

Nadia Kaabi-Linke

19 March - 4 May 2012

sharpening









# Nadia Kaabi-Linke

Black is the New White

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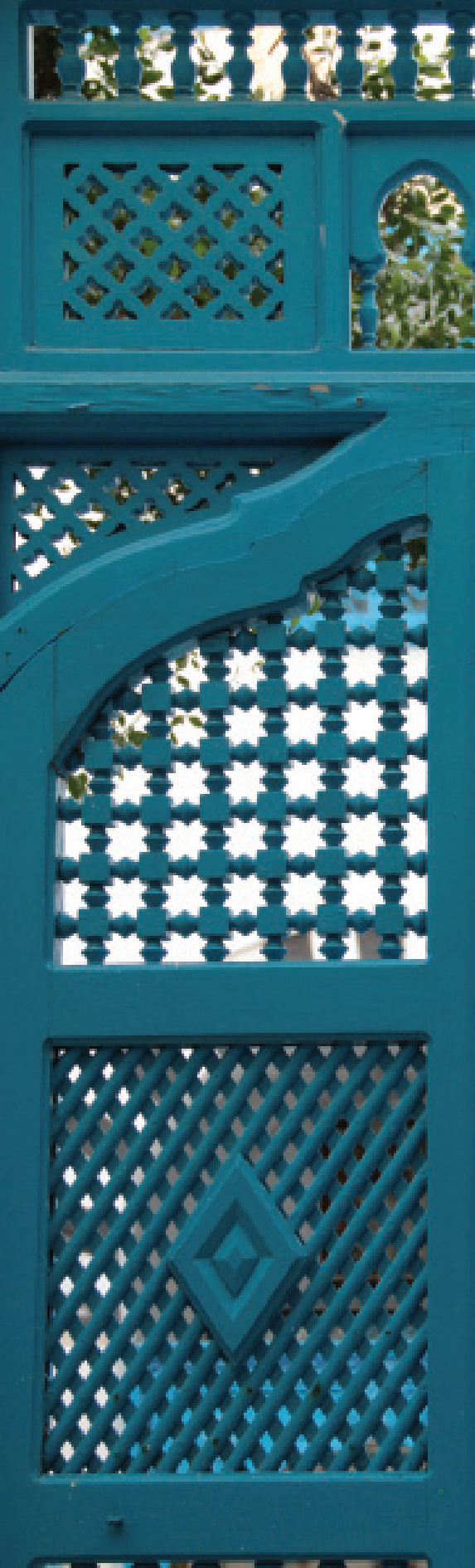
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# The Visible is the New Invisible

*Black is the New White* is the witty title of breakthrough artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke's first solo exhibition in the Gulf. Kaabi-Linke's practice is based on plural observations of the world, without soliciting the viewer's response, she creates subtle nuances that aptly state as an artist she has no answers to give and searching for questions is all she can do. Kaabi-Linke's multi-layered practice reflects on a variety of cultural, social and political positions, which she layers in an encyclopaedic fashion in order to critique and unravel both overt and covert social codes and symbols that ordinarily go unnoticed by the naked eye.

Inspired by both personal and impersonal events in recent history, particularly those pertaining to her native Tunisia (the artist belonging to both Russian and Tunisian extraction), and the Maghreb (such as gendered social positions of women, the rise in fundamentalist Islam and events that marked the Arab Spring) the artist continues to probe the semiotics of culture as a continuation of her practice. The exhibition *Black is the New White* puts forward easily recognisable social and cultural symbols from the region, which have been intentionally modified to appear both seductive and alluring in order to trap their audiences. The notion of the trap is an important and recurring feature within the exhibition that threads through the works as a means of challenging restricted and corrupted value systems. Kaabi-Linke puts forward the idea that humans are trapped by their social conditioning, traditions, political and cultural strictures to the extent that they fail to realise they are ensnared. Ironically, when the trap becomes apparent, freedom is made impossible by the very nature of these mentioned constraints. However, she leaves this question open ended: who is setting the trap for whom?

Both the title of the exhibition and a striking new work *Black is the New White* (2012) are akin to that of popular fashion headlines. She presents an incongruous photographic image that takes its direct inspiration from a highly staged fashion shoot. Keeping in common with its source, the image presents an attractive young male Arab model wearing the traditional kandura, and is set against the backdrop of the Dubai skyline. Here, the artist has altered the attire switching the traditional light coloured and airy cotton fabric with a heavy synthetic black material, the same fabric that abayas are made from. The artist intentionally employed an actual fashion photographer to style and capture the image to deliberately question the restricted fashion codes assigned to men and women in the Gulf region. By introducing just one change in the colour and cloth of the kandura, Kaabi-Linke shifts the unquestionable practices of everyday life. The result is that the male model is given a taste of new levels of discomfort by being styled like a woman. On close inspection one can see small beads of sweat forming on the model's face, which ordinarily would have been air brushed out of a fashion photograph, yet remain present in order to punctuate the image in a discrete manner. As the title of the piece suggests the image functions on the same parameters as a fashion forecast - one that subtly predicts, or at the very least, solicits social change calling for a reassessment of public gendered representations. The work also echoes the artist's desire for social transformation in her native Tunisia, where



the recent turn of events that sparked the Arab Spring across North Africa have taken a sharp u-turn. Consequently, the rise of extremist manifestations within the public sphere, such as shifts in women's appearances, which have altered from a white light veiling to a sudden rise in the adoption of Saudi Arabian style black abayas and even niqabs, are questioned and challenged by the artist in this work.

Another recurring theme within the works is the reassessment of architecture as a structure and signifier for power and oppression. This is presented through the assessment and inspiration of civic buildings such as the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Finance in Tunisia. In the work *Ministry of Tourism* (2011) a mixed-media large-scale painting of an impression from the external wall of the building a small window punctures the upper left hand corner of the canvas and is reminiscent of an enclosed prison window. Incidentally, the ministry was situated in close proximity to where the political protests took place in 2010-11 and yet remained intact. Following the Arab Spring the economy greatly depreciated in Tunisia due to a sharp decline in tourism, which up until that point contributed to approximately a third of the country's economy. This satirical work suggests that the very ethos of the Arab Spring has imprisoned Tunisia from being a popular travel destination to a place of instability. According to the artist "[in] Tunisia everyone speaks about the 'great revolution' that people have achieved, especially with the government, but the real change has not occurred yet and there is no sign that this change may happen in the near future". Subsequently, this idea is punctuated within the architecture, which remains stubbornly in place.

In parallel to this work another work that questions the structures of architecture is *Bait Atta'a* (2012) in which the artist created a replica of the shadow created by the barmaqli façade of the Ministry of Finance. Barmaqli, or mashraibiya as it is more commonly known in the Arab world, is a traditional Arabic structure of wooden architecture projected onto windows made of decorative carved latticework. The purpose of barmaqli is to

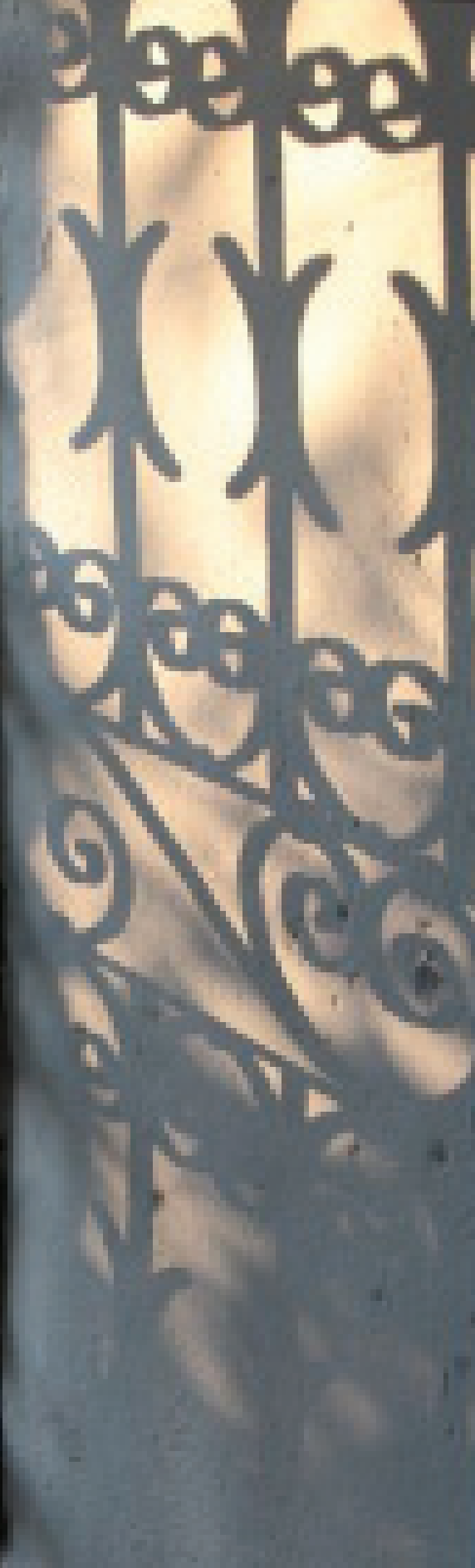
see what is going on outside without public visibility from the outside. *Bait Atta'a* in Arabic translates literally as a 'house of obedience' and is applied here by the artist to highlight the space where disobedient wives were sent for correction and punishment, then were forced to return to their husbands or face losing their nafaqa (Islamic dowry). Women under the Shariah law practiced in Tunisia were traditionally expected to obey their husbands or face this form of imprisonment. The practise has become obsolete in Tunisia yet continues in other parts of the Arab world. Kaabi-Linke links the dilemma caused by this outdated tradition to the wider economic problems faced by modern day Tunisians. Her choice of the barmaqli of the Ministry of Finance is calculated to highlight the breakdown of Tunisia's economy, and to give voice to the ironic effects of a revolution, which promised financial improvements yet has so far failed. In commenting on *Bait Atta'a* the artist suggests "we see open windows, but they open onto a wall – freedom in any form is an illusion". Furthermore, the play of invisibility and shadows creates a sense of drama whereby the concept of disobedience is highly subjective and questionable. Both architecturally inspired works allude to the double binary that exists between the disproportionate division of labour and wealth. These financial and gender traps remain very much in their positions with Kaabi-Linke's practice functioning here as an interlocutor between architecture and society.

The metaphor of the trap exists in Kaabi-Linke's works not only as a reference to poverty or imprisonment, but also to the wider Arab problematic concerning the question of Palestine as presented in the sculptural work *Smooth Criminal* (2012). This steel powder coated sculptural object takes its title from the popular 1980s Michael Jackson pop song and its form from the lobster traps used in the Gulf. The lobster traps are usually constructed from wires that cross to create a repetitive pattern that is reminiscent of the Star of David, the widely recognisable symbol of Judaism. The artist re-appropriates this work as a large-scale readymade symbol of the political ongoing tensions between Palestine and Israel: a rhetorical trap in which there are no apparent winners or losers.

This poignant work also offsets another sculptural work *Bugs* (2012) a wall sculpture featuring the reproduction of a beetle found in Tunisia. Through this installation the artist plays with the language of political and computer scientific interference using the metaphor of the insect as a means of "debugging." At the same time in ancient Egypt the bug was also a sign of prosperity and here it is applied to reflect the idea Tunisian society is starting its independent process of freeing itself of its political and social constraints albeit the journey remains uncertain.

Rounding out the exhibition is *Bara'a Yadawiya* (2011) which consolidates the various concepts that Kaabi-Linke puts forward in this exhibition. This grand scale work, an amalgamation of 15 various sized canvases, is an impression from a school playground's wall. The work is arranged like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and is an ode to the youth of Tunisia who played an active part in





the revolution. Overall the piece reveals a hidden curriculum, where school children expressed their suppressed creativity and in some cases anxiety. These young people represent the informal architects and new custodians of their country's future and this important work celebrates their contribution.

In articulating the work of this young and inspiring artist, one thing that becomes apparent is her acute ability to deconstruct and unveil opaque strictures pertaining to visible and invisible traps.

*Sara Raza is an independent curator, editor for West and Central Asia for ArtAsiaPacific magazine, and contributing editor of Ibraaz, a non-profit research platform for the MENA region. She is a PhD candidate at the Royal College of Art London.*





*Smooth Criminal*, 2012  
Powder coated steel  
120 x 230 cm



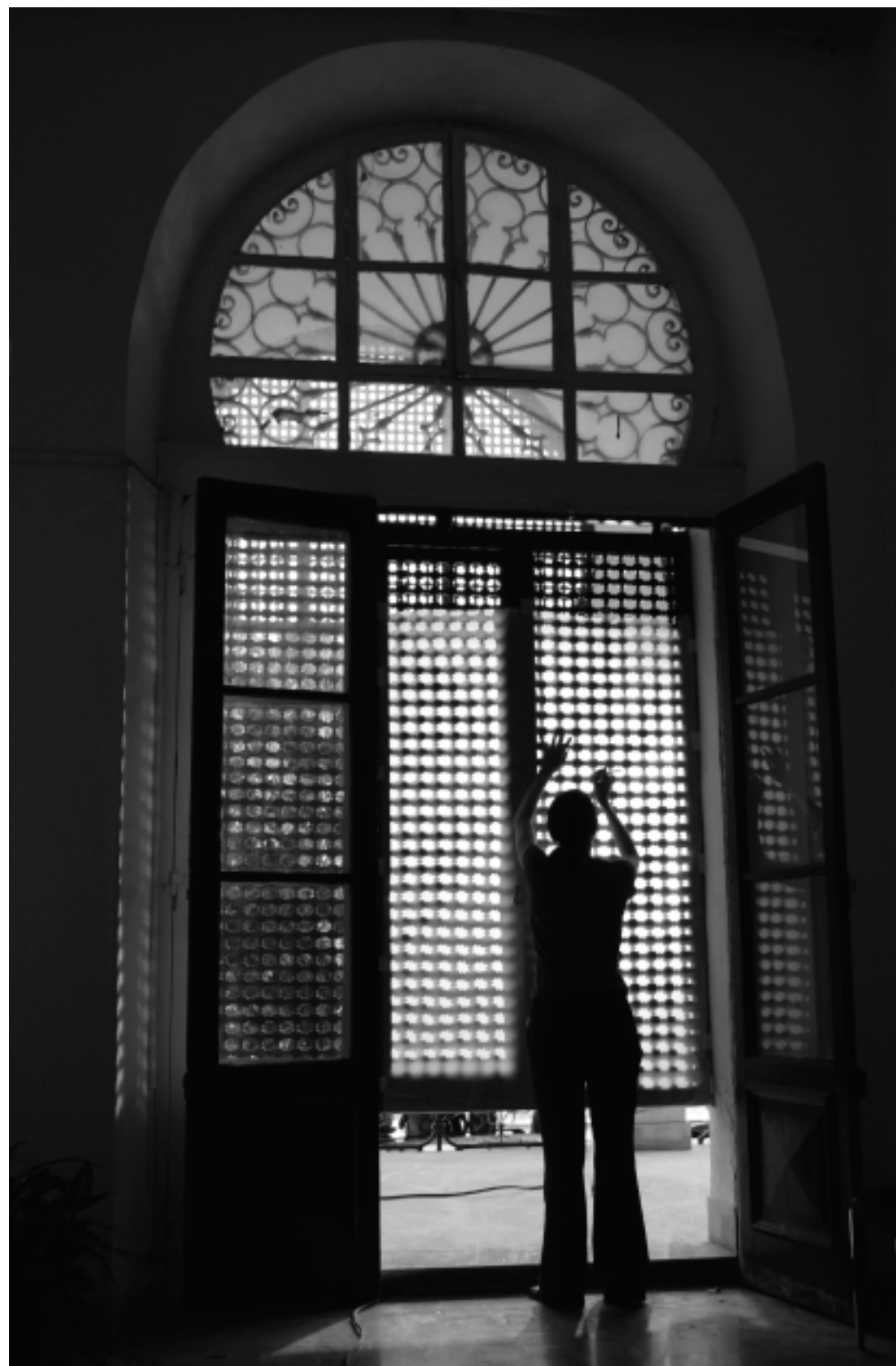












*Bait Atta'a*, 2012  
Acrylic glass and wood  
188 x 135 cm













*Ministry of Tourism*, 2011  
Wax, ink, pigment and oil on paper  
mounted on canvas  
250 x 198 cm















*Bugs*, 2012  
Acrylic polymer and alumina trihydrate and glass  
1.2 x 8 x 120 cm  
Bugs of variable sizes  
A series of 3

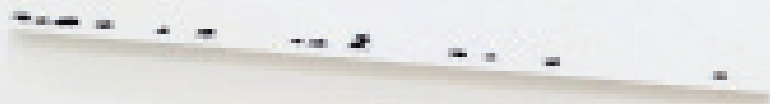
















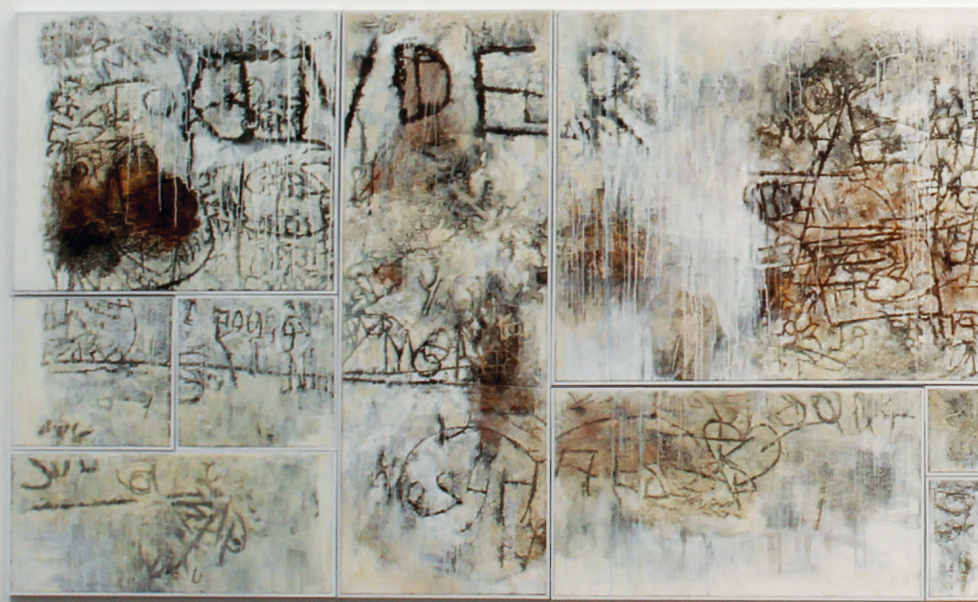


*Bara'a yadawiyya*, 2009 - 2011  
Wax, ink, pigment and oil on paper  
mounted on 15 canvases  
176 x 608 cm

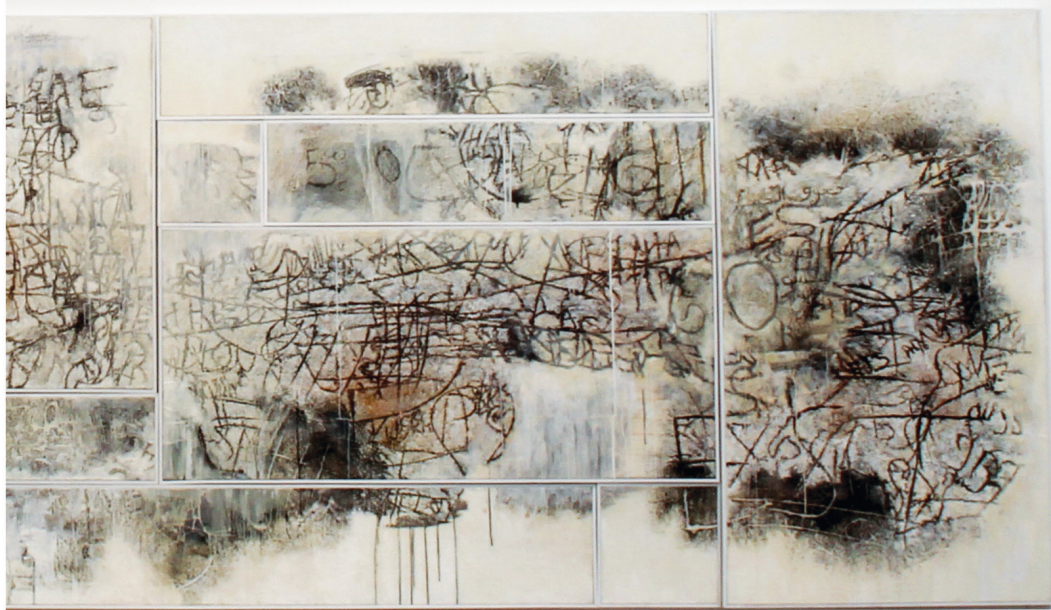


















*Black is the New White*, 2012  
Light Box  
173 x 117 x 11 cm  
Edition of 3

JOSEPH VAN HELT

**Black is  
the new white**





JOSEPH VAN HELT



**Black is  
the new white**

# In Conversation with Joseph Van Helt

**NKL** Joseph, you are a fashion designer from Amsterdam and you have recently decided to move to Dubai, where you are developing a new fashion brand. Why Dubai?

**JvH** Everybody loves the sunshine – so do I. After living in Amsterdam and London for years, the decision to move to a country with an estimated 360 sunny days per year is not that hard to make, but the main reason was to do with my work. I was so tired of the seasonally changing fashion styles in Europe. As a result of the competitive structures of the Western market, the idea of consecutive and recurring fashions appears quite normal and has never been questioned. I got the impression that making things different isn't a creative task anymore, but just a mere demand of the market. The real reason to launch a new collection is not to create something new; it's just about running the next product line.

**NKL** So what drew you to a country where everybody dresses pretty much in the same way? How did that influence your work?

**JvH** This was exactly what I was looking for. In Europe I sometimes had the impression that the many fashion styles and weird accessories had some strange effects. Instead of celebrating individualism, people somehow looked the same. The only differences were due to the seasons.

**NKL** The seasonal change in Dubai doesn't quite square with changing fashion collections, if not to say that it doesn't exist at all. Were you interested in the difference between uniformity and steady change?

**JvH** When I first came to the Gulf, my work as a fashion designer raised some new questions to deal with. First of all, I was interested in the duration of traditional styles; they seemed to be opposite of the forms I knew from the fashion world up to this time. The longer I stayed here, the idea to integrate durability with my work became more and more intriguing. Finally, I started to ask myself how to target longstanding styles. I understood at once that I was in the right place – where the old never gets old, it's much easier to invent new things. Often it's enough to switch a few parameters that trigger a big change.

**NKL** If I understood correctly, your attitude as a fashion designer changed with your new life in the Gulf region. Instead of surfing on the latest trends and styles, you started to work with traditional forms. Did that also change your idea about design in general?

**JvH** Dubai was a great new challenge, actually the best that ever could happen to me as a designer. The minimal variation in the climate doesn't force you to change and produce new collections. For a designer that means that your ideas are neither influenced nor determined by natural conditions. Since there is no



external reason to shift gears, you must find a reason yourself. You don't make things different because you need to change something; you do it because you want to realise a new idea. Your work is free and more creative. I was pretty much inspired by the traditional gear, and I thought if successive fashion styles failed to celebrate aesthetic individualism, perhaps the lasting local wear could do better.

**NKL** I think I got your point, conformity for the sake of individualism. How did you translate that in your new collection? Do you feel you have pushed something towards a stronger individualism?

**JvH** I would have liked to. I love individualism. It's the highest form of entertainment. However, I don't like the big revolutions in style. I consider my work minimal design. Also, small changes can make a big difference, and when I first came to the Gulf, I immediately understood that this was the perfect place to launch a brand for what I call minimal fashion design.

**NKL** I never thought about fashion in these terms. Your approach seems to be almost like art, but in the medium of clothes. Can you tell me more about how you change things by modifying just a few details in your collection?

**JvH** Indeed, I consider fashion design contemporary art. As art is directly connected to the lives of people, fashion is too. When you see my new collection, you will understand what I mean. I am not interested in creating something totally new. In the Gulf region where the old never gets old, it is too simple to invent new things. What really interests me is to intervene in longstanding traditions through minimal changes. I just switch some qualities like, for example, the colours. What happens if you flip white into black or vice versa? These colours are directly connected to the ordinary lives of men and women. When you go in for changes on this level, your aesthetic decisions relate to how people see and understand life. It's pretty much like art.

**NKL** In your new collection you are using the symbolism of colours. In Islamic tradition colours have particular meanings – this is particularly the case with green and red, which are considered the colours of Islam. Indeed, most of the Arab countries have their flags either in green or red or both. Black and white are connected to a symbolism, too. White is considered the colour of purity and peace. This is the reason why worshippers wear white during the Hajj. The meaning of black became very important during the Abbasids empire. In Shi'a countries a black turban is worn only by male sayyids who descend from the prophet Mohamed through his daughter fatima. Black is also the colour of the chador worn by Iranian woman. The black colour of their dresses represents mourning and grief. Shi'a Muslims are supposed to grieve for Husayn Ibn Ali, who was killed at the battle of Kerbala. But if black is the colour that represents the Shi'a for historical reasons, why is it that most, if not all, of the women in the Gulf region who mainly belong to the Sunni tradition wear black abayas? Of course the abaya is very elegant and can suit perfectly almost any woman, but I mean historically and

culturally, what could be the reason for such a generalisation?

**JvH** First of all – you already mentioned it – black is an elegant colour. Since it absorbs light, it also draws attention, and – I guess this is the best point – it gives you a slender appearance. In female fashion there are so many hidden tricks for looking sexy. High heels shape your booty and black colour gives you a slim figure. Fashion is all about drawing attention, be it traditional or the modern gear.

**NKL** If I got you right on this point, you understand the colour black more by its gender meaning and not by its cultural origins. Black is assigned to female, white to male. Is that right?

**JvH** I have spent ages figuring out why it is like that, and there might be many reasons, but I think the main issue is just a measure of practicability. I can imagine myself in summer in the Gulf at 120° F and 80 percent humidity – a thin, cool cotton would probably suit me best. If you go outside into the sun, white is a good choice, since it reflects the light and it doesn't get too hot underneath. Normally, fashion respects these functional constraints, but in my new summer collection I decided to go a little further. I wanted to cross the line between art and fashion and I liberated the dress from any constraints assigned to practicality. This is the idea that black is the new white. I opted for the abaya cloth, because it gives you that elegant and slender appearance. Since art does not follow any functions, fashion cannot be considered art if it does. Only as art, can fashion be free.

**NKL** Do you think so? I think there are other constraints and many differences between art and fashion. Fashion is renewed again and again, whilst art is made to stay.

**JvH** However, aside from these differences there are striking similarities. We distinguish ourselves from animals through artistic expression and the fact that we produce and wear clothes, don't we?

**NKL** I don't know if the two, humanity and fashion, are necessarily connected. Regarding what people are willing to do and suffer for just to be part of the latest trends, they sometimes seem to me to be quite like animals that are trapped within new, fancy styles. They even pay a lot of money for things that are more bothersome than comfortable. Let's take high heels as an example. Where is this trend going, five or even seven inches? Will they get higher and higher? As a fashion designer you should have an answer to this question. The ladies will soon not be able to walk anymore. This, too, isn't functional anymore.

**JvH** Yes, you see, here again we cross the line towards art. High heels cannot be considered fashion alone; it's beyond any practicability, it is art. I don't know

the ambitions of these airy baronesses in seven-inch hot heels, but I admire the style and adore their gorgeous and wonderful fetishes that are at once glorifying beauty and pain, elegance and torture. Super high heels tell so much about femininity.

**NKL** So you mean, good looks deserve some sacrifices?

**JvH** That's how it usually is, pass over the pancakes for the new pants! There seem to be just a few things that put people up to these kinds of sacrifices: the serious advice of a doctor, religion and the latest fashion trends. Beside the doctor, I think, religion and fashion have something in common. Both are cults. People fasting because of their beliefs or because of beauty may not be that different.

**NKL** In Europe, where people are less attached to religion, fashion has replaced religion in many ways. In quite the same way people once went to the church they are now frequenting gyms and wellness spas; and diets seem to replace fasting.

**JvH** Yes, old habits and rituals always find new forms and styles – even new colours.

# Biography

Born in Tunis, Tunisia 1978

Lives and works in Berlin, Germany and Tunis, Tunisia

## EDUCATION

2003 - 2008 PhD Summa Cum Laude in Sciences of Arts at Paris I  
Pantheon Sorbonne

2000 - 2002 MA in Sciences of Art at Paris I Pantheon Sorbonne

1995 - 1999 Academy of Fine Arts, Tunis, Tunisia

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2012 *Black is the New White*, Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai, UAE

2010 *Tatort*, Gallery Christian Hosp, Berlin, Germany

2009 *Archives des banalités Tunisoises*, Gallery El Marsa, Tunis, Tunisia

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2012 *Social States: Baptist Coelho and Nadia Kaabi-Linke*, Pump House Gallery, London, UK

2012 *Lines of Control*, Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, USA, a Green Cardamom project

2011 *El arte contemporáneo en el Magreb, dos orillas*, Circulo de Bellas Artes in Madrid, Spain

2011 *Based in Berlin*, Kunst-Werke-Berlin, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany

2011 *Different Abstractions*, Green Cardamon, London, UK

2011 Abraaj Capital Art Prize, group show at the Art Dubai 2011, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai, UAE

2011 *Drawn from Life*, a Green Cardamom project at the Abbot Hall Art Gallery, UK

2010 *1 Year in Berlin*, Gallery Christian Hosp, Berlin, Germany

2010 *Hiwar*, Gallery Le violon bleu, Tunis, Tunisia

2010 *Split*, Darb 1718 Contemporary, Cairo, Egypt

2009 *Drawn from life – Drawing Form*, Green Cardamom, London, UK

2008 *Urban Traces*, Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP, Berlin, Germany

2008 *Art Connexions*, Arab Contemporary Artists, Gallery el Marsa, Tunis, Tunisia

## BIENNALES AND PUBLIC EXHIBITIONS

2012 *Meinsten*, public art project commissioned by the City of Berlin in collaboration with EL:ch landscape architecture and AKMS in Platz der Stadt Hof

2011 *The Future of a Promise*, 54th Venice Biennial, Venice, Italy

2009 *Aftermath*, 25th Alexandria Biennale for Mediterranean Countries, Alexandria, Egypt

2009 *Africaines*, 2nd Pan-African Culture Festival, Algiers, Algeria

2009 *Provisions for the Future*, 9th Sharjah Biennial, Sharjah, UAE

2008 *Without Borders: Hispano/Maghreb Artistic Convergences*, 30th Pontevedra Art Biennial, Pontevedra, Spain

## AWARDS AND HONOURS

2010 Abraaj Capital Art Prize, Dubai, UAE

2010 First prize of the joint art and urban architecture competition for rebuilding the square "Platz der Stadt Hof Neukölln" in Berlin, Germany

2009 Prize of the Jury, 25th Alexandria Biennial for Mediterranean Countries, Alexandria, Egypt

**PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS**

Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

Abraaj Capital, Dubai, UAE

Ministère de la Culture et de la Sauvegarde du Patrimoine, Tunis, Tunisia

Kamal Lazaar Foundation, Tunis, Tunisia

**FELLOWSHIPS AND RESIDENCES**

2011 Artist in residence at The Delfina Foundation, London, UK

2000 Five year scholarship from the Ministry of Education Tunisia

## BOOKS AND CATALOGUES

Nadia Kaabi-Linke – Tatort (Crime Scene) edited by Jamila Adeli, Kerber Verlag: Bielefeld 2010, ISBN 978-3-86678-459-8

"Archives des banalites tunisoises", exhibition catalog, Galerie el marsa, Tunis 2009

## PUBLICATIONS

Arte del Maghreb, in: Minerva, quarterly of the Circolo dos bellas Artes, Madrid, Spain  
The Future of a Promise (exhibition catalogue), edited by Anthony Downey & Lina Lazaar, Ibraaz Publishing and Kamel Lazaar Foundation, Tunis, Tunisia

Footnote to a Project — The 2011 Abraaj Capital Art Prize, edited by Sharmini Peireira, Dubai, UAE: ACAP 2011

Drawn from Life, Catalog of the exhibition curated by Hammad Nasar and Helen Watson at the Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal. UK: Green Cardamom and Lakeland Arts Trust  
Aftermath — Quelle serait la suite. 25th Alexandria Biennial for Mediterranean Countries - 25ème Biennale d'Alexandrie des pays de la Méditerranée, Catalog

Drawn from Life — 3: Drawing Form, Green Cardamom: London 2009

Provisions. Sharjah Biennial 9 | Book 1, Sharjah Biennial and Bidoun: Sharjah, New York 2009

"Archives des banalites tunisoises", exhibition catalog, Galerie el marsa, Tunis 2009

"Urban Traces", exhibition catalog, edited by S. Ziegenrucker, WilmerHale, Berlin 2008

"Übersetzen", off topic #0, edited by Academy of Media Arts, Cologne 2008

"Philosopher en Tunisie aujourd'hui", Rue Descartes - Revue Collège International de Philosophie / 61, Puf, Paris 2008

Without Borders: Hispanic-Maghreb Artistic Convergences, catalog of the 30th Biennial of Pontevedra, Spain, Deputacion Pontevedra, Pontevedra 2008

## SELECTED PRESS AND MEDIA

"Nadia Kaabi-Linke captures a sense of the trap", by Christopher Lord, The National, Jan 16, 2012

"A spring in their step", by Rachel Spence, Financial Times, June 3, 2011

"Echoes of Political Unrest at Venice Biennale", by Nazanin Lankarani, New York Times, May 25, 2011

"It Is Life That Inspires Me': A Q&A With Tunisian Political Artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke", by Ben Davis, ARTINFO, March 29, 2011

"Nadia Kaabi-Linke's document on identity", by Acelya Yonac, Swide, March 28, 2011

"ArtintheCity Talks to Abraaj Capital Prize Winner Nadia Kaabi-Linke", Interview with Art in the City, January 2011

"Gewalt und Schönheit", by Hülya Gürler in: die tageszeitung (taz), September 20th, 2010

"Divided we fall", Daily News Egypt, May 3, 2010

"STILBRUCH" (Globetrotter), RBB, October 1, 2009

Mémoire, histoire, point de vue, Marc Lenot, Paperblog.fr, March 31, 2009

"9ème BIENNALE DE SHARJAH: PROVISIONS FOR THE FUTURE, Cécilia BEZZAN, HART International

"Quand les murs vous parlent", La Presse, 07/02/2009

Interview on Radio Mosaïque, Tunis, January 19, 2009

"عندما تغير الجدران وظائفها", Essahafa, 22/01/2009

"Les murs de la ville ont pénétré la Galerie...", Le Temps, 21/01/2009

"Unos barcos de papel da Bienal de Arte de Pontevedra viaxan por medio mundo", Diario de Pontevedra 11/09/2008

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*Black is the New White* Photographer: Russ Kientsch

*Black is the New White* Model: Feras Siam

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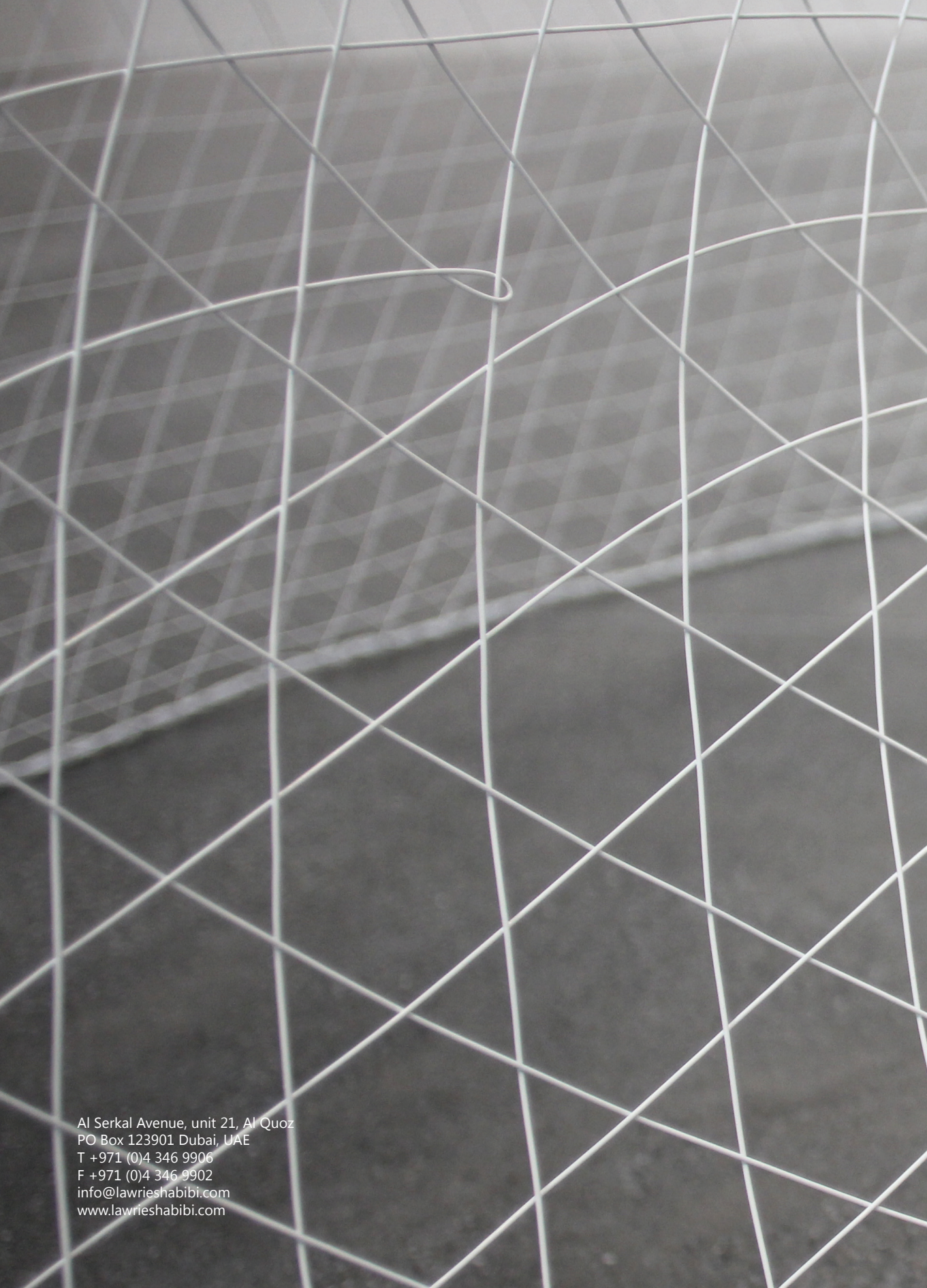




The publication of this catalogue coincides with an exhibition of the same title at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai 19 March - 4 May 2012. Copyright © 2011 Lawrie Shabibi, writer and artist.





The background of the entire page is a grayscale photograph of a soccer field. A white wireframe, resembling a net or a geometric pattern, is superimposed over the image. The lines of the wireframe are curved and intersect to form a series of diamond and triangular shapes. The soccer field itself is visible through the wireframe, showing the green grass and the white lines of the pitch. The overall effect is a modern, abstract, and technical aesthetic.

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