The Abraaj Capital Art Prize February 2011

Hamra Abbas, Cityscapes Istanbul, archival pigment prints, 50 by 230 cm, 2010 courtesy OUTLET Independent Art Space

Background

2011 sees the coming of age of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize, neatly bringing the total of completed art projects to 11 with 5 new artworks unveiled at the 5th edition of Art Dubai this March. In its first two years, we have seen ground-breaking artworks stretching artists to the limit of their practice. The prize is unique in that it rewards artists on the basis of a proposal, an idea of an art project they always dreamt of realising, rather than a completed body of work. Marwan Sahmarani, when it was announced he was one of the three winners for 2010 joked that it was rather like being given a trophy for winning a marathon before running one step. This approach is refreshing for artists, so often commissions have clear directives. For Abraaj Capital it means their art collection as it develops is one full of works which for artists are really intrinsic to their practice, and are important in the wider reception of their work. Artworks will always be available for loans, and will therefore be part of larger retrospectives and exhibitions of these artists. Artworks have already travelled to New York for an exhibition at the Museum of Arts & Design.

The structure of the prize echoes Abraaj Capital's own investment philosophy, to put faith in promising ideas, which have the potential to grow into something big; breeding a new generation of cultural entrepreneurs who will go on to be global champions. Abraaj Capital is the region's leading private equity firm with offices across the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (MENASA). They hosted a landmark event in November 2010 called The Celebration of Entrepreneurship (CoE), labelled an anti-conference which brought together leading inspiring figures in the private sector to Dubai to foster new connections and business opportunities. Nazgol Ansarinia's winning ACAP artwork Rhyme & Reason from 2009 was on display, and she led a 'Spark' session aimed at inspiring young art

professionals. There were many creative initiatives such as the Art In Progress wall, a collaborative project with local artists to create a giant mural, at the close this was signed by Arif Naqvi, Founder and Group CEO, Abraaj Capital and Fadi Ghandour, Founder and CEO, Aramex.

The MENASA region is central to the prize, each work chosen is rooted in that geographical space, and showcases to the wider international artistic community what diverse areas of creative excellence there are, all the way from North Africa to South Asia. So far through ACAP we have seen works commenting on issues that are current, and affect our lives every day. Many comment on the state of the cities in which the artists have lived, rather prophetically in the case of Hala Elkoussy from Cairo's Myths & Legends Room: the Mural. Some use the resources of traditional craftsmanship, such as Ansarinia's Rhyme & Reason made in Iran, and Hamra Abbas's Woman in Black. Artists have travelled to their home country to produce their artwork, such as Kutluğ Ataman's Strange Space shot in south-eastern Turkey close to the Iraqi border, formerly known as Mesopotamia and Jananne Al-Ani's Shadow Sites II. Some have been inspired by significant historical and spiritual landmarks such as Kader Attia's History of a Myth: the Small Dome of the Rock. Multiple themes are often at play. This year is no exception: the projects show leading artists working with new media, on larger scales and realising projects that have been brewing for years, as if waiting for the funding and opportunity the Abraaj Capital Art Prize offers each year.

2011 sees winners with backgrounds in Tunisia, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan, and the guest curator Sharmini Pereira hails from Sri Lanka – but the regional influences working on the art projects offer a far more varied scope than that. The projects collectively reflect on past histories and signifiers – through experimenting with new mediums,

Shezad Dawood, Until the End of the World, 2008, neon, Courtesy of the Artist and The Third Line, Dubai

collaborating with musicians, street hawkers and creating new, independent artworks. Art Dubai sees their unveiling, but the period that chiefly interests us has drawn to a close by then. As Nadia Kaabi-Linke perceptively puts it, the most creative point for an artist who works in installation is in the conceptual phase, what follows is a journey to make that idea a reality, often through quite logistical and practical legwork. This year the journey each artist has gone through is going to be documented in a publication masterminded by Sharmini Pereira and designed by OK-RM from the UK called Footnotes to a Project that will be launched on Saturday 19th March at the fair. Sharmini Pereira sees this as a project in its own right. To quote Pereira, 'it will be a place where you will be able to see the processes involved of all five artists and the intention is for it to be there like the artworks during the opening event. Like any publication, it has the potential to live on after an exhibition and continue to disburse the ideas behind it as much as the names of the artists involved, as well as the reputation of this prize. The distribution of this will be essential to developing a wider audience.' Sharmini Pereira is the director and founder of Raking Leaves, a not-for-profit independent publisher of artists' book projects and special editions. Since 1999 she has worked internationally as an independent curator and writer. In 2006 she co-curated the first Singapore Biennale. She was a Trustee for Book Works, London (2005 – 2010) and an academic advisor for the Asia Art Archive (AAA), Hong Kong (2005 – 2009). She currently acts on the boards of several international organisations and journals and lives and works in London and Sri Lanka.

Hamra Abbas, detail of ACAP 2011 artwork

The prize has recently launched its own dedicated website: www.abraajcapitalartprize.com, which is not only the place where new artists can apply for the prize each year (the deadline for 2012 submissions is April 30 2011) and anyone interested can read the catalogue, press releases and articles, watch films and see photographs of each project – but will soon launch an interactive map which seeks to chart artistic developments across the MENASA region. Applications are also open for international curators to apply for the annual guest curator role. A new element is the introduction of a nominating system, where artists need to be proposed by leading art professionals mainly based in the region. Fresh names are welcomed, confirmed names are listed on the website and include curators such as Christine Tohme from Ashkal Alwan in Beirut, Samar Martha of Art School Palestine, November Paynter of SALT in Istanbul and Delphine Leccas based in Damascus. By involving representatives from leading institutions across the region, for example Anupam Poddar, Founder of the Devi Art Foundation and Pooja Sood, Director of Khoj International Artist's Association both from New Delhi, Wassan al Khudhairi Director of Mathaf, Doha and Lara Khaldi of the Sharjah Arts Foundation, the prize is seeking to tap into yet more artist networks. Art critics are also welcomed as nominators, among others listed are Abhay Sardesai Editor of Art India, Niiloufer Faroukh, Editor of Nukta Art, Negar Azimi of Bidoun and CP's own Omar Donia and former editor Aida Eltorie; as are established artists. 2012 sees a new selection committee – experts based internationally who are increasingly becoming known in the region – from London Julia Peyton-Jones, Director, Serpentine Gallery, and Co-

Shezad Dawood, New Dream Machine Project, detail

Director Exhibitions and Programmes who spoke at CoE, and Jessica Morgan, Daskalopoulos Curator, International Art, Tate. Salwa Mikdadi, Executive Director, Arts & Culture Program at the Emirates Foundation and Vasif Kortun, Curator of the UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale this year also join, as does Dana Farouki, a curator and patron based in Dubai and New York.

What follows are a series of question and answers with the ACAP 2011 winners, exploring with each artist what winning the prize has brought to their art practice and some idea of what we expect to see in March.

Jananne Al-Ani was born in Kirkuk, Iraq in 1966. Working with photography, film and video, Al-Ani has a longstanding interest in the power of testimony and the documentary tradition, be it through intimate recollections of absence and loss or the exploration of more official accounts of historic events. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at Darat al Funun, Amman (2010); Art Now, Tate Britain (2005); and the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC (1999). Recent group exhibitions include Closer, Beirut Art Center (2009); The Screen-Eye or the New Image: 100 videos to rethink the world, Casino Luxembourg (2007) and Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2006). Al-Ani has also co-curated touring exhibitions including Veil (2003 – 4) and Fair Play (2001 – 2). Her work can be found in public collections, among them the Victoria & Albert Museum and Tate, London; the Pompidou Centre, Paris; the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC and Darat al Funun, Amman. Al-Ani›s photographic work is represented by Rose Issa Projects, London.

You are the first artist of Iraqi origins to win ACAP, but you live and work in the UK. How do the two locations affect your work? Do you think that one place holds more influence than the other or is your work less geographically rooted?

I don't think such a binary opposition exists in the work, it is more complex. Some artworks I have made respond directly to what I perceive as perhaps a European, Orientalist perspective of the Middle East and the Middle East's population and landscape. But I have also made works which do not have anything to do with that at all. It is difficult when you are talking about a body of work that spans a long period; I have been making work for about 20 years. There was a significant shift in my practice in 2003, when I came to the region in order to make works. Formally, in terms of the way the work is produced, I was previously working in a very controlled environment in the studio orchestrating very focused situations with very little going on visually, often using something like a head on a black background speaking. The 2003 shift was also about moving out of the studio and into the landscape.

You have been involved in co-curating exhibitions like Fair Play in the past. Is curating something

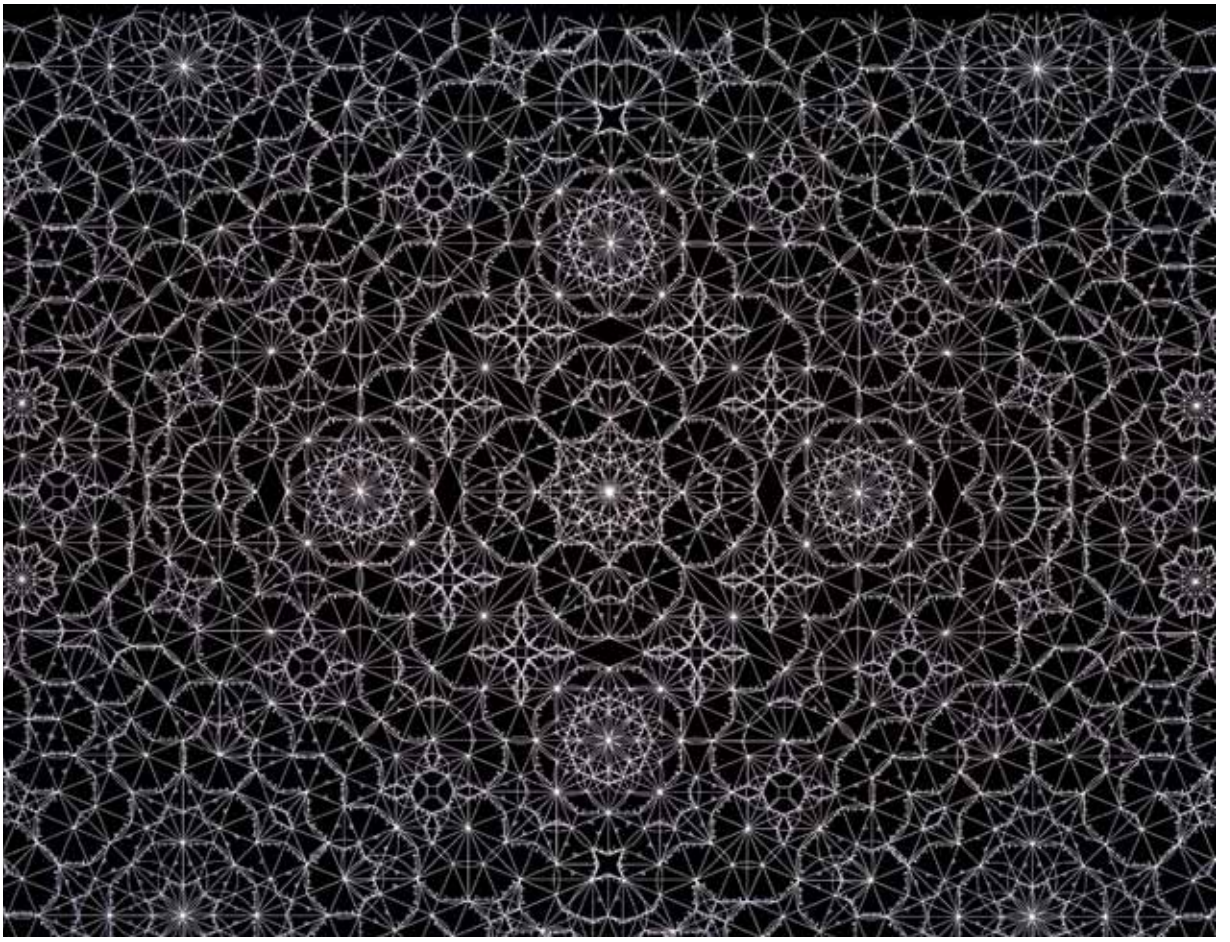
Shezad Dawood, New Dream Machine Project, with Musicians

you see as separate to your practice or integral to it?

Not really, I haven't curated for a long time. I think that curating is a response to a very particular set of circumstances, which for an artist will always relate to ones practice, and how curators perceive you. After 2001 there was obviously a heightened interest in art from the Middle East in Europe, curators visiting me at the studio wanted to look at my work purely through the framework of the fact that I was born in Iraq. For me this was too reductive – I wasn't interested in being in shows that were of artists from the Middle East without any other curatorial narrative. As a response, I curated a show called Fair Play, which looked at artists who have made work that is somehow based on games and playing. For me, that was a way of saying that my work can be seen in other contexts apart from this very narrow Middle Eastern context. The other show that I curated (Veil, 2003) was quite different; that was about way artists work with the notion of the veil. But again, that was a reaction to the way in which the image of the veil has been reduced to these monolithic, very uninteresting images.

Do your films ever follow a linear narrative, and if so, do you intend for the viewer to feel that there is some sort of resolved narrative by the end of a film?

No they don't in fact. Most of the works are cyclical anyway, but they run continuously when they are shown. They are not really single screen works where you would sit and watch as in a cinema experience,



Timo Nasseri, One and One # 22(124x180cm), courtesy of the artist

they are usually multiple screen installations which you have to interact with and move around. For example, in two of the works that I have made, The Loving Man (96 99) and She Said (2000), the monitors are embedded within a circular space in which the audience stands.

Hamra Abbas was born in Kuwait in 1976 and lives and works between Islamabad and Boston. Abbas has a versatile practice that straddles a wide range of media. Drawing upon culturally loaded imagery and iconography, in an often playful manner, Abbas appropriates and transforms traditional motifs and styles to examine questions of conflict within society. She has held several international solo exhibitions that include Cityscape, OUTLET Independent Art Space, Istanbul (2010); Adventures of the Woman in Black, Green Cardamom (2008); God Grows on Trees, Schultz Contemporary, Berlin (2008) and Lessons on Love, Rohtas 2, Lahore (2006). Her work has also been included in the 9th Sharjah Biennial (2009); the International Incheon Women Artists Biennale (2009): Thessaloniki Biennale (2009); Guangzou Triennial (2008); Istanbul Biennial (2007) and Sydney Biennale (2006). In 2009 Abbas was awarded the Jury Prize at the 9th Sharjah Biennial and was shortlisted for the inaugural Jameel Prize. She is represented by Green Cardamom, London and OUTLET Independent Art Space, Istanbul.

You've exhibited at Sharjah Biennial and have visited the UAE before, How do you think the UAE's art scene is taking shape?

I think it is very interesting that there is a bulk of new work being commissioned, by organisations such as Abraaj Capital and the Sharjah Art Foundations

Production Programme. I think that it is very helpful to artists, especially at this time when artists are seeing more and more cutbacks on arts budgets. It›s a good opportunity to be able to realise projects, such as last year for the Sharjah Biennial 9 (2009) I was very happy to be able to create a new piece that I would not have been able to make without that funding. Winning the Abraaj Capital Art Prize will definitely also further my practice.

Would you say collaboration is something which features quite a lot in your work and plays an important role?

Sometimes I work with other people, but it›s not always collaboratively. Sometimes I just need technical expertise so I will involve people in the building, creating and design elements of the work. For my Abraaj piece, I produced the work in Birmingham, UK at Pugin Ghardman & Powell Ltd, founded in 1838 during the height of the Gothic stained glass revival. There were of course a whole group of people there working on the project, thankfully led by Jamal-e-Mustafa, a wonderful artist that I know and have respected since my days as a student at the National College of Arts, Lahore in the 1990s. It has been such an exciting learning experience, engaging with a new material that I have wanted to incorporate into my work for several years.

How has the journey been from that initial proposal submitted back in January 2010 and where we are now, unveiling the completed piece at Art Dubai?

When writing proposals, one can feel so far from the actual realisation of the work, both mentally and physically. Such was the case for me. On the one hand the opportunity of producing a new work was extremely exciting, but on the other the challenge of actually producing the piece was also quite high. It was a big and complicated project that required close attention to detail and a number of technical skills to ensure all of it came together seamlessly. There were moments of anxiety and elation during the process, to say the least. This is a unique project and unlike anything i had done before, and now it is completed, I look forward to the final installation.

Stained glass is a practice commonly used in churches and places of worship. Tell us about how the piece relates to faith.

Nadia - Kaabi Link - under_standing_over_views, 2009, collected pieces of chipped layers of paint, black silk threads, metal grid, paper clips & sportlights, Galerie Christian Hosp

I have been working with religious iconography over the past few years now, being fascinated with the power of symbols and myths in our societies. For several years, I have been interested in the traditional use of stained-glass, imagery, abstract or figurative, which conveys narratives in places of religious significance. The aesthetic dimension of the stained glass was skilfully blended with the lofty tenets of spiritual instruction to convey a sense of awe and sacredness. The interplay of light, glass and colour projected translucent images that were meant to be monuments of beauty and religious lessons, to look ethereal and heavenly. The purpose however, of a stained glass window was not to allow

Jananne Al-Ani, location stills, Shadow Sites II, single channel digital video, photography Noski Deville

those inside the building to see the world outside or even to admit light, but rather to control it. I wish to employ this medium in projecting a narrative that has held our imagination in suspense today; a narrative that works upon themes of war, authority, beauty, and ideology. Here I have created a labyrinth of geometrical patterns, motifs, and vibrant colours to invoke the power of the image, to draw the viewer into its spatial consciousness.

Tell us more about this narrative, and the way you are using a traditional medium to comment on contemporary society.

We stand in an age where extraordinary forms of violence, in terms of technology and brutality, have become an ordinary part of our consciousness. The stream of reports in newspapers, the internet, radio shows, and television images and tickers periodically remind us of the perpetual state of our existence. We now see footage of cities set alight by bombs and missiles fired from great distances. It is a time where the slogan of peace has become both a cause and an argument for more violence. So the 20th and 21st centuries do not seem too far removed from the way we conceive our medieval or ancient past, filled with armies marching to war, and despotic rulers with their notions of truth to fuel the fight.

In 2011 Hamra Abbas will also be displaying work at Triangle Open Studios, New York, The Power of Doubt, PhotoEspagna, Museo Colecciones ICO, Madrid, The Asian Art Triennale, Manchester, Green Cardamom, London and OUTLET Independent Art Space, Istanbul.

Timo Nasseri was born in Berlin in 1972 to a German mother and an Iranian father. He began his artistic career as a photographer, and in 2004 he made the transition to creating sculpture. Combining Islamic and western cultural heritages, his work is inspired as much by specific memories and religious references as by universal archetypes described by mathematics and language, and the inner truths of form and rhythm. He has held several solo exhibitions which include Ghazal, Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg (2009); One

Jananne Al-Ani - The Guide 2008, courtesy the artist

of Six, Kunstverein Arnsberg (2009); Epistrophy (2008) and Falling Stars (2006) both at Galerie Schleicher+Lange, Paris and Op-Felder, Galerie ABEL Raum fur Neue Kunst, Berlin (2002). He has also participated in the following group exhibitions: Taaffe-Streuli-Nasseri, Sfeir-Semler, Beirut (2010); Nasseri/Englund, Schleicher+Lange, Paris (2010); En Miroir, CRAC Alsace (2010); Taswir – Pictorial Mappings of Islam and Modernity, Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin (2009); Mashq: repetition, meditation, meditation, Green Cardamom, London (2009) and Eurasia, Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Trento (2008); Phoenix vs Babylone, Espace Paul Richard, Paris (2008) and ECHO, Sfeir-Semler, Beirut (2008). He was awarded the Prix Saar Ferngas Förderpreis Junge
Kunst in 2006. He is represented by Galerie Schleicher+Lange, Paris and Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg and Beirut.

You come from a mixed heritage, with an Iranian father and German mother. Do you feel this mixed background has influenced your artistic practice?

Yes definitely. I grew up in Germany, but I think that being half Iranian gives me a sensibility for certain themes and aesthetics. It took me a while to realize how this has affected me; I certainly have an intrinsic interest in Islamic art and the region.

You actually started your artistic career working in photography. Why did you make the transition to sculpture?

To be honest, I was kind of bored with photography, the distance: making images of something rather than creating something in a certain way.

There was a gallery I was working with at the time which gave me support and encouraged me to be open and try whatever I wanted. There were certain ideas I had on my mind, which eventually manifested in sculptural work.

Mathematical order seems to really resonate through your work and this is something which has strong roots in both Western and Eastern art. For example

the golden ratio during the Renaissance and in Islamic art mathematics also plays an integral part, with geometric patterning replacing any depiction of God in places of worship.

Are references to such sources in your work deliberate?

In my works I'm looking for parallels between cultures, combining the heritage of the Islamic and the western world. Memories, religious references, the universe, infinity, mathematics, space and volume, ornament, language, eclecticism and exoticism, constructivism, universal principles of science, the inner truth of form and rhythm inspire me.

Tell us how your piece for ACAP relates to your general practice – in which ways it is more ambitious, in scale but also technique?

The Abraaj Capital Art Prize gives me the opportunity to work on a sculpture that is more ambitious in terms of size, complexity and budget from everything I've done so far.

This piece is again a combination of ancient Islamic and 19th century western mathematics and at the same time it opens up notions of constructivism. A lot of my inspiration came from travelling in the Middle East and Central Asia, but also from books about mathematics, calligraphy and architecture.

I started with hand sketches, than soldered models and when it came to finally manufacturing the sculpture there was a lot of work on the computer.

What most excites you about ACAP?

To have the chance to realise a project like this, that would probably have stayed as a small-scale model without the prize. It has been especially inspiring working with Sharmini on Footnotes to a Project.

Shezad Dawood was born in London in 1974. He received an MPhil in Fine Art Photography from the Royal College of Art (2000 – 3) before gaining his PhD from Leeds Metropolitan University in 2008. Dawood has a research based practise that employs many different art forms. The evolution of his work has become increasingly more interdisciplinary and collaborative, as part of a discursive interest in mapping territories through narrative intersections between history, literature and cultural appropriation. Following his first solo show, Shezad Dawood & Friends, held at his studio in 2006, solo exhibitions of his work have been held at: Axel Lapp Projects, Berlin (2007); The Third Line, Dubai (2008); Galleria Riccardo Crespi, Milan (2008); Galerie Gabriel Rolt, Amsterdam (2009) and Aarhus Kunstbygning, Denmark (2010). He has also participated in the following group exhibitions: Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today, Saatchi Gallery, London; Disorientation II, Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi (2009); Making Worlds, The 53rd Venice Biennale (2009); Altermodern, Tate Britain (2009); Century City, Tate Modern, London (2001) and 000zerozerozero, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (1999). Dawood's works are in the collections of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, the Saatchi Collection and The Frank Cohen Collection in the UK. He is represented by The Third Line, Dubai; Paradise Row, London; Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai; Galleria Riccardo Crespi, Milan; and Galerie Gabriel Rolt, Amsterdam.

What has winning the Abraaj Capital Art Prize meant for your practice, and how long have you been planning this work?

Typically, as with most of my projects, an idea, or set of references continues to evolve in my thinking over a period of years. I'd been researching, not just Gysin, but artist-run spaces and platforms in Morocco for some time now. It involves dialogues built up with partners and collaborators in Morocco and internationally, so it is great to see it going forward. The interest was how Morocco becomes a bridge between Europe and the Middle East while being part of neither, reinforcing my interest in possible third spaces, which overlap but exist between what we know. The piece itself allows me to extend my work with both light sculptures and experimental film, and the project brings to light some beautiful dialogues and discussions that have been percolating for some time, with an amazing set of collaborators. Having the opportunity of working with such a budget, and the discipline of preparing a project proposal, means you're really forced to hone what it is you do, and how you intend to develop and expand your working practice. This is very much in keeping with my own disciplined way of working.

You have a very versatile practice and work in various mediums, from neon, to film, to even taxidermy recently.

Do you plan a body of work according to medium or is deciding on a medium a more organic process which develops naturally when you are thinking about/researching new work?

It is more of an organic process that definitely starts in the more abstract realm of ideas. This then proceeds through visualisation into a final formal resolution. So research and reflection is definitely the jumping off point, and then it really becomes a choice as to the best medium or set of mediums to translate a set of concepts, and communicate them. In this way the making of art is different from other forms of creative expressions as it allows you to reveal something more slowly over time, and in how different works relate to one another. Describe how dream machines, Morocco and the rolling stones come together to form this piece.

Well Gysin was very influenced by ideas of calligraphy and formal repetition in Islamic culture – perhaps why his reputation has suffered till recently. And it was on his return from Fes that he developed the idea for the Dream Machine, with mathematician Ian Somerville. I have followed this story backwards to look at the steps that might have informed his thinking, and a looser narrative of his inter-relationships in Morocco. For example, when the Rolling Stones were in Tangiers, they left a rather worse-for-wear Brian Jones stranded there. He was taken under the wing of Gysin and Hamri, who took him to meet the Master Musicians of Jajouka, who happened to be the house band at Gysin & Hamri's '1001 Nights' restaurant in Tangiers. This in turn led to the seminal cult album: Brian Jones presents the Pipes of Pan at Jajouka (1968). So I'm interested in this loose network of artists and musicians, who happen to come together organically in a specific moment, in a specific place. And in turn I'm trying to replay this with my own set of organic networks in the present. The event hosted at the Cinémathèque de Tanger on February 12th, which is documented in a film shown alongside the The New Dream Machine Project brought together the current incarnation of the Master Musicians of Jajouka, led by Bachir Attar with contemporary cult British guitarist Duke Garwood who also made the soundtrack for my last film. While they were performing the 3 metre tall Dream Machine, emitting purple and green flickering light, mesmerised the audience.

Where else should we look out for your work in the near future?

Well after Abraaj, I'm starting work on a new sci-fi film all about the politics of migration, in an expanded global context. I'm also preparing a solo show at The Third Line for the end of the year (all around Ibn Arabi's cosmology and how it pertains to both inner mappings and a vision of the cosmos). And then I have a major solo show coming up next April at Modern Art Oxford, which will hopefully be touring further.

Nadia Kaabi-Linke was born in 1978 in Tunis to a Russian mother and Tunisian father. She studied at the University of Fine Arts in Tunis (1999) before receiving a PhD from the Sorbonne University in Paris (2008). Her installations, objects and pictorial works are embedded in urban contexts, intertwined with memory and geographically and politically constructed identities. She held her first major solo show, Tatort at Galerie Christian Hosp, Berlin in 2010. She has participated in several international group exhibitions that include Drawn from Life, Green Cardamom (2009 – 10) and Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendall, UK (2011); Split, Darb 1718 Contemporary, Cairo (2010); Aftermath, 25th Alexandria Biennale (2009); 9th Sharjah Biennial (2009); Art Connexions: Arab Contemporary Artists (2008) and Archives des banalities tunisoises (2009) both held at Galerie El Marsa, Tunis, the second was a solo show. In 2009 she was awarded the Jury Prize by the Alexandria Biennale. Kaabi-Linke is represented by Galerie Christian Hosp, Berlin. Let's start by hearing about Understanding over views commissioned for the 9th Sharjah Biennial (2009).

In this installation, as the title suggests, the spectator has to stand underneath it in order to understand the work. It is made of two materials, delicate chips of paint fallen from walls in various cities which have some meaning for me, mainly in Tunisia and Europe;

and black silk threads. Through this work, I attempt to express the impossibility of defining a single point of view; there is a natural diversity and complexity in each geopolitical, social and cultural situation. The shadow, which is always a distortion of the reality, plays a major role here since it echoes the shape of the UAE, so this can be seen as a mapping exercise. The contrast between precious black silk threads and chips of paint relates to the immigrant situation in the UAE. My family were part of this, moving to Sharjah from Tunisia in 1990 when I was 12 during the first Gulf War.

Can you draw parallels with your ACAP commission?

It›s only after I planned my ACAP project and started producing it, that I began to wonder about the coincidence of creating hanging pieces each time I worked in the UAE, they are the only two projects which I have used threads and hanging structures. I think that there are two main factors that can explain this. One is my personal history with the UAE as described above. Secondly it refers to the transient, rootless nature of the UAE and its inhabitants, during the financial crisis we saw thousands lose their jobs, and were therefore forced to leave the country. It is interesting now how the Gulf is putting down cultural roots, through the expansion of museums and galleries. If someone had told me this would happen when I was here in the 1990s I would not have believed them! For Flying Carpets I again use only two materials: metal and black threads. The choice of materials in my work always relate closely to the concept. I want to express both the idea of floating flying carpets but also imprisonment and cages. The metal geometrical profiles recall the bars of a prison and the black vertical threads enable the hovering but also give the effect of imprisonment.

You have described your work as a 'homage' highlighting a particular situation of hawkers from Africa and South Asia trading in Venice.

Can it be seen as an exemplar of a wider situation?

Absolutely. Firstly, the immigrant situation in Europe reflects one of the oldest and most natural habits of humans. There are theories that since prehistoric times we have changed our geographical location in order to optimise living conditions. The new phenomenon in our modern world is national borders. Ironically it is mainly the western civilisations whose constitutions are based on the idea of freedom that impose an ethical stance on migration, condemning it often as criminal. It is true to say there are also specific problems in political and economic relations between the north / west and the south / Africa / Orient, such as the choking of local infrastructures by the export of subsidised agricultural goods. My work is very much about seeing everyday life and the things that surround us in a different way, encouraging us to question what we can take for granted. The hawkers are there, and at the margin of society, due to wider, market issues. My position as an artist, of Tunisian decent, is not to offer a powerful politically charged message, but to highlight the situation. These people exist and they have their place, they suffer from being either invisible or considered as a troublesome element in society when they become visible. Their hopes and dreams are real, they took the risk to immigrate and they are living with the risk of being arrested every second of their existence.

Tell us more about this realism, and how it is directly reflected in your work.

For at least three years my working method has been based on taking imprints. I work with actual traces avoiding media such as photography, video or film. In this sense my work is highly realistic. The objects I produce as a result of physical contact, surfaces which are moved from one place to another, and in a sense archived, or highlighted by their presence in my work. Faithful to my method, I decided to keep a 1:1 ratio of the bridge and the carpets, even though this made the realisation much more complex and complicated. The carpets have specific dimensions which can carry a specific amount of goods. Every bridge in Venice is unique, and the hawkers' dreams and needs are unique too. The only tangible thing I could take with me after living with them for 8 days were measures. It made no sense to me to reduce the scale. Reproducing the carpets in their original size through the form of the bridge, Il Ponte del Sepolcro where I met them, for me is the best way to present

this homage of their situation. I like to keep things open, I love the greys; nothing is black and white. Who am I to make a political statement, my job is art. Talk us through the process that has led to the finished installation for ACAP.

For Flying Carpets and my work in general it is crucial to focus on the process of creation. My work is strongly anchored in places and historical contexts which have an important literary background. Every work tells a story or contains the premises of a certain history. My installation for ACAP is accompanied by a diary that I wrote during my research period in Venice. For nearly two months I was based in Sharjah supervising the production of the metal grids and frames, and have had the tremendous luck of reconnecting with a school friend whose husband, Tarek Zebian is an engineer who owns an aluminium factory, who fabricated my work and really fed so many constructive, creative ideas into the project. It has been an adventure working with volunteers in Sharjah, and making more and more decisions and often compromises – but in the end they all have a positive result. I feel that I am blessed in meeting all these people and having the privilege of working with them.

Would you like to talk about your commission in Berlin?

Yes, this is another project which deals with immigration and integration into society entitled Meinstein which translates as 'my stone'. The project will be built on Karl-Marx-Street in Neukoelln, which has the highest rate of immigrant population in Germany. Inspired by unique pavements in Berlin, I decided to use Mediterranean mosaic techniques and represent the population of Neukoelln with coloured natural stones. These stones will be imported from the countries of origin of the population those with no passports (Palestinians and others) will have a different type of stone, I am thinking of natural glass. My work is based again on data, numbers and statistics. The quantity of coloured stones will be determined by the latest statistics of inhabitants from 2010, as well as a series of workshops with local people. Meinstein is about a public square made by the people for the people where the stones are symbols of bringing a part of one›s own past and planting it in their new home.

These series of interviews have been edited and written by Laura Egerton, Curator of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize and Amy Sutcliffe , Senior Features Writer, ArtintheCity. A selection of these question and answers are available on the websites http://www.artinthecity.com and www.artdubai.ae/journal.

Timo Nasseri, Gon, 2011, Stainless steel, 567 x 230 x 300 cm