

# Cosmos/ κόσμος

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## Cosmos Artist Statement

For the Ancient Greeks, Cosmos – the harmonious order of the universe – stood in antithesis to Chaos – the formless void preceding Creation; a chasm keeping Heaven and Earth apart. Like many other ancient words, Cosmos had multiple meanings: “good behavior”, “style”, “government”, “honour”, “ruler”, “the known world”, and “men” in general. When applied to women, however, Cosmos acquired a meaning very far from these manly ideals. It meant “ornament” or “decoration”. It is in the order of the universe and the details of individual ornamentation, in this early dichotomy of ancient definitions and the incongruity of Man’s age-old tendency to worship the images of his own creation, and to trust in the transitory powers of hollow ornamentation to ward off his ultimate descent into “Nothing” that my work, Cosmos, has its roots.

Cosmos is an installation of seven hollow hand-made suits of armour, made from chainmail, leather and ceramic fragments. These objects of masculine virility are not meant to impart a sense of physical security but rather to highlight notions of frailty and ephemeral beauty. These sumptuous, yet empty, suits are testament to the frailty crouching behind military prowess. They emphasise the aesthetic nature of warfare, its ritualistic elements and theatrical processes. These most intricate and beautiful ornaments stand at the juncture of the horror and artistry of warfare. Any protection they offer is only symbolic, like a talisman, disguising the horror of war with a layer of vanity. Perhaps the fact that shields have always been decorated is a way of shielding us from the horrors of war.

Behind the installation of the armours an image of a lone soldier/hero floats, spectral-like, against a backdrop of shimmering gauze, fleeting and ephemeral beside the silent forms of armour.

## The cosmos and warfare

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

From “The Second Coming” by WB Yeats

Each suit of armour has a decorative mandala, which traditionally represents divinity, the twin pillar of the self and the universe. Thus the true nature of reality appears as the self dissolves into the universe; the part into the whole; the ornament into the cosmos. The cosmic truth hidden in the geometric patterns of the mandala provides a pictorial representation of this recurring theme of mythological and scientific thought: that the birth of the individual mirrors the birth of the world, genealogy flowing from cosmogony, and that the evolution of the organism mirrors that of the species, morphogenesis following phylogenies.

However, the heterotopic space in Cosmos explores the collapse of the universal order upon the intimate details of the personal. The refracting four-gated circles within the squares of the mandala offer a miniature representation of the cosmos. Cosmos does not have a centre where the forces of the universe rest in balance, rather the contents of the mandala are chaotic and kinetic – they do not allow the viewer to turn inward and experience that place where unity, infinity, transcendence, timelessness and Absolute Being can be experienced. Here the absence of a centre leads to a disintegration of the world. When the cosmic axis or axis mundi disappeared, mankind regressed into Chaos, a time before Creation. Anxiety and despair marked the falling away of the world into non-existence. Within this space of broken self-exploration and self-actualisation we find a soldier, the hero of the work. Yet he is a broken and depleted hero, disfigured, with his insides exposed for all to see and his lower body is missing. Instead his bloodless torso strapped to a tear gas canister, his eyes closed

perhaps in meditation or perhaps in death. His body is fragmented and dismembered and when reassembled the parts do not fit, they are maimed and atrophied. He clutches a small child that is, in fact, himself. A talisman of our times, the mutilated hero is a symbol of the violence Man inflicts on the icons of his own creation. We are locked in a cycle of maiming and destroying, putting our heroes off center in a relentless quest for life beyond death, and for form beyond formlessness. The assorted pieces form a mandala to create wholeness and individuation, yet highlight what is crippled at the centre.

In this sumptuous kaleidoscope of impressions, icons of gender flash before us, then become meaningless and dissolve from view without propelling us to an ultimate conclusion. With these armours, I pay tribute to the sumptuous aesthetics of the manmade ornament, even as I recognize that beauty cannot stand between us, and, non-being. Chaos is a state without images. Our lives, and the narratives that define them, are little more than images papering over the void.

Cosmos is the story of a world where the correspondence of the part to the whole, the harmony of the self and the universe, has given way to perpetual conflict. No resolution can be found at the centre of these war-themed mandalas, which are anti-mandalas. Instead, their centre is empty, displaying the ultimate realities of modern subjects – a dense impression of figures and symbols, existing in a single moment, refuting manmade notions of linear time. Mutilated or fragmented bodies, cannon-fodder, children with weapons, innocent hostages to a ticking time-bomb. The ancient Egyptian symbol of the soul hovers about the lions of Tahrir Square, oriental dancers and Hollywood starlets crowd the space, interspersed with political leaders, and crowds, all against backgrounds of Persian miniatures: selfhood understood as the sovereign prerogative to dispose of life, the legitimate right to kill.

Within this cosmic order, the traditionally feminine ideals of peaceful harmony have been conscripted to the ego as killing machine. Like the mobs that carry war heroes to their untimely death and fragmentation

through the promises of honour and glory, the female figures in Cosmos gyrate joyously, waving at the violent masters of the universe with promises of blissful earthly oblivion. Like Barbarella, the poster girl for feminist emancipation in the 1960s, the Cosmos women stare at us defiantly from the centre of the universe as models of gender equality through their equal power to inflict death. Despite their adornments and dress, the killing machines at the heart of the universe form the centre of a world spinning off its axis. Perhaps, the ceramic shields of Cosmos represent the temptations of power; the temptations of individuation through war, bringing order by giving orders, structuring through commanding; the temptations of a world founded on endless cycles of domination and destruction, and threatening to be swallowed by its own chimerical tensions, intertwining snakes, or dying elephants. The spectacle of this tempting picture fascinates as much as it repels, invites as much as it forbids. The shields of Cosmos, held not by humans but by spears, stand in a vacuum, devoid of human life, which has been exterminated by the Apocalypse it fabulously announces. Ironically, like other objects of consumerism, these fragile and horrifying tributes will outlive us, bearing witness to our world long after our last breath. The world they represent is more interested in outer decoration than the cosmic centre. What we see is the living decoration of a dying cosmos.



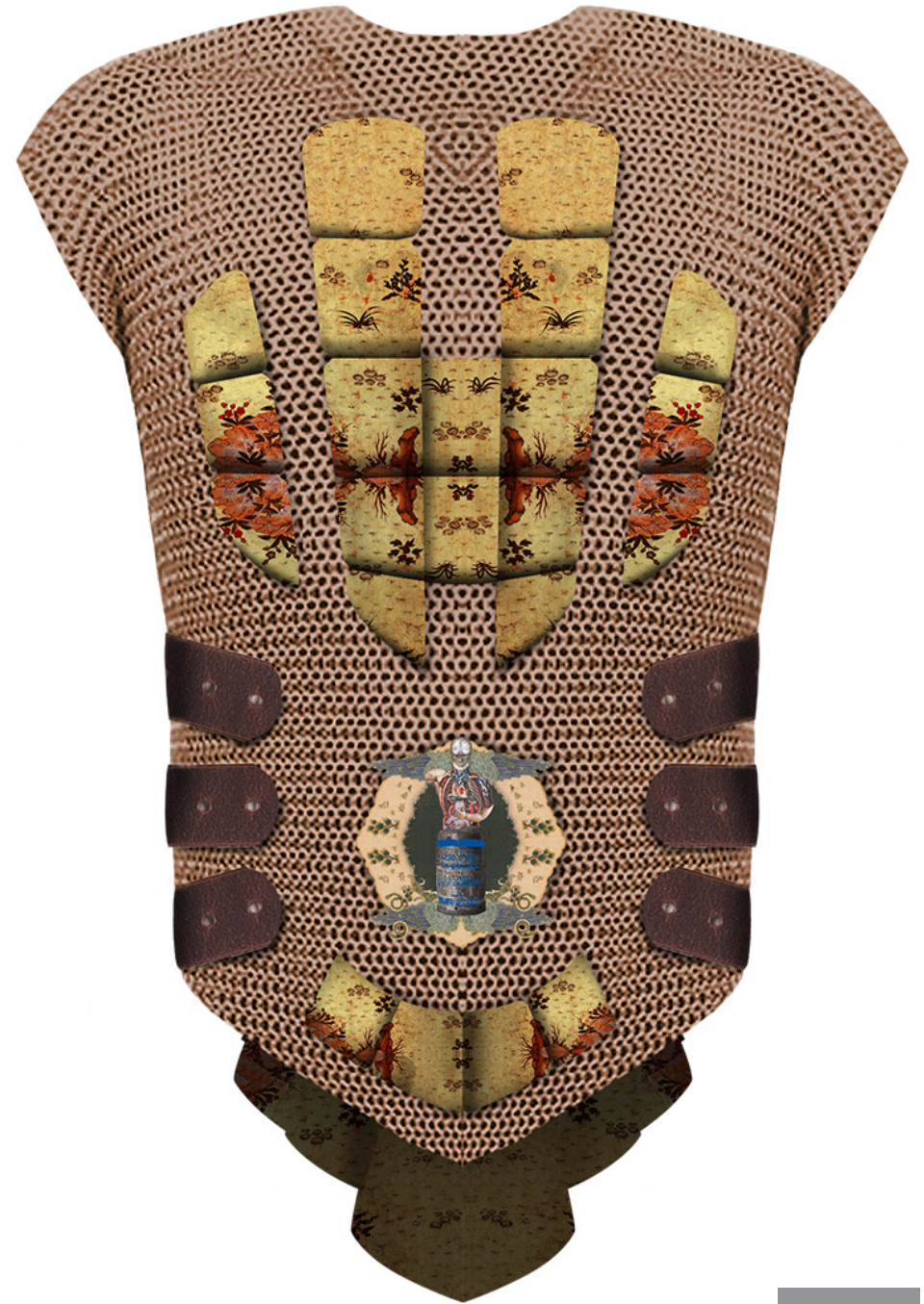
Armour 1

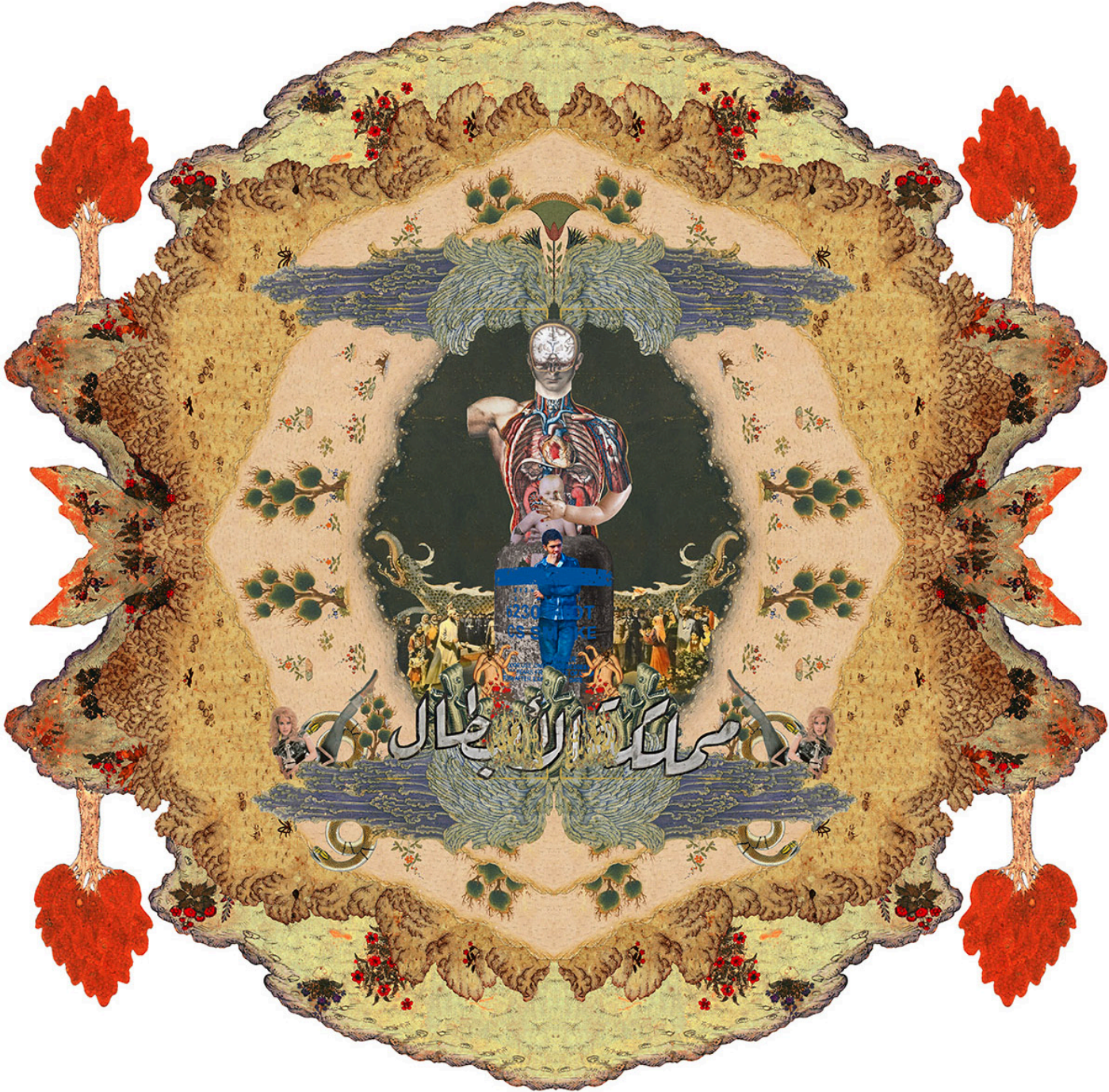


Mandala close up 1



Enamel Back close up 1



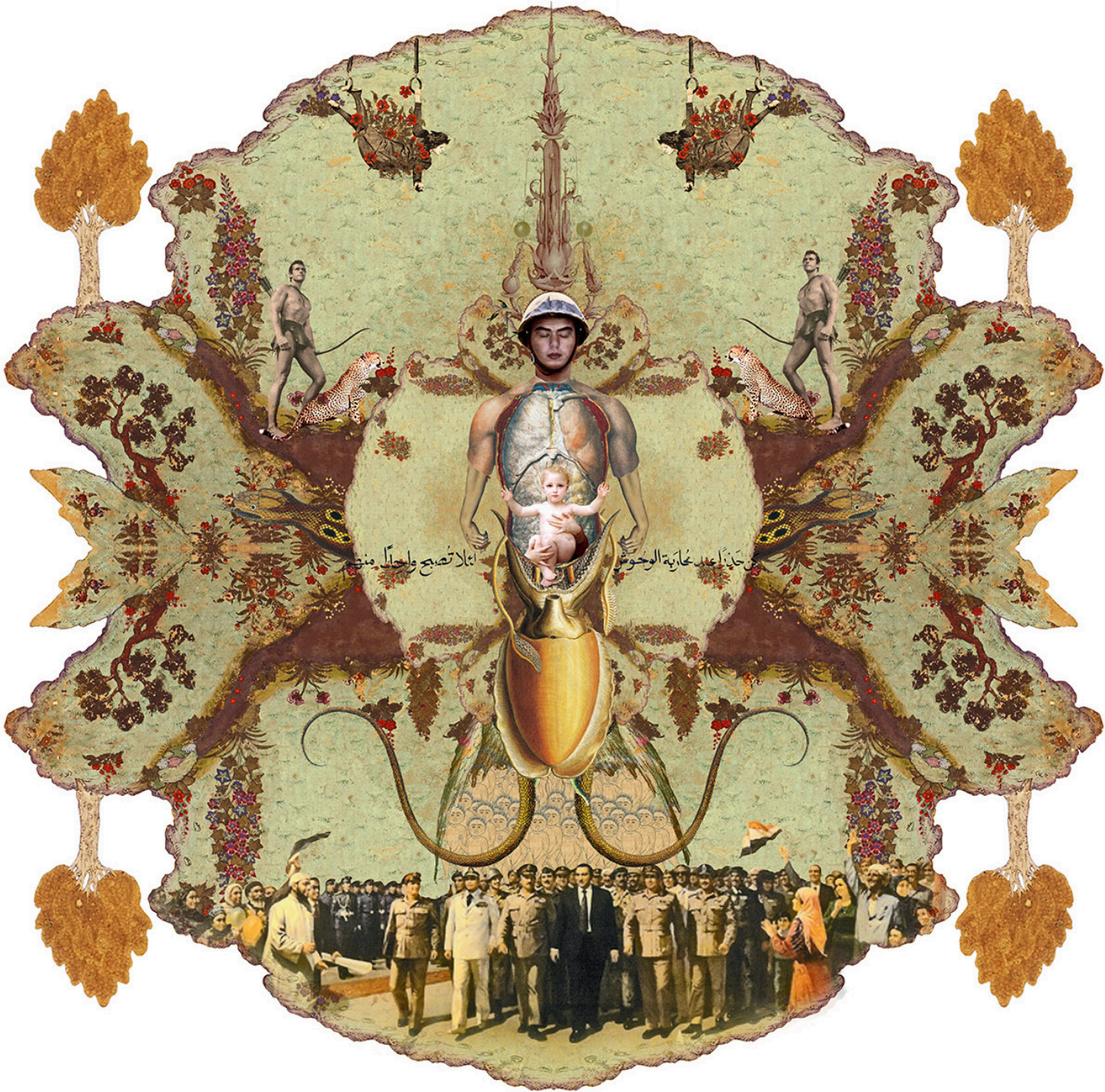


Mandala close up 2

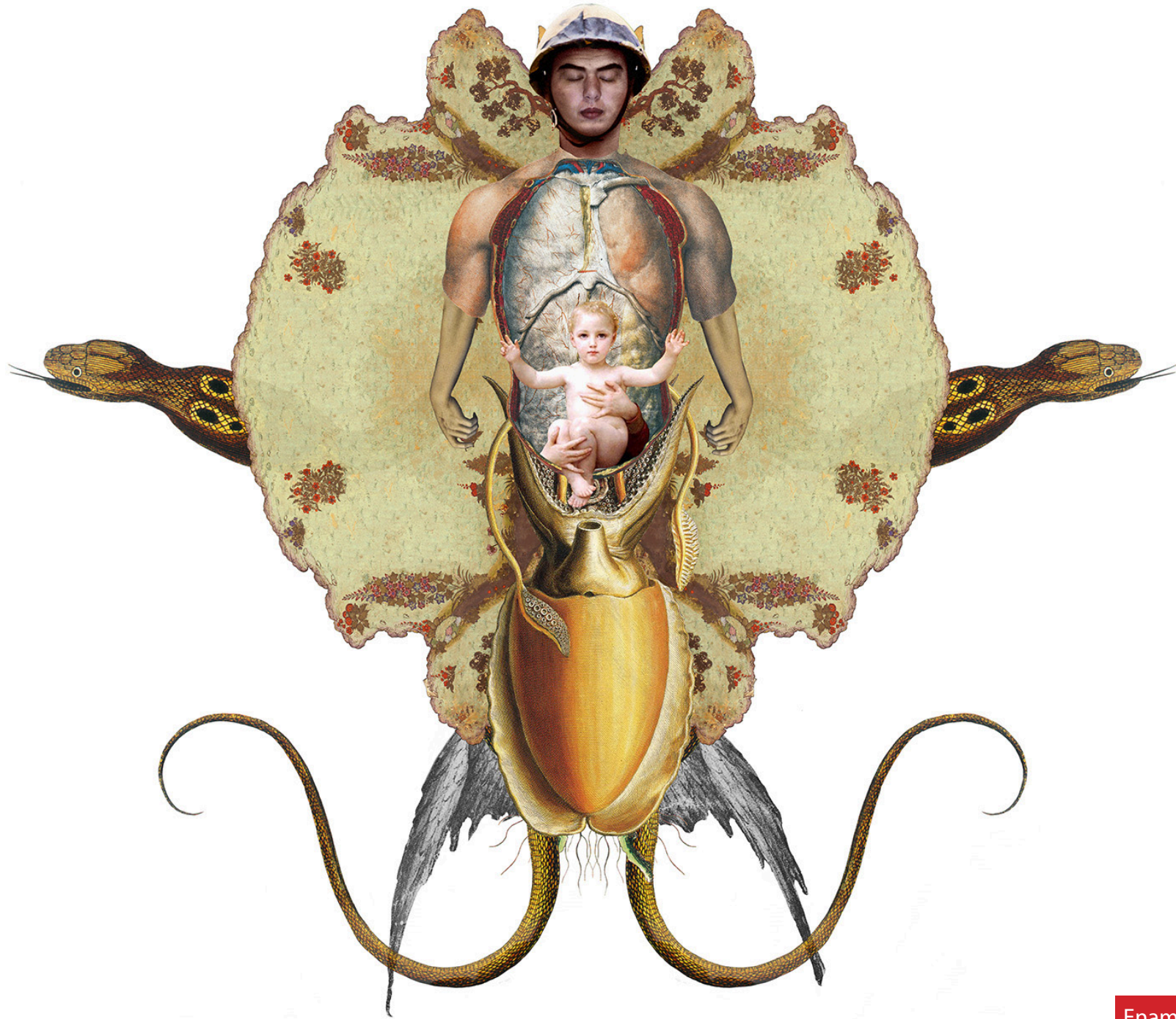








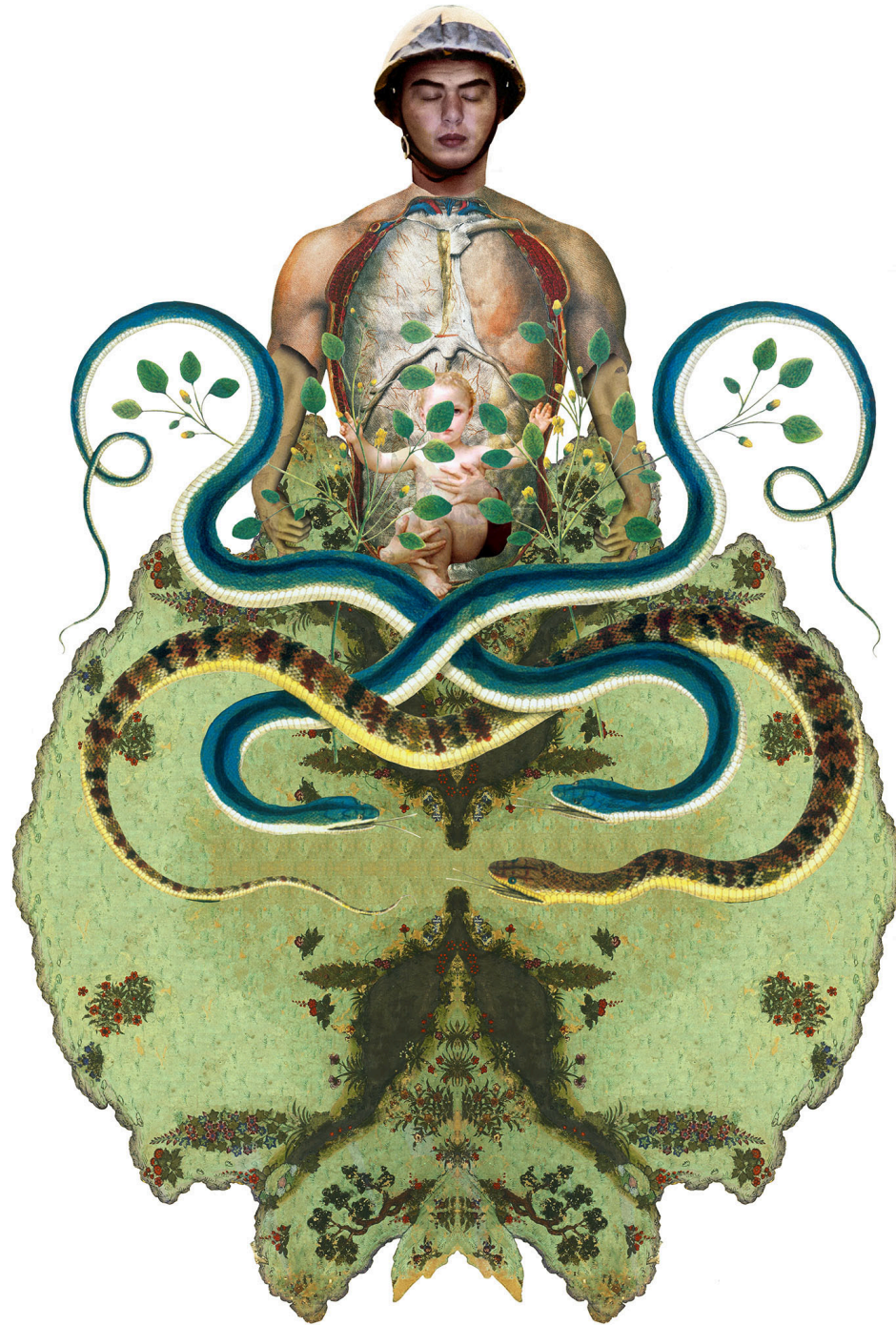
Mandala close up 3







Mandala close up 4









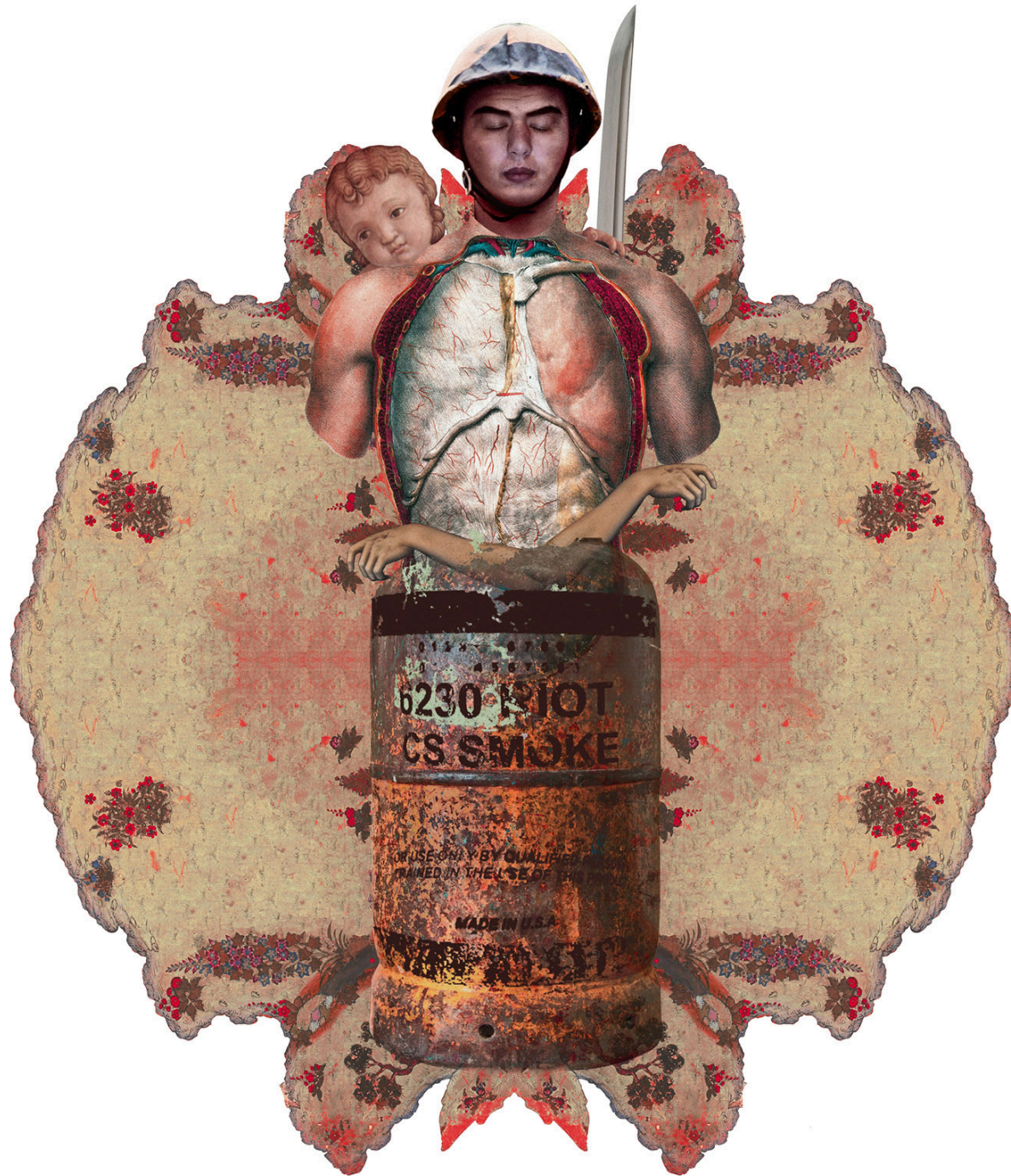
Mandala close up 5

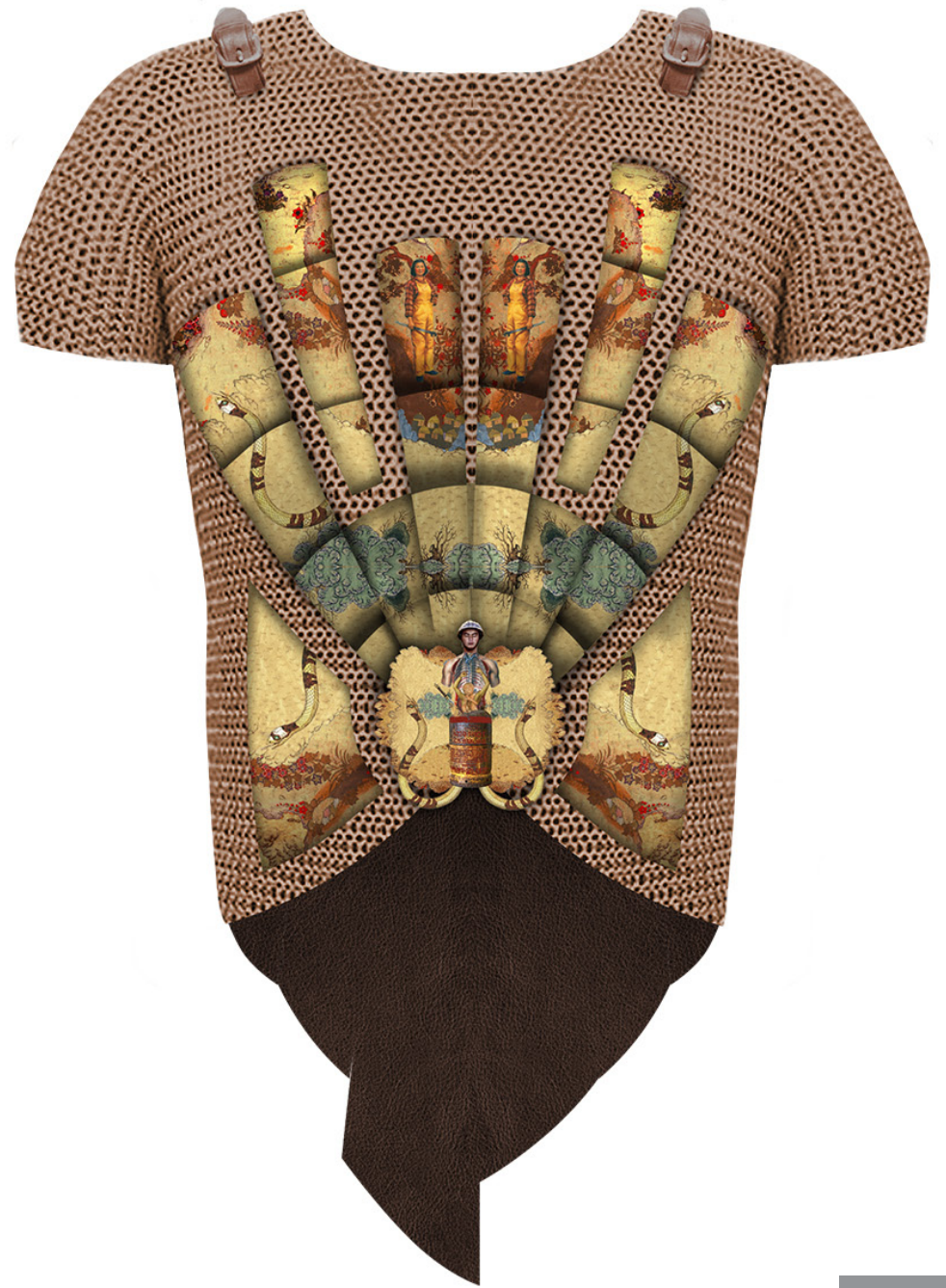






Mandala close up 6







Mandala close up 7







## Cosmos Proposal

Cosmos is an installation consisting of seven life-size suits of armour and a photographic projection of a single soldier on several layers of silk, one behind the other. The armour will be displayed on iron stands, facing the viewer, at different levels between 1.6–1.9 metres high with a space of 1.5 metres between each suit.

The seven suits of armour reference the symbolism of this number throughout world history and culture, from the seven days of creation to the seven chakras and the multiple references to the number seven in Islam. Attached to the front of each suit of armour is a mandala, printed in relief, which shows the topography of a garden. This garden is based on Foucault's notion of "Heterotopia", those suspended moments of time or place that are physical as well as mental and represent something other than themselves. The background of each mandala is composed of traditional Persian and Moghul miniatures, painstakingly put together to form an infinite circle.

### The Armour:

The seven suits of armour are made from chainmail, leather, enamel, pearls, and fragmented pieces of ceramic. The individual ceramic fragments will be held together by metal links or leather thread. Each breastplate will have a unique design and the image of a mandala.

The idea behind the ceramic fragments is to convey the fact that this armour does not bestow any physical security, but instead highlights notions of frailty and the ephemeral nature of beauty. They emphasise the aesthetic nature of warfare, its ritualistic elements and theatrical processes; they show the delicacy of these objects and their inability to shield and protect.

Armour has traditionally summarised the most intimate aspects of a warrior's identity: his skin colour, lineage, nationality, or rank. With the de-personalising aspects of war, these ornaments offer the last bastion of individual recognition; whether beheaded, burned or mutilated a person could still be identified and his body given to a caring family for burial. After all, armour not only reveals the family lineage, it also announces a noble family's full title – an honour most often acquired through distinction in warfare.

### The Mandala:

At the centre of the breastplate is a mandala about 40cm wide and 5cm deep.

In the form of one of the most ancient symbolic ornaments known to mankind, the mandalas in Cosmos do not convey their usual message of the meditative experience of self-discovery, harmony and centredness, but instead have a broken centre that represents the chaotic and dysfunctional times that we live in today.

### The Soldier:

Within each mandala we find a soldier, the hero of this installation. Yet he is a raw and depleted hero, disfigured, with his insides exposed. Like the ceramic ornaments on the armour, he too is fragmented: his parts do not fit. Rather than having legs he grows out of tear gas canisters photographed from ones that I collected from Tahrir Square.

The soldier in the mandala clutches a small child, which is in fact himself. The soldier is a physical embodiment of what man today does to his constructed icons. We create ideas, and then we maim and disfigure them. We are in a cycle of maiming and destroying the icons of our own creation, putting our heroes off centre.

### The Enamel Brooch:

On the back of each suit of armour is an enamel brooch 15cm wide with an image of a lone soldier, his eyes closed, as if dead. It is the same soldier as on the front mandala, but he has been cast out of the mandala's symbolic garden. This signifies that the armour is in fact the coffin of the warrior, similar to the ancient Egyptian Fayoum portraits on the caskets of mummies from the Coptic period.

**The Projection:**

Behind the seven suits of armour is the image of a single soldier, printed on several layers of light silk screens to give depth to the image, yet at the same time keeping its fluidity and sense of otherworldliness. This image is therefore never static and viewers can walk through it.

**The Layout:**

The suits of armour will be placed in a configuration loosely based on sacred geometric patterns, with three suits at the centre of the space, flanked by the remaining four. The suit by the far wall of the installation will have a female bust to reference the role of women as army soldiers and mothers. This work will be free-standing in an open area chosen by the committee, rather than in an enclosed space.

**The Production:**

Adam Lowe and his team at Factum Arte in Madrid will work with me to build the installation. Many stages of the work require innovative processes and a wide range of artisanal skills, both digital and physical.

The chainmail will be made by a traditional armour manufacturer. The size of the chain links will vary and each piece will be custom-made.

The ceramics will be made in two ways. The smaller “fragmented” ceramic pieces will be printed on flat shaped pieces, similar to traditional Fatimid ceramics. The mandalas will be modelled by hand, cast and printed in relief using Factum Arte’s purpose-built flatbed printer.

We will experiment with other techniques and incorporate these into the final suit of armour. Traditionally-made vitreous enamel will be produced on sheets of copper and inset into the chainmail and embroidery by hand and digital printing.

The finished pieces will be mounted on specially designed iron display stands.

The work will take 6 months from the time of approval.