

## Creating the Dream Space

by Aida Eltorie



Photo credit: Amr Mounib



Susan Hefuna is a foreigner of her own land. Half here, half somewhere else, she overrides the assumed stereotype that defines her cultural differences. Playing with the exoticism of two clearly unbridged cultures of Egypt and Germany, she is not from the Orient, nor does she represent its European cliché. Reverting back and forth between the layers that pertain to that other side, she cannot belong to one idea, but diversifies into many.

Mashrabiya's are the center of Susan's corporeal juxtapositions, allowing and disallowing the conventional imagery of a modern Egypt with all its historical glory, she reaffirms cultural qualities in the diversity of her work by playing with an open [yet closed from public view] window, commonly seen in the architecture of Old Cairo and certainly available in its rural disperses. She navigates through an escaping combination of science and mathematics, a modulus diversus that abstractly references belonging while not belong-

Photo credit: Russ Kientsch

ing. As much as you can be part of a place at a certain time, you can also not belong and still be completely part of it. This is where her visual production offers a welcoming array that cannot be restricted by cultural clichés and instead it is what you want it to be.

Briefly commencing with the Cairo Biennial, Egypt 1992, Susan exhibited her first solo show. A multimedia installation with digital photographs in Cairo, under the connoisseurship of Ahmed Fouad Selim and the late Fatma Smail (ex-curator of the biennial), she was invited for the second time to show at the Biennial by December 1998 and won the International Grand Prize. Her funa was independent from the contemporary art scene, and recognized for her mashrabiya's, a theme not considered any less conventional from the work already produced within the city's palpating setting, her work clearly stood out with its unconventional overlays of pinhole camera techniques combined with digital photography. At that same event, Susan met William Wells, the director of The Townhouse Gallery of contemporary art, a space that only opened a month earlier with an unknown fate at the time.

By 2000, Susan had her first solo show at The Townhouse Gallery and became officially affiliated since then. She had met a curator at The National Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa that same year and was invited to a 3-month artists residency program. Susan got to experience two sides to a newly introduced African community; an all-white university in Stellenbosch (1), and separately she was to give workshops with Muslim women in the local community. Even though there was no more apartheid, the communities were still quite segregated. At the same time Susan worked with South African students on the theme of "Life Stories." During her 3-month stay, she had met so many people from the locale she then came up with a new idea. The Grid Project was based on a wooden cage made of palm wood. Usually used to transport fruits, vegetables and animals from the rural areas, Susan decided

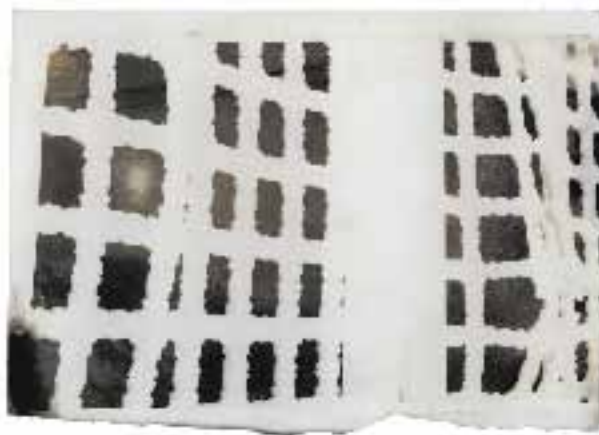
to cross terrains and transport an empty cage from the Delata to Cape Town by ship. She was already crossing physical boundaries.

Exhibited on the entrance of The National Gallery, was the beginning of the concept of 'vitrines' that later showed up in her work, and in this scenario, Susan occupied with a peasant-like showcase an institution that only housed European art. The Grid was Susan's empty gift for the people of Cape Town who were invited to put their gift inside in order to complete the work. Developing a personal relationship with the women was part of Susan's natural process and it resulted in their telling stories. She gained their trust, and as essential participants to her work, they brought personal objects and items into the exhibiting space. Objects that were

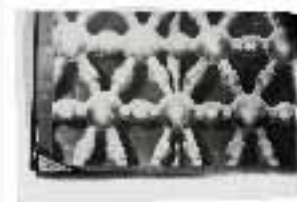
offered to the 'afas ('cage' in Arabic) included things like African spiritual stones, porcelain cups, Arabic scriptures from the Quran, dolls, children's toys, dry grass that carried ancestral spirits, and her favorite: an Ostridgegg from an Indian Muslim woman with writings of the 99 names of Allah. Inspired by the diversity of her audience, people from many religions and cultures, a "rainbow nation," they were also not the typical museum goer.

Publicity around the event traveled by word-of-mouth. Not one flier was distributed, and a pool of unorthodox visitors occupied the space. The audience's involvement included poetic hymns, dancing, and even food was brought into the National Gallery. Becoming a political piece, the space also became a temporal shrine. Societal segregation was broken and once again Susan was deconstructing the status quo and breaking the label. Being

careful on how people define each other and define themselves, her work continues to explore 'identity.' "We cannot assume the obvious and we cannot always define others according to the stereotype, and



Above and below from Cityscape Cairo Series, 2001.  
Photography 60 x 80 each



(1) Universiteit Stellenbosch University <http://www.sun.ac.za/>



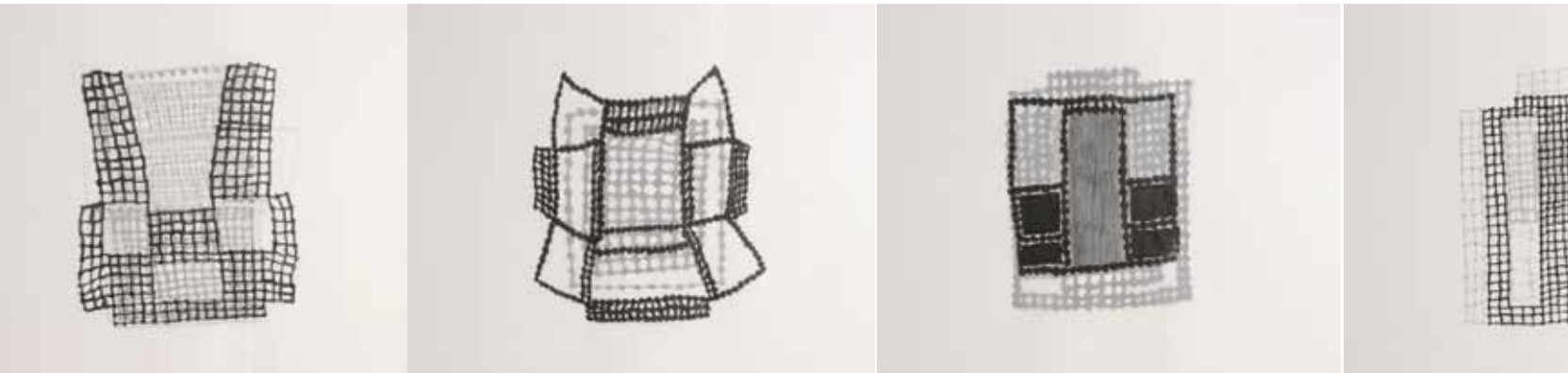
that is exactly why the viewer is important in my work, they are responsible of how they see themselves and those around them," said Susan. "Everyone sees their own version of the same picture, and the artwork is not separate from its viewer." (2)

By 2001, The Townhouse Gallery was running for its third year and still going strong. It began to expose an avant-garde wave of artists in the contemporary locale and joined forces with two others significant and independently run spaces that had their own subtle ripple effect in the city: Espace Karim Francis and Mashrabia Gallery. Together they designed the first art festival in Cairo, Al Nitaq, and Susan, amongst other talents, created the first contemporary public art in downtown's Talaat Harb Square.

Hanging from the building façade right above Gropi restaurant, an age-old cultural landmark in the heart of the downtown area was a red cloth with old photographic

group exhibition titled 4Women/4Views, Susan had continued to travel between cities. She gained significant presence in London, and by 2003 she was exhibiting in the Center for Contemporary Culture, a show curated by Rose Issa in Barcelona, followed by DisORIENTATION curated by Jack Persekian in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin.

In a published conversation with Rose Issa (3), Hefuna dwells on her process and identifies the reading of her work as dependent on cross-cultural codes. Inviting the flexibility of her viewer's background, it is through their choice of perception that they bring associations to her series of drawings. They can relate to both differences and similarities at once when identifying with the structures she has to offer. Bouncing back and forth from a micro to macro approach, Hefuna develops her Cityscape Series. A variety of ink, pencil and watercolor drawings, in various dimensions, they take on the shape of a visual game, like 'connect the dots.'



From the Cityscape NYC Series, ink on paper., dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist

prints of a city, its outskirts, and silhouettes of figures on the fore and hind of abstract mashrabiya designs. Motifs conventionally seen near the staged setting, Hefuna was already on her way confirming her signature in the cultural scene. Taking a 'Greetings from Cairo' postcard, she designed her own series of postcards with a loud pantone yellow, and printed the words CAIRO on one side, and on the other the Islamic and Gregorian year 1422/2001. Looking like ordinary street banners in Cairo, Made in Cairo and Printed in Berlin, Hefuna continuously re-affirmed her cross-cultural duality.

By 2002, Hefuna was a resident at Delfina Studios in London, and she was preparing for the first Photo Cairo show initiated by The Townhouse Gallery. Followed by another

Exploring her own visual memories from her childhood summer holiday visits to the Delta, to her own grown-up playground, that sheet of paper did not settle in a single layer, but many layers of tracing and retracing her personal and emotional journey's in the form of dots and lines. A continuous physical process from the commencement of free-standing dots, to their connections, Hefuna plays both the role of the institution and its participant. Before reaching out to her audience, she required quiet isolation for her own optimal completion.

Inspired by in-between-ness: Inside looking out and outside unable to lurk in, Susan does not settle on a single zone, and instead grows from constantly traveling, growing

(2) Aida Eltorie in conversation with Susan Hefuna, December 25th 2008, New York City.

(3) Xcultural Codes. Kehrer Publishing, Rose Issa in conversation with Susan Hefuna, London, August 2002. pp.41-44

and multiplying. Her lines connect the dots, and those dots multiply and leap off tracing sheets into wooden screens. Commissioning the same carpenter's from the latticework shops in Old Cairo, three-dimensional grids the size of doors occupy the space, and between the grid modules come even smaller units. To those at a distance appear signage's like "ANA," "ICH," "New Woman," "Cairo," "1427," "1428," "1429," "NOT FOR SALE," and the infamous "Knowledge is Sweeter Than Honey."

Diversification vis-à-vis attendance, interaction, and participation, the mashrabiya's are inviting by becoming part of and completely disbarred from their surroundings. Hefuna delineates by recreating a showcase of fantasies and the silhouette of a dream space.

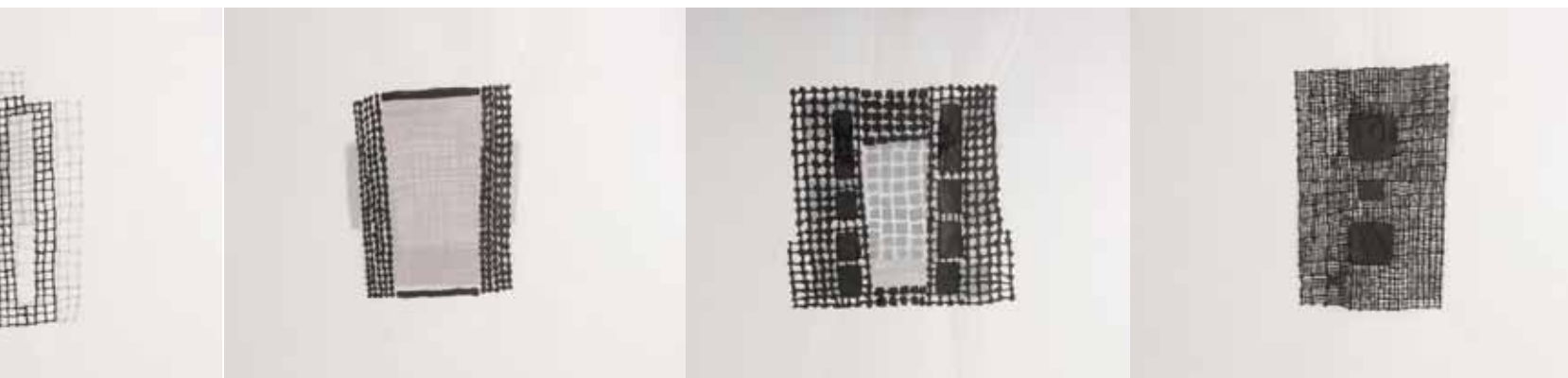
"Fantasy for me is like breathing air. I do art because it is the only place for my fantasy to come to life, to create my own non-verbal language that goes beyond words. I need

drawings without interruption.

During a brief Q&A interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist on February 6, 2009, he was kind enough to share his thoughts and experiences about this process as a curator and working with Susan Hefuna:

1. How did you learn about Susan Hefuna, her work, and what sought your interest?

I felt the necessity of continuing my research by going to the Middle East and so I attended the first Dubai Art Fair 3 years ago. I visited The Third Line Gallery and was struck by Susan Hefuna's work. The 'First Interview' happened in a very strange format. Everything on that day went wrong, from the taxi and on the way to the airport, we developed an incredible spark out of this interview. So we decided to produce a book, and it became a collaborative 'ping pong.'



to live my Fantasy in order to survive." Susan tells as she describes her process, her mask series, and the experiences she shared with an all girls' school during a design workshop in Zayed University in Abu Dhabi last year. She seeks to expose and nurture subconscious traits of identity, whether in her own work or through her students. What she receives, she gives back by identifying with new information, new media and new ideas. For Art Dubai this year, Susan will be literally creating a dream space.

Hans Ulrich Obrist described Susan's Cairo as a "laboratory," in their first volume of *Pars Pro Toto* (4). Susan works in different cities depending on her travels, whether in hotels or apartments, her studio takes on the shape of an isolated site. Even when in the heart of New York City, she will still manage to disconnect in order to get back to her

2. Tell me about your recent project with Susan?

At the Serpentine Gallery, we began producing the Manifesto Marathon, and Susan participated by producing postcards, and invited people to write their manifesto's on the postcards. It became a collective manifesto.

3. Could you comment on the collaborative piece you are creating with Susan, the second volume to *Pars Pro Toto*?

HUO: *Pars Pro Toto*, Volume 2 is to be launched in August 2009. The third interview is in motion, a work in progress. While walking in the park, or while sitting in a car, my conversations with Susan have been caught off-guard. Susan then

(4) Susan Hefuna, *Pars Pro Toto*. Ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist. Kehrer Publishing (2008), pp. 15

came up with the idea that I could write questions, and she would answer in drawing. Drawings invented a whole new role of contribution to this second volume and we are very excited about sharing it.

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Susan reflects on her experiences with Hans, as they were supposed to meet at the Serpentine Gallery, but plans did change, and she had to meet him on his way to the airport to New York. Meeting Hans for the first time, and during the interview session in a car heading to Heathrow airport, and then through the Heathrow Express air train to the airport terminal. They spoke for two hours non-stop.

By December 2007, Susan's solo exhibition at The Townhouse Gallery, took place right before another solo at The Third Line Gallery and was followed by her first debut in New York City's Albion Gallery. Directed by David Ross, he saw her work in March 2008 at The Third Line exhibition, and decided she would be the perfect inaugural opening for New York's Albion. Exhibiting beside Vito Acconci, this show was very well received by a large part of the art community. Including curators from significant institutions in the community, Susan was also having a group show in the New Museum's Museum As Hub project. Exhibiting along the likes of Ayman Ramadan, Tarek Zaki and Jan Rothuizen, the director of the educational and development program at the New Museum, Eungie Joo, hosted an exhibit, curated by William Wells, under the concept of Antikhana, or the neighborhood that surrounds the Townhouse Gallery today.

Part of the solo exhibition Susan had on display at Townhouse back in December 2007, a collection of objects showcased in vitrines put on a small crowded street in the mechanic's district, was moved into the New Museum's space in SoHo, NY. Susan's work methodology was to always involve her audience, so she originally asked from all the workers in the lane and at the gallery, to meet their wives, mothers and sisters. She visited their houses, all living in the suburbs one to two hours drive outside of the city, and asked them to give her a gift from the house. It took her four months to collect "lifestories" with all the women in the downtown Cairo neighborhood.

The vitrines on the street, were removed daily, by people from the street. Each object would tell a story; a plate, had a story about a life or a relationship, a particular memory.





The objects had hidden stories, fantasies if you will. A dream space was created by involving and collecting works from the neighborhood. Very much like the dream space Susan had constructed 10 years earlier in Cape Town, a new dream space is being constructed at this moment at the Dubai Art Fair 2009. For the first time, Susan will be building a three dimensional mashrabiya house. Breaking away from a single

**“Fantasy for me is like breathing air. I do art because it is the only place for my fantasy to come to life, to create my own non-verbal language that goes beyond words. I need to live my Fantasy in order to survive.”**

screen, you will now be able to walk all around the concealed module.

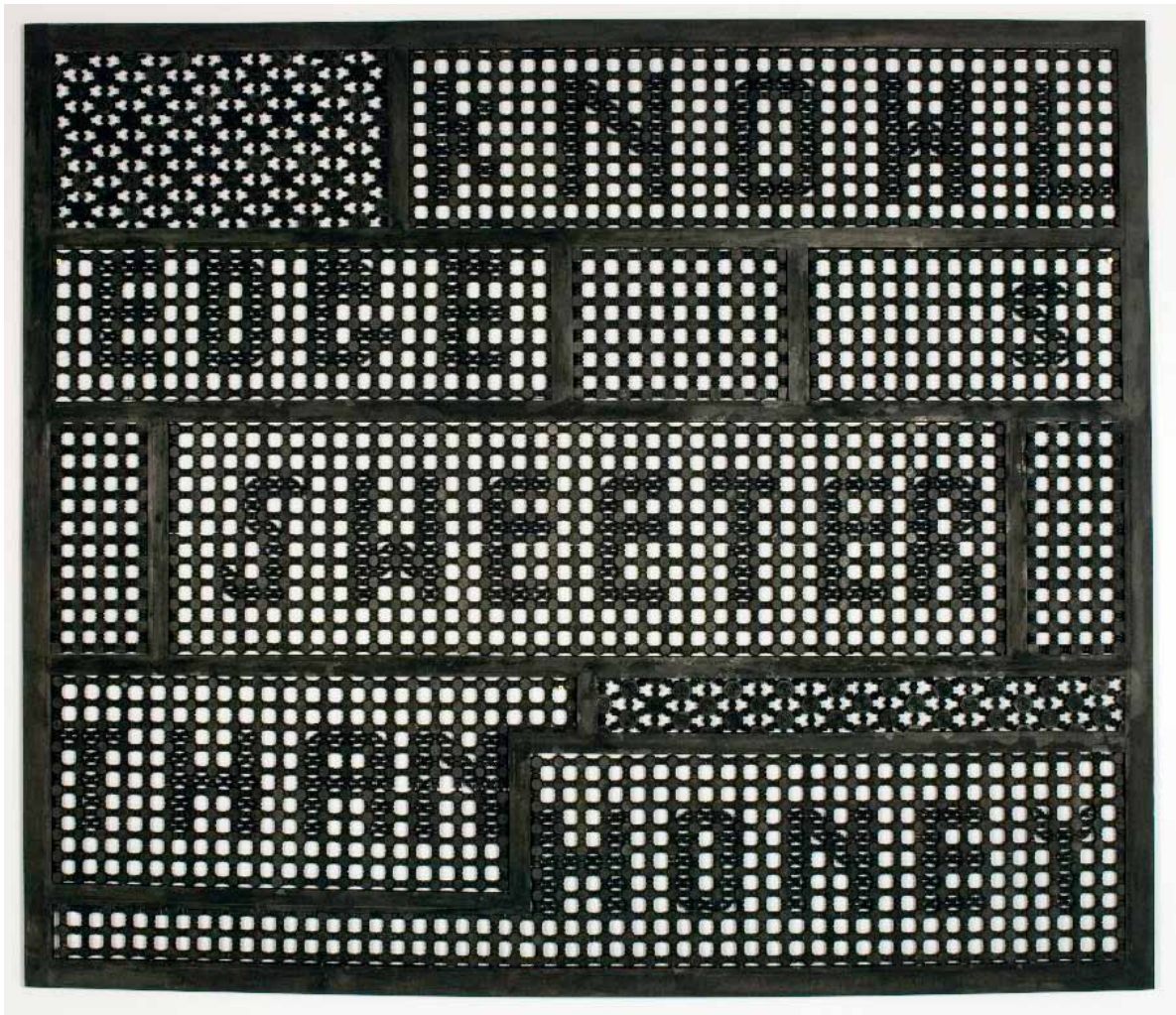
Learning about why Susan started to show in Egypt, her response was: “It is important to keep true to where you are from.” and Townhouse was that experience. She developed a very different relationship with Cairo then she had in Dusseldorf. She mainly went there for post-production in photographs and books, so Germany acted as a site to take a step back and re-evaluate her experiences around the rest of the world. “It was always good to have that distance.”

Susan Hefuna has exhibited at the Louvre, National Gallery in Cape Town, The British Museum, participated in several group exhibitions, as well as solo shows in; The Third Line Gallery, The Townhouse Gallery of contemporary art, and this year been seen at the Victoria & Albert Museum for the Jameel Art Prize, Youniverse (Seville and Granada Biennials) and the Venice Biennial 2009.

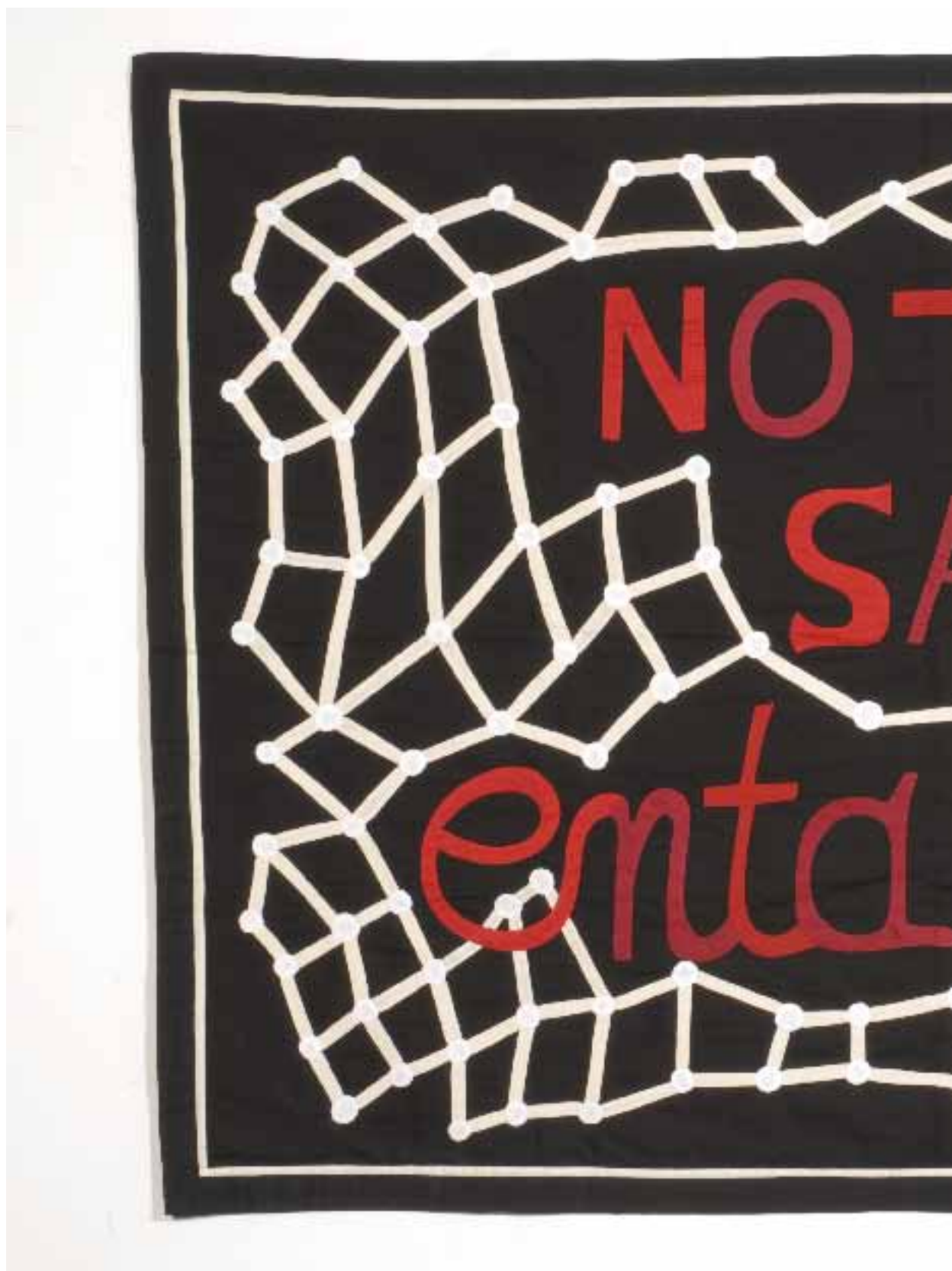




Mirage 07, Sharjah Biennial, 2007



Knowledge is Sweeter Than Honey, 2006







Not For Sale, 2006  
Embroidered cotton  
Approx 100 x 150cm