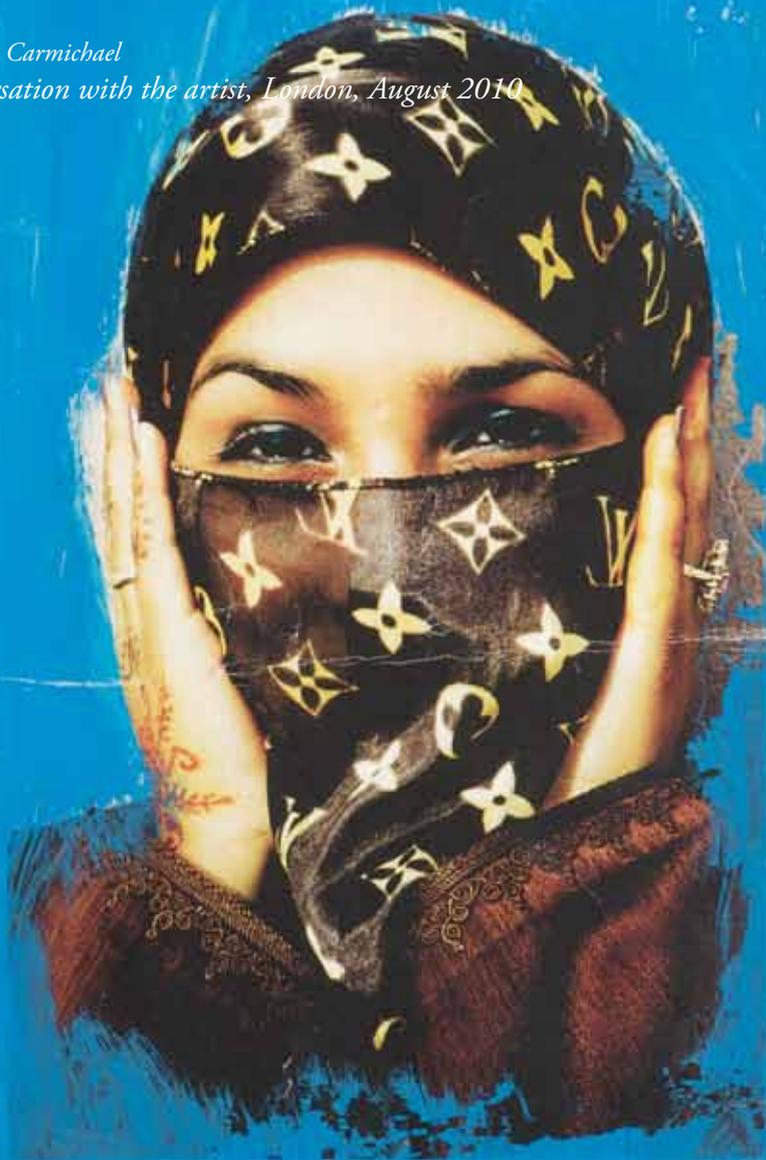


HASSAN HAJJAJ COCA COLA RIAD

by: Kelly Carmichael

Conversation with the artist, London, August 2010



*Saeda_Hassan Hajjaj, Dakka Marrakesh Series,
Digital C-type print with wood and recycled tyre frame, 50x40cm, 2000*

Sometimes you meet an artist and it's impossible to separate their practice from their life: the approach is the same, one reflects the other and somehow these two strands strengthen the whole. Arriving at Hassan Hajjaj's showroom situated in London's East End you're immediately surrounded by the iconic items of his practice. Hung from the ceiling, bursting out of shelves and stacked against walls are lamps, tables, clothing, photographs, plastic coca cola crates, empty packaging, boldly printed fabrics and mats. These everyday objects are the building blocks of a practice that stretches across fashion, design, photography and installation, one capturing the vibrant atmosphere and upbeat rhythm of the artist's homeland of Morocco. Incredibly eclectic, brimming with colour, warm, engaging, playful, streetwise and witty – welcome to the world of British-Moroccan artist and designer Hassan Hajjaj.

Jumping between genres with the same energy and vibrancy he lives life, Hajjaj's work reflects the living culture of Morocco. His materials come from the souk while inspiration, models and attitude are courtesy of the streets of Marrakesh. It would be impossible to imagine Hassan Hajjaj's practice without the medina, the souk, the colours and enticing confusion of this ancient city. His works are not so much a reflection of Morocco but a distillation of its essence and its influences. For Hajjaj his practice is "a celebration of my culture – the smells, the sounds, the everyday objects, the foods, shapes and feel of this hot, sunny, noisy world." When his family immigrated to London in the 1970s, the 14 year old was taken away from the colour and vibrancy of Morocco and plunged into a whole new set of surroundings. It's tough when you're a teenager who doesn't speak English, is trying to fit in and "figure out what it means to

be a streetwise Moroccan kid in London", but such circumstances teach you a lot about making opportunities and thinking on your feet. Hajjaj recalls the newness of everything he found – "Roxy Music, Rod Stewart, ska, the food, the clothes!" – with exhilaration, with the sense of someone who fished in the exoticism of a new set of pop culture references. Popular culture is Hassan Hajjaj's pulse. His passion for the products, look, attitude and feel of the streets – Western or Moroccan – is clearly evident in his work, an astute combination of global urban culture and Middle Eastern clichés.

Coming of age in London during the Punk era and birth of the clubbing scene gave Hajjaj a unique cultural playground. If, as Frank Zappa would have it, it's true that "art is making something out of nothing and selling it", Hassan Hajjaj might just be the man he had in mind. Various a van driver, club promoter, restaurant designer and fashion store owner – selling luxury labels such as Vivienne Westwood and Galliano mixed in with cheeky Moroccan fakes – Hajjaj rode the cultural and economic wave of the times. His ability to spot and catch a trend just as it began to surface says much about the shrewd 'street-wise Moroccan kid' and many aspects associated with his earlier ventures are later incorporated and translated into his artistic practice. However it was his recycling of objects, the turning of discarded Coca-Cola crates with Arabic script and advertising signs into chairs and tables – a common practice in North Africa – that first launched Hajjaj as a designer. Reinventing and recasting these signifiers of culture and place with something of a Punk DIY approach, Hajjaj drew upon the familiarity of Moroccan brands and their logos and packaging reminiscent of the 1950s and 60s along with practices he rediscovered from childhood.



Hassan Hajjaj, *Seating for Tea Room Installation*, Similar for sale at his London showroom

It's hard to ignore that much of Hajjaj's work involves the use of brands and logos and this is never more evident than in the Salon works – a glorious riot of colour, logo, reworked textiles and signage. Whether designer labels or his fascination with the retro look of Moroccan packaging, brands play an important role in Hajjaj's work and he describes them as “playing a large part in influencing my perception of the world”¹. Preparing items for a Salon to be installed in the upcoming Berlin exhibition ‘My Beautiful Rubbish’ when I visit his studio, Hajjaj shows me the objects he's sending, all made

from recycled, re-appropriated North African materials and overflowing with the vibrant packaging and typography used in North African and Middle Eastern commerce. Tins, beaten flat and pierced then shaped into traditional Moroccan-style lamps, their original printing still visible, advertise the baby milk formula, Nescafe or meat they once contained. Stools are made of large paint buckets covered with fabric carrying the Louis Vuitton logo while the legs of one low table are constructed from stacked Moroccan teapots and the top of another is a light-box advertising Fanta. Red Coca Cola crate bookcases, clothing made from empty flour sacks, Moroccan pouffes and cushions

¹-Hassan Hajjaj Dakka Marrakesh, Hassan Hajjaj and Beyond Art Productions 2008. Interview by Juliet Cestar

of vibrantly coloured 1960s designs abound. Hajjaj conceives each Salon as an immersive and interactive social space. Tea and sweets are served with traditional Arabic hospitality while especially selected music, films and even Wi-Fi entertain visitors to the space. Conceived with the same careful and considered approach towards brand, content and atmosphere as the club nights he used to organize or the celebrated 'Andy Wahloo' restaurant he designed in Paris, each Salon bursts with the energy of global popular culture. The Western food and beverage logos that dominate our lives are well represented here, albeit in a distinctly Moroccan reincarnation, and often in Arabic script.

Hajjaj's blending, overlaying, re-creating and transforming of everyday objects and material means the term 'multi-disciplinary' falls short to accurately describe his technique. Perhaps 'mash-up' is a better term, for it is this street-wise urban approach of overlaying items, influences and cultural signifiers that is evident in the Dakka Marrakesh exhibition of 2008 and later photographic series *Kesh Angels* (2010). Though already a celebrated designer, Dakka Marrakesh at Rose Issa Projects in London was the first outing of Hajjaj's considerable body of photographic work. The images had been steadily building up since around 2000, but Hajjaj had chosen not to show them, saying the photographs were "initially too personal. I wanted to protect my friends and my culture. Design is fun, but for me photography is personal. Rose got the work, it felt ok to exhibit the images with her and in that context". With a nod to both African studio photography, Arabic film posters of his childhood and the iconic look of international fashion magazines, the photographs of both bodies of work are

carefully stage-directed by the Hajjaj. Poses, costumes, props and backdrops form mini sets upon which theatrical narratives can be played out around the iconography of East meets West and contemporary culture and consumerism. Bringing his fashion background to both bodies of work led Hajjaj to design the clothing worn by models selected from the medina or who were already friends. Many images feature counterfeit logos of global giants Louis Vuitton and Nike alongside hybrid items designed by Hajjaj and richly patterned with polka dots, leopard print and camouflage. The works, some framed with old tires or collages of Moroccan packaging, are a fusion of cultures, influence and place. The collision of Western urban street fashion and

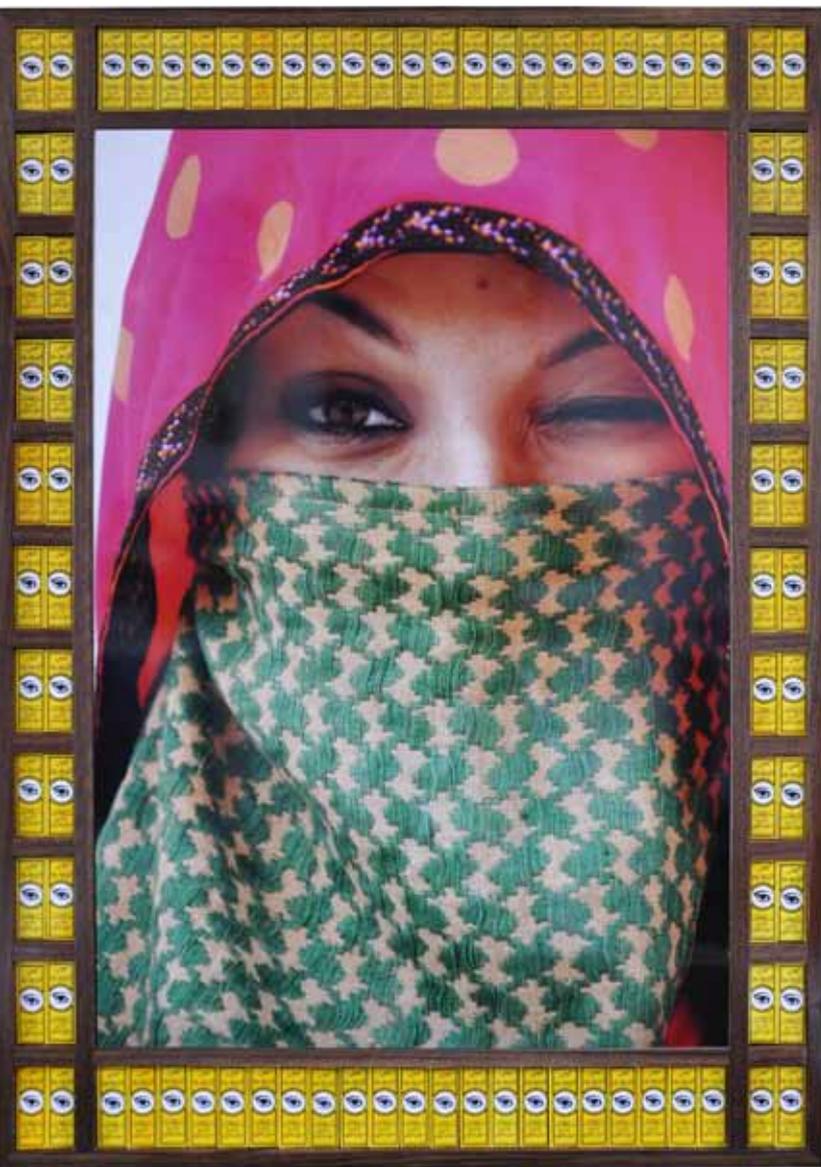


Hassan Hajjaj, *Kesh Angels Series, Hassans Angels-Khadija*, Metallic Lambda Print, wooden frame and soda cans, 135.9 x 93.4 cm, 2010

traditional Moroccan style in the earlier works culminate in the Louis Vuitton logo hijab or Nike babouche, all modeled in the nonchalant manner of fashion magazines. In these works faux Vuitton is quite literally part of the fabric of urban life. But while these images reflect the rampant consumerism and brand fetish of contemporary culture they also seem to fuel it. Hajjaj's borrowing of the fashion shoot aesthetic – all glossy surfaces, street smart attitude and sass – whetting our appetite for more.

Creating an unexpectedly rich and compelling narrative, the Kesh Angels series draws upon the

biker culture of the young women of Marrakesh. Styled in strong colours and patterns and posed upon scooters and motorbikes, Hajjaj reflects the strength, spirit and street smarts of these women. While the biker girl look may be a rock song cliché summed up by a pair of jeans and a clingy t-shirt, these images have been recast in characteristic Hassan Hajjaj style. The Kesh Angels model colourful djellabah and veils of the artist's own design, respecting tradition but also addressing the viewer with a confident, modern and independent manner. The urban street aesthetic and contemporary textiles teasingly subvert traditional attire and rework tired



Hassan Hajjaj, *Kesh Angels Series, Wink*, metallic lambda print, wooden frame and kohl packaging, 91.8 x 63.7 cm, 2007

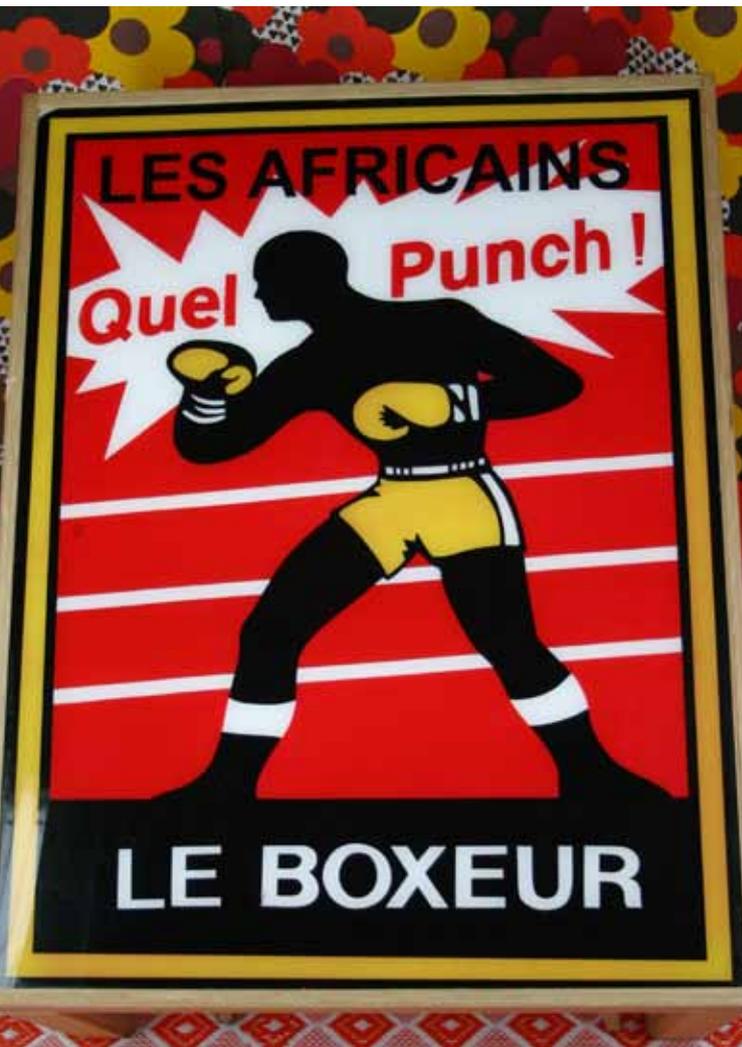


Hassan Hajjaj, Hassan Hajjaj, Shelving for Tea Room Installation

clichés, becoming a theatrical device for Hajjaj to cast a flirtatious glance at his audience. Also addressing the politically charged symbol of the veil, Hajjaj playfully questions our perception of and obsession with stereotypes. The Kesh Angels may be djellabah clad, but their inner biker chick shines through. The juxtaposition of familiar components from contrasting cultures is further emphasized by frames that draw upon Moroccan packaging, forming a distinctive kind of Maghreb product placement. Again mixing and unifying elements of new and old in characteristic style, the frames are hand crafted from wood inlaid with various items – mini soft drink cans, boxes of matches, make up bottles, plastic blocks or little boxes of kohl – each is unique, integral to the overall work and

responds in some way to the image it surrounds.

Confessing that he “likes to play with the concept, likes to loosen up people’s ideas of what an Arabic woman looks like” Hajjaj often creates works and images that bring Western and Moroccan culture head to head. Previous photographs have drawn upon and reworked stereotypes such as the Odalisque, that 19th Century symbol of Oriental exoticism and passive femininity. A well-known work from 2000, *Ilham* shows a woman recreating the standard odalisque pose, reclining on a sofa behind which Moroccan tiles in a geometric design cover the wall. However this woman looks directly at the viewer, engaging them with a confidence and presence that suggests we are more a guest in her space, perhaps her home, and that we are equally being observed. Hajjaj’s approach is to toy with the perceptions of Arabic culture and the relationship between East and West, recasting iconic images and allowing shafts of 21st century light to reenergize the encounter. While Hajjaj touches upon the politics of observation and there is obvious ground for evoking postcolonial debates in much of his photographic practice, it would seem that he is always careful to evoke a certain ambiguity in the work. Commenting that his images “can go either way” Hajjaj’s practice of inclusion and contrast rarely offers just one aesthetic or theoretical option. His works evoke numerous stereotypes and arguments, subvert just as many and playfully ask viewer to examine their own reactions. Toying with and questioning labels – literal or those imposed by history or culture – Hassan Hajjaj’s practice is full of images and situations that look familiar but on closer inspection disrupt what we thought we’d



Hassan Hajjaj, *Tabletops for Tearoom Installation*

see. Turning Orientalist clichés on their head is a particular favourite, none more so than in two [insert ‘previously un-shown’ if we can use them here] photographs from 2008. The first image sees the Hajjaj staging a scene of dreamy Orientalist fantasy, but with a contemporary twist. Lying on a sofa, its base made from the artist’s trademark red Coca Cola crates, we find a man at rest. Seated on the ground, beautiful women surround him, one wearing a kaftan drenched in Louis Vuitton logos. The second image capsizes this Orientalist illusion – the man is now standing, at work it seems, serving the women while they relax. One of them has even stolen his sofa.

casting objects and cultural clichés, he coaxes Western and Moroccan cultural influences into a uniquely celebratory, powerful and vernacular aesthetic.

There’s a distinctly un-academic and personal approach to the way Hassan Hajjaj works. It’s

Hassan Hajjaj, *Football*, 62x86cm, digital C, Type print and handmade walnut frame with plastic building cubes, 2006

