MEENA KHALILI

Designer, Educator, & Generational Storyteller

By Emily Moffitt
Photos by Brian Harmon

Graphic design functions as a great vehicle for telling stories and sharing messages. Meena Khalili, an extraordinary and award-winning graphic designer, found her passion for the medium in college, but an interest in graphic design all started at a young age with a B-52's cassette tape.

Khalili was born in Washington D.C. and raised in a mixed heritage household in Virginia: her father, an immigrant from Iran, owned barbeque restaurants while her mother worked with the House Parliamentarian on Capitol Hill. "Being raised by these two parents wove an interesting tapestry," Khalili says. "I was learning how to read English at the same time I was learning how to read and play music, while listening to my dad in another room speak Farsi on the landline to someone very far away." She may not have realized it at the time, but moments like these, instances where her cultures connected even on a day-to-day basis as she grew up, would have a tremendous impact on her work in the future.
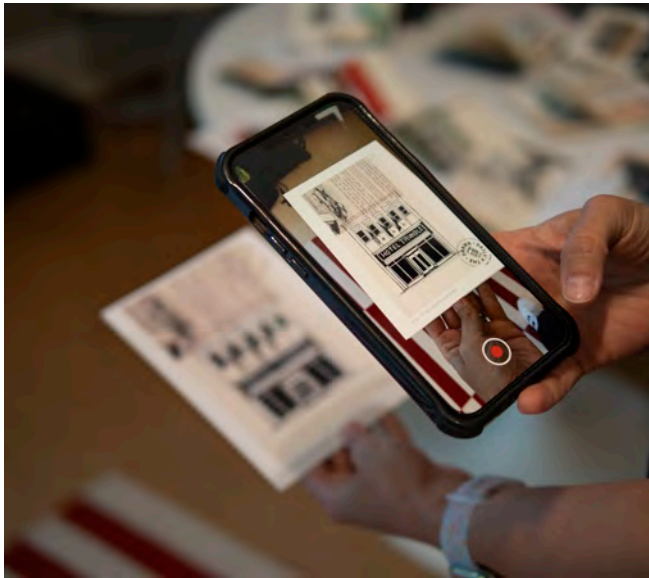
Khalili recalls a moment where she found herself drawn to the field of graphic design, even before realizing it could be a career path. "Like most students back then and even today, I didn't know what graphic design was until college," Khalili says. "But when I was very young, I bought a tape by the B-52's that was so special I kept it in my bedside table." The striking imagery of the four band members printed in black over a rainbow gradient background along with the beautiful, dark, topaz blue color of the tape itself stuck with Khalili for years to come. Amazed with the conjunction of function and visual appeal, her mind was set on a career path that would allow her to create works that could evoke the same feelings in other viewers. "As I've moved forward in my career, I've kept that idea at the front of my practice: to make things that are both visually and functionally appealing," she says. "Design in all its frameworks—not just graphic, but also digital, systems, interactive, product, motion, and experience design—allow me to make things that work,

and that people actually like to use." Khalili has a great understanding of all the facets of design and implements this knowledge in her own work as well as fostering it in her students' work.

Khalili aptly mentions that being in the education field as an instructor should not inhibit the instructor's ability to learn. The design field is fluid, constantly adapting to find new ways to create work or increase efficiency. Combining education and design allows Khalili to learn this herself parallel to her students, providing ample opportunity for everyone to become even better designers

"I WILL GLADLYLE NDYO UMYC OPY"

1,333,000!

Donald Trump, let me ask you: Have you even read the US constitution?

— Khizr Khan
Father of Captain Humayun Saqib Muazzam Khan 1976 - 2004

Khalili creates work that explores technology, human experience, and generational storytelling. She realized how valuable new forms of digital media can be in the creation of new material through the lessons she taught her students. In her current work, Khalili uses augmented reality, and she has recently developed a course in the Graphic Design + Illustration program at USC for co-piloting design with generative AI through a grant from the McCausland Innovation Fund. Khalili continues to create exciting and innovative new design projects, and there are three we consider to be hallmarks of her creativity.

One project Khalili continues to work on is the SC Small Business Storytelling project. This archival project is funded by a grant from the University of South Carolina and consists of interviews with multiple small business owners across the state and their experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. Khalili, raised by a restaurant owner, empathized with the situations of the industrious Palmetto State business owners and aimed to amplify their voices, showcasing the bitter truths of the effects the pandemic had on local economies. She says, "I felt compelled to tell the stories of these hard-working people in hopes we would not forget how difficult and scary that time was in our collective history." Each interview is paired with an augmented reality postcard with a drawing of the featured business and allows the viewer to listen to these stories; all it takes is a smartphone. Using the modern, commonplace smartphone as a vehicle for making these stories much more accessible is a genius idea and speaks to her ingenuity and compassion.

than they already are. "So very often what our faculty are doing in our respective practices is what the students get to do," Khalili says. "For instance, when I learn a new technology, I teach it to my students."

She encourages group learning and valuing the perspectives of each individual designer. The projects she leads with her students at the University of South Carolina include co-piloting artificial intelligence, working with businesses and clients, and so much more. Khalili values the importance of real-world experiences in the classroom and can execute these lesson plans with aplomb. "Students in our program at the School of Visual Art and Design at USC are working in the field and experiencing studio practice as soon as possible. We work with clients, so our students work with clients."

Under the greater umbrella of creating work with augmented reality features, some students created posters based on National Parks while others created augmented reality experiences on the field at Eugene E. Stone III Stadium for the university's Women's Soccer team. Khalili's students also had the opportunity to work with the South Carolina State House Legislative Oversight Committee to improve the visual appeal and user-friendliness of their communication systems.

Khalili also expresses her knack for illustrating through her meditative "Drawn Daily" series. She uses these illustrations as opportunities for both the mundane and the revolutionary, celebrating every moment she has the chance to. "Each drawing marks a moment and is truly meditative in that I am tremendously present when making these drawings," she says. "For instance, if I look at a drawing from ten years ago, I can recall most of that day." The "New in LOU 365" iteration of the "Drawn Daily" project started from her desire to learn more about Louisville while living there. Khalili says, "I had moved six times in four years when I began that project, and I really felt the need to be grounded!"

This similar sensation inspired another subproject, the "100 Days of Honest Pregnancy" sketch series. These works were dual-purpose, but the second purpose was developed postpartum. "While the 'Honest Pregnancy' series was a visual catch-all for my days leading up to

The sketch that began in this notebook became a postcard designed to deploy augmented reality technology to create a rich, multimodal experience.

Use your mobile phone's camera to scan this QR code and engage with the online component of the project.

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becoming a mother, the relationship of artmaking to motherhood came later for me," she muses. Khalili found new pathways for conversation between her new status as a mother, and her art. Her daughter has been present at many landmarks in Khalili's career, such as her projection-mapping exhibit TYPO/TOPO and her residency as a visiting artist in San Francisco. "I have found myriad new relationships between motherhood and creating art, but my biggest revelation has been to combine them by bringing my family into the process whenever possible," Khalili says. Fostering a relationship between a state of being and a physical place comes to the forefront in Khalili's "Drawn in Soda City" subsidiary of the "Drawn Daily" collection. The iconic combination of collaged pieces of paper from books and letters with buildings across the city represent the sense of remembering who we are and where we come from and create a pathway for making new memories associated with the subject.

A deeply personal and continuous project of Khalili's, titled "Khoobe." explores her relationship with her Iranian heritage and growing up in the Southeast United States, a concept shared amongst many fellow artists of color. A core tenet within the project is the idea of entropic design. Stemming from her father's tenure as a physics instructor in Iran, the concept took a deeper meaning when combined with the power of augmented reality. Khalili says that "entropy, the act of gradual decline into disorder, remains a cornerstone principle in this project, which is an amalgam of sound, motion, and printed work." Through the AR functionality, she can combine the discordant pieces into one harmonious exploration of both the whole of her identity, and the individual piece. Her experiences as an Iranian American are infused into her day-to-day projects, drawing from her sensitivity and love of geography and language.

Between the physical manifestations of her love for Columbia through illustrating bustling local hotspots, and her dedication to amplifying the voices of creatives pursuing a similar career, Khalili serves as a paragon of innovation in graphic design. Columbia does not receive the same kudos for making strides in the arts, but that does not mean that progress is obsolete here. "The art scene in Columbia is on the precipice of something great, and I'm convinced of this," says Khalili. "I have lived in several cities, big and small, and there is an energy here in Columbia. Even the artists I bring in to work with my students feel it is palpable." It is a goal that sustained energy and hunger—along with genuine support from our elected representatives and city leaders—can lead us to.

Khalili had the chance to show her work at the Columbia Museum of Art in the talk and tour Woman, Life, Freedom: An Evening on the Art of Protest, which also allowed her to share her heritage with patrons. She is ever present at the Cottontown Art Crawl and spreads her love for design and the city of Columbia any chance she has. With a penchant for sleek and accessible design projects, each new work from Meena Khalili is exciting and innovative, and keeps Columbia in the conversation of cities that are bringing the best and brightest ideas to the design field.