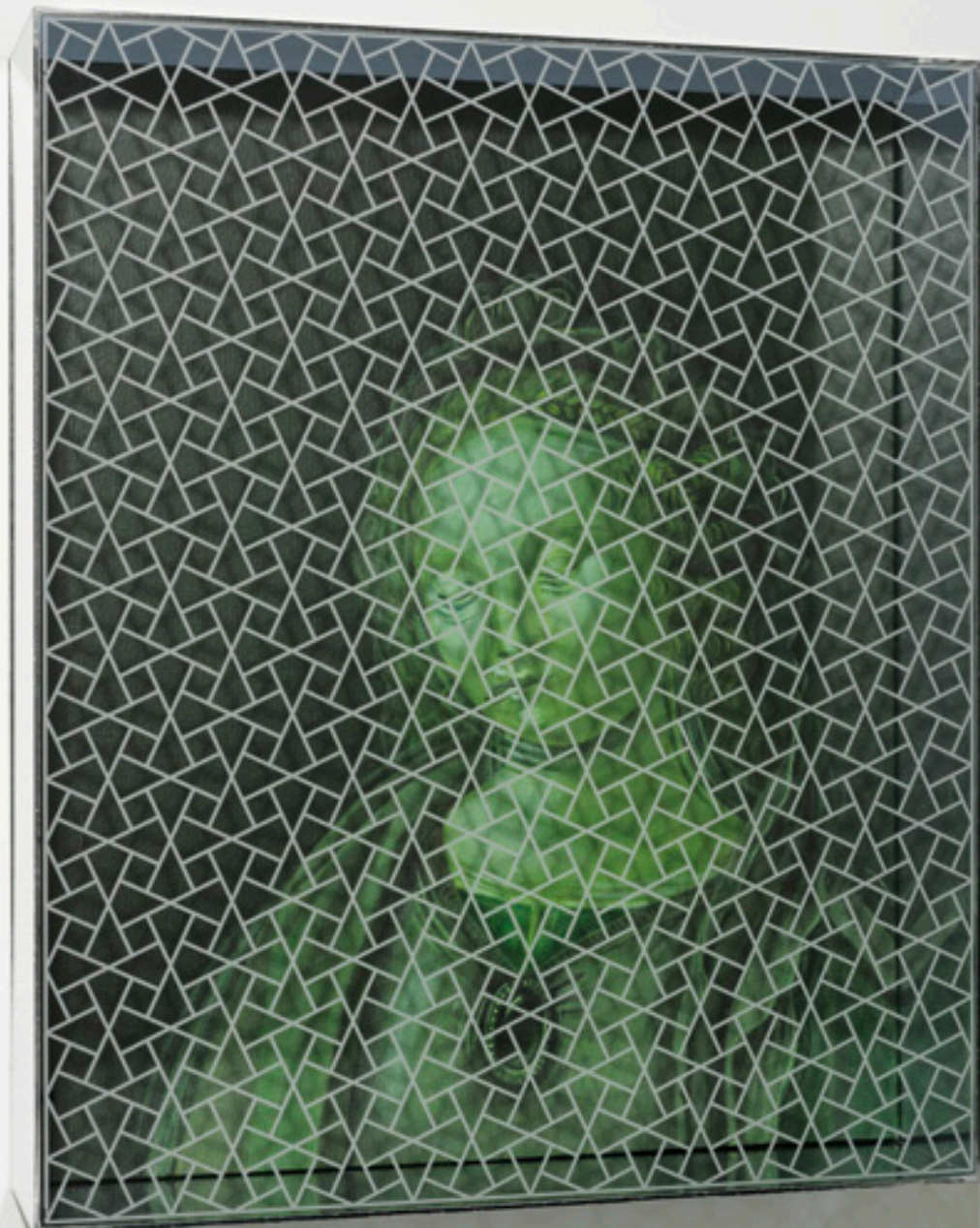




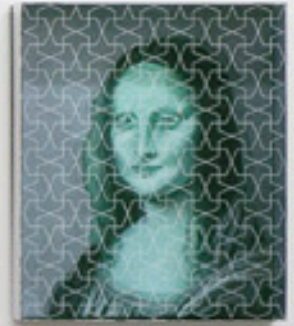
Enigma 5, 2013
Acrylic on canvas,
laser cut acrylic perspex,
mirror film
61 × 51 × 12 cm

Enigma 6 (detail), 2013
Acrylic on canvas,
laser cut acrylic perspex,
mirror film
61 × 51 × 12 cm





Enigma 7, 2013
Acrylic on canvas,
laser cut acrylic perspex,
mirror film
61 × 51 × 12 cm





Enigma 8, 2013
Acrylic on canvas,
laser cut acrylic perspex,
mirror film
61 × 51 × 12 cm



Enigma 9, 2013
Acrylic on canvas,
laser cut acrylic perspex,
mirror film
61 × 51 × 12 cm



Enigma 10 (detail), 2013
Acrylic on canvas,
laser cut acrylic perspex,
mirror film
61 × 51 × 12 cm

Enigma II, 2013
Vinyl print on mirror
(16 × 12 cm), mirrors,
plaster, plywood, mirror
film, polycarbonate
91 × 72 × 15 cm



Roxana Manouchehri is a visual artist based in Dublin, Ireland. Her works include paintings, installation, photography and drawing. Her inspiration is derived from her environment, childhood memories, her hometown and Persian miniatures.

Manouchehri was born in Tehran and studied at the Art University of Tehran graduating with an MA in painting. In 2007 she was awarded a six-month residency in Chang Dong Art Studio, Seoul, South Korea. Manouchehri was granted an artist residency in Belmont Studios, County Offaly, Ireland in 2010. In 2011, she had a residency in Rauma, Finland. In April 2013, she was awarded a full stipend residency in Can Serrat, Barcelona. Currently she is resident in one of the RHA studios in Dublin.

Manouchehri has exhibited her works widely, including locations such as Seoul, Pori (Finland), Tehran, Dubai, London and Dublin. She has worked with Assar Art Gallery in Tehran since 2001. Her current body of work entitled *Enigma* is exhibiting at Kevin Kavanagh, Dublin, Ireland, in December 2013.

This book was published by Roxana Manouchehri and Kevin Kavanagh on the occasion of the exhibition *Enigma* presented by Kevin Kavanagh in collaboration with Assar Art Gallery.

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www.roxanamanouchehri.net
www.kevinkavanagh.ie
www.assarartgallery.com

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GALLERY
نگارخانه آسار

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