

# Being Contemporary, is Not Cutting off the Past<sup>1</sup>

*By Yasmine Allam*



*“I am shaped by a foundation, rooted in the past”*

**Sara Raza**

At 33 years of age, London-based independent curator, Sara Raza, has a professional resume and reputation that far exceed her years. Graduating from Goldsmiths College<sup>2</sup> in 2001, with an MA in Art History and a joint BA (hons) degree in English Literature and Art History, Raza embarked on a multi-faceted career that today spans several countries. A former curator at the Tate Modern, she now runs her own independent curatorial practice, Sara Raza Projects (Asia/London), pursuing a range of assignments, and speaking opportunities, throughout Asia and the UAE. Raza is a longstanding editor of ArtAsiaPacific Magazine for

West Central Asia as well as contributing Editor for Ibraaz, a non-profit platform on the MENA region. She is a prolific writer and a winner of curatorial fellowships and awards. She is a visiting lecturer on the Masters program at the Sotheby's Institute in London and a student in her own right, currently pursuing a PHD in art history and curating at the Royal College of Art in London. Working from home, her day begins at 5 am and proceeds at a heady pace. She moves between her roles as curator, consultant, writer and student with a confidence, tenacity and capacity for sheer hard work that have earned her the nickname “Caffeine Curator” with her PhD supervisor at the Royal College of Art. Raza chose early in her career to reject the more Euro-



**Lida Abdul, *In Transit*, 2008, Still image - Courtesy of the artist and Galleria Persano, Turin, Italy**

centric discourses on art, as propounded by British art and cultural institutions. Instead she turned her attention eastwards to the Middle East and Post-Soviet and Central Asian sphere, dedicating herself to building a visual cultural knowledge away from Western mainstream discourses. Raza is a specialist in contemporary Asian art with an active knowledge of “other modernisms from Asia and the Middle East”. Today, many of her curatorial projects emerge from this area of interest, which she also pursues in frequent travels along the Silk Road and in her academic studies: within a theoretical framework of Post-Soviet Orientalism<sup>3</sup>, she explores the ways in which artists, working in the Central Asia and Caspian region post 1991, have articulated and engaged with their rapidly changing political and geographic context following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Drawing on this theme, her independent curatorial assignments have included *Migrasophia* (2012), an exhibition of 18 artists from the post-Soviet sphere of Central Asia, Caspian and Caucasus, at the Maraya Art Center in Sharjah. In 2011, Raza curated the Central Asian Salon at the 6th Tashkent Biennale where she also won first prize at the

Biennale’s curatorial award. Raza is research curator at Art Gallery of Uzbekistan and has curated a variety of group and solo exhibitions for leading Central Asian and Middle Eastern artists including Shezad Dawood, Erbossyn Meldlbekov, and Lida Abdul. In 2005, Raza curated the 2nd Bishkek International under the title: *In the Shadow of Fallen Heroes.* Most recently she accepted the assignment as head of curatorial and educational programs at Alaam Artspace, a multi-functional contemporary arts space and educational hub in Riyadh, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.<sup>8</sup> The very first curated space of its kind in Riyadh, Alaam Artspace is scheduled to open in October 2012. Sara Raza acknowledges certain inevitability around her choice of career. She was born in Surrey, England, in 1979, child of an Indian born Turkic-Persian mother and Iranian father who had lived and studied in both Germany and the UK. A child of the revolution, and of mixed ethnicity, she grew up in a home frequented by artists, musicians and writers. Raza travelled extensively with her family living for brief periods in Syria and Saudi Arabia and making annual trips to India where she witnessed in her words: “the richness there was in



Zeigam Azizov, Zurückgewiesen, 2000 -Image courtesy of the artist.

the East". At home, Raza's father: "bequeathed me pre-revolutionary versions of Iran," she says. Her mother, an educational physiologist and a linguist, dedicated her career to academic work around the colonial implications of English language and worked with displaced persons. She imparted to her daughter an appreciation of the power of language, not only as a barrier to integration and inclusion but also a repository of shared history and collective memory - a repository that can be carried along at times when other possessions must be left behind. From her father, an Electronics Engineer and Systems Analyst, Raza inherited his private passion for astrology, astronomy and Sufism which she describes as a somewhat of a 'family-wide obsession'. Raza grew up playing among her father's large collection of esoteric books; they represented the confines of her physical universe well before she was

able to decipher their teachings for herself. While it was not until her early twenties that Raza clearly identified the professional path she wanted to follow still she admits: "I probably absorbed a great deal by osmosis during those early years." Today her 'heroes' are the great poets and scholars of the Iranian golden age whose multifarious spheres of interest and engagement she greatly admires: "In the golden age of Iran people had multiple professions. I admire the writers of historical classics such as 11th century poet Ferdowsi and Rumi, the 13th century Central Asian Afghan poet. Even the great rulers were also poets or mathematicians. In life, there isn't one single, everything is plural. Singular is death." In her life, she aspires towards what she terms: "the ability to live in two worlds at once, while also having a realistic sense of one's abilities and limitations." Though Raza never experienced her parents' migration



**Manal Al Dowayan, *Esmi*, 2012**, Coated maple wood with natural wool for rope and Sadu weave, Installation - Courtesy of the Artist, Cuadro Gallery and Alāan Artspace

first hand, the displacement of the Iranian revolution continues to exert a profound influence on her work. For her, art has been a necessary means of reconnecting with a heritage from which she was separated: “Through contemporary art and cinema, I am always trying to analyse and reconnect to Iran, or rather, to a fragmented history and culture that I was never a part of...” She searches in the present for remnants of the past: “I am always looking for what has been lost...for something that possibly can't be found.” Her curatorial projects engage with the themes of migration and forced portation, visibility and invisibility, hybridity and mutuality. She searches for frameworks with which to transcend the limitations of dominant political, ideological and intellectual binaries in favour of “something more rhizomatic, multiple and entwined”<sup>4</sup>

Many of the artists with whom she works share this interest in plurality and difference contesting, through their art, notions of difference, dislocation, territory and geography. Raza admits that in her selection of artists: “I look for the familiar....Perhaps everything I do, is on some level, related to myself. When I have tried to do something dislocated to me, whether personally or professionally, it has rarely worked.” They include Shezad Dawood and Wafaa Bilal<sup>5</sup>, who each, in their distinct ways, pose as interlocutors between two worlds exploring, through their art, the unseen spaces that exist between countries and cultures. Like them, Raza is irresistibly drawn to the gaps that exist between people and ideas and the ‘corridors’ that artists build to navigate these divides: “I am always looking for the meaning in between....the in between space is as important as it



**Farhad Ahrarnia**, *On the Road, the silk Road, no 1*, 2010-2011

is problematic.” She is interested in finding ‘the third way’ and in “new histories being created.” Indeed, for Raza the movement of people and ideas across borders is a powerful and timely metaphor for art: “I believe that ideas are always in flux - everything is always in movement. Now with the advent of technology, it is possible to connect with everything and everywhere... migration is no longer purely geographic, but there is also a continuous migration of the mind.” She approaches migration in her work as a potentially liberating force and an inherent reality of our contemporary existence in a globalised world: “I feel it is rather ignorant to ignore the flux and movement that is an inherent part of our existence.”

Sara Raza recognises that her career has been propelled by the strength of her ideas and her willingness to go ‘back to the drawing board’: “I am not afraid to write proposals even if they are rejected,” she says. She applies rigorous theoretical frameworks to her curatorial

assignments believing that without such context, ideas become loose and devoid of relevance. In *Migrasophia*, for example, she takes ‘the ultimate migratory ready-made’, namely a passport from 1991 stamped entry denied, as a starting point for a “plural perspective on the ‘migrational paradigm and... a discursive dialogue on being contemporary”<sup>6</sup> For *Migrasophia*, Raza brought together 18 artists, working across a range of artistic mediums and ideas, to engage with the notion of migration as a metaphor for art, setting up a dialogue between them. Iranian-born artist Farhad Ahrarnia for instance, created a series of silver-plated shovels for the exhibition reminding us of the impossibility of returning to his country’s epic past. Meanwhile, his handcrafted thread embroidered works “*On the Silk Road*” offer a measurement of migration which is not elastic but “prone to breakages and ruptures.”<sup>7</sup> Kazakh mixed-media artist Erbossynian Meldibekov, presented “*Peak of Communism*” re-appropriating the Tajik



Sarah Mohanna Al-Abdali, *Arba'a Arayes* (from the series *Four Wives*), 2012 - Courtesy of the Artist and Alāan Artspace.

mountain range using everyday objects such as cooking pots and pans, as a comment on the experience, by ordinary citizens, of their rapidly changing political context. Meanwhile, Bulgarian born Turkish artist, Ergin Carvosoglu showed “Liminal Crossing”, a two-screen synchronised film where a family pushing a piano across a geographic border are surprised to encounter no resistance at the checkpoints they pass. Speaking of this work Raza says: “I was fascinated here by how the piano served as kind of sliding signifier between geopolitics and borders.”

In her most recent assignment as head of curatorial and educational programs for the Alaan ArtSpace in Riyadh, Raza is once again probing the boundaries of a dominant ideology, this time exploring those ‘in between spaces’ occupied by female artists working in Saudi Arabia and navigating the country’s dominant masculine discourse. Her pioneering exhibition, *SoftPower*, features new commissions by emerging mixed-media artists Sarah

Abu Abdallah and Sarah Mohanna Al-Abdali and a special loan by one of Saudi Arabia’s leading artists Manal Al Dowayan. While varied in their style and methodologies the works employ a nuanced and at times humorous approach towards exploring the position of women within contemporary society, forgoing militant tactics for those of solidarity, ambiguity and irony. The pioneering exhibition functions as a platform for dialogue and exchange about current thinking within contemporary art inside Saudi Arabia<sup>8</sup>.

As a curator, Raza believes that one of the most important aspects of her work is the artists’ voice: “for without the artist, there can be no curator.” Shaped by her own studies of Post-Soviet Orientalism, she is fascinated by the notion of the artist as a critic of history and a barometer of culture. She explains: “While historians work in literal prose, and are therefore more readily open to censorship, artists work in poetry and often escape uncensored”...: “as a curator I often try to avoid

prosaic analysis and try to look at art as poetry.” Her curatorial approach is distinctly shaped by her training as an art historian: “I believe as a curator it is important to have a historical grounding, an understanding of where contemporary artists have come from, and what have been the pivotal moments and movements in their history, in order to identify and make the relevant links. After all, their practice didn’t just fall out of the sky but evolved from a long history.” Raza came to curatorial practice through her writing. Early in her career she began writing for the Art Review and then as part of her Master’s degree. She was then able to build on her writing in her first jobs with the Asia Society and the Bonham’s auction house, respectively. Today, writing is always the starting point for any curatorial assignment. After all, she notes: “anyone who starts as a writer does so for the sheer pleasure of the ideas...”

Growing up, Raza’s parents impressed on their children the importance of ‘giving back’ to the society around them. Today, she allocates fixed time slots in her schedule to regular mentoring engagements, with Debut Contemporary, where she introduces emerging UK-based artists to curating. In terms of her wider career, her commitment to outreach has been the catalyst for an active engagement in public programming and working alongside local communities “to demystify art”. This interest in public programming began in 2004 when Raza was awarded the curatorial fellowship<sup>9</sup> at the South London Gallery, where she worked as curatorial fellow with artists such as Henrik Plenge Jacobsen and Steve McQueen. The South London Gallery was situated in an area of London with a high West African demographic. “The local community did not frequent the gallery. Therefore, it became a mission of mine to devise art and public programs, not only within the gallery, but also in local universities, cinemas, cafes and club to engage the public with the art.”

In her later position as Curator of Public Programs with Tate Modern (2006-2008), Raza developed an international program of artist talks, symposia, workshops and courses with an emphasis, for the first time, on contemporary art from the MENA region: “At Tate Modern, I was able to shift how they looked at art from the Middle East and North Africa.... I feel that I opened the door for something that would later

become very important” she says. Even in her present work with Alaam Artspace she has devised a public program of talks and panels that is unprecedented in Riyadh. “I don’t think a curator’s job ends with the exhibition,” say Raza, “That is just the beginning. Art can be intimidating so the curator must try to connect audiences with the artists and the exhibitions so that the alienation is dissolved.” She adds: “I’d like to articulate my ideas to as wide an audience as possible...after all, today’s students are tomorrow’s collectors and patrons”. As 2012 comes to a close, Raza’s schedule of commitments for the coming year has already begun to pile up. She will be traveling around the world to lecture and curate and she hopes to have made considerable headway with her PhD thesis. Perhaps there might even be an opportunity for relocation to another country? As ever, she is open to new challenges and fresh, new destinations. Indeed, it seems that Raza’s confident embrace of the new has a lot to do with her strong connections to a past which is always there, at the heart of her personal and professional life, as a source of strength and inspiration. By her own admission, the past is something to be cherished and to be taken with you on your journey into the contemporary “The past is like a good piece of furniture or an antique.” Even migration itself is about the past: “Migrants come from somewhere and even though their situation changes, it is never about rejecting the past, you take it with you.” She concludes: “In the end, you can’t escape who you are. Knowing who you are is itself a kind of history, even if you are firmly rooted in the now.”



#### Endnotes :

- 1-Zeigam Azizov
- 2-University of London
- 3-As distinct from the Western Orientalism defined by Edward Said
- 4-Migrasophia catalogue, p. 18
- 5-Iraqi born artist Wafaa Bilal created the work 3rdi, shown at Mathaf Modern, where a camera was surgically inserted into the back of his head, produced random, non-hierarchical recordings of his day. Himself forcibly deported from Iraq, this work was a way of reconnecting with the past in a non-confrontational manner.
- 6-Migrasophia Catalogue p. 18
- 7-Migrasopia Catalogue p.21
- 8-It is rare for Raza to focus on gender as the theoretic framework of her projects. She believes this has to do with the absence of gender, in Farsi, where there is no gender difference in the words used for men and women: "I was always fascinated by this absence of gender specification in language and, for that matter, also in architecture.
- 9- Arts Council of England/South London gallery one-year curatorial fellowship award. (2004-2005)

#### About the writer

*Yasmine Allam is a cultural operator living and working in Egypt. She promotes contemporary Egyptian art, engaging in both commercial and non-profit work with a range of young Egyptian practitioners as well as older, more established artists. She is the founder of Profile PR Egypt, a boutique PR agency dedicated to serving clients in the arts and culture space. Yasmine Allam also works with several local and international arts institutions and is a contributor to regional publications on topics relating to the Egyptian arts scene. Prior to moving into the arts space, Yasmine Allam pursued a longtime career in public affairs communications representing leading public and corporate figures in Egypt. She holds both a BA and an MA from Oxford University in English Literature and an MSc from the London School of Economics in International Relations.*